

Election of a Bishop

Four Devotional Bible Studies on Discernment

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Discerning God's Will for Our Synod

The Basics of Discernment

The period that precedes the election of a Bishop is one in which the whole synod is engaged in discernment. For Christians, the goal of discernment is seeking the will of God. For synods before an election, that includes understanding God's will for the future mission and ministry of the synod and understanding God's role in choosing a shepherd for that ministry. It is God who chooses. It is the work of the Synod Council, congregations and rostered leaders, assembly voting members and the pastors who will be interviewed to discern God's choice and the Spirit's leading.

The process of discernment has its roots in the New Testament community as described in the book of Acts. In Acts 1, when filling the vacancy among the Twelve Apostles, the disciples all prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry..." (Acts 1.25-26). It was a prayer of discernment.

In Acts 6, when it was time to expand the ministry of the local church in Jerusalem, the leaders called the membership together and asked them to nominate seven men "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" for this new task of ministry. The seeking of candidates "full of the Spirit" was a seeking of the Spirit's leading and calling, and seeking of God's will. It was a process of discernment. (Acts 6.1-6)

At every point of development of the new Christian Church in Acts, the Spirit was leading the church, and its members were seeking the Spirit's leading so they could follow God's bidding. At a particularly crucial point, when the leadership questioned whether Gentiles had been included in God's gift of salvation, the Holy Spirit made it known to them through a careful discernment process of receiving reports, examining evidence, engaging conversation, and prayerful deliberation that "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11.1-18). This led to further discoveries of God's will for the Gentiles that led Church leaders to publish the results of their discernment in a letter sent to the Gentiles that boldly declares, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials..." (Acts 15.28).

Some Basics about Discernment

Through Holy Scripture and faith experience, all Christians have come to realize that knowing

and doing God's will is the best possible thing that can happen to them. And so Christians pray to God frequently, "Your kingdom come, your will be done," as Jesus taught in the Lord's Prayer.

Accordingly, Christians over the centuries have learned that there are some basic assumptions that undergird the discernment process. We assume:

God's Presence

1. The Triune God is self-revealing and reveals his will within the context of our committed faith relationship with him.
2. God becomes human and vulnerable in Jesus so that we are drawn into a higher purpose through the cross.
3. The Holy Spirit is present in our personal and corporate lives, given in baptism, so that we may discern God's way of the cross that leads to new life in the resurrection.

Our Practice

1. We place God's word and will as the ultimate value in our knowledge and experience, higher than all other values that might influence us.
2. We participate humbly in a faith community of grace as we discern God's will for our lives.
3. We are dedicated both personally and communally to practices of Scripture reading, prayer, worship and discernment to know and follow God's word and will.

Our Posture

1. Trusting in faith, we are willing to follow God's word and will, shedding our personal fears, needs and anxieties.
2. We share our God-given gifts and insights in the ministry of discernment for the benefit of the discerning community.
3. We practice discernment as an ongoing feature of a life of discipleship as modeled by Jesus and the apostles.

In this period prior to the election of a Bishop, our life together as a synod will be greatly enhanced by being a discerning community. The following Bible studies are offered as a starting point for your ministry and personal reflection. We encourage you to look into other resources for the discernment process. Irene Flynn in the Synod Resource Center can assist you.

In the end, the goal of discernment for our synod is much as it was for Christians in Acts and that is to be able to say, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..."

Bible Study #1

And the lot fell on Matthias.

Read Acts 1:12-26.

This story follows the Ascension of Jesus and shows the process by which a new person was chosen to replace Judas the Betrayer for the ministry of the Twelve Apostles.

The story makes clear that there were more who believed in Jesus than just the Apostles. How many did they number? (1:15) Note the number being a multiple of 12, the number of disciples and the number of the tribes of Israel. How accidental or purposeful might this number be in the narrative? In the whole scheme of God's plan of salvation?

Peter takes the lead in the account and suggests a discernment process to follow.

What was the criteria for the candidate to be considered? 1:21-22 What's the relationship between this criteria and Jesus' teaching about the Holy Spirit in John 14:26?

If Jesus' ministry from his baptism to his ascension was about three years long, then what are the implications of the criteria suggested by Peter?

How many candidates were settled upon that fulfilled the criteria? 1:23

Could there have been more? What do you think led them to put forward only two?

What was the next step in the process? 1:24

What specifically did the prayer ask for? 1:24c

The last step in the process was casting lots (1:26). Proverbs 16.33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the Lord's alone." Although this method of determining God's will was an old and venerable one, appearing 20 times in both Old and New Testaments, this was the last recorded use of casting lots in the Bible.

How do you see casting lots differing from taking a vote as we do today?

All human methods of determining or discerning God's will can be corrupted by the human element. What might be the advantages and disadvantages of casting lots for determining God's will? What might be the advantages and disadvantages of voting?

In the end, "the lot fell on Matthias, and he was added to the eleven apostles" (1:26). This verse closes the narrative without indicating faith in the process and general agreement among all the believers that God's will had indeed been done. What might help believers to have faith in a discernment process and that the results show God's leading within it?

In Acts 5:38-39, a Pharisee named Gamaliel makes a helpful statement about discernment, saying, "if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them--in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" How might Gamaliel's insight be applied to the results in the Acts 1 story? How might Gamaliel's insight be applied to our discernment processes today?

What do we learn from this passage about God's leading in our ministries?

What do we learn from this passage that has implications for our synod as we approach the election of a bishop?

This passage points out criteria for candidates. Other scripture lift up spiritual criteria for leadership in the church (Acts 6:3, 1 Sm. 16:7) as well as practical criteria (1 Tm. 3:1-7). What criteria should be considered for a bishop?

It is clear from 1:24 that the disciples expected that God would do the choosing and that their task was discerning God's choice (compare with 1 Sam. 16:1-13). How do we see God's hand acting in the choice and election of a bishop?

Close this devotion with a prayer asking God to teach us how to listen with ears attuned to the Spirit and eyes open to the signs of God's leading.

Bible Study #2

Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.

Read Acts 11:1-18

In this passage Peter comes to see that God has included Gentiles in the plan of salvation, and thus that the church also should accept Gentiles as Gentiles rather than as converted (circumcised) Jews! - among its number and in its table fellowship. Luke Timothy Johnson calls this *a narrative of faith*. It begins in Acts 10:1 with the centurion Cornelius and ends in Acts 15:35 with the Jerusalem church affirming its fellowship with the Antioch church through a letter. James, the leader in Jerusalem, states the principle succinctly: "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). How did the Jerusalem council discern what "seemed good to the Holy Spirit"? The answers to that question appear only as the story unfolds the way faith is lived out. Along the way, the progression of events reveals Peter's leadership skills - or perhaps the experiences develop Peter's skill for following the Holy Spirit and that is leadership in the church.

This narrative of faith is a journey of discovery through experience, reflection on the Word, prayer, and community debate that leads to discernment. In Acts 11:2-4 Peter tells about his dream in the previous chapter. Where is Peter now and to whom is he recounting his vision?

What is the vision about? Does Peter grasp its significance immediately? What is the coincidence with his vision? (Acts 11:11; 10:17) Who directs Peter's next action? Peter does not act alone; who goes with him? What do his companions represent? Reflect on how leadership emerges.

What happens when Peter begins to speak to the Gentiles? What does v. 15 mean in saying the "Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning"? (See Acts 2:4 and 1:8)

What Word does Peter remember in 11:16? (See 1:5) This is the Risen Lord Jesus speaking, not the earthly Jesus or the Hebrew prophets. How does authority work itself out here - who else knows this Word that Peter remembers?

In 11:17, Peter draws a logical conclusion based upon the reception of the same gift of God. What is that gift? How does it manifest itself? In 11:18, who makes the judgment that "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life"?

Contrast the human and divine actions in this passage. Humans dissent and question, receive visions, send representatives, provide testimony, draw conclusions. God stirs visions, gives directions, pours out spiritual gifts, and acts outside the church as it knows itself currently. What insights arise from the comparison? A Trinitarian framework shapes this narrative. How is the work of the Triune God shown in the passage?

And, what is the significance of Peter acting on his experiences (vision, meeting with Cornelius' household, and witnessing the Spirit's outpouring) before the church in Jerusalem has affirmed his theological insight? Notice how Peter's leadership involves the integration of his spiritual experiences - from Acts 1-2, Acts 4, Acts 10 and Acts 11.

This whole narrative of faith in Acts 10-15 illustrates many aspects of discernment, including the dissension that is sometimes part of the process. For now, address the opening question: what does "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us" mean in the context of Acts 11? What actions has the Holy Spirit taken to include the Gentiles in the church? What judgments has the church discerned about the Gentiles? Include other items from the whole narrative, if you know them.

Stepping back from the text, what does leadership look like in this passage? How is it responsive to tradition, new experiences and accountability to the larger church? Who owns the discernment process here in this passage? Imaginatively speaking, could the mission of the church among Gentiles have developed without this discernment? What's the role for discernment in our mission?

Close this devotion with a prayer asking God to teach us how to listen with ears attuned to the Spirit and eyes open to the signs of God's leading.

Bible Study #3

It is not right that we should neglect the word of God.

Read Acts 6:1-6

The Jerusalem church faces a profound question about its ministry that threatens community-wide conflict: how to distribute its goods justly.

Just before the Ascension, the disciples asked Jesus about when the kingdom would be restored (Acts 1.6). He told them to wait for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, the Spirit was poured out and the church came into being. Believers pooled their resources to care for the needy among them (Acts 2.44f; Acts 4.32ff). The kingdom is being restored within the church!

But a problem develops; what does Acts 6.1 say it is? How does this problem reflect the way the church has so far been known in Jerusalem? In several gospel stories, Jesus addresses the poor. He tells a rich ruler to sell his possessions and give them to the poor (Luke 18.22). Zacchaeus hears that "salvation has come to this house" because he gives half his possessions to the poor and pays back those he defrauded four times over (Luke 19.5ff). What possible integrity issues are at stake for the church in its first crisis? Think about issues around conflict itself, resources, status, authority, authenticity of gospel, etc. How profound of a problem does Acts 6 narrate for the Jerusalem church?

In Acts 6.2 the twelve call together the community. Even as the community shares its goods so that all are provided for, leadership is shared so that all may be included. How does the calling of the meeting and the process for choosing the seven reflect power and authority among the twelve and within the community?

In calling the meeting, the twelve define themselves and their calling. What do they mean by saying "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables"? Why would distributing goods to the needy be a neglect of the Word of God for the leadership? How are they projecting a sharing of ministry within the community?

Notice how the seven are chosen – who chooses them? What is the difference between choosing and appointing? How does authority look in the sharing of ministry between the twelve, the community and the seven? Also, what do these criteria mean: good standing, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom? How do these criteria compare to that for choosing one of the twelve in Acts 1.

The twelve further define their work as "we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word" (Acts 6.4). Not to neglect the Word involves prayer and serving the word. On the night of his arrest Jesus tells the disciples, "the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14.26). Since Jesus is the Word of God made flesh (John 1.14), the twelve pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit to help them remember and enact Jesus' teachings with power – that is, so that "your will be done; your kingdom on earth as in heaven."

The community is pleased by the recommendation of the twelve and acts on it. The community chooses the seven, and following rabbinic tradition, lay hands on them to appoint them. The conflict addressed successfully, we're told the church continues to grow. Its integrity is secured. Now even temple priests are joining the movement (a significant marker since priests were paid through a portion of the daily sacrifices; perhaps the church's daily distribution was a more powerful witness to a living sacrifice (Rom 12.1f).

How important is the role of twelve for the church today? Do we, should we, define the role of bishops and pastors as "not neglecting the Word of God in order to wait on tables rather for their part to devote themselves to prayer and serving the word"? What might service to the word look like today among bishops and pastors? How does the Spirit help us remember everything Jesus taught and put it into practice?

Close this devotion with a prayer asking that God open up his word of scripture and his living word of presence that we might better discern his will.

Bible Study #4

The Lord looks on the heart.

Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13

This Old Testament story follows God's rejection of Saul, the first king of Israel, because he had not followed God's commands (1 Sam. 15:24). Samuel, the prophet who had anointed and advised King Saul during his reign, was deeply grieved by Saul's transgression and God's rejection of him (15:35).

As this passage opens, God is quite clear that he has a new king in mind. To whom does God send Samuel? (16:1) What town does this man live in? (16:4) Samuel, still grieving, seems reluctant to go. What reason does he give? (16:2) What instruction does God give to address Samuel's concern?

When Samuel arrives in the city, he is met by the elders who are said to be "trembling" (16:4). Why do you think they are trembling? (cf. 16:2)

Jesse and his sons arrive and take part in the sacrifice (16:5), and afterwards Samuel examines the sons for God's choice as king (16:6). On what basis does Samuel apparently begin to evaluate Jesse's sons? (16:7a) What is the criteria that God uses to choose a king? (16:7b) What elements are contained in this criteria that God would be looking for? How many sons of Jesse does Samuel examine and God reject with this criteria? (16:10)

In verse 11, Samuel asks if there are any more sons, and Jesse answers that there is another. Why do you think that Jesse had not included this other son from the beginning? Why would this be the least expected choice for king?

In verse 12, God's choice is made known, and the shepherd boy David is anointed by Samuel as God's chosen "in the presence of his brothers." What was the sign that resulted that confirmed God's choice? (16:13)

A major theme in this narrative is that God does the choosing. Identify and list all the verses that point this out.

It is also clear from this narrative that God's choosing is accompanied by signs that confirm that choosing. In addition to the sign in 16:13, two more stories from David's childhood years immediately follow this narrative, which serve as signs confirming God's choice: 1. David's ability to soothe Saul's evil spirit by playing the harp (16:14-23), and 2. David's conquering of the Philistine giant Goliath (17:1ff). How do these signs manifest what God sees in David's heart? If God does the choosing, will there always be signs to show this?

What can we learn from this passage about how God raises up leaders?

What can we draw from this passage that we can apply to our current process of electing a bishop? In what way does God choose a bishop? In what way are we discerners of God's choosing? How might we experience God's "no" as Samuel did when examining potential candidates?

An important criteria for God was not the outward and obvious, but what was in the heart. How might mortals look into the heart to see what God sees in an election process for a bishop?

This story also took place in a context that required new direction for Israel's leadership and created anxieties among God's people. How does God empower us in the face of anxieties over a bishop's election? How might a need for new direction inform our present election process?

Close with a prayer asking the Holy Spirit to help us to have open our eyes to see as God sees.