

Life Along the Way
Using Scripture for Decision Making and
Discernment in the Church

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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.

Other test cases

Acts 1.15-26
Choosing replacement for Judas
History, tradition, role of Spirit,
prayer, qualifications, group process

1 Corinthians 8.1-13
Food offered to idols
Paul's example, love of God and concern for others

1 Corinthians 8.1-13

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ² Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; ³ but anyone who loves God is known by him. ⁴ Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." ⁵ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth-- as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

1 Corinthians 8.1-13

⁷ It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

1 Corinthians 8.1-13

⁹ But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. ¹² But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

1 Corinthians 8.1-13

- What is problem:
- Factors:
- How decision made:
- What and why:
- Application:

1 Corinthians 8.1-13

- What is problem:
Can Christians eat food sacrificed to idols?
- Factors:
Love of God > knowledge; concern for weak
- How decision made:
No explicit decision made, but...
- What and why:
Paul's not eating implies they not; concern that weak not fall nor sinned against; do not sin against Christ
- Application:
Lead by example; love of God and concern for weak

1 Corinthians 8.1-13 *continued*

OBSERVATIONS

- ◆ Paul provides something of an intellectual treatise, but ultimately it is not the key factor. Just because everyone should know better does not make it best.
- ◆ Paul does not appeal to the Church decision of Acts 15.29
- ◆ Paul does not make explicit command here but does in 1 Corinthians 10.21: "You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons."
- ◆ Personal decisions have Church-wide implications

Acts 1.15-26

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, ¹⁶ "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus-- ¹⁷ for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." ¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.)

Acts 1.15-26

19 This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 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.' 21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us-- one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection."

Acts 1.15-26

23 So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Acts 1.15-26

- **What is problem:**
One disciple short due to Judas
- **Factors:**
Tradition (need 12); Scripture fulfilled; Qualifications
- **How decision made:**
Identification of problem, nominations, prayer, casting lots
- **What and why:**
Matthias by lots
- **Application:**
Pay attention to history and tradition; role of Spirit; answer to prayer; group process

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 things ¹⁸ 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 15:28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...

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

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

APPLICATION

- What were not decisive factors in why this decision was made?: Tradition, Finances, democratic majority vote

Acts 15

APPLICATION

- How does one deal with Scriptures that are in tension with each other?
- What do you learn from their decision-making process?

It is quite notable that in this case, the experience of the Spirit and the theological principle of salvation by faith trump Scripture, or perhaps more precisely, provide the interpretive keys for understanding Scripture.

Acts 15

APPLICATION

- Are you bound by this decision to keep kosher?

>> Another principle: table fellowship, eating together

•Moving along the way

• **Recognizing that this is a living word, that Spirit continues to move among us**

• **Life along the way as an act of faith**

•Hope: More aware of how decisions are articulation of our faith

•More intentional about thinking Xnly, reflecting on Scripture but also aware of all the other factors

>> discerning

•Examine scripture: God's will has always ultimately been accomplished

•Confidence in the midst of complexities that God's will shall be done among us

•Life along the way

•We walk—dance!—along the way

•A life lived in God's amazing grace

- Are you bound by this decision? Specifically, the decision basically affirms kosher food laws? Do you keep kosher? Why not?
- As for Scripture, note that in this case, the Principle of being saved by faith and the Experience of Peter and the others provides the filter for selecting and interpreting which Scriptures count.
- What were not decisive factors? 1) Tradition (The way we've always done it...) 2) Finances (What will be the economic impact of this decision?) 3) Democratic majority vote
- >>> In our churches, how many times are those precisely the decisive factors!?!?
- It is quite notable that in this case, the experience of the Spirit and the theological principle of salvation by faith trump Scripture, or perhaps more precisely, provide the interpretive keys for understanding Scripture.