

## *Acts: Catching up with the Spirit Session Three: Discernment and Change*

### Session Three Agenda

- Opening Prayer
- Video (15 minutes)
- Ice-breaker discussion
- Discernment and Change: Four events (Acts 6:1-6; Acts 11:1-18; Acts 15:1-21; Acts 21:1-6). We likely won't have time to truly honor all four of these.
- Closing prayer

### Discernment and Change

Stories in this session are selected in part to illustrate the distinction between discernment and decision. Skinner addresses this on p. 62:

*“What happens in Acts is less about choosing and deciding and more about discerning. When I speak of discernment, I mean a process that involves reflection on who God is, what God desires, and how we—God’s people—might play a part in being faithful to God’s purposes. Discernment entails more than just collecting data, making projections, and choosing a sensible course of action. Discernment is an act of faith, because in the end the discerners don’t say, “This is what we choose” but “This is where we think we will discover the challenges and rewards of faithfully bearing witness to Jesus.””*

### Ice-breaker

Think about a time when you were part of a group other than a church or faith community that was trying to make a decision.

- What was the decision that had to be made?
- What specific steps did the group take to reach a decision?
- What specific steps did the group not take that you think it should have taken, and why?
- How confident did the group feel about the decision it reached?
- How much more difficult is group decision-making than personal decision-making, and why?
- In your experience, how differently do churches make decisions from how other groups?
- What specific steps did the group not take that you think it should have taken, and why?
- How confident did the group feel about the decision it reached?
- How much more difficult is group decision-making than personal decision-making, and why?
- In your experience, how differently do churches make decisions from how other groups do?
- How differently do you think churches should make decisions? Why?

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### Acts 6:1-6

1. What problem faces the church in this story? (Background: Acts 2:44-46; 4:34-35).
2. The story describes “grumbling among the believers, and Skinner notes, “Anyone who works with groups knows that grumbling can produce resentment and hostility, which is where especially damaging troubles live.” When have you experienced “grumbling” in groups, including churches, you’ve been a part of? What happened because of it and how, if at all, did the group deal with it?
3. “Stated and unstated values always guide a church’s decision-making, and there are always theological implications to the values we choose to employ.” What stated and unstated values do you find in the early church’s solution for this problem? Which of these values do you share and affirm, and why? Which ones do you have questions about or do you object to, and why?
4. For Skinner, this story highlights the church’s need to change its procedures when they fail to accomplish God’s mission: “Not all procedures are meant to last forever, especially if they prove discriminatory in ways that run counter to the good news.” When, if ever, has your church changed its procedures in order to more faithfully follow Jesus? How easy or difficult was the change, and what helped your church accomplish it? What procedures, if any, do you think your church still needs to change in order to more faithfully and effectively witness to Jesus?

### Acts 15:1-21

1. What is the issue about Gentile Christians that causes controversy within the church in Antioch in this story? Why was this question so important? (Background. Exodus 19:1-6; Leviticus 19:1-2; Psalm 19:9-13; Matthew 5:17-20.)
2. “There was no reason a person could not be scrupulous about his or her own Torah observance (as the Pharisees were) and a Christian at the same time.” Pharisees wanted all Jews, not just priests, to observe God’s Torah (literally, “instruction”) in order to serve the world as a people witnessing to God’s holiness.” Acts doesn’t preserve their arguments in these deliberations: Why might the inclusion of Gentiles in the church especially concern the church’s Pharisee members? What arguments do you imagine these Pharisees made?

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3. Paul, Barnabas, and the other believers from Antioch tell the church in Jerusalem about their flourishing ministry with Gentiles. How do the apostles and elders weigh their lived experience and their received tradition and Scripture (“the Law of Moses”) when reaching their decision? When your church faces decisions, how much weight does it give to personal experience on the one hand and tradition and Scripture on the other? What are the challenges in considering both, and the dangers in not paying enough attention to either?
4. Truly welcoming new people into a community means the community must be open to the possibility of changing. How much openness to change do you see in the apostles and elders’ decision in this story, and the way in which they reached it?
5. “There is no way,” writes Skinner, “of organizing a meeting or a discernment process that protects us entirely from errors or injustice.” Do you agree? Why or why not? How do your church’s decision-making or discernment processes attempt to minimize errors or injustice? How well do you think these processes work, and why?
6. Reflecting on the decision in this story, Skinner writes, “[M]ore convincing than any theological debate across a conference table were the stories of changed lives, new friendships, increased energy given to reconciliation and compassion, and unexpected experiences of solidarity and empowerment. . . . It’s the things that are life-giving that finally settle the debates.” When, if ever, have you experienced this to be true in your church’s discussions and debates about dealing with change?

### 13 Acts 21:1-6

1. Why did Paul and his companions have to “tear themselves away” from the community in Ephesus? (Cf. Acts 20:22-24, 36-38.) When, if ever, have you followed the Spirit even though doing so caused you grief?
2. Skinner writes, “[M]ore convincing than any theological debate across a conference table were the stories of changed lives, new friendships, increased energy given to reconciliation and compassion, and unexpected experiences of solidarity and empowerment. . . . It’s the things that are life-giving that finally settle the debates.” When, if ever, have you experienced this to be true in your church’s discussions and debates about dealing with change?
3. Reflecting on how the believers in Tyre object to Paul’s itinerary Skinner writes, “Both sides can’t be correct—that the Spirit is simultaneously leading Paul to Jerusalem while urging the Tyrians to dissuade him—or can they?” What do you think?

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4. Skinner states that although Paul and the Tyrians disagree about where Paul should go, their discernment has not failed. How can discernment that doesn't lead to agreement still be the result of faithfully following Jesus?
5. What lessons does the way Paul and his companions leave Tyre offer Christians today who find themselves going in different directions because of, in Skinner's words, "fundamentally different theological perspectives, each arrived at in good faith"?