

## The Early Church Finds Its Way: Discernment in the Acts of the Apostles

by Bonnie Bowman Thurston

Your General Assembly has created a task force with the mandate to lead the church “in spiritual discernment of [your] Christian identity.” It seems to me that an obvious source for this is St. Luke’s Acts of the Apostles, the story of the early Church’s growth and development. “How did the early Church in Jerusalem discern the will of God?” is the question I asked myself.

We all know that there are certain caveats in using Acts as an historical source for what the early Church did. One way to say this is to say that St. Luke is writing historically, but not modern history. St. Luke’s concern is to write *biblical* history, to continue the story of Israel where it left off by picking up the Jesus story and showing God’s new way with people in his community, the Church. Jerusalem is, for St. Luke, the bridge between Israel and the Church.<sup>1</sup> I think it is clear that the portrait of the Jerusalem Church in Acts is an idealized portrait, warts and wrinkles airbrushed out! As Carl Holladay has noted, Luke emphasizes aspects of religious community valued in both Jewish and Greco-Roman society: daily devotion to public and private religious activity; respect in the presence of divine power; internal harmony and community solidarity expressed in generosity and concern for each other.<sup>2</sup>

That said, I am quite comfortable mining Acts for principles of Christian action. The Acts of the Apostles may reflect St. Luke’s theology, but as Acts is a canonical book in our Holy Bibles, it is our theology. Indeed, for us its witness is authoritative. What it says is what we ought to do. So I am going to remind you of three stories in Acts in which those early Christians had to discern how to act for the sake of the public, communal ministry of the ancient Church. After giving a brief reading of each passage focusing on this one issue, I’ll suggest three biblical principles for discernment found therein.

But first, it might be valuable to think about the English word “discernment.” It isn’t a biblical word, that is, one with a Greek or Hebrew root. It comes from the Latin word *discernere*, to separate. It is formed from the prefix *dis* meaning “apart” or “asunder” (as in disparate) and the verb *cernere*, “to perceive” or “to see.” To discern, then, is to perceive with the eyes or the intellect, to recognize or comprehend mentally the various parts of something. The closest Greek word that I can think of is the verb *krino* which is usually translated “decide,” “determine,” or “resolve,” but which, interestingly, has the first dictionary meaning “to separate” or “to put asunder.”<sup>3</sup> Apparently the oldest meaning of the word meant to separate as in sifting, shaking out the chaff and retaining the flour. To discern, then, is to sift out what is not useful in order to have what is useful in full view.

And there is another suggestive possibility for *krino*. In parallel Greek literature *krino* is used as a kind of technical term for “the response of an oracle.”<sup>4</sup> Somebody asks the gods about something, and their response is their “judgment.” So the word meant to submit to the judgment of the gods. And that, too, it seems to me, has relevance for

Christian discernment. When Christians are engaged in discernment, we are seeking to “sort out” our situation, to perceive it accurately in order to respond to the will of God for us. Our response must be, in essence, submission to God’s will for us. In discernment we respond to the Christian oracles: the Word of God in flesh, Jesus Christ, and the Word of God in book, the Holy Scriptures.

As we turn to situations in the life of the Jerusalem Church that called for discernment, let us remember that for Christians then, as for Christians now, the necessity for discernment always comes with a promise. We see that promise in Acts in this paradigmatic verse: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). Christians are promised power for discernment through the Holy Spirit. As Gerhard Dellinger noted, Christian teaching gives not only an order of life (as any philosophy worth its salt does), but a power to put that order to work.<sup>5</sup> Our “power source” is the promised Holy Spirit, the Paraclete. In the Farewell Discourse in St. John’s Gospel, Our Lord Jesus promises “. . . the Advocate, 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). When Peter and James and John and the Galilean women and the mother of our Lord met to make decisions for the Church, they did so empowered by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Or so they were instructed. And therein is our first example of early Church discernment, Acts 1:12–26, the choice of a twelfth apostle to fill the vacancy left by Judas.

## Acts 1:12–26 The Amazing Silent Apostle

In his wonderful study of biblical prayer, *They Cried to the Lord*, Patrick Miller says “One of the clearest biblical instances of prayer for the purpose of seeking divine guidance and instruction is the gathering of Jesus’ disciples, after his departure, for the purpose of choosing a successor to Judas.”<sup>6</sup> This first story describes the need for discernment in the selection of leaders for the Body. This story troubles me. It troubles me on three counts: (1) Jesus didn’t instruct the disciples to do this; (2) the disciples make the selection without waiting for the arrival of the promised Holy Spirit; and (3) the person selected, Matthias, is never heard from again.

The background of the story is direct words from Jesus Christ: “. . . you *will be* baptized [*baptisthesesth* (future-not yet happened-passive)] with (or “by”) the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (1:5). Further Jesus says “you will receive [*lempsesthe* (future-future-not yet happened-passive)] power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you . . .” (1:8). They have been promised the Holy Spirit here (and in Jesus’ Farewell Discourse in St. John 14–16). St. Luke’s use of the “Divine passive” tells us it is a gift of God. But it hasn’t yet come. Hold that in mind.

After the ascension of Jesus, the disciples, including the apostles and “certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers” (1:14) gather in

Jerusalem with a crowd of 120, presumably Believers (1:15). Our good friend, the impulsive St. Peter stands up and gives a speech the gist of which is, they had better select a replacement for Judas.<sup>7</sup> This troubles me because Jesus didn't instruct them to do this, although I suppose Greek students might argue that the *edei* in verse 16 and the *dei* in verse 21 suggest divine plan. Many scholars have pointed out that "twelve" may be intended as a symbolic number, a representation of the twelve tribes of Israel rather than a historical, inner-circle of Christian authority.<sup>8</sup> Certainly no two lists of The Twelve are exactly the same. And there were other "apostles," Paul, for example, and a woman, Junia, named by him in Romans 16:7.

St. Luke seems to be the first person to link the two separate groups, The Twelve and the apostles; narratively, he needs twelve people in order to have all twelve tribes symbolically present at Pentecost. But I wonder whether in his desire to fill out The Twelve, Peter isn't a bit like Mary Magdalene in the Garden of Resurrection, desiring to hold onto something from a previous way of life. Things, after all, are different after the resurrection of Jesus!

Be that as it may, Peter lists the qualification for "the twelfth": one of the men [*andron*] who have been with them since the ministry in Galilee, a witness to Jesus' resurrection and ascension (1:21–22). Peter's plea convinces the Believers, so the group nominates Joseph Barsabbas/Justus and Matthias, prays about the decision and casts lots as a way of allowing God to make the choice of nominees: "The lot is cast into the lap/but the decision is the Lord's alone" (Proverbs 16:33). The lot falls on Matthias . . . whom we never hear from again. And, narratively, there is no summary word from St. Luke indicating divine approval as we shall see there is in other circumstances of discernment.

I can't help but wonder if Matthias is the "amazing silent apostle" because all this activity is carried out *before* the coming of the Holy Spirit. The disciples haven't waited for the promise of Jesus, but acted according to their own lights to elect a leader . . . who doesn't figure at all in "the rest of the story." Patrick Miller makes the point that while prayer and the casting of lots are not incompatible, after this account the casting of lots plays no further part in prayers of discernment in the New Testament. "Even in the choosing of the seven apostolic assistants in Acts 6 there is no reference to lots."<sup>9</sup> Has the Church just used an old device to perpetuate an outdated institution, "We've always done it this way"?

I know this is not the usual reading of this story, but I wonder if the first example of communal discernment in the early Church after the Ascension isn't a negative example? From it I would discern the following three principles that are *positive* regarding discernment:

1. Pray. After the two nominees are chosen, the church prays (1:24). We should ask God directly to guide our decision making.
2. Follow the direct commands of Jesus. It looks to me at least as if the early Christians ignored the direct word of Jesus recorded in the first chapter of Acts (verses

4–5 and 8) to await the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. They got impatient about the process. This leads me to principle number three—

3. Don't get ahead of the Holy Spirit. Wait for the Spirit's clear direction, or you may end up with an "amazing silent apostle," a leader who apparently doesn't lead.

### Acts 4:26–31—"The Priority of Authority"

If Acts 1:12–26 represents an internal issue for communal discernment—the need to choose leadership—Acts 4:23–31 is part of a longer narrative describing a problem that arose from outside the church community: persecution. The third and fourth chapters of Acts are an extended narrative that begins when Peter and John heal a lame man in the Temple (3:1–10). They use the healing as an occasion to proclaim the power of the risen Lord Jesus (3:11–26), and for that are called before the Sanhedrin (4:1–22) which "saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men" and "recognized them as companions of Jesus" (4:13). The upshot of this encounter is that Peter and John are commanded "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (4: 18).

Peter's response has to do with his understanding of what I call "priority of authority." "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge," Peter says, "for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (4:19–20). As Delling so clearly noted, the Church's early preaching was "witness to an experienced reality" (what was "seen and heard"; compare 1 John 1:1–4); the Spirit of God was "the inner motivating force of primitive Christian preaching . . ." <sup>10</sup> In 4:23–31 the early Church comes together to discern what to do. The fault lines are clearly drawn. If the disciples of Jesus exhibit his power and preach his resurrection, they will be in big trouble with the religious "authorities." Here we see one of many instances of St. Luke's narrative practice in Acts of having experiences of the early Church mirror experiences that their Lord had faced.

Upon their release the first thing Peter and John do is to seek out their friends, their fellow Believers, literally "their own" (*pros tour idious*; 4:23). The Church is summoned to gather, and when they do, "they raised their voices *together* to God" (4:24). This serves to remind us that, in general, a community rather than an individual is better at discernment. Two heads (or more!) *are* better than one for discernment, providing we don't gather heads that are too much like our own. We must be careful not to choose as partners in discernment those who are likely to have the same spiritual blind spots we do. And note that early Christian prayer was communal prayer, prayer that freed individual members of the community from "isolation and egocentricity."<sup>11</sup>

Acts 4:24–30 is one of the relatively few New Testament passages that preserve the text of an actual prayer.<sup>12</sup> It demonstrates that when the church raised its communal voice in prayer, the first thing it did was to remind itself who their God was: Sovereign, Lord, Creator, and Scripture-Giver. The primary subject of the prayer is God addressed as "Creator," which reminds the Christian community that any "enemy action" against Jesus is under God's sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> St. Luke records that in the prayer the Church quoted Holy Scripture, in this case Psalm 2:1–2. It prayed a scripture and then applied it to its own situation (4:25b–28). Very unflatteringly, the Church compares the

Sanhedrin to the raging Gentiles and the “kings of the earth” who opposed God and God’s anointed.

Having applied scripture to their particular circumstance, the assembled Church made their request: “grant to your servants to speak your word with boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant [or child, *pais*] Jesus” (4:29b–30). The request is not for their own safety, or for deliverance from corrupt or misguided religious authority, but that *they* might have boldness in their preaching and that God might keep doing the things that got Peter and John into this mess in the first place! As we know from the teaching of the Lord Jesus, prayer is answered to the degree that it conforms to the will of God. And, as Fred Fisher’s book *Prayer in the New Testament* reminds us, prayer in God’s will gives the pray-er new power to do God’s will.<sup>14</sup>

St. Luke closes this account of seeking God’s will in persecution with a vivid indication of divine approval of the prayer. While they were still praying, “the place in which they were gathered together was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (compare this with the situation of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 6:4). A “mini-Pentecost” ensues that dramatically answers the prayers that are still in progress. And the conclusion is that they “spoke the word of God with boldness (4:31).”

The narrative of Peter and John’s healing in the Temple, with the subsequent encounter with the Sanhedrin and communal prayer meeting, suggest the following new principles of discernment, each reinforcing the point that in all circumstances when decisions must be made, God’s will should be sought in prayer:

1. Seek the wisdom of the gathered community. Indeed, gather the community to seek its wisdom. Even the primary apostle, Peter, and the Apostle John did not rely on their own understanding, but sought counsel among the Believers, “their own” and not outsiders (no matter how “expert” they might be).
2. Apply Holy Scripture to present situations. The early Christians knew their own Bible and saw in Psalm 2 a situation they believed was parallel to their own. We can still do this. And it is one of the reasons why seminary training in biblical studies is so important, so that we as the Church can do it well and appropriately.
3. Make advancement of the Kingdom the polar star of intercession in the Church. When facing the first serious persecution from without, the early Believers in Jerusalem did not pray for their own security and safety, or even for their own existence as a community. Rather, they praised God and prayed for boldness to proclaim the Word and for God to continue mighty works in the Name of Jesus. A Church that prays only for its own existence is a Church that cuts off its own source of empowerment.

### Acts 6:1–7—

#### Varieties of Gifts, But the Same Spirit

The final text we will consider in our quest to uncover biblical principles for the Church’s communal discernment returns to the internal question of the selection of appropriate leaders for the Christian community. The passage narrates “the first move

to a structure and defined responsibilities in the early church”<sup>15</sup> although this is not the aspect of it we shall explore. The text presents a “happy problem”: increasing numbers of Believers necessitates a more developed organization.<sup>16</sup> That’s the “good news.” The “not so good news” was that the church was dividing along either ethnic or linguistic lines, depending upon how one interprets who the *Helleniston* in verse 1 are. The danger is not just burnout on the part of The Twelve, but division in the Church.

Note that the established authority, The Twelve, “called together the whole community of the disciples (Acts 6:2).” This was not to be a decision made by a small group at the top and imposed on the majority, but was to be a solution worked out among the Believers. The Twelve had come to a realization that many of us have not grasped two thousand years later: nobody can do everything. Here we see dramatically enacted the “many gifts/one Spirit” idea that the Apostle Paul is so articulate about. Not even The Twelve could do everything! Preaching and prayer and social service were too much. And so the plan is to delegate authority for some of the work and in doing so to let the squabblers sort out their own problem.<sup>17</sup>

The Hellenists, either Christians who were ethnically Gentile Jews or were Greek-speaking Jews, had complained against the ethnically Semitic Christians or Hebrew-speaking Christians. That group was apparently in charge of distributing help to the widows who had become Christian and were no longer eligible to receive help from the Temple’s benevolent funds.<sup>18</sup> The Hellenists felt their widows weren’t getting a fair share of the dole. So the community (note, not just The Twelve) chose six men, all with *Greek* names, to take over the distribution. This clever solution places the complainers in the position of scrutiny and apparently pleased everybody. Having been chosen by the community, the six Hellenists are given authority by those who legitimately have it. The community “had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (6:6).” Once again, St. Luke indicates divine approval of the community’s discernment: “The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (6:7).”

As we think about the principles of discernment evident in this story we see again the importance of prayer, of together seeking God’s will and guidance. Patrick Miller points out that The Twelve chose to devote themselves “to prayer and to serving the word” (6:4). “And the order of Acts 6:4 places prayer first, giving some weight to that responsibility.”<sup>19</sup> The Twelve/the Apostles, the leaders of the early Church, thought prayer was their most important ministry.

Second, note that the early Church was not afraid to do two things that are always difficult: share the power and make structural changes. Here The Twelve relinquished some of their authority for the sake of justice, and they don’t hesitate to restructure the community to do so. These additional principles suggest themselves:

1. First, a “reminder” principle: use the wisdom of the assembled community. Gather the Church to make decisions that will affect everybody. People who have

ownership in decision-making are more likely to accept and abide by the decisions that are made. Though this story begins with dissension in the Church, the solution fixed on seems to please everybody including God, who affirms it by spread of the Gospel and increasing numbers of Believers.

2. Don't take it all on. Not even The Twelve could do everything. In discerning direction for a community, delegation of responsibility to appropriate persons is entirely appropriate. Most Christian communities will have people "of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (6:3) who can be regularly appointed for tasks.

3. Seek "both/and" solutions. In a potentially divisive situation, The Twelve in consultation with the "whole community of the disciples" (6:2) were able to come up with a solution that pleased everyone ("What they said pleased the whole community . . ." 6:5). Discernment that contributes to factionalism isn't likely to be very good discernment.

### Conclusion and Summary Listing of Principles for Community Discernment

Obviously a great many more things could be said about these very crucial texts from the Acts of the Apostles than I have said. What I have hoped to do is to highlight some principles that these texts suggest for the Church's communal discernment, although I think many of these principles work in individual discernment as well. Let me close, then, with a list of seven principles apparent in the texts we have been considering.

1. Pray. And pray and pray and pray! Seek God's guidance in discernment. This is the first and most important principle, and Acts 6: 1–7 suggests that it is particularly so for the Church's leaders. **The first and most important principle is to pray.**

2. Follow the explicit words of scripture, especially the commands of Jesus as they are recorded in the Gospels. In the New Testament the Word of God is described as "living" (See Hebrews 4: 12 or 1 Peter 1:23). Scripture is not some dead text from the Greco-Roman world. Thus it is an active tool in our discernment. **If there is a word from Scripture on the issue at hand, especially one from Jesus, follow it.**

3. Accept the leading of the Holy Spirit, but don't get ahead of the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus has promised us the Spirit to teach us and to lead us. It is absolutely crucial that we accept this gift. A gift is useless unless the recipient opens and uses it! Writing about Pentecost, Thomas Keating says "The Spirit . . . is not given only once." It "is an ongoing promise, an endless promise—a promise that is always fulfilled and always being fulfilled, because the Spirit is infinite and boundless and can never be fully plumbed."<sup>20</sup> **It is crucial that we learn to wait for the promised Spirit to lead before we make a move.** Since the Promiser is God, we know the promise will be fulfilled. One Matthias is enough!

4. **Seek the wisdom of the community.** Gather the Church together to discern what the Body is thinking about the issues being discerned. Beware the discernment of one or two isolated individuals, especially those "at the top," when the issue for discernment is one that will affect the whole Body.

5. Make the furtherance of the Kingdom the polar star of intercession for the Church. **When the community gathers for discernment, it should be praying**

**about bold witness and God's will, not self-preservation.**

6. Don't take it all on. Learn to delegate. Trust that God, by means of the Holy Spirit, will give the gifts that are needed for the Body. This is related to the third rule: **Community wisdom and community giftedness go together.** As the Apostle Paul says "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us . . ." (Romans 12:4–6a). Among the members of the community, God has distributed the gifts necessary for the community. Individually and as a community we must learn to trust this fact.

7. **Seek "both/and" solutions that will please the whole community.** "You can't please everybody" is most assuredly not a Christian principle. Parenthetically, we can learn a great deal about this matter from The Society of Friends, also known as the Quakers, and their consensus decision-making. Personally, I think the "majority rules vote" is one of the worst ways of making decisions in the Church because somebody always loses and is disgruntled or disaffected. The only worse means of decision-making is having one or two people "at the top" decide and impose their decision on the Body.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I am fool enough for Christ to think that consensus discernment is not only possible, but is the will of God for Christ's Church.

\*Whenever a scripture refers to  the Book of Acts should be assumed.

<sup>1</sup>W. Ward Gasque, "A Fruitful Field. Recent Study of the Acts of the Apostles." *Interpretation* XLII/2, 1988: 121–122.

<sup>2</sup>Carl R. Holladay, "Acts," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*. Eds. James L. Mays, et.al. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988: 1082.

<sup>3</sup>H. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953: 996.

<sup>4</sup>J. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980: 360.

<sup>5</sup>Gerhard Delling, *Worship in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963: 40.

<sup>6</sup>Patrick Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994:37.

<sup>7</sup>For more on this see Max Wilcox, "The Judas Tradition in Acts," *NTS* 19 (1973): 438–452.

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "The Twelve," in *Women Priests*. Eds. Leonard and Arlene Swidler. NY: Paulist Press, 1977: 114–122.

<sup>9</sup>Miller 38.

<sup>10</sup>Delling 101, 102.

<sup>11</sup>Delling 114.

<sup>12</sup>For a detailed reading of this prayer (and further references) see chapter six in my book *Spiritual Life in the Early Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

<sup>13</sup>Holladay 1084.

<sup>14</sup>Fred Fisher, *Prayer in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964:

101.

<sup>15</sup>Miller 326.

<sup>16</sup>William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987: 101.

<sup>17</sup>Parenthetically, but interestingly in the context of use of scripture in discernment, in his commentary on Acts, Charles Talbert thinks this follows a pattern set in the Hebrew community and recorded in Exodus 18:14–25 and Numbers 1:1 and 27:12–23. Charles Talbert, *Reading Acts*. New York: Crossroad Press, 1997.

<sup>18</sup>For more on this see F. Scott Spencer, "Neglected Widows in Acts 6:1–7." *CBQ* 56 (1994): 715–733.

<sup>19</sup>Miller 326.

<sup>20</sup>Thomas Keating, *The Mystery of Christ*. New York: Amity House, 1987: 90.

Bonnie Bowman Thurston, Professor emeritus of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, is an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She is a poet and the author of numerous books and articles, including her most recent work *Preaching Mark* (Fortress Press 2001). Of related interest to this article is her book *Spiritual Life in the Early Church: The Witness of Acts and Ephesians* (Fortress Press 1993). In addition to her writing, Dr. Thurston is also a popular retreat leader.

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