

Today I want to talk a bit about discernment. It's not a word that we use very often, but Chambers dictionary says - Discernment is the [ability](#) to [judge](#) which things of a particular [kind](#) are good and which are [bad](#).

All sorts of things require discernment: fake news, facebook posts etc.

Christianity.com says - *In its simplest definition, discernment is nothing more than the ability to decide between truth and error, right and wrong. Discernment is the process of making careful distinctions in our thinking about truth. In other words, the ability to think with discernment is synonymous with an ability to think biblically.*

For believers, it has something to do with working out what the best choice is in different situations, and there is a spiritual element to it.

I found a reference online attributed to the great preacher C H Spurgeon – I'm not sure about that, but I like the thought: *Discernment is not knowing the difference between right and wrong. It is knowing the difference between right and almost right.*

So, in Acts 13 a group of people in the church in Antioch were worshipping and fasting. During that time of worship, Holy Spirit told them to 'set apart' - our word might be ordain – Barnabas and Saul 'for the work to which I have called them'! Not very specific. What are the hours? What are the responsibilities? Where is the office? Jesus never gave specifics. His call is simply, "Follow me."

They ended up on a journey around the Mediterranean during which their preaching caused so much trouble that, at one point, they were stoned and left for dead, but they also saw God perform miracles and many people come to faith. Churches had been planted. How? They went to the synagogue, then the public square to engage with those who weren't in the synagogue!

In ch14 Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch, and eventually, in Ch 15 they go to the church in Jerusalem to tell their story. What they find is a dispute over tradition. "This is the way we've always done it." The Message translation puts it like this Acts 15:5 *Some Pharisees stood up to say their piece. They had become believers, but continued to hold to the hard party line of the Pharisees. "You have to circumcise the pagan converts," they said. "You must make them keep the Law of Moses."*

That dispute was, for a while at least, resolved when Peter, Paul and Barnabas told that God had made no difference between them and the Gentiles. How did they know what the best thing to do was? OT set the standard as far as the law was concerned – now there was a movement of grace. What does God's word say? Do that. If it's not clear, ask God and look for what he is doing.

They head back to Antioch where, after a short time, Paul decides to head back to where they had visited before. There is no mention of prayer this time, just a statement from Paul. At this point, Barnabas and Paul fall out because Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them, but Paul doesn't. He went on their first journey, but, when it got hard, he left them and headed home. How many chances do you give someone? How do you know who should be on a team? Who should be leaders in a congregation? What skills and abilities should they have? What happens when people have very different ideas and all claim to be sharing what God has told them?

As a result of their falling out they went different ways – Barnabas back where they had been already and Paul took Silas and headed North. They travelled through what we now call Turkey visiting some of the churches they had planted and planting others as they went. It would have been logical to head for Ephesus because that was the main cultural centre – today it would be like touring the UK and not visiting London. Acts 16:6-7 **6** *Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. 7* *When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.*

We're not told how they were kept from preaching or what happened when they tried to enter Bithynia, just that it didn't work out. However, Acts 16:8-10 **8** *So they passed by Mysia and went down*

to Troas. **9** During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' **10** After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Some people here have potentially life-changing decisions to make: Morag starting to look to her future ministry; Kirk Sessions and congregations looking to the future of ministry in Prestwick; NWC looking for a minister; some contemplating house moves, or changing job. For most of us, the decisions we face are not so significant, but there are always questions about the best way to move forward. It would be great if every decision were clear and obvious, but we know life is not like that. Sometimes we do face that choice of right or almost right. What if two choices appear to be good? How do we know which to choose? How do you choose between right and almost right

What do we learn from these stories about understanding God's plans and purposes?

What does this passage say about discernment?

- Discernment is the FIRST step – asking: what is God up to? What is God's preferred and promised future?
- Discernment involves trial and error
- God's priority is not always ours – the timing is God's, not ours
- Discernment involves tuning in, listening, before acting
- Sometimes requires stopping, retreating and, where necessary, recovering (especially if we've understood it wrong)
- Sometimes involves waiting on others to catch up (Luke)
- Brokenness/Vulnerability often provide breakthrough
- Yesterday's strategy is not tomorrow's strategy
- Requires humility – fully reliant on God, not on the last successful strategy
- Invitation – called and sent at the same time, openings coincide with preparedness
- Calls us out of our comfort zone

Discernment is: (pic: word puzzle)

- More of an art than a science
- Having a tried and tested strategy is not unspiritual, but we must hold it loosely and allow for agility to respond to God.
- No guarantee that copying a successful strategy will work again
- Discernment often comes along the way, not mapped out at the beginning
- Holy Spirit often interrupts our plans and takes us on a circuitous route
- God's no and yes are often reflected on the ground – as doors open and close
- Discernment is resourced and supported by the gifts of the spirit – especially the prophetic
- Discernment works (pic: two people and lightbulbs) best when we involve others
- Discernment is not whimsical – but a worked out, thorough process of listening, reasoning, discussing, experimenting
- Discernment must be followed by obedience in faith