

**GOING DEEPER**  
**DISCUSSION GUIDE**  
**October 26, 2014**



*Life was not meant to be lived alone-*

# Discussion Guide

## We Listen

Acts 12.25-13.3

### Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

### Getting Started:

10 minutes

- What is your process of making a decision? Is this process different for big and little decisions? Could you elaborate?

### Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Use the notes to explain the background and context of Acts 12.25-13.3. You might consider reading Acts 11.19-30 aloud to give context.
- Read Acts 12.25-13.3 aloud. Pause. Read Acts 12.25-13.3 aloud once more, seeking to imagine the events being described.
- In what ways did this leadership community approach decision making? (Draw out as many elements from the text as possible.)
- What would you imagine was present in this leadership community for them to function in this manner?

- This leadership community seeks to make a decision by discerning God's will rather than just processing the options. In your mind, what might be the differences between discerning and processing?
- How do believers today typically go about the process of making decisions? Is this similar or dissimilar to what you see in the text? Why might this be the case?
- What might be the benefits of approaching decision making in the manner seen in the text? What might be some drawbacks?
- What might need to be present within a Christ-centered community for this process of decision making to function?
- Is this form of decision making something that this group might want to pursue? If so, what steps might this group take to move closer to this way of hearing and responding to God's will?
- Conclude in prayer. Consider spending some time listening to God together, seeking his will for your next steps as a group. You might do this by first reading Acts 12.25-13.3 and then listening together and then sharing what you feel God might be saying. Listen to one another and then spend time in prayer, asking for God's voice to come to the fore.

## Context and Background

### Discernment

To discern is to engage in the practice of separating or discriminating two things. Spiritual discernment is the practice of distinguishing between what is good (that which draws us closer to God) and that which is evil (that which draws us away from God). Some Christians feel that discernment is a spiritual gift and base their understanding on Paul's instruction to discern between prophetic messages (1 Corinthians 14.29). As Paul's instruction comes within a larger discussion of spiritual gifts, there may be some merit to this argument. However, the practice of discernment is encouraged for all believers and not just a select few (1 John 4.1; 1 Corinthians 2.6-16). The general encouragement to engage in the practice of discernment is less about truth and error and more about knowing the difference between God's wisdom and man's wisdom; that is, the practice of discernment for the average believer is to seek to know and pursue God's will. This form of discernment begins with

the assumption that God's wisdom is greater than our own and that he has plans for how his kingdom should progress (1 Corinthians 1.18-31; Jeremiah 29.11). With this acknowledgement in view, the believer seeks to know what the wisdom of God dictates in each situation and setting so that it might be pursued. This seeking of God's will might be done as an individual, but throughout the New Testament, it appears most often within the context of community (Acts 13.1-3; 15.1-21; 21.10-16), with believers engaging in the practices of worship, prayer, fasting, and discussion in order to discern between their own wisdom and the wisdom of God.

## The Text

### **Acts 12.25-13.3: *The listening church***

The present passage marks a major turning point in the book of Acts, the expansion of the Church to the ends of the earth (Acts 13-28). The seeds of this movement were planted in the aftermath of the stoning of Stephen as many within the Jerusalem Church fled the persecuting efforts of Saul (Acts 8.1-4). Most of those who scattered carried the gospel message with them and shared it with their fellow Jews. However, some who fled to the city of Antioch began to share the gospel with Gentiles, most likely in the synagogues (Acts 11.19-21). While Gentiles had come to follow Jesus through the ministry of Peter, and the Church had approved of this Spirit-led movement (Acts 10.1-11.18), the mass inclusion of Gentiles into the life of the Church was something new, something the Church in Jerusalem wished to verify. Therefore, they sent Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11.22). Upon reaching Antioch, Barnabas realized that the response of the Gentiles was God-driven. Therefore, he went to find Saul, the former persecutor of the Church, and brought him back to Antioch, where the two men spent an entire year discipling the fledgling believers (Acts 11.23-26). Through the ministry of Barnabas and Saul, this new congregation took up a congregational rhythm that resembled the life of the Church in Jerusalem as they shared freely with those in need (Acts 11.27-30).

Luke provides a brief glimpse into congregational life within the Antioch Church in chapter 13. The Antiochean Church was led by a group of leaders: Barnabas, Simeon (the black one), Lucius (from North Africa), Manaean (a friend of Herod Antipas), and Saul. The order of the listing is important for it demonstrates that while each of these men was an important leader, Barnabas was definitely the first among them and Saul had the least authoritative

role. This is probably due to the fact that Barnabas had been sent from Jerusalem and thus bore a measure of authority, while Saul was known as a former persecutor of the Church and was at this point working under the tutelage of Barnabas (Acts 8.1-3; 9.26-30). What is also apparent is that these men met together (apart from the rest of the congregation) for worship and prayer. This practice of having a group of people to share life within the larger congregation seems to fit the pattern of congregational life in Jerusalem (Acts 2.46-46; 4.23).

Within the context of prayer and worship, this group of leaders heard from God. More than likely, the means of God's speaking was through one or more of the leaders present (Acts 13.1). The early Church firmly believed that God was present in his people and continued to speak through his people (Matthew 18.20; 1 Peter 4.10-11). The message from God was that the Church in Antioch was to set aside Barnabas and Saul for a new work to which God was calling them. To send Barnabas and Saul off into a new work would have been a huge emotional blow to the fledgling congregation and would have created a huge leadership gap. It would not have made organizational sense, and yet, in the context of community, these men heard God speak. Rather than quickly deciding for or against the idea, these men entered into a process of discernment in which they approached God together to ensure they had heard correctly; that is, they checked their wisdom against God's wisdom. (See Discernment.) After a time of fasting and further prayer, they each agreed that they had truly heard God. Therefore, they placed their hands on Barnabas and Saul, endorsing God's call upon their life, and sent them off. The process of endorsing these two men demonstrates not just a willingness to submit to God's will, but an incredible inner strength to bless those whose departure would cause great emotional and organizational distress. Somehow the seeking of God in the context of this smaller community prepared the Antiochean leaders for this major transition.

### **Real life with Blake:**

I don't know about you, but I want to know what God has in store for me. Sure, I would like to know what that means for me years out, but more practically, I want to know how to take steps to follow God in real time. The struggle I seem to always face when I consider this prospect is the struggle to determine what God is saying to me. I feel an assortment of tugging desires and hear a cacophony of competing

voices inside me, and it is not always easy to determine which one is God's because they are not all saying terrible things. Rather, many are whispering competing good ideas. Just which one is God's good idea? That is the one I want to follow. Most of the time, when I can't discern God's voice, I just decide what seems to be the best course of action. In his grace, God has watched over me as I have defaulted to this position time and time again, but this text reminds me that there is another way. It really is possible to hear God's voice loudly and clearly. His voice can be heard in the context of community. God is present in his people and he speaks through them to his people, even people like me. God makes his voice heard when I am willing to listen to those with whom I am intimately connected within the body of Christ. As I hear and reflect what I think I am hearing, these same people who spoke God's word are there to help me clarify and ascertain what God is really saying. This same group of people is there to cheer me on as I take steps to follow God's call, and they are there to encourage me when I become afraid. I am able to know and follow God's plan insofar as I am willing to connect and listen to what he is saying to me through his people.

### **Real life with you:**

One of the most commonly asserted beliefs is the belief that God has a plan for our lives (Jeremiah 29.11). However, when we are most honest, few of us have the faintest idea of how to go about figuring out what that plan is. We try begging God to show us. We try little tests. "God, if you want this for me, then do this to show me." We read Scripture. We pray. In the end, it is really difficult to know what is God's plan and what is our desire. It makes a big difference in the end, but telling the two apart can be difficult at best. Because we struggle to discern God's will, we often settle for deciding our own path. It does not have to be this way. We can hear the voice of God within the context of community, if we will listen. God is present in his people and he speaks through them (1 Peter 4.10-11). He speaks encouragement. He speaks correction. He also speaks direction. We just have to be listening for it. How do we do this? The first step is to get connected to a group of people with whom you can share life. On a regular basis, seek to share life, blending the sacred and secular

realms into just one thing, this thing called life. Laugh. Play. Cry. Celebrate. Pray. Worship. Serve. Live life together and in time, you will hear God speak through them to you. This may come without asking. It may also come as you take large and small decisions before them and are honest about the desire to know God's will. Rather than rushing for an answer, allow time for the group to seek God together. In the end, the direction will become clear and the endorsement and encouragement from your community will follow. If you desire to take a step in this direction, one of the best ways is to join a small group by contacting Pastor Bill at [bsprouse@unioncenter.org](mailto:bsprouse@unioncenter.org). You can also gather a few people on your own and begin meeting to share the journey of life and faith together. As you grow, live, serve, and engage God together, you will not help but begin to hear God. For these and other opportunities, check out the bulletin or the website, [www.unioncenter.org](http://www.unioncenter.org), during the Me We Series. If you would like to read further on the practice of discerning God's will in community, several good books exist. The most recent and accessible is *Pursuing God's Will Together* by Ruth Haley Barton. A classic explanation of this practice is *Discerning God's Will Together* by Danny Morris.

Want to know how this looks in real life? Check out Blake's blog at [BlakeShipp.blogspot.com](http://BlakeShipp.blogspot.com)



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