

October 17, 2021

7. The Church as a Discerning Body

Matthew 16:13-20 NRSV

The writers of this study have created one of the clearest explanations I've read of the "binding and loosing" words of Jesus. Wil LaVeist nails it:

Sometimes [the church] must . . . make things stricter or clearer so that the church remains true to God's will. Sometimes we must relax teachings so that God's will has room to work its way and allow people into the body. (*S&L Leader*, p. 42)

In whose hands should the power of discernment lie? Only those who have the gift of discernment? (See 1 Corinthians 12:10.) The pastor? Or should the church be patterned after secular democracy in which a majority decides what God's will is? Depending on who votes and how closely they follow God's lead and with what motivation, important actions are bound or loosed. I wonder if God is pleased with all congregational council decisions.

Sometimes church decisions are hard to accept. My husband and I experienced that. We felt strongly led to start an Anabaptist church in José's hometown in Mexico. José saw overwhelming spiritual need among his family and friends. All the building blocks were in place: the Mexican Mennonite conference called a pastor; a segment of our home church was on board and willing to pray and give; the Holy Spirit obviously was leading and guiding. But for our local church leaders, this was too much to fathom. Could a church really be started by individuals or a single sponsoring church without the rules and approval of the denomination's mission organization? Surely not!

That mission church began 12 years ago. Despite resistance and being labeled as rogue and defiant by leaders, we persisted. It was hard and isolating. We thought, *What could possibly be wrong about starting a church and making disciples?* Granted, sometimes the Mexican pastor didn't follow long-established US church accountability rules. We haven't always agreed with the little congregation's decisions. But last Sunday, Jose visited the church. It is alive and growing, breathing deeply of the wind of the Spirit, "loosed" to do the work of the kingdom.

Who do you think was following the Spirit in this situation? Do you currently have a similar situation in your church? "How can believers tell the difference between spiritual discernment and adapting to the dominant [church] culture?" (*S&L Leader*, p. 38).

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Helen Tellez has been a writer, editor, and copy editor for church and secular organizations for more than four decades. Formerly from northern Indiana, she now resides in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, with her husband, José, where they run a clothing alterations business. Being married to José for 18 years has opened her eyes to the world beyond rural, white America, and she is grateful for the changes in her Christian perspective.

Resources for session 7

Salt & Light Videos

These teaching videos are great for leader preparation or introducing each session.

They are available on **MennoMedia's YouTube channel**. **Naomi Yoder** is the presenter for unit 2, Church Means Assembly. She serves on the pastoral team of East Goshen Mennonite Church in Indiana.