

The Essentials of Discerning God's Will Together

June 4, 2017

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."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 the apostles and the elders about this question.³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.⁵ But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

⁶ The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.⁷ And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

¹² And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me.¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name.¹⁵ And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

*¹⁶ "After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;
I will rebuild its ruins,
and I will restore it,*

*¹⁷ that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,
says the Lord, who makes these things¹⁸ known from of old.'*

¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.²¹ For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

Acts 15:1-21 (ESV)

I both listened to and read Alex's introductory message last Sunday on this new series, "Discerning God's Will Together." Which is a reminder that if you are absent on any given Sunday you can always access the message at our web-site. I think it's especially important when we do a series like this. Alex provided a good foundation for the series.

“Christian discernment is primarily about seeking the will of God in any particular situation.” Alex gave us three assumptions regarding discerning the will of God – three assumptions that are found in Scripture:

1. The wisdom of God is fundamentally different from the wisdom of the world.

That should throw up a very large caution sign whenever we try and discern God’s will regarding a decision we are going to make – whether it be in our own individual lives or in the life of a Christian community.

2. Believers are given access to the wisdom of God.

The Scripture Alex used for last Sunday was from 1 Corinthians 2 where the prophet Isaiah is quoted:

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” 1 Cor. 2:9, Isaiah 64:4

God has blinded the eyes, ears and minds of unbelievers from His wisdom. But He has revealed it, at least at some level, to believers, to those who love Him.

3. God reveals His wisdom to believers through His Holy Spirit:

¹⁰ these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. 1 Cor. 2:10-12 (NIV)

Alex also quoted Ruth Haley Barton from her book, *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, “Christian Spiritual discernment is the ability to distinguish between good (that which is of God and draws us closer to God) and evil (that which is not of God and draws us away from God).”

Alex then used the example of the early church and their discernment in choosing the disciple Matthias to replace Judas as one of the 12 apostles, found in the Book of Acts 1:12-26. The Book of Acts is all about the early church discerning the will of God as the church began and moved forward. Our Scripture this morning is just another example. Whereas last week Alex talked about some of the Biblical assumptions for discerning or pursuing God’s will together, This morning I would like to focus on the essentials of discerning God’s will together:

1. We need to accept and recognize that God is already at work in the world, specifically in the life of the church, in the community, and in the lives of individuals.

You would think that would be a given but it is not so. Often we try and figure out what we should be doing, make our own decisions, and then we invite God to join in.

Several years ago, a very popular contemporary pastor and writer Craig Groeschel, wrote a book entitled *The Christian Atheist: Believing in God but Living as if He Doesn't Exist*, and that was the main idea of the book. We believe in the Bible and all the stories that we find in there, that God was at work throughout history, but for some reason we don't think God is still at work in people's lives today. It's like He's gone somewhere and hidden himself. God is still alive and He is still at work in the world today and the first essential to discerning God's will for our lives, whether individually or collectively as the church, is accepting that He is at work and recognizing where He is already at work and joining Him in what He is already doing.

2. Accepting and recognizing that in many things, God has already revealed His Will in His Word – the living Word found written in the Bible and the living Word found in the person of Jesus Christ.

If the Word of God as revealed in the Bible and in Jesus Christ is not first and foremost what we turn to in discerning the will of God, then the church becomes no different than any other organization or entity which exists in the world. Again, while you would think that would be a given, that is not the case in many churches and among many who call themselves Christians today.

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective – Article 4 – Scripture:

“We believe that all Scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit for instruction in salvation and training in righteousness. We accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and as the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life. We seek to interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ as we are led by the Holy Spirit in the church...

“We accept the Bible as the Word of God written. God has spoken in many and various ways through the prophets and apostles. God has spoken above all in the living Word who became flesh and revealed the truth of God faithfully and without deception. We also acknowledge the Scripture as the fully reliable and trustworthy Word of God written in human language. We believe that God continues to speak through the living and written Word. Because Jesus Christ is the Word become flesh, Scripture as a whole has its center and fulfillment in him.

“We acknowledge the Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship. Other claims on our understanding of Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers, need to be tested and corrected by the light of the Holy Scripture.”

Commentary – “In reference to the Bible as the Word of God written, we are acknowledging its authority for the church. All other claims to represent an authoritative word on matters of faith and life must be measured and corrected by Scripture through the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the community of faith.”

Traditionally, Mennonites and Anabaptists have sought to be a biblical people, holding to the authority of Scripture discerned with the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the community of faith. Discerning God's will on matters of faith and life in the community of faith carries with it an awesome responsibility. That awesome responsibility is that the entire community of faith has a

fairly good grasp of the entire Scriptures. In 21st century America, with all our busyness, all the options at our disposal and all the demands on our lives from so many different areas – work, school, sports, technology, etc. – the chances of even having the majority of people making up the community of faith who have a fairly good grasp of the entire Scriptures is a lot less than it once was.

3. A third essential to discerning the will of God in community is that it needs to be done with great humility. While accepting and recognizing that there are many things that are clear in the Word of God, there are many things that are not, and when it comes to discerning those matters, humility is very important.

*“If my people, who are called by my name, will **humble** themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” 2 Chronicles 7:14 (NIV)*

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who being very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he **humbled** himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.
Philippians 2:5-8 (NIV)*

Christians should be the most humble of people but the truth is often the exact opposite is the case. Which leads to the 4th essential of discerning the will of God together:

4. Love is our ultimate calling.

As Christians, love for God, love for others, love for ourselves and love for the world is our ultimate calling. While sometimes it is difficult to discern the will of God on specific issues, the one thing that we know for sure is the will of God is love for God and love for others (including our enemies)!

Jesus said, “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your strength and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. Matthew 22:37-40

But for Jesus, love is not just an emotional feeling. Love of God shows itself in how we live our lives:

This is love for God: to obey his commands. 1 John 5:3 (NIV)

5. Prayer

Finally, the 5th essential of discerning the will of God together, something that Alex touched on last week, is prayer. While all kinds of prayer are useful for discerning the will of God – two are extremely important.

a. Prayer for Wisdom

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault.
James 1:5 (NIV)

The apostle Paul writes that God's wisdom is foolishness to the world, to those who are perishing and the wisdom of the world is foolishness in God's sight.

We need to pray for God's wisdom.

The second prayer which is necessary when it comes to discerning God's will is what is known as

b. Prayer for Indifference

The Prayer of Indifference is when we ask God to work in our hearts to make us indifferent to anything but the will of God.

Our primary Scripture this morning has the early church discerning God's will in a very serious matter, whether or not Gentiles who become believers in Jesus Christ have to be circumcised like the Jewish believers. This was no small dispute. Circumcision was the Old Testament Covenant sign that God had made with his people the Israelites. The big leaders of the church came to Jerusalem to discern this matter. We have Paul and Barnabas, Peter and James, they're all there.

Actually all five of the essentials of discerning God's will are evident in the passage. There was no doubt among them, especially those that had been sharing the gospel with the Gentiles that God was at work. Many were coming to faith. They both accepted and recognized that God was at work.

They turned to the Word of God. At one point they even quote the Old Testament Scripture, from the prophet Amos (9:11-12) who foresaw the day when people other than the Israelites) would be brought into God's kingdom. They recognized that this was the day.

They were also able to discern that circumcision was an Old Testament, an Old Covenant sign that represented "the custom of Moses," or the "law of Moses," with a small "l." Not the "Law of God" with a big "L" such as the 10 Commandments. The "law of Moses" with a small 'l' represented all the rules and regulations that the Israelites were supposed to keep – not that which saved them but which set them apart, or showed them to be the people of God.

But the long awaited Messiah had come and ushered in the New Covenant between God and his people. The "law of Moses" with a small "l" and all the sacrifices and offerings had been done away with. And besides that, it had all been a yoke on the neck of all the Israelites, that which they too were unable to bear. Why were they trying to put that same yoke on the non-Israelites whom were coming to saving faith in Jesus?

The one thing that is continually repeated throughout this discernment process, however long it took, and we are never told how long it took – it could have been one day it could have been many days (my guess is that it was many days), but the one thing that is repeated over again is just how much God is already at work and how many Gentiles are coming to faith. Why would they want to hinder that?

If love is our ultimate calling as God's people, then we need to recognize that God loves all people and that His ultimate desire is that all people, Jews and Gentiles (slave or free, male or female) come to a saving relationship in Jesus.

While it might not say it specifically in the passage, there is no doubt that deep prayer and deep humility were needed among the strong leaders of the church to come to a decision. And who is it that makes the final decision? It is James, who was the leader of the early Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

By the time we get to the end of the passage it is James who is taking and it says in verse 19 and following:

¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

But all the leaders needed to agree to this for the judgment to move forward. And I am sure they didn't all agree but they were able to humble themselves and make them indifferent to anything but the will of God, both in this matter and all other matters.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about their discernment is that which they agreed that the new Gentile Christians were still supposed to abide by: abstain from food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, and the blood of animals. Why those things? Well, sexual immorality, though the words in the Hebrew and Greek meant different things at different times, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, has always gone against the will of God. Idol worship in any form has always gone against the will of God, and blood represents life. God has always been for life. The only acceptable sacrifice of blood was and is the blood of Jesus, the lamb of God who was slain for the entire world.

Discerning the will of God is just the first step. The second and most important step is doing the will of God. Discerning without doing means absolutely nothing. How important is discerning and doing the will of God for our lives? Doing God's will is really what sets believers apart from non-believers. Doing God's will is what makes a part of the family of God.

Jesus says in Mark 3:35, "*Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.*"

Let us Pray: