

Making Decisions as a Group

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Acts

Acts 13:1-3 shows the Christian community trying to discern how the Spirit is leading them toward witness. Paul and Barnabas are singled out to work as traveling evangelists and healers. What is remarkable is that this discernment is accomplished communally. The Christian community, rather than the individual, is best able to discern the vocations of its individual members. This could mean that today's Christian communities should participate alongside families and young people as they seek answers for questions such as, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" "What will you do after graduation?" or "To what is God calling you?" This would require Christian communities to develop a much greater expertise in vocational discernment than is presently common. It would also require them to take a much more serious interest in work that serves the world beyond the structures of the church. Merely asserting authority over young people's work lives is not enough. Young people will pay attention only if the Christian community can help them do a fuller job of discernment than they can do by other means.

Doing this well would be a double form of witness. First, young people from all religious traditions—and none—struggle deeply with the burden of choosing or finding work. Imagine if the Christian community could genuinely help reduce the burden and improve the outcomes. Second, the great majority of Christians work outside the structures of the church. Imagine if all of us engaged in our work as a means of Christian service to the world, improving the lives of the billions of people we work alongside and on behalf of. How much more visible would that make Christ in the world?

Community discernment of vocation continues throughout Acts, with Paul taking many missionary partners from the community—Barnabas, Timothy, Silas, and Priscilla, to name but a few. Second, testifying to the book's realism, we see that this shared vocation to witness does not eliminate the relational tension brought about by human sinfulness. Paul and Barnabas have such a serious dispute over the inclusion of John Mark (who had deserted the team on a previous engagement), that they go separate ways.

Another test of the Christian community arises during a deep dispute about whether Gentile Christians must adopt Jewish laws and customs. In hierarchical Roman society, the patron of a social organization would dictate the decision to his followers, perhaps after listening to various

opinions. But in the Christian community, important decisions are made by the group as whole, relying on their equal access to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The dispute actually begins in chapter 11. Peter experiences a surprising revelation that God is offering “the repentance that leads to life” to Gentiles without requiring them to become Jews first. But when he travels to Jerusalem in the company of some uncircumcised (Gentile) men, some of the Christians there complain that he is violating Jewish law. When challenged in this way, Peter does not become angry, does not attempt to lord it over the men by reminding them of his leading position among Jesus’ disciples, does not denigrate their opinions, and does not impugn their motives. Instead, he tells the story of what happened to lead him to this conclusion and how he sees God’s hand in it, “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?” (Acts 11:17). Notice that he portrays himself not as wise, nor morally superior, but as one who was on the verge of making a serious mistake until corrected by God.

Then he leaves it to his challengers to respond. Having heard Peter’s experience, they do not react defensively, do not challenge Peter’s authority in the name of James (the Lord’s brother and the leader of the Jerusalem church), and do not accuse Peter of exceeding his authority. Instead, they

too look for God’s hand at work and reach the same conclusion as Peter. What began as a confrontation ends with fellowship and praise. “When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God” (Acts 11:18). We can’t expect every dispute to be resolved so amicably, but we can see that when people acknowledge and explore the grace of God in one another’s lives, there is every reason to hope for a mutually upbuilding outcome.

Peter departs Jerusalem in concord with his former antagonists, but there remain others in Judea who are teaching that Gentiles must first convert to Judaism. “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses,” they say, “you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch at the time, and they, like Peter, have experienced God’s grace to the Gentiles without any need for conversion to Judaism. The text tells us that the division was serious, but a mutual decision was made to seek the wisdom of the Christian community as a whole. “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” (Acts 15:2).

They arrive in Jerusalem and are greeted warmly by the apostles and elders. Those who hold the opposite opinion—that Gentiles must first convert to Judaism—are also present. They all decide to meet to consider the matter

and engage in a lively debate. Then Peter, who is of course among the apostles in Jerusalem, repeats the story of how God revealed to him his grace for the Gentiles without the need to convert to Judaism. Paul and Barnabas report their similar experiences, also focusing on what God is doing rather than claiming any superior wisdom or authority. All the speakers receive a respectful hearing. Then the group considers what each has said in the light of Scripture. James, functioning as the head of the church in Jerusalem, proposes a resolution. “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 15:19–20).

If James were exercising authority like a Roman patron, that would be the end of the matter. His status alone would decide the issue. But this is not how the decision unfolds in the Christian community. The community does accept his decision, but as a matter of agreement, not command. Not only James, but all the leaders—in fact, the entire church—have a say in the decision. And when they send word to the Gentile churches of their decision, they do so in the name of the whole body, not the name of James as patron. “We have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you” (Acts 15:25). Moreover, they claim no personal

authority, but only that they have tried to be obedient to the Holy Spirit.
“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (Acts 15:28a)

In the second half of the twentieth century, the benefits of group decision making have been documented by business, military, educational, and government institutions. These gains would be no surprise to the leaders of the early church. Their decisions ushered in an explosion of productivity which resulted in the rapid expansion of the Christian movement throughout the ancient world.