

“A New Challenge” Part 2 - How to recognise a new challenge from God. August 2024

Thames Valley churches of Christ

Introduction

So far this year, we've explored 'A New Thing' and 'A New Creation'. We are now exploring the theme, 'A New Challenge'. Are you facing new challenges? Is your group or your church facing new challenges? Today, we will explore how to *recognise* a new challenge from God when it appears, and how to respond.

Types of challenge

Let's briefly survey seven examples of new challenges in the Book of Acts. The early church and its members regularly faced new challenges and had to recognise whether they were from God *and* how to respond.

Acts 1: Apostle

A leadership challenge. Interpreted as a sign to honour God's word.

Acts 1.20

““For it is written in the book of Psalms, ‘Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it’; and ‘Let another take his position of overseer.’”

Result?

Acts 1.24-25

“Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.””

Question: Do you have a leadership deficit? Are you asking God to reveal the right person for the right role?

Acts 6: Division

A community harmony challenge. Interpreted as a sign to heal division.

Acts 6.1

“Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.”

Result?

Acts 6.7

“The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”

Question: Do you have a community division? Can you involve the community in healing the division?

Acts 8: Scattering

A persecution challenge. Interpreted as a sign to preach the word (not coalesce, or 'we were wrong').

Acts 8.4

“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”

Result? The gospel spreads to Samaria and beyond, and large numbers are converted.

Acts 11.19

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews.”

Question: Are you facing opposition? What would happen if you saw it as an opportunity?

Acts 10/11: Gentiles 1

A crossing barriers challenge. Interpreted as a work of the Spirit.

Acts 11.12

“The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house.”

Result?

Acts 11.18

“When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.””

Question: Do you have entrenched ideas about how to fulfil Jesus's mission? What would happen if you opened your mind and heart to a different approach inspired by the Spirit?

Acts 11: Gentiles 2

A crossing barriers challenge. Interpreted as a sign to check what the Spirit is doing by sending Barnabas.

Acts 11.23

“When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion;”

Result?

Acts 11.24

“for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord.”

Question: Are you facing confusion or anxiety? What would happen if you invited someone with experience and wisdom to explore the challenge with you?

Acts 13: Sending

A "what's next?" challenge. Interpreted as the Spirit directing them.

Acts 13.2

“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.””

Result?

Acts 13.3

“Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.”

Question: Are you unsure of what God wants from you next? What would happen if you devoted yourselves to worship and fasting?

Acts 15: Circumcision

A global church harmony challenge. Interpreted as a sign to research God's Word (v16-17 - Amos 9 & Isaiah 45).

Acts 15.15

“This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,”

Result?

Acts 15.30-31

“So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation.”

Question: Are you facing a relationship challenge with another person or group? What would happen if you looked to God's Word for guidance rather than human wisdom?

Conclusion

In this brief survey, we have seen that the early church faced many challenges. We are fortunate that the Holy Spirit recorded how the church recognised and responded to those challenges. We can also observe that the challenges faced by the church were no barrier to joy, the conversion of many, and the spread of the good news.

One of the signature qualities of a Christ-focused faith is that we see nothing as impossible:

Matthew 17.20

“He replied, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move.”

Nothing will be impossible for you.””

There may be mountains in your way, but they are movable by faith.

For reflection

- What is your current mountain-challenge personally?
- What is your current mountain-challenge as a group?
- What is the best way to respond to that mountain-challenge?
- What is your first step in responding to the mountain-challenge?

Your brother, Malcolm

Please add your comments on this week’s topic. We learn best when we learn in community.

Do you have a question about teaching the Bible? Is it theological, technical, or practical?

Please send me your questions or suggestions. Here’s the email: malcolm@malcolmcox.org.

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