

# Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

## R<sub>2</sub>L – Resolved to Live: In the Heart of God’s Will

Acts 13:1-5

1 Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” 3 Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. 4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 5 When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper.

There is a problem in the church today but there are very few who are either aware of it, or, if they are aware of it, that they are unconcerned. The problem lies in what it means to be a church and specifically what it is that a church is supposed to do. How are we supposed to “do church?” Have you ever thought about that? For many who do think about it, their approach is anything but Biblical. The mentality today is often along these lines. “We want our church to grow. It is our task to *make* the church grow. And so, if we are to make the church grow, we need to look around us and find out what people want in a church. Then, once we know what people want, we can become that kind of church and the people will come, the church will grow, and we will be *successful!*”

What is the problem with this approach (beside the fact that it is not biblical)? With this philosophy, the goal is growth, not the glory of God, and thus, whatever brings growth is okay, even if it lies outside the scope of the Scriptures. So, if people want a political action group, let the church be that. If the people want a concert hall, that is what we will be. If the people only want 20 minute sermonettes (sermonettes are for christianettes you know), then we will scrape the 60 minute sermon. The philosophy is, “Give the people what they want!”

Beloved, nowhere in Scripture are we called to measure success in light of immediate outcomes, but rather we are to measure success by what promotes eternal significance. We have to define what a biblical church is for if we fail at this point, we will end up doing a rock concert with stand-up comedians every weekend with a little theology thrown in here and there. Sometime back, Pastor John MacArthur of Grace Community Church was asked if it annoyed him that some churches nearby Grace Community, that practiced this kind of pragmatic leadership and philosophy of ministry, were using in their names “Grace Community Church”? His response was classic as he said, “It doesn’t bother me that they use the word grace in their name, it bothers me they call themselves a church!” Pragmatism, that “whatever works mentality” is not to be what determines the practice of the church.

There is an approach to church that pleases God. To be sure, as believers we must be *looking out* in order to see and meet the needs of others. But when it comes to how to “do church” we should rather be looking back, looking back to the Word of God; looking back to see how the early church did ministry.

Now, let me clarify something. This is not to say that Hope CBC ought to look like the early church when it comes to *external* things. For example, the early church met in homes; they did not have air conditioners; and, as best I can tell, they did not have hymnbooks, electronic keyboards or video projectors. Those are externals and such things change with time. What we

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need to see and thus make our own are the internals of the early church. And what do I mean by the “internals”? By the internals of the church I mean to make note of what these people *valued* – *what they knew to be most important to God*. Why is this important? Because what a person or group values will determine what you do. For a church that values growth at all costs, they will do whatever it takes to attract people. For a church that values an impressive campus and buildings, they will raise the funds? For a church that values relevance, they will seek to have others seem them as relevant. For a church that values traditions, they will die on the mantra, “That is not the way we used to do it!”

Beloved, I am neither interested or inclined to be a mediocre, status quo, stale, stagnant, tired, stuffy ol’ church because I do not see anywhere in Scripture such descriptions of that defining what a church is or what it does. Rather, I desire to be a church smack-dab in the heart of God’s will, and like Israel of old that moved when the Shekinah glory of God moved; and rested when that cloud of glory rested, we must be moving when and in the way God directs. And if we would do this, we must know what God values for the church and then make those values our own values. Why? Because, as we just noted, what we value as a church will determine how we function. So, what does God value? Can we know? Beloved, not only does God tells us what He values in His Word, He also shows us in His Word what values that please Him look like. In Acts 13 we see a vivid picture of a church in the heart of God’s will. It is the church at Antioch.

Remember that the church at Antioch is one of the most significant in book of Acts. In Acts 11:19-26, it began when some people from Cyprus traveled there, preaching the person and work of Jesus and the Lord bringing many to faith in Himself. When the Jerusalem church heard about the conversions, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to investigate. As Barnabas surveyed the work of God that had begun in Antioch, he sensed there was too much for him to handle and thus sought out the help of Saul of Tarsus. Together they taught the disciples for a whole year.

Barnabas and Saul taught the believers in Antioch to look beyond themselves. How do we know this? We know this by the benevolent offering the church took to help famine-stricken brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. This offering was taken to Jerusalem by Barnabas and Saul (11:29). But another evidence of this church looking beyond themselves is revealed as Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch. Not only was this church willing to give of its money, but also of its *people*. And this is because the church valued people.

We can learn much from the example of the church at Antioch. Instead of *looking around* at what our culture wants or what people think they need, we need to *look back*; back to the Word of God to discover the heart of God. The question always before a church is this, “What is God’s will for the church?” Or to put it another way, “what does God value in a church?” If we learn and practice what God values in a church, then we have come to know the heart and will of God for our church. Then we must be resolved to carry out what God values in the church; to love what He loves; to do what He would have us to do. And our text offers us four such values that reflect the heart and will of God found in the church at Antioch. These values are too bountiful to unpack all at once so we will take them one at a time, looking the first of the four this week. So, if we would be a people resolved to be in the heart of God’s will, we must possess these values as well. To make it more personal, if you would be a person resolved to be in the heart of God’s will, then you must possess these values. Let us look at the first one.

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## Value #1: The Importance and Influence of the Word of God (1)

*Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.*

As you have heard many times from this pulpit, a church after God's own heart is a church that is Bible-centered; Scripture-focused – everything revolves around the precepts and practice of the Word of God. From our text, there are three obviously implied practices as it relates to the Word of God in the early church that need to be continued in the church today

**Frist**, we need to hear God's Word. Our text tells us that there were “**prophets**” in the church at Antioch. Much like their Old Testament counterparts, New Testament prophets were primarily heralds of God's truth. They spoke on behalf of God. Sometimes, in order to lend credibility to their commands, a prophet might proclaim a God-given prediction (such as Agabus in Acts 11:28, the prophet who revealed a severe famine was coming). However, while we tend to think of prophets more in their role of foretelling the future, the majority of the message given by a prophet was that of forth-telling, of simply delivering God's message to the people where they did not have any revelation, usually with the formula, “Thus says the Lord!” Once the New Testament was completed, the need for the prophetic office also ceased. The New Testament presents the position of prophet as a temporary gift to the church prior to the completion of God's self-revelation in the Scriptures. Today, we have no need of prophets as we have the completed Scripture. Our job is to make known what God has already revealed. Thus, we need to hear God's Word. This is why God gave the early church prophets, to proclaim in the hearing of the people the truth of God. Nevertheless, as most of you know, hearing alone is not enough when it comes to valuing the Word of God.

**Second**, we need to comprehend God's Word. Therefore, not only did God give the early church prophets who proclaimed the content of His truth until it could be written down in the New Testament, but He also gave them “teachers”. Whereas the emphasis of the prophet was to communicate what God says; the role of the teacher was to communicate what God means. The teachers were called to instruct believers carefully as to proper belief and practice.

A church in the heart of God's will longs to both hear the Word and then to comprehend, understand and thus properly practice God's Word. The reason why so many churches are looking out to the world to determine their practice is because there is a famine when it comes to God's Word. Preachers are not preaching the Word of God but rather the whims of people. And people want a spiritual experience, not a spiritual education. They would rather “feel” something that be expected to “do” something. As one preacher of the Word has put it, “This is the true nature of preaching. It is the man of God opening the Word of God and expounding its truths so that the voice of God may be heard, the glory of God seen and the will of God obeyed.”<sup>1</sup> We must be hearers and doers of the Word. This is what the church at Antioch valued. But there is something else we need to notice in this valuing of God's Word from verse one.

**Third**, we need a plurality of teachers. Notice in our text that there was not just a prophet and/or one teacher. Rather, there were “**prophets and teachers.**” The words are in the plural and then Luke identifies five of these men. Where did these teachers come from? Remember that Barnabas recruited Saul; could it be that he sought out these others too?

<sup>1</sup> Lawson, Steven J. “Famine in the Land” p.18

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One of the striking things you find as you consider what the New Testament reveals about the churches of its time is that they all had a number of leaders who ministered the Word to them; not just one, but a plurality of men. When Paul went anywhere, he took someone with him. Whenever Paul would leave a church, he always put into place a number of teachers or pastors to feed and care for them. In Titus 1:5 Paul instructed Titus saying, **“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you...”** Yet, how often, either because a congregation demands it, or a man thrives on it, is there but one minister, teacher, pastor in a church. Too often people think along the lines that this one man, he is the minister, it is his job to do the work of ministry. Beloved, whenever a church comes to see their pastor or pastors as the ones called to do ministry, not only is this unbiblical, but it will ultimately weaken the ministry and witness of the church. When it comes to teaching, we need a plurality of input. There is not any one man who has all the gifts and all the insights needed. I believe that God will raise up and men need to rise to the challenge of being able to communicate God’s Word. You may not be a pastor or a “teacher” – but this does not absolve you from being able to rightly communicate God’s truth, especially if called upon. And for some of you, perhaps you are being called to teach, thus you need to rise up to the challenge and offer yourself in that capacity to confirm one way or the other your teaching abilities. As we look at the names of those Luke listed in our text, I would have you realize that these men came from diverse backgrounds, yet they all taught the same truth of God’s word.

First mentioned is **Barnabas**. He was a Jewish Levite from the island of Cyprus. Though Jewish, since he was not from Jerusalem, he understood Greek culture and how to minister in it. Next, we have **Simeon**. Our text says he was called “Niger,” a Latin term which means black. It is believed that this indicates Simeon had black skin. Then we have **Lucius** who was from Cyrene, from the same island as Barnabas. Remember that that the people who evangelized Antioch were from Cyprus and Cyrene (11:20). It may be that Lucius was one of the men who led people to Christ in Antioch. His name is Latin, which would suggest he was steeped in Roman culture.

Moving on we find **Manaen**. Manaen is the Greek form of a Hebrew name, implying he was most likely a Hellenistic Jew. But something captured Luke’s attention with this man as we are told that Manaen was raised with Herod the Tetrarch. We have already examined some of the soap opera like realities of the Herodians. This was Herod Antipas and since Manaen had been brought up in the household of Herod the Great with Herod Antipas (and the term “brought up with” could even be translated “a fellow-nursling” or “childhood companions”), he would be a man of great standing, privilege and political connection. Yet here he is at the church of Antioch associating with the “nobodies.” While the Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1 that not many people of nobility are called, thank God that some are called to Christ!

I must pause here and point out that by mentioning Manaen, Luke has offered us an interesting contrast between this man and Herod (this is the Herod, Herod Antipas, whom was in power at the time of the birth of Christ). The point is that they both had the same upbringing. But Herod Antipas went down in history as the man who killed John the Baptist and was later involved in Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. Manaen became a Christian and a leader in the church. Here is the sovereignty of God, that two men brought up the same way could come to such different outcomes.

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The final name mentioned is that of “Saul” whom we know will come to be known as Paul. Saul had been a rabbi and a Pharisee. But you know the story of how God saved him from his own self-righteousness to truth in the full and complete righteousness of Christ alone.

Why does Luke lists all these names? I believe the point is to reveal the team approach to leadership that existed in the church at Antioch. There is nothing easy about ministry in the first place. If the teachers’ role was to help the people understand and practice the principles of the word of God, you yourself already know how hard it can be to get people to change their ways. You yourselves already know how hard you can make it on a pastor or an elder or a spiritual mentor when they share with you what God expects and empowers the believer to do, but you want to do it your way or simply no follow God’s way. Ministry, the art of serving people in order to direct them in the ways and practice of Jesus, has been described by someone as frustrating and seemingly futile as trying to herd cats. If you try to herd ten cats into a three foot gate entrance, where do most of the cats end up? Anywhere but in the entrance. Sometimes this is what ministry is like.

But not only is ministry itself challenging, but then bringing a five man team of leadership together from the various backgrounds that these men in our text had, men from Greek culture, from Roman culture and from Hebrew culture; politicians and rabbis, men of light skin and men of dark skin, and expect them to function in unity? But they did because they had something unifying that brought them together, their resolve to live in the heart of God’s will. They had a commitment to God and His Word and this was more than sufficient to bring unity.

Let us remember that we are looking at this text in order to examine what this church and these leaders of the church valued. These men were called “**prophets and teachers**” of the church. What they valued was hearing, understanding, and teaching God’s Word. And evidently, the people of the church also valued the hearing, understanding and teaching of God’s Word because the church was growing; not because they surveyed the wishes and perceived needs of this cosmopolitan, worldly city, but because they were committed to this key value. Turn back to Acts 11:20 and let us see this key value as stated there. We read, “**But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene (i.e. Barnabas and Lucius), who came to Antioch, and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.**” What is the key value here? The preaching of the Lord Jesus! They valued the Word and Message of God.

Beloved, we cannot say that we value the Word of God if we are not actively, purposely, relentlessly, persistently, preaching the Lord Jesus! Let me ask you, by the majority of your words; by the great content of your conversations, by what you speak about to others the most, could others or even yourself conclude that you value the Word of God and the preaching of the Lord Jesus?

Can it be said of this church that we value the Word of God; not just because we say so, but because we live so? The church at Antioch, particularly through the commitment and example of the men like Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul demonstrated that they valued, they considered as of first importance the revelation, communication and application of the Word of God.

Now, as we close on this first of four values to which we must resolve to pursue if we would be in the heart of God’s will, I wish to ask and answer this very practical question; how can we know for certain what it is we truly value? I doubt that any one of us would dare to say, much less think so lowly of our priorities as to say that we do not value God’s Word; but as I asked

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before, can it be honestly said of you that you value the Word of God, not just because you say so, but because you live so? What does valuing the Word of God look like?

Some might try to answer that by saying that the word of God is a priority in life. That sounds good, right! To say, “God and His Word are a priority in my life.” What is more spiritual and more noble than making God and His Word a priority in your life? We sometimes confuse or mistake valuing something with making that a priority. I would like to suggest to you that from the example of our text, as well as from the entire book of Acts, and from Scripture itself, God and His Word are to be more than “a” priority in your life but rather God and His Word are to be “the” center of your life. What do I mean? What is the difference between making God and His Word “a” priority versus making such “the” center?

Most of us have been programmed to live our lives via a list of priorities. We make a list of items, and then we order them in matter of importance; generally attacking the first item, then marking it off so as to go after the next until we work our way through the list. Now, if I were to ask most of you to give me your list of priorities in life, the general “list” would almost universally look something like this:

1. God
2. Family
3. Job
4. Some hobby/activity, etc...

I would like to suggest to you that as noble as such a list looks, it is not honoring to God, nor will it ever put you in the heart of God’s will. When we put God first on our list with the other things to follow, we do so with great confidence and authority, believing that these are the priorities that we model in our lives. But let me tell you the first of two truths, the first truth being the ugly truth; that few of us actually live according to our list of priorities. If you really want to know what your priorities are in life; then I would ask you to look at where you invest your time and money. As I heard one preacher put it, “Show me your checkbook and I will tell you what you value!” I might add, “Show me your calendar, your schedule of past and coming activities from the time you rise in the morning until you lay your head down to rest, and I will tell you what you value. These are the things that show you the real priorities of your life.

But there is a second truth and it is this; that living your life in a prioritized system, that list, mental or written, causes you to live your life in blocks of time, separated from each other. Think about it! You have your God block, that time set apart for reading God’s Word, for dedicated prayer, study, and church time. These are supposed to reveal that God is first in your life. Sometimes I wonder if our God blocks really do reveal God’s importance in our life. After the God block we have a family block; or a me time block. There is of course the Job block, that 40, 50, 60 hours a week at work. Then we have our passions, our real loves, our hobby time. You might be thinking, what is wrong with this system. Generally speaking, these blocks of time we set up are generally isolated from one another. We do not do our Bible study and prayer time in the middle of our job; we do not want to bring our jobs into the middle of our family time; you get the point. This is the way we tend to think. But by living this way, we subtly separate God from the other areas of our lives, sometimes so much so that He has little to do with our family, our job, our hobbies and the like.

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So let me make a shocking statement; one that I want you to take to heart; to ponder and to digest. Here it is; God does not want to be your first priority! God does not even want to be found on your list of priorities. I know I sound radical, but if God is on some mental or written list of priorities, then I can safely say that you do not value Him or His Word as you ought. Why? Because I know, by my own experience and the experience shared by many others, that if God is on a list of priorities in our life, then once you have honored the God block of time; once you have gone to church, or read your Bible, or finished some Bible study, or prayed; then you can mark Him off your to do list for the day. You can then move on to other things of importance, like work, family, or play. Beloved, the person that “moves on” to other things will inevitably leave God behind.

Thus, I offer you this truth, something that was so clearly modeled in the early church, so vividly portrayed in the lives of people like the men listed in our text. God does not intend to be number one on your list of priorities; rather He intends to be the “center” of all that you do. Please look with me at Ephesians 1:18-23. This is a great prayer of Paul, who is Saul in our Acts text. Notice as I read this prayer that Paul prays for these believers not to have Jesus be the first or primary consideration in a list of things in their lives, but rather he prays that Jesus be the preeminent, predominant, and all permeating focus or center of their lives.

***18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might 20 which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And He [God the Father] put all things in subjection under His [God the Son's] feet, and gave Him [God the Son] as head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.***

You have heard me quote Colossians 1:18 many times from this pulpit. This verse says, ***“He [Jesus] is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.”*** Having “first place in everything” may sound like Jesus is to be on the top of our list of priorities. But the phrase translated “first place” – “*proteuon*” – means not only first in rank, but also first in influence. Jesus is to be the influence and flavor, the very center and focus of anything and everything you do.

So I had asked you earlier, how can you know if you value God and His Word. We know we value God and His Word not when we can say that we spend our 30 minutes each morning in Bible Study and prayer; or that we faithfully attend church every Sunday, but we know we value God and His Word when we see Jesus influencing everything we do; when what matters to Him always; matters to us always; when what Jesus would do or say in any and every circumstance becomes what we do or say. And thus, like last week, as we spoke on being resolved to life to the glory of God; to see the character and purpose of God shine in and through all that we do so that He receives the honor and prestige in all that we do; what we see here in the lives of these men who faithfully preached and taught the Word of God, and what we see then in the lives of the

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congregation of those in the church at Antioch, is not simply a resolve to glorify God, but a resolve to glorify God by being in the heart of God’s will; which all begins by hearing and heeding God’s Word.

Beloved, God does not intend that He and His Word be “a” priority in your life; He intends to be the “center” of your life; to be involved and influencing every area of your life, family, job, recreation, struggles, successes, in all things, good or bad, He is there and intends to be involved and influencing you. This is how God rightly rules in our lives – as the “center” of it all.

So then, if we would be a church and a people in the heart of God’s will, it begins by being resolved to hear and to heed His Word so that His Word can influence and guide us in everything we do; so that Jesus, who bought you with a price by shedding His blood on the cross in your place, might not just be on your list of things to do in life, but rather that He simply is your life. This is what it means to value God and His Word. This is the first step and next week we will digest the other things we are to value. Let us pray.

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*Soli Deo Gloria*

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