

Essential Choices: Life over Death

Acts 1:1-3; 2:37-39; Deuteronomy 30:19-20; 1 John 5:11-12

Three weeks ago, Connie and I had a Penny Date.
 We got this idea in a *Focus on the Family* magazine.
 You drive to an intersection
 and flip a coin to determine the direction you will go, right or left.
 You decide in advance the number of coin tosses you will make,
 and after the final toss, wherever you are, you have lunch together.

For some reason, our coin flips came up heads more often than tails,
 so we took more right turns than left turns,
 which meant that even though we drove on *some* new roads,
 we also drove in circles, three times, and retraced some of the *same* roads:
 Stoney Battery Road, three times,
 Prospect Road, three times,
 Old Harrisburg Pike, two times;
 and we ended up at a Sheetz, just south of Manheim, for lunch—

all because of the *choices* we made in response to the flips of a coin:
 easy, fun, and (in the big scheme of things) inconsequential choices.

Just as you have, Connie and I have also made *critical* choices in life.
 We both trusted Christ as our Savior as children,
 the most important choice we have *ever* made.
 51 years ago—today!—we were married, a decisive life choice for us.
 Actually, the first time I saw Connie I was smitten,
 so I'm not sure I ever had a choice.
 48 years ago we asked Jesus to baptize us with the Holy Spirit;
 apart from that choice, you would not have wanted me as an interim pastor.
 42 years ago we made the decision to seriously invest in prayer
 which has turned out to be transformative for us.
 40 years ago, we accepted the call to start a church in Oklahoma City;
 and in that daunting endeavor I made so many mistakes . . .
 that I stumbled into insights on leadership
and have been able to lead God's people in one context or another
 small or large, ever since, always with Connie's full support and partnership.

For Connie and me, these have been critical choices, decisive choices,
essential choices which, by the grace of God,
 have drawn us into a deepening experience with Jesus,
 and by the presence and power of his Holy Spirit,
 into the same kind of experiences that we read about in the New Testament.

This is what Jesus wants for all of us—and for this church:
to *reproduce* the life and witness of the early church, here and now.

As Millersville BIC Church, we have made the decision to move forward.
Our intention is not merely to survive.
We want to thrive as a healthy, growing, empowered, innovative,
outward-focused, and life-changing church!

Like the early church, we *can be* a dynamic movement of God's Spirit
in which people decide to follow Jesus, grow in Christlikeness,
serve others, and go to all people.

**The decisive factor, the difference-maker,
is to make the same essential choices as the apostles.**

When we do,
we can anticipate that “all that Jesus began to do and teach”
in his earthly life, and through the apostles,
will be replicated in us—in this church!

With this hope and expectation,
a number of us will be preaching through the summer
about twelve essential choices
as we see the apostles making them, sequentially, through the *Book of Acts*.

Each message will be an invitation for you—and all of us together—
to make these same *essential choices*
that will draw us into the life of the Spirit,
into the transformation of this church,
and into the dynamic movement of God in the world today.

Next week, Michael Ibarra will preach on choosing “Prayer over Anxiety.”
Today I am introducing the series with the first essential choice—
which is to choose **life over death**.

The biblical passage in focus is the first paragraph in *Acts*—
chapter 1, verses 1-5—
which is a masterful capsulation of the message of the entire book.

Acts was written by Luke, a physician who traveled with the apostle Paul.
Luke was a Greek by birth, a man of culture and refinement.
By every indication, he was modest, intelligent, sympathetic, and loyal.

Interestingly, Luke was the only *Gentile* writer in the NT. He wrote the *Gospel of Luke*, named for him, and the *Book of Acts*, a two-volume set. These two books together, *Luke* and *Acts*, comprise over 25% of the NT.

If you have a Bible close at hand, turn to Acts 1:1-5.

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

The first sentence is one of the most powerful promises in the book!

By the Holy Spirit, Luke was declaring:
All that Jesus did and taught *before* his ascension into heaven he was *continuing* to "do and teach" through his apostles—and, beyond that, would *continue* to do and teach through every believer who (to use Luke's word) is "baptized" with the Holy Spirit!

The phrase: "all that Jesus began to do and teach. . ." points to the *ongoing story* of what Jesus is doing and teaching in the world, first of all through the apostles, as reported in the 28 chapters of *Acts*, and through the centuries since then, by faithful believers in what has been described as the era of *Acts 29*—the *ongoing, unfolding* story, beyond the pages of Scripture, of the movement of God's Spirit among Christ-followers who make the same essential choices as the apostles.

Think for a moment about our ability to make choices.

As we learn in the first three chapters of the Bible, all of us are created in the image of God, which includes the capacity to make moral decisions. We can choose life or death, good or evil, to obey or disobey God.

The freedom to choose makes us responsible for our decisions *and* liable for their consequences.

At the same time God grants humankind the freedom of choice, God also knows the end from the beginning, and in His wisdom and grace, is working out His eternal purposes within human history.

This interplay between God's sovereignty and human free will is one of the mysteries of the Christian faith. In spite of this paradox that we cannot fully understand, it is clear that the responsibility to choose between life and death was given to humankind from the beginning.

Adam and Eve were the first choose. They made the devastating decision to disobey God, and incurred the inevitable consequence of disobedience, which is death.

At that point the spiritual DNA of humankind was forever altered. This first sinful choice caused a mutation in their spiritual chromosomes that has been transmitted to all their descendants— a default propensity, innate in every human being, to make *wrong* choices, resulting in death as an inevitable part of the human experience.

The Good News, entrusted to the early apostles, and recorded for us in the New Testament, is that Jesus, by *his* decision to choose death on our behalf, has opened that way for humankind, once again, to choose life!

In verses 2-5, Luke lists the essential facts about Jesus: in verse 3, that Jesus suffered, died, and rose again— with many convincing proofs that he was alive over the next 40 days; during which time he helped the apostles understand the true nature of the kingdom of God; In verse 2, that Jesus was taken up into heaven; and in verses 4 and 5, that after Jesus' ascension, the disciples would be baptized by the Holy Spirit.

This compact summary of the *words* and *works* of Jesus is the heart and core of the Gospel, the Good News, and the central content of every sermon recorded in the book of Acts, whether by Peter or Stephen or Paul, and, for that matter, in the whole of the NT.

In the words of the apostle John, in 1 John 5:11-12,

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann rephrased *this truth* in this quote:

Where Jesus is, there is life.
There is abundant life, vigorous life, loved life and eternal life.

When we decide to follow Jesus,
we choose life over death;
and in every subsequent choice,
as we make them day in and day out,
we have the capacity to make right choices—because Jesus lives in us!

In our pluralistic society, people must actively choose
among competing beliefs and world-views.

2,000 years ago, in the Roman Empire,
the challenge was exactly the same.
People needed to be persuaded and converted;
so the preachers and witnesses in *Acts*
would tell the essential facts about Jesus
and then call people to decision—to repentance and faith.

In Acts 2:37-38, after the first recorded message by Peter, we read:

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Peter was inviting his listeners to choose life
by “repentance” and “faith” in Jesus.
By this he meant admitting their sin, with real sorrow,
trusting Jesus to forgive their sin; and turning away from sin—
all together, a complete change of heart and mind,
a deep, personal experience of Jesus’ love and power.

When we accept Jesus by repentance and faith,
we make the essential choice of life over death;
our sins are forgiven and we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit
which opens the way to *a whole new* dimension of living.

The declaration of Luke—
that all that Jesus began to do and teach continues *then* and *now*—
means that anyone who has a life-changing encounter with Jesus,
and is infused by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit,
is a recipient of full, abundant, eternal LIFE
and becomes a conduit of this LIFE.

The word “apostle” literally means “one who is sent.”
After these many centuries, none of us will be a first-generation apostle;
but *all of us* who have had a life-changing encounter with Jesus
are *chosen* and *sent* to live out and share the good news of Jesus!

Jesus said to his disciples—to all of us—in John 15:16.

I *chose* you and *appointed* you that you should go and bear fruit. . .

This is what Jesus wants for all of us—and for this church:
to *reproduce* the apostolic life and witness of the early church.

Let me repeat what I said at the beginning of this message.

Millersville BIC Church can thrive as a healthy, growing, empowered,
innovative, outward-focused, and life-changing church!

Like the early church, we *can be* a dynamic movement of God’s Spirit
in which people decide to follow Jesus,
grow in Christlikeness,
serve others,
and go to all people.

**The decisive factor, the difference-maker,
is to make the *same essential choices* as the apostles.**

Of all the essential choices we will consider this summer,
the first, and most important of all, is choose Jesus.
When we decide to follow Jesus, we choose life over death—
because whoever has the son has life.

And once we have life in Jesus,
and are infused with his Holy Spirit,
we have the capacity to make good choices, right choices, essential choices;
and as we do, the life of Jesus will flow *through* us,
and *we will have a catalytic* impact for Jesus
in this church and in this community!

In his final message to the Israelites before his death,
recorded in Deuteronomy 30:19-20, Moses said this:

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I
have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life,
so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord
your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your
life.

The prophet Jeremiah (chapter 6, verse 16) said the same thing in different
words:

This is what the Lord says:
"Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.

The choice is ours!

Warren L. Hoffman
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Millersville BIC Church