

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Practicing the Art of Discernment”**  
**a series on *Becoming the Church***  
**Acts 15**  
**May 14, 2017**

I have a question for you this morning, a question that might seem a little odd, but it's an important question.

***How do you know what you know?*** I mean, how do you know it?  
Did someone teach it to you? ... Or did you just figure it out along the way?  
Did something happen that made you see things differently?  
***How do you know what you know?***

How do you know the earth is round? Was it from seeing a globe and someone explaining it to you? Or did you see a video taken from a satellite in space?

How about the fact that the earth rotates around the sun... and not the other way around?  
There was a time, not all that long ago, where everyone knew that the sun rotated around the earth. And to suggest otherwise...  
threatened what everyone had always known was true...  
which means it also undermined how we know, what we know.

**So it's important for us to ask, to wonder every now and then,  
how do you know what you know?**

How did you know how to get here today? It can be a bit tricky to find your way from the sign you first saw on 270 to our parking lot. Did you just wander around until you figured it out on your own? Did you read directions on our website? Or did your phone tell you? How did you know?

And as long as we're talking about church, how do you know that God is love? Did a Sunday school teacher teach you that? Or did you find it in the scriptures, in 1st John? Or did you learn in it a song a long time ago that put it all together for you? ***“Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.”***

Or did you need something more than that song?

Did you need to experience God's love moving toward you in some way in your life? Maybe you experienced it somewhere deep in your being... in some moment of grace, or forgiveness, or joy, or reconciliation.

How do you know God is love?  
How do you know what you know?

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That question is at the heart of this story in Acts 15.

The church is still in its infancy. It's just being born, and suddenly there is a controversy at the heart of its very existence.

The church is trying to figure out what is true and what isn't...

Trying to figure out what God would have them do  
and what God wouldn't have them do.

Trying to figure out the difference between  
what God is doing and what people are doing.  
And everyone seems to have a different opinion here.

**You see, they have different visions of what it means to become members of the household of God.**

The problem really got started with the story we heard about last week. Philip baptized an Ethiopian eunuch and then just disappeared. He didn't follow through with all the key things that the law would have laid out. But luckily no one was there to find out. It happened in an isolated place.

The controversy really breaks loose when Peter went to the household of a gentile named Cornelius, and to Peter's shock, the Holy Spirit came down on Cornelius. And so Peter didn't know what to do. If God gave him the Holy Spirit, who was he to argue? So Peter baptized him and his household.

That set off a firestorm at the end of Acts Chapter 10. So in Chapter 11, Peter is called to Jerusalem to explain what happened. He told them the whole story... start to finish, along with his reasoning, "If 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?"

That made sense!

Well, that settled things down. Everyone agreed... It must be God's doing.

Case closed, right?

Well, not so fast.

The controversy keeps brewing.

Paul and Barnabas now start baptizing all kinds of gentiles. But the church was mostly good, God loving, scripture reading, Jewish people... people who've gone to worship every week their whole lives.

And they know what the scriptures say. They know what the tradition says. If all these gentiles want to be welcomed in, then they need to get circumcised. They need to follow the bible on this one.

These aren't bad people pushing circumcision. And I really hope you see that. They are good hearted. They just want to make sure no one is being led astray here. They are concerned about the gentiles and their eternal souls. Chapter 15:1 says that they explained to the new gentile converts **"Unless you get circumcised, you aren't saved...and we don't want that for you."**

Well, verse 2 says, **"Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them."** That's putting it politely. They argued and argued. After all, hadn't this already been settled with Peter back in chapter 11?

And here's an important insight about becoming the church... an insight from the very beginning. ***Discernment in the church is never a straight line. It's forward and backwards and sideways and circling around to meet people where they are along the way.***

Because when the church is in discernment, not everyone will be in the same place, or go at the same tempo. Some folks get too far out ahead. Some lag behind. Some take a sidetrack and get distracted from the main questions at hand.

*Which is to say, that the path of discernment in the life of the church will always be a winding path.*

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So the argument here in Acts 15 is heating up again.

And now this controversy is threatening to tear the community in half.

They're arguing and it's an argument that could split the church in two. I mean, this passage that proves... there have always been... Baptists.

We know a thing or two about arguing and splitting, don't we? There are more different kinds of Baptist churches and Baptist denominations than there are flavors at Baskin Robbins.

In our tradition, discernment work has been pretty simple. If the decision goes my way, we stay. If it doesn't, we take our marbles and go build a church in our own image.

Here in Acts 15, the church is reminding us that there is another way. They're arguing and they're fighting with one another, but they aren't giving up on one another.

For the sake of the church,

for the sake of being faithful to Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, they've got to come to some kind of clarity here... even if everyone does not agree. They've got to find a way forward.

And so they all gather together in Jerusalem... and begin to hash it out. They argue... and they try to explain, they quote the scriptures, they tell stories, because they're trying to figure out ***how to know what they think they know.***

It's underneath the question they are arguing about, and it's been underneath every other argument in the history of the church... you know, in the last 2,000 years, those 3 times we disagreed.

***How do we know what we know?***

That's the central question of discernment.

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Lucky for us, the church has had a lot of practice at this question...

The Reformation is one of those times we were asking this question a lot. The split of the Protestants from the Catholics was in large part around this question...

Catholics said, "**We know because of what the great tradition says.**"

Protestants said, "**We know only by what scriptures say.**"

And we have argued pretty heavily between these two paths of discernment along the way. But what we haven't always realized is that we are both defending a similar way of knowing what you know. That is, we both rely heavily on an outer authority – to tell you what is right and wrong.

Well there are a lot of people these days, Protestant and Catholic alike, religious and non-religious alike, that are fed up with being told what to believe. They aren't interested in listening to any outer authority. Instead they only follow their own inner authority.

That is, they trust their experience and their intuition over everything.

That sure feels good and liberating at first, but it doesn't take too long before you realize just how shallow that can be by itself. ***When you haven't got ground to stand on but your own opinions***

*and experiences, then you're standing on shifting sands... a ground that can so easily crumble and fall apart.* We need something more than a truth of our own making.

Lucky for us, there have been a few wise folks along the way that have tried to make sense out of all this.

One of those folks was a guy named John Wesley... maybe you've heard of him, ahem, Marsha. He had a paradigm that held together both our inner authority and our outer authority, both the wisdom of others and our own inner teacher.

It came to be known as the Wesley Quadrilateral. He said that there are 4 things that the church needs to use when it's trying to decide how to know what it knows: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

The first two are the outer authority: scripture and the tradition.

The second two are the inner authority: our shared experience and reason.

When these are all in relationship to one another... they help us to know. When they are held together, we move to a deeper place of wisdom.

Richard Rohr puts it this way, **"Only when inner and outer authority come together do we have true spiritual wisdom."**

We need both. The Church needs both.

1) The outer authorities of scripture and the great tradition, both that ground us in something beyond the smallness of our own life.

2) The inner authority of our shared experience and reason, both that ground us in the living of real lives in a messy world.

They work together in a dynamic relationship of discernment.

Together they become the way... in which we know... what we know.

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And when we look back to this moment in Acts 15, back to this groundbreaking moment in the life of the church, that's exactly what they are doing.

Some talk about the tradition of circumcision that began with Father Abraham and his many sons... and that tradition Moses laid down in the law. It became scripture, and that matters. The scriptures cannot be ignored.

But we don't read them in isolation from real life and what God is doing in our own time.

So others tell stories... stories about what they have experienced and have seen happening... Peter reminds them about what happened with Cornelius. It doesn't fit the scriptures, but Peter experienced the Spirit of God, the presence of God in Cornelius... the Roman gentile... so yes, he baptized him.

And then Paul and Barnabas began to tell their stories of what they had seen and experienced... the way that God is present and working among these gentiles.

But even that doesn't end the story. It doesn't negate the scripture, but it does change how we read the scripture. James, he gets up and he starts to hold all of it together, outer authority and inner

authority, the wisdom of the ages and the inner teacher. He acknowledges the experience of Peter, and Paul, and Barnabas... but he also points back to scripture...

He reminds them of other voices in the bible besides the texts at hand.

**“Yes, Moses said that, but the prophets said this, remember? And maybe this moment is what the prophets were describing...”**

Inner authority and outer authority... held together.

Scriptures and tradition, in relationship with  
our experience of God working among us  
and our own reasoning.

This is how the Church discerns when it matters most...

It's how we know what we know.

It's how we hear the Spirit's voice to us today.

It's how we hold our convictions, but hold them with humility...

And so, they make the radical, groundbreaking decision... to welcome in everyone...without the requirements of the law.

Case closed....

Or...maybe not.

Like I said, discernment is always a winding road.

You see, there were all kinds of parking lot conversations that day.

People are still grumbling, still not happy about what direction things were going.

And we'll see more of this controversy play out over the next few weeks in our series.

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But for today, we have a third piece of the puzzle of becoming the church:

Two weeks ago, we began by saying that the church is a community defined by one central conviction: Jesus is Lord!

Last week, we saw that the church was becoming a radically inclusive community around that one central conviction, with the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch.

This week, we are seeing that the church is not a static community. It has always been, is now, and always will be, a community that must practice the art of discernment.

Let's pray together,

*O God, in this messy world of ours,*

*we cannot always see the road ahead of us.*

*We don't know the future of our church,*

*and we don't know what the future holds for our very lives.*

*But we do know that we want to honor you.*

*We want to follow you.*

*And so we ask for wisdom... in all that we face*

*Give us the wisdom to find you... even when the road is dark.*

*Help us now to learn to taste your goodness here at the table.*

*Help us learn to recognize your grace in this bread and cup,  
so that we can see it, taste it, and recognize it... out in the rest of our lives.*

*Through Christ we pray,*

*Amen.*

Reflection:

*“Scripture as validated by experience and experience as validated by Tradition are good scales for one’s spiritual worldview.” ~Rohr*