

July 12, 2018

## Fourth in a six-part scriptural exploration of Presbytery Leadership

### New Testament Lesson

Acts 15:36-41



Paul and Barnabas stayed on in Antioch, teaching and preaching the Word of God. But they weren't alone. There were many teachers and preachers at that time in Antioch.

After a few days of this, Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's go back and visit all our friends in each of the towns where we preached the Word of God. Let's see how they're doing."

Barnabas wanted to take John along, the John nicknamed Mark. But Paul wouldn't have him; he wasn't about to take along a quitter who, as soon as the going got tough, had jumped

ship on them in Pamphylia. Tempers flared, and they ended up going their separate ways: Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus; Paul chose Silas and, offered up by their friends to the grace of the Master, went to Syria and Cilicia to build up muscle and sinew in those congregations.

Here we see the primary work of the Presbytery leader: to encourage congregations with presence and affirmation. This is the essence of a Presbytery as an institution in service to God's mission. In that respect we bring two things:

1. We are a network of relationships where we encourage one another, remind each of other of God's missionary calling and God's love. Indeed, these relationships are the incubator for the Spirit's continual movement among us. Zora Neale Hurston, at the end of her book "Their Eyes were Watching God" describes Love: "Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore."

Together we are that front edge of water and together we discern the shape we will take as we meet the shore, wave after wave after wave. The changes Paul brought to the church in response to his ministry with the Greek speaking Gentiles, evidences that love meeting a different shore. His love set his feet in motion to visit these churches across Asia Minor. Our love drives us to visit our churches, to encourage them in their singular unique calling to the Mission of God in the world.

2. And Second, we are an institution that constrains sin. We constrain sin through regulations, standards, and discipline. Boundaries such as these are also loving. But we are often chafed by the discipline of life together. Paul was chafed by the oversight the Jerusalem church. He was chafed by the oversight of Barnabas with whom he disagreed concerning the need for early Christians to observe the cultic rituals of Judaism as well as embrace Christ.

There has been quite a movement in the church to eschew regulation imagining we can then better be missional. False. Eschew regulation and we just embolden sin. One reason Jesus wants us in community is that we tend to be blind to our own self-seeking. We need others to point it out and keep us in line. This polarity between freedom and restraint is one we are called to master as Presbytery leaders. Paul himself was on one end of this polarity, but believed it was important to keep the unity of the church intact so he submitted himself to the regulations and restrictions set by James and the Jerusalem Church.

Power still has its temptations. I am remembering a COM member whose sole reason to get on COM was to get rid of his pastor. I recall several candidates seeking ordination to Word and Sacrament who sought to avoid an open search. Our Presbytery has suffered for lack of robust financial policies. Our congregations have suffered because the Presbytery failed to regulate appropriately. It chose to satisfy their immediate desires rather than provide prudent wisdom and caution. I can also point to a congregation where the Presbytery did say "no" which in hindsight were profoundly thankful. They were not happy at that moment however. Presbytery regulation chafes. I even worked with a church in Texas that had mineral rights they shared with the Methodists down the street. They trusted the Methodist lawyer was representing them on the cheap since they would share in the proceeds 50/50. We insisted they secure their own attorney and even pre-approved whatever they decided, but they had to listen to their own attorney's counsel. Grudgingly they did. They shelled out \$1,500 but made \$100,000 more than they would have going with the Methodist's lawyer. And to this day they are still mad with "the Presbytery" for interfering. No good deed goes unpunished in this line of work folks.

Seemingly we are just in the way. But we have a vital role to play for the congregations. We keep them from doing stupid things sometimes. Often, we provide a range of expertise unavailable to them. We offer some distance on a decision made in the sway of group think. We keep the treasurer from disappearing with the Building Fund. We hope to provide safe sanctuary for that hormonally possessed teenager. We make sure our pastors hold theological commitments that are within the reformed theological boundaries. We oversee the spiritual formation of inquirers and candidates. To use a ranching metaphor, we ride fence. We repair the fence. We sometimes reconfigure the fence. Riding fence is also loving. There are appointed boundaries even for the ocean. It's a moving thing. It meets the shore differently every time a wave breaks. But it needs to not be coming up over the dunes here if we can help it.

So off we go into our congregations, encouraging, blessing, but also constraining and regulating all because we love them and call them to be faithful to the gospel and the Mission of God in the world. Off goes Paul, the first Presbytery leader, to encourage and bless, but also to correct and restrict.

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