

Signs of Life 5: "Did I apply scripture to a decision this week?"

July 6, 2014, Boone UMC

Bluegrass, communion, I preach all 3, Fine Arts Camp mish moment, Zoe prints for childrens' blessing

"Do What?"

We are in the midst of a series of a series of sermons on our measures as a church. These help us know whether we are achieving our mission or not. Are we "loving our community and inviting all to discover life in Christ?" You've heard me or Vern preach on these other signs of life: where did worship send me this week? Have I walked with someone not like me this week? How have I connected beyond Sunday worship this week? Some of these we can simply answer yes or no, check the box, and move on.

Today's is a little harder.¹ "Did I apply scripture to a decision this week?" I remember discussion in our visioning group, a longtime leader said we have to ask if we applied scripture *to a decision*, and not just whether we applied scripture to our lives. That'd be too easy. When we're standing at a crossroads and could go left, could go right, did we consult with scripture then?

So, getting ready to preach this week has been really hard, thanks visioning group. Because it's really hard to apply scripture to a decision. Acts 15 is one key place the church did so. The question at hand was this: do gentile Christians need to obey Jewish laws? Not for salvation, everyone knew salvation is only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But to be obedient to God, *after* trusting in Jesus, do gentiles need to obey Israel's laws? Circumcise their sons? Listen to what the church decided.

Acts 15:1-21

Then certain individuals 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 discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. 3 So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses." 6 The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. 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 as he has made no distinction between them and us. 10 Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? 11 On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

12 The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. 15 This agrees with the words of the prophet, as it is written, 16 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and will set it up, 17 so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus

¹ On screen plz

says the Lord, who has been making these things 18 known from long ago.' Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, 20 but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. 21 For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues." . . . 28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials.

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the Pentecost people of God, **thanks be to God.**

There are all kinds of ways to imagine applying scripture to a decision. One time honored way is to take the bible, open it up, point to a random place, and see that as God's word for you. Every time I do this it lands on something nonsensical. "And Joash reigned 29 years and lay down with his fathers," or whatever. Thanks God. John Wesley did this though, and several times in a row landed on passages that suggested he should be a missionary. He should go into all the world baptizing. He should go and preach good news. How can they hear without a preacher? So Wesley went and became the worst missionary in world history. Our Methodist movement is born out of missionary failure, so we're glad Wesley did. Several greats in church history have pointed to random verses and done what they say. St. Anthony in the third century randomly pointed to a verse that said go "Go, sell all you have, and give to the poor," and he did. St. Francis 1000 years later pointed to a random verse and also got "Go, sell all you have, and give to the poor." And he did. Careful if you go about today's measure this way. It reminds me of the joke, the person is in the parking lot and can't find a spot, and prays, "God if you give me a parking spot I'll go to church every week, I'll tithe, I'll tell my friends about Jesus, I'll . . . oh, wait, never mind Lord, here's a spot."

Random passages of the bible are probably not the best way to discern God's will. Doing that *does* take courage. God *is* willing to speak to us that way sometimes. But the more ordinary way God speaks to us is by our reading the thing. And here, I'm going to tell you God's will for the rest of your life. You ready for it?² "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." That's it, God's will for the rest of your life. The rest is just details. When we're making a decision: x or y, marry this person or that, this job or that, it's almost like God doesn't care which we choose. What God cares about is *how we serve him either way!* That's how we apply scripture to a decision: to be the sort of people Jesus wants. The rest will work itself out.

It was terribly hard for the early church to decide whether gentile believers in Jesus needed to circumcise and keep kosher. The Jews had just fought a war against a Greek ruler named Antiochus Euphianes when he tried to forbid Jewish law and circumcision. He wanted to make them Greeks, to root out Judaism, so he tried to lure Jewish leaders into breaking Jewish law with wealth and power. The Jews resisted at the cost of their lives. Their inspiration, a man named Mattathias, said³ "do not fear the words of sinners, for their splendor will turn into dung and worms." Jews would rather die than give up God's laws. *Now* Christians want to give them up voluntarily? Without a fight? We Christians often forget the reasons Israel tried to keep the law. Leviticus 18:26 says⁴ "You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations . . . otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it." To keep the law is to be part of God's blessings. Not to keep the law is to betray and die and be vomited. And Christians want us Jews to give it up? I mean, we've kept this law for millennia, it was good enough for our fathers and grandfathers back to Moses. Who are all these new people who say we don't have to? What do they know?

² On screen plz

³ 1 Maccabees 2:62 on screen plz

⁴ On screen plz (when we post scripture let's put the chapter and verse too—thanks).

You can feel the force of this if I were to say, on a week like this, July 4th week, democracy? Who cares about that? Let's not do that anymore. That wouldn't go well. Or the bible? Who cares about that? Let's just make our religious life up ourselves. Wouldn't go well either. These Christians were radical innovators, dangerous threats to tradition. Pharisees are people who guard and defend tradition—and that's a great thing to do. You can chop up a great tree in 10 minutes. But to grow one takes 10 years. Or 100. John Henry Newman, one of our greatest thinkers,⁵ said this, "Great acts take time." The church has things we will never change: Jesus, the bible, worship. Where we get confused is we think *everything* has to be kept as it is.

One of the key questions in the bible is what to do with non-Jews. Gentiles. Most of us in this room, perhaps all this morning. In some of the Old Testament it seems the only good gentile is a dead gentile. When the chosen people take over the promised land they slay all the Amalekites. When Ezra purifies Israel he commands the Jews to get rid of their foreign wives and children—to break up families. Israel is God's chosen people, they have to obey and stay pure to be a light to the world. But then other parts of the Old Testament are different. Ruth is a Moabite woman, she's not Jewish, but she *is* an example to the rest of Israel. Moses marries a Midianite wife. And the most important part of the Old Testament: the prophets promise a time when all people—*all people*—will stream to Zion and worship Israel's God.⁶ Acts 15:16-17, quoting Amos and Isaiah, says this "After this I will return and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, *so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.*" See? Scripture imagines a future where Gentiles come and worship. In the church this is happening now! And the prophet says nothing about those gentiles becoming Jews first. Sometimes people think the church said "it was a mistake ever to think Israel was God's chosen." No we didn't. That's a heresy. We said God always promised to use Israel to bless everybody. And that's happening now in the church.

This is how the ancient church applied scripture to a decision. There's a four-part process. One, they notice conflict. Two, they present testimony. Three, they interpret scripture. Four, they render a decision and interpret it. A little bit about each.

One,⁷ they recognize conflict. Some think new gentile believers should be circumcised and obey the law of Moses. Some think not. *No one* is afraid of this conflict. The old joke goes what do you have if you have two Jews in an argument? Three opinions. So too with us who descend from the Jews. Churches sometimes feel something is going wrong if they are arguing. On the contrary arguing could be a sign of doing something right! The church in Antioch and Jerusalem summons a council. Gets their best minds on it. And tries to settle the thing biblically. Hear me friends: conflict is not a sign of unfaithfulness. It could mean you're headed somewhere good, and so you argue in good faith about the best way to get there. Show me a couple who never argue and I'll show you a spouse who quit a long time ago. It's the God of the universe we worship. He gave us these marvelous minds. Surely we'll disagree on what to do, and that's a good thing! John Courtney Murray said a good argument is a great moral achievement. Actually to hear the other person, specify where you disagree and hash it out, congratulate yourself, that's amazing.

⁸Two, they present testimony.⁹ "They reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers," (Acts 15:3), "they reported all that God had done with them," and all rejoice (Acts 15:4). One of the greatest things that happens in church or life is we think something we do will bear fruit over here and it actually does over there. Like a volunteer squash, we carried seeds over to this tilled ground but the

⁵ On screen plz

⁶ On screen plz

⁷ 1. Recognize conflict

⁸ 2. Present testimony

⁹ Vs on screen plz

one we spilled on the path, that's what comes up big and beautiful. Joe Miller of Cheap Joe's here in Boone was a pharmacist, bought painting stuff for Boone Drug downtown because that way he could buy it cheaper for his own use as a painter, and then found he couldn't keep the stuff on the shelves. You aim for success here and it comes over there. Well the early church expected its fellow Jews to see Jesus as messiah. Most didn't. But we gentiles, hey, we loved this Jesus stuff and signed up. And the church rejoices. But wait, shouldn't we gentiles also become Jewish too as a sign of obedience? Well, our experience says not.¹⁰ (Acts 15:8-9) "God, who knows the human heart, testified by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us." The bible suggests we make decisions not just by reading the bible, but by reading the people. Does this make people flourish the way God wants? The Holy Spirit is present and saving here too—weird! Wonderful. God must be more creative than we thought.

A church I know got into prison ministry as several of you have done. And it found the people who responded best weren't the prisoners. It was the guards. People mistreated and disrespected by prisoners and administrators and civilians often. So the church baked cakes on the guards' birthdays, visited with them, and found the culture of the prison changed, because the people working in it were transformed. A volunteer squash. Or the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Three, they read scripture. The passage is from Amos.¹¹ God says "All other peoples may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called" (Acts 15:17). If you look it up in Amos it won't read that way, James is quoting the *Greek* Old Testament. The point is clear, Israel's purpose to bless the whole world is coming true in the church. God is using Israel to bless the whole world *the way God always said he would*. It's not that Israel was a bad idea, no. Israel's whole point was to bless all people. As God said to Abraham,¹² "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:4). But then look what James does! He lays down some guidelines:¹³ "Only abstain from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood" (Acts 15:20). What? I thought we were done with rules like that! These come from Leviticus, which says when we slaughter animals we should present them as an offering to the Lord.¹⁴ We can't eat blood, for "the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Lev. 17:11).¹⁵ "Do not defile yourselves," God commands, with sexual immorality, "Otherwise the land will vomit you out" (Lev. 18:28). No rare steak y'all. And eyes only ever for the person you're married to. There's a little bit of Torah, Israel's law. Here's where this comes from. These are the rules for foreigners in Leviticus, resident aliens, living in Israel. We just need to be sexually pure, not worship idols, and not eat the way pagans eat. We gentiles don't have to be Jews, but we shouldn't offend against Judaism either. I so wish we had lived by that rule for the whole church's life.

What do we make of these things? Well, how we eat, how we have sex, how we worship, all that matters to God. To worship the true God means we will eat and marry in ways that bless the world and not in ways that don't. How do we do that? By keeping our promises and not lusting. By eating in ways that bless the Lord and help the poor. By not killing wantonly. The rules in Acts seem strange. But like all of God's rules they're there for our good and for the world's good. A rabbi a friend of mine knew used to say "no religion that doesn't tell you what to do with your pots and pans and genitals can possibly be interesting." Well we do. They're all there—pots and pans and genitals--to glorify God, and so we can love God and neighbor.

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¹¹ On screen

¹² On screen

¹³ On screen

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¹⁵ On screen

Fourth and finally the church comes to a decision and interprets it. James says gentiles can stay gentiles, Jews can stay Jews, and all together can be one church. If gentiles follow these minimal rules we can eat with Jews. Denise Stanley our wonder volunteer used to work for a Jewish company. She says no one wanted to be awarded employee of the month because their Jewish employers would take them out to eat. But the Jews wouldn't eat with them. The food wasn't kosher. So they'd sit there and watch you eat! But these biblical rules can let Jews and gentiles eat together. And when we eat together as we'll do in communion we are made the body of Christ, Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. I'm amazed at the wisdom of this church's leadership in keeping us at one table worshiping one Lord.

This church Boone Methodist was founded in 1866 down about where the courthouse is now. Then we moved across the street when we got too big. Then in the early 1920s we built a grand building where the Turchin Center is now. That burned in 1981 so we built another grand one that is now Turchin. Then in 2000 we opened this beautiful facility. We move physically at the speed of platetectonics—we'll be in the ocean in 50,000 years. But it wasn't at all clear this move in 2000 would ever happen. Folks said the church has always been in downtown Boone. Jim Deal says his mother used to say the church has to be here. He would say but mom you remember when it was west of here by the courthouse! In other words, *to stay faithful, sometimes you gotta change*. And we did. One thing I love about that is our church has never had a spirit that says we have to do it this way! You're sitting in my pew! The paraments are the wrong color! Or whatever. We've said we'll *innovate* to be *faithful* to Jesus, that's what we've always done. What does God seek from us now? Not to keep things the same, frozen in amber, then you're a museum. But to be faithful in a new day as we treasure our history—that's what makes you a living being, the body of Christ.

Some of y'all told me stories this week of scripture guiding decisions. And those decisions aren't easy. As Mark Twain said it's not the parts of scripture I can't understand that worry me, it's the parts I can. Some of you learned from scripture about tithing and giving generously. One of you tried to use scripture to convince your parents to let you get your ears pierced. Didn't work. Others said you had a distressing work situation, and read that we should have the mind of Christ and be humble, and it changed everything, transformed your work from a burden to a joy. Others said scripture has helped you when you're scared not to be afraid. That it's helped you to love enemies. To stand up to injustice. Scripture teaches us to be like Jesus. He's at the heart of scripture. And he commands us to love God and neighbor. The rest is just details.

Martin Luther said that if he knew the world was going to end tomorrow,¹⁶ he would plant a tree. A little gesture of hope against the darkness. Why? Because the way God ends the world is not by destroying it. But by making it new. Every good thing now will be made eternal. Every evil thing burned away. Now there's a decision born of the bible. To plant a tree. How about you? How will you apply scripture to a decision not at the end of the world, but this week? After all, this week could be the end of the world. Amen.

¹⁶ http://fc01.deviantart.net/fs70/i/2011/360/0/b/baby_tree_by_adinafay-d4kc1ow.jpg