

PRONOUNCEMENT

Principles for interpreting scripture in the 21st century

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THE APOSTOLIC FAITH MISSION OF SOUTH AFRICA: DOCTRINE, ETHICS AND LITURGY STATEMENT AS APPROVED OF BY THE 50TH NATIONAL LEADERSHIP FORUM

It is important to understand that interpreting scripture moves from exegesis via hermeneutics to homiletics.

GETTING BEHIND THE TEXT

Who is the author, who is the original recipients and the historical context of the text? The biblical text has one meaning and that is the authors intended meaning.

GOING INTO THE TEXT

This revolves around the identification of the genre of the text in question. Highlight the key words and phrases and to compare different translations of the same text. The meaning of the text is dependent upon the various types of literary forms. Recognize the literal and figurative language of the text.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT OF THE TEXT

It is of utmost importance that the historical, political, social-economic, religious and cultural factors of the text should be considered.

LET SCRIPTURE INTERPRET SCRIPTURE

The text should be allowed to speak for itself in the context of the whole scripture with reference to the history of salvation. Reading from the text instead of reading in the text, because no 21st century reader come to the text with a blank mind, but the text is confronted by readers with culturally, socio-economic and politically tinted lenses. Be aware of it when present day human situations, concerns are address ethically and morally.

In view of the fact that we are participants of the spiritual experience that is brought about by the in filling of the Holy Spirit, we will have to employ a process of discernment as outlined below.

A PROCESS FOR DISCERNMENT

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:2 NRSV)

You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? (Deut 4:6-7 NRSV)

But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1Cor 2:14 NKJV)

The purpose of this paper is not to establish a theological framework for discernment but to propose a way of making decisions for a leadership team based on discernment. The whole idea of a leadership team making decisions through a process of discernment is based upon a lot of ideas concerning leadership, who God is and how God works, how the Holy Spirit guides us, the role of Scripture, etc. It touches on our basic theology, anthropology, view of Scripture, etc. According to this process of discernment, Scripture is for instance viewed as a communal book and should be read in community and exegeted within a community. The Holy Spirit for instance lives in each one of us but also in us as a community. God is actively involved and present in us and have a specific will for us now. The presumptions underlining this process of discernment will not be discussed. This paper will focus on the praxis of discernment by a leadership team.

When we speak about discernment, we speak about the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God both personally and in the community. Like the Israelite journey that is really a story of on-going discernment, this is about a group of human beings learning how to recognize the presence of God and then following that presence wherever it guides them. The history of leaders forming a community to discern is very old and we find a Biblical example of that in one of the first big challenges of the New Testament church in Acts where they had to decide what the Gospel means and what God expected of them in their specific situation. In prayer, discussion, looking at the Scriptures and listening to the experience of people, they eventually came to the conclusion that it seemed right to them and to the Holy Spirit to move into a specific direction.

EXPLORING THE PROCESS FOR DISCERNMENT

The proposed process of discernment might seem very mechanical in the beginning but it is not always linear. As a community becomes comfortable with the process they will experience less of a step-by-step procedure and more of a creative mix of following the dynamic elements of the discerning process.

CLARIFYING THE QUESTION FOR DISCERNMENT

This would be the next important task of the discerning leadership team. Not all questions are warranting the full discerning process. Some questions such as, what's for lunch, might be answered in five minutes through a fact base discussion. However, there are other questions that require a different investment of intention and prayerfulness for the entire leadership team especially those issues shaping our identity (who we are) and values and vision (where we are going).

PREPARING THE LEADERSHIP DISCERNMENT TEAM

It is important that the right people are involved in take part in the discerning process. The prerequisite for the community discernment is a conviction that God has a specific will for us in a situation and that God can communicate with us through his Word and the work of the Holy Spirit within our hearts. It is essential that these individuals practice personal discernment and in their own decision-making. It is very hard to think that a group of undiscerning people are expected to show up in a leadership setting and then suddenly become discerning. If our way of experiencing the guidance of God is just by studying the Bible and understanding it, or by opening the Bible haphazardly, or by waiting for a specific inner conviction, the leadership team would first be prepared for the process of discernment. It is of course always of great value if there is someone who has a gift of discernment as well.

GUIDING VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

The group should clarify values – values like honouring and respecting others, their views and giving each person an opportunity to speak without interruption. It is especially important to clarify the values, whether there is disagreement, or invested interest in the group. The group should reaffirm that they gathered for discernment and that they will commit to each other, to the integrity of the relationships and to seeking God's will above everything else. We will be committed to honouring each other's deprivations or resistance to a particular direction or decision, trust in the Spirit of God in that person and will wait for deeper understanding and unity throughout the process.

ENTERING INTO THE DISCERNMENT PROCESS WITH PRAYER

We ask for God's guidance and enlightenment for understanding but we also pray for indifference. Not indifference in the sense of apathy – indifference in the discernment process means that I am indifferent in matter of ego, prestige, organizational politics and personal comfort or favour. God's will – nothing more, nothing less and nothing else. The indifference of the participants is a big question during the process and this would also be discussed throughout the process.

LISTENING ON MANY LEVELS

An example of listening on many levels is found in the book of Acts chapter 15. The leaders listened to the conversion experiences of the Gentiles (the people within the question of the debate), to the Pharisees (the people who opposes) to Paul's sense of personal calling, to the Gentiles and his experiences of God's work through signs and wonders, to James exposition of the Old Testament (Scriptures). One can say that there should be a 360 degree listening orientation. What is the Scripture saying? We listen to the presented papers and look again at what the Bible tells us.

We listen to our hearts. What is happening inside us? We need to pay attention to our distress, confusion, desolation and consolation, affirmation and “burning sensations” (Luke 24).

We need to listen to the people we are deciding about and to the other voices around us. How is God leading all the other churches in this matter?

We need to listen to our history and the tradition of the church. It is an important task of the leadership team to determine the voices that should be listened to in the process of discernment.

COMPLETING THE DISCERNMENT PROCESS

After all the listening it is time to look at the options that seems consistent with what God is doing amongst us? If the outcome is not clear, we might select an option or two that we seek to improve on, in order to acquire the best possible option. The Quakers who are known for their discernment process, has a practice where they encourage everyone to hold the decision near their heart in order to see which one brings consolation or desolation. It is important that there should be an agreement in the group. In the Quaker tradition, what is more important than the decision itself is the quality of life together after the decision and the sense that they found a decision which is in the group's best interest. A Quaker pastor put it like this: “Unity is the fundamental marker that God's direction has been discerned”.

SEEK INNER CONFIRMATION

We need some time apart from the group to become quiet in God's presence to pray and think about the options and notice whether there is peace regarding the decisions we've made. If people are experiencing deep inner peace within, then affirm that together. Now is the time to make the decision, bring in the strategic planners, the consultants. We need the 'how, what, where'.

CLOSING REMARK

This proposal on how to become a discerning leadership community, allows oneself to envision the decision making process and what it may be like becoming a community of discernment and to live more fully into the spiritual practice of discernment. This process asks for commitment and the whole group should be ready to embark on the process of becoming a discerning leadership team.



THE APOSTOLIC FAITH MISSION OF SOUTH AFRICA

National Office

Building no. 14, Central Office Park, 257 Jean Ave, Centurion, Gauteng, South Africa

P.O. Box 9450, Centurion, 0046

Tel: +27 12 644 0490 | Fax: +27 12 644 0732/4

www.afm-ags.org

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