

February 11, 2024

God's Good News Story: The Church Alive & Growing
The Book of Acts Pt 2 - Discerning God's Will

We continue today with our theme for 2024 is God's Good News Story Pt.2 ... ***"The Church Alive & Growing"***.

We have been looking at the basic idea and descriptions of the Church as found in the Book of Acts. It is a COMMUNITY, which requires COMMITMENT. The Church is a Fellowship, a Family, a Body, a Flock, and an Army. Last week we followed that up by discovering the true call, purpose and power of the Church as found in the Book of Acts... That is to be Powerful Witnesses of God's Good News Story motivated by love and accomplished empowered by the Holy Spirit! We pick up where we lift off last week. It appears to be day 40 after the resurrection and Jesus was gathered with his followers on Mt. Olivet about ¾ miles or so outside of Jerusalem. They obviously knew something different was coming or going to happen. Then they asked Jesus a burning question on their minds **Acts 1:6-8**... *6 So, when they had come together, they began asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time that You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" 7 But He said to them, "It is not for you to know periods of time or appointed times which the Father has set by His own authority; 8 but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and as far as the remotest part of the earth."*

Jesus refocuses their attention off THEIR AGENDA (knowing the end times schedule) and onto the true call, purpose and power of the Church can be found in the Book of Acts... *To be Powerful Witnesses of God's Good News Story, motivated by love and empowered of the Holy Spirit!*

Let's pick up from there with the Ascension and then see how the early Church began to make decisions and move forward with Jesus' call to action.

Acts 1: 9-26... *⁹ And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were watching, and a cloud took Him up, out of their sight. ¹⁰ And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, then behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them, ¹¹ and they said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."*

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mountain called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ When they had entered the city, they went up to the upstairs room where they were staying, that is, Peter, John, James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴ All these were continually devoting themselves with one mind to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. ¹⁵ At this time Peter stood up among the brothers and sisters (a group of about 120 people was there together), and said, ¹⁶ "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled,

which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.¹⁷ For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry.”¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out.¹⁹ And it became known to all the residents of Jerusalem; as a result, that field was called Hakeldama in their own language, that is, Field of Blood.)²⁰ “For it is written in the book of Psalms:

‘May his residence be made desolate’; “And may there be none living in it’; and “May another take his office”. (Psalms 69:25 & Ps. 109:8)

²¹ Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—²² beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.”²³ So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), & Matthias.²⁴ And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all people, show which one of these two You have chosen²⁵ to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.”²⁶ And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the 11 apostles.

Just like last week there is a lot of material and things we could discuss in more detail, but I would like for us to focus on the first act or decision that the early church leaders had to make. We can learn some valuable and practical guidance on making decisions and discerning God’s will.

Making decisions is a daily task for everyone. Some decisions are seemingly minor whereas others have the potential of being life-altering. It is comforting to know that God teaches us some basic principles for decision making, both as individuals but also as a church. From this and other passages it is clear that God wants you to know His will about important decisions in your life. A key foundation fact is that we need to put together finding God’s will with the advancing God’s Kingdom. Automatically that rules out any decision or act that directly goes against what God has already revealed to us in His Word, the Bible.

Let’s recap and set the stage...

Jesus has ascended, the disciples are back in the Upper Room and come to the awareness that they were missing someone... a key leader someone... Judas. Jesus made a specific choice to select 12 Apostles to be the leadership foundation for the church. The number 12 was not arbitrary or optional. The scriptures clearly teach that there were 12 Tribes in Israel, and Revelation teaches us that the 12 Apostles will judge in the end times. So, they needed to fill the scriptural and vitally important “12th Man” office.

A Quick overview is that Peter states that the person must have been an eyewitness follower of Christ’s life, ministry, resurrection, and ascension). This is part of the description of an Apostle i.e....one who has actually seen the life and ministry of Jesus and is an expert witness of those events and is “sent to tell those events”.

If one takes this definition strictly, it means that after the deaths of the original eyewitnesses of Jesus, none could ever again be technically considered an “Apostle”.

A key reason for the eyewitness necessity is that “Christianity is founded on the historical resurrection of Jesus, and those who first proclaimed it had to be trustworthy and informed ‘expert witnesses’.” (Merida)

With that in mind let’s remind ourselves that the primary reason for this particular story here in Acts, is not simply just to be able to discern God’s will, even though that is our practical goal today. We must look at the bigger goal of informing us of how God sovereignly works to advance His Kingdom Mission. Remember it is always His Mission that is the point, discerning His will is just a step in accomplishing that end. Thankfully, the two go hand in hand.

With that in mind, let’s look at a key point in discerning God’s will so that we can advance His Kingdom Mission.

We must distinguish between God’s Revealed Will and His Concealed Will

Let’s start with understanding His **Revealed Will**, since it has already been ‘revealed’ to us! Makes sense right. Lol. The revealed will of God is that knowledge, teaching, and principles which has been recorded for in in the Holy Bible. In the Bible we have recorded or revealed to us the very heart and passion of God. In the Bible God has revealed for us everything necessary for our salvation and redemption. Which means we don’t need to debate or wonder about things like:

Sharing the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, Making Disciples, praying, living holy lives, bearing fruit, caring of the widows, orphans and the needy, etc. I think you would agree that we have more than enough of the ‘revealed will of God’ to keep us busy.

But realistically, the Bible does not try to, nor need to, give specific directions for every single decision or event that might ever come up in all of time. That would make us puppet-like and with no need for responsible discernment. We would just be Rule Followers, rather than Relational Disciples.

I will address the Concealed Will in the following points:

Let’s see what we can learn about

Decision Making From The Example Of The Early Church.

1. Consult God Earnestly Through Prayer

Acts 1:14... All these were continually devoting themselves with one mind to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

2. Trust the Bible as Your Authority & Act Accordingly

These early church members demonstrated their allegiance to and reliance upon the Holy Scriptures in this first test of decision making. We see the example of these church members submitting their lives, circumstances, and direction to God’s Word. (Merida, p. 17)

This group of around 120 people listen to Peter say in Acts 1:1... *“Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.*

These early church member trusting that God’s Word was true and inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus was a trustworthy guide to follow to make their decisions. In this same chapter we see that even Judas’s betrayal was Biblically prophesied and documented. It is sensible to deduce that Peter and the other church members believed that the Bible is a responsible documents to provide interpretation and perspective in making decisions.

It is imperative that we understand that God wants us to give priority to His revealed Word that is recorded for us in the Holy Scriptures. In the Scriptures we have a bountiful resource of ready-made guidelines and principles to follow for many decision-making actions.

Praying and consulting God’s Word, the Bible is the first two steps. But we all must realize, as I stated before, God doesn’t spoon-feed us everything. We must, as maturing, responsible Church Members, realize that God wants to **WALK AND WORK** with us to determine and discern **HIS** best actions to take in any given circumstance. When we don’t seem to have clear and specific directions in the Bible, it is time for the next point.

3. Look For God’s Concealed Will Through the Lens of God’s Revealed Will

Obviously, by Concealed Will, I mean God’s Will that is not clearly revealed in the written Word of God, but is ‘concealed’ in general principles, teaching, and examples from which we can ascertain what God would be expected to say if this specific circumstance had been addressed in Scripture.

So, how do we go about revealing God’s guidance in these situations...

a. Prayerfully, Skillfully and Cooperatively Gather Information Concerning the Issue

As I mentioned earlier these early Church Members were well versed in the Bible (Old Testament) and God’s choice to have 12 Tribes and 12 Apostles. They also were aware of the revealed prophecies concerning the betrayal of Jesus and the need to replace him so that the full complement of 12 leaders would stay intact. Also, they must have understood from Jesus what an APOSTLE and their role really is.

We see this established in Acts 1:1,2...

¹The first account I composed, Theophilus, (Gospel of Luke) about all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had given orders by the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen.

The word Apostle comes from the Greek...

<652> ἀπόστολος *Apostolos*. **Meaning:** a messenger, one sent on a mission, an apostle. **Usage:** apostle (19), apostles (52), apostles '(5), messenger (1), messengers (1), is sent (1). (BibleWorks Software)

Jesus Himself called these 12 men Apostles and obviously spent around three years training and mentoring them to take over the leadership of the new Church. So, they understood that their key task was to **“GO” (be sent) to be witnesses and disciple-makers!** We can logically deduce that they would have a good understanding of their role as Apostles. We can deduce ourselves from their remarks that they understood that an Apostle was also one who had been an eyewitness of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. So with that information *“revealed to them by Jesus”* they were able to *“unconceal”* the additional information that they needed to replace Judas with someone who had been with Jesus and was an eyewitness. Thus they did their research and the information gathered revealed to potential candidates. Now, the question is, Which One is God’s Choice?”. Well, they choose to follow the Old Testament scriptural pattern of ‘casting lots’. WHOA! That brings up a rather challenging situation. IS this passage teaching that we should cast lots or rely on ‘chance’ for making decisions... the answer is NO! Remember, this is pre-Pentecost and the Holy Spirit was not residing permanently with all believers at this point the same way He will be in about 10 days from this point when Pentecost will bring the Holy Spirit to every believer. These early church members appear to simply be following what had been **“REVEALED”** to them in the Old Testament. The Old Testament belief was that God was in charge of every outcome, so what really is the key point is that these believers were following the Biblical procedure of seeking to have God guide and decide. **That leads to the 2nd sub-point>>>**

b. Trust in God’s Sovereignty Through His Holy Spirit’s Guidance, Make a Decision and Go With It

They trusted in God to give the right outcome. They cast lots and trusted God’s hand in the matter and made a decision to choose and go with Matthias. As a logical and theological sound deduction, we now, living in a post-Pentecost environment, no longer need to follow a temporary policy of ‘*casting lots*’, but now we can seek God’s direction directly through the Holy Spirit. The end result is still the same, **God’s will sought and determined!**

The simple summary is this:

Seek God, Trust God, Make A Decision and Go With It.

Now is this approach always guaranteed to produce the accurate will of God in every single situation? Honestly, maybe not. How can I say that? There is no doubt that God can be trusted and never fails. But God has chosen to give fallible humans creative and governmental input. That leaves open a slight chance that we may not always make the best choice, but it is still the best way to go about decision-making. God is merciful and understands. If we are sincere and intention seek God with our whole hearts, He will lead us to correct any previous missteps. God in His Providential Will can be trusted, and He will prevail. **We must learn to trust in the Father’s Love & Sovereignty. Pray, Do your Homework, Seek Guidance from God’s Word and God’s People and let the Kingdom Mission of God guide your decisions, then Boldly Act. Do it for the Glory of God, in Jesus’ Name and by the power of the Holy Spirit!**

(Some Information from “*Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary on Acts*” by Tony Merida)