

Text: Acts 16:1-15

My purpose for this message: To show believers that in making important decisions we should both exercise wisdom and listen to God's leading.
Delivered: March 14, 2004 @ KEFC by Keith Rohrer

Should We Plan, or Listen to God?

An incredible thing happened Thursday night when 60% of our members met about buying land, and by secret ballot all 84 voted “yes!” In prayer meetings we regularly pray for unity. I never imagined such a vivid answer. I praise God that He is more able to *do*, than I am able to *imagine*.

Now we'll spend another 8 months making sure there are no obstacles left. After the purchase and other costs, we'll have maybe \$120,000 left in our Expansion Fund. That's a great start, but a drop in the bucket compared to what we'll need to start building—especially when we require 75% cash to start construction. We don't do capital campaigns here or twist your arm to give. We simply ask you to pray, and give accordingly. FYI, the next monthly expansion offering is March 28.

Whether it's a church, a business, a couple, a family, or an individual, we all have to make important decisions. How should Christians make them: should I plan or try somehow to listen to God?

Marriage: should you plan, or listen to God?

Changing jobs—even relocating: should you plan, or listen to God?

Investing (after watching stock market for the last 4 years): should you plan, or listen to God?

Church plant: Should we plan, or listen to God?

Possible college next year: should you plan, or listen to God? READ Acts 16:1-15.

PRAY.

Here are 3 “snapshots” that give us some insight on planning, and God's leading. Some people think God no longer speaks, so they make their own plans as smartly as they can. Others fear that planning *itself*, leaves God out of the equation. We should instead ask—and expect—him to speak to us. Should we plan, or listen to God? “Yes!”

1. Snapshot #1: Planning by God-given Wisdom. 1-5

2nd missionary trip: In Lystra Paul hears about a maturing young Christian they think shows great promise for ministry. So Paul invites him to join his missionary team, “*after you've been circumcised.*” (Circumcision is a surgical procedure requiring good anesthetic! Circumcision's still done for health purposes. But its origins are religious.)

Why have him circumcised? Paul got upset when people demanded circumcision. Even though it was God's idea. He first asked it of Abram, the first Jew. “You, all males in your household, all your descendants, are to have this *signature* to my covenant. *I* promise to bless you, and you promise to obey Me, and this is your sign (Gen.17:1-14). Circumcision mattered so much to God that when Moses failed to circumcise his son, God moved to kill him (Ex.4:25). His wife's quick action saved him.

But God's expectation of circumcision ended with Jesus' death and resurrection. For Jesus *fulfilled* the covenant. So, Paul attacked circumcision supporters (Gal.2:12). READ Gal.5:2-3. Then Gal.2:3.

So, why would *he* circumcise anyone? Or, why Timothy, and not Titus? Titus was a Gentile. Circumcision would make him a *Jewish* Christian and Paul knew that this Jewish sign would add *nothing* to his faith. But Timothy had a Jewish mother, and had been raised Jewish. To Gentiles he was Jewish. But not to Jews without circumcision.

So even though God didn't order this, Paul probably thought, "You know, I'll bet that when we talk to Jews about Jesus, they'll be more interested if they know their Jewish evangelist is circumcised." So, he made a decision, made plans, based on what seemed wise to him. Prov. 9:10: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.* So in 1 Cor.16:4 Paul mulls over the possibility of accompanying men taking an offering to Jerusalem: *If it seems advisable [fitting or worthy] for me to go also...* Simple planning as elsewhere.

Snapshot #2: Planning by God-given Speech. 6-10

But what if my plan is wrong? Maybe it's not cultural sensitivity like Paul used with Timothy, but a question like "who should I marry?" or "Should I move my family across the country" or "Should I participate in this ministry?" or "Should I join the military?" Can I make the wrong choice if I only make plans myself?

Leaving Pisidian Antioch, Paul was set to head southwest for Asia's bustling seaport of Ephesus (still part of Turkey today). That was his plan. But he was (...*kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia*", v.6). It may have been as terrifying as a voice from heaven, as simple as a prophecy from Silas, Timothy or someone else, or as simple as being turned back at a Roman checkpoint.

Paul apparently didn't agonize over it, saying, "Oh, man, I really wanted to go down there; I wonder what God's trying to tell me!" Instead, he just set out another direction. Looking at his map he concluded, "Well, up around the Black sea there are a lot of wealthy people so maybe I should go reach them." So off he went toward Bithynia. (Incidentally, more and more mission efforts are being strategically targeted on the rich and the upper classes in countries. For traditionally, they've been neglected. Yet it is precisely that class that can most greatly affect the entire culture and nation.)

But apparently Bithynia was out too. *When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to [7].* Again, we don't know how, but God stopped Paul in his tracks. Rather than wrestling with his sanctification (is God *mad* at me for something!?), Paul simply went toward the one place he could go: Troas, and got a good night's sleep. Except for the dream.

In it, a man from Macedonia begged them to come and help them [9]. That was all it took. The band concluded, "Well, that must mean we're to go to Macedonia" and off they went. No agonizing, wondering, "Now what does this mean?"

In 1987 I was in La Mirada, CA visiting Talbot seminary. At home I had an acceptance letter from Trinity and they wanted an answer in 2 weeks. Many of you know that the next morning after I arrived, the area was jolted by an earthquake that measured 6.3, and killed one person in Pasadena.

After my visit to the school, friends attending Fuller seminary picked me up and I stayed with them overnight before flying back to Lancaster. During the night, I got awake about 3 and couldn't sleep. I was just agonizing over this decision of where to go to school. I liked Talbot, I liked the weather, but since I was planning to minister in the free church, TEDS seemed wise. I prayed for a half hour, assuring God I'd go anywhere

he wanted, I just wanted to know for sure. In desperation I finally prayed for a sign. Within 60 seconds an aftershock hit that we learned later was measured at 6.0. An hour later I was back in bed asking God, “OK..., so what did that mean? Come here, or go there?”

Paul and his team just packed up and left. No wrangling. If some of you can identify, perhaps we are so accustomed to doing things our way that when we come to an impasse and in desperation seek God’s guidance, it’s such an unfamiliar tact, that we either miss what God is saying, or overanalyze it. In hindsight, I’m not sure either choice would have been wrong, but an aftershock probably more likely means “run” than “stay!” Although because we are humans hampered by sin and the sinful world, God is not operating a shell game to see if he can confuse us about his will. He’s more anxious than we are, that we hear his leading.

Snapshot #3: Planning by God-given Wisdom. 11-15

And finally, one last snapshot. The missionaries made their way by Troas, through Samothrace and Neopolis, finally arriving at: Philippi, a key Macedonian city.

Looking about, they saw no synagogue to attend so they headed for a river (Gangas). To put up a synagogue in a city in those days, required at least 10 Jewish men to participate. So Jews were scarce in this city. But Paul still believed, “Instead of starting with Macedonian pagans who worship Diana, I want to find God-fearing people who might be open to hearing about Jesus.”

And Paul knew the custom of Jews and Gentile God-fearers everywhere was to meet by a local river on the Sabbath. Like his decision to circumcise, this too is a human plan. No dreams, no supernatural POSTED signs.

Sure enough, they met a group of women. No men apparently. Paul began to preach. For many of us, this marks the spiritual stump of our family tree. For this was the first time the gospel was preached in Europe—here in what’s now Greece. And many of us have European roots. Aren’t you glad Paul heeded God?

As Paul preached, God moved in the heart of Lydia. She was a purple fabric wholesaler. Her product was restricted to the wealthy so presumably she was well off. *The Lord opened her heart to respond to the message (14)*. Here’s another reminder of Jesus’ words in Jn.6:44: *No one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws him.*

When they realized she and her household members had surrendered to Christ, all were baptized and missionaries stayed with her for a while. First European converts. Because Paul looked for the most likely spot to find God-fearers. There was no revelation from heaven, no supernatural intervention, etc. Just human planning with the Holy Spirit.

Concl:

Should I plan? Yes! Should I listen to God? Yes! Most of us don’t think much about God when we schedule a lunch, business meeting, basketball game, or other relatively inconsequential activities. But give us big decisions to make and as Christians, sometimes we’re not sure what our role is, what our job is, to choose. Should we choose or should God?

God offers us wisdom (Prov.1-4: above all else, get wisdom). Not just knowledge, but wisdom. Wisdom is using knowledge in a godly fashion.

However, we would be foolish to assume that God does not—or will not—guide us in important—or even what seem *unimportant* at the time—decisions. God *does* still speak. Usually not verbally; at least he has never to me. But sometimes he speaks powerfully through other's opinions. Or through some remarkable circumstances (you know the kind: they bear all sorts of divine fingerprints). Or the Word of God itself gives us insight.

Most of you would much prefer 6 particulars to know God's will to what I've just given you. But God is more interested in you than he is in your big decisions. What I mean is, He wants you walking in close, sweet fellowship more than he wants you to know the particulars about cannot divorce understanding what would please God from walking faithfully with Him day in and day out. READ Rom.12:1-3.