



Discerning What God Is Doing: A Study of Acts

SESSION 1

In what ways can God be at work among human beings? In what specific ways does God work today, with us, in our world? How do we recognize and partner in this work?

Insights from the Book of Acts

“God is still speaking,” the United Church of Christ currently announces in promotional and outreach materials. Another denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is entering into “a season of discernment,” encouraging its members to seek a deeper understanding of the will of God and how they might “embody God’s purposes in and for the world.” Individual congregations in all denominations compose mission statements to articulate how they seek to fit into God’s plans or manifest God’s concerns. This language about God’s ongoing influence and activity raises questions. In what ways can God be at work among human beings? In what specific ways does God work today, with *us*, in *our* world? How do we recognize and partner in this work? Christians propose a wide variety of answers to these questions, and this study aims to help participants think about how they, in collaboration with others, attempt to identify God at work around them. The study does not pretend to offer an exhaustive analysis of what it means for God to act or to be recognized in the actions and experiences of people of faith. Instead, it offers an exploration of selected biblical passages that prompt their readers to reflect on how they consider and expect God to be at work.

The Acts of the Apostles portrays some of Jesus’ earliest followers trying to keep pace with what God is doing in their midst. In many passages these believers speak about God’s activity through their explanations of what God has done and their interpretations of what God is still doing. The theological conclusions they reach are rarely self-evident. Their statements about God result

from discernment—declarations of faith that require an openness to God and attempt to make sense of events and people’s experiences in light of convictions about who God is and how God operates. Although Acts does not prescribe a foolproof process for how communities of faith can successfully discern God’s leading, it does remind us that God’s people have always found discernment to be necessary as well as often contentious and surprising.

Like the characters in the book of Acts, groups of Christians today frequently find themselves trying to make sense of where God might be leading them or trying to express a shared sense of mission or set of values and beliefs. Indeed, this is an essential piece of exploring how Christian faith relates to the lives we live and the world we inhabit. Although today we face different issues than the people of the first century, Acts helps us think about the assumptions, ground rules, and expectations that shape our theological discernment.

Chapters 10, 11, and 15 of Acts describe believers trying to make decisions about the terms on which they will admit Gentile (non-Jewish) converts into their fellowship. Acts presents these as theological decisions. That is, the chief concern is not propriety, strategic planning, or policy making; it is a question of interpreting where



God is still speaking.

WHAT IS DISCERNMENT?

This study speaks of discernment as something more than merely decision making or consensus building among people. Directed toward God, *discernment* refers to coming to an understanding about God and about God's relevance to a set of circumstances. It involves identifying God's presence or initiative and interpreting the significance of that for Christian faith and life. Discernment is a necessary part of being responsive to God as believers seek to participate with God in the work of the gospel.

God stands in this new missionary endeavor and how Christian faith connects to new developments in the churches' experience. This session explores the events of Acts 10:1–11:18. *Please read that passage before continuing.* The second session addresses Acts 15:1–31.

What's Wrong with Welcoming Gentiles?

Although first-century Jews and Gentiles interacted with one another in numerous ways in many social venues, many aspects of Judaism attempted to maintain boundaries between Jews and their Gentile neighbors. The sharpest distinctions and criticisms tended to center around religious, dietary, and sexual practices. Religiously, many Jews regarded the polytheism of Gentiles as idolatry. Often they considered Gentiles' dietary practices to be repulsive (imagine what you would think if your neighbors ate squirrels and cockroaches). Some sexual ethics of Greek and Roman cultures were considered offensive. This does not mean that certain Jewish religious commitments were based on bigotry or stereotypes; rather, Judaism generally held that God had set the Jews apart from the other nations in distinct ways that were to be guarded lest Jewish identity be overwhelmed. Circumcision and adherence to the law of Moses were the primary Jewish marks of distinction, reflecting the Jews' identity as beneficiaries of God's grace and holiness. It was no trivial matter, then, when the early church (whose membership was, at first, entirely Jewish) had to consider the question of what it meant for Gentile "outsiders" to embrace Christ and join in the fellowship of the gospel with Jewish followers of Jesus.

Scene 1: Acts 10:1–8

The story begins with a private religious experience, Cornelius's visit from an angel. The angel does not give him a clear idea of what to expect when he meets Peter. As a centurion, Cornelius leads a unit of one hundred soldiers. He is already positively disposed toward God, but his identity as a Roman soldier would have made him an outsider from the perspective of most Jews.

Scene 2: Acts 10:9–17a

Next Peter receives a vision. In it, he is presented with the option of eating animals prohibited by the law of Moses. Peter's refusal to eat these animals is not criticized; the issue is not about what Peter will or will not eat. The voice he hears admonishes him for his use of the labels "unclean" and "profane"; distinctions about what is pure and acceptable ultimately are God's to make, not Peter's. Again, we read of a vision that does not explain what is going to happen to the participant. The communication to Peter raises questions and provokes the next course of action. The events of the story to this point will make sense only in hindsight, once people consider more evidence and try to grasp what God is doing with Cornelius and Peter.

Scene 3: Acts 10:17b–23a

Peter admits Cornelius's representatives in response to the Spirit's command and because it is a good idea to answer the door when a Roman soldier comes and asks for you. Peter's willingness to provide lodging introduces to the story the idea of hospitality. As these visitors from Cornelius are likely Gentiles, it is no small step for Peter to extend himself in this way. He welcomes them in obedience, not because he yet understands where it will lead.

GENTILES

The term *Gentile*, derived from biblical words denoting the "nations" of the world, describes anyone who is not Jewish. The term reflects beliefs that God had established the people of ancient Israel as a unique nation, one that would be distinct from and a blessing to all others.

Scene 4: Acts 10:23b–33

For Cornelius, his reverence toward Peter is a sign of respecting a guest. To Peter, it is perhaps a reminder of Gentiles' propensity to engage in idolatry. The awkward moment highlights how significant differences separate these two men. Peter nevertheless grasps the lesson from his vision; it is not up to him to regulate standards of purity and acceptability (v. 28), yet he still cannot be sure where all this is heading (v. 29). But once Peter and Cornelius can describe their visionary encounters to each other, it is clear that Peter is there to proclaim the gospel.

Scene 5: Acts 10:34–43

Peter begins his speech by interpreting the events that have transpired, based on what he is learning and experiencing. When he says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality," he does not mean that God is indifferent. He declares that God's concern encompasses all—Jews and Gentiles. This significant statement indicates that Peter's own theological presuppositions are being transformed, even as Cornelius and his associates are about to be transformed. Peter moves to recount the story of Jesus, but he will not complete his message.

Scene 6: Acts 10:44–48

Again, God takes the initiative in this story when the Holy Spirit interrupts Peter and fills his listeners even before they can express repentance or be baptized. It has become clear that this is a story about God's impulses; the human characters endeavor to respond, participate, and make sense of things. Clearly the coming of the Spirit surprises Peter and his friends, but they also under-

WHY IS HOSPITALITY SIGNIFICANT?

In the ancient world, acts of hospitality expressed meaningful commitments between hosts and guests. Because it extended protection and supplied provision, receiving a guest forged a personal bond and declared a relationship of reciprocity among those involved. The idea of self-giving between host and guest implied such a deep commitment that Jews and Christians often considered hospitality as symbolic of God's dedication to humanity as an ideal host.

stand it as a decisive moment: Peter sees that these Gentiles receive the same Spirit as he and other Jewish believers have and therefore share in the gospel with them. Cornelius and his party extend hospitality to Peter, and he accepts, thereby strengthening the bond of identity they now share as believers.



What did it mean for "outsiders" to embrace Christ and join in the fellowship with Jewish followers of Jesus?

Scene 7: Acts 11:1–18

The narrative of Cornelius and Peter could have concluded at the end of Acts 10, but the story is retold in this scene, allowing Peter's own community in Jerusalem to hear, evaluate, and confirm both the events and the response of Peter and his companions in 10:45–47. The initial criticism from the people in Jerusalem in vv. 2–3 underscores the established cultural and religious boundaries that Peter has transgressed in his willingness to associate so intimately with Gentiles by accepting their hospitality, in his apparent violation of God's supposed desire to maintain distinctions between Jews and Gentiles. Peter's response, however, his retelling of the events from his own perspective, satisfies his critics. All of them interpret the circumstances with theological affirmations, identifying God at work. First, Peter concludes from the reality of the Holy Spirit and the promise of Jesus (see Acts 1:5) that God is making God's intentions known (11:15–17). Then the others declare the discernment of the wider community: God is at work here (11:18). God clearly transforms Cornelius, along with his relatives and friends; God transforms the wider church, too, as people come to recognize that the gospel belongs also to Gentiles and that they belong to the fellowship of God's people.

Acts 10:1–11:18 and Discernment

According to this passage, Gentiles first come to know the promises of the gospel and become members of the Christian community (as confirmed by their receipt of the Holy Spirit) through an act of God. Human beings play key parts in this drama, of course, but their participation compels them to inquire after the theological

significance of the events—how God might be involved in them and how they might reflect God’s desires for humanity. Only as the events play out can Peter and others attempt to interpret them; in the end, their participation and reflection lead them to make bold declarations about what God has done in their midst.

Cornelius, Peter, and their companions do not make their declarations blindly. Their supernatural visions and observations of the Holy Spirit’s presence give their discernment a certain advantage, compared to those who must engage in discernment without the luxury of miraculous phenomena. At the same time, we must notice that there is more to the story than the obvious ways that God prompts the people involved. What aspects of the story help us think about how discernment happens, how people might recognize God at work?

Repetition and Storytelling

This passage is full of repetition. Not only does the narrator describe characters’ religious experiences, the characters also recount those events to one another. The opportunity for discernment arises from people’s experiences, and the larger picture of what is happening begins to come into view for them only as they discuss and ponder their descriptions of what they have encountered.

Hospitality and Community

The story does not raise the question of whether Gentiles should hear the gospel as much as it dwells on the issue of hospitality. Peter must learn that God determines who or what is acceptable, and what scandalizes his associates in Jerusalem is that Peter shares fellowship with “uncircumcised men.” The matter of cleanliness and acceptability underscores the wider community’s stake in the contact between Cornelius and Peter. The Jerusalem believers’ interest indicates that what transpires between Peter and Cornelius is hardly a private affair. How God might be present there has implications for the entire community of faith, and elements of that community take a role in interpreting and responding to God’s involvement. Discernment is a communal event that affects a communal understanding.

Obedience and Reflection

The events described in Acts 10:1–11:18 do not make sense to their participants until they are completed. Cor-

nelius and Peter both are obedient to their visions, and they are willing to take risks in response to the instructions they hear. Yet neither knows at the outset where the visions and their meeting in Cornelius’s home will take them. It takes time for Peter to be able to make his statements about God in 10:34 and 11:17. He first must hear Cornelius’s story, interact with him, and remember prior promises—in this case, Jesus’ teaching about the gift of the Holy Spirit, which points out a meaningful consistency between Jesus’ message and current events. Likewise, the believers in Jerusalem must hear Peter’s account and reflect on his rationale before they can make their declaration in 11:18. It takes obedience, conversation, observation, and reflection before discernment’s conclusions emerge.

Surprise

The conclusions in this story also reflect an openness to surprise. The lesson Peter learns about the labels “unclean” and “profane” represents a sharp break from what he, as a Jew, probably has been taught his whole life about God and what is pleasing to God. The fact that he and others are even willing to endorse all of what happens in this passage suggests that they hold even deeper convictions about God’s capacity to reorient expectations and assumptions.

How might Christians today respond to this story and its descriptions of people making bold proclamations about God’s deeds and desires? On one hand, we are rightly cautious about people who claim to speak for God or who talk glibly about their ability to know God’s will. On the other hand, the story of Cornelius and Peter encourages us to view life from a vantage point that seeks to affirm and account for God’s active presence. Such discernment always comes with risks (as we will see in session 2, as we explore another passage in Acts that addresses similar questions about Gentiles’ inclusion in Christian communities). But this story also insists that discernment is necessary and that it energizes the life and activities of believers. It is a story that prompts us to consider God working among us and our efforts to be responsive to God.

About the Writer

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