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Sermon Brief
Text: Acts 16:6-10
Title: Seeking God's Will
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

One seeks to know God's will throughout his or her entire journey of faith. The will of God has many aspects that each of us needs to seek to discover and then to follow. The topic "God's will" covers daily living in terms of our behavior, our relationships to other people, and most importantly our sense of being led through each day by the Spirit of God. But also included under the label of "God's will" is a sense of calling in ministry. Here one discovers a career along with a job location at any given moment of time. As dedicated believers in Christ, we become a business person -- or whatever -- out of a sense of God's leadership in our lives. We seek His guidance in where to locate this business and also in how to operate this business. Everything we do as a business person should flow from God leading us. The scriptures make this abundantly clear in places such as James 4:13-17.

13 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." 14 Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 15 Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." 16 As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. 17 Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

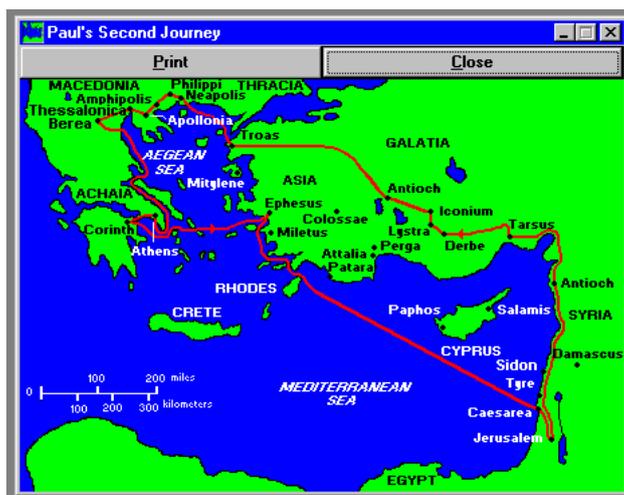
But discovering that direction from God is not always easy and simple. Often God tests us at the point of our trust in His leadership by not making the way clear to us until the last minute. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "we walk by faith, not by sight."¹ This often means a 'step into the dark' where we can't see what lies ahead in our life. Yet our commitment is to God and to follow His leadership wherever it may take us.

When Paul made this statement about walking in faith rather than in sight to the Corinthians in the middle 50s of the first century, he was speaking out of personal experience. Several years before on the second missionary journey, he and Silas made an important discovery about finding God's will in ministry. Luke describes this in Acts 16:6-10. Turn with me to this text and hear the words of scripture today.

6 They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; 8 so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.²

This is one of the most interesting passages in the New Testament. Some folks read it and focus on Paul's vision of the 'man from Macedonia.' But this is not the main point of the text. Rather, the point of Luke's narrative is to describe the process of searching for God's leadership as to where to do missionary work. Some geography understanding is essential to grasping the point of the text. Paul and Silas had left Antioch in Syria first to revisit the churches of Galatia³ that had been established on the first missionary journey (cf. Acts 13:13-14:28).

Once they completed this visit giving encourage-



¹2 Cor. 5:7

²GNT: 16.6 Διήλθον δὲ τὴν Φρυγίαν καὶ Γαλατικὴν χώραν κωλυθέντες ὑπὸ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος λαλῆσαι τὸν λόγον ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ· 16.7 ἐλθόντες δὲ κατὰ τὴν Μυσίαν ἐπέιραζον εἰς τὴν Βιθυνίαν πορευθῆναι, καὶ οὐκ εἶασεν αὐτοὺς τὸ πνεῦμα Ἰησοῦ· 16.8 παρελθόντες δὲ τὴν Μυσίαν κατέβησαν εἰς Τρωάδα. 16.9 καὶ ὄραμα διὰ τῆς νυκτὸς τῷ Παύλῳ ὄφθη, ἀνὴρ Μακεδῶν τις ἦν ἐστὼς καὶ παρακαλῶν αὐτὸν καὶ λέγων, Διαβὰς εἰς Μακεδοῦναι βοήθησον ἡμῖν. 16.10 ὡς δὲ τὸ ὄραμα εἶδεν, εὐθέως ἐζήτησαμεν ἐξελθεῖν εἰς Μακεδοῦναι συμβιβάζοντες ὅτι προσκέκληται ἡμᾶς ὁ θεὸς εὐαγγελίσασθαι αὐτοὺς.

³The ancient Roman province of Galatia is located in the south central region of the modern country of Turkey.

ment to these churches,⁴ the decision before them then was where to go next. While in Lystra they picked up a young assistant named Timothy who joined the missionary team. Now these three missionaries were faced with whether to continue going westward toward Ephesus in the province of Asia,⁵ whether to turn northward in the direction Bithynia along the Black Sea or perhaps to go in some other direction. Luke says in verse six that they passed through the ethnic region called Phrygia / Galatia, which lay in the western sector of the political province of Galatia and at the eastern edge of the province of Asia.



His language, “having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia,”⁶ clearly asserts that their first intention was to continue on westward toward Ephesus. Their initial impression of God’s will led them this direction, but God closed the door with instructions that this wasn’t the time to evangelize in the province of Asia. On the third missionary journey, some four or five years later, this door would be open so that he and Silas would journey through Galatia and continue on westward all the way to the coast where Ephesus was.⁷ When God turned them away from Asia, they headed northward through the ethnic region of Phrygia / Galatia on the border between the provinces of Asia and Galatia. After traveling through the central region of modern Turkey from the south to the north, they came to the south edge of the Roman province of Bithynia which lay on the coastal area of the Black Sea. Thinking that this was where God wanted them to evangelize, they moved toward this region but once again God closed the door to Bithynia as a place to preach the Gospel.

Twice now the door had been closed to these missionaries. Where were they supposed to go? Sensing a signal from the Lord, these missionaries again turned westward and entered into the Roman province of Mysia in the northwestern sector of modern Turkey. The green light came from the Lord for them to continue in this direction and they eventually landed in the ancient city of Troas. When they had left Lystra several weeks earlier, they had no idea where they would eventually land. Through a zig zag pattern of travel, they went from the south central part of Turkey to the northwestern coast. What lay ahead of them was even more surprising.

While at Troas Paul had a dream while he was sleeping⁸ and in this dream he saw a man motioning and saying to Paul to come across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia to preach the gospel there. Many are convinced that the man Paul saw in his dream was Luke. This is in part prompted by a shift in the narrative by Luke in verse ten. Everything up this point was written from the vantage point of ‘they.’ But beginning in verse ten the perspective shifts to ‘we.’⁹ Luke joined the group of missionaries at this point and will remain with Paul to the end of Paul’s life in the middle 60s, some fourteen or so years. When the three missionaries crossed over into Macedonia they discovered God’s will for them in their evangelizing the pagan world. With this the gospel made an entry into Europe and this would have staggering impact on the history of the European continent for the coming centuries.

What can we learn from this? Quite a lot actually. One of the most famous and influential sermons in the first half of the twentieth century in the US was preached from this text: “Handling Life’s Second Best” by Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, delivered on Oct. 29, 1922 at the Riverside Church in New York City. Thousands of individuals have been helped and encouraged by Dr. Fosdick’s sermon from this passage.

The passage in Acts 16 reminds us of numerous aspects of Christian living that we dare not forget or overlook. The one thing that I want to stress today from this text relates to the nature of seeking God’s will in

⁴Acts 16:1-5 (NRSV): “1 Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. 2 He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.”

⁵In the English Bible translation pattern the ancient Roman province of Asia (Ἀσία) is normally translated as ‘Asia Minor’ in order to distinguish it from the term ‘Asia’ in reference to the Orient.

⁶GNT: κωλυθέντες ὑπὸ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος λαλῆσαι τὸν λόγον ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ

⁷Cf. Acts 18:22-23 and 19:1 (NRSV): “22 When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. 23 After spending some time there he departed and went from place to place through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.” and “1 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples.”

⁸GNT: ὄραμα διὰ τῆς νυκτὸς

⁹The first person ‘we’ perspective will be found in 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16. This constitutes the so-called “We-narratives” or “Travel Log” texts signaling that the author of Acts became a traveling companion of Paul, Silas, and Timothy in Macedonia on the second missionary journey.

our lives and in ministry. Two points are important to understand.

BODY

I. The will of God in ministry is ever shifting, vv. 6-8.

6 They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; 8 so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

16.6 Διήλθον δὲ τὴν Φρυγίαν καὶ Γαλατικὴν χώραν κωλυθέντες ὑπὸ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος λαλῆσαι τὸν λόγον ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ· 16.7 ἐλθόντες δὲ κατὰ τὴν Μυσίαν ἐπέειραζον εἰς τὴν Βιθυνίαν πορευθῆναι, καὶ οὐκ εἴασεν αὐτοὺς τὸ πνεῦμα Ἰησοῦ· 16.8 παρελθόντες δὲ τὴν Μυσίαν κατέβησαν εἰς Τρωάδα.

When Paul, Silas, and Timothy finished revisiting the churches of Galatia, they knew God had further ministry in mind for them. And they were committed to doing this work. The challenge was to find where God wanted them to be. The natural direction was simply to travel along one of the two major routes that led through Galatia westward through the province of Asia to the coastal region where Ephesus lay. Several important towns such as Colossae and Hieropolis lay along this route and would be good places to preach the gospel. Large Jewish settlements existed in this region and would serve as the starting point in planting new Christian congregations. The missions strategy in new towns and cities was to preach the Gospel first in the Jewish synagogues and afterwards to the non-Jews in the area (cf. Rom. 1:16). This plan had worked well on the first missionary journey in Galatia (cf. Acts 13:1-14:28). This region seemed to be a natural for such ministry, and these missionaries were committed to ministry there. But God had a different timing in mind. The early 50s wasn't yet when God wanted them there. He had other plans in mind. As they moved northward toward Bithynia and Pontus along the Black Sea again God closed the door for ministry to them. I'm quite sure that by this point these men were beginning to wonder where in the world God wanted them to go. What they were to be doing, "speak the word" (λαλῆσαι τὸν λόγον), was very clear. The unanswered question was Where? The first place wasn't right, and now the second place wasn't correct either. So they headed westward into the region of Mysia to its chief seaport city Troas, hoping that this was where they were to preach the Gospel message.¹⁰ Whether or not they had opportunity to establish a church in Troas at this point is unclear. But more importantly it was here that these missionaries discovered God's plan for them in preaching the Gospel.

What can we learn about God's will from this? For one thing, **God's plan for our lives is more often fluid, rather than static.** Rarely does God call us to serve Him in one place throughout our entire spiritual journey. To be sure, it does happen. I know this out of my own family's experience. My father came to know Christ as a young boy in the late 1920s through the Baptist church in Perrin, Texas. When he passed away in 1991 -- well over 60 years later -- he was an active leader in that same church in Perrin, and this was the only church he ever belonged to all his life. God planted his life in that congregation and kept him there throughout his entire spiritual journey.

But with me, the case has been entirely different. I came to Christ in 1947 in that very same church, and was baptized by the same pastor who had earlier baptized both my father and mother. But my spiritual journey took me away from Perrin in 1960 and I have not been a part of that church, except for three times as interim pastor, since then. From that time ministry and service has taken place in Texas and North Carolina as well as in France and Germany. The longest time that God has left me in one place was at Southwestern Baptist Seminary in Fort Worth where I served some twenty-three plus years. And in pastoral ministry the longest at Springdale Baptist Church in Fort Worth for six years. The Lord has taken me to two different continents to preach the Gospel during these fifty plus years of ministry.

Another important lesson from these verses is simply that **we must always be open to God's leading in our lives.** What emerges from this text is that Paul, Silas, and Timothy were careful to seek and then to follow God's leadership in ministry. The verbal expressions "having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit" (κωλυθέντες ὑπὸ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος) and "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (οὐκ εἴασεν αὐτοὺς τὸ πνεῦμα Ἰησοῦ) unquestionably indicate obedience to God's leadership in their lives. These men actively sought God's direction for ministry with a commitment to go only where God led them. The general nature of Luke's language here does not spell out in detail how God made His will known to them, apart from the designation of the prompting and leadership of His Spirit in their lives. Their initial projections of God's leading came through what seemed to be logical and natural in doing church planting: go where there is a large potential receptive audience to

¹⁰At what point a Christian church was established in Troas is unclear. Paul alludes to the opportunity to preach the Gospel there in 2 Cor. 2:12, "Well, when I came to the city of Troas to preach the Good News of Christ, the Lord gave me tremendous opportunities." But this reference clearly assumes the visit there on the third missionary journey in the mid 50s after he left Ephesus looking for Titus who was supposed to meet him either in Troas or somewhere in Macedonia. On the return leg of the third missionary journey Paul came through Troas and spent a week there encouraging a church already existing in the city, according to Acts 20:1-12.

hearing the Gospel.

But God does not always work off human logic. He can see a much larger picture than we can. The Lord knew that some four or five years later He would plant the apostle in Ephesus and leave him there for over two years in ministry -- the longest time that Paul stayed in any one place during his entire ministry. But now was not the right timing. That would come later. Instead, a more important opportunity for ministry was center stage for Paul and God had to make this clear to the apostle over the coming weeks and months.

God always sees the 'big picture' and we mostly can only see one small piece of that picture. Remember Paul's observation to the Corinthian believers, "[We walk by faith, not by sight](#)" (2 Cor. 5:7). Here is where faith comes in. Our Christian commitment is to follow God wherever He leads us. Thus we must always be ready to change locations in ministry as God leads.

Throughout our married life this has been the commitment of Claire and me. In the 1990s we began sensing that God's ministry for me at Southwestern Seminary was coming to an end. And we were prepared to move to wherever God wanted us to go. In the middle 90s it seemed at first that He wanted us to come to the Bethel Baptist Church in Frankfurt. But after discussions with the pastor search committee there over a six or seven week period, it became clear that this door was closed and not the right one for us. A little while after that came the opportunity to go to the North American Baptist Seminary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota to teach New Testament and Greek. But God closed that door as well. By 1996 we were seriously wondering where our ministry would be. The only thing that was clear was that it would no longer be at Southwestern Seminary. Completely 'out of the blue' with no forewarning at all there came in 1997 the invitation to join the faculty of Gardner-Webb University in western North Carolina. God gave the 'green light' for us to move from Texas to North Carolina. And so in December 1997 we made the move, not fully knowing just what to expect at this large Baptist university on the east coast of the US. For over two decades I had taught students at a masters and mostly at a doctoral level of studies. Now I was going to mostly teach younger, less mature students at a bachelor's level. The cultural difference between Texas and North Carolina was enormous -- much greater than between Texas and Germany. What I didn't know at the time -- and I'm glad that I didn't know -- was that during the next eleven years of ministry in North Carolina I would experience the most severe health problems of my entire life, problems that would bring me to the brink of dying. And yet through it all God would choose to spare my life and to teach me vital lessons about coping with ongoing severe levels of pain and struggling to regain my health. My preaching ministry would largely be put on the shelf during this time so that I could continue teaching in the midst of severe challenges with my health. North Carolina also brought dramatic changes in Claire's career directions as well. In Texas she had taught deaf children in elementary school, but in North Carolina she would shift over to becoming an elementary school librarian. This required doing a master's degree in her early 50s while teaching full time in the public schools. God had all kinds of surprises for us in North Carolina.

In 2007 we began seriously thinking about what to do in retirement. We had a nice home in Boiling Springs and knew that when retirement day came in the summer of 2010 we could continue living there. The stress and pressures of both our teaching jobs were rapidly increasing to a level beyond what we could handle successfully. In the back of our minds lay, however, a growing feeling that continuing to live in North Carolina was not going to be in God's plan for us. But what the alternative would be wasn't clear at all. Then in April of 2008 came the invitation from Jimmy Martin at the International Baptist Convention to consider coming to Cologne to help a struggling congregation get back on its feet so it could continue an important witness in this city. In dramatic fashion God miraculously opened the doors for us to come over for the summer to explore God's will and to help this church. God opened this door and so in December 2008 we made the move from North Carolina to Germany. Again, knowing this was God's will for the moment and not sure how long God would leave us in Germany. My hope was for a long time. But experience and scripture had taught me that only God can say 'forever.' Our task is to always be open to His leadership.

This past year of 2009 has seen dramatic blessings from God upon this church, confirming in our minds that we made the correct decision to come to Germany. But last September we began feeling with increasing conviction that the time of ministry to the IBC church in Cologne was coming to an end for us. With the growth of the church came increasing responsibilities and obligations. This is normal and basically a good thing. But these demands also have proven increasingly more than I am able to handle at 68 years plus and with the ongoing health battles that I fight each day. How would the church find a new pastor? How could they afford one? These were questions we put to the Lord over and over. We began discussions with the leaders of the IBC, along with many friends and family members back in the US. Step by step the Lord has given us complete peace and confirmation that He is able to provide for the needs of this church, and that I'm not to fret myself in worry over it.

When Paul and Barnabas reached the last town on the first missionary journey, God directed them to retrace their steps to revisit each church strengthening and encouraging them. Acts 14:23 contains a power-

fully insightful statement: “And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.” These missionaries helped complete the organization of each church, and then with prayer and fasting simply ‘entrusted them to the Lord.’ The Greek verb used here¹¹ literally means that in their minds and hearts these missionaries picked up the churches and put them in the Lord’s hands to take care of. This they did with each of the churches, as Luke makes clear from his use of the Aorist Tense verb form. They were at peace about moving on to new places of ministry because they knew that God could and would take care of these new, and sometimes struggling, congregations in Galatia.

About Christmas time God gave to Claire and me this same peace that the future of the IBC church in Cologne lay not in our hands but in God’s hands, and that He was committed to taking care of the church. So on December 27 we submitted our letter of resignation as pastor of the church to the church leadership. The resignation is to be effective upon the church’s calling of a new pastor and will become effective no later than Dec. 31 of 2010. In the discussions then and subsequently on Wednesday, Dec. 29, in a follow-up meeting, the leadership asked that we help the church find a new pastor. Preliminary efforts at this have already begun and God has already raised up one or two possible new pastors with keen interest in the church. These are pastors presently in the US who would have basic financial support in place from the US and would then be able to lead the church with the partial support that our church is presently able to provide. When the time comes during this year for the church to issue a call to a new pastor, then Claire and I will step aside from the pastoral leadership. We will continue living in Wesseling for the time being and will be available to assist the new pastor in transitioning into leading of church. I fully believe that God will perform another miracle in this church by enabling it to transition into a new pastoral leader without any break or gaps in leadership. This is not typical among the IBC churches, but as you all know the IBC church Cologne is not a typical church either.

Serving God is an adventure. Exciting, often challenging, always a walk of faith! But never dull or mundane. Never in my wildest imagination could I have anticipated the kind of ministry and the places of ministry that God has led me to over the past half century. Nor do we have a clear sense about where God is going to place us in the future. The one aspect that has become clear is that I must move into the fuller writing ministry that God has been impressing upon me for over thirty years. Greatly overdue writing contracts with publishers in the US need to be completed; I greatly need to resume the writing / editorial work with *Christ To The World Ministries* that impacts hundreds of thousands of people toward Christ all over the world. Where this will take place we do not yet know. We are waiting on God for this.

II. At the right timing God makes His desires known to His servants, vv. 9-10.

9 During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10 When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

16.9 καὶ ὄραμα διὰ τῆς νυκτὸς τῷ Παύλῳ ὤφθη, ἀνὴρ Μακεδόν τις ἦν ἐστῶς καὶ παρακαλῶν αὐτὸν καὶ λέγων, Διαβὰς εἰς Μακεδονίαν βοήθησον ἡμῖν. 16.10 ὡς δὲ τὸ ὄραμα εἶδεν, εὐθέως ἐζητήσαμεν ἐξελθεῖν εἰς Μακεδονίαν συμβιβάζοντες ὅτι προσκέκληται ἡμᾶς ὁ θεὸς εὐαγγελίσασθαι αὐτοῦς.

When Paul, Silas, and Timothy arrived in Troas, God opened the door for a new ministry across the Aegean Sea in the Roman province of Macedonia. Little did they realize just how significant this new ministry would be. The Gospel would reach the European continent and their establishing churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and elsewhere in Macedonia would launch one of the greatest expansions of Christianity in its entire history. It took God several weeks, and perhaps months, to get the missionaries situated to a place where they were ready to begin this new work. At each intersection of the journey, however, the Lord guided them from Galatia to Troas and then into Macedonia.

This is how the Lord works in leading His people. He knows the details of each step of the journey, but only paints out the broad, general strokes of the road map to us as we make that journey. That’s all of the ‘big picture’ we normally get to see. But, at each juncture of the road, when it comes time for us to make important decisions about when, where, and what to do in serving God, He reveals to us the necessary details so that we can make the correct decision. I have certainly found this to be true throughout all my spiritual journey with the Lord. Plus, the older I become the more I realize how much I really don’t need or want to know anything but the necessary details that enable me to correctly follow God’s leading.

The journey is a faith journey and we are challenged to continuously trust God and His leading of our lives. This was true of these missionaries in the early 50s of the first Christian century. It remains true for God’s people today. The so-called prophets who claim to be able to predict the future are a contradiction and denial of the faith based journey that God has designed. They want sight, not faith. And God says “Trust me!

¹¹παρέθεντο.

I will show you all you need to know and when you need to know it.”

How God chooses to do this is His choosing. And He has a variety of ways of making His will understood. Foundational to all of them is the Word of God. He has given us the treasure of divine revelation in scripture. This charts out the broad strokes of His will in clear, unmistakable fashion. Through prayer, dreams, intuition, developing convictions, the council of friends etc. He fills in the details as we need to know them. Through prayer and discussion with one another these three missionaries found the leadership of the Holy Spirit at Lystra and near Bithynia. At Troas God chose to reveal His will to Paul in a dream while the apostle was sleeping. God has all kinds of ways to make His will known to us.

Our challenge is to always be open and sensitive to what He is trying to say. It's not how God speaks to us that's important. What matters is what God says to us! And our developing conviction of that must always be tested by scripture. If it goes, contrary to what the Bible says, we know for sure that this conviction didn't come from God. As the apostle John admonishes us in 1 John 4:1, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

The decision that Claire and I have made has come about through much searching of scripture, along with much praying and discussion with trusted spiritual leaders that we have known over the years. We deeply believe God is leading in this. Because of that we look forward to the future. Not just to ours, but equally to the future of this church. It is bright and full of possibility for ministry and witness under the leadership of God's servant pastor.

CONCLUSION

Seeking God's will! A joy and an opportunity to experience God's hand in your life taking you into places of witness and ministry that you could never imagine. That was true for Paul, Silas, and Timothy in the early 50s of the beginning Christian century. It remains just as true today for each of us.