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COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT IN THE EARLY CHURCH

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the often-neglected communal dimension of discernment by focusing on the way in which the early church responded to the controversy about the circumcision for gentiles in Acts 15. It analyses how discernment takes place mostly in times of ambiguity and crisis in which a faith community is challenged to seek the divine will. The article then investigates the way in which discernment takes place: it is first and foremost a communal matter which brings together all parties in order to participate in intense debate and weighing of possibilities. Before examining the awareness that discernment is about a contemplative gaze, the article analyses the way in which wisdom of community leaders and wisdom of the past play a role in discerning the right way.

Discernment is the ability to see the revelatory meaning in the ongoing process of one's own or another's life; to see, as the saints say, "with the eyes of faith" the salvific significance of what seem to be ordinary events (Schneiders 1982:49).

1. COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT¹

Spiritual traditions of Christianity agree that discernment normally takes place in the routine of daily life and about mundane matters. It involves making choices and determining the right way "at the many seemingly unimportant crossroads of everyday practice" (Derkse 2008:455). Much

1 In this contribution, discernment is approached from the assumption that it concerns the rational and contemplative gaze of an individual and/or community of faith which is at work in understanding the way of God. The systematic and methodological remarks of Waajiman (2002) on discernment will be used insofar as they have explanatory power for an analysis of Acts 15. However, the text itself, rather than Waajiman's model, determines the contents of this contribution.

attention is paid to this process of discernment, especially within the context of spiritual direction or mystagogy. As a result, the understanding of discernment has been linked to the actions of an individual who, in consultation with a spiritual companion and in line with his/her conscience, examines and tests the way forward in the light of deeper considerations, desires, motivations and drives.

Discernment is, however, also undertaken when groups and societies have to reflect on the divine will in times of transition and change. This discernment, as discussed in this article, is already evident in the time of the early church when, according to Biblical texts such as Acts 15, the church needed special wisdom on matters of importance. Relatively little attention is paid to this communal discernment² and even less to its place and role in Biblical Scholarship and Spirituality.³

Such communal discernment took on many forms, as a few concrete examples from biblical texts reveal.⁴ The gospels challenge their readers to discern true from false prophets, especially at the crucial end of the age (Mt 24:23-28; cf. also Mt 7:15-16 par.). Paul spoke of the *διακρίσεις πνευμάτων* (1 Cor 12:10)⁵ as one of the eight important spiritual gifts with which the community had to interpret divinely inspired speech and to build up the church as body of Christ. This discernment was important,

2 Recently, there has been some research on communal discernment. Cf. Johnson (1996:58); Liebert (2008:10, also 15, who refers to Acts 15 as “a community learning to act in discerning ways”) and Lonsdale (1992:99-113). Lonsdale (2005:247-249) offers the most comprehensive overview of institutional discernment. He traces it to the influence of the Second Vatican Council and points out how discernment functions in Liberation/Feminist movements. Of special value are his remarks regarding the urgent need for discernment in the contemporary world. He does not mention a great deal about discernment in Biblical texts, pointing towards the need for more research on communal discernment in the Bible.

3 Cf. Hense (2010, especially 11-14) for discernment in early Christian literature. She provides a short, useful overview of the Pauline literature, the *Didache*, 1 Clement, the Barnabas Letter, the Shepherd of Hermas, 1 John, *De Principiis* of Origen and the *Vita Antoni*.

4 Cf. Howard (2000:1-12) for examples.

5 Hense (2010:7) points out that, despite numerous exegetical attempts to explain the term in 1 Cor 12:10, there is no consensus on its meaning. This uncertainty has, however, as she aptly notes, not prevented this verse from becoming the *locus classicus* for discernment as a central term in Spirituality. Cf. also Liebert (2008:73-74) for a discussion and for sources on the relevance of Acts 15 for discernment.

because prophecy was “a central element” in the regular gatherings of the community (Anderson 2011:19).

In other instances, discernment was the result of interaction between members of a group or different individuals. This is evident in, for example, discerning whether visions had divine or demonic origins. In Acts 10, Peter failed to understand the “heavenly” vision of the impure animals, as Acts 10:17 points out when it records that he was wondering (*διηπόρει*) about its meaning. He “realizes” that God accepts gentiles only after he heard Cornelius’s report of his own vision (Act 11:34).⁶ Peter thus does not discern God’s will on his own, but only after discussion and in communion with Cornelius, after hearing of Cornelius’s vision and reflecting on it in the light of prophetic tradition (Act 10:43).

Acts 15⁷ provides one of the best examples of discernment by the faith community. It takes place within the framework of the church’s missionary actions. The witness of Jewish Christianity among non-Jewish groups evoked strong opposition from other Jewish groups who regarded it as blasphemous and against the will of God (Act 3:17-18). These other groups sanctioned their interpretation of the divine will to such an extent that they did not hesitate to eliminate those who differed from them, as is clear from the killing of Stephen (Act 7; cf., for example, also 4:3; 8:3; 12:1-2; 14:19; 17:13-14; 20:3; 21:21,31; 22:30; 23:12, 14; 24:1-9). In the period of the second temple, the position within the larger Jewish community on this matter was clearly ambiguous.

There is, however, an even greater ambiguity within the early Christian community itself. The incorporation of non-Jews within the community began to impact on the unity of the movement when its members split into groups who were involved in, or opposed to the conversion of the Roman centurion (Act 10-11). In Acts 11:3, Luke records the criticism of “circumcised believers” that Peter “went into the house of uncircumcised

6 Cf. also Act 4:13; 10:34; 25:25.

7 For an authoritative discussion of introductory issues, of interpretive approaches and of Lukan themes, cf. Bovon (2005). References to these issues will be limited because of restricted space. A great deal of historical work has been done on the Lukan texts, on their sources, on their Graeco-Roman context and many other aspects. Cf., for example, Bauckham (1995), which is part of a five-volume series on Acts. In this contribution, the focus is on Luke’s perspective on discernment and not on the historical traditions behind the Lukan texts. It reads Luke’s text in terms of its narrative world, that is, in terms of such aspects as its character and plot, with some attention to its rhetorical communication. It focuses on the Lukan reception of a crucial event in early Christianity rather than on the historical nature and roots of Luke’s narrative.

people and ate with them".⁸ The issue at stake was the legal responsibilities of gentile Christians to uphold dietary laws. The matter becomes more complicated in the following narrative. The issue of Jewish law resurged in Acts 15 as a bone of contention, but, in this instance, the legal responsibility of gentile Christians regarding circumcision, one of the most important and widely accepted characteristics of Jewish identity, is being questioned.⁹

The meeting in Jerusalem, which was called to discern a way out of the tension, takes place after Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from their first visit to mostly gentile areas where, in their words, God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. The dispute becomes more intense with the actions of the Judean party¹⁰ in Antioch¹¹ (Act 15:1). Finally, in Acts 15:5, believers from the party of the Pharisees, regarded by Luke as the strictest form of the Jewish religion,¹² bring the simmering tensions to a climax when they challenge Paul and Barnabas in Jerusalem, the centre of Jewish life and the seat of the early Christian movement. It is a crucial moment: various groups within the community of faith are finally in open, even bitter dispute about their identity and actions. They question the way in which the will of God regarding these matters is being discerned in their midst.

Luke's narrative speaks of the crucial nature of the Jerusalem meeting in several other ways. He reports that the stakes were so high that some travelled 250 miles¹³ to Antioch to take action on this matter. He also allocates to Acts 15 a pivotal place in his book,¹⁴ as is clear from its contents and from references to it in the rest of the book. Finally, for the

8 Cf. also Act 15:20, 29 for the problem of table fellowship. Segal (1990:231) notes that there was no law in rabbinic literature that prevents a Jew from eating with a gentile. Only a very conservative Pharisee would not have eaten with gentiles or impure Jews.

9 Bock (2007:494) correctly indicates that, as verse 5 suggests, Acts 15 is not only about circumcision, but also, more widely, about keeping the law.

10 Schneider (1982:177) believes that they are from Judea. This is doubtful, since Luke mentions in Acts 15:24 that the dissenting group "went out" from "us", that is, the community in Jerusalem.

11 The importance of Antioch in Acts is often underlined. It is the place where, for the first time, the gospel was proclaimed to "Greeks" (Act 11:29). In other places, the message was brought "only" to Jews (Act 11:19).

12 Act 15:5; cf. also Act 26:5. In Acts 23:6-8, Luke records how the Pharisees sided with Paul – revealing that not all Jews opposed Paul.

13 Bock (2007:495).

14 Cf. Story (2010:35-39) for an analysis of the place of Acts 15 in the book as a whole.

first (and last) time in Acts, all its major characters meet in one place to reflect on the issue.

With this ambiguous situation and with competing groups discerning the divine will in diametrically opposite ways, one arrives at an issue that is central to Spirituality.¹⁵ If Spirituality is the pursuit of life-integration that has to do with self-transcendence toward ultimate values, as Schneiders (2000:5) suggested, the question is how ultimate values should be understood. This requires discernment – also and especially within groups that differ about their shared values. It is, therefore, necessary to read this event and its description in Acts 15 in terms of the spiritual issue that was at stake. From the fact that the opposing parties of believers belonged to the one movement of early Christianity and that, ultimately, some decision was reached, it may seem as if the parties were not so far apart. This may, in turn, lead one to underestimate the intensity of the conflict or disregard the significance of the spiritual issue. And yet,

sometimes it is necessary to peer through the surface of things to see a difference. On the outside two things may look similar, but under the surface they differ (Waaajman 2002:487; cf. Waaajman 2002:486-490).

Luke's narrative yields important clues that the differences between the groups were essential. A vital spiritual issue is at stake in this meeting.

This spiritual issue had to do with the notion of salvation that was central to Luke's writings and that is mentioned explicitly in Acts 15. The circumcision party linked salvation to obedience to the law.¹⁶ For them, circumcision was in agreement with "the custom according to Moses" (τῷ ἔθει τῷ Μωϋσέως; Act 15:1) and had to do with obeying the law of Moses (τηρεῖν τὸν νόμον Μωϋσέως; Act 15:5). For the group of Paul and Barnabas who had the same Jewish affiliation and identity, salvation is, however, by the grace¹⁷ of God (Act 15:11) through faith (Act 15:8-9). Luke elaborates on the spiritual significance of the dispute by his understanding of salvation as wholeness. At stake in the dispute are the "times of refreshment" and

15 Cf. Lonsdale (2005:248) on the inherent ambiguity of moral and religious experience that explains the need for discernment. Cf. also Schneiders (1982:49).

16 Cf. Story (2010:40) on the notion of salvation in Luke-Acts. "In Acts, the verb to save ... is used fourteen times and the noun salvation ... occurs seven times, and is augmented by numerous other terms of the salvific word-family. The salvific terms, so central for Luke, are comprehensive and relate to numerous benefits for the people of God."

17 In Acts 15:11, "the reference to the grace of gift of God is placed forward in the Greek construction for emphasis" (Bock 2007:501).

the “restoration of everything” which are the gifts of divine blessing (Act 3:19-21, 25-26). This means that salvation is about the church discerning the way towards a life-giving, life-enhancing end that will bring about a completely new dispensation, towards salvation or, alternatively, towards a dead-end, that is, towards a burdensome existence under the law (Act 15:10, 28; Waaijman 2002:486).

2. DISCERNMENT AS PROCESS

There was no easy solution to the conflict, especially since the opposing parties all based their opinions on their foundational sources and traditions. In addition, there were no other precepts, regulations or rules which could have solved the issue once and for all. All that was left, was to reflect on the controversy in terms of practical wisdom and through a careful scrutiny of the experiential reality behind it.¹⁸ Ultimately, it was not only about weighing their traditions, but especially about reflecting on their experiences. It is illuminating to consider how they did so.

2.1 Discerning together

Discernment, as Acts 15 reveals, was first and foremost a matter for the entire community. Acts 15 describes how opposing groups in the early Christian community repeatedly met over a period of time in one place to reflect on God’s will.¹⁹ This communal reflection was not unique. It is part of a pattern of such reflections in Acts. In Acts 1:15-26, the disciples and the 120 believers replace Judas after careful discernment.²⁰ In Acts

18 In discussing the close link between spirituality and experience, Schneiders (2000a:262) writes: “Spirituality deals with spiritual experience as such, not merely with ideas about or principles governing such experience (although these certainly have a role in the research). ... It is difficult to imagine that one could understand mysticism, discernment, or spiritual direction without some personal participation in a spiritual life in which these phenomena or their analogues were experienced.” In the case of Acts 15, the personal “participation” of the apostles in the missionary praxis empowered them for their exercise in discernment.

19 Cf. Acts 4:19-20 where the apostles refuse to obey the Jewish leaders who instruct them not to speak about what they have seen and heard, stating that they need to be more obedient to God’s will. Bock (2010:198-199) remarks: “Of course, the council would be shocked by such a distinction, but this is the crux of the dispute. Who better represents God? For Luke, the apostles have the healing on their side, as well as God’s activity in raising Jesus”.

20 It is striking that prayer and the lot play a seminal role in that discernment. Cf. Acts 1:25-26. The lot indicates the presence of God in the process of appointing

6:1-2, the twelve together with all the disciples, consider the grievances about the neglect of the widows and the election of the seven.²¹ In the case of Acts 15, though, a larger and more diverse community is involved. Jewish Christians “from the circumcision”, the Pharisees (Act 11:2), but also individuals such as Peter, James, Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas as leaders of the community take part in the deliberations. In this sense, the communal discernment in Acts 15 reflects the spiritual lifestyle of the faith community.

Churches from different places in and outside Palestine are also involved. There is “the church” from Antioch that sends Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem (Act 15:3) and that receives the letter from Jerusalem in which the decision is explained. In Jerusalem, the delegation is welcomed by “the church”, the apostles and the elders who participate in the ensuing events (Act 15:4).²² Especially noteworthy is that everyone, even the bitterest of opponents is included in the ongoing process of discernment. Luke stresses this. Acts 15:22 refers explicitly to the presence and participation of the whole church (σὺν ὅλῃ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ).²³

The inclusive approach is striking since it further illustrates the spiritual nature of the decision-making. It shows that the meeting was not merely about discussions between groups and individuals, but was driven by an awareness of unity and togetherness – even after the bitter debate. Acts 15 portrays the groups as reflecting together and agreeing wholeheartedly on the way forward and informing the churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia in a letter about the outcomes (cf. Act 15:22; also Act 15:41). The unity is expressed when it states that they “all agreed” (ὁμοθυμαδὸν) to send leaders to Antioch together with the “beloved” Paul and Barnabas (Act 15:25-26). There is, in Luke’s mind, a special, even loving bond between all groups in the community who are one in their understanding of the Way and united in their discerning of the divine will. This unanimity also functions to authenticate the discernment as being of divine origins.

a replacement of Judas.

21 In this instance, prayer and the laying on of hands are striking elements. Cf. Acts 6:6.

22 Anderson (2011:110) has an impressive list of the many people involved in the deliberation. He names apostles and elders (15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23), the apostles (15:33), the church (15:3, 4, 22), the entire body of members (15:12, 30), the brothers (15:1, 3, 7, 13, 22, 23 twice, 32, 33), the men (15: 7, 13, “leading men” in 22 [twice], 25), certain ones (15:1, 2, 5, 24), key individuals (Paul, Barnabas in 15:2 twice, 12, 22, 25, 35), Peter/Simeon (15:7, 14), James (15:13), prophets (Judas and Silas in 15:32) and divine persons (God in 15: 4, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 18, 19; the Lord Jesus in 15:11, 26 and the Holy Spirit in 15:8, 28).

23 Cf. πᾶν τὸ πλῆθος in Acts 25:12.

There is, however, another form of structure in the collection of groups with special spiritual significance. Acts 15 reveals the strong leadership and influence of the Jerusalem church.²⁴ When the dispute cannot be settled, it was time to consult the Jerusalem church. This is not new. Previously in Acts, even Peter had to explain his actions before this community (Act 11:2; cf. Act 11:18). The Jerusalem community's influence is also detected in the travels of its prophets to other centres (Act 11:27). Later, Luke again would recount (Act 21:18) that Paul visited James in Jerusalem to report about his mission among the gentiles. This explains the remark in Acts 15:3 that Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go to Jerusalem to meet the apostles and elders about the conflict in their midst. Implicitly, then, the churches in other regions, together with Paul and Barnabas, accept the importance of consulting the church in Jerusalem.

This structure is not only the result of the history of the church and its birth in Jerusalem. It has a deeper spiritual nature. Luke stresses that the consultation in Jerusalem to discern the divine will is first and foremost about meeting with "the apostles and elders" (Act 15:2).²⁵ Later on he repeats this focus when he mentions again that the "apostles and elders" gathered to investigate the matter (Act 15:6). The authority of the church in Jerusalem is, therefore, especially linked with the presence of the apostles and the elders. This is confirmed by Luke's reference, in the concluding letter, to the church's own awareness of its authority. In the letter, the church remarks that the Judean party acted without authorisation (Act 15:24). They also speak about "requirements" they laid down for gentile

24 Bauckham (1995:422-423) remarks that it was natural to have Jerusalem as centre of the church, given that it saw "itself as the nucleus of the renewed Israel under the rule of his Messiah and the leadership of its twelve phylarches". However, for Luke, there is more to the central authority of Jerusalem. For him, it is the place where the first followers of Jesus reside and accompany the churches elsewhere on their spiritual journey – as Acts 15 confirms. The symbolism of the return of the Emmaus disciples to Jerusalem after their encounter with the resurrected Lord and the outpouring of the Spirit in Jerusalem gives deeper meaning to Jerusalem as centre of the spiritual life of the church.

25 On the apostles and elders, cf. Story (2010:36). References to apostles are found 34 times in Acts 1-14, six times in Acts 15 (5 times with the elders), whereafter they are mentioned only once more in Acts 16:4. This is another good argument for the pivotal role of Acts 15 as the climax of the first half of Acts with the apostles and elders as main characters. The apostles and elders stand in contrast with chief priests (Act 4:5, 8, 23; 6:12; 23:14; 24:1; 25:15). This contrast illustrates that the two ways are represented by particular characters who promote good or evil and the need for believers to discern whom to follow.

Christians (Act 15:28). Luke further speaks of the church's awareness of leadership and authority when he mentions that they chose Judas and Silas, because they were leaders (Act 15:22; *ἀνδρας ἡγουμένους*).²⁶

In Luke-Acts, the apostles and elders are the main, authoritative characters especially because of their knowledge, insight and experience of the ministry of Jesus and their empowerment by the Holy Spirit (Act 2). Luke often links their authority with the metaphor of the Way. They have authority as those who have been on the Way with Jesus (Act 1:21) and as those who continued in the Way with their proclamation of the gospel. They thus have authority as mystagogues guiding the church in discernment because of their original experience. This is made clear in Acts 1:5 where their missionary praxis is inextricably linked with their empowerment by the Spirit and then linked to the way of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Discernment in Acts 15 thus takes place in the company of those who have travelled the road for a longer, crucial period of time in the presence of the earthly and resurrected Christ. They were part of the events that represented the spiritual origins of the church.

All this points to seminal aspects of discernment and to a further spiritual dimension of the meeting in Jerusalem. In his discussion of Aristotle's analysis of practical wisdom, Waaijman (2002:582) draws attention to the need for wisdom in order to discern the possibilities in a concrete situation and to orient everything rationally to this end. "To discern creatively the happiness inherent in the irreducibly concrete we need experience. Without experience one does not see it." He then adds, "Only older people have experience." This Aristotelian insight throws some light on Acts 15. It did not suffice to simply meet and reflect on the experiential reality with which the church was confronted. What was needed at this crucial stage of the Jesus movement was to seek that practical wisdom of the "older", more experienced apostles and elders who could illuminate this reality in terms of their own mature experiences and learning. Practical wisdom is also the result of the experiences of these senior, more experienced people. They could discern creatively the possibilities in a concrete situation of conflict and orient everything to that end because of their experience (Waaijman 2002:883).

There is an attractive dimension to this special place of Jerusalem and the church's experience. The wisdom of these "older" members of the faith community is illustrated in a special way by their attitude towards their

26 Their special position is further underlined by the remark that they were prophets (Act 15:32).

own authority.²⁷ They willingly and in solidarity share this with Paul and Barnabas by including them in their delegation to Antioch (Act 15:22), by recommending Paul and Barnabas so highly in the letter as “beloved” (Act 15:25), and by speaking highly of them as men who risked their lives for Christ (Act 15:26). Even though they enjoy priority in their relationship, it remains a relationship characterised by mutuality. They allow input by Paul and Barnabas and do not dictate to them.

One of the most telling moments in the meeting is when the entire assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul recounting the divine actions among the gentiles (Act 15:12). This silence is so important that Luke underlines it in the next verse by stating that James addressed them “after they were silent” (Act 15:13). This is a striking remark by Luke which reminds one of what Waaijman (2002:884), in his discussion of mystagogic research, wrote about the relationship between the accompanist and the person being accompanied in the process of discernment. He remarks that the relationship is of a conversational nature and marked in mutuality. It “consists in ‘holy listening’ on the part of the accompanist, listening to the person *and* to what God wants with this person”. In Jerusalem, in the context of heated debate, such a time of holy silence is also present on a corporate level. Schille (1983:320) has an unusually extensive comment on this silence.

Das Schweigen der Menge ist weder harmlos, noch historisch (eine unvergeßliche Minute) oder durch die Gegenwart der Hierarchie bedingt. Es unterstreicht die Effektivität der entscheidende Worte.

The silence speaks of the effect of the remarks by Paul and Barnabas: in their words the gathering recognises the divine actions. The atmosphere in the large gathering is, therefore, permeated by mutuality, openness and even inquisitiveness.

Briefly, discernment in Acts 15 takes place in the midst of a gathering of all who are involved in, and challenged by a situation of ambiguity and uncertainty. It is a gathering that aims at deeper understanding by drawing on the insight of those who are more experienced. They include those with seniority, not only in terms of knowledge, but also in terms of maturity. This maturity is characterised by integrity, by a willingness to share and an openness to listen carefully, but is, most of all, driven by a sense of unity and belonging. It also involves openness on the part of those who speak

27 In Luke-Acts, there are several references to the wisdom of prominent characters such as the seven (Act 6:3), Stephen (Act 6:8), Moses (Act 7:22), Joseph (Act 7:10) and Jesus (Lk 2:47).

and those who are heard, to submit themselves to the scrutiny of those who accompany them on their spiritual journey.

2.2 Discerning through debate

Closely linked with the previous remarks, one notes that discernment is characterised by extensive discussion and debate about the praxis under discussion. The attention in this debate is focused on a thorough discussion of external events. In debate, the “area of praxis is opened up by reasoning (syllogism)” as the church seeks practical wisdom which “is judicious in relation to concrete particulars” of a person, group or society (Waaajman 2002:528).²⁸ This is also clear from Acts 15, in which the various contributions by the participating characters are essentially dialogical in nature and focused on the experiential reality.

This does not mean that it is an “objective”, distanced and scholarly debate. In Acts 15, the debate is, in fact, heated and emotional. Luke’s use of language speaks of an intense exchange of words with the Judean group (Act 15:2; *γενομένης δὲ στάσεως²⁹ καὶ ζητήσεως³⁰ οὐκ ὀλίγης* and *πολλῆς δὲ ζητήσεως γενομένης* in Act 15:7). Luke thus indicates the intensity of the discussions, but also expresses a serious lack of agreement. The division of opinion ran deep (Bock 2007:495).

Despite such intensity and serious disagreements, the groups remain dedicated to debating their differences. Despite the dead end in Antioch, the church still does not give up and sends a delegation to Jerusalem “about this question” (*περὶ τοῦ στήματος*) where arguments are again presented and weighed in another round of extensive debating. This round consists of speeches by the Pharisees, Peter (Act 15:7-11), Paul and

28 Luke’s sensitivity for careful investigation is spelled out in Acts 24:8 where he describes the claims of some Jews that Paul is a troublemaker who needs to be “examined to learn the truth” about the charges against him (*ἀνακρίνας περὶ πάντων τούτων ἐπιγινῶναι*). Cf. also Acts 25:20.

29 In this instance, the word is used in the sense of strife, discord or disunion. Cf. Bauer-Gingrich-Danker (1979:764). Cf. also Acts 23:7, 10 which mention the dispute between Pharisees and Sadducees and the division this caused. Even stronger is the use in Acts 19:40 where it refers to “rioting” about the worship of Artemis in Ephesus instigated by Demetrius.

30 Baur, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker (1979:339) explains the word as referring to discussion or debate and refers explicitly to Acts 15:2, 7. The word is sometimes used for a controversy. For this, they refer to 1 Tim 6:4. In the light of the combination of this word with *στάσεως*, the latter meaning is to be preferred. Cf. also Abbot-Smith (1959:*ad loc*); Acts 19:23; 18:15; 23:29; 25:19 and 26:3 for the use of this word.

Barnabas (Act 15:12) and, finally, by James (Act 15:13-21). Luke portrays James as describing his own contribution as “My opinion is” (διὸ ἐγὼ κρίνω; Act 15:19).³¹ Similarly, Acts 15:6 remarks that the apostles and elders met to “see”, that is, to consider the question (συνήχθησαν ... ἰδεῖν³² περὶ τοῦ λόγου τούτου).³³

In summary, then, discernment in Acts 15 does not involve authoritarian pronouncements or instructions by people in positions of power. There is, once again, a spiritual dimension to this insight. The final discernment does not read “as a power play by one faction dictating its will to the rest”.³⁴ The accommodating outcomes of the debate confirm this: the Judean party is also taken seriously when Luke lets the meeting stress the important role of Moses for the church, even though they are criticised for being guilty of subordinate and inconsiderate behaviour (Act 15:24). The end result of the discernment process in Acts 15 is a compromise. The debate and the decision by all decentred the power interests of the Judean party. Their concerns are re-entered in God who, as was argued in the debate, gave the Spirit to all and made no distinction between groups (Act 15:9-10). It is the compassionate, non-discriminating divine relationship with humanity that transforms power relations so that the community can exist on an egalitarian level (Act 2) and can meet in mutual understanding and debate.³⁵ One group does not lord over the other, as the concerns of everyone are taken seriously.

The debates in Antioch and Jerusalem thus reflect an extensive process which is essentially dialogical in nature. It is an interaction which reminds one of what Waaijman (2002:565) wrote: “Discernment is a cognitive activity which attempts, via critical interaction, to arrive at a knowledge – tested

31 In referring to this verse, Baur *et al.* (1979:451) explain the verb as “judge, think, consider, look upon”. Haenchen (1971:449) translates the verb as “my opinion is”, rejecting the translation as “I decree”. Schneider (1982:183) is also of the opinion that it “bezeichnet ... die Auffassung des Jakobus”.

32 In this instance, the verb is used in the sense of seeing with the mind, to perceive, to know. It also means to see in the sense of becoming acquainted with by experience. Schille (1983:319) refers to Gal 2:7, 9; Did 11-13.

33 That this is the trend of these remarks is confirmed by other pronouncements such as Acts 19:36-40 where Luke portrays the city clerk in Ephesus as calling for calm and for a hearing that will reveal the true state of affairs.

34 Cf. also Dunn (2008: 198).

35 Cf. Munzinger (2007:176-178) for the same thoughts on an individual level and in terms of Pauline letters. Hense (2010:11) draws attention to 1 Clement in which the humility and brotherly affections are so important for the unity of the church that it relativises the critical nature of discernment. This does not happen in Acts 15.

and recognized by others – that is distinct from naïve, opinionated views. To that end discernment tests insights, behaviors, memories, expectations, phrasings, and so forth.” At stake is an attitude of critical communication and mutual schooling.³⁶ Waaijman (2002:501) draws attention to examples (in Proverbs, Jesus Sirach and Wisdom) to illustrate how “in ancient Israel people tried, by mutual counsel and the study of sagacious sayings, to discover wisdom amidst the ordinary circumstance of life”. This has to do with

a critical center where experiences can be exchanged and tested, a community where the profession of spiritual praxis is developed with prudent expertise and where the learning experiences of so many people is systematically taken into account. By intensive interaction (discussion, chapter, conferences, and the like), a discipline takes shape – by the discipline of interaction (Waaijman 2002:501).

Acts 15 is a perfect example of this process of interaction.³⁷

2.3 Discernment and wisdom of the past

In the previous analysis of discernment as debate, reference was made to the study of sagacious sayings in wisdom circles in order to discover wisdom. The characters in Acts 15 also appeal to sacred traditions and their wisdom, which, together with the wisdom of the apostle and elders, provide the necessary insight into, and authority for the discernment. The debates show how the various characters draw on past discernment to authorise their own understanding.³⁸

Both sides make this appeal to past wisdom. The Judean party “taught” (*ἐδίδασκον*) that circumcision was necessary because of the “custom taught by Moses” (Act 15:2; *τῷ ἔθει τῷ Μωϋσέως*) and the law of Moses (Act 15: 5; *τὸν νόμον Μωϋσέως*).³⁹ By contrast, James motivates his position that gentiles are incorporated in the people of God from prophetic traditions

36 “Knowing how a process of experience, a process of choice, a process of calculation, and a process of realization works, calls for a patient attitude of inquiry, which inwardly senses what assessment, understanding, deliberation, and circumspection is” (Waaijman 2002:523).

37 It must be borne in mind that this cognitive activity, as it is tested and recognised by others, also provides a hedge against “subjectivity, sentimentality, unreflective piety or uncritical enthusiasm” so often found in discernment (Lonsdale 2005:248).

38 Seitz (2001:122) describes Acts 15 as a chapter about “adjudicating” a matter on the basis of scripture. Cf. also Bock (2007:495).

39 Cf. Preisker (2000:373) and examples in Acts 6:14; 16:21; 21:21; 26:3; 28:17.

in Amos 9:11-12, Jeremiah 12:15 and Isaiah 45:21 (Act 15:15) to support Peter's pronouncements on the matter with Scriptural grounds. Once again, wisdom of earlier times is used to discern their practical wisdom regarding the issue under discussion.⁴⁰

The past wisdom is important insofar as it illuminates the experience of the church in its missionary praxis and illuminates the presence of God among them and the gentiles.⁴¹ That is why the wisdom of the past is consistently linked with what God is doing in their midst and the way in which these events illustrate the gracious gifts of the divine.

The grounds of the church's decision then was the work that God was doing among Gentiles, bringing them to salvation through faith. On the basis of this experience of God's work, the Church made bold to reinterpret Torah, finding there unexpected legitimation for its fidelity to God's surprising ways (Acts 15:15-18) (Johnson 2004:65).

As such, the church is not merely deciding or making choices. With this reflection on the wisdom of the past, the process of discernment moves beyond the cognitive level of decision-making to reflection on the divine presence in their midst and the consequences for the life of the church and the issue under reflection.

2.4 Discernment and affections

Discernment is not only about people debating the divine will in a rational manner and in terms of earlier wisdom. Other human factors also play a role in discerning what way is the right and best to follow. One such factor has to do with feelings, emotions and intuitions.⁴² This may be one of the

40 Johnson (2004:61-62) notes that "nothing could be more offensive than to challenge tradition on the basis of casual or unexamined experience, as though God's revelation were obvious or easy or reducible to popularity polls". And yet, he continues, discernment is about rigorous asceticism of attentiveness. This is what happened when early Christianity, in an agonizing way, allowed their perception of God's activity to help them reinterpret Scripture and its insistence on circumcision.

41 Cf. Liebert (2008:55-65) on the role of memory in discerning the divine presence.

42 Lonsdale (2005:248) speaks of discernment as a process of critical reflection "which seeks to draw both affectivity (feeling, desires, impulses, moods) and understanding, reason, judgment and choice into a creative partnership". Note his more extensive remarks in Lonsdale (1992:51-75). Cf. also Liebert (2008:123) who refers to Fischer's remarks that feelings belong to the centre of spirituality and that emotions are a form of reason. On the role of affections in discernment, cf. Rakoczy (1980, especially 141), Howard (2000) and Liebert (2008:121-131). Liebert (2008:79-94) also provides another interesting discussion of

most neglected dimensions of discernment and one which requires further attention, especially in analysing discernment in a Biblical context.

Recently, Derkse (2008:456) noted:

In the process of discernment we must carefully and attentively investigate what is moving and stirring in our souls. The affective dimension – how we are affected by things, situations, others and ourselves – should be present in the weighing process of discernment.

This concerns the fundamental insight that discernment transcends mere rational reflection or is about more than a consideration of theological contents. It also concerns inner experiences and feelings – not only within the person who discerns, but also when one discerns by taking into consideration how others are affected.

This insight is relevant for an understanding of Acts 15. Luke discusses the role of affective dimensions in discernment in the letter to Antioch, Syria and Cilicia (Act 15:22-29). It shows how the church was aware of affections and emotions that were evoked by the negative effects of the Pharisees' claims. The Pharisees disturbed the believers and were troubling their minds (Act 15:24; *ἐτάραξαν*⁴³ *ὁμᾶς λόγοις ἀνασκειάζοντες τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν*). The troubling and disturbing effects are still lingering in their midst as part of the collective memory of the church. This past trauma, which reveals the destructive results of wrong decisions, indicates that they may not reflect the will of God (Liebert 2008:55-65).

This corresponds with other motifs in the chapter that spell out the negative emotions generated by the Pharisaic position. The church in Jerusalem does not want to “burden” the gentiles with anything (Act 15:28) – obviously like the Pharisees did. Similarly, James remarks that it should not be made difficult for the gentiles who are turning to God (Act 15:19), referring again to the attitude of the Pharisees. This is even more the case where these destructive actions can be traced to an arrogant and insubordinate attitude. Paul, for example, notes about the Pharisaic party that they are trying “to challenge God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear”

discernment and feeling in terms of, what she calls, “body awareness”. She draws attention to the fact that all experience and, thus, data for discernment must come through bodies. “Can listening to our bodies give us wisdom before us? If so, in what language does the body speak?” (Liebert 2008:79).

43 This verb means to perplex, throw into alarm or confusion. Cf. Haenchen (1971:452). These verbs receive hardly any attention in Schneider (1982) and Schille (1983).

(Act 15:10). For the Jerusalem church, the Pharisees challenge God, act insubordinately, ignore the authority of the church (Act 15:24) and lack humility.⁴⁴ Acts 15 thus reflects sensitivity for the oppressive nature of the position of the Judean party. This means that a dehumanising, humiliating and burdensome outcome questions the authenticity of discernment.

The important role of affections is also illustrated in the positive response to the Jerusalem meeting. When Judas and Silas leave Antioch, Luke notes that they are sent away with the “blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them” (Act 15:34). The news contributed significantly to the knowledge that the discernment was good. Judas and Silas were able to “encourage and strengthen” the churches (Act 15:32). They were no longer disturbed and troubled (Waaijman 2002:490). The situation is completely transformed: it is no longer so hostile when the circumcision party “tried to ruin the lives of the Antiochene believers” (Pervo 2009:328). The church is at peace, no longer in turmoil because of the divisive discernment of the Pharisaic group.⁴⁵ One recognises in this regard what Lonsdale (2005:249) noted about discernment in general:

Its aim is to discriminate between those affective stirrings which lead to greater love of God and of others in God, after the pattern of Jesus' love and death, and those which lead in the opposite direction and are thus potentially destructive of human beings and communities.⁴⁶

44 On discernment and humility, cf. Anderson (2011:34) who notes how Cassian stated that true discernment cannot be obtained without true humility. “This will be the first proof of this humility, that everything which is not only done but thought is submitted to be examined by elders ...” This is closely linked with the communal nature of discernment. “We can most easily come to a precise knowledge (*scientiam*) of the true discernment by following the traces of our elders, by doing nothing novel, and not presuming to discern by our own judgment” (Anderson 2011:34-35). These remarks shed more light on the attitude of the Antioch church which refers the conflict to the Jerusalem church, thereby humbly indicating their own need for enlightenment.

45 Cf. Munzinger (2007:176) for the role of affections in discernment. He refers to Spicq who wrote, for example, that love opens intelligence and gives it the acuteness to understand something of the divine mystery.

46 Having noted the striking lack of biblical research on affectivity in discernment, Howard (2000:16) points out that affective elements have a central role in the situational dynamics in which discernment is practised. He refers to the role of lust (1 Cor 7:5), unforgiveness (2 Cor 2:10-11), anger (Eph 4:27), pride (1 Tim 3:6-7) and others in the discernment of the work of the enemy of the gospel. Intriguing is his reference (2000:19) to recent historical work that indicates that discernment should be regarded as an affectively rich act of knowledge.

3. THE CONTEMPLATIVE GAZE

The consequences of the gentiles' conversions challenged the early church to discern the will of God about its way forward. In the process of reflecting on this way, the church was empowered by its spiritual practice, its traditions and its mutual relationships. Their affections and those of others also guided it. The many other perspectives that are involved in the process of discernment, such as judgement, prudence, reasonableness and wisdom, make discernment highly complex and rational.⁴⁷ These do not, however, encompass discernment in its fullness (Derkse 2008:454), because there is still another, deeper dimension that qualifies and drives discernment.

The investigation of events, affairs and realities in the process of discernment is accompanied by the desire to seek their significance from the perspective of God.⁴⁸ "To discern God's logic requires a contemplative gaze." This refers to contemplation as the highest virtue and as the final destiny of human beings (Waaïjman 2002:487). In this regard, Waaïjman (2002:484) writes: "*diakrisis* is the process of assembling and sorting out knowledge with respect to the way toward God."⁴⁹ In practice, this means that the community has to perceive the difference between its present, factual situation and its ultimate destiny and perfection in God. It seeks "a passable way which bridges this difference, and assists others in actually going this way, knowing that it is God who moves them to go this way" (Waaïjman 2002:563).

47 The complexity is, for example, clear in Acts 15 where there is a "plethora of potentially authorizing agents" such as "confessorial or communal approval Scriptural prooftexts ... miracles ... fulfilled predictions, determinations (and last, but not least) the charismatic verdict of the Holy Spirit" (Anderson 2011:9). De Certeau "posits a multitude of 'strategies' and 'tactics' through which authorities can be interrelated, prioritized, or balanced within and around a given institutional framework" (Anderson 2011:9). Derkse (2008:454) also writes that discernment in moral problems "[is] highly complex and seldom lead[s] to simple and straightforward solutions as sometimes is possible in physical dynamics".

48 Liebert (2008:51-52) emphasises that the search for "signs pointing to the presence of the ineffable, the mysterious, and what we cannot completely know: the mystery of God's call to each of us as unique persons" constitutes one of the differences between decision-making and discernment.

49 Waaïjman (2002:518-523) often addresses this issue and emphasises that discernment must be situated epistemologically within the cognitive domain of human praxis, which must be distinguished from scientific knowledge which has abstraction as highest principle.

In Acts 15, this role of and movement by the divine in discernment is spelled out in the letter sent to the churches: “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us (ἔδοξεν γὰρ τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ καὶ ἡμῖν) not to burden you with anything” (Act 15:28).⁵⁰ Discernment thus has to do with following the lead of the Spirit of God (Lonsdale 1993).⁵¹ Mentioning the Holy Spirit first and before the expression “and us” heightens this awareness of the role of the divine.⁵² It is further significant that the reference to the Holy Spirit is made in a phrase that stresses the relational dimension. It is about a “mutual” insight that develops between the divine and the human. The divine-human relationship in discernment is symbiotic, picturing a flawless unity between the divine and human.⁵³ The Spirit is not portrayed in an impersonal manner (as, for example, in Acts 2), or on his own, but this phrase describes the Spirit as being in an intimate relationship with the apostles and elders so that their decision is also a decision of the Holy Spirit.

This remark thus allocates a primary role to the divine in the process of discernment. The active role ascribed to the divine corresponds with the rest of Acts 15 and is closely related with discernment of the divine providence and presence in the Church’s missionary praxis. In their individual speeches in Acts 15, Peter, James, Paul and Barnabas express their conviction that God initiates and remains involved in events in the world, the church and their missionary praxis.⁵⁴ They repeatedly reflect on the conversion of the Gentiles from the perspective of God. Peter discerns

50 Cf. similar remarks by Munzinger (2007:175) for the Pauline letters.

51 Commentators generally belabour the importance of this phrase. Cf. Schneider (1982:187): “Der Beschluß der Versammlung ist nicht nur menschliche Entscheidung der Apostel und der Jerusalemer Gemeinde, sondern zugleich Willenskundgebung des heiligen Geistes”, whereas Haenchen (1981:453) notes that “the highest supernatural authority and the legal earthly authority derived from it stand side by side”. Räisänen (1987:92) observes the following: “Luke is at pains to show that the decision was made because of God’s clear guidance (Act 15.7-14) and in accordance with the words of the prophets (Act 15.15-17). God himself has shown that it is not necessary for Gentile Christians to observe more than the minimum law (the Decree).”

52 Cf. Pervo (2009:382) who misses the focalisation and translates as “we and the Holy Spirit”. He does, however, point out how this “confidence that their resolution was guided by the Spirit” became “generally characteristic of Christianity through Irenaeus, at least.”

53 It reminds one of what Munzinger described as follows: “Both Spirit and mind must be at work symbiotically in order for authentic discernment to take place” (Munzinger 2007:194; cf. Hense 2010:34).

54 Cf. Squires (1993) on the notion of the plan of God which plays an important role in Luke-Acts. Acts stresses God’s guidance of events from the beginning of the Gospel to the end of Acts and shows how, at key points in the narrative,

that it is God who worked among the Gentiles (Act 15:5) and who chose Paul as witness for the mission to the Gentiles (Act 15:7). The signs and wonders and the gift of the Holy Spirit are further regarded as indications of the presence of God in the missionary praxis (Act 15:12).⁵⁵ God is actively involved in the action: God purified the hearts of the gentiles (Act 15:9; τῇ πίστει καθάρισας τὰς καρδίας αὐτῶν)⁵⁶ and showed concern for them (ἐπεσκέψατο;⁵⁷ Act 15:14). Paul explains his missionary work as what God did “through/with” him (μετ’ αὐτῶν; Act 15:4). In this instance, God is active, but there is also a symbiotic relationship in which divine and human actions become one.

These observations in Acts 15 correspond with the rest of Acts, in which the apostles are constantly described as being aware of the Spirit’s activity in their missionary praxis. It is the gift of the Spirit that stands at the beginning of each of the missionary phases in Acts: there are outpourings in Jerusalem (Act 2:1-4; Act 4:28-31), in Samaria (Act 8:15-17) and in Caesarea (Act 10:44). Paul’s journeys take place in obedience to the guidance of the Spirit. In Acts 16:6-7, the Spirit prevents the preaching in Asia and Bithinia (cf. Act 20:22-23). They may have travel plans, but ultimately God and the Spirit determine their journeys. The activity of the Spirit in all these examples is in line with the participatory role of the Spirit in the process of discernment in Acts 15.

The role of the Spirit in the process of discernment is confirmed from another perspective. In Acts 15, there is a strong awareness that contemplation of God is the goal of discernment. The discussions

such divine control is emphasised. Luke thus stresses that the actions of the community were in line with what God wanted.

- 55 In fact, discernment is presented in two ways in this passage, since not only does the church seek God’s will, but God is portrayed as the One who discerns. Peter, emphasising the mission to the Gentiles, notes that the gift of the Spirit to the Gentiles is proof that God “who knows the heart” accepted them (Act 15:8).
- 56 Cf. Waaijman (2002:512) for the important relationship between purity of heart, discernment and contemplation. Purity, pertaining to both the physical and spiritual aspects of human existence, follows where people are liberated from the self-focus that is characteristic of the unconverted state. It is the *skopos* (objective) of the spiritual journey, desired by humanity, to come to contemplation (the final goal). “Purity of heart focuses everything on God and, being receptive, opens itself to him.” As human beings grow spiritually, they understand that they are being “sustained in their thinking, willing and doing by God’s grace, and from this fact they gain their freedom. It is precisely this moment of transition, for which purity of heart hopes, which is the real moment of discernment” (Waaijman 2002:512-513, discussing Summa [1992] on Cassian).
- 57 Cf. Luke 1:68, 78 and 7:16 for the positive meaning of this verb.

repeatedly return to this perspective. James, supporting Peter, discerns behind the gentile conversion the fulfilment of the divine promises in the prophets. He views the mission in terms of the expected future in which gentiles will seek the Lord (Act 15:17-18). In accordance with this, the missionary praxis of the early Church is, to the discerning eye, about gentiles “who are turning to God” (Act 15:19).⁵⁸ In their conversion, according to James, God was taking a people for God’s name (Act 15:14). The missionary praxis is weighed in the light of the gentile’s longing for community with God. Its contemplative nature is even more striking when one contrasts it with the Judean party’s focus on the law and the custom of Moses as the goal of their discernment (Act 15:1-2, 5). They, in a process of deformation, are restricted to an I-it relationship, which contrasts starkly with the I-Thou relationship which is the result of the missionary praxis of the church. These remarks confirm that the discernment in Acts 15 has an authentic nature, reflecting a contemplative gaze. The Spirit is present in the discernment, because the discernment has a contemplation gaze.

In summary, the church was convinced that the Holy Spirit was an active partner in their discernment on the issue of circumcision in Acts 15. The Spirit’s role is especially discerned by recalling the divine actions in the missionary praxis of the church, particularly the gift of the Holy Spirit purely through faith. There are no calls for direct divine action or intervention during or after the meeting in Jerusalem. Elsewhere Luke does speak of such divine participation in human events or deliberations once when, in Acts 1:24-26, prayer and the lot played a seminal role in the process of appointing a replacement for Judas. The active role of the Spirit in the discernment in Acts 15 is detected in a more indirect manner. The Holy Spirit is mentioned only twice in Acts 15:28 where it is said that the Holy Spirit and the community decided not to impose any burden on the believers except the four requirements. In Acts 15:8, Peter speaks of the Holy Spirit that was given by God to the gentiles. The reference is to Acts 10:44-47 when the Spirit was poured out on the household of Cornelius without them having been circumcised or baptised.

The involvement of the Holy Spirit at that stage of the mission sufficiently indicated that the missionary praxis is a result of the divine intervention and action. The church could thus confidently write in their concluding letter that the Holy Spirit and they decided not to impose any further burden on the gentile believers. Their discernment was more than a rational matter of debate and a sensitivity for affections. It was also a matter of a contemplative gaze on their experiential reality and of contemplation as the final destiny of human beings. One does not find an

58 Cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10.

“epistemological attitude of an indiscriminate faith in the power of reason, or a charismatic, intuitive and spontaneous ‘guidance of the Spirit’” in Acts 15. The actions of God contribute decisively to discerning the divine will and to questioning existing traditions that no longer reflect the divine will. This means “challenging plausibility structures which undermine, shame or instrumentalise the dignity of individuals and their communities” – pointed out in Acts 15 by the insistence that Gentiles should not be burdened by a yoke that Jews themselves were not able to carry (Munzinger 2007:195).

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