

Scripturally Speaking
Using Scripture for Decision Making and
Discernment in the Church

Mark Vitalis Hoffman

Theological Ethics

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SESSION 2

“It seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us...”

Decision Making in the Church

What is this study about?

- The early Christians and their world
- The issues they faced and how they made decisions
- How the witness of the early Church can help us deal with issues we face today
- A study in practical (*both in terms of being useful and something to practice*) theology:
How do Christians make decisions?

Why is this issue important?

Reaching decision in the church should be an articulation of faith.

Luke T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*

As a Christian, reaching decision should be an articulation of faith.

How do we make decisions about controversial issues?

We are likely to argue for a position by appealing to:

- Scripture
- Laws
- Traditions
- Experience
- Reason and Science
- Values (*cultural, family, American, Christian, etc.*)

How do we use Scripture to make decisions?

In the example of discussing the death penalty, Scripture might be cited as:

- Moral law (*Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed.*)
- Principles / ideals (*Love one another*)
- Analogy (*Cain and Abel*)
- Analysis of world / humankind (*Live by sword, die by sword*)
- Understanding of God (*God is love*)

The Process of Developing a Christian Ethics

- The Descriptive Task
Reading the texts carefully
- The Synthetic Task
Placing the texts in canonical context
- *The Communal Task*
Discussing the texts within the faith community
- The Hermeneutical Task
Relating the texts to our situation
- The Pragmatic Task
Living the texts

Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*

Acts 15

THE PROBLEM

Acts 15.1:

“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Can Gentiles be Christians?

Can Gentiles be Christians? *Background*

Luke 2.32

Simeon says of the baby Jesus:

“My eyes have seen your salvation, ... which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel...”

Luke 4.24-27: Jesus at Nazareth

Can Gentiles be Christians? *Background*

- Luke 7.2-10: The worthy (Gentile) centurion whose slave was sick
- Luke 9.51-53: The Samaritans who reject Jesus
- Luke 17.12-19: The ten lepers and the one Samaritan
- Luke 21.24: “Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”
- Luke 23.47: The centurion at the cross

Can Gentiles be Christians? *Background*

- Luke 24.46-48: Jesus said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.
- Acts 2.21: (Joel 2.32) “... everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Can Gentiles be Christians? *Background*

Acts 10-11: Peter and Cornelius

10.16: What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

11.17-18: If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" 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.”

Acts 15

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.

Acts 15

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

Acts 15

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.

Acts 15

⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us;⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."¹² The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Acts 15

After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me.¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name.¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,¹⁶ 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up,¹⁷ so that all other peoples may seek the Lord -- even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things¹⁸ known from long ago.'

Acts 15

¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,²⁰ but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.²¹ For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues."

Acts 15

WHAT FACTORS ARE INVOLVED?

Tradition
Scripture
Experience of God at work
Information
Principles

Acts 15

HOW DECISION MADE?

Debate
Testimony
Leadership's discernment
Consent of all

Acts 15

WHAT DECISION MADE?

15.18: "I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood."

Acts 15

WHY THIS DECISION MADE?

- **Experience** of Peter, Paul, & Barnabas
- **Principle:** "We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."
- **Scripture:** (set in context, selected, interpreted) Amos 9.11-12

Acts 15

APPLICATION

- Are you bound by this decision?
- How does one deal with Scriptures that are in tension with each other?
- What were not decisive factors in why this decision was made?
- What do you learn from their decision-making process?

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