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# 2. The Gift of Discernment

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1st Edition

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**BIBLE STUDY**

The Council of Jerusalem is recorded in the Book of Acts as one of the first gatherings of the 'whole church' to discuss pressing theological and pastoral concerns – the admittance of Gentiles as full participants in the Church, and the particular questions of male circumcision and the eating of meat offered to idols. The Spirit's gift of discernment is at work here as it is still at work in the decision-making of the contemporary Church. How do we use that gift wisely today and develop processes that ensure that decisions reached seem 'good to us and the Holy Spirit'?

### *STUDY: Acts 15:6-29*

6 The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; <sup>9</sup>and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. <sup>10</sup>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? <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>After they finished speaking, James replied, 'My brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup>Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup>This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, <sup>16</sup> "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,  
<sup>17</sup> 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 <sup>18</sup>known from long ago.”

<sup>19</sup>Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>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.’

<sup>22</sup> Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, <sup>23</sup>with the following letter: ‘The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. <sup>24</sup>Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, <sup>25</sup>we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, <sup>26</sup>who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>27</sup>We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. <sup>28</sup>For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: <sup>29</sup>that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.’

*Questions:*

1. Describe the various elements in the discernment process outlined in the text.
2. Compare the communal discernment processes in your congregation or Circuit – Church Council, etc – with the process in the text. What similarities and differences do you see?
3. What religious or cultural attitudes might be at work in your congregation that hinder the Spirit's working in new and unexpected ways?
4. There is a confidence in v28 – 'for it seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit'. What similar experiences of communal discernment have you had that would have led you to write a similar conclusion?
5. Doubt about the acceptance of non-Jews might have become a barrier to the movement of the early Church. What doubts are present now that might be barriers?

**Notes:**

# The Gift of Discernment

*Together Towards Life* concludes with a number of affirmations which help the Church in its task of discernment:

The mission of the church is to prepare the banquet and to invite all people to the feast of life. The feast is a celebration of creation and fruitfulness overflowing from the love of God, the source of life in abundance. It is a sign of the liberation and reconciliation of the whole creation which is the goal of mission.

- **We affirm that the purpose of God's mission is fullness of life (John 10:10) and that this is the criterion for discernment in mission.** Therefore, we are called to discern the Spirit of God wherever there is life in its fullness, particularly in terms of the liberation of the oppressed peoples, the healing and reconciliation of broken communities, and the restoration of the whole creation.

We are challenged to appreciate the life-affirming spirits present in different cultures and to be in solidarity with all those who are involved in the mission of affirming and preserving life. We also discern and confront evil spirits wherever forces of death and negation of life are experienced.

*Question: How does having John 10:10 as the single criterion for discernment affect your congregation's understanding of mission?*

**Notes:**

- **We affirm that spirituality is the source of energy for mission and that mission in the Spirit is transformative.** Thus we seek a re-orienting of our perspective between mission, spirituality, and creation. Mission spirituality that flows from liturgy and worship reconnects us with one another and with the wider creation. We understand that our participation in mission, our existence in creation, and our practice of the life of the Spirit are woven together, for they are mutually transformative. Mission that begins with creation invites us to celebrate life in all its dimensions as God's gift.

*Question: How does the worship you participate in empower mission and reconnect you with others and the whole creation?*

**Notes:**

- **We affirm that the mission of God's Spirit is to renew the whole creation.** "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Ps. 24:1, NIV). The God of Life protects, loves, and cares for nature. Humanity is not the master of the earth but is responsible to care for the integrity of creation. Excessive greed and unlimited consumption which lead to continuous destruction of nature must end. God's love does not proclaim a human salvation separate from the renewal of the whole creation. We are called to participate in God's mission beyond our human-centred goals. God's mission is to all life and we have to both acknowledge it and serve it in new ways of mission. We pray for repentance and forgiveness, but we also call for action now. Mission has creation at its heart.

*Question: How does your congregation understand its responsibility to care for creation?*

**Notes:**

- **We affirm that marginalized people are agents of mission and exercise a prophetic role which emphasizes that fullness of life is for all.** The marginalized in society are the main partners in God's mission. Marginalized, oppressed, and suffering people have a special gift to distinguish what news is good for them and what news is bad for their endangered life. In order to commit ourselves to God's life-giving mission, we have to listen to the voices from the margins to hear what is life-affirming and what is life-destroying. We must turn our direction of mission to the actions that the marginalized are taking. Justice, solidarity, and inclusivity are key expressions of mission from the margins.

*Question: How does your congregation receive from the marginalized in decision-making and discernment of mission?*

**Notes:**

- **We affirm that the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news in all ages and places and should be proclaimed in the Spirit of love and humility.** We affirm the centrality of the incarnation, the cross,

and the resurrection in our message and also in the way we do evangelism. Therefore, evangelism always points to Jesus and the kingdom of God rather than to institutions and it belongs to the very being of the church. The prophetic voice of the church should not be silent in times that demand this voice be heard. The church is called to renew its methods of evangelism to communicate the good news with persuasion, inspiration, and conviction.

- **We affirm that dialogue and cooperation for life are integral to mission and evangelism.** Authentic evangelism is done with respect for freedom of religion and belief, for all human beings as images of God. Proselytism by violent means, economic incentive, or abuse of power is contrary to the message of the gospel. In doing evangelism it is important to build relations of respect and trust between people of different faiths. We value each and every human culture and recognize that the gospel is not possessed by any group but is for every people. We understand that our task is not to bring God along but to witness to the God who is already there (Acts 17:23–28). Joining in with the Spirit, we are enabled to cross cultural and religious barriers to work together towards life.

*Question: How does your congregation integrate evangelism and dialogue in its proclamation?*

**Notes:**

- **We affirm that God moves and empowers the church in mission.**

The church as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit is dynamic and changing as it continues the mission of God. This leads to a variety of forms of common witness, reflecting the diversity of world Christianity. Thus the churches need to be on the move, journeying together in mission, continuing in the mission of the apostles. Practically, this means that church and mission should be united and that different ecclesial and missional bodies need to work together for the sake of life.

*Question: How do we embrace greater diversity in our mission as a local congregation and Circuit?*

**Notes:**

The Triune God invites the whole creation to the Feast of Life, through Jesus Christ who came “that they may have life, and may have it in all its fullness” (John 10:10, REB), through the Holy Spirit who affirms the vision of the reign of God, “Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth!” (Is. 65:17, KJV). We commit ourselves together in humility and hope to the mission of God, who recreates all and reconciles all. And we pray, “God of Life, lead us into justice and peace!”