

Scripturally Speaking
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.

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

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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SESSION 3

"Is it lawful...?" **Scripture and Discernment**

TEST CASE: **Divorce**

Guiding Questions

- What is the understanding of the roles of husbands and wives portrayed in this passage?
- Is divorce considered to be a sin?
- Should divorce be avoided at all costs?
- Are there legitimate grounds for divorce?
- What are the larger societal ramifications?

TEST CASE: **Divorce**

Deuteronomy 22:28-29

If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, ²⁹the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman's father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.

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How is this justice?

**TEST CASE:
Divorce**

Deuteronomy 24.1-4

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds **something objectionable about her**, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house ²and goes off to become another man's wife.

³Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); ⁴her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the LORD, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession.

**TEST CASE:
Divorce**

Deuteronomy 24.1-4

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds **something objectionable about her**,

"Objectionable" = *literally*, a matter of nakedness >>

... he finds in her indecency in anything...

**TEST CASE:
Divorce**

Malachi 2.13-16

And this you do as well: You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor at your hand. ¹⁴You ask, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth.

¹⁶For I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless.

**TEST CASE:
Divorce**

Matthew 5:31-32 "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, **except on the ground of unchastity (porneia)**, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Mark 10:11-12 He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Luke 16:18 "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery."

**TEST CASE:
Divorce**

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Luke 16:18 "Anyone *could initiate divorce* s another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

How is this justice?

**TEST CASE:
Divorce**

Matthew 19.3-11

**TEST CASE:
Divorce**

1 Corinthians 7.10-17

To the married *I give this command--not I but the Lord*—that the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹(but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

¹²To the rest I say--*I and not the Lord*—that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

**TEST CASE:
Divorce**

1 Corinthians 7.10-17

¹⁵But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound.

It is to peace that God has called you.

¹⁶Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband.

Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.

¹⁷However that may be, let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in all the churches.

Is this a good guiding principle for us?

**TEST CASE:
Divorce**

How do you agree or disagree with the following statements in light of the Biblical texts studied?

1. God hates divorce but still loves divorced people.
2. Divorce is sometimes the lesser of two evils.
3. Married or divorced, the important thing is to be happy.
4. The only grounds for divorce is adultery.
5. Divorce is
 - a sin
 - divorce is a symptom of our sinful condition
 - divorce can cause sin
 - divorce is simply an unfortunate reality (like a tornado or earthquake) connected with human limitations
6. Divorce is permitted but not encouraged.

**TEST CASE:
Divorce**

How do you agree or disagree with the following statements in light of the Biblical texts studied?

7. The Church should consider a ritual for the blessing of divorce.

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