

## Looking Ahead Through The Rearview Mirror Breaking Into The Church



Pastor Dave Spate

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A number of years ago, while working on my Doctorate at Fuller Seminary, I was with a few pastors in a van traveling back from a Sunday Night service at the Anaheim Vineyard church, when we realized that we were passing by the Crystal Cathedral Church. So we turned into the parking lot, only to find out that the church closed down for the evening. We decided to check to see if any doors were still open. I found the back door unlocked, so we took it as a sign from God that we should go inside and explore. We entered the sanctuary, walked on the platform, and I stood behind the pulpit where God (Schuler) speaks. It is a beautiful building with fountains and birds flying around. We were having fun when I decided that it would be interesting to run up into one of the higher balconies to get a better look at the sanctuary. The problem was that part way up I tripped a silent alarm. And over the PA system we heard these words *'Intruders in the main sanctuary. Mobilize the guards'*. You have never seen 6 preachers run for the back door so fast, or lay rubber in a church parking lot like we did that night. Yes I have broken into a church, and it seemed pretty easy, however, I know from experience and from talking to various people that their experience is different than mine. For when they started to attend a new church, they have said that it seemed almost impossible to break into some church groups. So today I want to talk about how to break in and become a part of a church, and what we need to do at Brentview so that others may quickly feel at home in this community of faith.

### Newly Saved

We have been looking at what has been happening in the young Church who were following the resurrected Jesus. Let me review what has been happening. Acts 9 Following the brutal murder of Stephen because of his faith in Jesus, Saul devastated the young church in Jerusalem by throwing many of their people into jail, beating and killing them. Then he heard of a growing group of Christians in Damascus, so he traveled the 215 km north to try and wipe out the church there. However, just as he was about to enter the city a blinding light dropped him to his knees and left him blind. A voice from heaven, which he and those around him heard (Acts 9:7) said, *'Saul – Saul why do you persecute me?'* When Saul asked who the voice was, his worst nightmare

came true, for the voice replied, *“I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting”*. Did you notice that when someone persecutes us as Christians, Jesus takes their actions personally for he said, *‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting’*. Saul is then instructed to go to a street called Straight, where Saul sits in blindness trying to reconstruct his thinking, wrestling guilt over killing Christians, destroying their families, and how this dead Jesus who died on a cross is now alive and speaking to him. Look at verse 9:15. There is Saul’s life story written before it even happened. I believe that even before we become a Jesus follower that God has prepared in advance the things which he wants us to do. *Ephesians 2:10 For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* But now look at verse 16 where God also laid out what would be part of his future ministry so he could choose to follow Jesus knowing what it would cost. Acts 9:17-22 Verse 20 *“at once”* shows it didn’t take Saul long to throw his life full bore into speaking about what he had experienced. Look what he preached vs. 20 – *“that Jesus is the Son of God”* vs. 22 – *‘proving that Jesus is the Christ* (Christ – *Christos* in Hebrew is the word for Messiah/Anointed one). But trouble arose vs. 23-25 And he had to escape over the wall in a basket (I Cor.11:32,33 – he found that embarrassing). I believe that between vs. 25 and vs. 26 there is a period of time, for Gal. 1:17-18 says that *‘after 3 years he went up to Jerusalem’*. During that time he went into Arabia preaching and spending time in the Old Testament scriptures re-thinking how Jesus the Messiah fit into all he had been taught in seminary, plus I am sure he preached through that region ending up in Damascus again.

### **Jerusalem – Quickly Rejected**

Before I take you to Acts 9:26, let me remind you of what the church was like in Jerusalem. It was known as a fantastic warm and welcoming church. Acts 2:43-44 It was a church that grew rapidly, and when issue arose (for example the issue of the Greek widows in Acts 6), they prayed and worked through the issue. So it was a great church, and I am sure that Saul was excited and apprehensive about visiting Jerusalem. He was probably a little worried about how he would be received in a church, for there were probably people there who had lost loved ones because of his past actions. He

was also going to the city where his old Professor Gamaliel was, and many Jewish people would believe he had become a heretic. BUT, he was a Christian now, wonderfully saved, so he was excited to sit with those who were followers of Jesus from the beginning. Now turn to Acts 9:26. He was rejected. We find that James met with him for a while, but he was completely shunned by the church. If you want to put this in perspective we need to understand that *Saul, after the life transforming encounter with Jesus in the light on the Road to Damascus- having his life so radically changed that for 3 years he had been in full time Christian ministry, was still unable to break into the Church in Jerusalem.* I read that and it takes my breath away. How, after all that Jesus had done to save and change Saul, could the church, especially this church with such a glowing record, reject him? The answer may be that they were afraid of him and felt they couldn't trust him, or it could be that he didn't seem like them, but this was the Saul that met Jesus in the light that they were rejecting. But sadly, I can tell you lots of similar stories.

Example: I was asked to preach at a small country church, and before I spoke I was sitting in a specific seat near the back of the church, and a person came and stood above me and told me that I would have to move because that was his seat.

Do you know that when Mahatma Ghandi was fed up with the Hindu caste system he wanted to find another faith for his people? So he went to a Christian church to learn about Jesus. The only problem was that he went to a white's only church in India, and was not allowed to come into the church. So, he left believing that Christianity wasn't worth following because it had a caste system as well. How different would India be today if He had been allowed to enter that church; found Jesus in that church?

Some of you will remember that I told of a campus age student who came to Laurier Heights Baptist church one Sunday. She was actually a Taylor student who left her clothes in a garbage can overnight to make them stink – put make-up on so she looked like she had been slapped around by someone. And came to our church to see how we would react. Thankfully that day she was cared for. As she left, one of our men (not sure what to say) even asked if she needed some legal help. She was cared for by 7 different people that day. She ended up joining our church. But she had visited 11 other

churches. In one church she had been ushered to the balcony all by her self, in another church people had moved out of her pew, away from her, and in most churches not a single person had talked to her. She did her assignment and then sent reports to each of these churches. A number were so incensed they wanted a written apology from her. I think they owed her a written apology.

But before we get too snug, while many new people have found us very open and welcoming (just 2 weeks ago I had a number of people come up to me and said they were new here and had been so impressed with how welcome you had made them feel), there have been times when we have blown it badly. When have not been as friendly and welcoming as Jesus needs us to be. For I think we forget that: No one gets up Sunday morning/evening comes to a morning service/Hub/International Fellowship out of the blue without a reasons for coming. That reason may be that they have lost a loved one, a job, have a pull in their heart to find out if God is real, or it could be that after 6-10 years of being far from God they want to come back. It could be that God has had to orchestrate 10 different events/conversations with 20 different people or 8 years to bring their heart to a place where they have come today hoping to meet God. You or I are the people like Ananias who needs to be that first point of contact that help them find community, and maybe even faith.

As I read verse 26 and the idea that Saul, after meeting Jesus in the midst of a blinding light on the road to Damascus had trouble breaking into the church in Jerusalem, I have to pause and ask what we are doing to make sure that isn't happening here.

I use the word "we" because of what happens next in this passage vs 27 '*But Barnabas...*'. Barnabas was the man who had a heart for others. The first time we meet him was Acts 4:36,37. It happens after he has noticed that some specific people had financial needs in the church, so he sold a field he owned and gave it to people in need. He had such a heart for others that they nicknamed him '*son of encouragement*'. Do you have a gift of encouragement or discouragement? The second time he is mentioned is here, look what he is doing vs. 27 Barnabas stuck up for Saul because he was an insider. He knew where the church was meeting so he personally took him to meet the

Christians there, then he told them about how he had seen the Lord on the road to Damascus and then he bragged about how Saul had been preaching the word of God these last 3 years. Barnabas was the one who vouched for Saul and ushered him into the community of believers. Without Barnabas Saul may not have been able to break into 1<sup>st</sup> Baptist Jerusalem. The result vs. 28-30, Saul was enfolded in the community of faith and that small group was blessed. Don't ever miss the profound impact you can have as you invite, welcome, care for people in your Small group/ Men's breakfast/ Women together/ B-true ministries or one of our Sunday gatherings.

### **Antioch –Completely Accepted**

Grab your bibles and turn to Acts 11:20,21. A revival is breaking out in Antioch. Look at where those who are sharing the good news of Jesus are from: Cyprus and Cyrene. Where have you heard the term Cyrene before? Simeon of Cyrene, the man who carried Jesus' cross, known also by the name Simon of Niger, was a leader in the revival. Hold your finger here and turn over to Acts 13:1-2. Do you see who is listed in this church? Simeon Niger/ Cyrene (the man who carried the cross of Jesus and his son). Now turn back to Acts 11:22,23,25. Barnabas, seeing the movement of God in the Antioch Church, traveled to Tarsus (141 miles) because he knew these new believers needed good scriptural teaching, he knew Saul would do a great job, and it would be good for his growth. The result of that teaching was that they were called Christians for the first time in Antioch. Why, because *Christ* means Messiah, the *anointed one* in Hebrew, and I'll bet the scholar behind that word usage was none other than Saul. But as I read this passage, I believe that his reception at Antioch was very different than the one he received in Jerusalem. Here he was welcomed as a Brother, he was freed to use his Spiritual gifts, and he was ALLOWED to minister to his full potential. The key to this happening was Barnabas who endorsed him, and the Church at Antioch embraced him. The result was that Saul found a community of faith that changed his life. As you read Saul/Paul's letters you will see he never flew solo again, he was always connected to other believers. For example, in Romans 16 he mentions 35 individuals by name who had been walking with him in specific ministries in the

church in Rome. We are made to walk together in ministry and life. As one monk said, *“If you live life alone, whose feet will you wash?”*

Let's get practical: I asked Julie Peter's who has moved a few times because of Grant's trainings as a Specialist in Cardiology about lessons they learned.

1. For those wanting to join the community: One of the realities of a church our size is that we are too large to be described as a family (for you can't know everyone who attends here). Instead we are in reality a community of believers. As we saw God growing us we made a decision to have multiple services which would meet the needs of different groups of people and then have a variety of programs (like choir/ B-true/ Hub/ Women together/ Men's breakfast) plus smaller bible study/prayer groups so there would be numerous places where many different needs and interest could be met, which would also provide ways to find friendships, ministries, and to grow spiritually.

i. Know that it will take some effort to join a community. You can't expect someone to do it for you. Look for Blue lanyards – pastor and elders wear them. Head to the info booth and ask those with Greeter tags some questions. Check out our website.

ii. Look for people you may know or people who in discussions seem to have some things in common with you. It will give you things to talk about as you do the 'friendship' dance.

iii. Try and find a group that appeals to you. An example is Men's Breakfast – “Real Men love the outdoors”. Drop a note in at the office and try out a Small Group, see if it fits. These can be precious times.

iv. Volunteer for some ministry. For often in doing something with others, you will develop a friendship which can grow deep. Find something you may like to be involved in and give it a try. Join the choir – volunteer to work a few Sundays with kids – volunteer to build props for Family matters or our Creative team – ask if you can usher. Try it – you may enjoy it and find a great friend in the process.

v. Come to a Welcome to Brentview luncheon which will allow you to ask a few questions and also meet some people who are new here as well. November 1st [Basic Intro to Brentview].

2. For those already part of the community

i. Look around for those who you haven't met before and say hi. Use the 5 handshakes rule. Invite them to join you for lunch. Say hi, listen for their name, use their name and ask them how long they have been coming...

ii) If this is a passion you have, some people love to care for new folk and we need you to join our Info. Booth team/ Greeters. Each Sunday look for 1 new person to care for and welcome.

iii) Make room for one more person in your small group. If you love your group I'll bet so will they.

iv. As a church we need to keep planning for and properly announce a variety of events where a new person can get connected. This is something that I think we need to keep working on. Each and every ministry within our church needs to ask *how we can make sure that people find and Welcome into our church community, like in Antioch, instead of the cold shoulder that happened to Saul in Jerusalem. But please remember that this is the responsibility, given by God to all of us.*

## Conclusion

Can you imagine in one night, shortly after Saul came to Antioch someone didn't turn to Simeon Niger and ask him *'Brother Simeon, tell us about the tree of cursing'*.

Remember that at Stephen's trial he, Saul, had said "I can't believe Jesus is the Messiah because the Old Testament said *'cursed is he who dies on a tree'*", so he perked up his ears. Simeon cleared his throat and began *"I was with my teenage boys walking up to the temple for sacrifice when we were stopped by 3 men carrying their crosses out of city. One man kept stumbling and finally fell under the weight of the tree/cross. That is when the soldier grabbed me and shoved me toward the man and*

*yelled, 'take the beam, carry the criminal's beam!'. As I lifted it off his back. I saw his back was nothing but pulp and blood after his beating. No wonder he couldn't carry the cross. I bent beneath the weight, worried about where my boys had gone, and watched as he stumbled behind me. At the hill they stripped him naked, spread him across the beam, and drove spikes through his wrists. You know, he didn't scream, he simply whispered to the men with the hammer and nails, 'Father forgive them... for they don't get what they are doing'. I wouldn't have known who he was except they hammered a shingle onto the cross that read Jesus of Nazareth king of the Jews. Later he turned to his mother and pointed with his face a man standing there 'women behold your son'. I stayed there until he died, I tried to leave but I couldn't. He simply leaned forward, then he threw his head back, drove his chest away from the cross, the veins on his neck stood out, and he shouted "it is finished!" He died in triumph. And the first one to teach me the meaning of these things was the soldier at the cross. He simply said, 'this man really was the son of God'. I couldn't make sense of it until Simon Peter explained it to us on the Day of Pentecost when he said, 'this same Jesus whom you crucified, God raised up'. And then I repented, was baptized, and realized that I, Simeon of Cyrene, had been chosen not only to carry the cross but to be his follower'." And then Simeon, overcome by his story sat down. The room was silent, and Paul was so glad that he was now part of the community of believers at Antioch. We welcome you to this community. We need to covenant together to be a community of believers where we do our part to welcome, love, and care for those God brings into our church. We must make sure that no one has to break into this church.*

For information about Brentview Baptist Church and its ministries,  
please contact the church office at:  
3512 Charleswood Dr NW, Calgary, AB T2L 2C3  
Phone: 403-284-4691 Fax: 403-284-0132 email: [mail@brentviewbaptist.com](mailto:mail@brentviewbaptist.com)  
Website: [www.brentviewbaptist.com](http://www.brentviewbaptist.com)