

Next Door: Unexpected Doors that Advance God's Story!

Week 2: The Door of a New Direction

I. We're in a series of messages entitled Next Door and the theme is that many times:

[Slide]: God uses unexpected doors to advance His story!

A. A physical door is symbolic of life in many ways. A door when operating by its design is a demarcation point but not a permanent one. It's a threshold that delineates one space from another. To physically walk through a door is to leave one space and enter another. Simplified it's a change of locale. Metaphorical doors in our lives represent new opportunities or challenges, but change is change. The only change I really enjoy is when I find it in the seat of my car! God so often uses unexpected doors because He's fully aware we as humans don't naturally gravitate toward change. Yet, change can be a necessary and good thing! We tend to hold onto what we know even if it's not working, or we don't like it, because at least it's seemingly predictable.

B. After the resurrection of Jesus and just before He ascended into heaven, He gathered His disciples one last time and gave them the plan:

Acts 1:8 [Slide]: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

1. The plan was to deploy people out to engage the mission as far as the ends of the earth and through chapter 8 of Acts there was yet to be any significant mobilization toward the overall mission. God put the early church through a door of distress and it scattered Christ-followers beyond Jerusalem. Look at Acts 8-10 in more detail when you can because some really important events occur. It begins on a microlevel with an Ethiopian Eunuch becoming a Christ-follower and a Roman Centurion named Cornelius getting saved. Sandwiched between these conversions, Saul who becomes the Apostle Paul entrusts his life to Christ! So the theme of these chapters is that people who should be way beyond the scope of getting saved are in fact the very people God loves to save.

One guy who persecuted Stephen and the early church, and two guys that were:

[Slide]: Gentiles!

II. God had to walk those early Christ-followers through an unexpected door that can be exciting and scary:

[Slide]: The Door of a New Direction

A. Do we know why the early church stalled out at the Jerusalem city limit sign? Sure, the early church was an exciting thing to be a part of. God was moving in Jerusalem despite the challenges. But the biggest boundary probably wasn't the internal pull of the community, it was a deep-seated conviction that Gentiles or non-Jewish people weren't worth it. It's impossible to understand the dynamics of the early church without understanding the cultural mindset of the Jewish world and the larger Greco-Roman Gentile world. We read Acts as the origination story of what we call the Big "C" Church. Those first Christ-followers weren't thinking about a door of new direction as much as the final chapter on what God had done before. Jesus was God's promised Messiah for the Jews. God wasn't starting something new; He was tying up the bow on Judaism. It was evident in their thinking that Jesus was coming back in their lifetime to bring judgement on the Gentile world. We must enter the 1st Century world to fully appreciate the text and understanding that those first Christ-followers were Jewish and even the Hellenized Jews didn't see themselves as being separate from the Jewish faith. They simply believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah of Judaism. They weren't wrong in their thinking. There was just more to the story!

B. We see in Acts 8-10 that the Holy Spirit's direction was a new direction, but of a formerly neglected plan. Way back in Genesis 15, God made a covenant with Abraham that God would use him to bless the nations. But in large part that plan had failed to happen. Even in Acts, the first Christ followers were having a difficult time wrapping their minds around loving and incorporating Gentiles into the community of faith. Both the Ethiopian and Cornelius are like pulling teeth to get a response, and we can sense the disorientation of Philip and Peter as they're engaging with these first Gentiles.

1. Once we get a feel for these first conversions of Gentiles on a microlevel, we can zoom back out along with the author of Acts, Luke, to appreciate what occurs in the City of Antioch.

Taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth was the plan all along, but for those in the moment it certainly felt like a door of new direction! 10 chapters into Acts the early church is about to launch into another gear by way of a new direction and the Apostles in Jerusalem finally get it:

Acts 10:34-36 [Slide]: 34 Peter began to speak: “Now I truly understand that God doesn’t show favoritism, 35 but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 He sent the message to the Israelites, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ- he is Lord of all.”

- a. Peter comes back to Jerusalem and tries to explain all that took place, and the other leadership doesn’t respond with joy initially. They couldn’t wrap their minds around Peter eating a meal with a Gentile.
The closest correlation would be like a Christian walking into a bar to connect with a non-believing co-worker. Eventually the leadership recognizes the beauty in what Peter is saying:

Acts 11:18 [Slide]: 18 When they heard this they became silent. And they glorified God, saying, “So then, God has given repentance resulting in life even to the Gentiles.”

- 2. A door of new direction that begins to crack open on a microlevel, burst wide open when the crew that had been scattered as a result of Stephen’s persecution, finally arrived in the booming City of Antioch. We talked through some details of Antioch last week, so I won’t do that in detail, but this was a bustling city. The 3rd largest in the Roman Empire, only behind Rome and Alexandria! It was the crossroads of East and West, much like modern day Athens. God opened a door of new direction in Antioch, because it was a strategic place to reach the nations! Those who had been scattered out of Jerusalem had made their way to Antioch and to that point still had a focus on sharing the story with Jews.

It was time to embrace the door of a new direction:

Acts 11:20-21 [Slide]: 20 But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord’s hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.

- a. Sharing the gospel with Greeks was a new direction and unexpected from the perspective of those first Christ-followers who still saw themselves as Jewish. But the Holy Spirit made it clear that although unexpected, this was a door that God had opened.
How do we know this? And how might we know this in our own lives?
- b. When walking through a God door, it might not be smooth sailing, but there is a partnering with the Holy Spirit that is unmistakable. We are told that as these folks began to share with Greeks, “the Lord’s hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.” The hand of the Lord is an expression of His power, which for those in Christ is most evident through the indwelling Spirit.
 - (1) Some of us might be trying to take an easier direction than what God is calling us to and we’re feeling frustrated and frazzled. Could it be that we’re trying to open a door of our own accord and God loves us enough to frustrate our plans?
 - (2) When we are willing to humbly seek God’s direction and submit to His guidance, the empowerment of God’s Spirit is made evident in our lives.
How is the power of God evident in our lives? By effectively engaging the mission of God.
 - (3) We can easily miss something here by a consumeristic approach to the next door God has for us. We think of the next door in terms of what house we have, what job we have, what relationships we have or don’t, etc.
 - (4) When we look at next doors from a Scriptural or Acts perspective, it’s not “me” focused but “missional” focused. God has an effective ministry for all of us.
 - (5) It may be that we are refusing to walk through a door of new direction and that may explain why we aren’t experiencing power in our walk with Christ. We should at least be honest with ourselves in those seasons when we’re experiencing frustration. In some instances, it’s our unwillingness to embrace a door of new direction.
- c. Lives were being changed to the extent that word reached Jerusalem and the leadership in Jerusalem decided to send someone to verify what they’d heard:

Acts 11:22-24 [Slide]: 22 News about them reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, 24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord.

3. Barnabas is one of my favorites! He's a behind the scenes kind of guy, but he's bold! When Saul was saved on the Damascus Road and made his way to Jerusalem, who was it that accepted the now Paul when no one else did?

[Slide]: Barnabas

- a. Barnabas would be classified in today's terms as an "early adopter." Praise God for people like that! He signs up for Antioch and when he sees this multicultural, multiethnic community of Christ-followers, how does he respond? He recognizes the presence of God's grace! He's filled with joy! And he encourages them to cling to Jesus! Praise God for leaders!

Barnabas was certainly that and his leadership was based on 2 key ingredients:

[Slide]: Courage and Character

- (1) He joined God and embraced a door of new direction, and even more people were added to the Lord! God was doing a work in these individuals, but also radically changing what the parameters of the Church would be. God had already determined the direction, but as humans we tend to drag our feet. It takes courage to move toward a vision that not everyone can see, but Barnabas could see a new direction.

He believed in what God was doing, so much so that he goes and gets additional support.

- (2) Where does he go? To Tarsus! And who does he find? Saul turned Paul!

Talk about an unexpected door! The former Pharisee Saul turned Paul is about 100 miles away in Tarsus and Barnabas has the vision to see a door of new direction for Paul's life! Sometimes we get so focused on our own direction, we neglect the opportunity to recognize a door of new direction for someone else! This is the power of the Church in action. Paul at this point is sidelined. No one is believing that God has opened a door of new direction. Except Barnabas! Can you imagine the knock on Paul's door that day? Barnabas saw the new direction in his friend and loved him enough to invite him into the story God was crafting through Antioch! This is discipleship at its best!

I love how Luke records this story!

Acts 11:25-26 [Slide]: 25 Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, 26 and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.

- (3) There's intentionality in Barnabas's pursuit of Saul/Paul. Paul was just the right guy to partner in this work and Barnabas believed in Paul enough to "search" him out and didn't give up until he "found" him. God has opened a few doors of new direction in my life through people who cared enough about me to bring me along.

- C. God did an amazing work in Antioch through an unexpected door of a new direction. The Antioch Church is about to go global, but first God wanted to establish that the door of a new direction also meant a new identity. The way Luke lays out this new identity is very specific. "Were called" is a passive transitive verb even in the Greek with the direct object being "Christians." They didn't call themselves Christians, rather the City of Antioch quickly took note of what was happening, and it was the larger community that identified them as:

[Slide]: The Christ Group

1. They were no longer identified by a religion or an ethnicity, but by the One they followed! It wasn't a new religious system that took the world by storm, it was a Person. Jesus! God had sent His Son to pay the price for sins and extend the grace of God in relationship. No one had heard anything like this, and they saw the effects of the Christ group firsthand. One person with a firm identity in Christ can make an impact. A group of people with a firm identity in Christ can change the world and it's happened before.

2. We seek to be a church community that is clearly marked by our identity in Christ, and we simply point people to Him. We say it this way:

[Slide]: We Clear the Path to Jesus

3. He alone has the power to transform the world one heart at a time!

4. Some of you are standing before a door of a new direction today and God's Spirit is working in your heart to accept His invitation of grace. Believe that Jesus is the Christ, who died for you and now offers eternal life through faith in Him. Believe and turn to Jesus just like those people did 2000 years ago in Antioch.

5. For others of us, God has a new direction for you, and you're saved, but it's time to now obey. There's a step of obedience through the door of a new direction, and it could be a family member or a neighbor that needs a bold proclamation of Jesus. It could be someone God has placed on your heart to disciple or bring alongside to invest in.

6. Some of us are saved, but we're not engaged in the mission. We're disconnected from the body of Christ that is moving in a missional way to push through boundaries to share God's story from Norfolk to the nations. You'll never hear me get up here and beg and plead for you to plug up a hole around Tab. Because that's not what it's about. It's about you experiencing the power of God working through you to make a difference for the kingdom.

a. There is no job too big or too small. We've got faithful folks that play music, we've got a faithful saint that mails the newsletters to the shut ins every week, we've got faithful folks that lead after school Bible clubs for kids across Norfolk, we've got faithful folks that cook food anytime the church has an event, and we've got faithful folks who go downtown every week to connect with those living on the streets. Those are windows where the power of God is breaking through on earth and God is inviting us to partner in His power.

D. Are we willing to go through the next door? You might walk out of here today or sign off online having walked through an unexpected door of a new direction. We'd love to connect with you! What next door does God have before you today? I challenge you to take the step. There's so much joy in the journey.