

Shaped by God's Story

The Work of the Discerning Community

Western District Conference
August 3, 2013

Plan for Tonight



- Look at Acts 10 and 15 as windows on the early church's hard work of discerning the voice of the Spirit.
- Not as much heady input tonight: more reflection on Scripture, with skits designed to help us imagine the scenes.
- We take these chapters too much for granted. What a delightful and informative window on the early church!
- The challenge facing the Holy Spirit: how to get these Jewish believers in Jesus to make room for Gentiles.

How Did They Get from Here to There?

- The early church leaders had been taught all their lives about what foods were clean and what foods were unclean.
- Peter had a dream in which God seemed to be saying something different.
- How and why was he able to change his mind, to see these things differently?
- How and why was he able to convince others that this change of policy was truly of God?

Leviticus 11

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them:

2 Speak to the people of Israel, saying:

From among all the land animals, these are the creatures that you may eat. 3 Any animal that has divided hoofs and is cleft-footed and chews the cud—such you may eat. 4 But among those that chew the cud or have divided hoofs, you shall not eat the following: the camel, . . . 5 the rock badger, . . . 6 the hare, . . . 7 the pig, . . . 8 Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch; they are unclean for you.

Leviticus 11



10 Anything in the seas or the streams that does not have fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and among all the other living creatures that are in the waters—they are detestable to you 11 and detestable they shall remain. Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall regard as detestable. 12 Everything in the waters that does not have fins and scales is detestable to you.

46 This is the law pertaining to land animal and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms upon the earth, 47 to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean, and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten.

The Two-Fold Word



- The written Word is uniquely authoritative for the Christian life.
- The Holy Spirit's voice is also important as we seek how to read and apply Scripture in life.
- Let us consider the interplay between the word of Scripture and the word of the Spirit in the story of Acts 10.

“The Circumcised Believers Who Had Come with Peter” (Acts 10:45)



- Imagine that you were one of those circumcised believers with Peter.
- Probably “some of the believers from Joppa” in 10:23.
- What had they seen and heard from Peter?
- What had they seen and heard from Cornelius?
- What had they seen and heard from the Holy Spirit?
- What were they supposed to think about all of this?

Acts 15 as a Case Study in the Hard Work of Spiritual Discernment

Genesis 17



⁹ God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. ¹³ Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

What was it about this passage that the Early Church did not understand?

Experience, Reason, Scripture, Tradition



The apostles called for a consultation in Jerusalem.

1. They told stories about how the Holy Spirit was working to save the Gentiles, drawing on their **experience** of what God was doing (Acts 15:3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 14).
2. They *debated* with one another and *listened* to one another, using their **reason** to determine what the Holy Spirit was trying to say (Acts 15:6, 7, 9, 12).
3. They looked for ways in which **Scripture** was in line with the current activity of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:15-18), though they did not always take the "obvious" passages at face value.
4. They looked for what they could learn from **tradition**, on one side *and* the other (Acts 15:1, 21).

Table Discussion

- Consider Acts 10 and 15 and the dramatic presentations you have just experienced.
- How do you understand the ways in which Spirit and Word interacted in the early church's discernment of God's voice and will?
- What do you think the Holy Spirit is saying to the church today in light of these dramatic presentations?

Biblical Evidence of Vigorous Debate

Acts 15

- 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.
- ⁷ After there had been much debate, ...
- ¹² The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul ¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied,
- ¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that ... [Greek: it is my opinion that ...]

Biblical Appeals to Unity



The First Church of Philippi

- ¹²⁷ Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel. ²¹ "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." ³¹⁵ Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

—*Phil 3:15-16*

Biblical Appeals to Unity



The First Church of Corinth

- ¹⁰ Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

—*1 Cor 1:10-11*

- ¹¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

—*2 Cor 13:11*

Maintaining Unity in Vigorous Debate

Conclusion: What are the keys?

1. Delight in Scripture *and* in your brothers and sisters in Christ.
2. Maintain your focus on discerning God's Spirit.
3. Listen well.
4. Speak well so that others can hear you.
5. Be mature.
6. Maintain love for one another.
7. Pray, asking the Spirit's guidance for both wisdom and direction.
8. Listen for what God is doing among God's people (i.e., value the lessons of observation and experience).
9. Recognize that *occasionally* God calls for mind-boggling paradigm shifts ... *even when the biblical warrant is not immediately obvious*.
10. Stay on the same side of the table: "striving side by side" (Phil. 1:27). (Don't mistake your brother or sister for the enemy.)