

'CONCERN FOR THE CHURCHES'

SERIES:PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN

by Ron Ritchie

In 1966, I was called to be Director of Christian Education at Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church. Working with the college, high school and junior high staff was part of my responsibility. When I began my ministry there, the senior pastor asked me how long I intended to serve. I asked him how long would he be on staff, and he said seven years. "Then I will minister here for seven years," I told him. He expressed satisfaction with my answer, and I too was pleased with the prospect of a secure position for seven years. I looked forward to an exciting ministry with the young people of that church.

As I look back on that time now, I call that period "Plan A." One day Ray Stedman called me and asked me to join him for breakfast. He asked me to consider coming on the staff of Peninsula Bible Church to take over the high school ministry. I replied that I wasn't interested. I had already committed to Walnut Creek and I intended staying there. About a month later Ray again asked me to consider coming to PBC. Again, I told him that I had given my word to minister in my present position for seven years and I intended to remain faithful to my word. I told him I wanted to be known as a man of integrity; one who meant yes when he said yes and no when he said no. He responded by quoting the apostle Paul's word to the Corinthians, "Your life is not your own; you were bought with a price." I asked him what did that have to do with coming to minister at PBC. Ray said, "You have locked yourself in to a seven-year commitment, leaving no room for change in the event that God decides to change your plans." I left the restaurant greatly disturbed at what he said.

I never even considered that God might have a Plan B for me, but in 1969 I eventually came to minister in PBC. I realized that indeed my life was not my own; that it had been bought with a price. My life is caught up in the life of my Lord and Savior. I am his, and I must always be ready to respond to his leading. I must say, however, that even after I joined the staff of PBC, my heart was still with the people in Walnut Creek. Now and again I would drive over there to meet with fellow-pastors and talk about the "sheep" among whom I had ministered for three and a half years. I was concerned that they were being cared for and loved; I was concerned over who would replace me as youth pastor. It was hard for me to give up my plans and accept Plan B, which was God's plan for me.

In our study in the life of the apostle Paul we have reached the point in his ministry when he began to think of making a return journey--we now call this his second missionary journey--to the churches which he had helped establish, together with Silas and Barnabas, on the first missionary journey. Paul, the shepherd and pastor, wrote of his concern for these churches in 2 Corinthians:

I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? (2 Cor.11:27-29).

Following the Council of Jerusalem in 49 A.D., Paul and Barnabas accompanied the two apostles Judas and Silas and traveled down to Antioch to meet with the church in that city and impart to them the news that the church in Jerusalem had affirmed the gospel which Paul had taught them. The council had debated the issue of whether believers had to submit to the rite of circumcision and to obey the law of Moses, as the Judaizers were demanding; in other words, whether believers had first to become Jews before they could call themselves Christians. Peter's stirring word to the council affirmed the gospel of grace: "...why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." When the letter was read in the church in Antioch, Acts 15:31 records, "they rejoiced because of its encouragement."

Judas departed "in peace," Silas remained; and Paul and Barnabas began to teach and preach the word of God among the flock.

After a time of ministering there, Paul apparently determined that the saints were well equipped to continue the work of the ministry. That was when the apostle suggested to Barnabas that they make a return journey to the Galatian churches to see how they were doing. And that is where we take up our studies once more the life of the apostle Paul. I have come to see that this second missionary journey of the apostle divides into two parts. I call these parts, first, a Tour of Encouragement (Acts 15:36-41); and second, a Tour of Adventure (Acts 16:1-10). Included in each of these tours, as we will see, are two plans--Plan A and Plan B.

I. A Tour of Encouragement

Acts 15:36-41

Plan A: 36-38

Plan B: 39-41

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." And Barnabas was desirous of taking John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return to every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how the believers are faring." The apostle was referring to the cities which he, Barnabas and John visited on the first missionary journey two years earlier. Their ministry began on the island of Cyprus--where Paul made his first convert to the faith, the Gentile proconsul, Sergius Paulus--some thirteen years following our Lord's commissioning of Paul. Then, Jesus said of the apostle, "He is a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:15,16).

How Paul must have longed to meet once more with this man, his first convert to Christianity.

Following the ministry in Cyprus, John left the team and returned to Jerusalem, while Paul and Barnabas sailed to Perga in Pamphylia. From there they went on to Pisidian Antioch. They preached in the synagogue in that city and were invited to return the following Sabbath, only to be accused of blaspheming by some Jews. They were driven out of the city and went on to Iconium, but not before "many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas" (13:43); and, "the word of God was being spread through the whole region" (13:49). In Iconium, "a great multitude believed, both of Jews and of Greeks" (14:1); but some disbelieving Jews stirred up trouble against them, so the apostles fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding region. At Lystra, Paul healed a man who had been lame from birth, and the result was that the people wanted to worship them as gods. Once more, however, the Jews won over the crowds and turned them against Paul and Barnabas. They stoned Paul and left him for dead, but the Lord raised him. The apostle and Barnabas went on to Derbe, where they made many disciples. They then retraced their footsteps and returned to visit the various cities they had preached in and made disciples, returning at last to their home church in Antioch. Now, following the Council of Jerusalem and the reading of the letter to the church in Antioch, once more Paul senses the need to return to all the churches they had visited and founded on that first journey.

Barnabas agrees with Paul's plan for making a return trip to visit the churches, and he suggests that they take his nephew John Mark along with them. John had been living with his mother in Jerusalem up until the time when he accompanied Paul and Barnabas upon their return to Antioch. He went along on the first missionary journey but, according to Acts 13:13, left the team in Perga and returned to his home in Jerusalem. John Mark's decision to desert them is why Paul here insists that they not take him along on this proposed return

journey to visit the churches. Paul regards him as a novice, an intern who does not have the will or desire necessary to complete the task the Lord has called him to. The apostle understands the close family ties he has with Barnabas, but for him the bottom line was that Mark had jumped ship and deserted them. Paul was not anxious to repeat the same experience. It looks like Plan A is never going to get off the ground.

Let's see what Plan B looks like. Verses 39-41:

And there arose such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of God. And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Here we have a situation where one Christian brother is deeply concerned about the work of the ministry of Jesus Christ, while another is concerned about the maturing process of a single follower of Jesus. Thus, one brother is led by the Spirit to encourage the churches, while the other is led by the same Spirit to encourage an immature but growing brother. Their separation was not wrong in itself, but there was sin involved in the way they separated; there seems to have been anger present in their sharp disagreement. Barnabas takes Mark and sets sail for Cyprus, without the blessing of the church at Antioch.

There is no further mention of either of these men in the rest of the book of Acts, but a study of the epistles reveals the fruit that Barnabas' action had in the life of his nephew. Paul makes reference to John Mark in two of his prison letters. First, in Colossians 4:10, the apostle writes ten years later, "If he [Mark] comes to you, welcome him" (4:10). Then in 2 Timothy, written fourteen years later from the same prison, the apostle says to Timothy, "Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service" (4:11). Mark was with Paul during the apostle's second imprisonment when he wrote to Philemon in 64 A.D. Another reference to Mark is included in Peter's first letter. Writing to the Galatian churches, Peter sends his greetings and those of "my son, Mark." This is the same Mark who wrote the gospel of Mark, which was Peter's account of the ministry of Jesus. Tradition holds that Mark was sent on a mission to Egypt, where he is said to have founded the church of Alexandria. There, as bishop of that church, Mark was said to have been martyred in the eighth year of Nero's reign, in 62 A.D. The sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas resulted in Barnabas taking his nephew John Mark under his wing. Mark grew in maturity, and went on to become a man much used of God in the early church.

"But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches" (verses 40,41). Again we find Paul working within the Body of Christ, acknowledging his need for the support of the local church--in this case the church of Antioch--to whom he submits himself and Silas for prayer and blessing before their departure on the second missionary journey. They begin by heading fifty miles north to the churches in Syria; then they turn westward, to Tarsus, and travel on to the churches of southern Galatia.

I am greatly encouraged at the shepherd's heart displayed by the apostle in his concern for the churches. At times I myself come up with plans for what I can accomplish for Jesus in the community and in my family, but there somehow seems to be included in those plans what they will do for me. I don't know why I do that, but I think the Lord will explain it very clearly to me one day. There is a lot of the flesh left in me yet. I struggle with it and I try to cover it and make it look religious, but it never accomplishes much. Scripture says, "Many are the plans of a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord, it will stand." I may make plans, but it is the Lord's pleasure to change them at any time. For example, David Roper and I once took a group of high schoolers to Mount Hermon for a discipleship week. I had planned the whole week and mapped it out on a paper which I gave to David. By the middle of the week, however, as I looked at my plan I found that most of it had been scrapped and had been replaced by a completely different set of ideas. Dave did not seem a bit surprised by this turn of events, but I as the administrator got a little bent out of shape. I had to rely on God, not my plan, for my security. I learned a valuable lesson that week. Later, I wrote at the bottom of my plan something which I still write on every schedule I make: "Caution: This programme may be changed by the Holy Spirit at any moment, so please be alert." That has been my philosophy of ministry ever since. I have my red pencil ready to change my plans at any moment.

Paul had a wonderful plan to take Barnabas with him on this missionary tour but he ended up with Silas instead. He had plans to strike out on a tour of encouragement, but the Holy Spirit took his Plan A and offered instead Plan B. The new plan, however, accomplished two great plans for the price of one: the churches were strengthened by the ministry of Paul and Silas, and a young believer, John Mark, was given opportunity to continue his spiritual growth so that he might return to Paul as a fully mature coworker in Christ some ten years later. The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas allowed the Lord to cover even more territory in the same amount of time. It also provided opportunity for two young men to grow alongside two seasoned believers, providing at the same time the space necessary for these older brothers to think through their own immaturity, pride and impatience.

Thus we move from this Tour of Encouragement to.

II. A Tour of Adventure

Acts 16:1-10

Plan A: 16:1-5

Plan B: 16:6-10

And Paul came to Derbe and to Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees, which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.

This is familiar territory for Paul and Silas. Many new believers had come into the Kingdom of God in the three years since the first missionary journey. At Lystra, they meet Timothy ("God-honoring one"), a believer with a Jewish mother and a Greek father. As a youth, Timothy was trained in the Scriptures by his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois, a woman known for her "sincere faith" (2 Tim.1:5; 3:15). All were now "completed" Jews, and were well spoken of by the local elders. Now, Timothy is invited by Paul and Silas to join them on their missionary journey.

There was one problem which had to be addressed, however. The team would be visiting many synagogues to preach the gospel of grace and Timothy was not circumcised. That would be an offense to the Jews. Thus, Paul took Timothy and circumcised him so that together they could walk through the doors of opportunity which would be available to them to preach the gospel. With Titus, of course, Paul took quite a different tack. He refused to have him circumcised in order to appease the Judaizers. Salvation by grace, not works, was the issue then. But in Timothy's case the issue was open doors of service to the Jews--salvation versus service, in other words. Paul was prepared to compromise where service was concerned, but not when salvation was at stake. Thus the apostle legitimized Timothy in the eyes of the Jews. Once more Paul was following the principle he would write about in 1 Corinthians 9, "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became a Jew, that I might win Jews...that I may by all means save some."

The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is considered a sacred place by the Jews. Once when I was there, I was confronted by a man who told me I should be wearing a hat. I replied that I was a Christian and that I was free from the law; I did not have to wear a hat. He backed away and stood beside two soldiers carrying Uzzi submachine guns. "You can see the wall from the barricade here," he told me, "or else buy a postcard of it; otherwise put a hat on." That is a custom which they take very seriously. Later, a visit to the Temple revealed that the Arabs are in control there. They insist visitors wear long pants--but I was wearing shorts. I told them I was from California, that I was a Gentile Christian, and that I was not used to having people come up to me

and tell me to put on pants. They fed me the same line as their Israeli counterpart: put on pants or else buy a postcard. That wasn't good enough for me, so they sold me giant baggies. I cut two holes in the end and pulled it on like pants. The Arabs feel that a man in shorts looks like a little boy and they don't think that's dignified. Then, if you go to a restaurant on the Sabbath, you must have a ticket. It's no good saying you're not Jewish and that you don't go to church until Sunday. They respond by saying that exchanging money for meals on the Sabbath is work, and so they demand a ticket which you must buy earlier in the week.

Paul insists on becoming all things to all men so that some might be saved. That is why he circumcised Timothy. Then Timothy was set aside as an evangelist by the laying on of hands, and he accompanied the other two men teaching Jews and Gentiles alike that salvation was by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, plus nothing. The result of their ministry is set out in verse 5: "...the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily."

Now we come to Plan B. The missionary team intended visiting only the churches they had ministered in on the first journey. God, however, had other plans for them. Verses 6-10:

And having passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and when they had come to Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a certain man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

In these verses we learn some excellent principles concerning the will of God. I cannot count the number of times I wondered what God's will was for me in given situations, and how many times others had asked me the same question. There are some foundational principles here which will help us answer that question.

First, when a sinner comes to the realization, through the work of the Holy Spirit, that he has fallen short of the glory of God, that he needs a Savior in order to be reconciled to God, and that the only Savior offered by God is Jesus, then, Paul declares in Romans, "...if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" (Rom.10:9,10). Second, as a result of that confession of faith in Jesus as Lord, the sinner becomes a new creature in Christ. Part of being a new creation then is the spiritual reality that, "...your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own...for you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor.6:19,20). Now you are responsible on a daily basis to understand that your body is the temple that houses the Holy Spirit; and you are to choose to allow the Spirit to control your life so that he can make the invisible Christ visible in and through you. Third, when Paul wrote to the Thessalonians later and said, "This is the will of God, your sanctification," he is saying that this is always the will of God: that you allow God to set you aside for his intended purposes on earth in the age of the Spirit, within his plan of redemption. Thus the will of God is a relationship with the Living God. We are his servants, meant to live to his glory. And this is exactly where we find Paul, a spiritual man, awaiting the inner witness of the Spirit so that God's purposes on earth could be fulfilled through him.

According to the passage, the missionaries intended visiting the churches which were visited on the first journey, and then head for home. But now Paul is being led by the Holy Spirit to strike out into new territory with the gospel. The team leaves Pisidian Antioch in southern Galatia and heads west into Asia, where Paul, as we read, was "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word." The Spirit is in charge of the church of Jesus Christ just as he is the servants of Jesus. Paul was forbidden, either by some prophet in Pisidian Antioch, by the inner witness of the Spirit, or by some other means. But in any event he obeyed and headed north to the region of Phrygian, where the word had been spread by Galatians from the cities of Lystra and Derbe (14:6). So Paul and his fellow missionaries continued to travel north, heading directly into the populated areas of Bithynia, on the northern coast of Turkey. Then the Holy Spirit proposed Plan B.

Paul experiences what all of us do at times when we feel that although we are in the will of God, things are just

not working out. The inner witness of the Holy Spirit comes to us, in concert with the Word of God, and we follow the Spirit's leading. We are not talking about an urge or an impulse, but rather a clear statement from God; one door shuts and another opens.

The first principle therefore is: the will of God is a relationship with the Living God. Paul was freely carrying out his commission to be the chosen instrument of God, but at times the Spirit would close doors of ministry that appeared to the apostle to be open. And since Paul's life and plans were no longer his own, he submitted to the Spirit's plans rather than his own hopes and dreams. Thus Paul gives up his plan to travel to Bithynia and sets out for Troas instead, a difficult trek through hard terrain, several hundred miles away from where he had planned to be. We can well imagine the team's questioning each other as they tried to figure out why they were in Troas. Then Paul had a vision in which a man said to him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." The apostle was available and awaiting instructions from God, and then he was given his orders in a vision by this man from Macedonia. Some think the man who appeared to him was Luke and that it was he who uttered the cry of Europe's need for Christ.

So we have a second principle: the Spirit of God presents the will of God to a man of God by a variety of means, at times by means of visions, or circumstances, or even commonplace things, perhaps by difficult situations or by disappointments. The Spirit guides, molds and fashions all the pathways in the age of the Spirit to carry out the plan of redemption by followers of Jesus. Paul is a man of God who seeks to preach the Word of God by the power of the Spirit of God, and he is willing to be led by the Spirit. Spiritual men and women are in tune with spiritual things that come from his Spirit. After he had seen the vision, Paul concluded that it was time to bring the good news of salvation by grace through faith to the continent of Europe. His response once more was to be available to the Spirit's leading. God was in charge of his life and was directing him, and Paul was faithfully responding. It all seemed to fit now for the apostle. The closed doors he had earlier come up against finally made sense. It was as if Paul and his companions were in a ship, hoping to sail north, but the winds of the Spirit carried them west to Troas; now they must set sail once again and continue westward to Europe.

Thus, the third principle is that the will of God can be found as we live a life of faith in concert with the Word of God. Christians believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is alive and that through his Holy Spirit he is directing their lives and their participation in his plan of redemption in the age of the Spirit in every generation until he comes back. I heard just last week of a pastor who was teaching his church on missions. As he was teaching, he became so convicted by his own words that he resigned from his church and is now preparing to leave for the mission fields.

Paul knew that he was a chosen instrument of God. As such, he knew that "his life was no longer his own; that he had been bought with a price." This knowledge motivated him, by the power of the Spirit, to feel a "concern for all the churches." By faith therefore he set out with Plan A, only to discover that God had in mind for him Plans B, C, D and E. As believers, we too are in Christ, servants of the Living God. We have an exciting personal relationship with him, and we are daily motivated by his Spirit to live in his will. Like Paul, we set out to accomplish certain aspects of his will, thinking up tours of encouragement and adventure, which in themselves are not wrong; but we need to keep in touch with the witness of the Spirit so that we are willing to move from Plan A to Plan B. These changes in direction which are led by the Holy Spirit give us a sense of the abundant life that God has promised to give us. All that happened to Paul and his team occurred because he was willing to keep moving out by faith, never losing sight of his commission, his gifts, and the will of God. The apostle's relationship with the Living God and his Son Jesus Christ worked in harmony with the Holy Spirit in accomplishing God's plan of redemption in the age of the Spirit.

God is preparing his body to participate in everything he had been doing since the day of Pentecost. Not every effort we as believers make will turn out right. Yesterday I went to visit a friend who was having a personal struggle because God laid it on my heart to share the gospel with him once again. Right in the middle of our conversation, God said to me, "Ask him." I said to the man, "Your problem is that you don't know who Jesus Christ is. Would you consider once again who he is? He will solve all these other problems over time. Your attitude will change; you will have a new value system if you do." The man cut me off. So much for Plan A. Did I fail? No. The Lord wants us to just show up. I don't know what will happen with the seed which I planted. My friend may have gone into his home and said, "He almost got me this time! I can't give him

openings like that again." I don't know what God is doing in that situation. But when I wake up in the morning, I know why I am here and I know where I'm going. I have a relationship with the Living God. And I have all kinds of plans. You should see my yellow pad. You should see my red pencil!

The question remains, are we available to allow the Living God to live through us this week? Pray that this will be our attitude toward our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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Tenth Message
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