

Deciding about deciding: Early Christian communal decision-making in Acts

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The importance of the communal in Acts

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The importance of the communal in Acts

- **2:42-47**
 - **6:1-6**
- In these days, that is, when the disciples were increasing in number, grumbling arose among the Hellenists against the Hebrews because their widows kept being neglected in the daily distribution (6:1)

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The importance of the communal in Acts

- 2:42-47
- 6:1-6
- other sharing in Acts
 - 11:27-30 gifts from Antioch to Jerusalem
 - 9:36, 39 Dorcas makes clothes for other women
 - 20:34; 18:3 Paul provides for his companions by working
 - cf. 2 Cor 8-9 esp. 8:9 God's generous giving in Christ is the model for Christian giving
 - I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. (2 Cor 8:13-14)

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The importance of the communal in Acts

- What about Paul?
 - his co-workers
 - Barnabas 13:2
 - John Mark 13:5, 38
 - Silas 15:36-40
 - Timothy 16:1-4; 1 Thess 1:1
 - relationship with the Antioch community
 - 13:1-3 sent out by them
 - 14:26-28 report back to them and spend time there
 - 15:1-2 sent to Jerusalem as their delegates
 - 15:36 on return, spend 'some days' there

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Examples of communal decision-making

- The choice of Matthias 1:15-26
 - praying in unity 1:14
 - interpreting the loss of Judas Pss 69:25; 109:8
 - person specification vv 21-22
 - two-stage decision
 - shortlist of two v 23
 - prayer and casting lots vv 24-26; cf. Prov 16:33

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Examples of communal decision-making

- The choice of Matthias 1:15-26
- The Spirit calling Barnabas and Saul from Antioch 13:1-3
 - the Spirit speaks as they worship and fast v 2
 - the community responds v 3; cf. 1 Thess 5:20-21

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Examples of communal decision-making

- The choice of Matthias 1:15-26
- The Spirit calling Barnabas and Saul from Antioch 13:1-3
- Going to Macedonia 16:6-10
 - the Spirit hinders (κωλύω) them v 6
 - Paul's night vision v 9; contrast 10:5-6
 - Paul and his companions respond v 10
 - 'he saw' εἶδεν → 'we began seeking' ἐζητήσαμεν
 - 'since we were convinced that God had called us' συμβιβάζοντες ὅτι προσκέκληται ἡμᾶς ὁ θεός
 - an 'underwhelming' mission in Macedonia 16:16-18, 19-24, 25-28, 40

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Key factors in communal decision-making

- the believers trust God and are dependent on God
- each of the divine activities requires interpretation
- testimony to what God is doing is important
- human leadership has a role in offering a path forward
 - but never a dictatorial or authoritarian role

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The inclusion of Gentiles

- a gradual process
 - the man at the Beautiful Gate 3:1-10
 - Philip and the Samaritans 8:4-25
 - Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch 8:26-40

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The inclusion of Gentiles

- Peter and Cornelius 10:1-48
 - divine initiative
 - Cornelius vv 1-8
 - Peter vv 9-20
 - Peter with Cornelius in Caesarea vv 24-48
 - Peter understands his vision v 28
 - Cornelius draws a conclusion from his vision v 33
 - Peter recognises that God accepts people who fear him from all nations vv 34-35
 - divine action: the coming of the Spirit vv 44, 46
 - Peter interprets the Spirit's coming v 47

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The inclusion of Gentiles

- **Debate and discernment in Jerusalem** 11:1-18
 - challenge to Peter's actions v 3
 - Peter tells the story of his conversion vv 4-17
 - Peter's vision vv 5-10
 - 'the man' v 12
 - the six brothers v 12; cf. 10:45-46
 - Peter interprets events v 17

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The inclusion of Gentiles

- **The Jerusalem meeting** 15:1-35
 - Barnabas and Saul's mission chs 13-14
 - on what basis are Gentiles members? v 1
 - debate in Antioch vv 2b-4
 - 'much debate' v 7
 - Peter's speech vv 7-11

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Peter's speech Acts 15:7-11

7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days **God made a choice** among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. 8 And **God, who knows the human heart, testified** to them **by giving** them the Holy Spirit, just as **he did to us**; 9 and in cleansing their hearts by faith **he has made no distinction** between them and us. 10 Now therefore **why are you trying to test God** by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that

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 - on what basis are Gentiles members? v 1
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 - 'much debate' v 7
 - Peter's speech vv 7-11
 - Barnabas and Paul's testimony v 12
 - James offers leadership vv 13-21 (Amos 9:11-12)
 - the community embrace his proposal vv 28, 22, 25

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Lessons from this process

- they focus on God
 - with real openness to God
- they read contemporary events through the lens of Scripture
 - in the light of the work of Jesus
- they are ready to listen to testimony
 - weighed in the light of Scripture and God's purposes
- the process is corporate, open and unhurried

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