



# Discernment

Action, Change, Togetherness and the Spirit



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**Text by Mike Walsh and members of the Mission and Discipleship team**  
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# Contents

## **Introduction:** *p5*

how do we know what God is calling us to do?

## **The Acts of the Apostles:** *p6*

discernment in the early church

## **The Theology of Discernment:** *p10*

the *why* and *how* we 'vote' in the church

## **Conclusion:** *p13*

seeking 'The Mind of Christ'

## **Space:** *p14*

for your own thoughts and reflections

Inside back cover:

## **Check-list:** *p15*

for a discerning Church Meeting



## Introduction:

In the Reformed Tradition, (from where the Baptist and United Reformed Church both have their roots), we believe the way to explore what God may be calling us to do is by a process of *discernment*, that is, listening for and recognising the voice of the Spirit to guide us in our decision making.

Whenever we are gathered together, either in worship, or in meetings and committees, we meet to hear what God has to say to us.

Questions for our Church Meeting are:

- ▶ What does our discernment process look like?
- ▶ How will we make decisions together in ways we believe put God's priorities at the forefront, rather than our own preferences?

Discernment can be difficult, and take time -  
**but it is about discovering together  
what we believe God is saying to us!**



**Q. How do we know what God is calling us to do  
as followers of Jesus?**

## The Acts of the Apostles: discernment in the early church

The story of the first followers of Jesus and the emergence of the early church is told to us by the gospel writer of Luke, in the book of Acts. Throughout this account of how the church first grew there are stories of individuals and groups, informal gatherings and structured councils, endeavouring to discern the voice of the Spirit's leading. Many of these stories are remarkably similar to situations we face; like electing leaders, including others, accepting diversity, deciding the rules, and sometimes even making a decision when we are still not sure how it will work out.

The acts of those first disciples have much to say to us about how we might go about making important decisions together.

Let's briefly explore five very different accounts;

### **Acts Chapter 1 verses 12 - 26**

choosing a replacement for Judas

In Acts chapter 1, the eleven disciples gathered together to discern who should succeed Judas and restore the number of disciples to twelve.

From the story we know that ...

... they prayed

... they heard scripture

... they shared, discussed, and listened

... they asked the Spirit to guide them

... they then drew straws, rather than 'voting'!

**Q. How do we feel about making an important decision  
... by drawing straws?**

## **Acts Chapter 2 verses 1 - 47**

the coming of the Holy Spirit

The first Christians were Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They saw themselves as a family, rooted in their shared discipleship of Jesus, with a distinctive communal life and some distinctive practices that related to their faith (Acts 2: 41-46).

From the story we know that there was ...

... teaching

... fellowship

... breaking bread

... prayer

... and a controversial decision to admit  
Gentiles in the early church

What they had not bargained for was that the Gentile Christians would soon begin to impact the way they understood themselves, and what faith and discipleship would come to mean.

**Whenever we welcome someone new,  
who we are often needs to change!**

In our Church there is a wide variety of people -  
different ages, cultures, and backgrounds;  
diverse experiences, beliefs and contexts.

**Q.** What we find essential to our faith  
might be completely alien to someone else!  
**How do we hold all our diversity together?**

## Acts Chapter 8 verses 26 - 40

### Philip and the Eunuch

When Philip unexpectedly baptises an Ethiopian Eunuch, the early church was changed forever.

From the story we know that ...

... God just told Philip to go!

He wasn't told why,  
or what was going to happen

... Philip discovered God's purposes on the way  
and had to think on his feet

**Q. How comfortable are we to make important decisions without knowing every detail, or the outcome?**

## Acts Chapter 15 verses 1 - 31

### the Council at Jerusalem

Chapter 15 tells the story of the Council at Jerusalem which met to resolve the first controversy in the church; do Gentiles need to be circumcised to be saved?

From the story we know that ...

... the decision is made collectively:  
everyone is involved, and in agreement

... the decision is communicated to the church  
via a summary of the Minutes,  
and the decision is binding to all!

**Q. How do we hold each other accountable to decisions we don't all agree with?**



## **Acts Chapter 16 verses 8 - 9**

the man of Macedonia

In this story Paul has a plan, but God intervenes and turns his whole world upside-down!

From this story we know that ...

... sometimes we make plans  
and commit ourselves to following them

... sometimes we can be absolutely convinced  
we are right, and able to argue our point

... then the unexpected completely changes  
our priorities or what's important to us

### **The Further Acts ...**

... of today's disciples in Chorlton!

We are the disciples of Jesus today, and like Paul on his missionary journeys, we also need to be willing sometimes for our well made plans and deeply held convictions to change, often at short notice!

### **Q. How do we know when God is calling us to change our plans, priorities, preferences?**

So like Paul, we need a Church Meeting which holds in tension: the need to reflect and plan together in the confidence that we are discovering God's will for us; at the same time, we need the courage to admit when we might have got things wrong, or circumstances have simply changed.

Revisiting, reviewing, and re-discerning will therefore always be central to a discernment-minded Church.

Discernment requires - *Attention, Change, Togetherness, and the Spirit!*

## The Theology of Discernment:

In the Reformed Church we believe that we can hear God speak to us when gathered together. Times of worship, prayer, teaching, and fellowship are not religious add-ons to the main business of our meetings, but are essential if we are to create an atmosphere where we are more likely to listen to God and each other, and be guided by the Spirit.

### **Our attitude and conduct in meetings is vital to our discerning together.**

Listening is much more important than speaking. If listening for God in the contributions of others, we are far less likely to be bound to our opinion alone.

We each only have a partial grasp on the truth. That is to say, the truth is much bigger than our own particular context, experience, and journey of discipleship. We need to hear from others whose experiences may have revealed very different truths than ours.

We are all to “speak the truth as we see it”, but with an eagerness to hear how others see it too, we can often be challenged and changed.

So when we meet in Church and Deacons Meetings, **we are gathering for worship, scripture, and prayer**, in order to best create an atmosphere in which deep listening and discernment is possible.

### **Only then are we ready to make decisions!**

## How decisions are made

**Our Church is not a democratic, our theology is significantly different from that.**

We do not meet in together to determine the will of the majority, but, as we have heard, to discern where God is leading us together.

**The word we use for this is ‘Theocracy’.**

Depending on the issue under consideration, or the number of people present, the way we discern the will of the meeting can vary. However, our approach should always be to listen respectfully to others’ point of view and come to a decision *together*, not simply to get our own point across or *win* the argument.

### **In addition:**

*Carrying out the decisions of the Church Meeting is the work of the Deacons, other committees, and individuals appointed by the Church Meeting.*

*The decision-making ability they have is the mandate to do what is required to carry out the direction discerned together at our Church Meetings.*

**All committees, and individuals, are accountable to the Church Meeting.**

## Small Groups:

In a **small group**, such as a **Deacons' Meeting**, or sub committee, consensus can be achieved quite naturally in conversation. As an issue is discussed and people listen to each other, a small group can easily come to agreement. The role of the Chair is to gauge the mood of the meeting, ensure everyone has been heard, and all are happy with the decision.

## Larger Meetings:

If our **Church Meeting** is **too large** to work in this *conversational* way, the chair may also need a *visual* way to gauge opinion. This is most commonly by a simple show of hands.

However, we must remember, the meeting is still trying to discern a shared decision and is seeking the guidance of the Spirit. Showing hands should not be interpreted as being a simple majority 'vote'. If the show of hands does not show a clear result, or if considerable concern is still present, it is perfectly in order, indeed it is desirable, for the Chair to decide that clear discernment has not yet been achieved and further prayer and discussion are required before a decision is made.

### **In addition:**

*For items which are legal formalities, or simply accepting a report, the Chair may still use a simple show of hands for a majority vote, as this is often much quicker for issues unlikely to require much discussion.*

*However, when seeking to discern God's will for significant issues concerning the Vision and Mission of the church, a format which seeks consensus has proved far more effective in achieving decisions where everyone has been heard and far more are content to accept.*

## Conclusion:

From all we have explored so far, both in the Biblical stories of the early church, and in the theology and workings of our shared Reformed Tradition, two things should be clear:

1. **We meet together as the Body of Christ**, the Church. Therefore our meetings are always in the context of Worship, Prayer, Scripture, and fellowship. And food should be a regular feature too!
2. Our gatherings are not ‘business meetings’, nor are we there to simply discover the will of the majority: but instead to listen for God through the Holy Spirit, and **discern the Mind of Christ**.

Therefore **times of worship will be essential in our meetings** as we seek to discern where God is leading us. This is very different to a “quick nod to God in prayer” so that we can then get on with the “real” business; it is an atmosphere that allows each of us to encounter the Living God as we gather to do our work of discernment.

So when we meet together we will expect to ...

- ▶ Worship, pray, and explore the scriptures
- ▶ Eat, and break bread together
- ▶ Share with honesty, and listen deeply to each other

So our time together should be structured, (this doesn’t necessarily mean formal) to facilitate the greatest possible listening and sharing with one another.

Our task is to discern  
**new opportunities for mission and ministry -  
together, in the power of the Holy Spirit.**

Space:  
for your thoughts and reflections



# Check-list for a Discerning Church:

Like the very first followers of Jesus, we will ...

- ▶ Worship together
- ▶ Pray together
- ▶ Explore the scriptures together
- ▶ Eat, and Break Bread together
- ▶ Share with honesty, and listen deeply to each other
- ▶ Listen to the guiding of the Holy Spirit

To help us to discern what the Spirit is saying to us, we will ...

- ▶ Be a safe space for all people to share honestly
- ▶ Be flexible in how we structure meetings, using styles which enable everyone to be heard
- ▶ Be patient and gentle with each other
- ▶ Be accepting of difference and celebrate diversity
- ▶ Model simple and effective ways of reaching consensus in seeking the Mind of Christ for our church

We also know that ...

- ▶ Sometimes it may feel to *you* we are moving to slowly
- ▶ Discerning God's will, and the best use of our resources, may not mean everyones priority coming first
- ▶ We may decide to focus on a particular project for a time, if this is how the Spirit leads us
- ▶ Shared discernment is sometimes difficult to achieve.

**In listening attentively, we might hear the whisper of God in the silence of some, and the words of others.**

