

Acts 15
Fun Things Quakers do part 3: Cooperate
discernment

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1 Reading – Acts 15:1–30

1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. 2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. 3 And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren. 4 And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them. 5 But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. 6 And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter. 7 And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. 8 And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; 9 And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. 10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? 11 But we believe that through the grace of the LORD Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they. 12 Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them. 13 And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: 14 Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. 15 And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, 16 After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the

ruins thereof, and I will set it up: 17 That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. 18 Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world. 19 Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: 20 But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. 21 For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day. 22 Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: 23 And they wrote letters by them after this manner; *The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: 24 Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: 25 It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; 29 That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well. 30* So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle:

2 Message

Friends, today I only am bringing a single reading for us to consider. It is unique in that it is the only formal business meeting found in scripture. This meeting has an agenda, a resolution, an outgoing epistle, and it is

dismissed. It is formal just as monthly and yearly meeting sessions are formal. This was a meeting of people representing multiple Christian communities and they met together to make a decision which would affect all of them – they were talking about the very nature of what it meant to be a Christian community. Perhaps we could carefully consider what had happened here – for I have learned that people are people whether 2000 years ago or today.

As you know, at first the Christian community was only made up of Jews who followed Jesus. In the first years, most of these Jews had heard Jesus personally, and many were there at the time of the crucifixion and the resurrection. Yes, at Pentecost the church grew thousands – but thousands followed Jesus, and thousands left Jesus when they learned that Jesus came to free His people from an enemy other than Rome.

Jesus did tell His followers to make disciples of all nations, however what exactly does this look like? You might know that the Jewish religion has been described as a religion of pots and pans. Jews find identity in what they don't eat. Part of their devotion to God is showed by the way they carefully follow not only Torah, but hundreds of hedge rules which cannot be found within the Torah. Many in the Jewish Christian community valued their Jewish identity – and could not imagine the idea that someone might become right with God without strictly following the law, including the parts which only existed to mark others as Jews.

These attitudes were challenged when Peter had a vision where he saw all kinds of animals which were forbidden to eat – and he saw Jesus telling him to eat the forbidden food. Paul refused saying: “No Lord – I have never eaten what was forbidden”. This vision was followed by a visit from a Roman Centurian who happened to believe in God, and was drawn to Peter. God had to prepare Peter to invite a Gentile, and even an enemy into the Church – the vision showed that Christianity was to become more than a path within Judaism.

This continued and people began to hear about outsiders joining with their group. A church formed in Antioch – and the Christians there organized the first recorded Christian relief effort, and they also were the first to be called Christians. As gentiles became a high profile part of the church, it became rather controversial. A task force formed to fix the gentile problem, the most obvious solution was to have the gentiles become Jews – and they went to Antioch to enforce it. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas found this solution to be inconsistent with the Christian Gospel,

so there was a major difficulty to unravel.

The solution to such questions is of course to call a business meeting. A general assembly of Christians met in Jerusalem to talk about what they would do. Paul and Barnabas represented the Gentile Christians in this meeting. The scripture tells us that there was much debate over, that people talked about scripture and matters of faith. There was a conclusion, that no one had to become Jew in order to become a Christian, and there was an epistle written telling the same.

The obvious question from this meeting is: "What happened after?" When we read Paul's Epistles, we learn that those who argued that people must become Jews first did not change their minds – they still traveled, they still preached, and they still caused trouble in gentile churches. They were one of Paul's greatest opponents. One thing about business meetings is that even when they make a clear decision – sometimes people are not willing to live with it. Even in the primitive church, just because there was a meeting does not mean that people accepted what was decided, sometimes when people are petty there is a lot of trouble.

One thing that I notice about early church business is that it is easy to imagine such a business meeting among Friends. When I read the "Canons" of church councils, they read a lot like our minute books – a few major written reports on the topic at hand, sometimes on both sides, the decisions of the body, and the letter that the council writes about their gathering. I have not come across a report of the "vote", I personally wonder if the early church did not vote?

Friends have much experience with meetings where we discuss both sides, and prayerfully come to a decision. Like the primitive church described in Acts 15, we want to say: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." There is a reason that in recent times we have had "Meetings for worship with attention to business" instead of business meetings – Friends want to remember that we invite the present Christ to be part of the process.

Our meetings for business are very much like the consensus model – this is not unfortunate because it is a bad model, some Canadian local governments and some Japanese businesses use this model quite successfully, however their goals are secular. The goal of consensus is to find the acceptable compromise so that unlike voting it is not so clear who the losers are.

One of the most radical points of Friends theology is that we believe

that God wants to connect with us – and has through the person of Jesus Christ. We not only believe that Christ came – but that since Pentecost, God has continued to work with the Church and is in fact our teacher. We believe that God want to, and can, be part of all Christian’s lives – that every one has the ability to grow and learn. As Friends, God is our teacher, and we are so many students trying to understand how to apply what we have learned.

As we gather in the business meeting, all have a chance to speak about the issue. There is a time of debate so that all can express every issue that they see. We pray together, we talk together, and the discussion continues until the meeting feels somewhat clear that they have discovered Christ’s will. We want to be Jesus’ community – we want to follow our True shepherd, even though sometimes it is difficult.

If you have not yet figured out where I am going, our goal is not consensus – that is making everyone as happy as possible, but instead our goal is to discern the spirit of Christ. Our meetings are open. . . meaning that if someone or a group of people would come in to destroy the possibility of consensus, they would be able to do so, but the idea of God’s will remains. Our goal is not to find our own will, as it is in secular consensus, but to find God’s will.

The reason that our goal is not consensus is shown at the times when the Friends decision making process breaks down. Every time we meet, it is an act of faith that if we are willing God will change our hearts and allow things to move forward. The expectation that if we pray together, we can find God’s will and move forward, even if it really is not what we want is ambitious. It means that we expect a group of otherwise normal people to put God first, and actually make an effort to understand what this means.

Unfortunately, too often we look to ourselves instead of God. Too often the Friends meeting fails to seek God’s will, instead seeking consensus. When this happens, it is all too clear. Too often, people feel God’s call in their life. Unfortunately when we are convinced that the goal is consensus a very petty person will decide that the church only does what he wants to do. I have heard of Friends meetings accomodating this one petty person in the name of consensus, refusing to follow what almost the whole meeting felt was God’s will, held hostage by a false ideal until that person dies.

It is challenging to recognize God’s will and separate it from our

own. The youth of Western Yearly meeting said that the problem is that we have difficulty discerning whether it comes from ourselves, God, or something else all together. No matter what form of government a church takes, they have to deal with this challenge – Friends are a little closer to the challenge than some others, because we not only say we believe that we follow Jesus – that Jesus is our teacher, and our pastor, but our form of government assumes that Christ touches all of our lives. Because the whole body shares the responsibility to discern God’s call for the community – the whole body needs to learn how to hear God.

2.1 Prayer

The first step in recognizing God’s leading is of course prayer, which includes listening prayer. We cannot discern a true leading if we never give God enough time to lead us in the first place. Perhaps God will try and catch our attention like Saul on the Damascus road, but personally I prefer to listen for a still small voice than for God to need to blind me to catch my attention.

2.2 Biblical study

Next to prayer is a deep knowledge of scripture. Whatever God leads us to do will be consistent with scripture – if it is opposed to scripture our *Richmond Declaration of Faith* tells us that it is not a leading but a delusion. When I say that we must be consistent with what we learn from scripture – I do not mean that we prove a true leading by putting the plan into biblical language. I have heard racism put into biblical language, I have heard hate put into biblical language, and I have heard greed and pride justified with biblical language. It is far too easy to come up with a notion, and then search the scriptures for any phrase that seems to support it without considering the context. Friends need to baptize themselves in the scripture so that we can discern the leadings when the time comes. We need to know enough that we are not fooled by wishful thinking or the abuse of scripture.

2.3 Patience

Discernment is rarely something that happens in an hour – and, when discernment is necessary God’s work should be lasting enough that it is worth the effort of our prayer and discernment. I confess that some things are easy. Scripture calls us to care for each other, visiting and praying for the sick. If a person is thirsty, it should be rather obvious that we give the person water to drink – these day to day issues where we are faithful in the little things. Scripture tells us that if we are not faithful in little things, we should not be trusted with great things.

2.4 Repentance

Remember, I shared the queries with all of you, the tool of accountability so that we can work to become more aware of our relationship with God. What is it that God wants? God wants to share a good relationship with us – this is a priority, this is why Christ came – to restore the relationship. These basic things that everyone knows are not only basic, but vitally important – they are a priority. It will be rather difficult to discern a leading, and follow the leading when we know the basics but do not consider how to follow them. We cannot attempt to follow the basics if we do not carefully consider what that looks like in our own lives

Faith and Practice suggests that we begin business meetings with a period of worship, and also to read one of the Queries. Before we seek God’s will, we seek God. Before we ask God how we should move forward, we ask ourselves if we are even on the right path. In Greek, repent is a compound word meaning “Think again”. If we look in *Webster’s unabridged dictionary*, we see that one of the meanings is to change the mind. Repentance is second guessing ourselves, and we read the Queries to help remind us to do so. We need to realize that God wants us to be better in the little things – what seems to be little things are actually a priority.

2.5 Obedience

Before we seek God’s will – we need to commit ourselves to obedience. Remember, silence before God is an act of submission. Reading the queries is ideal an act of repentance where we rethink our lives and consider how

we can better live out the basics of the Christian life. The epistle of James tells us that the one who hears a message but does not obey is like a man who looks in a mirror but forgets his own face. Perhaps I should have placed this earlier, however we have to carefully consider our lives before we can apply the new patterns of obedience. Obedience is not something we do, but it becomes a way of life, one of listening, hearing, and doing.

2.6 Community

Friends believe that Christ has a real presence in the community. One of the important checks that we have is that we seek God together, listen together, and share what we heard with one another. The reason for our slow business process which resembles concensus is that we do seek consensus – just not consensus in the sense of making the descision that makes everyone happy. The goal of the community is to discern God’s will, each person seeking to hear and to understand. Each person also listening to the others who are doing the same work. There is a hope that the work of listening will eventually bring the group to hear the same thing.

2.7 Conclusion

In spite of our best efforts, we do not always succeed in discerning God’s will. The Christian life is challenging – only Jesus lived it perfectly. We do our best, and trust that God is merciful. Friends, I know you are struggling to find God’s will. You want to make choices that will affect your future for years to come. I encourage you as you make these choices to be patient, to pray and listen to God. I hope that you as a community will seek God’s will as fully as you can discern it, and then obey what you have found as completely as you have strength.

3 Queries for reflection

- Do we seek God’s will or our own?
- How do we recognize the difference?
- Am I willing to truly surrender my will for God’s will?

- Do I consider the needs of others as well as my own needs?