

GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

TOGETHER, FULL OF WISDOM AND THE HOLY SPIRIT:
A PARADIGM FOR CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT
AND DECISION MAKING

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ABSTRACT

In American consumer culture a congregation's decisions are often based on the sum of individual personal preferences, limited information, and pragmatism, promoting disunity with no assurance that God's will is discerned and done. After exploring seven cultural "spirits" that cause problems for congregations as they discern God's will and make decisions, this dissertation examines the biblical, historical, theological, and cultural backgrounds for Christian communal discernment to discover how congregations can effectively make more God-focused, God-honoring, and God-reflecting decisions. The current study proposes that a Christian community makes better decisions—more faithful to its identity as the "body of Christ"—when it uses a model of discernment/decision making that includes: (1) insights/teaching/judgments from wisdom sources, (2) the guidance of the Holy Spirit through personal and corporate listening prayer and evaluation, and (3) contributions from the entire congregation or group. It looks at how the lack of one or two of these components is detrimental to healthy congregational functioning and provides examples from Scripture and Church history. Also examined are current models that enable congregations to apply wisdom and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as they together discern practical solutions to ministry concerns.

The Artifact (chapters and appendices from a proposed book) presents biblical, historical, and practical materials, and theological arguments supporting the proposal. It demonstrates how God's people have valued wisdom as a gift, using insights gained through thoughtful consideration of human behavior and Creation to aid their discernment/decision-making. It explores God's leadership of his people and the Spirit's guiding and gifting of Jesus and the Early Church. It also examines Jewish and Greco-

Roman models of community organization, and Early Church decision-making structures and practices. In addition, New Testament teachings about unity, leadership, and healthy “body of Christ” dynamics are provided.

INTRODUCTION: TWO VIGNETTES

The members of Lakeside Church were gathered for a quarterly congregational meeting to vote on a new set of church policies and procedures. After a brief prayer and devotion on the importance of unity, the Chair announced that the question/discussion time would be limited to issues of clarification, since concerns should have been expressed to the revision committee in writing prior to the meeting. The committee, of which she was a part, had worked many hours on the documents and the congregation's job was to approve them, not change them. The agenda for this meeting was a full one so discussion would be restricted to twenty minutes.

Fred leaned over to his wife and said, "Looks like they're railroading it through. I wonder if anyone will try to object." Ten minutes into the discussion, Charles, a former member of the church council, raised concerns that he had already given to the committee, and suggested a possible change to deal with them. He was promptly gavelled down by the Chair as being out of order and, in spite of his protests, asked to sit down. The tension in the air was palpable. John, whose wife was on the church staff, asked if the staff agreed with the revisions, since the church was currently without a senior pastor, and some changes were aimed at "restricting the power" of the pastoral staff. He was assured they all had agreed and that their concerns had been addressed. He was stunned by this response since he knew his wife hadn't heard back from the committee about the detailed six-page letter she had sent them several weeks before.

John was followed by Jane, a member of the revision committee, who talked emotionally about how much time and effort they had put into developing the new policies and procedures and suggested that the congregation needed to trust them and

honor their work by voting “yes” on the measure. She then called for the question. Her appeal apparently worked because the congregation voted to accept the documents. The church chair briskly led the congregation through the rest of the agenda, pausing only occasionally to allow brief discussion.

After the meeting Fred grumbled to his wife as they left, “I don’t know why I even bother coming to these meetings. Our thoughts and opinions aren’t important. I think God must be pretty disgusted and saddened by all of this.” Another church member was overheard to say, “I’m not sure what all the fuss was about. I didn’t bother to read the papers they gave us. I’ve got enough stuff to read already and they were pretty complicated, so I just voted ‘yes.’” His companion responded, “Well, I voted ‘yes’ because I didn’t want to disappoint the committee. They’ve worked so long on this. And besides, I’m not sure it makes much difference. The board runs the church the way they want to anyway, and I don’t think these changes will have much of an impact on me.”

When the new senior pastor began at the church the next fall, he largely ignored the new policies and procedures, saying to a staff member, “I was hired to lead. This congregational polity thing is the pits! It’s more important to just get done what you want to get done. You know the saying, ‘Easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.’”

Needless to say, the pastor did not last long, and the church continued to have meetings where unresolved conflict was the norm.¹

Unfortunately, the situation at Lakeside Church is not unique. Many Christians would nod their heads as they read this scenario—this has been their experience also, and

¹ The church’s name and some details have been changed for this initial scenario, but this was a real situation and similar comments were made about this meeting.

they have been left frustrated, wondering why church decision making is often so contentious and what that reveals about their communal life. Luke Timothy Johnson says,

I think there ought to be some connection between what a group claims to be, and the way it does things. The church claims to be a community of faith; is there any connection between this claim and its actual communal life? This could be tested by looking at several places where churches express their life, but a particularly important and revealing place is the process of reaching decision.²

Carl S. Dudley concurs:

How a congregation makes decisions about spending its time and energy is an important window on the inner dynamics of its life together. ... The way these priorities are established strongly affects the congregational climate—its general feeling of warmth and support, its overall morale, its general openness to change, its usual levels of conflict, and its habits for including people in decisions.³

An astute observer might ask many questions: Is the way Lakeside Church made decisions really any different from how secular local businesses or government groups make theirs? “What do we learn about the nature of the church as we see it reaching decision? Is its proclaimed nature revealed? Is its essential self-understanding given articulation? Or is there a disparity between what the church claims to be and what its way of deciding the future shows it to be?”⁴ What criteria determine success in deciding

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1893, 1996), 10. He says further on 15-16, “The process by which decision is reached tells of the nature of the group in a way other forms of ritual sometimes miss. Perhaps a community loudly proclaims its democratic lifestyle—and at work, rest, and meals, the members hold all things equally. But if the community’s decisions are made by executive decree, the claim to equality is empty; the group actually has an authoritarian structure. Conversely, if decisions on entrance and advancement, leadership and responsibility are made by a genuinely popular vote, that process reveals the group to be democratic in a way that propaganda never could. ... Property, gender, or age qualifications for voting give specific shading to the kind of democracy this is. The fact that we vote to make decisions tells us that we are a democracy. The fact that not all of us who are members of the group can vote tells us that this democracy is not absolute but relative. If it is possible for a member to lose a vote, that tells us how seriously we take responsibility or deviance. And if members of a group have the vote but do not use it, we learn of a profound alienation of the members from the life of the group.”

³ Carl S. Dudley, “Process: Dynamics of Congregational Life,” in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, eds. Nancy Ammerman, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley and William McKinney (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 111.

⁴ L. T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 20.

church business and following God's will? Why do church members act as functional atheists in their decision-making and why aren't all contributions allowed and valued?

What might be learned from the Early Church in passages such as Acts 6:1-7 which describes a potentially divisive incident and a problem-solving, decision-making process?

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Why and how were these early Christians able to agree and make God-honoring, church-building group decisions? Johnson says, "If we identify the church as a community of faith, the process of decision making ought to make the structures and implications of this response to reality called "faith" more explicit. *Reaching decision in the church should be an articulation of faith.*" How did communities of believers from biblical times and Church history express, or fail to express, their faith through how they made communal decisions, and what can they teach us today about discernment and decision making as a community of faith?

SECTION ONE: THE PROBLEM

The Challenges of Congregational Discernment and Decision Making in American Church Culture

The bitter protracted Congressional debates of 2011-2012 over budgets and raising the nation's debt ceiling led many Americans to ask in disgust and dismay, "Why can't they overcome their differences and agree?" American Christians might hope the Church could model for their country a more collaborative way of making decisions, since it claims to be led by Christ, and in theory (and sometimes practice) members work in unity to do his will. And yet from its beginnings to the present the Church has a long painful track record of failure in this regard. The Apostle Paul wrote at least two letters to the Corinthians to help them deal with divisiveness, chastising them for their secular legal disputes (1, 2 Cor). James wrote sharply to his readers about their destructive arguments (Jas 2: 5-7; 4:1-12). Historically congregations and denominations have bitterly argued and split, sometimes over important issues, but many times over insignificant ones such as the proverbial "color of the carpet." "Horror stories" of church decision making "gone bad" often end with decisions based on the sum of individual preferences, limited information, and a naturalistic pragmatic world-view. Churches using top-down business decision-making models experience fragmentation over both minor and major decisions.

Because of contentious decision making God is dishonored, the Church is shamed, and its witness is compromised (Jn 17:20-23). Many Christians have wondered, "Is our way of discerning God's will and making decisions broken? Eden Grace, a World Council of Churches' Committee member from the Religious Society of Friends USA (Quaker), notes the dissatisfaction with church decision-making practices:

Many churches yearn for a governance structure which is less politicized, and more closely interlaced with the spiritual life of the church—which is not “business” so much as it is community-building and spiritual discernment. We have a great desire to know each other more deeply through our shared commitment to the work of the church. Does our business facilitate a deepening of community? Bodies which use parliamentary procedure frequently begin and end their meetings with prayer, but these too easily become bookends, perfunctory prayers which have little relationship to the decisions being debated. There is no mechanism during the debate for offering prayer, pausing for silent reflection, recalling a Bible story, or inviting a hymn. Worship and business are separate realms, each with its own order.¹

Norman Nideng speaks for many: “Seeing that our methods divide congregations, splinter fellowships, and alienate Christians, can we still defend them as being anointed by God? Isn’t there at least a suspicion that somewhere there must be a better way? Can such a way be found in Scripture?”² He asserts, “No longer can the church be run like a business or managed like a branch of government. Rather, it must begin to function like the Body God intended it to be where every member is in subjection to Christ and in submission to one another.”³ Ben Campbell Johnson and Glenn McDonald concur:

The community of Christ must re-present Christ, his person and his mission, in an authentic form. How do we imagine this new form of the church for ministry today? Old structures have already proved inadequate; new ones have yet to be born. Also, we struggle with systems that have become irrelevant to Western, secular people, and lack the power to transform life. Increasingly, these old religious practices are like straitjackets restraining the mission of Christ.⁴

¹ Eden Grace, “Guided by the Mind of Christ: Yearning for a New Spirituality of Church Governance.” Edengrace.org. www.edengrace.org/guided.html (accessed May 30, 2011). Also published in *Ecumenical Trends* 32, no. 4 (April 2003): 1-7. See also Marlene Kropf, “Discernment: A River Runs through It: Flowing with the Current of the Spirit in Church Meetings”, Mennonite Church USA. www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre/ResourceDownload/7081 (accessed May 30, 2011).

² Norman Nideng, “There’s a Better Way than Voting!!,” *Searching Together* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1984):17. See also Janice Love, “Can We All Agree? Governing the WCC by Consensus,” *The Christian Century*, 119, no 23 (November 6-19, 2002): 8-10.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ Ben Campbell Johnson and Glenn McDonald, *Imagining a Church in the Spirit: A Task for Mainline Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 6.

Is it possible to discover decision-making practices that will glorify Christ, build unity, and not impede ministry both in and outside of the Church? Yes, but the issues behind congregational decision-making conflicts go much deeper. Implementing new practices may be helpful, but they will not solve the fundamental problems. James F. Cobble points out that in spite of communal structures, many churches are groups of “individuals, all viewing the world through different lenses, who gather together for meetings. These meetings represent the intersection of shared religious beliefs, which produces a common purpose for meeting, but not a common life. The result is a loosely associated group of people rather than the biblical concept of community.”⁵ Healthy congregational decision making requires being committed to living and ministering in authentic community.

The question then is not how to choose and implement a new model of decision making, but how to develop a community that is biblically counter-cultural, seeking to make decisions through the discernment of God’s Spirit and his wisdom, and has structures and processes that support and encourage this focus. As will be seen, there is a “better way” for congregations to discern God’s will and make corporate decisions, but it is not necessarily easier or more efficient. It requires willingness to grow in personal and communal discipleship, and a commitment to actively and patiently listen to God and each other, rather than pushing one’s own agenda. It also takes persistent perceptive diligence to recognize and counter the influences that work against this “better way.” Let us begin by examining the cultural roots of our congregational decision-making woes.

⁵ James F. Cobble, Jr., *The Church and the Powers: A Theology of Church Structure* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1988), 37.

Cultural Influences

In this search for a “better way” one must first explore the cultural philosophies and practices influencing how many American church members/leaders determine God’s will for their congregations. People are often culturally blind, thinking that the way they do things is “the way they are done,” and rarely consider that as followers of Jesus they might be called to a different way. John M. Staudenmaier struggles with this issue:

Since it is a given that I am shaped by my culture, what do I need to help me to become a believer? ... Culture lies too deeply embedded in human beings to ever become completely baptized, and the life of faith in every era takes the form of a holy tension between primordial cultural tendencies and God’s endlessly affectionate challenge to learn to live faithfully.⁶

Our practices are not only shaped by our culture, but once established they become cultural forces themselves. Human structures, philosophies, and processes exert tremendous influence in our lives, taking on a life of their own and determining, in this case, how we make decisions together. Cobble calls them “impersonal spiritual powers”:

These powers are present in the symbols, motivations, and structures of social groups. Thus we can speak of the “spirit of capitalism” or the “spirit of competition.” While these “spirits” have no existence apart from human beings, once in existence they have the potential to condition and shape life. Their influence is primarily exerted through institutions.

Impersonal powers shape us not only as citizens and consumers, but also as devoutly religious people. The very structures we embrace and utilize to maintain life and serve God are powers that shape and influence our own existence and commitments.⁷

Thus, it is crucial for American believers to recognize Western culture’s impact on church structures, particularly the decision-making practices of Christ’s followers. To help us in this task we will look at seven cultural “spirits” that especially contribute to the

⁶ John M. Staudenmaier, “To Fall in Love with the World: Individualism and Self-Transcendence in American Life,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 26, no. 3 (May 1994): 2.

⁷ Cobble, *The Church and the Powers*, 20. See also Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 40.

difficulties experienced when we seek to implement God's will together: rationalism, naturalism, narcissistic individualism, restless impatience and information overload, pragmatism, guardianship, and mystical experience and spirituality.

Rationalism

The cultural "spirit" of rationalism has had a significant long-term impact on how Christian believers individually and corporately make decisions. Donald Miller notes, "Since the eighteenth century Western philosophy of religion has been dominated by Enlightenment thought, which prescribed rationality and scientific empiricism as the basis for all explorations of truth."⁸ *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines rationalism as, "Any philosophy magnifying the role played by unaided reason, in the acquisition and justification of knowledge."⁹ *The Encyclopedia Britannica* elaborates:

Holding that reality itself has an inherently logical structure, the rationalist asserts that a class of truths exists that the intellect can grasp directly. There are, according to the rationalists, certain rational principles—especially in logic and mathematics, and even in ethics and metaphysics—that are so fundamental that to deny them is to fall into contradiction. The rationalist's confidence in reason and proof tends, therefore, to detract from his respect for other ways of knowing.¹⁰

This last sentence is especially insightful as the rationalists' agenda led them to evaluate religious claims solely on the basis of logic, and disallow any evidence associated with personal experience. For example, "In 1746, Denis Diderot, echoing the creed of the Enlightenment, proposed the following challenge to believers: 'If the religion that you

⁸ Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles, CA; London, UK: University of California Press, 1997), 22.

⁹ *Oxford Reference Online*, s. v. "rationalism," *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Simon Blackburn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), <http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t98.e2636> (accessed November 10, 2011).

¹⁰ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "rationalism," 2012, <http://0-www.britannica.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/EBchecked/topic/492034/rationalism> (accessed October 10, 2011).

announce to me is true, its truth can be demonstrated by answerable arguments. Find these arguments. Why pursue me with prodigies, when a syllogism serves to convince me?”¹¹ The acceptance of rationalism, and the related philosophies of naturalism and scientific empiricism, has dramatically impacted the ability of people in contemporary American society to believe in and experience God. If what is true or real is defined by what is rational, as opposed to experiential or historical, then much of human experience is ruled-out and ignored, especially in the realm of spirituality. One result of this emphasis on rationalism is “religious debates have been relegated to discussing the truth or falsity of beliefs, making religion a disembodied, cerebral matter.”¹² Religion becomes a set of truths, moral rules, and regulations to which one intellectually assents and adheres. Religious experience is invalidated, and not seriously discussed or encouraged.

Attitudes are changing, however. Miller notes, “In the last decade or so, many assumptions of Enlightenment thought have been challenged . . . and postmodern philosophy is questioning the authoritarian character of any claim to a universal epistemology, or theory of knowledge.”¹³ Church members whose faith is largely rationalistic have found these trends alarming. Anxiously reacting to calls for a more experiential faith, they have sometimes defensively retrenched, claiming they “believe in the Bible.” Keith Meyer comments on the strengths and weaknesses of this perspective:

Beliefs are important. But when our beliefs remain facts, propositions and information that do not translate into life, they are not enough. In fact, we can be dead wrong in life while being right about the Bible. Most of our church programming involves teaching of right beliefs. Even our application of doctrine

¹¹ Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 208.

¹² Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

more often boils down to more information about what to do and rarely offers an actual plan on how to live or embody the truth presented.¹⁴

This disconnect between doctrine and practice leads to difficulties in communal discernment and decision making. Church leaders *know* that unity is important, that God gifts members with different abilities for ministry, and that we should love God with our whole being. Yet typical congregational decision making uses divisive methods (voting), neglects the input of the whole body, and is highly rationalistic. The ability to think and express oneself quickly and concisely is overvalued, giving some undue influence, and excluding those whose strengths lie in other areas. Instead of living out their doctrinal beliefs, “rationalistic” churches lack holistic structures and processes, and limit or ignore emotional and experiential input, preventing members from discerning God’s will together by using their hearts, souls, and strength, as well as their minds. (Mk 12:30). Incongruity between Christian profession and lifestyle has led to charges of hypocrisy.

Naturalism

Naturalism, closely related to rationalism, likewise makes very little room for God and the supernatural. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines it as “a sympathy with the view that ultimately nothing resists explanation by the methods characteristic of the natural sciences.”¹⁵ It says further, “naturalism includes any belief that the nature of ethical thinking is exhaustively understood in terms of natural propensities of human

¹⁴ Keith Meyer, *Whole Life Transformation: Becoming the Change Your Church Needs* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 51-52.

¹⁵ *Oxford Reference Online*, s. v. “naturalism,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Simon Blackburn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), <http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t98.e2123> (accessed November 10, 2011).

beings, without mysterious intuitions, or operations of conscience, or divine help.”¹⁶

Phillip Johnson, critiquing Darwinism, describes naturalism’s impact on religious belief:

Naturalism does not explicitly deny the mere existence of God, but it does deny that a supernatural being could in any way influence natural events, such as evolution, or communicate with natural creatures like ourselves. *Scientific* naturalism makes the same point by starting with the assumption that science, which studies only the natural, is our only reliable path to knowledge. A God who can never do anything that makes a difference, and of whom we can have no reliable knowledge, is of no importance to us.¹⁷

In 1969 Peter Berger claimed, “Today the supernatural as a meaningful reality is absent or remote from the horizons of everyday life of large numbers, very probably of the majority, of people in modern societies, who seem to manage to get along without it quite well.”¹⁸ Ronald Rolheiser echoes Berger, “People no longer expect to discover dimensions of reality beyond the empirically evident. For most of us, the final spiritual exorcism has already taken place. There are no longer any supernatural dimensions to reality, or, in many cases, even to religion.”¹⁹ We have lost our spiritual vision in part because we are unaware. We have been told that the supernatural doesn’t exist and so we have stopped looking for it. “The struggle to experience God is not so much one of God’s presence or absence as it is one of the presence or absence of God in our awareness. God is always present, but we are not always present to God.”²⁰ Rolheiser concludes,

¹⁶ *Oxford Reference Online*, s. v. “ethical naturalism, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Simon Blackburn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), <http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t98.e1146> (accessed November 10, 2011).

¹⁷ Phillip E. Johnson, *Darwin on Trial* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991, 2010), 145.

¹⁸ Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969), 5.

¹⁹ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2001), 52.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

We live lives of quiet agnosticism. Our faith often feels like doubt. Our everyday consciousness contains little or no awareness of God. We tend to be atheistic in our imaginations and in our feelings, even as we profess faith, say the creed, go to church, and perhaps even do ministry. We have icons in our churches but not in our hearts. This is not because we are hedonistic, pagan, bad, or materialistic, but because we live and move and breathe in a culture that no longer gives us the tools to create these icons. Our present cultural currency, certainly in the Western world, is not equipped to help us imagine or feel God's existence. The air we breathe is agnostic, even atheistic.²¹

To deal with these cultural stresses, many church leaders and member who still officially profess to believe in the supernatural, in reality adjust their expectations and understanding of their faith to accommodate naturalistic assumptions:

God is religion and religion represents a way of life ... there is little evidence in it that anyone is actually all that interested in God. We are interested in virtue, justice, a proper way of life, and perhaps even in building communities for worship, support, and justice. But, in the end, moral philosophies, human instinct, and a not-so-disguised self-interest are more important in motivating these activities than are love and gratitude stemming from a personal relationship with a living God. God is not only often absent in our market-places, He is frequently absent from our religious activities and religious fervor as well.²²

This “absence of God” has serious consequences for as Donald Bridge and David Phipers point out: “Every cardinal Christian doctrine taught in Scripture thus implies the intervention of God, the bursting in of the transcendent, the spiritual, the divine—and Christianity cannot be explained or lived if this is forgotten or denied.”²³ From a naturalistic perspective though, the Church is not a community infused by the living Holy Spirit working with God to redeem and renew the world. Instead it is merely

a visible religious organization, governed by a hierarchy of officials, which is the sole repository of religious truth, ... an efficient social agency, a caring community, ... a building at the end of the street, ... a useful place to hold

²¹ Ibid., 10.

²² Ibid., 18-19.

²³ Donald Bridge and David Phipers, *Spiritual Gifts and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 17.

ceremonies at the crucial points of life—birth, marriage and death, ... a social club, a place where useful and worthy activities are pursued including religious services on Sundays and other selected occasions.²⁴

Johnson says, “The consequence of losing the sense of Christ’s presence in and among us here and now has changed the vital fellowship of believers into an institution; and the institution, rather than radiating the presence of the Spirit, often shields us from it.”²⁵

This loss of our sense of the supernatural has left us vulnerable to other spiritual forces at work, including the demonic. Cobble warns, “The failure to recognize the spiritual dimension of what is commonly recognized as secular is a tragic mistake. Never in the history of humanity have so many spiritual forces been actively competing to shape life.”²⁶ More will be said about this later in the discussion on mystical spirituality.

Naturalism has definitely influenced individual and corporate decision making. The theist understands that due to human limitations it is necessary to prayerfully wait on God for the guidance and discernment necessary for effective decision-making. If according to naturalism, God does not exist (or is uninvolved in the universe), then it is up to humans to control and create their world. The non-contemplative naturalist thinks

or rather knows, that there is only one set of rules for reality, one metaphysics: our own. There is no further framework. Attempts to render a problematic situation intelligible by reference to a higher framework (the mystery of the God) is considered ignorant, superstitious, or cowardly. With this perspective, there is no reason to contemplate because we already know all there is to know.²⁷

Decisions are made only by a careful evaluation of the data, not by divine guidance. But if we are honest, we don’t “already know all there is to know” and much of our research

²⁴ Ibid., 13.

²⁵ Johnson and McDonald, *Imagining a Church in the Spirit*, 2.

²⁶ Cobble, *The Church and the Powers*, 3.

²⁷ Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 55-56.

and study, even in the Church, is motivated by an anxious search for the magic formula, missing information, or wise advice that will keep life under control and bring safety and prosperity. Churches heavily influenced by naturalism struggle with spiritual blindness, lack of awareness, and functional atheism. Their prayerless decision making reflects their lack of a sense of the divine presence, weak belief and trust in the Holy Spirit's guidance, and their ongoing attempts to figure-out life by human effort.

Narcissistic Individualism

Narcissistic individualism adds to naturalism's lack of spiritual awareness by focusing on the self. "Narcissism" is "self-love, or sexual gratification obtained by contemplating oneself."²⁸ The *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* says "individualism" is

the view that the single person is the basic unit of political analysis, with social wholes being merely logical constructions, or ways of talking about numbers of such individuals and the relations among them. ... In liberal individualism the individual is the primary possessor of rights, with the activities of the state confined to the protection of those rights. Individualism is often charged with dissociating the 'free' individual from the matrix of social relations and norms that in fact make agency, freedom, and even self-consciousness possible.²⁹

Put together, narcissistic individualism is the "spirit" of self-absorption where one insists, "My heartaches, my headaches, my wounds, my problems, my chronic shortage of money, my mortgage, my tasks, and my worries are real. Other people's lives and the larger community and its concerns are not real."³⁰ Rolheiser considers narcissism a major threat to experiential Christian spirituality for, "Western consciousness today is

²⁸ *Oxford Reference Online*, s. v. "narcissism," *A Dictionary of Psychology*, ed. Andrew M. Colman (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), [http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/ views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t87.e5345](http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t87.e5345) (accessed November 10, 2011).

²⁹ *Oxford Reference Online*, s. v. "individualism," *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Simon Blackburn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, <http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/ views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t98.e1633> (accessed November 10, 2011).

³⁰ Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 29.

excessively narcissistic. Modern man seems incapable of motivation beyond what pleases us. Narcissistic heartaches and obsessions become a filter through which we see reality, reducing reality to a mirror of our own ego and its needs.”³¹ He points out, “It is not surprising that we have trouble believing in the reality of God when we have trouble perceiving any reality at all beyond ourselves.”³² We assume our desires must be what God and others want, and cannot hear dissent. When narcissism and naturalism combine, our world becomes increasingly like C.S. Lewis’ brilliant description of Hell in *The Great Divorce*—God not present, and the inhabitants of Hell moving further and further away from each other because they are quarrelsome, each wanting their own way.³³

Some consider the individualism in our society to be “liberating to the human spirit, leading to greater freedom of expression, creativity, and self-determination.”³⁴ Others, such as Robert Bellah and his co-authors, in their much-talked about book *Habits of the Heart*, express concern that individualism is running rampant in American society:

It seems to us that it is individualism, and not equality, as Tocqueville thought, that has marched inexorably through our history. We are concerned that this individualism may have grown cancerous—that it may be destroying those social integuments that Tocqueville saw as moderating its more destructive potentialities, that it may be threatening the survival of freedom itself.³⁵

For fallen human beings, self-survival and self-interest have always been strong motivators for action. In the past the actions of Americans were tempered by cultural

³¹ Ibid., 60.

³² Ibid., 35-36.

³³ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Pub. Co., 1946), 18-22.

³⁴ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 175.

³⁵ Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swindler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985, 1996), xlii.

traditions, biblical religion, republican ideals, and the needs of others, but traditional community has broken down as technology has advanced. For all of the benefits of our modern communications and transportation systems, these systems have mixed results in promoting strong healthy connections with others. As Staudenmaier has recognized,

These technologies permit me to maintain important friendships across very long distances, even cross-country marriages where spouses live in separate cities and commute on weekends. Consequently, I am much less dependent for my affective life on the people who live within walking distance of where I sleep at night. . . . These patterns mean that I tend to imagine myself as an autonomous entity who must work at, and who has some power to control, connecting with others. Unlike citizens of village-style cultures, my life feels individualistic.³⁶

As personal connection and accountability has diminished, this sense of autonomy has played havoc with our relationships and commitments to others. “Narcissism also reduces awareness by falsely enhancing our perception of ourselves as individuals to the point that we incorrectly perceive ourselves as *independent* when in reality we are radically and organically *interdependent* with others and the world.”³⁷ This has led to significant changes in how we view our involvement with important groups in our lives:

Church, nation, city, even extended family lay much less claim on us than they did on the average citizen of 150 years ago. Compared to them, we do not define ourselves as members in the sense that we readily give these larger communities the right to interrupt our lives and plans, nor do we open our affectivity to them so that we habitually long for the good of “*our church*” or “*our nation*” or “*our town*.” Often, it is only when we see civic troubles impinging on our personal lives that we are aroused to action as part of a special-interest group.³⁸

One’s focus turns in on oneself and “Everything—marriage, family, community, justice, church, morality, service to others, sacrifice—makes sense and has value only insofar as it enhances one’s self. Self-development is pursued with a sense of duty and asceticism

³⁶ Staudenmaier, “To Fall in Love with the World . . .,” 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

that were formerly reserved for religion because, for the yuppie, self-development is salvation, the religious project.”³⁹ Rather than self-identifying as a disciples of Christ and part of the larger community, his “body”, church members see themselves religious consumers, and may reject the basic doctrines and practices of the Christian faith. “Churches may seem ineffective and irrelevant, and the Christian message too restrictive and demeaning. . . . For those who prefer to believe that they are inherently good, that they can control their own destiny, or who place great value on self-esteem, self-fulfillment and the pursuit of pleasure, such restraints seem totally unacceptable.”⁴⁰ Commitment to a faith community is neglected for “the choice to align ourselves with a local church is seen as optional to faithful discipleship. We can have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and follow him faithfully without ever getting involved with other believers” (or even caring about what they need and God wants).⁴¹ Thus, church members strongly affected by narcissistic individualism have difficulty making decisions reflecting God’s will and the good of the community. Voting degenerates into power struggles. Their churches experience a host of problems including disunity, apathy, the manipulation, isolation, and marginalization of some people, and a lack of support for church activities/ministries, as well as bad or self-serving group decisions.

Restless Impatience and Information Overload

We live in an age where we have access to, are bombarded by, and try to manage more information than we can use or know what to do with. We are expected to be

³⁹ Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 31.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth L. Hillstrom, *Testing the Spirits* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 10-11.

⁴¹ Charles J. Conniry, Jr., *Soaring in the Spirit: Rediscovering Mystery in the Christian Life* (London, UK; Colorado Springs, CO; Hyderabad, India: Paternoster, 2007), 141.

technologically savvy, continually keeping up with the explosion of knowledge available. Since that is impossible, we overanalyze and overwork, feeling stressed and anxious. Although we have access to an amazing variety of religious and biblical resources on the internet, unfortunately we often don't have the time or the ability to discern what is valuable and true from the false and worthless. We can contact each other almost immediately and constantly through cell phones, email, twitter, Skype, and social networking sites, both locally and around the world. Our sense of privacy is sacrificed to our anxiety of not being available "24-7." While we may not know our next-door neighbor or fellow church member we can travel relatively quickly anywhere. As we buy household items made in China and struggle to make ends meet, we realize that our country's political and economic situations are tightly interwoven with those of other countries, as is evidenced by the recent recession and European debt crisis.

Most Americans live fast-paced and stress-filled lives. Rolheiser notes,

A 1989 *Time Magazine* cover story entitled "The Rat Race: How America Is Running Itself Ragged" pointed out that time has become the most precious commodity in today's world, that parents have to make appointments to spend time with their own children, that technology has increased the very heartbeat of today's generation, that for many persons the demands of staying on top of their careers take all their time and energy. How much worse things have grown in the ensuing decade! In our world, there is simply no time or energy (or even the capacity) to pray or be contemplative.⁴²

This "rat race" takes a toll on all aspects of our lives, including the spiritual. When our souls are neglected, rather than seeking God to nourish them, we turn to narcissistic addictions and distractions to hide the hunger and dull the pain. Rolheiser says when we are in this driven restless state

⁴² Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 40. Referencing Marguerite Michaels and James Willwerth, "How America Has Run Out of Time," in *Time Magazine* (April 24, 1989): 48-55.

it is no longer possible to be satisfied with being just a human being ... our actions do not issue forth from some free center, but from compulsion. Our lives become consumed with the idea that unless we somehow experience everything, travel everywhere, see everything, and are part of a large number of other people's experience, then we are small and meaningless.⁴³

Congregations do not function well when they are made up of stressed out, overloaded, anxious members trying to squeeze the last little bit of enjoyment out of life, while their relationships fall apart. Many set aside little time to volunteer in church activities (the 20/80% rule) and don't attend congregational meetings unless something controversial is being discussed. Opportunities to carefully deliberately discern God's will for the congregation seem unrealistic and too time-consuming.

A second impact of information overload is the challenge to cope with all of the different and new experiences and insights we are exposed to daily. Kent Ira Groff says, "The Church is not the only place where people go to get their spirituality. (Was it ever?) Yet most denominations once thought they were. Folks take their needs to the self-help bookshelf, the Twelve Step group, or the Internet, especially younger generations. Hindus and Muslims live next door—making churches feel anxious and defensive."⁴⁴ Berger explains how the "pluralization of socially available worlds"⁴⁵ affects religious belief:

It is very, very difficult to be cognitively *entre nous* in modern society, especially in the area of religion. This simple sociological fact, and not some magical inexorability of a scientific world outlook, is at the basis of the religious plausibility crisis. ... Religious affirmations percolate from the level of taken-for-granted certainty to the level of mere belief, opinion, or (a term that eloquently

⁴³ Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 43-44. He says further on 45, "... we rush about our lives refusing to wait for things, refusing to live in any tension, convinced that nobody or nothing has a right to deny us what we want. We see the effect of this impatience in our economics, in our sexual morality, and in our constant tendency to seize, as by right, what is by nature a gift. There is in our culture an inability to wait and, in this, a lack of chastity that is severely debilitating to contemplation."

⁴⁴ Kent Ira Groff, *The Soul of Tomorrow's Church: Weaving Spiritual Practices in Ministry Together* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2000), 32-33.

⁴⁵ Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 44.

expresses what goes on here) “religious preference.” The pluralistic situation not only allows the individual a choice, it forces him to choose. By the same token, it makes religious certainty very hard to come by.⁴⁶

Church members affected by the pressures of societal pluralization as Christendom implodes sometimes react with fear and cultural withdrawal. They forget that Christianity was born and grew in the midst of a very pluralistic culture. Churches with restless impatience and information overload as the norm are anxious to “keep up and get things done,” not taking the necessary time for calm prayerful reflection on their concerns. They tend to equate gathering lots of resources and information with discernment and struggle to have any assurance that they are actually perceiving and doing God’s will.

Pragmatism

The word “pragmatism” “comes from the Greek *pragma*, which means ‘business,’ but also has connotations of efficiency, sensibleness, and practicality.”⁴⁷ It is

a philosophy and a way of life that asserts that the truth of an idea lies in its practical efficacy. What that means is that what is true is what works. The test for truth is not whether an idea corresponds to the way things are, but whether the idea has some concrete utility, practical consequences, or can be used to manipulate the world beneficially. Worth lies in achievement. Things are good if they work, and what works is good. The ideals of pragmatism lie at the very heart of the Western mind, undergird our technological society, are deeply enshrined in our educational systems, and are evident in our impatience with anything (or anybody) that is not practical, useful, and efficient.⁴⁸

Pragmatism has a devastating effect on personal self-image and on how we view others:

We feel good about ourselves only when we are achieving, producing, and contributing in a pragmatic way. We feel good and important when we do things that society values as good and important and we feel useless and unimportant when we do things that society does not value. We hand out admiration and

⁴⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁷ Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, 36.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 36.

respect on the basis of pragmatic achievement more than on the basis of moral virtue or quality of personality. In a pragmatic society doing counts for everything, being counts for nothing.⁴⁹

Our pragmatic culture encourages the neglect of our spiritual lives for “when self-worth depends on achievement, then very few persons are going to spend much time in prayer or contemplation since these are by definition not utilitarian efforts. They are useless in a practical manner, a waste of time. Contemplation and prayer do not accomplish anything, produce anything, or add anything concrete to life.”⁵⁰ It is not surprising, then, that many congregations go “through the motions of being a church but without spiritually transformative power and spiritual urgency.”⁵¹ Johnson and McDonald note,

In too many instances both pastors and members have lost faith in prayer as little more than autosuggestion. The rational views of the Enlightenment and the ensuing religious skepticism have reduced prayer to an exercise in remembering.

Prayer is what pastors and people do when they have run out of options ... Some congregations begin their official meetings with prayer, but not all remember this simple gesture of gratitude and surrender.⁵²

The pressure is to do something “useful,” which usually includes building a bigger, attractive, and more successful church. To do this church leaders have turned to business models, corporate structures, and techniques, such as marketing and strategic planning.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 40.

⁵¹ B. C. Johnson and McDonald, *Imagining a Church in the Spirit*, 3.

⁵² Ibid., 60-61.

⁵³ Meyer, *Whole Life Transformation*, 78-79, says, “The business metaphor that controlled most churches seemed to promote the organization more than the transformation of people. The thinking is that bigger is always better, and larger churches influence people more due to economies of scale and organizational power. ... Regardless of a church’s size these days, this business metaphor shapes congregations to prefer pastors who act more as managers and CEOs of entrepreneurial corporations rather than churches.” Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1998), 48, note, “The church is vulnerable. We are apt to turn organizational tools into works; we think that if we are good enough and smart enough and careful enough, we can maneuver our way into a new future. Some theological homework would have

This pragmatic adoption of business models and mindsets by churches has encouraged several problems. Meyer notes, “Hand in hand with the business model of ministry is the growth of consumer Christianity, which flips the Church’s mission from forming servants for service in the kingdom of God to managing and designing programs that serve consumers of religious goods and services.”⁵⁴ Rather than countering our tendency towards narcissistic individualism, these organizational models actually promote it.⁵⁵

Another concern is the unrealistic expectations placed on pastors and church staffs. Meyer notes that under pressure to grow dynamic large churches many

have been programmed for high stress by the expectations of their congregations to repeat what they see in the megachurches. This robs them of the kind of life they could have. And this is compounded by conferences that extol purpose-driven or seeker-friendly formulas for success that only leave them more driven and disillusioned than before.

Instead of learning to listen for God’s call and unique work in their lives, they try to copy what God has done in successful churches.”⁵⁶

suggested to the church that it does not create its own future; it anticipates it as a gift from God.

Without thinking, the church borrows from the culture. It tends to use leadership and management theory for the purpose of organizing and administering the church. Often the church lags behind the culture by ten to twenty-five years. (It uses management theory long since cast aside by schools of management.)” See also, David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co., 2005).

⁵⁴ Meyer, *Whole Life Transformation*, 89. Cobb, *The Church and the Powers*, x, warns, “Spiritual merchandizing and consumerism can replace discipleship. Christianity thus becomes another commodity to be marketed, packaged, and sold in the marketplace of the world’s values.” L. T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 19-20, comments, “No corporation would attribute the decline in a product’s popularity to the work of the devil. Nor would a corporation (except in some unfortunate cases) try to discern ‘God’s will’ in its struggle to decide whether or not to continue production. These symbols and values are simply not part of the worldview of the corporation, even implicitly. ... There is no consideration given to whether or not the product is good for the buyer, in either the immediate or ultimate sense. This group does not exist to define or maintain legitimate human needs; rather, the profit motive drives the group to create needs where none existed.

⁵⁵ See Stephen Daryl Robison’s critique of this kind of church decision making in his dissertation *God at Our Planning Table: Spiritual Discernment as a Viable Alternative for Church Planning and Programming* (Wesley Theological Seminary, 1989), 1-13.

⁵⁶ Meyer, *Whole Life Transformation*, 87.

Decision making focuses on supporting and promoting the religious institution rather than on discerning and doing God's will and equipping the saints for ministry. Churches influenced by the "spirit" of pragmatism often succumb to the temptation to be self-sufficient and "wise in their own eyes." They use church structures and processes that "work," or are "what we've always done," or what has made other churches successful. Their members are religious consumers and their pastoral staffs and lay leaders are often burnt-out and discouraged. Not everything that "works" is helpful for building biblical community and promoting united action.

Guardianship

The prophets looked forward to the day when all of God's people would know him, be filled with his Spirit, and be able to hear his voice directly (Jer 31:23-34, J1 2:28-29). In spite of the fulfillment of these New Covenant promises, believers seldom appreciate and appropriate this reality. Perhaps we are content to live under the old system of institutional "guardianship."⁵⁷ Walking by the Spirit is challenging, and it is usually easier to have someone else tell us what to do or think. Christians have often allowed their church affairs to be discerned and decided by experts, "shepherds of the flock," and scholars familiar with ecclesiastical rules and regulations, trusting that they would know best what needed to be done.

It is easy to see why this would be the case in societies with limited access to education and information, or if it was believed God no longer spoke directly to his people, or only to those who were especially holy (or powerful). Charles Ringma, points out that in our culture "many institutions operate on the guardianship model. That is, they

⁵⁷ See Charles Ringma's discussion of "guardianship" on 117-223 of *Catch the Wind: the Shape of the Church to Come—and Our Place in It* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1994).

control and determine for people the goods and services that are meant to be good for them. But they don't put real power and responsibility in their hands."⁵⁸ He says further, "The theological agendas of the leadership and organizational realities of the institution predominate rather than the concerns and issues of the people who comprise the Church. In other words, the people of God are frequently peripheral in the very institution that claims to serve them."⁵⁹ Church leaders have taken on the roles of discerner, visionary, C.E.O., and decision maker, and "woe" to the "insubordinate" who challenge this understanding of leadership and use of power.⁶⁰ Dissent is stifled, and sincere people seeking their church's good are wounded, ostracized, and sometimes estranged not only from their particular congregation, but also from the whole Church. Miller warns,

What is clearly not functional as we enter the next century is a religious organizational form that is pyramidal in structure, deriving authority from the top and delivering answers and policies to those at the bottom. This structure may have worked in feudal society, when the serfs were both impoverished and unempowered, but it is highly dysfunctional in the information age. What is called for is a much more democratized structure, giving people access to power at many different levels.⁶¹

Ironically, business theory is now promoting paradigms of organizational structure and teamwork that have similarities to Paul's image of the Church as the body of Christ.⁶²

⁵⁸ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁰ Ringma, *Catch the Wind*, says on 42, "You can always go to your parish priest, pastor, elder, or community leader to express concerns or ideas. But if you do this too frequently, you are soon branded a difficult person or a troublemaker. Or at best you are regarded as someone who wants to run the show. If you take this a step further and mobilize others regarding your concerns and ideas, you are usually seen as someone who is undermining the life of the church and resisting God's appointed leaders. When these types of difficulty occur in the church, the tendency on the part of the leaders is to batten down the hatches and to exert further controls."

⁶¹ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 156. He is drawing Peter Drucker's research.

⁶² See Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 2003.

Unfortunately, the structures and decision-making processes in many churches often don't reflect this fundamental biblical teaching. As MaryKate Morse notes,

Most communities of believers—churches, parachurch or other Christian organizations—do not know how to trust the leading of Christ among us. Part of that is because we do not understand how to discern together his leading. Part of it is because we abdicate leadership responsibility to persons in traditional leadership roles or to persons who take up a lot of space in our meetings and other interactions. ... Perhaps we fear that if everyone has responsibility and everyone has a voice, there will be anarchy and rebellions and divisions popping up like fireworks on the Fourth of July—lots of sparks and gasps of awe, but no cohesive power to move forward in a God-honoring way.⁶³

Churches affected by the “spirit” of guardianship lack “adequate processes for listening, dialogue, reflection, prayer and cooperative strategies that lead to change.”⁶⁴

They tend to operate hierarchically, even with congregational polity. Leaders assume the right to make decisions and exercise power however they want or think best. Rather than equipping members to prayerfully listen and develop a united sense of God's leading, they use their position and influence to achieve their ends (of course for the good of the congregation). Members are passive, unwilling to challenge authority or take risks, and some become religious refugees. These churches are impoverished by the stifling of creativity, genuine dialogue, and the wisdom and insight of the whole Body of Christ.

Mystical Experience and Spirituality

During the last several decades Western, and American culture in particular, has undergone a massive shift in its approach to the supernatural and mystical dimensions of life. Intellectually it has become acceptable to question naturalism and rationalism:

⁶³ MaryKate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership: Power, Space and Influence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 31-32.

⁶⁴ Ringma, *Catch the Wind*, 46.

Secular materialism, which has long been promoted by scholars and scientists in our colleges and universities, is losing its popular appeal. Its insistence that humans are only physical—that they came into being through chance evolutionary forces and that they perish forever when they die—seems too mechanistic, narrow and hopeless. People are not as impressed by such statements as they used to be, for they are aware of the failures of science and technology as well as their successes, and they realize that scientists do not have all the answers. They recognize that the rational, scientific approach has its limits, especially when applied to philosophical or theological issues.⁶⁵

As the cold clarity and experiential limitations of rationalism and naturalism give way there is “a renewed appreciation for the spiritual side of human nature and a growing hunger for spiritually meaningful experiences. This collective yearning stems partly from a legitimate desire to verify that life has meaning and purpose, to know that death is not the end of our existence and to be reassured that we are not alone in this vast universe with our crushing problems.”⁶⁶ Intellectual belief is no longer enough for the seeker.

The “spiritual”, however, is not necessarily to be equated with the “religious.” It often means the “mystical.” Mysticism is defined as: “Belief in union with the divine nature by means of ecstatic contemplation, and belief in the power of spiritual access to ultimate reality, or to domains of knowledge closed off to ordinary thought.”⁶⁷ Charles J. Conniry, Jr. points out, “As many as half of all unchurched Americans identify themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious.’ To those with an emerging twenty-first-century outlook, religion spells *institution*—and institution spells *oppression*, *greed*, and *manipulation*. Organized religion is taken to embody all that was wrong with the modern

⁶⁵ Hillstrom, *Testing the Spirits*, 10.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁷ *Oxford Reference Online*, s. v. “mysticism,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Simon Blackburn Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, [http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/ views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t98.e2108](http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t98.e2108) (accessed November 10, 2011).

world.”⁶⁸ Instead, to be spiritual is to taste the smorgasbord of “spiritual” experiences available. Spiritual experimenters consider

spiritual practices as methods for making contact with a deeper part of themselves, developing spiritual and mental prowess, and inducing emotional highs or unusual experiences rather than as means of making more meaningful contact with God. Many of these seekers are taking an activist approach to spirituality. They want to take charge of their own spiritual destiny and to experience whatever spiritual realities there are at first hand, even if this means that they have to use some very unconventional methods.⁶⁹

This approach meshes well with our culture’s narcissistic individualism. Unfortunately, when traditional religion is rejected, centuries of experience in discerning between practices and experiences that are spiritually good and beneficial and those that are evil, unhelpful, and dangerous is lost. Hillstrom points out there is a, “growing and largely uncritical acceptance of esoteric phenomena that would have probably seemed very questionable to most Westerners just a few decades ago.”⁷⁰ Among these are eastern meditation, non traditional medical/psychological treatments, consulting psychics and fortune-tellers, channeling, mental telepathy, clairvoyance, spiritism, crystals, astrology, horoscopes, altered mental states, out-of-body experiences, and near-death experiences. Church members are also “shedding their rationalized beliefs and exploring the emotional and bodily dimensions of religion.”⁷¹ Miller says in “new paradigm” churches,

⁶⁸ Conniry, *Soaring in the Spirit*, 164, referring to Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Conniry notes on the same page, “Ironically, however, the same people have warm feelings toward religious traditions whose roots go deep into antiquity. They are fascinated by longstanding religious traditions that have managed to weather the storms of the modern period, unsullied by the corrupting influences of modernity’s political imperialism, corporate greed, and religious iconoclasm.”

⁶⁹ Hillstrom, *Testing the Spirits*, 11.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁷¹ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 8. The “new paradigm” churches are Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and Hope Chapel. Miller says, “I had assumed that truth was

Religion is a full-bodied experience that includes all the receptors—all the senses—with the rational mind being only one locus of information about reality. Right-brain activities (typically associated with nonlinear thought, and in this case with the Holy Spirit) are acknowledged as legitimate. . . . New paradigm Christians see no reason why they should exclude visions and ecstatic experiences from the realm of religious knowledge.⁷²

It is not only “new paradigm” Christians that are interested in spiritual exploration and religious experiences, as Hillstrom elaborates:

More conservative Christians are generally confining their search for deeper wisdom and spiritual techniques to the fathers and doctors of the church and the writings of ancient Christian mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux, John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila. Many nominal believers and liberals, however, are side-stepping Christianity altogether, delving eagerly into New Age/New Consciousness teachings, Eastern traditions and paganism in their search for new heights of spiritual experience.⁷³

In churches heavily influenced by mystical spirituality there is often confusion about which supernatural experiences are of God and which are from the unholy trinity, “the world, the flesh, and the devil.” Members are undiscerning as they adopt non-Christian Spiritual practices and teachings, or misunderstand the theological and devotional purposes of Christian practices, and focus narcissistically on personal spirituality.⁷⁴

Church decision making in this setting is difficult as all sorts of religious and supernatural input is offered without appropriate discernment, and factions develop based on spiritual

something that could be captured in a doctrinal or philosophical statement. My exposure to these rapidly growing churches taught me that religion is more than assent to well-formulated beliefs. Indeed, I started to wonder if I had the cart before the horse: if, instead, beliefs emerge out of experience. Perhaps I had not made the transition into our postmodern world: I was still dichotomizing mind and body, identifying religion more with the head than with the broader range of senses that are incorporated in worship.”

⁷² Ibid., 22-23.

⁷³ Hillstrom, *Testing the Spirits*, 12.

⁷⁴ For example see Nancy Reeves, *I'd Say Yes, God if I Knew What You Wanted: Spiritual Discernment* (Kelowna, BC: Northstone Publishing, 2001) which draws on spiritual practices from the Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Sikh, Sufi faiths, and others as well.

experience and “superiority”⁷⁵ Wise communal, historical, and biblical counsel are rejected on the basis of personal experience. Study is dismissed because, “If you were really spiritual, you would just pray and God would tell you what you needed to know.”

A “Better Way” for Congregational Discernment and Decision Making?

The cultural “spirits” of rationalism, naturalism, narcissistic individualism, restless impatience and information overload, pragmatism, guardianship, and mystical experience/spirituality have significantly affected our lives, our churches, and in particular, how we make decisions together. We have seen how congregational decision making can be divisive, rationalistic, prayerless, functionally atheistic, self-serving, rushed, over-or under-informed, pragmatic, spiritually undiscerning, and overly controlled by leadership and institutional concerns. In light of this, we must ask, “Do the ways we communally seek to understand God’s will and make decisions promote or discourage the problems or dysfunctions caused by these cultural influences? Sadly, in many, if not most cases, they exacerbate decision-making difficulties, and lacking

the much-needed service of spiritual discernment, the Church in the modern period was left without the higher order reflection needed to test its practices in the light of both Scripture and the guidance of Christ’s present leadership. In absence of this essential discernment element the followers of Christ have suffered from “soul dissonance” with regard to its nature and purpose.⁷⁶

The question then becomes, “How can we do better? What are the characteristics of a faithful effective decision-making process that includes spiritual discernment? How can a congregation make wise corporate decisions that are biblically sound, Holy Spirit-guided, and inclusive of and honoring to both God and its members? Meyer suggests that countering a church’s dominant paradigm “will require some sober thinking about the

⁷⁵ Consider the divisiveness of the Charismatic movement in some churches.

⁷⁶ Conniry, *Soaring in the Spirit*, 143.

condition of the church, taking it in some new and fresh Spirit-breathed directions. Our old organizational life must be abandoned for a new one.”⁷⁷ This dissertation proposes that a congregational Christian community will make better, God-focused decisions that are faithful to its identity as the “body of Christ” if it uses models of discernment and decision making that include:

- Guidance from Wisdom: insights/teaching/judgments from biblical, traditional, ecclesiastical, and cultural sources.
- Guidance from the Holy Spirit: insights given by Spirit through personal and corporate listening prayer, meditation, and evaluation.
- Guidance from the Community: insights given by the entire congregation or group.

It is my desire that this dissertation will encourage “sober thinking” and promote “Spirit-breathed directions” that lead to improved congregational discernment and decision-making processes that counteract the cultural “spirits” discussed above, bring greater unity to churches, and truly honor Christ.

Understanding Guidance from Wisdom, the Holy Spirit, and the Community

Before discussing different models of discernment and decision making it is important to understand exactly what is meant by “discernment”, “decision making,” “guidance from wisdom,” “guidance from the Holy Spirit,” and “guidance from the community.” “Decision making” is coming to “the final and definite result of examining a question; a conclusion, judgment. ... The making up of one's mind on any point or on a course of action; a resolution, determination.”⁷⁸ Thus, congregational decision making is the process by which a congregation makes a conclusive choice concerning an, issue,

⁷⁷ Meyer, *Whole Life Transformation*, 79.

⁷⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s. v. “decision,” <http://0-www.oed.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/view/Entry/48221?redirectedFrom=Decision#eid116310597> (accessed December 15, 2012).

concern or proposed action.⁷⁹ “Discernment” is usually considered to be a crucial part of that process. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as: “(1a) The act of discerning or perceiving by the intellect; intellectual perception or apprehension, (b) The faculty of discerning; discrimination, judgment; keenness of intellectual perception; penetration, insight, (2) The act of distinguishing; a distinction, (3) Perception by the senses; distinguishing by sight, distinct vision.”⁸⁰ When the Apostle Paul speaks of discernment,

Sometimes he uses cognates of *krino*, which have the connotation of judging. Other times he uses cognates of *dokimazo*, which have the connotation of testing. . . . From the contexts in which he uses such terms, it appears that Paul regards this capacity of judging, testing, or discerning to be a gift of the Holy Spirit that works in and through human intelligence.⁸¹

When we talk of “spiritual” discernment we are speaking of “a way of listening and paying attention to God’s leading.”⁸² The technique and methods used in discernment incorporate natural abilities, but rely on God’s presence and involvement in the process:

⁷⁹ L. T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 109, says, “The key element in decision making as a theological process—that is, as an articulation of the church’s faith in the Living God—is discernment. It is an essential component at every stage. Discernment enables humans to perceive their characteristically ambiguous experience as revelatory and to articulate such experiences in a narrative of faith. Discernment enables others to hear such narratives as the articulation of faith and as having revelatory significance. Discernment enables communities to listen to such gathering narratives for the word of God that they might express. Discernment enables communities, finally, to decide for God.”

⁸⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s. v. “discernment,” <http://0-www.oed.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/view/Entry/53694?redirectedFrom=discernment#eid> (accessed December 15, 2012). *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, s. v. “discernment,” <http://0-www.britannica.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/bps/dictionary?query=discernment> (accessed December 15, 2012), says, “discernment is, “the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure, . . . a power to see what is not evident to the average mind. Discernment, stresses accuracy (as in reading character or motives or appreciating art).”

⁸¹ L. T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 109. On 109-110 he speaks of discernment as “similar to the virtue of prudence (*phronesis*), which the New Testament, like the entire milieu of Hellenistic moral teaching, regards as the capacity to make proper practical decisions (see Rom 12:3; 15:5; 1 Cor 13:11; Phil 2:2-5; 3:15, 19; Col 3:2; Eph 1:8). We might, therefore, define discernment as that habit of faith by which we are properly disposed to hear God’s Word, and properly disposed to respond to that Word in the practical circumstances of our lives.” See also 1 Cor 12:10; 14: 29; 1 Thes 5:19-20.

⁸² Valerie K. Isenhower and Judith Todd, *Listen for God's Leading: A Workbook for Corporate Spiritual Discernment* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2009), 11. Gordon T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer and the Witness of the Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 38-39, says of Ignatian discernment: “Discernment for Ignatius and his followers is a matter of attending to, and

John 14:26 says that “the Advocate [Guide], the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” Therefore, decision making and planning in the Church must be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit opens our hearts and minds to hearing and gives us the wisdom we need to seek God’s vision.⁸³

Congregational (spiritual) discernment is a practice which helps members pay attention to God and listen for his voice through prayer, Scripture study, group discussion, self-examination, recalling his work in the past, and evaluation of pertinent information. It does not necessarily exclude common methods of decision making, but adds to them and goes beyond them to seek God’s presence and will, not just congregational preferences.

D. A. Hubbard defines “wisdom” as “the art of being successful, of forming the correct plan to gain the desired results. Its seat is the heart, the centre of moral and intellectual decision (cf. 1 Kgs 3:9, 12).”⁸⁴ Old Testament synonyms for wisdom (*hokma*) are: “*bina*, ‘understanding’, Jb 39:26; Pr 23:4; *tebuna*, ‘insight’, Ps 136:5; ... *sekel*, ‘prudence’, Pr 12:8; 23:9.”⁸⁵ Raymond Van Leeuwen says, “Biblical wisdom to a large extent has to do with practical knowledge, with a know-how regarding the whole spectrum of human skills and activities, all in tune with the normative patterns and possibilities—and with the concrete givens—of creation.”⁸⁶ The wise person acknowledges the world’s God-created structure and seeks to live in accordance with it,

being conscious of, the activity of God in experience. The purpose of this discernment is that our lives, our choices and our actions would be aligned in substantial measure to the presence and intentions of God.”

⁸³ Isenhower and Todd, *Listen for God’s Leading*, 15-16.

⁸⁴ D. A. Hubbard, s. v. “wisdom,” *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 3, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980), 1650.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1650.

⁸⁶ Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Building God’s House: An Exploration in Wisdom,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, eds. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 205-206.

studying nature, human culture and Scripture (2 Tm 3:14-17). Also, biblical wisdom has an individualistic emphasis for “the centre of interest is the individual with his needs, ambitions and problems; and even when the problems of the relation of the individual to society are discussed it is human society in general rather than the specific community of Israel to which reference is made.”⁸⁷ Thus, wise communal decisions are the result and sum of wise individual decisions.

Human wisdom is limited, however, and with minds darkened by sin we foolishly use it in our attempts at self-sufficient control over the world and others, including God.

Hubbard and F. Derek Kidner tell us while the Old Testament understands folly as

sometimes plain silliness (*e.g.* Prv 10:14; 14:15; 18:13), it is usually culpable: a disdain for God’s truth and discipline (Prv 1:7). Hence even the simple or gullible man (*peti*) is not merely without sense (Prv 7:7ff.) but fatally wayward (Prv 1:32). He must make a moral and spiritual choice, not only a mental effort (Prv 9:1-6, 13-18; Ps 19:7). Likewise the fool ... is typically one who, like Saul, has played the fool (1 Sm 26:21) and closed his mind to God (*e.g.* Ps 94:8ff; Prv 27:22; Je 5:21). The most hardened folly is that of the scoffer (*les*, *e.g.* Prv 1:22; 14:6; 24:9) and of the aggressive unbeliever called the *nabal* (1 Sm 25:25; Ps 14:1; Is 32:5f.).⁸⁸

Fools choose to ignore or defy God and his ways, seeking to live by their own rules as if they have control over their destiny and are not accountable to God. The New Testament continues this theme of personal responsibility for poor ungodly decisions:

In 1 Cor 1:25, 27 Paul takes up the term (*moros*, foolishness) used by unbelievers in their faulty evaluation of God’s purposes. A man’s folly may sometimes lie in his being unable to perceive the issues (*e.g.* Lk 11:40; 1 Cor 15:36, *aphron*), but more likely in the fact that he has made an unworthy choice (*e.g.* Lk 12:20, *aphron*; Rom 1:21, *asynetos*; Gal 3:1, 3, *anoetos*; Mt 7:26, *moros*).⁸⁹

⁸⁷ R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9, Studies in Biblical Theology, no. 45* (Naperville, IL: A. R. Allenson, 1965), 14.

⁸⁸ D. A. Hubbard, and F. D. Kidner, s. v. “folly,” *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 1, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980), 512-513.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 513.

In contrast, wisdom (*sophia*) is, “seldom neutral . . . it is either God-given or God-opposing. If divorced from God’s revelation it is impoverished and unproductive at best (1 Cor 1:17; 2:4; 2 Cor 1:12) and foolish or even devilish at worst (1 Cor 1:19ff; Jas 3:15ff).”⁹⁰ Worldly advice that disdains or ignores God may promise the good life and appear to bring success, but it is ultimately destructive. Following the counsel of Proverbs, the congregation that wishes to love, honor, and serve God, and find abundant life needs to value, seek, and use wisdom (Prv 1-9) in its decision making.

It is one thing to make wise decisions concerning the details of everyday life, it is another to know and do the will of God (or the gods). The ancient world had augurs, soothsayers, astrologers, wizards, and priests trying to “divine” correct courses of action for individuals and their communities.⁹¹ They were held in high esteem for “of all the voices of antiquity, none had more power or authority than those who could speak for God or, in a pagan culture, for the gods.”⁹² While both divination and prophecy were “supernatural” communication they differed in significant ways. Ben Witherington, III, says divination “is a human attempt to obtain an answer from God, presumably at a time when there is no spontaneous revelation from the deity about the matter.”⁹³ Although

⁹⁰ Hubbard, “Wisdom,” 1651.

⁹¹ J. S. Wright, s. v. “divination,” *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 1, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1980), 391: “The usual Heb. word translated divination and ‘diviner’ is the root *qsm*. The root *nhs* is used in Gn 44:5, 15, and elsewhere this is translated ‘enchanter’, ‘enchantment’, ‘use enchantments.’ The root *’nn* is sometimes coupled with the former words, and is translated observe vs. the “word of the Lord” times (RV ‘practise augury’), and twice ‘soothsayings.’”

⁹² Ben Witherington, III, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1999), 8.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

common in the surrounding cultures, divination was generally condemned in the Old Testament (Ex 22:18, Lv 20:6, 27; Dt 18:9-15; 1 Sm 28, Is 47:9-13).⁹⁴ He says further,

Israelites were forbidden to consult necromancers perhaps not merely because of the potential for erroneous information or charlatanism but because Israel was called to a higher and more intimate relationship with God through prophets and intermediaries (e.g., Moses). Seeking after mediums was taken as a clear sign of a spiritual breakdown in that intimate relationship.⁹⁵

Because finite humans cannot probe God's mind and know his will apart from revelation, He spoke directly to his people through prophecy. A prophet "received a revelation from God by dream, vision, or verbal communication. He [she] then declared that revelation as a messenger in the special service of God. What the Lord put in his [her] mouth he [she] spoke."⁹⁶ God's people looked forward to a day in the future when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD" (Is 11:9). Joel prophesied that all believers would prophesy and have dreams and visions (Jl 2:28-32).⁹⁷

Whereas the gift of God's spirit had previously been restricted to chosen leaders like Gideon (Jgs 6:34), the early kings, Saul and David (1 Sm 10:6; 16:13), and the prophet Micah (Mi 3:8), now all God's people will become prophets, and

⁹⁴ Lv 19:26; Dt 18:9-14, 2 Kgs 17:17; 21:6; Is 8:19; 44:25; Jer 14:14; 27:9-10; 29:8-9; Ez 12:21-24; 13:6-7; Mi 3:6-7, 11, Zec 10:2. See J. S. Wright, s. v. "divination", *IBD*, 391. Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 6, asks in this regard, "But what, then, is one to make of the sacred dice or lots, the consultation of Urim and Thummim for either yes or no answers (1 Sm 23:8-13; cf. Ex 28; 39)?"

⁹⁵ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 61. See also J. G. S. S. Thompson and J. S. Wright, s. v. "dreams," *Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 1, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980, 394. Wright concurs, "The Israelites were to reject divination because their God was a god who spoke directly to his people." See Nm 12:6-8; Dt 34: 10.

⁹⁶ Leslie B. Flynn, *19 Gifts of the Spirit: Which Do You Have? Are You Using Them?* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, SP Publications, Inc., 1981), 49.

⁹⁷ David Allan Hubbard, *Joel & Amos: An Introduction & Commentary*, vol. 22b of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 69, says, "In Joel the emphasis is on fellowship with God and communication of his word and ways, as the references to prophecy and vision suggest." This passage is repeatedly used in the New Testament: Mt 24:29; Mk 13:24-25; Lk 21:25; Acts 2:17-21, 39; 21:9; 22:16; Rom 10:13; Ti 3:6; Rv 6:12. Stuart, 260 notes the verbs used in this passage all "describe revelatory functions associated with the fullness of God's Spirit." He adds, "on the 'fullness' of the Spirit as a heightening of obedience and revelatory powers, cf. Dt 34:9; Acts 7:55; 11:24; Eph 8-20."

Moses' wish will be fulfilled. ... *All flesh* is defined as comprehensively as possible: sons and daughters, old people (cf. 1:2, 14; 2: 16) and young men (lit. "choice men," cf. Dt 32:25; Je 31:13), servants and handmaids. No exclusion will be made on the basis of gender, age or social station (cf. Paul's glorious expansion of this openness in Gal 3:28). ... superficial distinctions are set aside and even outcasts become core members of God's new fellowship (Ez 39:29).⁹⁸

The New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (31:23-34) would

involve the placing of God's law in, or the inscribing of God's law on, human hearts. ... The result of this process of changing the manner in which, and the degree to which, God's people will know God is that all of God's people, without regard to social status or standing or educational background, will know God intimately and He will truly be their God. This, in effect, would put priests, prophets, diviners, teachers, and other mediators out of business.⁹⁹

The fulfillment of these promises on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) is the basis for

the New Testament's emphasis on believers living by the Spirit. As Gordon Fee notes, "for Paul the Spirit, as an experienced and living reality, was the absolutely crucial matter for Christian life, from beginning to end"¹⁰⁰ Paul urged believers to "walk by the Spirit," be "led by the Spirit," and "keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal 5:16, 18, 25). Rather than insight from the Spirit diminishing with the coming of the New Covenant, it increased with the pouring out of spiritual gifts of prophecy, knowledge, wisdom, discernment, etc. on God's people (1 Cor 12-14; 4:7-16). As part of Christ's eschatological triumph over the "dominion of darkness" (Col 1:13) these gifts were given to aid and equip believers for service, as they grew in maturity and unity (Eph 4:7-13, Col 1:27-28) until his

⁹⁸ Hubbard, *Joel & Amos*, 70. See Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, vol. 31, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN; Dallas, TX; Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Beijing: Word Inc., Thomas Nelson, 1987), 260-261: "all of God's people will have all they need of God's Spirit. ... in the blessing of the Spirit's outpouring, no societal restrictions being able to limit the power of God to give himself to his people."

⁹⁹ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 140. He says further, "It needs also to be kept in view that by heart the author means the control center of the human personality—the seat of thought, will, and emotions. He is, then, not talking just about an inward experience of God, although that is part of the matter, but also about an actual inward knowledge of God and God's will, motivating the human will to respond accordingly." See Is 54:13; Jer 9:23-24; 24:4-7; Ez 28: 25-26; 34:30; Jl 3:17; Zep 3:9-13.

¹⁰⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 1.

return.¹⁰¹ Thus, the guidance of the Holy Spirit in congregational decision making is God's direct specific communication to his people through the exercising of gifts the Spirit has given them. It flows out of the activity of the Spirit in believers' lives and enables them "to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2: 10; Zec 4:6; Jn 14:12-17; 15:26). Jim Cymbala comments, "The living Spirit of God can give us direction at critical moments. He can indicate to us what to say, what not to say, and how to react to the onrush of satanic schemes. He gives us the mind of Christ and spiritual clarity regarding what we are really up against. He imparts wisdom and discernment that no school can teach."¹⁰²

While gifts are given individually, they operate communally:

God's plan ("that now, through the Church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known") is to be realized, at least in part, through the Church's doing those works "which God prepared in advance." ... It is to be accomplished "through the Church," not as so many isolated individuals, but precisely as "a new kind of community leading a radically new kind of life."¹⁰³

This new kind of community is rooted in humanity's creation in God's image (Gn 1:26-27) for the One whose image we reflect is "not a solitary God. The living God is not an

¹⁰¹ See Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 893, who in response to questions about Paul's expectations of the *charismata* ceasing after his lifetime says, "This particular "answer" to the issue is raised not on the basis of reading the biblical text, but from the greater concern as to their "legitimacy" today. But this is a hermeneutical question, pure and simple, and one that Paul could not have understood. His answer is plain: 'Of course they will continue as long as we await the final consummation.'" See also Leslie B. Flynn, *19 Gifts of the Spirit: Which Do You Have? Are You Using Them?* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, SP Publications, Inc., 1981), 20. See also Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 76, "The New Testament gives clear teachings regarding spiritual gifts and states emphatically that the exercise of such gifts is part of the normal life of the Christian community (1 Cor 12-14)."

¹⁰² Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Power: Experiencing the Vast Resources of the Spirit of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 140.

¹⁰³ Snyder, *The Community of the King*, 70-71, quoting John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 63.

isolated God. From all eternity the living God has lived in relationship—indeed, has lived as relationship.”¹⁰⁴ Darrell W. Johnson says:

At the center of the universe is a community. It is out of that relationship that you and I were created and redeemed. And it is for that relationship that you and I were created and redeemed! And it turns out that there is a three-fold-ness to that relationship. It turns out that the community is a Trinity. The center of reality is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁵

Johnson says that human relationships mirror this “‘*us-ness*’ of God.”

God does not exist alone; and neither do we who are created in God’s image. Thus God says of Adam in the garden, “it is not good for the man to be alone” (Gn 2:18). Why? Because Adam will be lonely, yes. But more importantly because “Adam alone” is not Adam in the image of God. God is not a solitary God. Adam does not reflect who God is until Adam shares life with Eve.¹⁰⁶

We were made to be in relationships with each other and God. Stanley J. Grenz notes, “This primal community of man and woman then became expansive. It produced the offspring that arise from the sexual union of husband and wife and eventually gave rise to the development of societies.¹⁰⁷ As those societies grew they developed organizational structures to facilitate interactions among members and the accomplishment of tasks. In and of themselves these are not bad, for as Christopher J. H. Wright notes, “the proper and harmonious ordering of relationships between individuals and communities, locally and internationally, is part of human accountability to God as creator of all. The political

¹⁰⁴ Darrell W. Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 61. See 21-31 for biblical evidence for the Trinity.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 37. See also 73-74, and Gal 4:3-6; 1 Jn 1:3.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 52. He is referring to what is known as the “social” analogy of the Trinity. Along the same lines, Paul K. Jewett in *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 46, says, “Man’s existence in the fellowship of male and female is the mode of his existence in the image of God. . . . In the Genesis narrative it is not declared expressly that God’s creating man in his image means he created him male and female. Yet the latter is brought into such close conjunction with the former as to imply the most intimate relation between Man’s existence in the image of God and his fellowship as male and female.”

¹⁰⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co., 1996), 79. See Gn 1:28.

task of maintaining a morally acceptable social order is a human duty under God.”¹⁰⁸

Unfortunately, due to the Fall human beings are unable and unwilling to live in loving fellowship, and our societies reflect relational dysfunction rather than the Trinity.¹⁰⁹

Thankfully, God was unwilling to give up his intentions for human community and has been at work throughout history orchestrating the

calling and creation of a people for his own possession, a new, redeemed humanity with whom He can dwell in his new, redeemed creation. . . . Their reason for existence is to bear witness to the kind of social relationship between persons that God desires and, in the eschatological vision, will ultimately create in perfection, under the headship of Christ and through the reconciling power of his cross.¹¹⁰

One of the Apostle Paul’s most influential metaphors for God’s “new, redeemed humanity,” the Church, is the “Body of Christ” (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 10:16-17; 11:29; 12:12-27; Col 1:18; 3:15; Eph 1:23; 2:16; 4:3-16; 5:23). In contrast to a common view of the Church as a collection of individuals who gather to do “spiritual things” and lobby for and vote on their preferred courses of actions or a “religious corporation employing

¹⁰⁸ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 213. The Apostle Paul commends the Colossians for their orderliness (Col 2:5) and warns the Corinthians that their chaotic worship is not good for “God is not a God of disorder, but of peace” (1 Cor 14:33). God himself has created “thrones,” “powers,” “rulers,” and “authorities” (Col 1:16).

¹⁰⁹ See D. Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity*, 52-53. He notes, “It is because we are created in the image of the Trinity that loneliness is so crushing, that broken relationships are so debilitating, that death is so painful. Lack or loss of relationship violates our essential nature, created to reflect the relational essence of God.” He says further, “That is why Jesus emphasized “righteousness” so much. Righteousness simply means “right relationship.” He came to reconcile us to the Father, and he came to reconcile us to each other and to ourselves. Nothing grieves the Triune God more than people who will not work at relationships.”

¹¹⁰ C. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 24. Grenz, *Created for Community*, 79, comments, “What began in the Garden of Eden finds its completion at the end of history. The Bible envisions a day when God’s will for creation will come to completion. One day God will bring to pass a human society in which God’s children enjoy perfect fellowship with each other, the created world, and the Creator (Rv 22:1-4).”

clergy to work, and inviting laity to come along”¹¹¹ the Church is “more than a human organization; it is a living organism. It is a body whose Head is Christ and whose members are individual Christians. Indeed it is a supernatural body for, unlike natural organisms, it is not subject to death. Its Head, Christ, is alive for evermore (Rev 1:18), and its members too through their faith in the Head will never die (Jn 11:26).”¹¹² All believers are “baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor 12:13), given gifts (1 Cor 12:7; Eph 4:7), and united in a common experience of God’s grace.¹¹³

They have begun to know God as promised in Jeremiah 32:34 (Rom 8:14-17), although that knowledge remains imperfect until God’s Kingdom fully comes (1 Cor 13:12). All believers have access to “the mind of Christ” (Rom 15:5; 1 Cor 2:16; Phil 2:5) and the Spirit can speak through all. Therefore all can and should contribute, not just those with natural ability and wisdom (although these too are gifts from God) or designated leadership positions. We “find our true identity only as we participate together with others in the community of the followers of Christ. In so doing, we bring honor to our Creator by reflecting the very character of the Triune God.”¹¹⁴ As all members humbly live by the Spirit and cooperatively share with each other their various gifts, abilities, insights, and experiences, unity is promoted, spirituality is tested, and communally the will of Christ is discerned, decided upon, and done.

¹¹¹ Donald Bridge and David Phypers, *Spiritual Gifts and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 149.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹³ See James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975), 265. He says, “To put it another way, the church consists of *koinonia* (sharing) in both its passive and active senses—sharing in the sense of the shared experience of grace which brings different individuals together into community in the first place, and sharing in the sense of each contributing the different charismata to the common life of worship and service.”

¹¹⁴ Grenz, *Created for Community*, 80.

SECTION TWO: OTHER MODELS OF CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT AND DECISION MAKING

Throughout biblical and Church history congregation leaders and members have sought to make decisions that honored God and accomplished his will. The processes and sources of guidance used have sometimes been similar and sometimes very different. Most congregations use one or two of the components just discussed above (guidance from wisdom, the Holy Spirit, and the community), but it is rare for a church to use all three simultaneously. Before exploring new models it is helpful to understand how God's people in the past have sought to discern his will and make group decisions. This section explores six models that use the elements of wisdom, the insight of the Holy Spirit, and member input either singly or in combination for decision-making (see Figure 1). While most churches seek at least a little guidance from each element, for the sake of clarity, it is assumed that at least one or two are dominant, controlling how a congregation makes decisions. Examples from the Bible and Church history will demonstrate some strengths and weaknesses of the six models, with the understanding that even within a particular denomination there may be much diversity about how decisions are actually made.

Guidance from Wisdom (Tradition, Bible, Natural Wisdom)

The "guidance from wisdom model" emphasizes the insights obtained through careful study of various sources of wisdom and knowledge: natural wisdom, tradition, the Bible and theology.¹ Luke Timothy Johnson emphasizes, "We must come to grips with the legitimate and necessary connections between the use of Scripture in theology, the

¹ In Christian literature on decision making this model is often referred to as the "way of wisdom" approach. See Dennis J. Horton, "Discerning Spiritual Discernment: Assessing Current Approaches for Understanding God's Will" *Journal of Youth Ministry* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 7-31. *ATLA Religion*

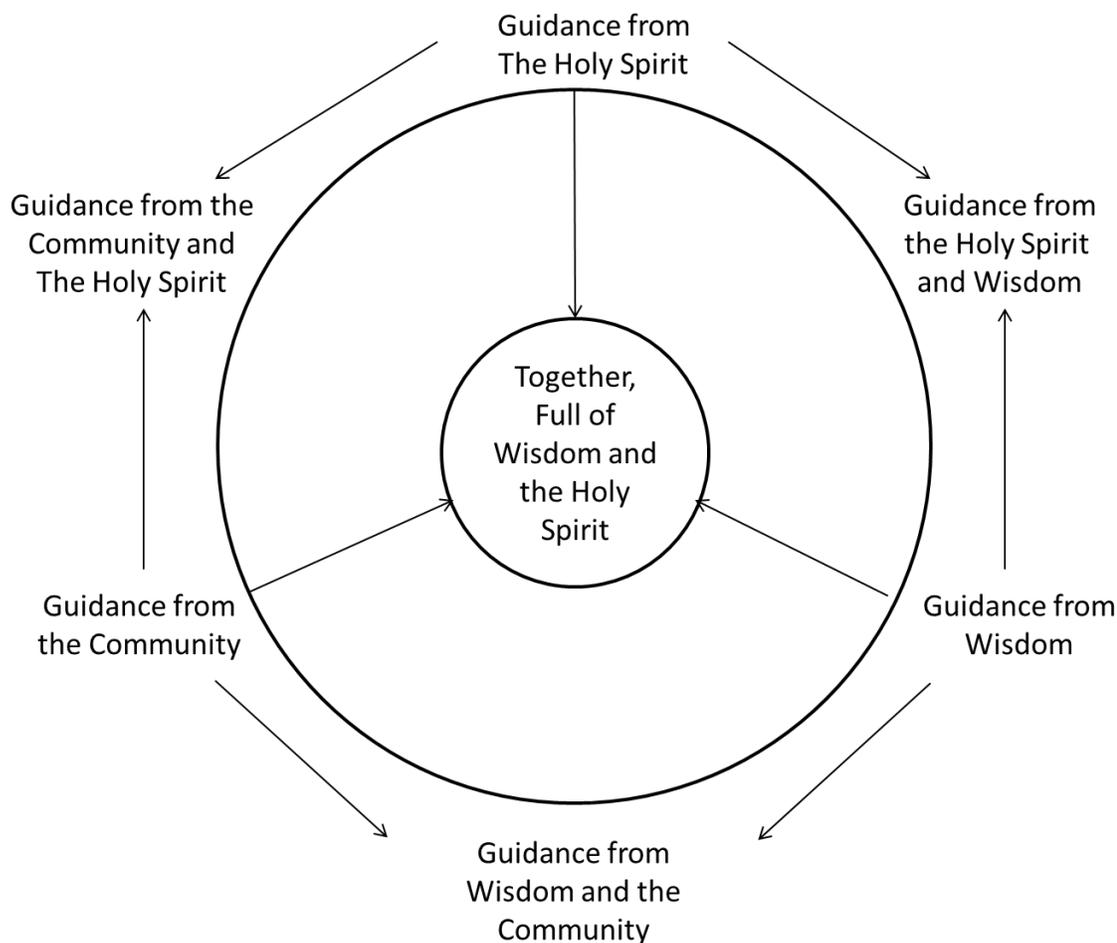


Figure 1. Models of Congregational Discernment and Decision Making.

place of theology in the Church, and the contribution made by both to that process by which the Church discerns and decides its identity in the present for the future.”² Helpful general principles for decision making are gained through education, practical experience

Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed November 24, 2009). He says, on 9, this approach, “advocates a decision-making process that does not look for detailed unmediated direction from God. Rather, Christians should rely extensively on their God-given reasoning abilities, wise counsel, and a dear assessment of their strengths, talents, and abilities. Though Friesen identifies only one wisdom approach, two distinct variations exist within this larger school of thought. One group, the one that Friesen himself advocates, emphasizes the role of the Bible as the primary wisdom guidebook. The other group emphasizes more of a pragmatic Christian wisdom in which the Bible is understood as one of the secondary factors of the spiritual discernment process.” This approach is often advocated by those who have a “cessationist” theology of the work of the Holy Spirit.

² L. T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 10.

and reason.³ This model depicts the Church as those who choose to follow God's wise law, recorded in nature and Scripture, and embodied by tradition. Leaders are teachers, preachers, exhorters, coaches, problem-solvers, disciplinarians, and executives, deriving authority from their skills, wisdom, expertise, and knowledge. They are set apart from member students/disciples, who listen, learn, and carry out their plans. Sunday School and other educational opportunities augment worship service teaching. Decisions are often made by the pastor, since he/she is assumed to be the wisest and best trained.

The "guidance from wisdom" model has several strengths. Following the Bible it emphasizes acquiring wisdom through education and experience (Prv 1-9). It gives clear general guidance for discerning between the good/righteous life and the evil/foolish one. It provides great stability due to its reliance on tradition, principles, and Biblical teaching, and excels in discerning false teaching and practice. It uses practical insights and skills from business to help congregations be efficient, effective, and successful.

This model also has many weaknesses. Because it lacks contemporary guidance from the Holy Spirit it can be static, legalistic, inflexible, and unable to give specific insight. The Bible is seen as a "rule book" of moral principles rather than the record of God's interactions with humanity. This model can also easily succumb to rationalism, naturalism, and pragmatism if the emphasis is on what "works" rather than what is right, leading to conflicts between Scripture's teachings and the "wisdom" of popular culture. Although the Spirit's involvement in decision making may be affirmed theologically, in practice it is not expected, due either to "cessationist" belief that the supernatural activity of the Spirit ceased after the establishment of the Early Church, or naturalistic unbelief.

³ Margaret Benefiel, *Soul at Work: Spiritual Leadership in Organizations* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2005) 56, observes, "Too often decisions are short-circuited because leaders fail to ask what information is needed, or they fail to gather all the necessary information."

“Guardianship” is common because this model grants authority to the aged and theoretically most learned, while input from the young and less-educated is restricted or underappreciated. It can feed a leader’s narcissistic ego, promote an attitude of self-sufficiency, and lead to a lack of accountability for the “wise one” if he/she is seen as above question. It can also lead to great anxiety as the leader recognizes his/her own limitations and tries to handle complex situations and information overload by seeking to increase in wisdom and knowledge, searching for quick “magic formulas” to deal with problems.

This model of decision making has ancient roots. In the Old Testament Solomon, and other kings, gathered Israelite and foreign courtiers around them who could give wise advice. Consistent with the ethos of international (pagan) wisdom, these royal court sages

were convinced that statesmanship could not be conducted in terms of the prophetic definition of “faith in Yahweh.” They probably drew a distinction between their private lives or their membership of Yahweh’s cultus and the public offices which they held. They were responsible for the safety and well-being of their country and were persuaded that they had to exercise a kind of political judgment which could not be reconciled with a prophetic, religious faith, or with an assumed undisputed sway of moral values.⁴

Though these sages thought of themselves as faithful Israelites, their decision making brought them into conflict with prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah who had a different understanding of what it meant to wisely follow YHWH. D.A. Hubbard notes,

Pagan wisdom, though it, too, may be religious, has no anchor in the covenant-God and, therefore, is doomed to failure, as the prophets frequently point out (Is 19:11ff; Ez 28:2ff; Ob 8). When secularism, materialism and disdain of the covenant-ideals squeezed the fear of God out of Israel’s wisdom, it became practical atheism, as vapid as its pagan counterpart, and drew Isaiah’s fire: Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes (5:21; cf. 29:14; Jer 18:18).⁵

⁴ William McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1965, 1983), 10-11.

⁵ Hubbard, s. v. “wisdom”, *IBD*, 1650.

Prophetic intervention in politics was rarely appreciated, as shown by King Ahaz's reaction to Isaiah's counsel not to make alliances against Israel and Syria (Is 7; 2 Kgs 16):

Ahaz is faced with the threat of invasion and so the interview takes place at a moment when the safety of the Judaeon state hangs in the balance and the king is confronted with a decision of the greatest delicacy and gravity. Yet it is just here—in this area of crucial political decision—that the prophet intervenes and tenders his advice. The prophet, as Yahweh's spokesman, cannot avoid interfering in affairs of state and seeking to influence the policies of the king and his high political advisers, because the most important things which he has to say deal with just those matters.⁶

Ahaz saw Isaiah as meddling, for he was “entering what the statesman believes to be his preserve and is challenging the authority and validity of well-trying and universally recognized crafts of political negotiation and diplomacy.”⁷ William McKane observes,

What Ahaz refused to do was just to abandon the well-charted routes of political negotiation and in this he would certainly have the backing of his professional advisers. Was he to scrap the ways of thinking and the attitudes which were universally current in diplomatic exchanges and political bargaining and to base the security of Judah on trust in Yahweh? We should not underestimate the revolutionary character of this demand nor wonder that the statesmen boggled at it and were moved to consternation and anger when it was formulated by a prophet of Yahweh.⁸

Rejecting God's kingship (1 Sm 8), Judah's kings sought to rule with international wisdom as they negotiated and made war. They were not unlike the leaders of many churches and Christian organizations who view themselves as primarily business people. While having personal faith, they believe that they need to run things according to “best business-practices” and are frustrated by those who, like the prophets, challenge them to seek another more “Spirit-filled” way. Ruefully reflecting on his experience with pastoral leadership and prayer, Glen McDonald comments,

⁶ McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men*, 114.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Historically, our corporate prayer muscles were most atrophied at the beginning of elders meetings. Faced with another three-hour siege of agenda items, I figured that these bright spiritual leaders would want to dive right in to business. So that's the behavior I modeled. Our time of opening prayer rarely exceeded the length of the treasurer's report stating our current cash position.⁹

God was not expected to intervene and insert his guidance into church business.

Guidance from the Holy Spirit

Unlike the previous model of decision making this one emphasizes the guidance of the Spirit.¹⁰ It sees the Church as the gathering of those called, gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit. At this model's most extreme the "Spirit" dictates the decisions of individuals and communities, with compliance expected. Authority for decision making comes from the belief that God's will is revealed to the congregation through prophecy, words of wisdom and knowledge, or other forms of supernatural guidance. Leaders are chosen on the basis of their perceived "anointing" by the Holy Spirit and charismatic gifts. Congregation members are to follow the personal "leading" of the Spirit, "test the spirits," and trust the guidance given to their leaders. Questions that affect the

⁹ Glen McDonald, in Johnson and McDonald, *Imagining a Church in the Spirit*, 71.

¹⁰ Following Gary Friesen's *Decision Making and the Will of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 2004), Dennis J. Horton, "Discerning Spiritual Discernment: Assessing Current Approaches for Understanding God's Will." *Journal of Youth Ministry* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2009), 8-9, says, "The 'bulls-eye' approach (which Friesen also refers to as the 'Traditional View'), theorizes that God has a perfect detailed plan for all individuals and seeks to reveal that plan to them. ... This school of thought has also been described as the 'blueprint' or 'dot' approach. Despite the various appellations, the objective for this approach remains the same: discover God's detailed plan and then follow it. While God may permit Christians to stray from the 'perfect' plan for their lives, they are not able to stray beyond the so-called 'permissive' will of God. The goal, however, is for Christians to hit the bulls-eye of God's will or plan for their lives by making the right decisions that are gradually revealed to them by God. To determine the 'right' choice between seemingly good options, these Christians pray for specific guidance or answers from God. In so doing, a central part of their prayer life functions much like a spiritual GPS device. Confirmation of the correct choice may come intuitively, sometimes described as an 'inner peace' granted by the Holy Spirit. At other times, the answer may be confirmed through an external sign or perhaps a combination of the two. Those belonging to this school of thought tend to be more open to unmediated divine intervention or direction. Advocates of the bulls-eye approach often prescribe a specific set of decision-making steps or guidelines which can become a type of formula for finding God's perfect will for their lives."

congregation can be brought to specially called prayer meetings where the Spirit's voice is sought. "Leadings" can also come during private prayer and times of open prayer and prophecy in worship services. Day-to-day decisions are often either "discerned to death" or handled in a pragmatic manner with the assumption that no guidance is needed.

The strengths of the "guidance from the Holy Spirit" model are its conviction of the reality of the supernatural world, its affirmation of the experiential (countering rationalism), and its openness to divine leading. It encourages dependence and waiting on God which counters naturalism, pragmatism and restless impatience. It affirms God's ability and willingness to give the needed insight for a particular situation, taking seriously the promises of Jeremiah 31:31-34, Joel 2:28-29 and John 14:25-26;16:12-15 that God would pour out his Holy Spirit on all his people, young, old, men, women, slave free, Jew and Gentile, and that they would intimately know Him and his will. This lessens the pressure on leaders to learn and know everything, for all can hear from God.

Its weaknesses however, are many. It does not value wisdom and the insight that can be gained through education, theology, tradition, and at times, even Scripture. The "voice of the Spirit" can be confused with other voices (one's own thoughts and preferences, the demonic, pressure from others), and an unwillingness or inability to "test the spirits" (1 Jn 4:1-3) can lead to poor or disastrous decision making.¹¹ There can be a lack of personal and communal responsibility for decisions because, "We were just doing what God told us to do." Individualism can run rampant as "anointed" ones compete with

¹¹ Horton, "Discerning Spiritual Discernment," 27, notes, "Strong advocates of the biblical wisdom approach often speak disparagingly about the ones who depend on the Holy Spirit for guidance. Stuart W. Scott, for example, refers to intuitive discernment as being inferior due to its subjectivity. He naively refers to his the biblical wisdom approach as objective and thereby preferable to other methods. Because 'intrinsic' approaches, according to Scott, depend on personal experience, 'anything goes, inconsistency is tolerated, and confusion often results' ([*A Study of Decision Making God's Way*, Doctoral dissertation, Covenant Theological Seminary,] 1996, 33). At one point, Scott even discourages the use of prayer as a means of guidance due to its potential for subjectivity (1996, 82)."

each other for leadership in the congregation. Leaders can view themselves as the guardians of those in the congregation who have not been as richly gifted by the Spirit. Congregants can also idolize charismatic leaders and give them too much authority in individual and congregational life, resulting in cult-like structures and behavior (mystical spirituality run amuck). Commonly there is an anti-institutional bent and a dislike of tradition, so congregations operate independently or in loose associations.

The church in Corinth serves as an example for some problems with this model of decision making. Paul rejoiced they had been “enriched in every way” and “do not lack any spiritual gift” (1 Cor 1:5-8). Regrettably, however, factions had developed between the followers of various teachers (1 Cor 1:10-17; 3:1-4:21) and there were problems with immorality (1 Cor 5:1-13, 6:12-7:40), lawsuits (1 Cor 6:1-11), possible idol worship (1 Cor 8:1-13), chaos in worship services, and confusion about spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40), among other things. Paul challenged their fascination with worldly spirituality, advised them on worship structure, and encouraged them to follow the way of love (1 Cor 13:1-14:1), seeking God’s wisdom and ways (1 Cor 1:17-32).

Some Pentecostal churches struggle with similar issues. Church members are drawn together because of experiences with the Spirit being poured into their lives.¹² Discussing the Assemblies of God, William Menzies comments: “Because the AG is strongly experientially oriented, its membership and leadership have not generally been overly concerned about the niceties of theological distinctions.”¹³ Menzies says further,

¹² See William W. Menzies, “The Challenge of Organization and Spirit in the Implementation of Theology in the Assemblies of God,” in *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times*, David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 97.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 99.

Pentecostal groups that formed denominations, such as the Assemblies of God (AG), borrowed nearly everything from other Christian bodies, such as church polity and the full panoply of fundamentalist theology, including the Scofieldian dispensational system of hermeneutics. That fundamentalist dispensationalism was inherently anti-Pentecostal was no problem for AG scholars like Frank M. Boyd and Ralph M. Riggs. They gave Scofieldian premillennialism a “Pentecostal baptism.” For them, the hiatus of the Church Age—the parenthesis between dispensations—instead of being shorn of the possibility of gifts of the Spirit (as the fundamentalists taught) became the age of the Spirit!¹⁴

This casual and eclectic treatment of theology is reflected in the fact that

Pentecostal Christians also tend to be anticreedal, believing that “knowing” comes from a right relationship with God rather than through reason or even through the five senses. Theirs is a God who can and often does defy the laws of nature with the miraculous and unexplainable. Without doubt the Bible holds an important place in their worldview, but for many it is a kind of catalyst and litmus test for the authenticity of personal and corporate experience rather than a manual of rigid doctrine and practices.¹⁵

Historically there has been a tendency for some charismatics to discard Scripture’s teachings in favor of new “revelation.” Stephen Parker refers to an example of some who

were caught up in new revelations of “soul marriage” (defined as taking sexual urges to be the leadings of the Holy Spirit). These revelations led to multiple divorces among the participants, including eventually the divorce by the partners of the newly formed soul marriage. Conn (1955), an early Pentecostal historian, has documented the divisiveness and destructiveness of early charismatic excesses among Pentecostals.¹⁶

Situations such as this have led some Pentecostal pastors to downplay the place of charismatic experiences in congregational settings. Margaret M. Poloma warns,

Opting for set programs, well-timed services, and a high level of professionalism, these pastors are often openly critical of emotionalism in services. The dilemma is further jeopardized by the fact that some very successful Assemblies of God

¹⁴ Ibid., 98.

¹⁵ Margaret M. Poloma, “Charisma and Structure in the Assemblies of God,” in *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times*, David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 51.

¹⁶ Stephen E. Parker, *Led by the Spirit: Toward a Practical Theology of Pentecostal Discernment and Decision Making* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1996), 33.

congregations have exchanged charisma for institutional techniques to promote church growth.¹⁷

Ironically, while seeking to avoid the anti-supernatural trap of naturalistic wisdom, in their desire for “success,” and their neglect of Biblical and theological wisdom, some Pentecostal church leaders have perhaps unwittingly adopted the ways of the world.

Guidance from the Community

The “guidance from the community” model encourages the participation of all members in congregational decision making. Luke Timothy Johnson points out, “groups must make decisions for the body as a whole. No matter how small or large the group, whether it be family, club, school, city, state, or nation; as soon as the pronoun is ‘we’ rather than ‘I’, a group’s decision-making mechanisms are invoked.”¹⁸ This model often uses British parliamentary or American democratic systems, rooted in the governmental models of ancient Greece, the Roman Republic, and the Israelite popular assembly.¹⁹ It commonly relies on *Robert’s Rules of Order* to guide its meetings’ process. It also may use consensus practices instead of voting.²⁰ Decision making authority derives from the

¹⁷ Margaret M. Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 206. She says on 209, “Waiting quietly and patiently for the leading of God is not readily compatible with the contemporary American culture, where instant lottery winners are heroes and fast-food chains a main export. Worldly models of growth and success have subtly made inroads in this denomination that once sought to be separate from the world.”

¹⁸ L.T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 14.

¹⁹ See John Hasling, *Group Discussion and Decision Making* (New York: Crowell, 1975), 23-25.

²⁰ Helpful books on building consensus are: Michel, Avery, *Building United Judgment: A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making* (Madison, WI: Center for Conflict Resolution, 1981); Larry Dressler, *Consensus Through Conversation: How to Achieve High-Commitment Decisions* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006); Steven Saint and James Lawson, *Rules for Reaching Consensus: A Modern Approach to Decision Making* (Amsterdam; San Diego, CA: Pfeiffer & Company, 1994); Monteze Snyder, Cheryl Gibbs, Susan A. Hillmann, Trayce N. Peterson, Joanna Schofield, and George H. Watson, *Building Consensus: Conflict and Unity* (Richmond, IN: Earlham Press, 2001); David Straus, *How to Make Collaboration Work: Powerful Ways to Build Consensus, Solve Problems, and Make Decisions* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002); Lawrence Susskind and Jeffrey L. Cruikshank, *Breaking Robert’s Rules:*

“will of the people” (or more accurately the will of the majority voting), or the achievement of consensus. The Church is viewed as believing individuals who come together for encouragement and support in the pursuit of mutually decided-upon goals. Leaders are initiators, facilitators, organizers and guides of the process. They may take sides, promote debate and negotiate between conflicting parties to reach a decision, but it is up to the members to own and finalize decisions through their vote or consensus.

The strengths of this model are its affirmation of the equality of all members and the opportunity for them to participate and take responsibility for decisions made at a variety of levels, which increases commitment to the group.²¹ It also values the diversity of opinions, insights, and perspectives of members and provides for congregational discussion and debate, which discourages “guardianship” of the congregation. Its main weakness is that the will of God can be neglected or undetermined, due to its focus on “the will of the people”. With little input from wisdom sources decision making can deteriorate into mob rule, and a sharing of ignorance and prejudice with conflicts developing between pastoral biblical teaching and popular consensus. Voters can be manipulated and misinformed to gain voting blocs and the pressure to conform to the

The New Way to Run Your Meeting, Build Consensus, and Get Results (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Lawrence Susskind, Sarah McKernan, and Jennifer Thomas-Larmer, *The Consensus Building Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to Reaching Agreement* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999).

²¹ See Charles Conrad, "Identity, Structure and Communicative Action in Church Decision Making," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 27, no. 3 (1988): 345-62. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed August 22, 2012). On 346 he says, “It appears that members' participation in decision making episodes, more so than their participation in generalized activities sponsored by the church, generates high levels of satisfaction and psychological commitment (Harrison, 1975; Hougland, Shepard & Wood, 1979; Hougland & Wood, 1980, 1982). Second, unlike non-religious voluntary organizations in which both the level of perceived influence over decisions and the distribution of perceived influence throughout the hierarchy of the organization influence morale and satisfaction (Tannenbaum, 1968), only the former factor seems to be salient in religious organizations (Hougland & Wood, 1980, 1982). Third, participation increases commitment by making alternative social ties less available and/or less attractive (Harrison, 1975).”

majority can be tremendous.²² Voting assumes that there will be conflicting goals and points of view, and that the losers in a vote have to bend to the will of the majority, which can promote disunity due to frustrations about losing, not being heard, and the inability to resolve differences. If a consensus process is used, a joint decision may be reached through negotiation with each party giving up a little. In either case there is no certainty that God's will has been discerned instead of just the collective desires of the people.

Ramsay MacMullen, in his book *Voting about God in Early Church Councils*, defines *kratos*, or Roman political power as “a claim on compliance by or upon those in public office.”²³ The Roman *demos* (people) asserted their *kratos* by massing in public places where important officials were in attendance and shouting or protesting, “behaving just like a political assembly and getting what they wanted. Lung power was people power, however informal it all appears.”²⁴ MacMullen explains the conventions:

²² Barry Morley in *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging the Sense of the Meeting*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet no. 307. (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1993), 6, says, “Because everyone has given up something to attain consensus commitment to the conclusion is often shallow. In one way or another we make decisions by going along. This is the weakness of consensus and a reason it frequently breaks down. ... I can give examples of monthly meetings which nearly tore themselves apart by forcing consensus rather than reaching the sense of the meeting. Arms get twisted, individuals lobbied, and telephone campaigns mounted. I know of meetings from which members withdrew because of the pressure. I know of meetings which suffer extended residual distress.” Elton Trueblood, in “The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions,” in *Beyond Dilemmas: Quakers Look at Life*, ed. Sceva Bright Laughlin, 104-24 (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1937), 119, comments, “The overpowering of a minority by calling for a vote is a kind of force, and breeds the resentment which keeps the method of force from achieving ultimate success with persons. ‘You have not converted a man,’ wrote John Morley, ‘because you have silenced him’ [John Morley, *On Compromise*, London, 1917, 246]” See also Richard Foster’s comments in *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, revised* (New York, NY, San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2002), 161.

²³ Ramsay MacMullen, *Voting about God in Early Church Councils*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-13. He mentions 3 examples of crowd decision making: “Constantius in Rome in AD 355 intervening in a church dispute to recall one of the contestants for the see from exile” (Theod., *HE* 2.17.4); Emperor Leo I (457-74) and the freeing of Isokasios; and the interchange between the crowds and the Emperor Justinian’s herald which resulted in the infamous ‘Nike’ Riots of AD 532. In footnote 32 he also says, “Similarly in Rome in AD 551, the Roman crowd intervenes successfully in support of the local bishop and against the urban prefect and the emperor’s commands.”

From the *demos* due deference was required as a sort of introduction to whatever they had to say. In Greek settings, they would perhaps add a word or phrase in Latin to show respect for the language of the conquerors of long ago, the masters now. ... And they would make an attempt at unison, so as to be both loud and intelligible.

Those who shouted would try to follow the phrase first called out by one of their number, their leader. By the third century the practice had been taken up even by the Roman senate in its more subservient transports; less surprisingly, it had long been common and in later centuries it continued at theatrical productions applauded by hired clagues. ... After the civilities, next the demands. These easily took on a sharper, noisier quality as they were reiterated.²⁵

This process could put considerable pressure on government officials to do the people's bidding. "In Antioch ... the assembled citizens chanted their demands rhythmically and got their way; in Alexandria the governor yielded to them in disregard of the law; in western cities as well as eastern, unspecified by the jurist Ulpian, a governor might yield to shouts when he knew he should not properly do so."²⁶ MacMullen points out,

It is a short step to the best known moment in Jerusalem (Mk 15:8ff.; Mt 27:15ff.) where the crowd began their demands as they usually did, for a prisoner to be released, and the governor wanted to give them one man but agreed to release another, just to keep them quiet. It was a moment with its rules: the crowd spoke and he listened.²⁷

It is interesting, as MacMullen notes, that this same process was used to make decisions in Early Church Councils such as Nicaea and Chalcedon.²⁸

The "guidance from the community" model of congregational decision making fit well with the ethos of American culture after the Revolutionary War. Nathan Hatch says,

The Revolution dramatically expanded the circle of people who considered themselves capable of thinking for themselves about issues of freedom, equality, sovereignty, and representation. Respect for authority, tradition, station, and education eroded. Ordinary people moved toward these new horizons aided by a

²⁵ Ibid., 14.

²⁶ Ibid., 15.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., see in particular chapters 1 and 7.

powerful new vocabulary, a rhetoric of liberty that would not have occurred to them were it not for the Revolution.²⁹

Church structure and practice was seriously affected by these “Revolutionary” values:

Increasingly assertive common people wanted their leaders unpretentious, their doctrines self-evident and down-to-earth, their music lively and sing-able, and their churches in local hands. It was this upsurge of democratic hope that characterized so many religious cultures in the early republic and brought Baptists, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, and a host of other insurgent groups to the fore. The rise of evangelical Christianity in the early republic is, in some measure, a story of the success of common people in shaping the culture after their own priorities rather than the priorities outlined by gentlemen such as the framers of the Constitution.³⁰

As passionate evangelists and itinerant preachers traveled around the new country, “they could rarely divorce that message from contagious new democratic vocabularies and impulses that swept through American popular cultures. Class structure was viewed as society’s fundamental problem, there was widespread disdain for the supposed lessons of history and tradition, and a call for reform using the rhetoric of the Revolution.”³¹

Lorenzo Dow, an itinerant Methodist preacher during the Second Great Awakening (c. 1790-1840), vehemently asserted in his pamphlet *Analects upon the Rights of Man*,

By what rule of right can one man exercise authority with a command over others? Either it must be the gift of God, or, secondly, it must be delegated by the people—or less, thirdly, it must be ASSUMED!

A power without a right, is assumption; and must be considered as a piece of unjust tyranny . . .

But if all men are BORN EQUAL, and endowed with unalienable RIGHTS by their CREATOR, in the blessings of life, liberty, and the pursuit of

²⁹ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT; London, UK: Yale University Press, 1989), 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7. Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*, 34, comment, “Church history shows that discernment in Europe was made by a body of elite equals, but the parliaments and town meetings that cropped up in every village in America led the church to embrace a culture of argument and persuasion. From about 1820, many churches adopted a faith that common people would discern the truth if they had the facts. The church’s theology of sin and evil fit in with democracy; government by the people would hold in check the evil intentions of a few.”

happiness—then there can be no just reason, as a cause, why he may or should not think, and judge, and act for himself in matters of religion, opinion, and private judgment.³²

This judging and acting, “for himself in matters of religion,” led to all sorts of doctrinal mayhem as, “popular theology combined odd mixtures of high and popular culture, of renewed supernaturalism and Enlightenment rationalism, of mystical experiences and biblical literalism, of evangelical and Jeffersonian rhetoric.”³³ Without wisdom from history and ecclesiastical tradition and theology,

such egalitarian circumstances also gave freer reign to subterranean folk beliefs and to unregulated displays of fervency and religious ecstasy. Under such fluid conditions, it was increasingly difficult to differentiate between science and superstition, naturalism and supernaturalism, medicine and quackery. It was a golden age both of empiricism and of imposters and counterfeiters.³⁴

Hatch says further,

The experience of Caleb Rich illustrates well the pervasive crisis of authority within popular religion in America in the years after the Revolution. His experience suggests the stages of a pilgrimage that confronted many Christians during this period. Rich came to find traditional religious systems no longer credible and to experience deep intellectual turmoil in groping for new verities. He eventually insisted that his own interpretation of Scripture should not be mediated by any other authority, historical or ecclesiastical—a conviction steered by the competing claims of rival denominations and a new openness to visionary experiences. He resolved his struggle for assurance by insisting that the unfettered conscience must encounter for itself the *ipse dixit* of the New Testament.³⁵

Itinerant evangelists could and did gather groups of converts around themselves and their personal theologies/interpretations of Scripture. Traditional denominations struggled as

the flexibility and innovation of religious organizations made it possible for an American to find an amenable group no matter what his or her preference in

³² Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 37.

³³ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 41. On 40 Hatch says, “Caleb Rich was the most important leader of Universalism in rural New England during the last quarter of the eighteenth century.”

belief, practice, or institutional structure. . . . Religious options in the early republic seemed unlimited: one could worship on Saturday, practice foot washing, ordain women, advocate pacifism, prohibit alcohol, or toy with spiritualism, phrenology, or health reform.³⁶

American “consumer” religion had been born and it continues to flourish today.

Guidance from Wisdom and the Holy Spirit

This model of decision making emphasizes the guidance of the Spirit plus the use of various forms of wisdom (natural, biblical, traditional). It sees the Church as a gathering of those who have responded to God’s call to follow Him and his wise law, *and* are gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so. Leaders are trained in the traditions and teachings of the Church, and empowered for ministry through the laying on of hands by officials representing continuity to the past and apostolic tradition and prayers for the anointing of the Spirit. Because of their spirituality, training, wisdom, and traditional authority leaders can have great power and dominance, and their churches usually have a polity that is hierarchical/monarchical, with the pastor or priest responsible for local congregational decision making (although consulting with a group of advisors). He/she is responsible to his/her superiors in the larger denomination, who can also make decisions that affect the congregation. The role of the members is similar to that in the wisdom model: they are learners and doers of the pastorally or denominationally defined vision.

The strengths of the “guidance from wisdom and the Holy Spirit” model are its doctrinal and organizational stability because it relies on tradition and Scripture, but also its ability to enfold movements of the Spirit as long as they do not threaten established structures. Renewal is possible but implemented from the top down, and because of clear lines of authority decisions can be made quickly. Its affirmation of the supernatural helps

³⁶ Ibid., 65.

it avoid rationalism and naturalism and encourages dependence upon God and his guidance. Its emphasis on tradition and doctrine grounds its mystical spirituality.

Its weaknesses are the same as the wisdom model: inflexibility, legalism, etc. if the guidance of the Spirit is neglected. There can be conflict between the teachings of Scripture, traditional and practical wisdom, and guidance by the Spirit. It also is weak in congregational involvement, often with a resistance to sharing decision-making authority, and a strong tendency towards guardianship. Its combination of spiritual, wisdom, and institutional authority can lead to a belief in the “divine right” to rule. Leaders can suffer from limited perspectives, inflated egos, burnout due to information overload, and unrealistic expectations to be all-knowing and all-spiritual.

We can see these problems in the life of Elijah (1 Ki 17:-21:29; 2 Ki 1:1-2:18). As God’s prophet and the nation’s spiritual leader he called the Kingdom of Israel to obey YHWH’s covenant, and shared prophetic words. King Ahab and the people, involved in false worship, were largely unrepentant even after YHWH’s dramatic “show-down” with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel (1 Ki 18:1-40). When Elijah fled into the desert to escape Queen Jezebel’s death threats he was burnt-out, isolated, and discouraged, repeatedly insisting that he was the only prophet left (19:10, 14). At Horeb, God gently directed him to retrace his steps and anoint Hazael and Jehu as kings, and Elisha as his successor. YHWH informed him, that even though Elijah felt alone in opposing Baal worship, YHWH had reserved “seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.” (1 Ki 19:18). YHWH was still sovereign over his people, and Elijah was his prophet, not the people’s savior.

Some of the difficulties with the “guidance from wisdom and the Holy Spirit” model are highlighted by the conflicts between the Roman Catholic papacy and proponents of “conciliarism” who were attempting to involve the larger church in decision making. Historian Francis Oakley defines conciliar theory:

Stipulating that the ultimate locus of authority resided in the universal Church itself rather than in its papal head, it insisted that under certain circumstances the general council representing that Church—acting even apart from or in opposition to the pope—could exercise a jurisdictional or governmental authority superior to his, and, by so doing, impose constitutional limits on the exercise of his prerogatives or serve as a control function to prevent their abuse.³⁷

The Encyclopaedia Britannica explains the theory’s origins:

Conciliarism had its roots in discussions of 12th- and 13th-century canonists who were attempting to set juridical limitations on the power of the papacy. The most radical forms of the conciliar theory in the Middle Ages were found in the 14th-century writings of Marsilius of Padua, an Italian political philosopher who rejected the divine origin of the papacy, and William of Ockham [d. 1349], an English philosopher who taught that only the Church as a whole—not an individual pope or even a council—is preserved from error in faith.³⁸

Conciliarists, frustrated by the pressing ongoing need for church reform, and papal resistance, were searching for ways to break the logjam. The move of the papacy to Avignon in 1305 and the corrupt extravagant lifestyle of Pope Clement VI increased their aggravation, and the issue came to a head with the Western Schism (1378-1417). Urban IV in Rome and Clement VII in Avignon (and their successors) both claimed the papal title and various European rulers backed the pope that they preferred. Following conciliar thinking, in 1409 the cardinals called the Council of Pisa to settle the matter. They unsuccessfully deposed the rivals Benedict XIII and Gregory XII as heretics and

³⁷ Francis Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church 1300-1870*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14-15.

³⁸ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “conciliarism,” <http://0-www.britannica.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/EBchecked/topic/131168/conciliarism> (accessed January 27, 2012).

schismatics, and elected Alexander V, resulting in three contenders for the papal throne. Alexander V was succeeded by John XXII who convened the Council of Constance (1414-1418, 16th Ecumenical Council). Again, following conciliarist teaching, it sought to resolve the papal power struggle and eventually successfully deposed John XXIII and the Avignon Pope Benedict XIII, and Gregory XII resigned. The Council elected Martin V as the sole legitimate pope and issued two decrees *Haec sancta* (also known as *Sacrosancta*, 1415),³⁹ which set forth conciliar theory and the ecumenical legitimacy and authority of the Council, and *Frequens* (1417) which mandated councils of the whole Church be held at least every ten years. The Council of Basel (1431-35) reaffirmed these decrees, but at the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-1517), Pope Julius II and his cardinals rejected conciliarism, asserting papal power over councils.

It is interesting to note,

The conciliarist hope, although it already had been frequently disappointed, was still alive when the Protestant movement began. Martin Luther, for instance, was quite confident that a true council, if one could be convened, would ratify his teaching. Yet that was a political impossibility. Neither the Holy Roman Empire nor the Vatican would convene such an event. In the absence of an ecumenical council, there was no available church-wide instrument to evaluate the theological legitimacy of the changes for which the reformation theologians were calling.⁴⁰

³⁹ Francis Oakley, *Council over Pope?* (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1969), 109, points out that in spite of attempts to suppress and ignore *Haec sancta*, “as Cesarini pointed out to Eugenius, the very legitimacy of his papal title and that of Martin V depended on the validity of *Haec sancta* and of the action which Constance had taken on the basis of the doctrinal position defined therein. ... Constance was an ecumenical council from the start because it held the supreme power in virtue of which it rid the Church of the rival claimants to the papacy and elected Martin V pope. Given this situation, the decree *Haec sancta* fulfilled all the conditions necessary to make it a dogmatic decree.” See also these works by the same author: *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church 1300-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); “Conciliarism and Papalism.” *Church History* 68, no. 1 (March 1, 1999): 175-176; “Conciliarism at the Fifth Lateran Council.” *Church History* 41, no. 4 (December 1, 1972): 452-463; “The New Conciliarism and Its Implications: A Problem in History and Hermeneutics.” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 8, no. 4 (September 1, 1971): 815-840.

⁴⁰ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA; Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1992), 64-65. He says further, “The solution that was found, especially in the upper Rhine Valley, was the disputation. Local authorities

Perhaps if an ecumenical council had been called, the Reformation would not have happened? In any case, papal authority grew during the following centuries and “the first Vatican Council in 1870 explicitly condemned conciliarism. The second Vatican Council (1962–65) asserted that the pope as a member and the head of the college of bishops forms with it at all times an organic unity, especially when the council is gathered in a general council.”⁴¹ Although conciliar theory was rejected by Roman Catholicism, “in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it played a most important constitutionalist role in the Protestant world—though in the context, this time, not of ecclesiology but of secular political theory.”⁴² Conciliar theory was foundational to the development of English parliamentary thinking and practice.⁴³

Guidance from the Holy Spirit and the Community

This model combines the participation of all members of the congregation with the direction of the Holy Spirit. It views the Church as those called, gifted, and empowered by the Holy Spirit who come together to encourage and support each other in the pursuit of mutually discerned goals. While all are encouraged to share their opinions and ideas, the focus of the decision-making meetings is to corporately discern God’s will. The authority for decision making resides in the congregation as they gather to worship,

borrowed this form of meeting from the university where it was the standard procedure for teaching and especially for authorizing a person’s promotion to the office of Magister or Doctor.”

⁴¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “conciliarism.” It should be noted that in the United States since Vatican II there have been efforts to “democratize” the Roman Catholic Church. See Eugene C Bianchi and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds., *A Democratic Catholic Church: The Reconstruction of Roman Catholicism* (New York, NY, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), and William V. D’ Antonio, “Autonomy and Democracy in an Autocratic Organization: The Case of the Roman Catholic Church,” *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 4 (1994): 379-96.

⁴² Oakley, *Council Over Pope*, 97.

⁴³ See Brian Tierney, *Religion, Law, and the Growth of Constitutional Thought, 1150-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

listen in silent prayer to corporately seek the inner light of the Spirit, and reach consensus about how He is leading the group. Members are responsible to discern and to share insights they have been given with the rest of the congregation. In some cases the casting of lots are used to determine God's will. Rather than acting as guardians, leaders serve by supporting the discernment process, encouraging all to contribute, discerning the work of the Spirit, and giving words to the growing consensus. There is also an influential, if informal, role played by those whose opinions are considered "weighty."

A strength of the "guidance from the Holy Spirit and the community" model is its openness to the participation of all regardless of gender, race, socio-economic status, etc. It can be very creative as a variety of perspectives, gifts, and experiences are brought to the discernment/decision making process, although not every contribution is necessarily given the same "weight." This has a unifying effect on the congregation as people feel they have been heard and taken seriously, even if their solution to an issue is not the one finally chosen. Although individuals participate, the stress is on communal discernment, with the congregation owning the decision. This model also encourages dependence and waiting on God for insight, countering rationalism, naturalism, and discouraging pragmatism. The slower process challenges restless impatience, allowing for contributions to be considered and prayed over, which helps with "information overload."

This model can be weak on the use of wisdom in its various forms, and although the whole community's involvement acts as a safeguard against false teaching and spirituality, this still can lead to a lessened ability to evaluate mystical experience and guidance. This model can be used to avoid exercising wisdom and taking responsibility, and to delay decisions making. Some claim that it takes too much time and that it is not

suitable for large-scale decision making, but historically, Anabaptist-Mennonites and the Quakers (The Religious Society of Friends) have used this model effectively for congregational and conference decision making.⁴⁴ At its best, Quaker decision making follows the proposed model, utilizing all three sources of guidance. However, some Quaker branches while recognizing “the Quaker faith has deep Christian roots,” also affirm,

Many Quakers consider themselves Christians, and some do not. Many Quakers find meaning and value in the teachings of many faiths.

Quakers strive to live lives that are guided by a direct encounter with the Divine, more than by teachings about the Divine. Quaker terms for the Holy include God, the Seed, the Light Within, and the Inward Teacher, among others.⁴⁵

This neglect or rejection of Biblical doctrine and wisdom, and Christian tradition can be problematic for Quakers concerned with mystical spiritual deception who want to “test the spirits” and follow the Holy Spirit’s guidance. Lee Junker warns,

In as much as we have disengaged ourselves from our Christian roots and at the same time failed to explore with one another our spiritual grounding, we may be in danger of undermining the bedrock of our faith community, group spiritual discernment. We need to be wary that our commitment to Spirit-led discernment does not slip into a humanistic approach of good decision making. Wilmer Cooper quotes John McCandless, “when it is asserted that some Friends are not Christ-centered, but are God-centered, or Spirit-centered or Light-centered, the question immediately arises: in which light, what spirit, what god are they centered?”⁴⁶

Loss of Christian roots is not the only challenge this model faces—like the model of “guidance from the Holy Spirit,” it also struggles with rationalism and naturalism.

⁴⁴ See Gayle Gerber Koontz. “Meeting in the Power of the Spirit: Ecclesiology, Ethics, and the Practice of Discernment,” in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999). On 329 she says, “Anabaptist-Mennonites, particularly in the Swiss tradition in which John Howard Yoder was rooted and from which context he spoke, had special interest in the practice of decision making in the community of believers or “meeting in the power of the Spirit.” See also Morley, *Beyond Consensus*, 26-27.

⁴⁵ Friends General Conference, “Quakers Believe . . .,” <http://www.fgcquaker.org/explore/quaker-way> (accessed August 30, 2012).

⁴⁶ Lee Junker, “Friends’ Practice of Group Spiritual Discernment,” School of the Spirit (May 2005), 8-9, www.quakerinfo.com/junker_discernment.pdf (accessed June 9, 2011), quoting Wilmer A. Cooper, *A Living Faith* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1990), 65.

Secularism among the peace churches would take the form not of outright criticism of the Christian faith but of a “Christian” ethic in which the living Christ is no longer crucial. In such an ethic obedience to his personal command would be replaced by sheer pragmatic calculation. Ethical decisions would be routinized to such an extent that Christ’s lordship would tend to be subsumed by the historical process and his purposes identified with the highest intentions of Western society. Christ’s freedom to break into the historical process and to command his Church to accept a path of obedience which transcends ordinary expectations of goodness and duty would be theologically conceivable but practically unexpected.⁴⁷

The struggle to faithfully discerning the will of God communally has been ongoing for several centuries in Anabaptist and Pietist churches. During the “Age of Enlightenment,” Elizabeth Sommer noted, “The Moravian Brethren, known in Europe as the Renewed Unity of the Brethren, resisted the triumph of reason over revelation into the late eighteenth century. In this they reflected the general hostility toward the emphasis on science and reason to which George Becker has pointed as a hallmark of the Halle Pietists.”⁴⁸ She says, “Their belief that the lot represented the true will of Christ stands at odds with a century which had inherited a changing world view in which a strong confidence in the power of human reason gradually replaced the assumption of God's providential power.”⁴⁹ Stephen Longenecker summarizes the process they used:

Though the first generation Brethren had developed an effective administrative system, they still asked the "true head," i.e., God, through the lot to make all the

⁴⁷ J. Lawrence Burkholder, “The Peace Churches as Communities of Discernment,” *The Christian Century* (Sept 4, 1963):1075.

⁴⁸ Elisabeth W. Sommer, “Gambling with God: The Use of the Lot by the Moravian Brethren in the Eighteenth Century”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59, no. 2 (April 1998): 267. She says on 268: “In the 1740s the philosophy of Christian Wolff (and hence also of Leibniz) became popular among many at Halle, despite his having been removed from the faculty in 1722. ... Through his view of reason as the divine source of human knowledge, Wolff shifted the ultimate test of religious insight from revelation to reason. ... By the 1790s, however, it became clear that, at least among many of the lay members of the Unity, the Enlightenment stress on the primacy of reason was winning. Just as the Collegiants had come to view ‘free prophecy’ as a function of human reason, several of the Brethren ultimately saw the lot as something open to human manipulation and objected to its use, arguing that decisions were best left simply to ‘brotherly reason.’”

⁴⁹ Sommer, “Gambling with God,” 267.

important decisions, especially about marriage, readmission after expulsion, and confirmation for office. The most common method was to submit two written statements expressing the divine will: “The Savior approves” whatever was being proposed and the converse, “the Savior does not approve.” A member of the Elders’ Council then pulled one of these papers from a container. Criticisms of this procedure appeared early. Some questioned whether individuals should be required to obey the lot even if they did not write the questions, and, more specifically, some feared that the lot would send them to the mission field in Ethiopia without their consent. Moreover, leaders could manipulate the lot by rewording and redrawing it until they got the answer they wanted. Second generation Moravians, influenced by the Enlightenment, suggested that God was too rational to use such an irrational system and that the lot was just a matter of luck. They asked why business and home ownership, which had no spiritual element, should be submitted, and they particularly resisted exposing marriage plans to the lot. Increasingly members urged that decisions be left to “brotherly reason.” Finally, in 1801 the Brethren removed the lot in election confirmation but only after receiving affirmation for this from the lot.⁵⁰

We might think the Moravians “quaint” for using the lot in their decision making, but it is still used by churches today. Recently, the Egyptian Coptic Church elected Bishop

Tawadros pope using a process which included evaluation and the drawing of lots:

A council of top church leaders selected a group of about 2,400 bishops and elite to winnow the candidates down to three possible nominees, excluding any contenders with a trace of controversy about him.

Then bishops picked a dozen boys and three understudies. Standing by the altar Sunday before a cheering crowd of thousands, the first in line drew the lots to determine that 6-year-old Bishoy Girgis Mosad would make the final pick. An aging bishop blindfolded him and guided his hand into the elaborate glass bowl to fish out one of three names.

The process, an ancient practice revived in the last century, is supposed to bring the hand of God into the selection process.⁵¹

While we might question whether the use of the lot is still valid for church decision making, the attempt to allow God into the process is certainly laudable.

⁵⁰ Stephen Longenecker, “A Tale of Two Gemeine,” a review of Elisabeth W. Sommer’s *Serving Two Masters: Moravian Brethren in Germany and North Carolina, 1727-1801* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000). Published on H-SHEAR (March, 2001), <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.php?id=5002> (accessed November 13, 2012).

⁵¹ David Kirkpatrick, “Boy Picks Out the Leader of Egypt’s Coptic Church” *The Seattle Times* (November 5 2012): A6.

Guidance from the Community and Wisdom

This model of congregational guidance combines insights gained from the use of wisdom from the Bible, tradition and experience with input from the congregation. It sees the Church as those choosing to follow God's wise law who come together for support and encouragement in the pursuit of mutually decided-upon goals. A church using this model often has a leadership team/board/council (which includes the pastor) for oversight but provides various avenues, including congregational meetings, for members to share their opinions with the decision makers. Leaders are usually chosen because of their biblical knowledge and/or their expertise at running organizations. The members' role is to select leaders, delegate authority to them, and support them and their decisions. The leadership team, board, or council makes decisions through discussion, debate, logical argumentation from wisdom sources, evaluation of problems and solutions, and prayers for good decisions and God's blessings on their efforts.

A strength of the "guidance from the community and wisdom" model is its checks-and-balances on the power of the leader. As community input is allowed and valued the problems of guardianship are diminished. It affirms a variety of insights/giftings/perspectives from the body of Christ, as well as wisdom from the Bible and other sources. It increases decision ownership, counters narcissistic individualism by promoting involvement, and tests false teaching and mystical experience with wisdom. There are fewer problems with information overload as evaluation responsibilities are shared, and this model can be more efficient than the community guidance model.

This model is weak on direct and timely guidance from God, and like the "guidance from wisdom" model it can succumb to naturalism, rationalism, pragmatism,

and impatience, with no guarantee of the Spirit's insights for a particular situation or problem. It can lead to guardianship by leaders if there is little congregational involvement. With multiple leaders each having their own areas of responsibility there can be a lack of communication and the development of "silos" to protect "turf." Power struggles occur when the "guidance from the community" and "guidance from wisdom" models are combined without realizing that they draw on different sources of authority for decision making. Nathan Finn blogs about his observations on difficulties in Southern Baptist churches with the pastor as expert and the congregation as decision makers:

Baptists have historically affirmed congregational polity, or the idea that the church's membership governs itself by means of democratic processes under the lordship of Jesus Christ. But Baptists have also affirmed strong pastoral authority, of the idea that a church's members are to submit themselves to the leadership of their pastor or pastors . . .

Many Southern Baptists have past experiences in churches where these two concepts weren't always balanced properly. Some have been members of churches where the pastor (or staff) made almost every important decision related to the church's ministry. There were rarely, if ever, church conferences. When the church did assemble in conference, they tended to focus almost exclusively on financial matters like the annual budget, building programs, and the buying and selling of church property.

Others have been members of churches where the pastor had little or no authority of any kind. Instead, pastors and other staff were treated as merely paid employees who worked for a personnel committee or deacon board. Almost every ministry decision was put to a full vote before the entire congregation. The pastor had to seek approval to make any changes whatsoever to the status quo. And if the pastor failed to toe the party line, it was time for him to find another ministry elsewhere.⁵²

Balance between competing sources of decision making authority is not easily achieved.

Historically, the "guidance from the community and wisdom" model has been exemplified well by the Jewish synagogue. By the first century AD there were

⁵² Nathan Finn, "Reconciling Congregational Polity and Pastoral Authority: Part One," May 5, 2011, *Theology—Between the Times*, <http://betweentheimes.com/index.php/2011/05/05/reconciling-congregational-polity-and-pastoral-authority-part-one/> (accessed November 15, 2012). See also Conrad, "Identity, Structure and Communicative Action in Church Decision-Making" for a fascinating study of the decision-making beliefs and practices of Southern Baptist churches.

synagogues all over the ancient world (Mt 13:54; Lk 4:16; Mk 1:21; Jn 6:59; Acts 6:9; 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1; Rv 2:9; 3:9). As the community's assembly it was responsible for decision making by majority vote, and "subject to the law of the land, the synagogue had its own government (Jos., *Ant.* 19. 291). The congregation was governed by elders who were empowered to exercise discipline and punish members."⁵³ Synagogues facilitated a variety of community activities besides regular worship services.⁵⁴ James T. Burtchaell says, "The instrumentality for virtually all communal aspects of life beyond the family—religious, civic, economic and educational—was found in their local synagogues. For most Jews it was perhaps the only organization to which they would ever belong."⁵⁵

In the 1st century male officials with differing terms of office provided synagogue leadership. Elders (*zeqenim*, *presbyteroi*) or shepherds (*parnasim*) were "duly examined as to their knowledge, and ordained to the office. But their election depended on the choice of the congregation."⁵⁶ The chief ruler of the synagogue was the *Archisynagogos*, or *Rosh ha-Keneset* (Mk 5:22; Acts 13:15; 18:8). While he was

⁵³ C. L. Feinberg, s. v. "synagogue", *Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 3, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1980), 1502. How much authority they had in local judicial and political matters depended upon how much their foreign rulers allowed. On 1499 he says, "The term synagogue comes from the Greek word *synagoge* which "is used frequently in the LXX for the assembly of Israel, and occurs 56 times in the NT. The basic sense is a place of meeting, and thus it came to denote a Jewish place of worship. The Heb. equivalent of the Gk. noun is *keneset* a gathering of any persons or things for any purpose. In the Scriptures it is a gathering of individuals of a locality for worship or common action (Lk 12:11; 21:12)." See James Tunstead Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 206-207.

⁵⁴ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 205, 220-224, 227, 281. See also *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "synagogue," <http://0-www.britannica.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/EBchecked/topic/578206/synagogue> (accessed February 1, 2012).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁵⁶ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Part 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 438. See also, Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 211-212, 228-237, 241.

the first among his equals, there can be no doubt that the virtual rule of the Synagogue devolved upon him. He would have the superintendence of Divine service, and, as this was not conducted by regular officials, he would in each case determine who were to be called up to read from the Law and the Prophets, who was to conduct the prayers, and act as *Sheliach Tsibbur*, or messenger of the congregation, and who, if any, was to deliver an address. He would also see to it that nothing improper took place in the Synagogue, and that the prayers were properly conducted.⁵⁷

He was assisted by a variety of other officials including the *Hazan* (attendant, Lk 4:20), the *Phrontistes* (financial commissioner), and the *Methurgeman* (translator of Hebrew into Aramaic).⁵⁸ Qualified congregants read Scripture, helped conduct services, and preached (Mt 4:23; Lk 4:16, Acts 13:15).⁵⁹ Although responsibilities were carried out by officials, traditionally the full assembly retained authority for a local synagogue,⁶⁰ and

the community created ways of popular expression and decision-making and accountability which kept even the most technical services as a communal concern. And the diverse activities leant upon one another: scripture understanding governed jurisprudence, leadership affected prayer, the prosperity of the treasury was a function of inter-familial politics. . . . It was a society where various people were in charge—often many people—but ultimately they answered to the community for the entirety of its needs and interests.⁶¹

At least this was how it traditionally worked. Unfortunately by the time of Christ, the authority of the local assembly

had been hedged by superior claims of superior synagogues and occasional synodal bodies, and had effectively been exercised locally by various officers, collegial and individual. . . . There were echelons of select people on whom most

⁵⁷ Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 438-439. Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 244, sees the *archisynagogos* as “the executive of the local community, acting under the formal oversight of the elders but the more active superintendence of the notables. He presided over the community, he convened it for its activities, he superintended its staff. It was a position of some permanency.”

⁵⁸ Feinberg, s. v. “synagogue,” *IBD*, 1503. See also Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 438, and Burtchaell, 246-249, 256-257.

⁵⁹ Feinberg, s. v. “synagogue,” *IBD*, 1503. See also Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 439, Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 258-259.

⁶⁰ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 215.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

of those prerogatives had effectively devolved. It was the responsibility of those personages to convene the assembly when they thought it appropriate, and to control its agenda and the freedom of the floor.⁶²

During the Reformation, the “guidance from the community and wisdom” model was used by Luther and other reformers. It fit well with their understanding of primitive church structure and the priesthood of all believers. In 1520 Luther wrote *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* and *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, quoting 1 Peter 2:9 and claiming all the baptized were priests. Grenz notes,

Because of the work of the one Mediator, we experience God’s grace directly. Consequently, all believers are priests, enjoying access to God through Christ without any human go-betweens. For Luther and others, the concept of believer priesthood also meant that our Lord has entrusted all Christians with the gospel and with the task of ministering the gospel to others.⁶³

About 1525 Luther went a step further and composed, *That a Christian Assembly or Congregation has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Discuss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture*. “Amidst a flurry of proof texts warning against false teachers and others describing the consent of local churches in the naming of their ministers, Luther also appealed ... to 1 Corinthians 14 as the warrant for a congregation taking its order into its own hands.”⁶⁴ Ironically, this passage of Scripture was also used by Swiss Brethren (Anabaptists) in their disputes with Reformed pastors:

This “Answer of Some Who Are Called Anabaptists, Why They Do Not Attend the Churches” gives six reasons for not attending the state church preaching services. “The first reason is that they [i.e., the Reformed state church preachers] do not observe the Christian order as taught in the gospel or the word of God in 1 Cor. 14, namely, that a listener is bound by Christian love (if something to

⁶² Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 215.

⁶³ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 723.

⁶⁴ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA; Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1992), 66, referring to *Luther’s Works*, vol. 39, 310.

edification is given or revealed to him) that he should and may speak of it also in the congregation.”⁶⁵

The common people wanted to be able to have their say in the congregation and its decision making. They took Luther’s teaching seriously, although they took it in directions that the reformers hadn’t quite anticipated:

The egalitarian claims of Luther and his first comrades had an appeal for the impoverished poor of the countryside, who inferred that if they should be free of servitude within the church, they should also have the domination of their secular rulers lightened. Luther sided with the nobles against the Peasants’ Revolt, and henceforth made it clear that this democratic ideal from the New Testament was intended exclusively for ecclesiastical application. Even within the church, Luther’s tone after the revolt is a little more managerial when setting forth the necessity for directive leadership.⁶⁶

Faced with uneducated (and often superstitious and non-Christian) church members demanding the right to participate in decision making

the ideal scheme of congregational sovereignty and of a single, unranked ministry did not long endure. Supervisory needs prompted the creation of various hierarchies which, however differently from traditional episcopacy they were explained, in form and function resembled nothing so much as a reformed order of bishops. Congregational say-so often subsided to a perfunctory endorsement of the judgments of the clerical professionals.⁶⁷

Luther was also nervous about claims of direct guidance by the Spirit. In 1525 He accused his former teacher and fellow reformer Andreas von Karlstadt “of devouring the Holy Spirit, ‘feathers and all.’ ... Because Karlstadt believed that the Spirit often speaks

⁶⁵ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 66, quoting from Paul Peachey, ed. “Answer of some ...,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 45 (1971), 5-32. The “Answer ...” pamphlet was written about 1533.

⁶⁶ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 17. He refers to *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation*, ed. B.J. Kidd (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911), 175, saying, “The first of The Twelve Articles of the Peasants in March, 1525, was: ‘First, it is our humble petition and desire, as also our will and resolution, that in the future we should have power and authority so that each community should choose and appoint a pastor, and that we should have the right to depose him should he conduct himself improperly. The pastor thus chosen should teach us the Gospel pure and simple, without any addition, doctrine, or ordinance of man. For to teach us continually the true faith will lead us to pray God that through his grace this faith may increase within us and become a part of us. ... Hence such a guide and pastor is necessary, and in this fashion grounded upon the Scriptures.’”

⁶⁷ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 36.

and acts in individual lives immediately—that is, apart from the mediation of the proclaimed scriptural Word—Luther dubbed him a *Schwärmer*, or “enthusiast,” and condemned his teaching on the Spirit in no uncertain terms.”⁶⁸ Luther argued

“If you ask who directs them to teach and act in this way, they point upward and reply, ‘Ah, God tells me so, and the Spirit says so.’ Indeed, all idle dreams are nothing but God’s Word.” Well-aware of the problems of projection and self-deception, Luther argued that the Spirit only acts in individual lives through the divinely-ordained medium of the Word. “In these matters, which concern the spoken, external Word, it must be firmly maintained that God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from the external Word which goes before. We say this to protect ourselves from the enthusiasts.”⁶⁹

In the midst of his battles with the Roman Catholic Church over the priority and authority of Scripture, Luther did not want to open the door to more false and misguided teaching by allowing that God might continue to give miraculous charisms and guidance.⁷⁰

A Better Way?

All six of the models that we have examined have their strengths and weaknesses. Proponents of each have sometimes defensively vilified the users of another model, and proclaimed their own model’s superiority. In reality, all of them are deficient since they only include one or two of the key elements we have identified for wise God-honoring

⁶⁸ Simon Zahl, “Rethinking Enthusiasm: Christoph Blumhardt on the Discernment of the Spirit,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 3 (July 201): 341, quoting Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*, 1525, trans. Conrad Bergendorff and Bernhard Erling, vol. 40, *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 83.

⁶⁹ Zahl, “Rethinking Enthusiasm,” 341-342, first quote from Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 40, 148, second quote from *The Smalcald Articles (1537)*, *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 111, 8, 3. See also Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 40, 146. Zahl, 342, notes, “Though it is usual for “theologians of the Word” like Luther to have quite low anthropologies and a strong concern for the problem of self-deception, and it is all-too common for charismatic and Pentecostal theologies to be overly optimistic about human nature, to be missing an adequately rigorous internal self-critical principle and to be prone to theologies of “prosperity,” nevertheless it is not *theologically necessary* that “enthusiasm” result in anthropological naivety.” See 344.

⁷⁰ See Zahl, “Rethinking Enthusiasm,” 360. He says Luther struggled with the question, “How is one to conceive of the Bible’s special or authoritative status if not as the reliable vessel in the church of the Spirit’s saving activity?”

and God-directed congregational decision making. Section Three will explore the proposed model, the “better way,” which includes guidance from the various sources of wisdom, insights from the Holy Spirit, *and* input from the congregation.

SECTION THREE: THE PROPOSED PARADIGM

Together, Full of Wisdom and the Holy Spirit

As was said, this “better way” for congregations to discern God’s will and make decisions is based on three elements, which give the decisions credibility and authority:

- Guidance from Wisdom: insights/teaching/judgments from biblical, traditional, ecclesiastical, and cultural sources.
- Guidance from the Holy Spirit: insights given by Spirit through personal and corporate listening prayer, meditation, and evaluation.
- Guidance from the Community: insights given by the entire congregation/group.

Artifact chapters and appendices provide in-depth cultural, biblical, theological, and ecclesiastical support for this claim; therefore, much of that information will not be repeated here. See Figure 1 (page 43) for a picture of how this “better way” relates to the six models of congregational discernment and decision making previously discussed.

Guidance from Wisdom, the Holy Spirit, and the Community

This paradigm has many strengths, but its greatest is that each of the three components acts to balance the other two and helps counter their weaknesses. Guidance from wisdom includes time-tested processes and methods, pertinent research on the issue, information on the needs, resources, and norms/values of the congregation and greater community, insights from Scripture, congregational and Church history, and “The Great Tradition.”¹ It appropriately uses business, sociological, and psychological skills and insights to promote efficiency, effectiveness, and healthy group dynamics. It provides

¹ Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 30-31, says, “The Great Tradition is how the church everywhere has always read the Bible. . . . We may learn to read the Bible for ourselves, but we must be responsible to what the church has always believed. We can reduce the Great Tradition to the Nicene Creed, the Apostles Creed, and the importance of justification by faith from the Reformation. These creeds point us toward the nonnegotiables of the faith; they point us to what God has led the church to see as its most important doctrines.”

objective standards for discerning between the wise/good and evil/foolish because it values Bible knowledge, tradition, education, and experience. This element assumes that since various kinds of wisdom are highly valued in the Bible (while their limitations are noted) believers should incorporate them into decision making practices.

Guidance from the Holy Spirit brings personal and communal experiences of God, his character, and his purposes to the process of discernment and decision making. Rationalism, naturalism and pragmatism are countered by the involvement of the Holy Spirit, who may give specific supernatural, creative, and unexpected guidance which goes beyond human wisdom. Dependence upon God is encouraged as room is made for Him to reveal his will to his people, allowing for the possibility of specific guidance in a given situation. Waiting on God also helps combat restless impatience as one cannot hurry or “force” God to speak. False mystical spirituality is countered by the community’s “testing of spirits” using the sources of wisdom and discernment.

The element of guidance from the Spirit assumes God has a will for Creation and has continued to reveal himself and that will in history, speaking to humans through personal disclosure, prophets, his Son, and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Some of God’s past communication with his people is recorded in Scripture for our edification and guidance (1 Tm 3:14-17; Heb 2-4). Much of his general will is already known. A congregation *must* take biblical revelation into account while listening for God’s voice and specific will, and making decisions that reflect the gift of the Spirit’s guidance.²

² Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 162, says, “Scripture must pervade and penetrate all of our thinking and acting. The one Spirit will never lead in opposition to the written Word which He inspired. There must always be the outward authority of Scripture as well as the inward authority of the Holy Spirit. In fact, Scripture itself is a form of corporate guidance. It is a way God speaks through the experience of the people of God. It is one aspect of ‘the communion of the saints.’”

Guidance from the community allows all to contribute in decision making and express a variety of opinions, perspectives, insights, giftings, and talents that enrich and enlarge congregational understanding and experience. Guardianship is discouraged by the affirmation of the equality of the members of the group. Individualism and information overload are weakened as input is valued and the congregation is involved at many levels, promoting unity and ownership of decisions. Conflict is diffused as, “People in conflict *want to be heard*, and this especially is true when individuals believe they will be affected by decision made by leaders or by the group.”³

This element assumes the Church is not just a group of individuals joining together to be “religious” but actually is the “body of Christ,” the people of God, created in his image with reasoning abilities for exercising dominion, empowered and gifted by the Holy Spirit for discernment and ministry.⁴ During the congregational discernment/decision-making process members share feelings, experiences, and insights from the Spirit, tradition, and Scripture, even as they are humbly aware of their own limitations and sinful failings.⁵ As part of God’s family they are qualified to participate in *all* aspects

³ Nelson Kraybill, “At 11: Conflict and Church Decision Making: Be Clear about Process and Let Everyone Be Heard,” *Anabaptism Today* 11(February, 1996), <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/book/export/html/166> (accessed June 8, 2011). He comments further, “If you have been part of congregational decision making that left people feeling angry or alienated, you know how painful that can be. Good process and careful listening may not remove the hurt of dealing with conflict in groups, but they increase the likelihood of a satisfactory outcome.”

⁴ See Brian Kelley Bauknight, *Body Building: Creating a Ministry Team through Spiritual Gifts* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁵ See Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 263. He says, “It is of central significance to Paul’s concept of the body of Christ then that each member has his own gift (Rom 12:3ff.; 1 Cor 7:7; 12:7, 11 ...; so 1 Peter 4:10); no member lacks a manifestation of grace; no member can refuse the contribution to the worship or the life of the community which the Spirit would make through him without thereby quenching the Spirit (1 Thes 5:19) and thereby ceasing to function as a member of the body.”

of congregational life.⁶ Historically, this understanding has been reflected in the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers,” (1 Pt 2:5; Rv 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). Grenz notes,

All may approach the throne of grace through Christ (Heb 4:15-16; 10:19-20). For this reason, the disciples of Christ were to acknowledge no mediatory hierarchy among them (Mt 23:8-12; Mk 10:42-44; 1 Tm 2:5). On the contrary, each believer has the privilege and responsibility to engage in priestly functions, such as offering spiritual sacrifices to God (Heb 13:15; Rom 12:1; 1 Pt 2:9) and interceding for others (1 Tm 2:1, 2; 2 Thes 3:1; Jas 5:16).⁷

This element also recognize that God has specially endowed some in the “body” with leadership gifts, wisdom, discernment, and ministry abilities, and affirms those gifts for shepherding the group. While Jesus was with his disciples in the flesh, he was their one teacher and Lord (Mt 23:8-10; Jn 13:12-16). He led them and made decisions. Although there seemed to be a few officers (Judas as treasurer, Jn 12:4-6) and natural leaders among the Twelve (Peter, James, and John, Mk 5:37; 9:2), echoing Dt 17:14-20, Jesus strongly discouraged the seeking of power and priority over each other (Mt 18:4; 20: 20-28; 23:1-12; Mk 9:33-37; 10:35-45; 12:38-39; Lk 9:46-48; 20:45-46; 22:24-27). They were to treat others equally as brothers and sisters, not following Jewish and Greco-Roman societal patterns of “lording it over one another.” Grenz asserts, “The foundation for democratic governmental structures resides in Jesus own teaching concerning how his disciples should relate to each other.”⁸

Instead of aristocratic policy-makers or earthly kings, leaders were to be the “shepherds” of his people (Jn 21:15-19):

⁶ See the classic book on the participation of lay persons in the congregation and its ministry: Hendrik Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1958, 1988).

⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 723.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 722. In his opinion, “This egalitarian strand in Jesus’ teaching is best lived out in church life through democratic congregationalism.”

A shepherd had a responsible job, but a fairly lowly status. He existed for the sake of the sheep, who were not his own, but for which he was accountable to their owner. So when Jesus not only claimed to be the model shepherd but also affirmed that true greatness is a matter of servanthood, not status, he was recovering an authentically Old Testament perspective on leadership and authority.⁹

It is important to emphasize that Christ remains the “head/source” of the Church, its shepherd leader who gives the vision and sets the agenda for each congregation. Church leaders are under-shepherds and “first followers” who choose to join Jesus in where he is going and what he is doing, encouraging others to come with them.¹⁰ Their goal is “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we *all* reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12-13, emphasis mine). Ringma asserts,

Unlike other social institutions which are characterised by hierarchical structures or social differentiation, the Church is to be different. . . . Roles and functions in the Early Church are emphasised rather than offices and position. . . . Church structures are not spelled out in the New Testament, but caring relationships are. Every-where in the Pauline epistles is the call to love, serve, care, and support each other (Rom 14:19; 15:7; Gal 6:2; 10; Eph 5:21; Col 3:12-17). Power relationships are deliberately transmuted into servanthood priorities.¹¹

This is in stark contrast with the goals of the “spirit of guardianship,” and clearly differs from corporate business models with the leader/pastor as the “head” and C.E.O.

⁹ C. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 243.

¹⁰ See Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus*. Nashville, Dallas, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2012. 3-14. See also Blackaby, Henry T. and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994, 1998).

¹¹ Ringma, *Catch the Wind*, 128-129. See also 124. Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson Inc., 1959, 1961), 99, says, “The Church is a new entity, established solely by God’s action and not to be regarded as a historical development. The miracle of this newness is shown by there being no fundamental organization of superior or subordinate ranks, because the gift of the Spirit is adapted to every Church.”

The proposed paradigm seeks to develop structures and processes that encourage this caring servanthood. It takes seriously God's desires for his people to individually and corporately love Him with all their hearts, minds, souls, and strength, love each other as He has loved them, and love their neighbors as themselves (Mk 12:29-31; Jn 15:12-17). It also recognizes that a congregation's witness to the world depends its unity and love (Jn 13:34-35) and that its decision-making practices must unite them and foster that love rather than destroy it.¹² Discussion, dialogue, evaluation, silent listening prayer and other discernment practices all help build consensus concerning God's will for the body. The goal of any process is to communally share wisdom, experience, knowledge, and insights from the Holy Spirit to develop solutions for problems and vision for the future.

A common question raised when considering process is, "When does a congregation use a discernment process as opposed to just making a decision?" The answer is not as simple as using discernment to decide "religious" things and using business wisdom for everything else (which is often how churches have done it) for God cares about it all—nothing is secular. Danny Morris and Charles Olsen wisely comment,

Not every situation raises an issue of discernment. ... Some items (approving the minutes, receiving a report) that come before the group are not issues for discernment. However, there are times (more often than we honor) when God's will should be known and a response taken. Deciding whether an issue is a matter for discernment is itself a matter for discernment.¹³

In addition, McKnight suggests, "Discernment is called for on issues that are obviously unclear in the Bible. No one discerns whether it is right to murder; no one believes

¹² Nideng, "There's a Better Way than Voting!!," 17, says, "Voting can be disastrous to God's work. We are equating the voice of the people with the voice of God. Finding easy access to our lower natures, Satan uses our fondness for democratic methods to divide and lay waste the work of Christ among us."

¹³ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together*, 43.

spousal abuse is right; no one thinks selling off children is acceptable; ... These are clear and unmistakable teachings with which most Christians agree.¹⁴ Congregational issues addressed by Scripture call for obedience rather than discernment, but if no clear sense of direction is emerging for a matter on the hearts and minds of members, or a division is beginning to appear, that concern is definitely a candidate for discernment. On the whole, seeking God and his will on any matter is a good thing!

Questions related to the element of “congregational input” often raised are, “How many people *need* to be involved in a given discernment process?” “Which decisions belong to the congregation and which should be owned by individuals or a smaller group, and how do you decide that?” For many congregations, these questions are pragmatically answered by their church’s polity, constitution, bylaws, and job descriptions, and it is assumed how things are done, is the way they should be done. Congregational decisions are divided up and delegated. The whole body agrees to a vision for current and future ministry and mission, while a leadership team develops priorities and goals that support that vision, task teams plan programs to fulfill the goals, and a few people make decisions about the day-to-day operations.¹⁵ Other churches involve their members in a wider range of decisions, and have greater participation in decision making as a goal. While the input of the whole body may be the ideal, this too is a “matter for discernment” and depends on

¹⁴ McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet*, 130-131.

¹⁵ For discussions on when to involve the congregation in a decision see Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003), 163-177; Sally Weaver Glick, *In Tune With God: The Art of Congregational Discernment* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press), 2004, 112-113; Gord Martin, “How and When to Involve the Congregation in Decision Making,” Vision Ministries of Canada, www.vision-ministries.org, http://www.vision-ministries.org/pdf/How_When_involve_congregation_decision.doc. He suggests besides “items of necessary information,” “items for healthy public dialogue,” and “items to be celebrated,” a congregational meeting should include “items to be affirmed by the congregation such as: proposed budgets, addition of staff, major non-budgeted items, building decisions, starting a new church, etc.” See also The Methodist Church in Ireland, “Decision making in the local congregation,” *Circuit Resources*, http://www.irishmethodist.org/connexion/circuit/decision_making.php (accessed June 8, 2011).

many variables such as culture, congregational history, the urgency of the decision, and the specifics of a given situation. Scot McKnight counsels,

Every culture will discern its own patterns for living out the Bible. ... This is perhaps obvious to many, but we must remind ourselves of the vibrant diversity of the Church when it comes to local level discernments. Seeking unanimity on all things is unwise; permitting discernment at the local level can sometimes create too much diversity, but it is wiser to have local discernment with some problems than having everyone under lock and key.¹⁶

Often behind these questions are issue of status, power and authority. Who *should* have the right to make the decisions? Some leaders, concerned about congregants' low levels of education and biblical/theological knowledge insist that discernment and decision making authority belongs to the leadership, the trained professionals, the clergy:

The people in the street ... in this age of poor church attendance and membership, are not apt to pronounce a credible and reliable judgment. Nobody can rely upon their inadequate deliberations. There exists such poor theological interest and education among lay people that the burden of such responsible decisions must fall upon the few clergy or theologians who specialize in these issues."¹⁷

Even among the clergy who believe in and depend upon the participation of the people in ministry there is resistance to sharing the power of decision-making. Members

may even have significant responsibility in particular areas. But they don't participate in determining the overall picture. There is no real power-sharing. Their involvement is welcome as long as they serve the institution and fit in with its predetermined goals.

A few clergy may laughingly dismiss the idea that people should participate in determining the life and direction of the church and be co-responsible for the outcome. People don't want such responsibility they may point

¹⁶ McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet*, 130.

¹⁷ Metropolitan Emilianos Timiadis, "Reception, Consensus, and Unity," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 26, no 1-2 (Spring/Summer 1981): 56. He says further, "Such criticism does not diminish at all the royal priesthood of all believers and their valuable contribution for the growth of the body of Christ. But we cannot overlook things as they are." Ringma, *Catch the Wind*, 42-43, says, some clergy "believe that under God they alone are to lead and guide the people. The people are not to determine the life and direction of the church. The role of the people is to partake of the life of the church and to support it. This is usually portrayed as a theological issue. This is the way, it is claimed, that Scripture portrays the nature of leadership."

out. People come to church primarily to be spiritually encouraged and nurtured. They have neither the time nor the inclination for such a demanding task.¹⁸

Unfortunately, these pastors are often correct—many are quite willing to allow “specialists” to take over discernment/decision-making responsibilities and “guardianship” raises its ugly head. Instead of leading people to seek the Lord’s will, helping them to grow biblically and theologically mature in Christ, and learning to love Him with their minds and wills, it is often easier for leaders and clergy to just take over.

In some congregations, members may insist on being involved in all or most church decisions, right down to the color of the bulletin paper or the scheduling of staff office hours. Often behind this tight control is a history of congregational abuse by pastors or leaders, and a determination to not be re-victimized.¹⁹ Past traumas need to be recognized and healed, and members need to learn how to trust their leaders (provided they are indeed trustworthy), let go, and empower those delegated to make decisions in areas of ministry responsibility (especially if they are being paid to do so).

Other questions seek to understand the relationship between the paradigm elements of guidance from wisdom and the Holy Spirit. Is one superior to the other? Are they to be ordered sequentially? Does a congregation first gather and evaluate wisdom materials and then pray about what has been learned? Or do they spend time in discerning prayer and then research wisdom that helps clarify “leadings?” Or is there a continual

¹⁸ Ringma, *Catch the Wind*, 43.

¹⁹ Morse, *Making Room for Leadership*, 137, says, “In Christian culture, religious leaders—pastors, lay leaders, parachurch leaders and academics—have power in social space and public space. The temptation is to use that power to maintain current religious and social systems that assure their status and authority. Words, gestures, and body orientation become tools for exclusion—to demarcate between who does and does not belong. Power is acquired, managed and distributed to make sure that the present system and power brokers are preserved rather than transformed.”

back-and-forth movement where the two are interspersed? Or is there an “incarnating” of God’s Spirit in human wisdom so that they operate simultaneously and cooperatively?

As discussed in Chapter Two of the artifact, in the Bible there are three sources of wisdom: natural human wisdom that is a Creation gift from God to all human beings, godly wisdom that can only come through the Holy Spirit’s revelation, and demonic/worldly wisdom. Natural wisdom gained through study and human effort is valuable, even crucial for human well-being and survival, and although it is limited and tainted by sin, that is not a reason to reject its use. Unfortunately,

some Christian leaders attempt to polarize God’s leading through prayer and spiritual discernment from the hard work of collecting, assessing, interpreting, and applying information to the decision-making process. However, both processes are essential and are not contradictory. When yoked with the proper motivations and commitments, they form the basis for planning as a spiritual discipline.²⁰

God expects people to use the faculties He gives them to obtain wisdom and make good choices. God’s wisdom is higher and superior (Is 55:9), but is revealed as a gift and cannot be demanded or discovered apart from the Holy Spirit. False/worldly wisdom is to be discerned, tested, and rejected altogether. This means that the process of discernment needs to be approached with diligence, to gain what human/natural wisdom can be had, but also with humility, realizing that it is insufficient by itself for perceiving God’s will. Congregations must be willing to wait in prayer for God’s insights, wary of deception, and “test the spirits” with godly wisdom from Scripture, tradition, and “common sense.”

²⁰ Cobble, *The Church and the Powers*, 142-143. Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 140, discussing patterns of church renewal, notes, “the renewal structure maintains an emphasis on the Spirit and the Word as the basis of authority. It is both Christological and pneumatological. It stresses the norm of Scripture and the life of the Spirit, and maintains both of these in some tension with the traditionalism of the institutional church. If it veers to the right or the left at this point, it will become either a highly legalistic sect or an enthusiastic cult liable to extreme or heretical beliefs.”

Usual practice in decision making is to gather the information necessary, and then ask God to grant wisdom and bless the decision made. Those making the decision still remain in charge, framing the questions and setting the agenda. If, however, we believe Christ goes before us into the future, and the Spirit is already at work guiding the Church, then the whole process needs to be bathed in prayer, including the information gathering. God's insight needs to be attentively sought from beginning to end, with time especially set aside for members to listen together to God and each other. Reggie McNeal asserts,

God does the planning; we do the preparing. It is God who declares: "I know the plans I have for you," He says in Jeremiah 29:11. He does not say, "I am waiting for you to develop plans I can bless." I am not against planning. I am just suggesting that there is a dimension beyond planning that is critical for us to understand. We can settle for our imaginations, our plans, and our dreams. In fact, I think the North American church has done just that. We have the best churches people can plan and build. But we are desperate for God to show up and to do something that only He can get credit for. God wants us to pray and to prepare for his intervention.²¹

While the proposed paradigm for congregational discernment and decision making is "better," it is not necessarily easier or more efficient than the six models examined earlier that primarily use only one or two of the key elements. It has very few weaknesses in theory, but it can be difficult to maintain balance between the elements when implemented. If one or two components is resisted, devalued, or neglected the weaknesses associated with those lacks will be experienced. For it to work well, it requires a willingness to grow in personal and communal discipleship, and recognize and counter the cultural influences that work against it. Tensions can grow between those who fear or prefer one element over another, and power struggles can mar the decision making process as individuals or factions sabotage communal discernment in favor of

²¹ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2003), 95.

getting their own way, or what they believe is “right.”²² Decision-making beliefs and practices often reflect a “hardening” of positions. Underlying them can be centuries of institutionalized hurt, anger, and bitterness which stifle openness to exploring new ones.

Resistance to the use of guidance from wisdom often surfaces from those who are legitimately tired of the “business as usual” way of church decision making, who long for a more “spiritual” approach, and do not want to revert back to secular models. Resistance may come from some who degrade wisdom as “earthly,” perhaps as a response to anti-Pentecostal criticism, in a mistaken attempt to elevate the charismatic and “heavenly.” In our culture of individualistic narcissism it also comes from those who, like Lorenzo Dow and Caleb Rich mentioned in Section 2, resist submitting their “spiritual” insights to the community for testing. Scot McKnight critiques this attitude in regards to Bible reading:

I believe everyone should read the Bible, but no one has ever said that everyone should interpret the Bible for themselves and whatever they come up with is as good as anyone else’s views. . . . no matter how much the Reformers wanted to place a Bible on the dinner table of every Christian, they also wanted to provide the readers with a sound method and theology that would lead them to read the Bible accurately. Sadly, in our world today many have neglected this Reformation strategy.²³

Similarly, while the opinions and suggestions of all should be sought in communal decision making, that does not mean all should have the same weight or be accepted without testing. For the good and protection of both individuals and the church community wisdom must be exercised, and contributions examined and discussed.

²² Richard Foster, *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life: Christian Reflections on Money, Sex & Power* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1985), 180, says, “Pride makes us think we are right, and power gives us the ability to cram our vision of rightness down everyone else’s throat. The marriage between pride and power carries us to the brink of the demonic.”

²³ McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet*, 30-31. He says further on 31, “Some are going farther than this, though, and are giving too much authority to tradition. They are saying we need to read the Bible through tradition. The singular problem here is *traditionalism*. Traditionalism is the inflexible, don’t-ask-questions, do-it-the-way-it-has-always-been done approach to Bible reading. It reads the Bible *through* tradition.”

Resistance to the Holy Spirit's guidance usually surfaces for several reasons. For some, past experience warns them the supernatural guidance of the Spirit can be dangerous. They remember incidents when, "discernment has been used as a tool for manipulation and mind control. Charges of false prophecy have camouflaged personality and power conflicts within communities. Since some are considered to have more power of discernment than others, they are in the position to judge whether or not others have the Spirit."²⁴ Understandably, these are not experiences the resisters wish to repeat.

Resistance also may come because listening in prayer for the Spirit's voice and other discernment practices seem too vague, spooky, and magical. Johnson explains,

Dependence on a gift supposedly in the mystical possession of a community appears dangerous, a capitulation to subjectivism. Heeding every so-called narrative of faith could lead to a collapse of standards. A willingness to revise our understanding of our most authoritative texts smacks of fashionable academic post-modernism leading to a moral or doctrinal relativism that threatens our already fragile hold on certainty.²⁵

What is to stop the congregation from adopting heretical beliefs and practices on the claim of inspiration by the Spirit? "How does it distinguish between the work of grace and the work of idolatry, the patterns of faith and those of sin? Does discernment have any criteria with which to work? It is precisely the sense that discernment is lacking in real norms that makes it such a frightening prospect for many Christian communities."²⁶

²⁴ L. T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 110.

²⁵ Ibid., 110. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 800, remarks, "Westerners are instinctively nervous about spirit activity, be it the Spirit of God or other spirits; it tends not to compute rationally and is therefore suspect. Hence our difficulties with regard to any genuine restoration of the experience and life of the early church."

²⁶ L. T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 12.

As discussed earlier, this is precisely where the use of wisdom can provide the necessary guidance for testing spiritual discernment. However the fear that is expressed in the resistance to guidance from the Holy Spirit may have deeper roots. Johnson asks,

What is it, really, that we could lose if we handed ourselves over to the discernment of faith? Would we really lose anything except the illusion of control? This question suggests that there may be an idolatrous project underlying resistance to spiritual discernment: the desire for a decision-making process that we can predict and control.²⁷

This desire for control, and the fear of change and abuse, has led to much conflict within the Church, and the exclusion of those seeking to promote the leadership of the Spirit.

Gordon Fee sagely comments,

Historically, Spirit movements have a poor track record within the boundaries of more traditional ecclesiastical structures. From my perspective the fault lies on both sides: reformers tend to burn structures and try to start over (and when they do they only create a new set of structures for the next Spirit movement to burn down); those with vested interests in the structures consequently tend to push Spirit movements to the fringe—or outside altogether. Thus there is a hardening of “orthodoxy,” on the one hand, that tends to keep the Spirit safely domesticated within creeds and office; on the other hand, when Spirit movements are forced (or choose) to exist outside the proven tradition(s) of the historic church, there is a frequent tendency to throw theological caution to the wind. The result all too often is a great deal of finger-pointing and name-calling, without an adequate attempt to embrace both the movement of the Spirit and existing tradition(s) simultaneously.²⁸

Amazingly, those traditions are the very things that the Spirit has used to bring about renewal and revival as they are rediscovered. Morris and Olsen emphasize the Church

²⁷ Ibid., 110-111.

²⁸ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 799-800. On 901 he says, “To be sure, the church has also had its history of “Spirit movements” of various and sundry kinds. Some of these were co-opted by the church; others were pushed outside the church and usually became heretical and divisive; and still others became reform movements within. The common denominator of most of these movements has been their attempt to recapture the life of the Spirit in some form or another. To the degree that they succeeded they have been a source of renewal and blessing. But Spirit movements tend to make institutions nervous—for good reason, one might add, both positively and negatively. The net result has been that the Pauline perspective of life in the Spirit, as a dynamically experienced reality creating an eschatological people who live for God's glory, has not generally fared well in the overall life of the church.”

will have to return to its own rich traditions and access the practices inherent in the Church's ethos to the development of its life and ministry. . . . Believing that God has entered into human affairs, religious assemblies will reframe their work as the work of discernment. What is God up to in our world? How can we be a part of God's work? While probing the questions of discernment, the Church has a grand opportunity to draw from its traditions and to discern new ways of discerning God's will for a transformed and transforming Church.²⁹

The following subsections seek to "return to [the Church's] own traditions" and explore congregational discernment and decision making models in the Book of Acts, and three different Christian denominations. This section will close with a survey of contemporary models of congregational discernment and decision making which attempt to develop new ways of discerning God's will and making decisions while drawing on past insights.

Discernment and Decision Making in the Early Church of Acts

After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension the disciples' natural leaders shepherded the believers as all waited for Pentecost and the Spirit's empowerment for witnessing and disciple-making (Mt 28:16-20; Acts 2:1, cf. Jn 20:21-23).³⁰ Their first instance of communal decision making after Jesus' ascension was the selection of Matthias (Acts 1:12-26).³¹ In Jerusalem the Apostles had joined others in prayer waiting for the promised baptism of the Spirit (1:5). At some point Peter suggested that they pick

²⁹ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together*, 49.

³⁰ See Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 342. He comments about the issue of apostolic succession: "The ministries of disciple and apostle vested in Peter and Paul are like the messianic, royal and prophetic ministries of Jesus: unable to be transmitted to certain designated successors because they are to be inherited by all who live in Christ. One cannot deny that bishops succeed to the charism of Peter and Paul; but it is a gift they share with all of their communicants. Nor were the apostles the first bishops. We have no historical evidence that Paul was bishop anywhere, or that Peter was bishop in Jerusalem (where James sat in that chair) or Antioch (a well established church already, and hardly one to his tastes) or Rome (also well established before he arrived)." In footnote 2 he says further, "As Irenaeus says, Peter and Paul were the foundation pillars of the Roman church, and they established Linus as its *episkopos*. *Adversus Haereses*, 3,3,2-3. This understanding of Peter and Paul as having a ministry more foundational than that of bishop is obscured by the later notion that they were themselves bishops."

³¹ See L. T. Johnson's Chapter 5 (81-108) in *Scripture and Discernment* for a helpful discussion of various decisions made by the Early Church recorded in Acts.

someone to replace Judas in bearing the apostolic responsibility. The group chose two candidates and after praying for guidance, used a traditional discernment method, casting lots. Since the filling of the Spirit had not yet occurred, the disciples relied on cultural wisdom and input from the community in their decision making. Pentecost was a communal experience and “from that point onwards the disciples’ developing experience is unfolded in corporate terms (cf. 2:44-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16; 6:1-7).”³² Perhaps it is significant that after Pentecost there is no mention of lots being used again.

Acts 6 records a potentially explosive problem: the Hellenistic Jewish believers in Jerusalem complained their widows were being neglected. The Apostles as leaders of the congregation, called an assembly of the local believers, asking them to select men who could take over leadership for that ministry. The assembly chose seven and brought them to the Apostles “who prayed and laid their hands on them” (6), authorizing them and perhaps gifting them for ministry (2 Tm 1:6). In this brief story both the leaders and people were involved in problem solving using a process similar to the synagogue election model. Cobble says, “Although this should not be construed as democracy, it does point to the importance of the shared life and mission of the Church in decision making and problem solving.”³³ It is noteworthy those selected were “known to be full of the Spirit *and* wisdom” (Acts 6:3), both important qualifications. Stephen is singled out as a being “full of God's grace and power” and a wise powerful speaker (Acts 6:10).

³² Milne, *We Belong Together*, 19. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 722, notes in the Book of Acts, “Many decisions pertaining to ministry and structure were made by an entire congregation. The whole people were involved in the choosing of Judas’ replacement (1:23-26), the selection of the first deacons (6:3-6), and the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas (13:3). Similarly, the Jerusalem council did not involve merely a select few, but the entire congregation (15:22).”

³³ Cobble, *The Church and the Powers*, 81.

At least up until the persecution mentioned in Acts 8:1 the Apostles, along with “the Seven” (Acts 6), provided leadership for the Jerusalem church.³⁴ But as they went on preaching and pastoral missions (Acts 8:14-25; 9:32-10:20) and were imprisoned or killed (Acts 7:54-60; 12:1-19) others were selected to assist or replace them in their community responsibilities.³⁵ Burtchaell remarks

Already when Paul and Barnabas were called before the authorities in Jerusalem, the apostolic claim of that community was largely an anachronism. Only Peter and John were there, and they might decamp at any time. The stable establishment there was not one of apostles, even though the decrees were issued in the name and authority of the apostles. They were assembly officers.³⁶

Acts 15:2 mentions elders as well as Apostles, and James, the brother of Jesus, apparently served as the *archisynagogos* (Acts 12:17; 15:13; Gal 1:18-19; 2:9).³⁷

Acts 13:2-3 describes how during a time of worship and fasting the Antioch church heard the Spirit tell them to commission two leaders for service. Richard Foster

³⁴ See Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 329. He says, “At first the authority of the apostles was seen to reside in Jerusalem. The church there spoke with secure *kyriotes* = ruling power: ‘It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves ...’” See Acts 15:1-16:4.

³⁵ See *Ibid.*, 350. Speaking of charismatic leaders Burtchaell says, “The people who bore most powerfully in their persons the force of divine conviction and transformative impetus were people who, without community screening or authorization, did God’s work. They spoke with authority. But that does not mean that they presided.” He says further on 351, “It requires saying that there is not a single text which describes an apostle or a prophet or a teacher presiding within an established Christian community, or filling the roles which were characteristic of the overseers, elders or assistants.” See also Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, 50: “What is vital, however, is that the old order was no longer regarded as legally binding—it had become to a certain extent loose and open. The prophet, a Church member called by the Spirit, can again become the decisive voice in everything. On the other hand, the supernaturalness of a phenomenon is not an indispensable condition. The facts that James was Jesus brother, and that the twelve were companions of the earthly Jesus, are not overlooked; and such natural circumstances play a particularly large part where the elders appear in the Church order.”

³⁶ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 330. In footnote 233 he says, “Peter alone is present in Paul’s narratives of his first visit to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18-20); Luke mentions none (Acts 9:26-30). No apostle is present for Paul’s final visit (Acts 22:15ff).”

³⁷ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 343, notes that in Acts 15, “Peter and Paul, gifted with the prophetic and apostolic spirit, set forth the policy and rationale that carried the day. James, the community chief surrounded by the elders, presided and pronounced the verdict. Both authorities—the charisma of *apostolos* and the order of *episkopos*—seem integral to the welfare of the church in crisis.”

remarks, “Perhaps the most astonishing feature of that incendiary fellowship was their sense of corporate guidance. . . . Having become a prepared people they received the call *together*.”³⁸ The guidance was clear and specific. Jim Cymbala notes the Spirit said,

“Set apart *for me* Barnabas and Saul.” The Spirit was claiming these two men for a special mission. Think of the spiritual drama as the living Spirit put his finger on these two individuals in the midst of the other leaders and possibly the whole congregation.

The Spirit has his own strategy and plans for the church. Notice the wording of verse 2: “... for the work to which *I* have called them.”³⁹

He concludes,

No Bible doctrines, precious and vital as they are to us, can replace this kind of daily, specific leading by the Spirit of God. The leaders in Antioch could have read the whole Old Testament, inspired by God as it is, and yet never have known that the Holy Spirit wanted to send out Paul and Barnabas specifically. It took a direct intervention by the Spirit to get God’s work going God’s way.⁴⁰

Before laying hands on them, the church members prayed and fasted again, and verse 4 says Paul and Barnabus were “sent on their way by the Holy Spirit.” “The commissioning of the church was merely the outward expression of the divine commissioning.”⁴¹

On Paul and Barnabus’ return from their journey they shared with the church how God had brought Gentiles to faith in Jesus. But these conversions raised many issues:

If both Jews and Gentiles are to be considered part of God’s people, will it be on even or uneven footing? On what basis will Gentiles be recognized and associated with? On the basis of their belief in the Messiah and the gift of the Holy Spirit, or on the basis of being circumcised and observing the law of Moses? Will the Church split into two ethnically and ritually distinct bodies? Is Yahweh a tribal deity, or Lord of all? Will fellowship be determined by faith, or by precedent; by the experience of God, or by the rules of the community? At stake is the Church’s identity as witness to the work of God. Will the Church decide to recognize and

³⁸ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 152.

³⁹ Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Power: Experiencing the Vast Resources of the Spirit of God*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 143.

⁴⁰ Cymbala, *Fresh Power*, 144.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

acknowledge actions of God that go beyond its present understanding, or will it demand that God work within its categories?⁴²

This conflict had the potential to divide the fledgling Church into two—one Jewish and one Gentile. From Acts 15 Nelson Kraybill outlines the resolution process:

1. *There was a big argument:* “Certain individuals” differed with Paul and Barnabas on the question of circumcision, and “no small dissension and debate” arose (Acts 15:1-2).
2. *The Church sought out a forum in which all parties could be heard:* The local faith community took action, and appointed “Paul and Barnabas and some of the others to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders” (Acts 15:2).
3. *People in conflict had opportunity to tell their stories:* The delegation of disputants arrived at Jerusalem and “reported all that God had done with them” (Acts 15:4).
4. *There was enough time to air convictions, feelings and perspectives:* There was “much debate” (Acts 15:7).
5. *Leaders, after careful listening, proposed a way forward that took into account concerns raised by both sides on this issue:* “After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘My brothers ... I have reached the decision that we should not trouble [with circumcision] those Gentiles who are turning to God ... but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication’” (Acts 15:13-21)
6. *The proposed solution was ratified by consensus:* With the “consent of the whole church” the leaders at Jerusalem sent a delegation to Antioch to convey the agreements reached (Acts 15:22, 25).
7. *The entire decision making process was handled with sensitivity to all participants, under Holy Spirit guidance:* The end result “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28).⁴³

Richard Foster points out the significance of this outcome for the Early Church’s discernment and decision-making practice: “As a people they had decided to live under the direct rulership of the Spirit. They had rejected both human totalitarianism and anarchy. They had even rejected democracy, that is, majority rule. They had dared to live

⁴² L. T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 90-91.

⁴³ Kraybill, “At 11: Conflict and Church Decision Making.” L.T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 108, points out various aspect of the Early Church’s decision-making process: “the active role of the assembly and not just leaders; the importance of silence and prayer for discernment to take place; the necessity of opposition and debate openly carried out; the significance of personal and pastoral communication of decisions once made.” In his discussion on Acts 15 he focuses on: “the experience of God, the narrative of that experience, its discernment, and the interpretation of the Word of God.”

on the basis of Spirit-rule; no 51 percent vote, no compromises, but Spirit-directed unity. And it worked.”⁴⁴ Communal discernment, relying on input from wisdom sources, the Holy Spirit, and church members and leaders, had resulted in the Early Church discerning that God was at work in the conversion of the Gentiles, and that they needed to join Him in what He was doing and accept them as full brothers and sisters in the faith.

Ignatian Discernment and Decision Making

One of the best known Church history examples of seeking of God’s will in the company of others comes from the life of the Spaniard Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). In 1521 He was wounded in battle, and while recovering in Loyola He noted his emotional states as He read and meditated on religious books. After healing and renouncing his life as a soldier, he lived as an ascetic in Manresa. He struggled spiritually, had a life-changing vision, and wrote about his spiritual experiences, reflections, and observations.⁴⁵ His well-known *Spiritual Exercises* is a thirty-day set of Christian meditations and contemplative practices. Ignatius’ early followers (friends from university and others) were encouraged to use the *Exercises*, and they are foundational for contemporary Ignatian spiritual discernment and decision making.

⁴⁴ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 153. Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, 211-212, agrees: “in the New Testament there are no majority decisions, but that efforts are made to arrive at a right judgment, even though the discussions are by no means easy or harmonious, till those of differing views can unite. Where no such understanding can be reached, the matter is taken so seriously in the New Testament examples that the Church has to summon up the courage to point out to the dissident(s) that they are repudiating the gospel, and to warn them of God’s judgment, or even to pronounce it.”

⁴⁵ *Catholic Encyclopedia (CE)*, s. v. “St. Ignatius Loyola,” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07639c.htm> (accessed September 21, 2012). See also Norman O’Neale, S.J., “The Life of St. Ignatius Loyola,” *Prayer Resource Book*, Loyola University Maryland, 2005-2006, http://www.loyola.edu/Justice/spirituality/yop_resourcebook.pdf (accessed September 22, 2012), 2-3.

While in Rome during Lent 1539, Ignatius and his companions spent several weeks in concerted prayer and discussion concerning their future together. Should they remain a loose association of priests or become a religious order with a superior and a set rule? The record of their process of communal discernment is known as “The Deliberation.”⁴⁶ Piet Penning de Vries notes six significant points concerning their method, quoting from the text of “The Deliberation” or the group’s actions for support:

1. *Unity of aim—difference of opinion regarding the means*: “it appeared, after several meetings, that our opinions and ideas about our state of life differed. We did have one intention and one mutual longing, namely to look for the perfect will of God and for his holy pleasure, in accordance with the aim of our vocation. But there were some differences of opinion regarding the suitable and fruitful means for ourselves as well as for our neighbor.”⁴⁷
2. *Unity of mental attitude*: “we unanimously decided and determined that we should pray, mortify ourselves and meditate with more zeal than usual and that, when we had done our utmost, we would cast all our cares upon the Lord.”⁴⁸
3. *Time for silence*: “the companions were not to assemble to discuss the matter or to draw one another out. The purpose was, that no one would be persuaded or moved by another, thus being inclined to obey or not to obey. Each one should only consider that which, while praying and meditating, He had found to be the most effective;—But before we deliberated and decided upon these matters, there had been many night-watches, prayer, physical as well as spiritual exertions.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ For a full text of “*deliberatto primorum partum*” or *The Deliberation* see Dominic W. Maruca, Joannes Codurius, and Petrus Faber, *The Deliberation of Our First Fathers: Woodstock Letters (July 1966)* (Jersey City, NJ: Program to Adapt the Spiritual Exercises, 1966). Maruca says on 326, “[In this text of the Deliberation] we can study at first hand the original method of arriving at a consensus: how each person had his opportunity to speak, each was listened to respectfully, each man’s arguments were welcomed and weighed. The striking contrasts will impress us: the freedom of spirit and docility to the Spirit, breadth of vision and allegiance to the Church, personal integrity and openness to others, astounding unity amid diversity of temperament and views. One can sense the warm esprit de corps: the mutual respect and affection, the sense of spiritual solidarity. It becomes evident why these men called themselves companions—men who broke bread together in Christ. They were truly a community of fraternal love.” See also W. A. M. Peters, “Ignatius of Loyola and ‘Discernment of Spirits,’” in *Discernment of the Spirit and of Spirits*, by Casiano Floristán Samanes and Christian Duquoc (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 27.

⁴⁷ Piet Penning de Vries, “Communal Election,” in *Communal Discernment: New Trends*, ed. Piet Penning de Vries, John Carroll Futrell, Alex Lefrank (Roma: Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis, 1975), 18.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

4. *Time for speech*: “Each one would enumerate all the disadvantages which could be brought against obedience. Namely, all the arguments which came into his mind and which each one of us separately had found after reflecting, meditating and praying ... On the following day we led the examination in the opposite direction and brought forward all the fruits and advantages of obedience which each one of us had found during prayer and reflection.”⁵⁰
5. *Unanimous decision*: “After having thus deliberated for many days about the solution to our problem, weighing the more important and effective motives and also busying ourselves with the usual exercises of prayer and meditation we finally decided to vote with God’s help, and not by a majority of votes but by a unanimity.”⁵¹
6. *Dedication and presentation for God’s confirmation*: “Thus the first fathers had their decision confirmed by prayer and sacrament: a fortnight later they came together once again to offer their decision to God and voice it for each others’ benefit, each one in turn, and just before going to communion.”⁵²

They eventually unanimously agreed on many resolutions which became the basis for Ignatius’ *Jesuit Constitutions*,⁵³ including absolute obedience to a superior general and the pope,⁵⁴ and the renunciation of chapter government. Pope Paul II approved the new order on Sept 27, 1540 in the Bull “Regimini militantis Ecclesiae,” and Ignatius was elected its first general in April of 1541.⁵⁵ Not surprisingly, given Ignatius’ military

⁵⁰ Ibid., 30. See *Spiritual Exercises* 181 for a similar process.

⁵¹ Penning de Vries, “Communal Election,” 32.

⁵² Ibid., 34.

⁵³ See *CE*, “St. Ignatius Loyola.” See also Jesuits of the New Orleans Province, “The Life of St. Ignatius of Loyola” (<http://norprov.org/spirituality/lifeofignatius.htm> (accessed, September 21, 2012); and *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Saint Ignatius of Loyola: The Jesuit Constitutions,” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/350127/Saint-Ignatius-of-Loyola/4331/The-Jesuit-Constitutions> (accessed September 22, 2012).

⁵⁴ Ignatius famously said, “That we may be altogether of the same mind and in conformity with the Church herself, if she shall have defined anything to be black which appears to our eyes to be white, we ought in like manner to pronounce it to be black. For we must undoubtingly believe, that the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of the Orthodox Church His Spouse, by which Spirit we are governed and directed to Salvation, is the same.” Ignatius Loyola, “Rules for Thinking with the Church” in *Documents of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., ed. Henry Bettenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 272.

⁵⁵ *CE*, “St. Ignatius Loyola.”

background, the Jesuits were to “fight with faithful obedience for *God*,”⁵⁶ but it is somewhat disappointing that after their experience of communal discernment they chose an organizational model which was monarchical.⁵⁷ Perhaps, given both the secular and ecclesiastical governmental structures of that time, it was to be expected. John Carroll Futrell, explains that the Jesuits also chose that form of organization because the Society of Jesus was an “apostolic” (missionary) order and lacked

the stability needed for an on-going chapter form of government. ... Thus from the beginning, the companions were faced with the necessity to respond to their vocation of mobility, while at the same time preserving the profound mutual union which is the being of the Company, and of continually making decisions concerning the life and action of the company. It was the experience of this “apostolic tension” that gradually brought about in the mind of Ignatius the evolution of the role of the superior.⁵⁸

At least in the early days of the order, Futrell points out that,

⁵⁶ Pope Paul II, “Constitution of the Jesuits, Bull of Sept 27, 1540” (“Regimini militantis Ecclesiae”), http://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/vatican/esp_vatican13.htm (accessed September 22, 2012). See also Ignatius’ opening statement for the *Formula of the Institute of the Society of Jesus* in the bull of Pope Julius III, *Exposcit Debitum* (1550): “Whoever desires to serve as a soldier of God beneath the banner of the Cross in our Society, which we desire to be designated by the Name of Jesus, and to serve the Lord alone and the Church, his spouse, under the Roman Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ on earth, should, after a solemn vow of perpetual chastity, poverty and obedience, keep what follows in mind.” Quote from Pasquale Puca, “St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Development of the Society of Jesus,” *L’Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English* (The Cathedral Foundation, 30 January 2008): 12. <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=8113> (accessed September 25, 2012). See also *Living Theology* (2012), <http://www.livingtheology.org.uk/Jesuits.html> (accessed September 23, 2012).

⁵⁷ See *Catholic Encyclopedia (CE)*, s. v. “The Society of Jesus,” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14081a.htm> (accessed September 22, 2012): The chief authority is vested in the general congregation, which elects the general, and could, for certain grave causes, depose him. ... Thus, authority in the Society eventually rests on a democratic basis. But as there is no definite time for calling the general congregation—which in fact rarely occurs except to elect a new general—the exercise of authority is usually in the hands of the general, in whom is vested the fullness of administrative power, and of spiritual authority. He can do anything within the scope of the Constitutions, and can even dispense with them for good causes, though he cannot change them.”

⁵⁸ John Carroll Futrell, “The Ignatian General Congregation and Communal Discernment,” in *Communal Discernment: New Trends*. Piet Penning de Vries, John Carroll Futrell, and Alex Lefrank, eds. (Roma: Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis, 1975), 73. Futrell suggests on 75 that, “in our contemporary culture of participative government and of rapid transportation and communication, there is much greater need and opportunity for the exercise of communal discernment through deliberation than there was during his own time, but without putting the apostolic effectiveness of the Company in jeopardy.” See also, Ladislav M Orsy, *Probing the Spirit: A Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Books, 1976), 23-34.

Ignatius insists that the superior continually make use of communal discernment in carrying out his role as discerner in the name of the community. According to the *Constitutions*, the superior must enter into constant dialogue with the companions about his decisions, especially consulting those among them who are the better discerners, the more so in the measure that the decision concerns more important or more complex issues. Above all, he should seek the advice of those companions who have most access to the concrete evidence, and when he sees that it is best, ask others to make the decision, which he then will make his own.⁵⁹

Ironically, “Ignatius, as soon as he had been chosen as superior, considered himself ‘superior’ and above unanimity,” as is demonstrated by numerous stories from his life.⁶⁰

It is not from Jesuit constitutional structure however, that “Ignatian” discernment is derived, but from the earlier “Deliberation.” About four hundred and thirty years after Ignatius and his companions met to pray and talk about their future together, in the 1970s the Jesuits began to re-explore spiritual discernment. William A Barry comments,

Articles and books began to appear describing and theorizing about the Rules for Discernment of Spirits contained in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Jesuits also began to pay attention to the example of Ignatius and his first companions who engaged in an extended period of communal discernment that led to their decision to ask the Pope to allow them to found a new order, the Society of Jesus. Both of these rediscoveries led some to offer communal workshops to groups who wanted God's help to make critical decisions in those heady days after Vatican II.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Futrell, “The Ignatian General Congregation and Communal Discernment,” 74.

⁶⁰ Penning de Vries, “Communal Election,” 33. He makes reference to the rejection of Juan de Alba and the dismissals of Francesco from Ferrara and Tomaso, as well as several others.

⁶¹ Mary Benet McKinney, O.S.B., *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision Making* (Allen, TX: Tabor Publishing, 1987), v (c.f. 1-8), writes, “Vatican II called the church to renew herself according to the principles of collegiality and to develop collaborative models of shared responsibility with an emphasis on the baptismal rights of all the people of God.” For Jesuit writings on discernment see William A. Barry, “Communal Discernment as a Way to Reconciliation,” *Human Development* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 10. See also Jules J. Toner, “A Method for Communal Discernment of God’s Will,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 3, no. 4 (September, 1971): 120-152; John Carroll Futrell, “Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 4, no. 5 (November, 1972):159-192; Piet Penning de Vries, John Carroll Futrell, and Alex Lefrank. *Communal Discernment: New Trends* (Roma: Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis, 1975); and Casiano Floristán Samanes and Christian Duquoc, *Discernment of the Spirit and of Spirits* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

The model of discernment and decision making that Futrell proposed after studying the “Deliberation” is now widely accepted and used,⁶² and includes the proposed paradigm’s three essential elements (wisdom, the Holy Spirit, and the congregation):

1. *Prayer*: Begin with prayer for light from the Holy Spirit, perhaps including an invitation to shared spontaneous prayer for a few moments. It might be well to situate the prayer by reading from the Scriptures, writings of the founder, or other documents expressing the spirit of the community.
2. *Sharing Cons*: Each person reports from his own individual discernment the reasons he has seen which militate against the proposed choice. These are recorded.
3. *Prayer*: At least a brief break. This must be long enough for each one prayerfully to reflect upon the results of step 2.
4. *Sharing Pros and Checking Consensus*: Each person reports from his own individual discernment the reasons he has seen which favor the proposed choice. These are recorded. At the end of this step find out whether it is already immediately clear to everyone from the recorded con and pro reasons what the election should be. If so, go immediately to step 7. If not, proceed to step 5.
5. *Prayer*: A break period for each one prayerfully to reflect upon the results of step 4 in the light of those of step 2.
6. *Evaluation and Discovery*: The effort is made now to evaluate the weight of the reasons con and pro recorded and then, in the light of this evidence, communally to discern the choice to which the community is called by God. If the Holy Spirit is working through the second and time of election, and if the conditions of authentic communal discernment have been fulfilled, the decision finally should be clear, and confirmation should be experienced unanimously through shared deep peace—finding God together.
7. *Prayer*: The deliberation session should end with a prayer of thanksgiving and of offering the election to the Father with a reaffirmation of corporate commitment to carry out the decision. Perhaps this could include an invitation to spontaneous shared prayer.⁶³

⁶² This method of deliberation is not the same as Ignatian “discernment” as found in the *Spiritual Exercises*, but draws on it. Futrell, “Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience,” 181, writes, “Communities have found that through the use of the method of deliberation, they have finally come to realize that they have indeed fulfilled the prerequisites and that their deliberations now are authentic spiritual discernment.” Besides being cited in many books, Stephen Daryl Robinson has recorded his church’s Council on Ministries’ experience with Ignatian communal discernment in his dissertation *God at our Planning Table: Spiritual Discernment as a Viable Alternative for Church Planning and Programming* (Wesley Theological Seminary, 1989). See also Loyola University Maryland, “The Deliberation of the First (Jesuit) Fathers,” *A Year of Prayer*, 189-193, http://www.loyola.edu/Justice/spirituality/yop_guidebook.pdf (accessed September 21, 2012).

⁶³ Futrell, “Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience,” 172-173.

This process of discernment is not one to be embarked on in a casual manner for Futrell insists, “much preparation is required before it is possible to begin the actual deliberation to discern the corporate election. Unless this preparation has been completed, the method of deliberation not only cannot be successful, it may, as a matter of fact, be disastrous”⁶⁴ He asserts further, “The deliberation itself begins, therefore, only when all possible evidence has been gathered, clarified through discussion, and individually discerned, and when the active love of God in history has indicated through events that there is no more time for preparation, but a decision must be made now”⁶⁵

The deliberation process is also not for spiritual slackers for it assumes that participants’ spiritual life will be characterized by humility⁶⁶ and three other qualities:

- A passionate commitment to follow God. The guidance that we seek is toward that decision that will bring us into the fullest possible participation in the work of God in the world.
- An attitude of indifference toward all other drives and desires. If we are to align ourselves with God’s purposes, we must first detach ourselves from our own desires for wealth, prestige, and security.
- A deep sensitivity to the ways and being of God. This sensitivity is cultivated through prayer, reading and meditating on the Scriptures, worship, and faithful acts of mercy and justice.⁶⁷

This “attitude of indifference” is crucial for participation in Ignatian discernment, but is sometimes misunderstood as lack of concern or interest. Gordon Smith clarifies:

⁶⁴ Ibid., 170.

⁶⁵ Futrell, “Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience,” 172.

⁶⁶ Gordon T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer and the Witness of the Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 41, says, “Ignatius Loyola gave special emphasis to the priority of humility in the Christian life and prayer. It is no coincidence that in the *Spiritual Exercises* the section on humility precedes the explanation of the times for making a choice or decision. For Ignatius, as for the late medieval mystics who shaped his thought, humility was “seeing oneself in truth.” Humility as true self-understanding means that we see ourselves for all that we are—our motives, our feelings, our weaknesses and strengths, and our limitations. It is through humility that we order our affections, and humility is a sign of ordered affections.”

⁶⁷ Frank Rogers, Jr., “Discernment,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1997), 108.

Indifference is not apathy or a lack of affect. It is rather an emotional posture in which we see and respond to God's creation in freedom. We experience an inner freedom from worldly goods because we have come, increasingly, to find that our lives are anchored in the love of God and trust of God's provision for our lives. Regardless of whether the Lord gives us things, we have the freedom of indifference to accept either outcome, not because we do not care or have no preferences, but because what ultimately matters is that we would live in the love of God.⁶⁸

Indifference allows us to be open not only to God's will, but to accept the contributions of others, as they may express concerns or insights that are helpful for moving the group forward, but which may be counter to our own individual desires. Barry notes,

most groups need to develop a trust in one another as deeply prayerful and honestly searching for God's will for the group. Communal discernment means that each member of the group trusts that God will reveal God's hopes for the group through their individual prayer and through their sharing of the fruits of that prayer. To engage in this process I must trust that all the others are sincerely praying and trying to remain open to discern God's will. After all, my future may be on the line if I am willing to abide by the group's decision.⁶⁹

Barry says it is the responsibility of the group's facilitators "to help the group to articulate what it, as a group, wants from God and to help the members to approach God in prayer with that desire. Here it is important to remind the individuals that they are asking God to relate to them precisely as members of this group with the group's desire, e.g., to know that God has hopes for us as a group."⁷⁰ If members can't come to consensus over God's will and a decision must be made, they may vote or delegate

⁶⁸ G. T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus*, 41-42. He says further on 42, "It is not easy to come to this holy indifference. Indeed the great challenge in personal discernment is not so much that we know what God is saying as that we would grow into this indifference. If we are indifferent, hearing God's call will not be difficult. ... Nothing matters so much to this indifference as a lively awareness of the love of God."

⁶⁹ Barry, "Communal Discernment as a Way to Reconciliation," 12. He says on 13, "Any group that has a history together has got some bodies buried somewhere. We have been talking about groups who begin the process with much good will toward one another. Often enough, however, groups do not begin with much good will and trust. This is the case in many of the conflicts in the Church today."

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11. He says further, 11-12, "Just as individuals ask God for what they desire, trusting that God has their good at heart, so too the individuals in this group context approach God with the group's desire trusting that God has the good of this group at heart."

decision making authority.⁷¹ However, Rogers notes,

Whether made by consensus or by vote, however, the decision still requires some confirmation before the community can conclude that it embodies God's leading. One important sign of confirmation is a peaceful conviction permeating the entire community—including those who dissented—that the decision is the one that will most allow the community to be faithful to God.⁷²

Thus, time for further evaluation, discovery, and prayer may be recommended.

The Ignatian model, with its sharing and evaluation of “cons” and “pros,” has been described as “analytical,” relying heavily on reason as well as prayer. “When Jesuits seek consensus, they employ methods of deliberating that solicit and weigh the points of view of the participants in ways that analyze the roots of individual leanings in order to dissolve irrelevant conflict and search out complementary insights that may be masked by superficial disagreements.”⁷³ The use of reason, however, is only part of the process, and attentive listening prayer and self examination play equally large roles. As mentioned earlier, the Spiritual Exercises are foundational for Ignatian discernment because they train the discerner to recognize the movements of his/her own heart and identify the source of those movements. Gordon Smith says Ignatius recognized the need to reflect on

our emotional ups and downs and inner turmoil as well as the deeper emotional disposition of our hearts. This does not mean that Ignatius discounted the place of rational and critical reflection. It is merely that the content or focus of this reflection is what is happening to us emotionally. He was convinced that we could take God and ourselves seriously only if we learned to take emotion and affect seriously. Emotion and feeling were for Ignatius key indicators of the work of God in our lives.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull and R. Taylor McLean, *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 89. See also Futrell, “Communal Discernment,” 184.

⁷² Rogers, “Discernment,” 113.

⁷³ Farnham, Hull, and McLean, *Grounded in God*, 88. See also 82.

⁷⁴ G. T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus*, 39.

Ignatius focused specifically on two categories of emotions, desolations and consolations:

“Desolation” speaks of the emotional orientation that diminishes faith, hope and love. These include the obvious negative emotional states of anger, fear and discouragement but also any emotional heaviness of heart or inner malaise by which one feels, in Ignatius’s words, “listless, tepid (or) unhappy,” in which one does not feel connected to God. “Consolation,” in contrast, is that emotional state of peace or joy in which one senses that one is in communion with the Lord and growing in faith, hope and love.⁷⁵

But emotions are tricky things and all may not be as they seem. The “discernment of spirits” is needed. Peters warns, that these emotional assessments must be tested,

Peace is not just peace, and joy is not just joy, and desolation is not just desolation. That is precisely where discernment comes in. We have too often seen peace taken to be a movement from and towards God, while in actual fact it was no more than the result of a conflict ended; we have seen joy taken to be the fruit of the Spirit, while actually the movement was nothing but Satan moving man into false security, or even the result of a good meal.⁷⁶

Self examination and evaluation of emotions is critical for discerning decision making for, “any opinion, judgment, vision of any advantage or disadvantage is strongly influenced by ‘*affecciones*,’ by inclinations (16, 179-181), even if one is not consciously aware of them.”⁷⁷ Peters concludes, “once movements have been properly discerned and hence clarified as to their whence, whereto and contents, darkness and confusion have been removed, and thus the retreatant will find himself in a much more favourable

⁷⁵ Ibid., referring to *Spiritual Exercises* 316-317. See Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* (315), quoted in Rogers, “Discernment,” 109, who famously said, “It is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul. It is characteristic of the good spirit, however, to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace.”

⁷⁶ Peters, “Ignatius of Loyola and ‘Discernment of Spirits,’” 32. He says further, ‘Spontaneity is quickly taken to be identical with being moved by the Spirit, to be some sort of release of the Spirit: *quod demonstrandum est*. Surely, the history of the Church is there to prove that more often than not spontaneity stands for superficiality; what floats on the top of our consciousness forces its way out, wants to express itself; but this is no guarantee whatever that such spontaneous movement is inspired and guided by God’s Spirit.’ See also G. T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus*, 40-41.

⁷⁷ Peters, “Ignatius of Loyola and ‘Discernment of Spirits,’” 30.

position to discover what pleaseth the Father.”⁷⁸ It is easy to see why a group which comes together personally prepared in this way would likely have a successful and conclusive outcome for their times of communal discernment and decision making.

Quaker Discernment and Decision Making

The Protestant Reformation was a messy business and “by the middle of the seventeenth century in England religious dissent had spawned such a bewilderment of antagonized sects that they threatened to capsize the established religion. All of these movements regarded the Reformation as ‘began not finished. . . . Standing out among them all for the radicalism of their articulated views on Early Church order were the Friends, who soon accepted the epithet of ‘Quakers.’”⁷⁹ The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) rejected all hierarchical church authority, and one of their most important theologians Robert Barclay (1648-1690) believed churches needed to return to

spiritual government . . . as described in the New Testament, and was convinced that the Quaker practice was none other than a return to the primitive Christian model. The early Christians did not have an intricate system of offices and delegation of powers, but met together quite simply, as a group of humble followers of Christ, to try to learn the leading of the Spirit. Barclay believed the time had again come when Christians could meet in little, intimate groups, quite as simply and quite as expectantly, and that the Divine Message would be given.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁷⁹ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 52.

⁸⁰ Elton Trueblood, “The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions.” In *Beyond Dilemmas: Quakers Look at Life*, ed. Sceva Bright Laughlin, 104-24 (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1937), 112. He quotes Robert Barclay, *The Anarchy of the Ranters*, Section VIII, as saying “If so be, in such a church there should arise any difference, there will be an infallible judgment from the Spirit of God, which may be in a general assembly; yet not limited to it, as excluding others: and may prove the judgment of the plurality; yet not to be decided thereby, as if the infallibility were placed there, excluding the fewer. In which meeting or assembly upon such an account, there is no limitation to be of persons particularly chosen; but that all that in a true sense may be reckoned of the Church, as being sober and weighty, may be present and give their judgment.”

Quaker founder George Fox (1624–1691) shared this conviction: “All Friends everywhere, meet together, and in the measure of God’s spirit wait, that with it all your minds may be guided up to God and to receive wisdom from God.”⁸¹

Unfortunately, some in the reform movements mistook individual “guidance” for extremism and license. Elton Trueblood notes “Barclay was especially aware of the dangers of libertinism, apparently much exercised by the outcroppings of this spirit in the infant Quaker Movement. Some had gone so far as to appear naked in public places, holding that they were led of God to make such a demonstration for a spiritual purpose.”⁸² The Quakers’ solution to misguided “inspiration” “included the setting aside of times for group judgment upon matters affecting both individuals and the group, the decision to be rendered not by a vote at the conclusion of a parliamentary debate, but by a joint decision of the entire group as the result of approaching each problem in the mood of reverent search for God’s will.”⁸³ George A. Selleck emphasizes,

Quakerism has always had within it a strong centrifugal force of individualism, but likewise there has always been a centripetal force of corporate life in tension with it; and from the fruitful interaction of these two have come the decisions of the Society. The visions and concerns of individuals prevent the Society from being over-traditional and static; the insights of a gathered group prevent it from moving over-hastily in unconsidered enthusiasm.⁸⁴

These Quaker “times for group judgment,” no matter the topic, were always conducted in the context and spirit of the congregation’s worship. “In an epistle written from Worcester prison on January 30, 1675, George Fox made clear that at their meeting for

⁸¹ George Fox, “Epistle 149,” *Quaker Spirituality, Selected Writings*, ed. by Douglas Steere (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 131.

⁸² Trueblood, “The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions,” 111.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

⁸⁴ George A. Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1977), 3.

business ‘Friends are not to meet like a company of people about town or parish business, neither in their men’s or women’s meetings, but to wait upon the Lord.’”⁸⁵ Early Quaker preacher Edward Burrough (1634-1663) elaborated, asking Friends to decide their business, “not in the way of the world as a worldly assembly of men, by hot contests, by seeking to out-speak and overreach one another in discourse, as if it were . . . two sides violently striving for dominion in the way of caring on some worldly interests for self-advantage”⁸⁶ Instead he encouraged them to act “in the wisdom, love, and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord, submitting to one another in lowliness of heart and in the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁷

Along with other persecuted English reformers (such as the Pilgrims), Quakers immigrated to America to set up communities where they could worship and govern themselves according to what they believed were God’s principles.⁸⁸ As Quakers spread throughout the American colonies they took with them their distinctive form of silent worship and “waiting on the Lord” for guidance in decision making. Richard Foster says,

A classic and dramatic illustration occurred in 1758. John Woolman and others had pricked the conscience of the Society of Friends over their involvement in the demonic institution of slavery. As Philadelphia Yearly Meeting gathered for its business meetings that year the slavery issue was a major agenda item. A great deal was at stake and the issue was hotly debated. John Woolman sat through the various sessions silent, with head bowed and tears in his eyes. Finally, after hours of agonizing prayer he rose and spoke.

⁸⁵ Michael J. Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1983, viii. See also Junker, “Friends’ Practice of Group Spiritual Discernment,” 1.

⁸⁶ Trueblood, “The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions,” 123-124, no quote reference given.

⁸⁷ Junker, “Friends’ Practice of Group Spiritual Discernment,” 6, quoting Burrough from Michael L. Birkel, *Silence and Witness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 67-68.

⁸⁸ William Penn (1644-1718) established the colony of Pennsylvania in 1682 with that goal in mind. Unfortunately Quakers did not find religious freedom in other colonies. See John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism, 1620-1957* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1992), 137.

My mind is led to consider the purity of the Divine Being and the justice of His judgment, and herein my soul is covered with awfulness. ... Many slaves on this continent are oppressed and their cries have entered into the ears of the Most High. ... It is not a time for delay. Should we now be sensible of what he requires of us, and through a respect to the private interests of some persons, or through a regard to some friendships which do not stand upon an immutable foundation, neglect to do our duty in firmness and constancy ... God may by terrible things in righteousness answer us in this matter.

The entire Yearly Meeting melted into a spirit of unity as a result of this compassionate witness. They responded as one voice to remove slavery from their midst.⁸⁹

Quaker discernment and decision making has remained essentially unchanged to the present day and includes the three guidance elements in the proposed model (wisdom, the Holy Spirit, the congregation).⁹⁰ George A. Selleck briefly describes the process:

a meeting for the transaction of business is conducted in the same expectant waiting for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the meeting for worship. It is presided over by a clerk, who after a beginning period of worship, brings before the meeting such business as is right to consider on any particular occasion. Time

⁸⁹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 157-158, quoting Woolman from Rufus M. Jones, *The Quakers in the American Colonies* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1921), 517. Foster says further, 158, “That united decision is particularly impressive when we realize that Quakers were the only body that asked slaveholders to reimburse their slaves for their time in bondage. It is also striking to realize that under the prompting of the Spirit, Quakers had voluntarily done something that not one of the antislavery revolutionary leaders—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry—was willing to do. So influential had been that united decision of 1758 that by the time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence Quakers had completely freed themselves from the institution of slavery.”

⁹⁰ See Lon Fendall, Jan Wood and Bruce Bishop. *Practicing Discernment Together—Finding God's Way Forward in Decision Making* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2007) for a contemporary and very helpful book on group discernment written by three Quakers. See also, Paul Anderson, “With Christ in Decision Making: His Present Leadership among Friends” (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1991); Bruce Bishop, “Discernment: Corporate and Individual Perspectives.” *Quaker Religious Thought* 106-107 (November 2006): 18-25; and Charles J. Conniry, Jr. “Discernment: Corporate and Individual Considerations.” *Quaker Religious Thought* 106-107 (November 2006): 7-17. Paul A. Hare, “Group Decision by Consensus: Reaching Unity in the Society of Friends,” *Sociological Inquiry* 43 (1): 75, says, “Although the method of reaching consensus is widely used by Friends in their committees and other decision-making groups, it has been developed primarily for the Monthly Meetings at which the business of the Meeting (church) is conducted. The basic unit of the Society of Friends is the Meeting. Membership is held in the Local Meeting rather than in the Society as a whole. To share common concerns, representatives of Local Meetings, called “Monthly Meetings” since they tend to meet for business once a month, meet together in “Quarterly Meetings” four times a year. In turn representatives of Monthly Meetings, in an area covered by several Quarterly Meetings, will meet together once a year in a “Yearly Meeting” Finally representatives of meetings in several Yearly Meetings covering even larger geographical areas will meet every five years. In every case the “authority” rests with the local meeting and in fact with the individual member. A decision cannot be handed down from the top.”

is permitted for careful and deliberate consideration, all members present who feel a concern to speak being heard. When it appears to the clerk that the meeting has reached a decision, he or she states clearly what appears to be the sense of the meeting. If the members then give approval to the clerk's statement, a minute is written incorporating it and read before the conclusion of the meeting. No vote is taken. There is no decision made by a majority that overrides opposition. Action is taken only when the group can proceed in substantial unity. Should the clerk sense times of unproductive argumentation, he or she may call for quiet waiting or for postponement.⁹¹

This method of decision making is guided by several theological convictions. The first is that God continues to speak to and guide his people through his Spirit. Quakers believe,

The devout Christian can and should expect as close a relationship with God as was known by those who wrote the Bible. Christ is as truly able to lead His followers today as when He walked in Palestine. The "Real Presence" is a perennial possibility, not especially in bread and wine, but in any features of our ordinary workaday world.⁹²

This belief in the real presence of God leads to the expectation that when believers gather to worship, fellowship, and conduct business,

the Spirit of Christ is present in all members to shape and guide the Church. Quaker silence in meeting is not, as some have thought more recently, a form of elite mysticism or a silent worship. It is a time of expectant waiting until someone—and the point is that it can and will be anyone—is moved to utterance. There is in this respect no formal difference between a meeting for worship and one for deliberation.⁹³

Selleck points out that worship "with an awareness of the real presence and direction of Christ in the worshiping fellowship" precedes and permeates the business meeting for "the religious fellowship experienced during such a period of reverent waiting is helpful also in seeking Divine guidance and in finding unity of action in the transaction of

⁹¹ Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*, 1-2.

⁹² Trueblood, "The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions," 107.

⁹³ Yoder. *Body Politics*, 67-68. Morley in *Beyond Consensus*, 14, says, "When a 'member' of the Meeting experiences 'an opening' (that is, a revelation) he or she may share that with the others gathered."

business. Only as Friends are aware that they are functioning in the Divine presence does the Quaker method really work.”⁹⁴ He says further,

Friends intend to seek God’s will rather than merely human wisdom. Decisions do not in the end depend on the particular knowledge and wisdom of certain outstanding leaders, but on a gathered insight in which the whole meeting is unified. The method is based on the faith that each person can know God’s will and that God’s will is one. The meeting for business seeks to find it.⁹⁵

The practice of persevering “waiting on the Lord” together is key, and “group spiritual discernment operates on a generous time schedule, resisting the world’s perspective that time is scarce and decisions must be made expeditiously. George Fox advised Friends to ‘... wait to hear the voice of the Lord there, and waiting there, and keeping close to the Lord, a discerning will grow.’”⁹⁶

While discerning the voice of God and his will is possible, is not straightforward or automatic. It is possible to be deceived. Early Quaker apologist Isaac Penington (1616–1679) warned,

It is not an easie matter, in all cases clearly and understandingly to discern the Voice of the Shepherd, the Motions of God’s Spirit, and certainly to distinguish the Measure of Life from all other Voices, Motions and Appearances whatsoever. Through much growth in the Truth, through much waiting on the Lord, through

⁹⁴ Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*, 5. He says further, “Secular groups sometimes use a method of consensus similar to a Friends meeting for business, but the Quaker method is not simply a technique; it is a faith that finds expression in a method. The method without the faith will work so long as differences are not too great but may then break down. The essential safeguard against such breakdown among Friends is the faith that there is a will of God for persons and discernible by them, and that faithful following of the light given us will lead into a realizable unity.” Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule*, 60, says his research revealed that conflict can lead to and be the result of situations where, “the externals of Quaker decision making may be observed ... [but] the dynamic of seeking higher unity through receptiveness to that of God in the other was only minimally at work.”

⁹⁵ Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*, 4.

⁹⁶ Junker, “Friends’ Practice of Group Spiritual Discernment,” 3-4, quoting from George Fox, “Epistle 149,” *Quaker Spirituality, Selected Writings*, 129. Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*, 11, notes, “It is sometimes objected that the Quaker business method is too slow, since frequently action must be postponed until unity can be achieved. But once unity is achieved, the meeting may go forward quickly with the united support of its members, which may in the end be more efficient than another group that has decided quickly by voting but does not have united support for its action.”

much Fear and Trembling, through much Sobriety aid Meekness, through much exercise of the Senses this is at length given and obtained.⁹⁷

To aid their discernment “early Friends often looked to the Scriptures for authentication of their decisions. Was there consistency between their behaviors and the Bible? While they did not see the Bible as a substitute for the Inward Teacher, they considered the writers to be divinely inspired.”⁹⁸ The Scriptures gave them wisdom.

Another distinctive of Quaker discernment is that meeting participation is not limited by age, sex, race, or education, etc., and “sometimes the unlearned have valuable insights which great learning tends to hinder.”⁹⁹ All may share because it is believed,

the Spirit of God is present within every person. Each person has, therefore, a fragment of God’s wisdom which should be listened to and respected. The fullness of the Spirit’s guidance is discerned when everyone’s wisdom blends together to produce a decision that each person can affirm—in short, when consensus has been reached. Often, the solution is a higher synthesis of the various views, a case where two and two make five.¹⁰⁰

This conviction places a responsibility on members to pay attention to their own spiritual life and devotional practices for as Dorothy Reichardt and Richard Sartwell recognize,

if we are to have power in our corporate discernment, we must be gathered as individuals who have already learned the way of obedience and practiced discernment. ... if we are not in the Life personally, we shall not likely find

⁹⁷ Isaac Penington. *Some Queries concerning the Order and Government of the Church of Christ*. This publication was not dated, but was “written in Alisbury Prison,” probably in 1666. Quoted in Trueblood, “The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions,” 109-110.

⁹⁸ Junker, “Friends’ Practice of Group Spiritual Discernment,” 8.

⁹⁹ Trueblood, “The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions,” 116.

¹⁰⁰ Rogers, “Discernment, 110-111. See also Farnham, Hull, and McLean, *Grounded in God*, 86-87, who quote *Britain Yearly Meeting*, 3.05: “It is no part of Friends concern for truth that any should be expected to water down a strong conviction or be silent merely for the sake of easy agreement. Nevertheless we are called to honour our testimony that to every one is given a measure of the light, and that it is in the sharing of knowledge, experience and concern that the way towards unity will be found.”

ourselves ‘in the Life’ when gathered for meeting for worship on the occasion of business.”¹⁰¹

It also means that one takes seriously that God speaks to and through others, and that one must prayerfully and attentively listen to them and the Spirit speaking through their words.¹⁰² Quaker meetings are presided over by the clerk who manages the process, invites members to speak, and listens for trends in the discussion, seeking to sum up the leading of God or the “sense of the meeting” in a “minute.”¹⁰³ The clerk

tries to stimulate thought by piercing questions or the balancing of opinions as they appear. He [or she] is not the master of the group, but more truly its servant, providing the necessary link for co-operative thinking. Like the Platonic Socrates the group discussion leaders’ purpose is not to present formed and finished ideas of his [or her] own, but to be a spiritual midwife, helping the members of the group to bear their own intellectual children.¹⁰⁴

All in the meeting are called to, “be alert to find the Truth even in a previously unacceptable point of view. Frequently, by a process of cross-fertilization, an entirely new solution may arise which incorporates both the majority and minority points of view and which is new thought to both.”¹⁰⁵ This requires willingness to humbly

move past willfulness, ego, and our own agenda in order to seek the Truth. We share our understandings and perspective with the group, and then try to cultivate

¹⁰¹ Dorothy Reichardt and Richard Sartwell, “Participants/Observers Summary Report,” *Friends Consultation on Discernment* (Richmond, Indiana: Quaker Hill Conference Center, 1985), 59, quoted in Junker, “Friends’ Practice of Group Spiritual Discernment,” 7.

¹⁰² Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*, 2-3, comments, “The Quaker conviction that the light of Christ is given in some measure to everyone implies both an individual apprehension of the will of God and also an understanding of God’s will mediated through the insight of others.” See also Junker, “Friends’ Practice of Group Spiritual Discernment,” 6.

¹⁰³ Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*, 6-7. On 12 he notes “Usually the clerk both presides and records the minutes of the meeting. In some meetings, however, the functions of the clerk are divided between a presiding clerk and a recording clerk.” He says on 3, “After due consideration has been given to all points of view expressed in the meeting, it is the duty of the clerk to weigh carefully the various expressions and to state what he or she believes to be the sense of the meeting, not alone according to numbers but also according to the recognized experience and spiritual insight of the members.”

¹⁰⁴ Trueblood, “The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions,” 105.

¹⁰⁵ Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*, 13.

an attitude of detachment, recognizing that we each only partially see the whole. George Fox wrote to Oliver Cromwell, “be still and silent from thy own wisdom, wit, craft, subtilty, or policy that would arise in thee, but stand single to the Lord without any end to thyself.”¹⁰⁶

From the above quote some might think that wise consideration of issues is neglected but, “Quakers have been practicing discernment for more than three centuries, and enjoy a reputation for intellectual competence and for studying issues carefully. For them, the time of discernment is one of allowing the rational to combine with the intuitive and numinous.”¹⁰⁷ Hallock Hoffman describes the Quakers mindset:

Spiritual discernment seems to flourish best from this contemplative, reflective, non-linear state of mind which is a wide, non-judgmental almost non-attached but very alert attentiveness. Being in the Mind of Christ, however, does not mean being spaced-out for the analytic faculties are not suppressed; they are merely put into their rightful harmony by being surrounded and cushioned by a more vast mind which takes all things into account. Indeed, our analytical faculties are at least as sharp if not sharper in the Mind of Christ than they are at other times; the difference is that here we know that we are not just our surface mind, as we Westerners tend to assume, and the difference is that this surface mind is no longer the master, but the tool, of the more integrated person we become in the Mind of Christ.¹⁰⁸

This understanding is foundational for the Quaker discernment of the “sense of the meeting.” Although the issue at hand may be well researched and discussed outside of the meeting, what is sought is the leading and “Mind of Christ,” “not unanimity of thought or judgment. ... While rational arguments may be presented to sway the final

¹⁰⁶ Junker, “Friends’ Practice of Group Spiritual Discernment,” 6. Quoting from George Fox, “Epistle 149,” *Quaker Spirituality, Selected Writings*, 87.

¹⁰⁷ Farnham, Hull, and McLean, *Grounded in God*, 82. At the “Leadership Institute for Group Discernment” at George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon on May 17-20, 2010, the importance of preparing for the meeting both spiritually and practically was stressed, with presenters “providing the group with appropriate information in a timely manner” (“Group Discernment” handout, 2). During the meeting presenters were encouraged to use handouts, PowerPoint presentations, charts, etc. to “present the issue in clear, neutral language that makes it clear what is being asked of the group,” and “present the appropriate information in a *digestible* form” (Ibid.).

¹⁰⁸ William Tabor in the *Friends Consultation on Discernment* (Richmond, IN: Quaker Hill Conference Center, 1985), 37, quoted by Farnham, Hull and McLean, *Grounded in God*, 83.

decision, they will not be the basis of decision.”¹⁰⁹ This is why, “a strong feeling on the part of even one Friend that the meeting is moving in opposition to the Truth, to the guidance of the Spirit, may properly be sufficient to block action of a meeting, whereas the objection of several on the basis of prudence or of human wisdom may not be.”¹¹⁰

What Quakers call the “sense of the meeting” is not the same as “consensus.” Barry Morley says, “Consensus involves a process in which we promulgate, argue, and select or compromise ideas until we can arrive at an acceptable decision. When we seek the sense of the meeting, the decision is a by-product. It happens along the way. The purpose of seeking the sense of the meeting is to gather ourselves in unity in the presence of Light.”¹¹¹ Selleck explains that for Friends the, “great affirmation that the Light is given in some measure to every one implied that each may also be led, if not in the same path, at least in the same direction. Thus the nearer the members of a group come to this one Light, the nearer they will be to one another.”¹¹² Thus decision making and discernment are approached with the belief that,

a group, meeting in the right spirit, may be given a greater insight than any single person. ... If an individual differs from what appears to be the general sense of the meeting, it may be taken as a sign that the Divine will has not quite been grasped

¹⁰⁹ Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*, 13.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹¹ Morley, *Beyond Consensus*, 14. On 5, quoting the comments of other Friends he says, “Through consensus we decide it; through sense of the meeting we turn it over, allowing it to be decided. “Reaching consensus is a secular process,” says a Friend. “In sense of the meeting God gets a voice.” ... Another Friend explains it this way: “Consensus is the product of willfulness. We *will* ourselves to a decision. Sense of the Meeting is a product of *willingness* in which we allow ourselves to be led. It is the difference between reason and faith.”

¹¹² Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*, 7. Morley, *Beyond Consensus*, 30, says, “When Quakers reach a sense of the meeting, they arrive individually at a place of internal harmony which manifests in collective outward harmony.”

and that the inclusion of the new insight may give a more accurate determination of the Divine will.¹¹³

Because of this the contributions of all are not only welcomed, but encouraged:

Each vocal contribution will be something added to the material in the mind of Friends, a fact or insight or judgment sincerely and humbly given, not in argument or debate, not deliberately criticizing a previous contribution, but a statement of truth, as seen by the speaker. Each may have some of the truth. Everyone must want to reach a decision and be open to new truth. There is no room for political maneuvering or coming in with set positions.¹¹⁴

Morley sums up the difference between consensus and “sense of the meeting” saying “A Friend wrote to me, “In the consensus process we have investment in our agenda. Under the sense of the meeting we have to let go of our agenda and listen to God’s agenda.”¹¹⁵

The ability to let go of agendas in a meeting is often dependant upon trust in and care for other group members. Selleck notes, “The Quaker method is likely to be successful in proportion as the members are acquainted with one another; better still, if real affection exists among them. The corporate life of the Society has been fostered in worship and fellowship, in the sharing of joy and suffering, in common action and in acceptance of a common discipline.”¹¹⁶ This common caring greatly aids the process, especially when there is serious initial disagreement. Trueblood points out,

The experience of an early stage of strong differences of opinion followed by a later stage of the discussion in which the differences are overcome by a deeper understanding occurs so often that Friends expect it. The point is that they *wait* for this culmination. . . . The Quaker method is calculated to discourage the

¹¹³ Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*, 8. He says on 6, “Friends endeavor to give unhurried and sympathetic consideration to all proposals and expressions of opinion. They also endeavor to respect an earnest and sincere minority and, if it seems necessary, may postpone action until they have secured more light on the question at issue and have attained a greater degree of unity.”

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹⁵ Morley, *Beyond Consensus*, 11, 12.

¹¹⁶ Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*, 3. See also Trueblood, “The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions,” 113.

development of party spirit within the group. Then the discussion is not devoted to the winning of a party victory, but to the ascertainment of the truth.¹¹⁷

It is as Quakers come to a sense of unity that they believe they are discerning God's will.

Hallock Hoffman compares "unity" with "unanimity" and clarifies their differences:

Unity, not unanimity, is the aim of the meeting. The distinction is crucial. A group organized according to the rule "one man, one vote" reaches unanimity, that special condition of majority rule in which the majority happens to include all the members. Unity is more complex. It does not necessarily reflect total agreement on the issue under discussion. It incorporates a perception of the relationship of the members to each other and to the issue. ... The unity sought is a recognition of what decision is proper for the meeting as a whole. Unanimity requires that all reach the same opinion on the issue to be decided. Unity requires all to reach the same conclusion about what should be done in the name of all, even when opinions may still differ.¹¹⁸

Unity recognizes that God can guide his people corporately through his Spirit and bring them to loving agreement in the midst of their differences.

Wesleyan Quadrilateral Discernment and Decision Making

England at the beginning of the eighteenth century was morally and religiously in severe decline. David Lyle Jeffrey describes it saying,

Rationalism had reinforced the moderationism of the Established Church, which for political as well as spiritual reasons became highly intolerant of any form of visible spirituality. After the collapse of the Puritan Commonwealth and the restoration of the monarchy with Charles II in 1660, the Church became effec-

¹¹⁷ Trueblood, "The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions," 118. Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting*, 9, says, "If there are serious differences of opinion, perhaps held tenaciously by some who feel sure that their way is the only right one, it is frequently possible to find unity by recourse to a period of silent prayer. It often happens that objections are then withdrawn or some new way opens which had not previously been suggested. Such a way transcends compromise; it is the discovery at a deeper level of what all really desire. It may be necessary to postpone action to a later meeting to allow judgment to mature before a unity may be found."

¹¹⁸ Hallock Hoffman, "The Quaker Dialogue," in *The Civilization of the Dialogue* 2, no 1 (1968): 10 (Santa Barbara, CA: Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions). Trueblood, "The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions," 118, stresses that the minute is to be "the judgment of the group *as a group* and not the judgment of isolated individuals. It is known that decisions are reached jointly which never could have been reached separately. A clerk cannot get the sense of the meeting by calling the members on the telephone and asking their opinions, as is sometimes done in committee work. Friends expect a creative development of thought as men and women search together."

tively a department of state. Both Puritans on the left and Catholics and Anglo-Catholics on the right were driven out of the Church with vindictive ferocity.¹¹⁹

Devout pastors were stripped of their parishes, persecuted, imprisoned, and declared insane, along with faithful church members.¹²⁰ “The practical result of the expulsion of genuine spiritual leadership from the Church and of the nearly complete corruption of its administrative hierarchy was a wholesale neglect of spiritual life at the parish level.”¹²¹ Alcoholism, crime, and severe poverty plagued the lower classes while, debauchery and corruption characterized many of those in high society.¹²² Deism replaced Christianity in wealthy and powerful circles and “for many, including Lord Shaftesbury and the Catholic-born Alexander Pope, deistic antibiblicism was a badge of intelligence and fashionable good taste.”¹²³ Jeffrey says further,

Any claim to individual spiritual experiences, any pretense to vision, or any excess of zeal (“enthusiasm”) was eschewed as irrational and vulgar—even socially dangerous. The definition of religious extravagance was codified by the Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, for whom any unverifiable presumption of personal revelation or divine calling was to be deplored and any extraordinary signs seen as delusory. “Reason,” he said, “must be our last judge and guide in everything.”¹²⁴

It was in this cultural atmosphere that John Wesley (1703-1791), after his spiritual experience at a Moravian Bible study in Aldersgate, began preaching the gospel in the

¹¹⁹ David Lyle Jeffrey, *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 2. See his excellent introduction to this book for a more detailed picture of the historic situation.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3. On 6 Jeffrey says, “‘Madness’ was thus the charge most often levied against any sort of serious and outspoken Christianity, and it is certain that many were locked up in insane asylums for life simply for preaching or declaring their faith openly. ... ‘Reason’ became at once the arch enemy of visible faith and the shibboleth of a dead religion.”

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹²² See *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2. Quoting from Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Bk. 4:19:14).

open air, starting the movement known as Methodism. There was a revival of genuine faith among the lower classes and “the official hierarchy expressed predictable alarm, fueled by almost paranoid speculation concerning the possible consequences.”¹²⁵ Many churches closed to Wesley and his converts, so he sought other methods for discipling new believers. However, unlike the Anabaptists, “while the Methodist societies, classes and bands formed a distinct subcommunity within the Church of England, they were never forced by the civil and religious power structure to become a separate and distinct sect.”¹²⁶ The organization Wesley set up for the movement combined Anglican and Moravian ecclesiologies. Frank Baker notes that Wesley joined

two fundamentally different views of the Church. One was that of an historical institution, organically linked to the apostolic church by a succession of bishops and inherited customs, served by a priestly caste who duly expounded the Bible and administered the sacraments in such a way as to preserve the ancient traditions on behalf of all who were made members by baptism. According to the other view the Church was a fellowship of believers who shared both the apostolic experience of God’s living presence and also a desire to bring others into this same personal experience by whatever methods of worship and evangelism seemed most promising to those among them whom the Holy Spirit had endowed with special gifts of prophecy and leadership.¹²⁷

From Anglicanism he retained an episcopal hierarchy of local leaders and stewards (deacons, elders, exhorters, local and itinerant preachers), bishop-appointed presiding elders, bishops, and a general conference.¹²⁸ For the most part Methodist decision making

¹²⁵ Ibid., 6. He adds, “It is of no incidental significance for an understanding of Establishment opposition to the revival that leaders such as John and Charles Wesley, for example, were known to have sprung from a lineage deep in both Puritan and Jacobite wings of English Christianity.”

¹²⁶ Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 117.

¹²⁷ Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth Press, 1970), 137, quoted in Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 71.

¹²⁸ See Thomas Asbury Morris, *A Discourse on Methodist Church Polity* (Cincinnati, OH: R.P. Thompson Printer, 1860), 38-70, http://books.google.com/books?id=qNIUCoSqPhoC&pg=PA3&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4# (accessed September 14, 2012).

operated “top-down.” From Moravianism he adopted a small group structure and “Wesley saw himself as imitating the primitive church in bringing Methodists together in close-knit societies. The classes and bands provided discipline, correction and mutual aid on the New Testament pattern.”¹²⁹ They also provided a training ground for raising up lay leaders and ministers, and at least the possibility for limited local decision making.¹³⁰

To guide decision making, Wesley retained the “Anglican triad” of Scripture, reason, and antiquity, and added the inner witness of the Spirit, resulting in

the Wesleyan quadrilateral ... with Scripture as the “norming norm” to be placed above all other authority. Wesley was a man of reason in an age of rationalism; yet he was roundly charged with enthusiasm or fanaticism because of his stress on experience and his openness to the expression of emotion. He was at once a High Churchman and a Pietist; a traditionalist and an innovator; a biblicist and an experientialist.”¹³¹

Wesley’s conviction that the inner witness of the Spirit (Rom 8:15-16) was essential for true faith arose out of his own experience. He knew what it meant to believe intellectually in the Gospel but have no personal sense of the work of God in one’s own life.

He was convinced that the Aldersgate experience of the “heart strangely warmed” was a direct, unmediated testimony of the Spirit to his inner being. ... He was

¹²⁹ Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 117. On 55 he says, “The classes normally met one evening each week for an hour or so. Each person reported on his or her spiritual progress, or on particular needs or problems, and received the support and prayers of the others. “Advice or reproof was given as need required, quarrels were made up, misunderstandings removed: And after an hour or two spent in this labour of love, they concluded with prayer and thanksgiving [John Wesley, *Works*, VIII, 253-254].” See also G. T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus*, 45.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 163, says, “The experience of John Wesley shows what most Christians suspect: that the essential qualifications for effective, redemptive ministry have little if anything to do with formal education or ecclesiastical status and everything to do with spiritual growth, maturity and structural flexibility. On the other hand, Wesley would not tolerate incompetence. He worked hard at training his helpers and traveling preachers.”

¹³¹ Ibid., 71. Gordon T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer and the Witness of the Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 45, says, “Wesley was a churchman deeply rooted in his Anglican heritage, which informed his conviction that the inner experience of the Spirit is necessarily complemented by external realities that provide parameters that regulate the experience of the Spirit. They are three: Scripture, the church and reason.” The term “Wesleyan quadrilateral” was coined by the 20th-century American Methodist historian and scholar Albert C. Outler in his book *John Wesley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

convinced that his own experience, taken together with the testimony of Holy Scripture and the historic witness of the Church, confirmed the vital place of the Spirit's witness in the life of the Christian believer.¹³²

Reason was not enough. The emotions and affections had to be involved also.

Wesley affirmed the priority of the heart in Christian faith and piety based on the conviction that true Christianity is fundamentally a heartfelt response to the love and grace of God. As with Ignatius, this did not mean that he discounted the mind. Not for a moment. It is merely that he believed the primary element in human identity is found in what he termed the "heart."¹³³

Similar to Ignatius Loyola, while affirming the emotions and experience, Wesley understood the real possibility of deception and "this emphasis on the affections and a religion of the heart demanded discernment. As Wesley himself noted, 'How many have mistaken the voice of their own imagination for this witness of the Spirit of God, and then idly presumed they were the children of God, while they were doing the works of the devil!'"¹³⁴ Like Ignatius, Wesley emphasized the importance of recognizing one's tendency towards prideful self-deception, and the need to seek the humility and self-awareness which would enable one to accept correction from others. Gordon Smith says,

a person of humility is disposed to the purposes and will of God. For Wesley, without a fundamental humility or meekness, expressed in a submission of the spirit before the holiness and goodness of God, there can be no knowledge of God. This submission is the antithesis of self-exaltation and self-centeredness. Only in this state of humility can we hear God in truth.¹³⁵

¹³² G. T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus*, 42.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 44, quoting from John Wesley, *Works* 1:269, see also 5:277-78. Smith continues: "Wesley emphasized that there are two signs that give evidence that what we are experiencing is authentically of the Spirit. The first is a deep, heartfelt assurance that we are children of God—a confidence that is evident in our joy. The second is moral renewal and reform."

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, *The Voice of Jesus*, 46.

To guide discernment and check mixed motives Wesley relied first on Scripture, and then reason and tradition.¹³⁶ He was convinced, “The inner witness of the Spirit will never contradict the Scriptures. The Spirit’s inner witness is always in harmony with the Spirit-inspired written witness. Consequently, Wesley could assert that a Christian believer matures in fellowship with the Spirit through prayer, but equally, in rigorous study of the Scripture.”¹³⁷ In response to charges of “enthusiasm” by his rationalistic detractors, Wesley stressed the need to balance the inner witness of the Spirit by the use of reason.¹³⁸

Wesley always insisted that God does not call us to be irrational. He believed that God does not violate prudence and seasoned human judgment. Indeed he affirmed that reason is one of the essential elements in the formation of a Christian theology. He distinguished between affections and passions. Passions are involuntary emotions, uninformed by either reason or the will—thus the danger of zeal without knowledge. True affections are informed and guided by reason.¹³⁹

In addition to Scripture and reason he relied on insight from the Early Church’s example and creeds.¹⁴⁰ “He recognized and appreciated the Christian tradition, which he

¹³⁶ Ibid. He says, “Wesley’s religion of the heart, his call for an affective faith, found expression in submission to Holy Scripture, within the context of the Christian community, and demanded the transformation of character. It was an affirmation of an inward reality that included external verification. He did not call for a denial of tradition, reason or the authority of Scripture. On the contrary, he emphasized all three.”

¹³⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹³⁸ Ibid., in footnote 7 on 42 says, “In response to those who denounced him and insisted that reasonable Christians did not believe in such things as an inner witness, Wesley had apt responses. Of those who might say, ‘But madmen, French prophets, and enthusiasts of every kind, have imagined they experience this witness,’ Wesley replied with, ‘They have so; and perhaps not a few of them did, although they did not retain it long: But if they did not, this is no proof at all that others have not experienced it; as a madman’s *imagining* himself a king, does not prove that there are no *real* kings’ (John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler [Nashville: Abingdon, 1984], 1:293).”

¹³⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁴⁰ Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 120-121.

presumed to have been led and governed by the Spirit of God. The inner witness could not, he believed, contradict the ongoing witness of the Spirit to the Church.”¹⁴¹

Similar to Ignatian discernment and decision making, the Wesleyan model is not taken from historic Methodist practice, but from Methodists creatively developing a model faithful to their heritage. In 1998 Garrie Stevens, Pamela Lardear and Sharon Duger published their congregational discernment, strategic planning, and decision-making model in *Seeking & Doing God’s Will: Discernment for the Community of Faith*. It is based on the Wesleyan quadrilateral and includes all three elements from our proposed model (wisdom, the Holy Spirit and the congregation). They designed a process which is “communal as it draws upon Scripture and tradition, yet it depends upon the individual reasoning and experiences of all of the people of God.”¹⁴² They claim, “Faithful engagement with the quadrilaterals fourfold sources—Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—requires a setting in which individual and communal experiences of faith contribute together to the process of discerning God’s will.”¹⁴³

The Wesleyan quadrilateral model follows the pattern of: (1) gathering for prayer and explaining the process and the focal question, (2) exploring the congregation’s history and traditions/insights from Church history, (3) studying and discussing relevant Scriptural passages, (4) spending an extended time in silent prayer and reflection on the focal question, (5) inventorying the congregation’s gifts, resources and needs, and the community’s needs, and suggesting ideas and options, or making proposals that answer

¹⁴¹ G. T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus*, 45.

¹⁴² Garrie Stevens, Pamela Lardear, and Sharon Duger, *Seeking & Doing God's Will: Discernment for the Community of Faith* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1998), 9.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

the focal question, seeking to come to consensus, and (6) closing the process with a time of sharing, prayer and commitment.

As with Ignatian and Quaker congregational discernment and decision making, the Wesleyan model requires preparation:

At a minimum, people must accept a basic premise of discernment: God has a will for the life of the congregation and wants to make that will known. In addition, even people who have spent all of their lives in the church will probably not be familiar with corporate prayer that is essentially listening, with decision-making that is consensus based, with storytelling that rehearses God's activity among the people, and with a recalling of Scripture that emerges from the group. Therefore, for people to participate fully in a discernment experience, a considerable amount of teaching and learning is necessary. Groups often need an extended time of practicing the discernment process before they feel a significant level of comfort and mastery.¹⁴⁴

Congregation members may need teaching and training in discernment processes, consensus building and listening prayer practices, story-telling, and communication and conflict resolution skills.¹⁴⁵ Extra time may be needed for trust building if the group has not met together previously, or is conflicted.

The greater the degree of conflict in the group or the level of controversy surrounding the issue, the greater the need for the group to have focused time and space for the discernment process. Retreats provide the time and setting needed to minimize the friction among participants, to minimize the participants potential discomfort with the issue, and to increase the effectiveness of the groups work of discernment.¹⁴⁶

Once the congregation is prepared, the discernment/decision making process can begin.

The aim of the first step, the "Gathering Movement" is "to create both a safe and sacred space so that participants may discern God's will."¹⁴⁷ The desire is that they

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 27-29.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 28.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 48.

gather in the power of the Spirit, conscious of their status as God's people. Gathering the group in this way is fundamental for discernment, for it marks them, or sets them aside, as God's people, created by God for God's will, rather than as a group of people inclined to follow their own desires. Attention is redirected from the individuals to the group and from the group to God.¹⁴⁸

The second movement, "Tradition," seeks, "to help participants ground the congregation's story in the story of what God has done in the past; to allow the historical perspective to provide insight as the group seeks God's will for the focal question it selected in Movement 1."¹⁴⁹ Exploring its Christian heritage and history helps the congregation members gain new insights as they

discern God's leading through story—both the stories that make up the tradition of the congregation and stories drawn from the tradition of the Christian Church through the ages. Discernment often comes as participants listen to the stories of their own congregation and as those stories are woven together with the story of the Christian Church as a whole.¹⁵⁰

This may "deepen the group's gratitude for God's faithfulness to God's people, and may strengthen its resolve to continue seeking God's will for the issues before it."¹⁵¹

The purpose of the "Scripture" Movement" is "to weave the congregation's story together with the biblical story so that Scripture may provide insight as the group seeks God's guidance for the focal question identified in Movement 1."¹⁵² In response to "Why is Scripture primary for the process of discernment?" Stevens, Lardear, and Duger reply,

Scripture locates the work of discernment in the arena of God's saving love for the earth and all its creatures. Scripture holds Christians in the main current of God's work in the world. Of the four movements of the quadrilateral, Scripture is the one that turns our hearts from ourselves to God.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 20. See also 8.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵² Ibid., 58.

In addition to providing the grounds for all of our thinking, praying, sharing, and reflecting, the Scriptures offer us inspiration for the journey of faith. . . . We need courage for such a journey. Scripture offers such courage in the stories of our mothers and fathers in faith who have gone before us.¹⁵³

The “Experience” movement’s intent is “to help participants immerse themselves in the presence of God in order to surrender desires and aims that may obstruct their experience of God; to reflect on how the group’s experience of God’s presence may provide insight into discerning God’s will for the focal question.”¹⁵⁴ While recognizing that God’s presence cannot be forced, “waiting upon God in a time of silence and gratefully acknowledging the leading of God’s Spirit in the lives of all the participants opens the group to hearing a new, and often surprising, word from God.”¹⁵⁵ Individuals are urged to pray and “share with the group images, insights, or inspiration that they have received from God during the time of silence. These may be vital in shaping the way the group approaches the issue or issues before them.”¹⁵⁶

The “Reason” movement’s purpose is “to help participants shape a faithful response to God’s leading with regard to the focal question; to help participants see how God’s leading is revealed in the spiritual gifts and identity of the congregation, in the needs of the world, in the promptings of the spirit, and in the living Word.”¹⁵⁷ It “builds upon the ideas of all the participants in the group instead of playing off the merits of the

¹⁵³ Ibid., 10. They add, “Many biblical stories are also powerful examples of the experience of discernment itself. There are numerous biblical accounts of individuals and communities seeking the will of God for the world and looking for specific direction for their lives.” See also 7-8.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 62. See also 23.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 23. On 26-27 they say, “Groups may be surprised by the outcome of a discernment process. Sometimes a completely new idea takes shape within the group; sometimes an idea that was previously thought to be a sure thing is dramatically reshaped or laid aside. Sometimes there seems to be no clear direction and the group must learn to wait patiently.”

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 66.

various contributions against one another. In discernment, reasoning means gathering together the wisdom contained in the whole group.”¹⁵⁸ This process utilizes consensus-making skills including “the ability to listen to other ideas, the ability to elicit ideas from people who might be reluctant to speak, and the willingness to explore creative possibilities rather than simply seek pre-meditated solutions.”¹⁵⁹ As the group reasons with each other, the expectation is that a sense of God’s leading about the focus question will develop.¹⁶⁰ The Wesleyan discernment model closes with the, “Sending Forth” movement which helps “participants ask God’s blessing on the spiritual gifts of the group and the group’s commitment to carry its decision about the focal group into ministry.”¹⁶¹

Contemporary Discernment Models of Decision Making

In the last twenty-five years, the topic of congregational discernment and decision making has bubbled to the surface of consciousness in various denominations and parachurch organizations. New patterns and processes have been proposed and experimented with, but in general, most congregations continue to do “business as usual.” They have not *experienced* a paradigm which incorporates the three key elements of guidance from wisdom, the Holy Spirit and the community, and are unaware that there is a “better way.” In this subsection I want to briefly discuss models from authors who have sought to develop new discernment/decision-making pathways for congregations. Each

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 23. On the same page they say, “Often we use rational discourse to pit one idea or thought against another to determine which idea is the stronger or the more worthy of the two. Following a process of elimination, ideas are analyzed, evaluated, and, if unsuitable to a person’s or group’s purposes, cast aside. Reason is used very differently during a discernment process.”

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 72. See also 25.

recognizes the need for all three key elements of the proposed paradigm, but approaches things from different perspectives, thus bringing unique insights, and placing different emphases on guidance from wisdom, the Holy Spirit, and the congregation.

Rev. Brian P. Hall, a psychologist and pastoral counselor, and Rev. Benjamin Tonna, a Roman Catholic priest and sociologist collaborated in 1980 to produce “a Value Approach to Communal Discernment” in *God’s Plan for Us: A Practical Strategy for Communal Discernment of Spirits*.¹⁶² They used their research from the behavioral sciences and work in values clarification to explore priorities and “the relationship between our choices, our actions, and our visions.”¹⁶³ Their complex process includes group contemplation, individual sharing, values discovery/clarification exercises, reflection, evaluation, testing against “Gospel Criteria,” and skills identification/analysis. They provide methods for use by both large occasional and small ongoing groups.

Writing from Benedictine and management consultant perspectives, in *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision Making*, Sister Mary Benet McKinney responds to the challenge of Vatican II for greater collaboration by proposing a three step process of: (1) gather the necessary data, (2) reflect prayerfully on the data in light of “lived experience and insights and ... listen to the promptings of the Spirit in the depths of the heart,” and (3) share wisdom “with the total group and listen to all the other members as they share their wisdom ... to try to hear the wisdom of the Spirit coming through the wisdom being shared within the group”¹⁶⁴ If consensus is reached the group can move

¹⁶² Brian P. Hall and Benjamin Tonna, *God’s Plans for Us: A Practical Strategy for Communal Discernment of Spirits* (New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1980), 27.

¹⁶³ Hall and Tonna, *God’s Plans for Us*, 28.

¹⁶⁴ Mary Benet McKinney, *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision Making* (Allen, TX: Tabor Publishing, 1987), 43-44.

forward with implementation. If not, the cycle may repeat, searching for new data and insights that may unify the group. She also includes many practical suggestions, helpful focus questions, and reflection exercises.

In *Discerning Your Congregation's Future: A Strategic and Spiritual Approach*, Roy M. Oswald and Robert E. Friedrich, Jr. share a ten step "Strategic Planning Process":

- Appoint a task force
- Assess the congregation's ministry [using home groups led by task force members]
- Reflect on the congregation's history
- Identify the congregation's norms
- Interview key people in the community
- Survey the congregation to evaluate data gathered
- Prioritize the goals,
- Share these priorities at a congregational meeting
- Hold a governing board retreat
- Develop a mission statement¹⁶⁵

Although, from the title and outline it may appear that their approach is mostly wisdom-driven, drawing primarily from business management techniques, a closer look reveals that it incorporates contemplative theology and discernment practices, and includes in the appendices, "Guidelines for Fasting," and "Centering Prayer." They also claim they are "committed to a theology and methodology that places the entire congregation in the center of the visioning process," rather than being leader-driven, and provide several opportunities throughout the process for members to give input.¹⁶⁶

Sally Weaver Glick writes *In Tune with God* from her Mennonite/Quaker experiences, suggesting a pattern of congregational discernment which includes: *preparation* (discerning and framing the question), *gathering information* (research,

¹⁶⁵ Roy M. Oswald and Robert E. Friedrich, Jr., *Discerning Your Congregation's Future: A Strategic and Spiritual Approach* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1996), 9.

¹⁶⁶ Oswald and Friedrich, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*, v. See also vii and 2-3.

clarifying the question, sharing history, Scripture, tradition, experience, etc.), *discussion* (creative attentive listening, prayer, sharing of insights, opinions, looking for clarity, convergence, consistency, and unity), *decision* (through consensus, voting, or another method), and *implementing* (dividing-up responsibilities, adjusting, evaluating).¹⁶⁷ She also gives helpful suggestions regarding the roles of the congregation and leaders.¹⁶⁸

Jonna Fantz suggests a four-step model where interested congregational volunteers first participate in a two-week prayerful study of scriptures focusing on God's call to the Church.¹⁶⁹ Sunday morning sermons are also drawn from these texts. Second, at a Saturday listening and discussion time, stories and insights from the study are shared and prayed over, and connecting themes are sought, compiled and organized. The most compelling themes are selected and shared with the rest of the congregation, which is invited to participate in the third step the following Saturday morning (listening, praying, and helping shape the vision, culminating in writing a vision statement which is to be taken home and prayed over). Again the conclusions of and stories from that meeting are shared with the whole congregation, and opportunities for feedback provided. The fourth step gathers the participants in a time of listening and prayer for developing goals, objectives, and an evaluation process. Fantz also includes a version of this model for churches whose decision making is more leader-driven.

Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen spell out a process entitled "A Guide to Doing Prayerful Discernment" in their classic book on congregational discernment and

¹⁶⁷ Glick, *In Tune With God*, 111-122.

¹⁶⁸ Glick, *In Tune With God*, 122-126.

¹⁶⁹ Jonna Fantz, "Discernment in the Visioning Process" (Appendix A) in John Ackerman, *Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in Congregations* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2001), 113-124.

decision making, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*.¹⁷⁰

Using a farming metaphor they speak of “selecting the seed,” “planting the seed,” “cultivating the plants,” and “harvesting the yield.”¹⁷¹ Their ten-step process includes: *framing* (“identifies the focus for discernment of God’s will”), *grounding* (“The guiding principle is informed by the values, beliefs, and purpose of the discerning community”), *shedding* (“lays aside ego, preconceived notions, false assumptions, biases, and predetermined conclusions so that persons involved in discernment can openly consider the matter”), *rooting* (“connects religious and biblical stories, themes, and images with the situation at hand”), *listening* (“enables hearing the promptings of the Spirit of God, the voices of all in the discerning community, and the cries of others who may be affected by our discernment”), *exploring* (“frees our playful imaginations to identify possible options and paths that lie within the guiding principle”), *improving* (“works in consultation and prayer to improve each option under consideration”), *weighing* (“sorts and tests the options or paths in response to the leading of God’s Spirit”), *closing* (“brings the explorations to a conclusion, moving toward the selection of an option which is given weight by the Spirit of God and the process in which the community is engaged”), and *resting* (“tests the decision by allowing it to rest near the heart to determine whether it brings primarily feelings of consolation (a sense of peace and movement toward God) or desolation (distress and movement away from God).”¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together*.

¹⁷¹ See Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together*, 69-93.

¹⁷² Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together*, 66-67. The First United Methodist Church of Bixby, Oklahoma has adopted Olsen and Morris’ model and includes it on their website: <http://fumcbixby-org.web28.winsvr.net/AboutUs/Discernment/tabid/64/Default.aspx> (accessed September 5, 2012).

Valerie K Isenhower and Judith A. Todd, heirs to Charles Olsen’s “Worshipful–Work” legacy, draw on his pattern for their own, in *Listen for God's Leading: A Workbook for Corporate Spiritual Discernment*.¹⁷³ Their very helpful model includes: naming and framing, centering, remembering and listening, sorting, path building, offering, waiting and resting, implementing, and God-centered evaluation. It incorporates contemplative prayer practices and has chapters on building a discernment team and preparing a communal atmosphere supportive of discernment.¹⁷⁴ Although their workbook is intended for a discernment team, which could include church leaders and/or those interested in participating, it could be used in a congregational setting as well.

In Presbyterian circles, Victoria G. Curtiss has provided “Guidelines for Communal Discernment” for use “at the congregational, presbytery, synod, and General Assemble levels by committees, response teams, administrative commissions, councils, and large plenary groups.” She includes many resources for congregations seeking to use discernment in their decision making, including “When is Communal Discernment Helpful?” and “Forms of Deliberation,” which compares debate, dialogue and discernment.¹⁷⁵ In her three-part process, “the community gathers in Christ (build community, affirm a covenant, and clarify the issue), the community listens to the Holy Spirit (let go, share information, reflect on Scripture and matters of faith, name options,

¹⁷³ Valerie K. Isenhower and Judith A. Todd, *Listen for God's Leading: A Workbook for Corporate Spiritual Discernment* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 2009).

¹⁷⁴ See *Ibid.*, Chapters 2 and 3.

¹⁷⁵ Victoria G. Curtiss, “Forms of Deliberation,” “When is Communal Discernment Helpful?” in *Guidelines for Communal Discernment* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church U.S.A.), 5, 20, https://www.pc-biz.org/Resources/dd95a72d-310f-466f-84f0-9852958e6bd6/comm_discern.pdf (accessed December 11, 2012).

and weigh options), and the community goes forth as God's People (choose direction, rest with the direction, make a formal decision).¹⁷⁶

This past year, Ruth Haley Barton, whose writing and speaking has done much to promote the acceptance of contemplative disciplines among evangelical churches, published *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups*.¹⁷⁷ While focusing on leadership teams as the necessary place to start (in most churches) to transform congregational decision making, she and her associates are seeking to expand discernment to include the whole congregation in some form.¹⁷⁸ In preparation for group discernment she stresses the importance of sharing an "understanding of what discernment means, a "conviction that discernment is the heart of spiritual leadership," and an "affirmation that discerning and doing the will of God is how *we intend* to lead."¹⁷⁹ Leaders must seek their own spiritual transformation and practice personal discernment.¹⁸⁰ The congregation must explore "values that undergird community, practices for opening to God together, practices for listening to each other, and a covenant that protects community."¹⁸¹ As they "get ready" for discernment they "clarify the question for discernment, gather the community for discernment, and affirm

¹⁷⁶ Curtiss, "Process Steps" in *Guidelines for Communal Discernment*, 12.

¹⁷⁷ Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

¹⁷⁸ From a conversation with Ruth H. Barton in October 2012, and materials on the website <http://www.transformingcenter.org/> (accessed December 27, 2012).

¹⁷⁹ Ruth Haley Barton, "Becoming a Community that Practices Corporate Leadership Discernment" *Transforming Center: Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*. <http://www.transformingcenter.org/> (accessed December 27, 2012).

¹⁸⁰ Barton, "Becoming a Community that Practices Corporate Leadership Discernment." Also, Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, Chapters 2-3.

¹⁸¹ Barton, "Becoming a Community that Practices Corporate Leadership Discernment." Also, Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, Chapters 5-8.

(or reaffirm) guiding values and principles.”¹⁸² They “get set” by praying and testing for indifference, and praying for wisdom in “quiet trust.”¹⁸³ The group discerns God’s will (“go”) as they: “Set the agenda for listening, listen to each other, listen to God in silence, reconvene and listen again, identify and work with options, agree together, seek inner confirmation, and affirm God’s guidance.”¹⁸⁴ Finally they “do” God’s will as they “communicate with those who need to know, make plans to do God’s will as [they] have come to understand it, and keep discerning as [they] do God’s will.”¹⁸⁵

Several other recent models deserve mention, such as “The Discernment Process” developed by Kris Haig based on the work of Dr. Elizabeth Liebert, which emphasizes the use of intuition, imaging and imaginative visualization,¹⁸⁶ the contemplative *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations* by Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull and R. Taylor McLean,¹⁸⁷ and “Opening to the Gift of Discernment in Highly Complex Situations” by Stephen V. Doughty and Marjorie J. Thompson in *The Way of Discernment: Participant’s Book*.¹⁸⁸ Sister Rose Mary Dougherty writes about contemplative communal discernment in *Group Spiritual*

¹⁸² Ruth Haley Barton, “Movements in Corporate Leadership Discernment” Transforming Center: Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership. <http://www.transformingcenter.org/> (accessed December 27, 2012). Also, Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, 172.

¹⁸³ Barton, “Movements in Corporate Leadership Discernment.” See also, Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, 172.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Kris Haig, “The Discernment Process,” The Office of Spiritual Formation, Presbyterian Church, USA (Louisville, KY, February 2004), Presbytery of Florida website: <http://www.presbyteryofflorida.com/resources/Discernment.pdf> (accessed December 28, 2012).

¹⁸⁷ Farnham, Hull and McLean, *Grounded in God*.

¹⁸⁸ Stephen V. Doughty and Marjorie J. Thompson, “Opening to the Gift of Discernment in Highly Complex Situations,” in *The Way of Discernment: Participant’s Book* (Nashville TN: Upper Room Books, 2008), 91-93.

Direction: Community for Discernment,¹⁸⁹ as does Alice Fryling in *Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction*.¹⁹⁰ Also helpful are, from a Quaker background, *Practicing Discernment Together—Finding God's Way Forward in Decision Making* by Lon Fendall, Jan Wood and Bruce Bishop,¹⁹¹ “Model 1” from *Discernment Steps: Toward a Vision of God's Will* by Bishop David J. Lawson,¹⁹² and “Participating in God's Revealing” from the New World Unity Church.¹⁹³ The Uniting Church in Australia began using a consensus/discernment decision making process based on the Quaker model in 1990 and adopted it for national use in 1997.¹⁹⁴ Its *Manual for Meeting* and an article “Decision Making in the Church” spells out its philosophy and methods used.¹⁹⁵ The World Council of Churches followed the Uniting Church and

¹⁸⁹ Dougherty, Rose Mary, *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1995). See also Rose Mary Dougherty, Monica Maxon, and Lynne Smith. *The Lived Experience of Group Spiritual Direction* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003).

¹⁹⁰ Alice Fryling, *Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

¹⁹¹ Fendall, Wood, and Bishop, *Practicing Discernment Together*.

¹⁹² David Lawson, “Model 1” in *Discernment Steps: Toward a Vision of God's Will*, 194-195, mentioned in Curtiss, “Process Steps” in *Guidelines for Communal Discernment*, 22, and Paul Anderson, “Moderating and Discerning the Leadership of Christ,” (Workshop for the National Presbyterian Moderators' Conference, 11/12/02) <http://www.georgefox.edu/discernment/Moderating.html> (accessed December 28, 2012).

¹⁹³ “Participating in God's Revealing,” New World Unity Church; originally titled “Participating in God's Unfolding.” From the appendix in Marjorie J. Thompson, *The Way of Discernment, Leader's Guide* (*Companions in Christ* series) (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2008), 134.

¹⁹⁴ The Uniting Church is the 3rd largest Christian denomination in Australia and a union of the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia, and the Presbyterian Church of Australia. The Uniting Church in Australia, Queensland Synod, “History.” <http://www.wa.uca.org.au/home/about/history/> (accessed August 28, 2012).

¹⁹⁵ The Uniting Church in Australia, Queensland Synod, “Decision Making in the Church”, <http://www.ucaqld.com.au/testInd.aspx?testInd=14> (accessed August 28, 2012). *Manual for Meeting* in “Resources,” <http://www.ucaqld.com.au/inc.aspx?content=Resources> (accessed August 28, 2012).

adopted a consensus decision-making process in 2005, using the “Guidelines for the Conduct of Meetings of the World Council of Churches.”¹⁹⁶

As was mentioned earlier, each of these models includes in some measure all three elements of the proposed paradigm and they have much in common, but because they come at congregational discernment and decision making from different perspectives and traditions they bring unique insights and emphases. Depending on a particular congregation’s strengths, weaknesses, and struggles with the cultural spirits of rationalism, naturalism, narcissistic individualism, restless impatience and information overload, pragmatism, guardianship, and mystical experience and spirituality, one model may be more helpful than another. Congregations seeking a new discernment/decision-making model may want to choose one from or close to their own tradition to ease concerns about change. Or, they may want to explore a model that challenges that tradition in order to promote new thinking and practices, while seeking a “better way.” It *is* possible for congregations to make decisions *together* that are *full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit*.

¹⁹⁶ See Walt Wiltschek, “Consensus: ‘A Better Way of Reflecting the Nature of the Church,’” World Council of Churches, Central Committee News Release (22 February 2005), <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/pressreleasesen.nsf/index/pr-cc-05-14.html> (accessed August 12, 2011). See also Janice Love, “Can We All Agree?” *Christian Century* (November 6-19, 2002): 8; Friedrich Degenhardt, “Consensus: Farewell to Majority Rule in World Council of Churches” (October 2005), <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/pressreleasesen.nsf/index/pr-cc-05-14.html> (accessed August 12, 2011); Daniel Blake, “World Council of Churches to Implement Consensus Voting at 9th Assembly,” *Christian Today* (October 7, 2005), 2009, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/world.council.of.churches.to.implement.consensus.voting.at.9th.assembly/4172.htm> (accessed August 12, 2011). See World Council of Churches, “Guidelines for the Conduct of Meetings of the World Council of Churches,” (February 14, 2006), <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/porto-alegre-2006/3-preparatory-and-background-documents/guidelines-for-the-conduct-of-meetings-of-the-wcc.html?print=1%2522onfocus%253D%2522blurLink%2528this%2529%253B%2522onfocus%25> (accessed August 29, 2012).

SECTION FOUR: ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

In American consumer culture a congregation's decisions are often based on the sum of individual personal preferences, limited information, and pragmatism, promoting disunity with no assurance that God's will is discerned and done. As many Christians have recognized lacks in their congregational discernment and decision making they have picked up bits and pieces of practices from other traditions and tried to implement them, hoping to find the magic formula or techniques that will work well. Pragmatically, they want to find "what works" and don't often wonder why they are or are not successful. When the new practices don't "work" they are discarded, and things revert back to how they were formerly done. Missing is the deeper understanding of the biblical, theological, and historical background of decision-making practices, an understanding of the current cultural forces working against godly decision making, and an analysis of how their own processes and structures either help or hinder them as they try (often unknowingly) to resist those forces in their discernment and decision making. Missing is the bigger picture of why congregational decision are made the way they are, and what might need to change in order to make them differently.

The goals of this artifact, a book titled *Together, Full of Wisdom and the Holy Spirit: a Paradigm for Congregational Discernment and Decision Making*, are to help Christian believers gain this bigger understanding, to pinpoint and evaluate the lacks and cultural sabotage in their congregation's discernment/decision making practices, and realistically figure out what needs to be kept, added, deleted, or changed to develop and grow better structures and processes. This book studies decision making and discernment models to discover if and how they combine wise insights from cultural, ecclesiastical,

and biblical sources, contributions from members, and guidance from the Holy Spirit to enable congregations to effectively make God-focused and God-honoring decisions.

The three chapters of the book included in the Artifact give this dissertation's reader the broad theological and biblical understanding needed, while appendices provide short summaries of several models for analysis and comparison, and a few practical tools.

Chapter Two presents Biblical materials showing historically how God's people have valued and used wise traditional insights/teaching/judgments from their own and surrounding cultures to aid discernment and decision-making. It proposes that all true wisdom comes from God and is gained through observation and thoughtful consideration of people's lives and the rest of Creation. God has given humans intellectual and sensory abilities which He encourages and expects to be used as they seek to love Him with their minds. This ability to discover principles and insights helpful for healthy full living is God's gift to humanity, and true wisdom can be found in all cultures. However cultural "wisdom" must always be tested against the truth of God's revelation, for in this fallen world "false/worldly wisdom" is actively promoted, and can lead God's people astray.

Chapter Three, offers biblical materials and theological arguments showing that since Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, they individually and corporately have access to God's mind through the Spirit in prayer, and can depend on Him to give guidance and insight as promised (Jas 1, Jn 14-16, etc.). God's leading of his people throughout Biblical history, and examples of corporate discernment/decision making in the Old and New Testaments are discussed. Jesus' and the Apostles' teachings about and experience of the Holy Spirit as guide and teacher are explored, as well as hindrances to valuing and appropriating the Holy Spirit's guidance, including "Cessationist" beliefs,

and the inability to “test the spirits” to discern if an insight/prophecy is from God or another source.

Chapter Four examines how the Spirit unites Christians and gifts them for ministry. The metaphor of Christian community as the “body of Christ” (Romans 12) implies participation and cooperation by each “member” in discerning and doing the will of Christ “the head.” The use of all members’ gifts, abilities, experiences and insights promotes unity in “the body,” protects it from false spirituality, and enhances both the discernment process and the decisions reached in a congregational/group setting. This chapter includes exegesis of and commentary on biblical texts on the role of the leader as servant, equipper, shepherd, and steward of the congregation. It also discusses the importance of unity, valuing others and their contributions as “body” members, and the need for each to share appropriately what God has given him/her for the group’s welfare, not personal glory. Hindrances to healthy group dynamics are discussed, as well as biblical teachings about prejudice, preferential treatment, power-plays, pride, selfishness, and other destructive behaviors.

SECTION FIVE: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

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January 1, 2013

To: Publishing House

Greetings!

The bitter protracted Congressional debates of 2011-2012 over budgets and raising the nation's debt ceiling have led many Americans to ask in disgust and dismay, "Why can't they overcome their differences and come to consensus?" American Christians might hope the Church could model a more collaborative way of making decisions, yet from its beginnings to the present it has had a long painful track record of failure in this regard.

Historically, congregations and denominations have bitterly argued and split, sometimes over important issues, but in many instances over insignificant decisions such as the proverbial "color of the carpet." Horror stories of church decision making "gone bad" often end with decisions based on the sum of individual preferences, limited information, and a naturalistic pragmatic world-view, rather than God's will. Churches using top-down business decision-making models encounter fragmentation over minor and major issues. Church members wonder why their experiences seem so far removed from what they read in the Bible, and what they expected from people who claim to follow the Christ who called his disciples to be united and love each other. Disillusionment sets in. Surely there *must* be a better way!

Together, Full of Wisdom and the Holy Spirit: A Paradigm for Congregational Discernment and Decision Making seeks to help congregation members and leaders find that "better way" through the integrated use of guidance from wisdom, the Holy Spirit, and the community. It also explores the cultural baggage which hinders healthy communal decision making. This 80,000-word book is written primarily for church members, lay leaders, pastors, and denominational officials in churches with a congregational polity, but it is applicable for anyone interested in exploring a discernment model of communal decision making who has some familiarity with Scripture, theology, and forms of church structure. It is likely that readers will have been heavily influenced by American CEO/business models of church decision-making, but are curious to examine new options because of dissatisfaction with current practice.

May I send you a copy of the proposal through email or regular mail? I appreciate your time.

Sincerely,
Merrie S. Carson

BOOK PROPOSAL—NON-FICTION

Title: *Together, Full of Wisdom and the Holy Spirit: A Paradigm for Congregational Discernment and Decision Making*

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Overview:

A congregation's decisions are often based on the sum of individual personal preferences, limited information, and pragmatism, promoting disunity with no assurance that God's will is discerned and done. As many Christians have recognized lacks in their congregation's discernment and decision making they have picked up bits and pieces of other practices and tried to implement them, hoping to find the magic formula or techniques that will help them. Pragmatically, they want to find "what works" and don't often wonder why they are or are not successful. Missing is the deeper understanding of the biblical, theological, and historical background of Christian group decision-making. Also missing is an understanding of the current cultural forces at work, and an analysis of how church processes and structures either help or hinder church members and leaders as they (often unknowingly) try to resist those forces in their discernment and decision making. The big picture of why congregational decisions are made the way they are, and what needs to change is lacking. This book is designed to meet that lack through its discussions of guidance from wisdom, the Holy Spirit and the community, and how one or more of these three key elements have or have not been present in past and current congregational discernment and decision making models.

Purpose:

- Assist Christian congregations to gain a larger deeper understanding of the biblical, theological, and historical background of decision-making practices, and the current cultural forces working against godly decision making
- Study decision-making and discernment models to discover if and how they combine wise insights from cultural, ecclesiastical, and biblical sources, contributions from members, and guidance from the Holy Spirit
- Provide a paradigm that helps congregations to pinpoint and evaluate the lacks and cultural sabotage in their congregation's discernment and decision making
- Enable congregations to understand what needs to be kept, added, deleted, or changed in their own practices to develop and grow better congregational discernment and decision-making structures and processes
- Enable congregations to effectively make God-focused and God-honoring decisions

Promotion and Marketing:

- Through Christian social-networking sites and personal church affiliations
- Seminary coursework that I will teach
- Through local, regional, and denominational seminars for the Evangelical Covenant Church and other churches
- Through Spiritual Direction networks

Competition:

- *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*, Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, The Alban Institute, 1997, 2012. This is an updated

classic book using a discernment model of communal decision making for groups of any size. Using a farming metaphor it speaks of a ten-step process of selecting, planting, cultivating and harvesting. It includes biblical and historical insights, and practical guidelines to help participants understand and walk through the process.

- *Discerning Your Congregation's Future: A Strategic and Spiritual Approach*, Roy M. Oswald and Robert E. Friedrich, Jr. The Alban Institute, 1996. This book integrates contemplative discernment practices and theology with a detailed ten-step strategic planning process. It would be useful primarily for leaders, although the process does include opportunities for congregational involvement.
- *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*, Suzanne G. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull and R. Taylor McLean, Morehouse Publishing, 1999. This book creatively explores group decision making through communal contemplative discernment and consensus and gives many helpful suggestions and insights.
- *In Tune With God: The Art of Congregational Discernment*, Sally Weaver Glick, Herald Press, 2004. Written with the author's Mennonite/Quaker experiences in mind, it provides a pattern of congregational discernment which includes: preparation, gathering information, discussion, decision, and implementing. It also gives helpful suggestions regarding the roles of the congregation and leaders
- *Listen for God's Leading: A Workbook for Corporate Spiritual Discernment*, Valerie K. Isenhower and Judith A. Todd, Upper Room, 2009. This book's very helpful model includes: naming and framing, centering, remembering and

listening, sorting, path building, offering, waiting and resting, implementing, and God-centered evaluation. It incorporates contemplative prayer practices and has chapters on building a discernment team and preparing a communal atmosphere supportive of discernment.

- *Practicing Discernment Together—Finding God's Way Forward in Decision Making*, Lon Fendall, Jan Wood and Bruce Bishop, Barclay Press, 2007. This book explores congregation discernment and decision making from a Quaker background, giving helpful insights into the process, and sharing encouraging stories of how the process helped several congregations make very difficult but unifying decisions.
- *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups*, Ruth Haley Barton, InterVarsity Press, 2012. This book focuses on transforming leadership teams as the necessary prerequisite to transforming congregational decision making. It stresses the importance of developing the leaders' personal discernment practices, and establishing a common understanding of and covenant for group discernment. It also provides a discernment process for the group.

Uniqueness:

All of the books listed above focus primarily on helping congregation members and leaders gain understanding and skills for successfully implementing a communal method of discernment and decision making. Most of them include some biblical teaching and contemporary illustrations, and a few of them include historical examples, but none explores in depth the key elements of guidance from wisdom, the Holy Spirit, and the community. While some note the American church's cultural baggage, its impact on

church decision making is not deeply examined. Discovering and implementing new decision-making practices may be helpful, but unless the cultural impediments are recognized, they will continue to sabotage church decision-making. What is needed is not merely a new practical model, but a new paradigm, a new way of understanding which draw on all of the resources and gifts that God has given his people to assist them in discerning His will and making decisions that glorify and honor Him.

Endorsements: (possible)

- Lynne Baab (published by The Alban Institute, InterVarsity Press)
- Chuck Conniry (published by Paternoster)
- Ruth Haley Barton (published by InterVarsity Press, Shaw Books, Zondervan)
- Margaret Benefiel (published by Seabury, Crossroad, Morehouse)

Book Format (non-fiction):

Introduction

Chapter 1 The Challenges of Congregational Discernment and Decision Making in American Church Culture

Chapter 2 The Promise and Pitfalls of Wisdom

Chapter 3 The Promise and Pitfalls of Spiritual Guidance

Chapter 4 Deciding Together: Communal Discernment, Leadership, and Decision Making in the Bible and Ancient World

Chapter 5 Deciding Together: Communal Discernment and Decision Making throughout Church History

Chapter 6 The Challenges of Communal Discernment and Decision Making, and Contemporary Solutions

Chapter 7 A Better Way

Appendices

Bibliography

Chapter Outline:

Chapter One discusses how in American consumer culture a congregation's decisions are often based on the sum of individual personal preferences, limited information, and pragmatism, promoting disunity with no assurance that God's will is discerned and done. Concerns about Rationalism, Naturalism, Narcissistic Individualism, Restless Impatience and Information Overload, Pragmatism, Guardianship, Mystical Experience and Spirituality, and their negative effects on congregational decision making are explored. To address these problem it is proposed that a Christian community will make better, God-focused decisions that are faithful to its identity as the "body of Christ" if it uses a model of discernment/decision-making that includes contributions from the entire congregation or sub-group, wise insights/teaching/judgments from biblical, ecclesiastical, and cultural sources, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit through personal and corporate listening prayer and evaluation.

Chapter Two presents Biblical materials illustrating how God's people have valued and used wisdom from their own and surrounding cultures to aid their discernment and decision-making. It is noted all true wisdom comes from God and can be gained through thoughtful consideration of people's lives and the rest of Creation. God has given humans intellectual and sensory abilities that He encourages and expects them to use as they seek to love Him with their minds. This ability to discover principles and insights that are helpful for living healthy full lives is the gift of God to all humanity, and true wisdom can be found in all cultures. However cultural "wisdom" must always tested

against the truth of God's revelation, as in the fallen world there is also "false/worldly wisdom" that is actively promoted and can lead God's people astray.

Chapter Three explores biblical materials and theological arguments which show that because Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit they individually and corporately have access to the mind of God through the Spirit in prayer and can depend on Him to give guidance and insight as promised (James 1, John 14-16, etc.). Throughout Biblical history God has led his people and the chapter focuses on the Spirit's leading of the Israelites, Jesus, and the Early Church. Examples of Old and New Testament corporate discernment and decision making are discussed. Jesus' and the Apostles' teaching about the Holy Spirit as guide and teacher is explored. Hindrances to valuing and appropriating the guidance of the Holy Spirit such as "Cessationist" beliefs, inability to "test the spirits," and difficulties in spiritual discernment are also dealt with.

Chapter Four examines biblical metaphors and teaching on Christian community, particularly the "body of Christ" (Rom 12). This image implies participation and cooperation by each "member" in discerning and doing the will of Christ "the head." The use of all members' gifts, abilities, experiences and insights promotes unity in "the body," protects it from false spirituality, and enhances both the discernment process and the decisions reached in a congregational/group setting. This chapter includes exegesis of and commentary on Biblical texts on the role of the leader as servant, equipper, shepherd, and steward of the congregation. It also discusses the importance of unity, and valuing others and their contributions, and the importance of each sharing appropriately what God has given him/her with the group for the group's benefit, not personal glory. It

discusses hindrances to healthy body dynamics and Biblical teachings on prejudice, preferential treatment, power-plays, pride, selfishness, and other destructive behaviors.

Chapter Five presents materials from Christian history and thought to show how God's people developed models of discernment and decision-making using both spiritual and cultural resources. The strengths and weaknesses of models, which incorporated both the leading of the Holy Spirit and wise teaching/insights from contemporary culture will be explored, as well as the strengths and deficiencies of models which did not. The chapter includes a discussion of the development of congregational polity. It presents models such as Ignatian Group Discernment, Wesleyan Quadrilateral Decision Making, Quaker Congregational Discernment, etc., and seeks to discover common principles and their unique features which may be helpful for use in contemporary models.

Chapter Six shares research into helpful contemporary discernment and decision-making models and practices, both spiritual and secular, which may be incorporated in present-day church processes. Ways are suggested to evaluate church structures and current congregational decision-making practices to determine if they limit or encourage participation by the members. Criteria are discussed for deciding which issues are brought to the whole congregation for discernment and decision-making (usually vision, policies, and some personnel issues) and which can be delegated to individuals or smaller groups (usually day-to-day operations). Also included is evidence that better decisions are often made by groups, and how healthy group decision-making promotes unity.

Chapter Seven offers conclusions about a preferred paradigm that teaches and enables members and leaders in churches with a congregational polity (or those interested

in exploring it) to apply wise insights and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as they together discern practical solutions to ministry concerns.

Intended Readers:

Primarily audience

- Pastors of churches with congregational polity wishing to move from a CEO/business or democratic voting model of communal decision making.
- Leaders/officials in denominations with a congregational polity who want to encourage pastors and lay leaders to move towards a discernment model of decision making
- Educated lay leaders of churches with a congregational polity who wish to explore possible discernment/decision making practices for their churches.

Secondary audience,

- Pastors from other denominations with other polities who wish to explore group discernment of God's will and decision-making
- Denominational leaders from other polities who wish to explore group discernment of God's will and decision-making
- Educated lay leaders of churches with other polities who wish to explore possible discernment/decision making practices for their churches

They will be conversant with Scripture, theological ideas, and some forms of church structure. It is likely they will have been heavily influenced by American CEO/business models of church decision-making, but are curious to explore new options because of dissatisfaction with current practice.

Manuscript: Chapters 1-4 of the book are complete and work has begun on the last three chapters, with a possible completion date of August 2013. Estimated length is 80,000 words.

Author Bio: Merrie Carson is a DMin Candidate in Leadership and Spiritual Formation at George Fox Evangelical Seminary in Portland, OR. She received a MCS in Applied Theology from Regent College in Vancouver BC, focusing on adult spiritual formation, and a BA in Art History from Whitman College, Walla Walla, WA. She also has a Certificate in Spiritual Direction from the Seattle School of Theology and Psychology (formerly Mars Hill Graduate School). She is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical

Covenant Church and has served at two churches and on national and local conference boards for her denomination. She is part of her denomination's Spiritual Directors Network, has provided spiritual direction locally and nationally for pastors and church staff members. She also has a private spiritual direction practice.

Merrie is a recovering “wisdom-aholic” who has been learning to walk by the Spirit and listen to God in prayer for many years. She longs to see the church become more balanced, healthy, and God-focused in its decision making. As a church member, pastor, denominational leader, and spiritual director she has known the individual and corporate trauma caused by bad congregational decision making. She has seen the power plays, lack of prayer, poor preparation, and limiting of discussion that can occur in congregational and group meetings. She is familiar with the pain of those who unwarily rocked the institutional boat and found themselves excluded from meaningful congregational participation. She has heard the confused questioning by both church leaders and members after divisive destructive meetings, “But this is the Church—I didn't think it was supposed to be like this.” She has seen the consequences of foolish decisions made with out sufficient research. All this has driven her to seek different discernment and decision making models that can help congregations make wise divinely-guided corporate decisions.

Future Projects: Currently Merrie is working on a seminar on congregational discernment and decision making which can be used in local, regional and denominational settings. She also is planning a series of magazine articles and will be contributing to her denomination's Spiritual Formation blog.

SECTION SIX: POSTSCRIPT

The Church has not been left an orphan by her Founder to make headway as best she can by manipulating auspicious circumstances, courting diplomatic alliances or adopting inflated titles. A spiritual house must grow, not by astuteness of tactics, but by spiritual agencies and methods.

F. F. Bruce and E. K. Simpson¹

As a child growing up in a non-Christian home, I was fascinated by Bible stories that spoke of God's presence with and guidance of His people. The few times that I went to church (for a wedding, memorial service, or with a friend) I had a strong sense of God being there in the worship service. I longed for that kind of intimacy, and that desire was one of the things that led me to Christ while I high school. During college and after, I avidly read Christian books, seeking to know God more and serve Him better. I became active in Christian ministry, and eventually became a church staff member, and then a pastor. I still longed for that intimacy with God, and although I had a sense of His guidance in my life, I became a "wisdom-aholic," always seeking the magic formula or spiritual insight that would help me succeed and handle ministry problems well. I gathered many books and magazines to help me in my quest.

One day I realized that I would never be able to read and learn enough to assure that I would "be successful," and that I was wearing myself out trying. It was at that point that God said to me, "Why don't you try asking me for what you need to know and trust that I can guide you?" The thought was frightening, but also very freeing. I asked God to make me a person of prayer and for many years now I have been learning to walk by the Spirit and listen to God. I discovered contemplative spirituality and spiritual direction,

¹ F. F. Bruce and E. K. Simpson, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians: The English Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Publishing Company, 1965), 94.

and shared my discoveries with friends, family, co-workers, and church members. As I experienced the frustration, power plays, prayerlessness, and traumas of bad leadership council and congregational decision making I began to explore what it might be like for churches to make decisions using a discernment model, rather than the corporate business model I was used to.

Unfortunately, my story is all too common among church members and pastors, except that many of them still do not know that God is able and wanting to guide them, both personally, and as they gather together to worship and do His will. This dissertation is the result of my search for congregational discernment and decision making models that could help me and others as we do the Church's "business." I realized that it wasn't enough to just find and implement a new decision making model. I knew that there were historical hurts, and theological and cultural impediments that could sabotage even the best model if they were not recognized and dealt with. So, my research led me to examine American culture, and how and why the Church historically has made decisions the way it has. Biblically and theologically exploring the use of guidance from wisdom and the Holy Spirit was invaluable, as well as examining issues of ecclesiology and leadership. Also, switching from the traditional dissertation form to a "Written Statement and Artifact" model helped me look at alternative models of congregational decision making, and the issues involved became much clearer. In the process I realized that a "one-size-fits-all" approach is not the most helpful, as different congregations approach discernment and decision making from various perspectives, with different histories and traditions, and particular strengths and weaknesses. The goal of making decisions

together that are full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit may be the same, but the means used may need to be very different, and tailored to the congregation's heritage.

Through this study I have reached several conclusions. As many authors point out, corporate church spirituality is based on individual member spirituality. This does not mean that everyone participating in a discernment/decision-making process must be a "spiritual giant" thoroughly trained and practiced in personal spiritual discernment. But it does mean that in most congregations there is much work to be done to help congregants understand that God *does* still speak to his people today, learn to hear God personally, and discern his voice from the others that seek their attention. How can they recognize God speaking in the community when they cannot discern His voice privately?

Closely related is the issue of "indifference," letting go of one's own agenda or "turf", being willing to have one's mind and heart changed, and coming up with unexpected solutions. A discernment model of decision making will not work if members and/or leaders are determined to frame the process as a "win/lose" debate or power struggle. Instead, a core assumption is that each person involved, while having and being aware of his/her own opinions and preferences, is genuinely seeking God's will for themselves and the congregation and is willing to submit to Him and his leading.

This "indifference" means that participants need to be willing to trust each other and God. The process requires vulnerability, freedom to ask questions, and willingness to share and take responsibility for insights. It involves really listening to others for as Morris and Olsen point out, "Listening to others takes on greater importance when you are trying to hear the voice of God speaking through them."² This may be particularly difficult when there is a history of conflict in the congregation, with unresolved hurts,

² Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together*, 132.

antagonisms, and a lack of forgiveness. In that situation, perhaps what God desires above all else is that the issues are resolved, as much as can be, and that forgiveness is given and received, allowing a restored love and unity to flow in the body. Without that, discernment of anything else will be secondary and flawed.

This trust also needs to extend between leaders and members of the congregation. Leaders must be willing to share decision-making power and authority with the congregation. Christ has provided his body with both gifted leaders and members who can make valuable and necessary contributions to the decision-making process. Also, members must be ready to allow leaders to make the decisions they have been delegated by the congregation to make. As was pointed out, not every church decision needs to be made through communal discernment! Those which do, need to be prepared for with research and prayer, and utilize the guidance shared by the congregation both from the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Both are crucial.

Congregational discernment/decision making takes time, and may require further sessions of listening to God and each, or the postponement of a decision. While this may seem inefficient, provoking impatience, the reward of taking this time is greater congregational spiritual growth, unity, and involvement both in the process and in the implementation. As Stevens, Lardear, and Duger note,

Corporate discernment does not promise a quick and easy way to solve a congregation's problems; rather, it offers the congregation a way to faithfully encounter and respond to the word of God for their lives. As Christians, we have God's assurance that the word of God will always accomplish the purpose for which it is sent (Isaiah 55:10-11). Our hope is to place ourselves willingly at God's disposal.³

³ Stevens, Lardear, and Duger. *Seeking & Doing God's Will*, 26.

Short term gains in efficiency may not aid, and sometimes even undermine, overall long-term congregational health.

With the growing interest in congregational discernment and decision making, a possible avenue for further research is a more in-depth comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of the various models of discernment decision making currently available, considering which might be best for a particular situation, congregation, or denomination. Another possibility could be the development of curriculums for church members of all ages which would introduce, teach, and experiment with communal discernment and decision making using guidance from both wisdom and the Holy Spirit. A third option would be the development of a seminar for pastors and church leaders who are interested in evaluating the discernment/decision making practices of their congregations and exploring new options.

It is my hope that this dissertation will provide me and others with the necessary background and understanding to help churches become more balanced, healthy, wise, united, and God-focused in their congregational decision making. I long to see the day when they joyfully and obediently live out the prayer of St. Isaac the Syrian, Bishop of Ninevah: “O Christ, the fulfillment of the truth, let your truth rise in our hearts and let us know how to walk in your way according to your will.”⁴ Soli Deo gloria!

⁴ Nikolaos S. Hatzinikolaou, *Voices in the Wilderness: An Anthology of Patristic Prayers* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press), 129.

APPENDIX A: THE ARTIFACT

*Together, Full of Wisdom and the Holy Spirit:
A Paradigm for Congregational Discernment and Decision Making*

By

Merrie S. Carson

The Church has not been left an orphan by her Founder to make headway as best she can by manipulating auspicious circumstances, courting diplomatic alliances or adopting inflated titles. A spiritual house must grow, not by astuteness of tactics, but by spiritual agencies and methods.

F. F. Bruce and E. K. Simpson
Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians

CHAPTER TWO

The Promise and Pitfalls of Wisdom

Wisdom begins with the worship of God for his goodness revealed in both the created and covenantal order, coupled with wonder at human folly—all the nuttiness of egoism, self-aggrandizement, idolatry, immorality, and mishandling of relationships. . . . Wisdom goes on to ask what direction and style of life make sense in light of what is known of God’s presence, preferences, and providential government. Within the reverential frame that “the fear of the Lord” has established, an across-the-board vision of humble, thoughtful, and God-centered living emerges.

J. I Packer, “Theology and Wisdom,” *The Way of Wisdom*¹

He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe.

Proverbs 28:26

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Psalms 90:12

The first element of the paradigm proposed for congregational discernment and decision making is the use of wisdom. The Bible encourages prudent congregations and their leaders to “walk in wisdom,” and avoid folly, to gain insight into difficult situations or issues and make godly decisions. But what is considered wise and desirable in one community may be very different or even contradictory to what is wise in another. Donn Morgan notes, “The more diverse the society and culture, the more sages and wisdom there are, though often with little or no consensus among groups competing for power and influence. How much a central story, with foundational values, can be embraced by all is . . . determinative of whether we have pluralism instead of chaos or anarchy.”² I

¹ J. I Packer, “Theology and Wisdom,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, eds. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 12.

² Donn F. Morgan, *The Making of Sages: Biblical Wisdom and Contemporary Culture* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), xx.

assume that most church leaders and members in our increasingly complex, pluralistic, and divisive American society want to make wise decisions about ministry directions, use of resources, and other congregational issues. But where should they look for guidance? Morgan reminds us, “If we begin with a common assumption, that whatever wisdom is and wherever it is found, it enables one to live skillfully and well, then we are met with a great number of wise authors and leaders who wish to sell their wisdom to our contemporary society.”³ Given that we are bombarded daily by advice and information (much of which we ignore) from family, friends, religious leaders, psychologists, business consultants, seminars, books, the media, etc., how would a congregation discover what is wise in a given situation? How would they evaluate that “wisdom” to see if it is true, trustworthy, and beneficial, or false and foolish; insight to be embraced, or that which might lead them away from God and his loving purposes?

This search for wisdom to live skillfully and avoid disastrous folly has ancient roots. Historically God’s people have recorded in Scripture the wise insights, teachings, and judgments from their own and surrounding cultures to aid their individual and corporate discernment and decision making. In this chapter we will explore how biblical wisdom developed and was used, and suggest ways in which the use of ancient and contemporary wisdom can help congregations counter the cultural “spirits,” discern God’s will, make prudent decisions, and avoid foolish mistakes.

³ Ibid., 162-163. Morgan comments in the Introduction, “There are many popular movements that promise wisdom and its benefits (success, longevity, health) to their adherents. Indeed, to cite but one example, the New York Times best-seller lists for both fiction (e.g., *The Celestine Prophecy* and its successors) and nonfiction (from *The Road Less Traveled* to *The Prayer of Jabez*) are filled with examples of what our modern culture considers wise and worthy of serious attention.” *The Making of Sages*, xxv.

What Are Wisdom and Folly?

D. A. Hubbard defines wisdom as “the art of being successful, of forming the correct plan to gain the desired results. Its seat is the heart, the centre of moral and intellectual decision (cf. 1 Kgs 3:9, 12).”⁴ The synonyms used for wisdom (*hokma*) in the Old Testament are: “*bina*, ‘understanding’, Jb 39:26; Prv 23:4; *tebuna*, ‘insight’, Ps 136:5; ... *sekel*, ‘prudence’, Prv 12:8; 23:9.”⁵ Elmer Martens comments, “Wisdom, biblically defined, is skill in living. The pithy proverb, the arresting aphorism, and the summarizing sentence—all these offer guidelines for living well.”⁶ Wisdom is essential for skillful discernment and godly decision making.

Hubbard and Kidner tell us that while the Old Testament understanding of folly is

sometimes plain silliness (*e.g.* Prv 10:14; 14:15; 18:13), it is usually culpable: a disdain for God’s truth and discipline (Prv 1:7). Hence even the simple or gullible man (*peti*) is not merely without sense (Prv 7:7ff.) but fatally wayward (Prv 1:32). He must make a moral and spiritual choice, not only a mental effort (Prv 9:1-6, 13-18; Ps 19:7). Likewise the fool ... is typically one who, like Saul, has played the fool (1 Sm 26:21) and closed his mind to God (*e.g.* Ps 94:8ff.; Prv 27:22; Jer 5:21). The most hardened folly is that of the scoffer (*les*, *e.g.* Prv 1:22; 14:6; 24:9) and of the aggressive unbeliever called the *nabal* (1 Sm 25:25; Ps 14:1; Is 32:5f.).⁷

A fool chooses to ignore or defy God and his ways, living as if he/she has control over his/her destiny and is unaccountable to God. The New Testament understanding of folly continues this theme of personal responsibility for poor ungodly decisions:

⁴ D. A. Hubbard, s. v. “wisdom,” in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 3, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980), 1650.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1650.

⁶ Elmer Martens, “The Way of Wisdom: Conflict Resolution in Biblical Narrative,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, eds. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 75.

⁷ D. A. Hubbard, and F. D. Kidner, s. v. “folly,” *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 1, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980), 512-513.

In 1 Cor 1:25, 27 Paul takes up the term (*moros*, foolishness) used by unbelievers in their faulty evaluation of God's purposes. A man's folly may sometimes lie in his being unable to perceive the issues (e.g. Lk 11:40; 1 Cor 15:36, *aphron*), but more likely in the fact that he has made an unworthy choice (e.g. Lk 12:20, *aphron*; Rom 1:21, *asynetos*; Gal 3:1, 3, *anoetos*; Mt 7:26, *moros*).⁸

In contrast, New Testament wisdom (*sophia*) is defined as responding well to God's insight. "Seldom neutral (although cf. the wisdom of the Egyptians, Acts 7:22), it is either God-given or God-opposing. If divorced from God's revelation it is impoverished and unproductive at best (1 Cor 1:17; 2:4; 2 Cor 1:12) and foolish or even devilish at worst (1 Cor 1:19ff.; Jas. 3:15ff.)."⁹ Worldly advice that disdains or ignores God may promise the good life, but is ultimately destructive.

To be wise, according to the Bible, is not about merely possessing theoretical or "spiritual" religious knowledge or understanding. Raymond Van Leeuwen says,

Biblical wisdom to a large extent has to do with practical knowledge, with a know-how regarding the whole spectrum of human skills and activities, all in tune with the normative patterns and possibilities—and with the concrete givens—of creation. Wise activities include not only 'natural' skills like nursing and weaning a child (see Ps 131:2, a metaphor for God and humans); they also include cultural activities like sailing (Ps 107:27, all [the sailor's] wisdom was swallowed up) and that earthly work we call agriculture (Ps 104:13-17; Is 28:23-29; cf. Prv 6:6-11; 10:4-5).¹⁰

Hubbard further notes, "Those who possess technical skill are called wise: Bezalel, chief artisan of the tabernacle (Ex 31:3; RSV "ability"); artificers of idols (Is. 40:20; Jer 10:9); professional mourners (Jer 9:17); navigators or shipwrights (Ez 27:8-9). Practical wisdom

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hubbard, s. v. "wisdom," *IBD*, 1651.

¹⁰ Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Building God's House: An Exploration in Wisdom," in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, eds. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 205-206.

may take on a sinister aspect, as in Jonadab's crafty advice (2 Sm 13:3)."¹¹ Roland

Murphy adds,

Such skill can be applied to various trades, even to government officials such as Ahithophel, David's counselor (2 Sm 16-17). Wisdom is also cleverness in coping with a situation, such as is evidenced by small but wise animals (Prv 30:24-28). Coping with life (*tazbulot*, or "steering"; Prv 1:5) is the heart of the wise teaching given in the Book of Proverbs. This is experiential wisdom, which issues in practical commands and admonitions for human beings. Many times this is equivalent to a code of ethics.¹²

The wise person acknowledges the God-created structure of the world and seeks to live in accordance with it, while the fool cannot perceive God's order and lives by his/her own rules. Biblical wisdom's emphasis on responsibility for skillful decision making gives it an individualistic emphasis for "the centre of interest is the individual with his needs, ambitions and problems; and even when the problems of the relation of the individual to society are discussed it is human society in general rather than the specific community of Israel to which reference is made."¹³ Thus, good communal decisions are the result and sum of good individual decisions.

In contrast to much of the Old Testament "the wisdom books say nothing whatever about Israel, its history and political vicissitudes, its peculiar status as the people of God, its cult, laws, priesthood or prophets."¹⁴ Murphy explains this is because much of

¹¹ Hubbard, s. v. "wisdom," *IBD*, 1650.

¹² Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, eds. Lloyd R. Bailey and Victor P. Furnish (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), 33-34.

¹³ R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9. Studies in Biblical Theology*, 45 (Naperville, IL: A. R. Allenson, 1965), 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Also, Murphy comments in *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 25, 26, "This is perhaps the most striking feature of biblical wisdom. There is practically no mention of the promises to the patriarchs, Exodus, covenant, Sinai, Torah ('Law'), and other aspects of salvation history. One may rightly claim that Sirach 44-50 ('the praise of the fathers') and Wisdom 10-19 (a *midrash* on the plagues, largely) are exceptions. But they are late books and prove the rule, so to speak. The rest of the books are silent on the favorite themes of the OT. Indeed, Job is explicitly identified as a non-Israelite; he is from the land of Uz,

Israel's wisdom is thought to have been borrowed from her neighbors. Her sages "adhered to the perspective of international wisdom, which is that of the created world and the experience of it. God is very much a part of this perspective, and Yahweh is the only God that Israel (and the sages) rightfully acknowledged. But the sages view the Lord primarily as creator, not as covenant partner."¹⁵ So, an Israelite's

reasoning was not in principle opposed to his faith, but it was used, at first at least, in relation to aspects of life concerning which his specifically religious teaching gave him no information or guidance. The knowledge thus acquired, which the Israelite called wisdom, was essentially practical: the attempt to understand the nature of things was dictated not so much by intellectual curiosity as by man's practical need to control his environment sufficiently to be able to survive and flourish.¹⁶

But this does not mean that this wisdom was considered secular for

the sages' world view is ultimately rooted in the Lord. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prv 9: 10a). It is important to appreciate this deeply religious approach to reality. Israel did not separate faith from knowledge (as we do), any more than she distinguished between the primary causality of God (who causes everything) and secondary causality.¹⁷

God is the loving creator of all truth and wisdom, which come from Him, no matter its human source. The wise seek his wisdom, knowing that he holds all people accountable for their decisions, including those that affect the welfare of their communities.

Wisdom, Dominion, and the Created World

The Book of Proverbs depicts wisdom as God's companion, and his instrument for creating the world (Prv 8:22-23, 30-31). Proverbs 3:19-20 declares, "By wisdom the

and the three friends are also from beyond the land of Israel. Of course, they all argue in the vein and spirit of Israelite wisdom, because they are serving the purpose of the Israelite author of the book."

¹⁵ Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 26.

¹⁶ Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 15.

¹⁷ Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 27.

LORD laid the earth's foundations, by understanding He set the heavens in place; by his knowledge the watery depths were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew." God's wisdom could be seen in the ordered structure of creation, and sages encouraged their students to seek it.

This order is something that can be discovered by experience, and it is expected that one should conform to it. It would appear that such an attitude was simply a basic part of the Israelite world view. Thus Isaiah can indict Israel in terms of breaking an order implicit in the created world: "The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people does not understand" (Is 1:3). . . . Hence, an order, perceptible in nature, exists, and the sages were aware of it and sought to capture it in their wisdom.¹⁸

Kidner points out, "what is implied here is a single system, a universe; and what is invited is the study of it in a spirit of humility, so that we may take our due place within it willingly and intelligently."¹⁹ From the biblical sages' perspective YHWH alone is creator, sustainer, and redeemer. "Instead of a world order which is the unstable product of rival wills, as the mythologies suggest, and is therefore subject to the arbitrary pressures of magico-religious manipulation, the Old Testament sets the world before us as the harmonious composition of a single mind."²⁰ Nature is not divine, and multiple gods do not control natural forces and fertility, or need to be placated. This search for wisdom is the foundation of all scientific study, and wisdom is source of blessing and life from the Lord (Prv 2:19; 3:18; 5:6; 8:35; 10:17; 13:14).

Ben Witherington, III, asserts, "There were at least three ways to gain wisdom according to the Hebrew sages: (1) the careful scrutiny of nature and human nature; (2)

¹⁸ Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 28.

¹⁹ Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 12-13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

learning from the traditions of one's elders, the accumulated wisdom of previous generations; and (3) through encounter with God or a special revelation that came to a person through such an encounter (e.g., Prv 8 and Jb 40-41).²¹ While partial wisdom could be obtained through the thoughtful consideration of creation and sage teaching,

Wisdom in the fullest sense belongs to God alone (Jb 12:13ff; Is. 31:2; Dn 2:20-23). His wisdom is not only completeness of knowledge pervading every realm of life (Jb 10:4; 26:6; Prv 5:21; 15:3) but also consists in his irresistible fulfillment of what He has in his mind. ... Natural (Is 28:23-29) and historical (Is 31:2) processes are governed by his wisdom, which includes an infallible discrimination between good and evil and is the basis for the just rewards and punishments which are the lot of the righteous and the wicked (Pss 1; 37; 73; Prv 10:3; 11:4: 12:2. etc.).²²

True wisdom is not available apart from God and “is inscrutable (Jb 28:12-21): God in his grace must reveal it if man is going to grasp it at all (Jb 28:23, 28). Even wisdom derived from natural abilities or distilled from experience is a gracious gift, because God's creative activity makes such wisdom possible.”²³ Although humans are admonished to,

Get wisdom. ... get understanding” (Prv 4:7), their comprehension of it will be incomplete because they are finite, limited, and mortal: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is 55:8-9). Those who would be wise like Solomon must pray for it (Ws 8:21-9:4a): “But I perceived that I would not possess wisdom unless God gave her to me ... so I appealed to the Lord and besought Him, and with my whole heart I said: “O God of my fathers and Lord of mercy ... give me the wisdom that sits by thy throne.”²⁴

YHWH is the granter of all true wisdom, graciously revealing it to any and all who

²¹ Ben Witherington, III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 12.

²² Hubbard, s. v. “wisdom,” *IBD*, 1650.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 33-35.

humbly seek it from Him (Jas 1:5) to aid them in their task of caring for God’s Creation.

MaryKate Morse comments,

Our ability to make decisions, respond to others, care about beauty and kindness, and do important work is part of God’s nature that is imprinted on us. We are designed to have power. Second, we are to subdue the earth and have dominion over every living thing. Twice God says “let them have dominion over.” “Dominion,” *urdu*, a Hebrew word, means “rule” or “dominion.” God created men and women to have authority, and after blessing Adam and Eve He commands them to exercise it. Therefore, it was and is God’s intention that people have the power to steward and nurture the earth and its resources. The intent is not to lord it over others or use other people and resources for personal gain, but to manage it wisely, as farmers manage their animals or fields.²⁵

The created order makes not only dominion possible, but also human creativity, for

creativity cannot exist without order—a structure within which creation can happen. On a cosmic level the extraordinary profusion of species could never survive if the world were an undifferentiated soup of elements. ... So in a way the Creator’s greatest gift to his creation is the gift of structure—not a structure which locks the world, let alone the Creator himself, into eternal mechanical repetition, but a structure which provides freedom. And those who are made in his image will also be both creators and rulers.²⁶

The ability to discover, use, and pass along helpful insights for wise creative decision making is God’s gift to all humans as part of being created in His image and equipped for stewardship. Thus, the gift of wisdom can be found in all cultures, a point that will be significant for both Israel’s and our contemporary search for wisdom.

The Downfall of Wisdom

God’s gift of wisdom was tainted by the rebellion of humanity in the Fall (Gn 3).

Genesis 3:1 describes the serpent as “more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made.” The word translated “crafty” (*arum*)

²⁵ MaryKate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership: Power, Space and Influence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 42-43.

²⁶ Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 22.

appears nowhere else in Genesis, but it is frequent in Proverbs, where it has the sense prudent, shrewd, or clever. The person possessing this trait is commendable, and he is contrasted with the fool (*ewil*, 12:16), with the foolish one (*kesil*, 12:23; 13:16; 14:8), or with the simple (*peti*, 14:15, 18; 22:3; 27:12). By contrast, the two appearances of *arum* in Job (5:12; 15:5) are pejorative, and the translation crafty is preferable.²⁷

The serpent tempts Eve to defy God and eat from the restricted tree. He subtly suggests that God is not trustworthy and does not have her best interests at heart. He promises “Consumption of the forbidden fruit will make the woman *godlike, knowing good and evil*.”²⁸ Kidner notes “the knowledge of good and evil can stand for moral or aesthetic discernment (e.g. 1 Kgs 3:9; Is. 7:15).”²⁹ Thus, Victor P. Hamilton points out, “Indulgence would give the woman something she did not, in her judgment, presently possess, and that is wisdom.”³⁰ One might wonder what is wrong with Eve’s desire for wisdom. Wenham clarifies the temptation,

The acquisition of wisdom is seen as one of the highest goals of the godly according to the Book of Proverbs. But the wisdom literature also makes it plain that there is a wisdom that is God’s sole preserve, which man should not aspire to attain (e.g., Jb 15:7-9, 40; Prv 30:1-4), since a full understanding of God, the universe, and man’s place in it is ultimately beyond human comprehension. To pursue it without reference to revelation is to assert human autonomy, and to neglect the fear of the LORD which is the beginning of knowledge (Prv 1:7).³¹

In following Satan’s “wise” advice to break God’s command and seek a rival human wisdom Adam and Eve found not life, but folly and death, not only for themselves but for

²⁷ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17, NICOT* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 7. See Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 67.

²⁸ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 189.

²⁹ Kidner, *Genesis*, 63.

³⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 190.

³¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15, WBC* (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publishers, 1987), 63. On 63-64 he notes the expulsion of the king of Tyre who claimed to be “as wise as god” in Ezekiel 28 and the comparison of the Law to the Tree of Knowledge in Psalm 19:8-10 support this interpretation.

all Creation (Gn 3:17-19; Rom 8:21-22).³² The loving trusting web of relationships between them, God, each other, and Creation was broken. As their descendants continued to search for wisdom, Satan offered the same temptation, and they likewise fell to its seduction (Rom 1:18-25; 3:23). It is not surprising that our ability to make decisions individually and corporately is often hindered by suspicion, lack of love, and a focus on self and personal autonomy. And yet, God, in his loving grace, continues to call people to find true wisdom in fearing and following Him, rather than in seeking to be self-sufficient, self-determining, and “wise in their own eyes”(Prv 26:12).

The Development of Wisdom in the Old Testament Period

Biblical scholars often describe the Old Testament books of Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, as well as the Apocryphal books of Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom of Solomon as “wisdom literature” because of their use of the Hebrew word *hokmah* or “wisdom.”³³ However, the influence of the wisdom tradition is much broader, and evidence of it is seen throughout the Old and New Testaments. Historically, wisdom teaching likely had its beginning in the advice and instructions handed down orally within the family or tribe.³⁴ As an illustration of this family wisdom transmission Murphy cites Tobit 4:

The elderly Tobit lays down recommendations to his son: “My son, when I die, bury me. . . . Seek advice from every wise man. . . . So, my son, remember my commandments, and do not let them be blotted out of your mind” (4:3, 18, 19). Moreover it is to be expected that a basic wisdom concerning life’s experiences

³² See Ibid., 64.

³³ See Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 14.

³⁴ See Ibid., 17: “In a world where the oral was naturally more prominent in and central to regular life, the important traditions of the family would have circulated orally and been transmitted on the basis of memory. Indeed, when one examines the proverbs and sayings, scattered in the historical books of the OT (e.g., Jgs 8:21; 1 Sm 30:24-25; 2 Sm 5:8), one is able to capture the feel of oral transmission.”

would have been transmitted from one generation to another within the tribe and within the family.”³⁵

The wisdom teachings of the family/clan guided both individual and communal decision making, with the family patriarch or village fathers usually serving as both community leaders and judges (Jgs 11:5).³⁶ The book of Proverbs directs its admonitions to “my son” but scholars have different interpretations of that phrase. Kidner suggests this may be “a teacher’s fatherly way of speaking to a pupil, as in the old Egyptian instruction manuals.”³⁷ However, he says, “appeal will be made to the teaching and discipline of both father and mother ([Prv] 1:8; 6:20), and at one point the grandparents come fondly into remembrance as well (4:3).”³⁸ Hubbard notes, “The wise man or counselor stood in a parental relationship to those whose well-being hinged on his advice: Joseph was a father to the pharaoh (Gn 45:8); Deborah, a mother in Israel (Jgs 5:7).”³⁹ At this stage wisdom teaching took the form of “generalizations about nature or human nature,”⁴⁰ rather than laws, and several “sages” are mentioned in Israel’s pre-Solomonic history.⁴¹

As noted earlier, Israel did not develop her wisdom in a vacuum. Abraham came from Mesopotamia, with its rich wisdom tradition, and during Israel’s pre-Exodus

³⁵ Ibid., 18.

³⁶ See Max I. Dimont, *Jews, God, and History* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1962), 47.

³⁷ Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes*, 19, 20.

³⁸ Ibid., 20.

³⁹ Hubbard, s. v. “wisdom,” *IBD*, 1650.

⁴⁰ Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 11.

⁴¹ See Ibid., 15, 16: “Four names in 1 Kings 4:31, from Ethan to Darda, obviously famous in their day; there were professional counsellors such as Ahithophel and Hushai his rival (2 Sm 15:12-17:23). More informally, there were star performers in their own localities: the crafty Jonadab (2 Sm 13:3), the wise woman of Tekoa whom we meet in 2 Samuel 14 and even a city that was noted for its collective wisdom (Abel, 2 Sm 20:18).” Lists of David’s advisors can be found in 2 Sm 8:16-18 and 1 Chr 27:32-34.

sojourn in Egypt her people would have become acquainted with the well-developed teachings of its sages and schoolmasters. Also, she was situated at the junction of important trade routes that would have brought her into contact with the beliefs and teachings of the surrounding cultures through travelers. Whybray claims biblical wisdom books

belong to a specifically literary wisdom tradition which ... had been sophisticated and practised as a literary art by the educated classes in Egypt and Mesopotamia for something like two millennia before Israel came into existence. ... A comparison of the Old Testament wisdom books with this foreign literature has shown that the relation of the former to the latter is not merely one of parallel development within a common tradition, but rather of the adoption by Israelites of a specific literary tradition which, at least in some respects, they copied closely.⁴²

This international wisdom was instrumental in helping Israel transition from a nation of city states with decisions made by clan elders and charismatic leader judges, to a monarchy with an established court. Murphy says, “Scholars have come to describe the Solomonic era as an age of Enlightenment, when Israel took on the new ways of the surrounding culture, especially in the administration of the newly founded United Monarchy.”⁴³ The ability to exercise wisdom was a crucial and coveted skill for leaders such as Joshua (Dt 34:9), David (2 Sm 14:20), and especially Solomon.⁴⁴ But often pragmatic, international wisdom lacked moral quality and was “empirical in its spirit, with an emphasis on intellectual rather than ethical values and so well adapted to the hard realities of statecraft and government.”⁴⁵ William McKane points out, “Jonadab is described as a wise man and it is evident that in this context *hakam* has no moralizing tendency. All that is meant is that Jonadab’s plan is shrewd in its conception and well

⁴² Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs*, 15.

⁴³ Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 18, 19.

⁴⁴ Hubbard, s. v. “wisdom,” *IBD*, 1650.

⁴⁵ William McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1965, 1983), 16, 17.

adapted to enable Amnon to satisfy his desire. ... that Jonadab uses his wisdom to secure an immoral end is not thought to impair its validity”⁴⁶ Likewise in 1 Kings 2:5-9 David counsels Solomon:

“Act according to your wisdom (*hokma*), but do not let his (Joab’s) head go down to Sheol in peace.” Again in v. 9: “You are a wise man (*hakam*) and you know what to do with him (Shimei).” In both instances David is advising Solomon to assassinate men who, in his judgment, have become too bad political risks to be allowed to live, and he tells Solomon that he will have to use his own judgment and shrewdness as to the best time to strike and the means which will have the least unfavourable repercussions on the stability of his kingdom.⁴⁷

So, while international wisdom was helpful in developing efficient and effective administration, it was quite pragmatic about running a government and maintaining power.

But the ability to wisely govern was also seen as coming from God:

Wisdom is a gift of God, and Solomon’s wisdom is compared to that of Mesopotamia and Egypt. It is almost as if Israel was aware of the international heritage of wisdom, and that she had arrived late on the wisdom scene. ... The nature of wisdom as gift is portrayed in the episode of his sacrifice at Gibeon (1 Kgs 3:3-14), where the Lord guarantees to give Solomon whatever he asks for. To this Solomon replies by requesting a “listening heart” (*leb shomea*) to govern thy people—a gift that is immediately illustrated by the story of the two harlots.⁴⁸

In his wisdom quest Solomon gathered and recorded Israelite and foreign insights, and mentally sparred with other nations’ leaders, such as the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1-13). Besides entertainment, these encounters were a search for wisdom, for they

implied that the truth one lived by was valid through and through, and that its writ ran everywhere; it also suggested that shared ground existed between the truly wise of any nation. Accordingly we shall come across sayings and concerns that were common property of Israelite and foreign sages; and we may notice that in 1 Kings 4:30-31 Solomon’s wisdom is compared with that of the East and of Egypt, as well as that of his fellow Israelites. True, he outshone them all; but there was a

⁴⁶ Ibid., 16. See 2 Sm 13:3.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 20-21.

basis of comparison between them. It was because his wisdom surpassed rather than by-passed theirs, that they flocked to hear him.⁴⁹

But there was a dark side to Solomon's successes. Confident in international wisdom he apparently forgot, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prv 1:7; 9:10; Ps 111:10), and the assessment of a person wise in his or her own eyes: "There is more hope for a fool than for them" (Prv 26:12). Kidner remarks, "Increasingly he set himself to outshine his fellow potentates, marry into their dynasties and give house-room to their gods. As a king, his legacy was disastrous, his grandiose achievements miserably short-lived."⁵⁰ Trusting in the promises of international wisdom, perhaps he believed in the "'act-consequence' mentality behind the sages' view of reality, ... an intimate, indeed mechanical, connection between an action and its result; if it is good, good will result; if it is evil, evil will result."⁵¹

Do wise decisions automatically bring prosperity or happiness, while foolish ones always lead to disaster? The answer according to Qoheleth, "the Teacher," (traditionally associated with the older reflective Solomon) and the author of the book of Job is "no":

The Lord is described as rewarding good and punishing evil. He *reacts* to good and evil, favorably and unfavorably (Prv 15:29; 16:4, 7). When Job is afflicted, he knows who is to blame: not a mechanical order, but God (Jb 9:22-24). On balance it may be that the "act-consequence" mentality and the view of divine intervention are both at work in the thought of the ancient Israelite. But the understanding of the all-pervasive divine causality seems to dominate biblical thought.⁵²

Non-traditional sages recognized human wisdom, even that given by God as a gift, was limited and did not always produce the desired results. Murphy says that Qoheleth was

⁴⁹ Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes*, 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵¹ Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 31-32.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 32.

not able to recognize any advantages for the wise man over the fool: “How the wise man dies just like the fool!” (Eccl 2:16b). . . . wisdom fails to bring the security it promises. . . . Qoheleth seized on the unknown and the uncertain in the wisdom enterprises and pushed them beyond human limits. Human beings simply cannot understand the “work of God” (3:11; 7:13; 8:17; 11:5). He remains sovereignly free, beyond human standards of justice or priests.⁵³

Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III, commenting on the mystery of God’s will, say the lesson of Ecclesiastes is:

God has created a world with order, and we yearn to experience that order. The Teacher tells us that this knowledge is beyond us all, and as a result we are frustrated to the core. . . . The Teacher touches the raw nerve of reality: The world is rigged for frustration. There is a right way to do things, but we will never know for sure what that is. There is a way to make life work, but we will never do it right. No matter how we try, we will never be in control of our world.⁵⁴

For all the blessings that wisdom can bring to human lives, it cannot give the self-sufficiency that people often seek. Witherington points out,

What may be learned from the examination of creation in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes is human limits—it makes clear how little we know. This is surely one of the functions of God’s rhetorical question-laden reply to Job (Jb 38). It makes clear that humans are unable to see the larger design of God, though one does get some glimmerings or inklings of a moral order, an order of that which is good, true, and beautiful encoded into creation. This order leads to negative consequences if violated. Dangerous and harmful things normally hurt or have disastrous consequences.⁵⁵

God is sovereign over his creation, and those who would avoid disaster must remember that true wisdom and understanding is a divine gift, not merely a human achievement.

Solomon, and succeeding kings, followed proverbial wisdom (Prv11:14; 20:18; 24:6; 2 Sm 16:23; Is 1:26), gathering courtiers around them who could give sage advice. The wisdom of others was valuable as they made political, legal, military, religious, and

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III. *Breaking the Idols of Your Heart: How to Navigate the Temptations of Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 33.

⁵⁵ Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 19.

social decisions affecting the welfare of God's people, and they recognized (at least some of the time) that, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed" (Prv15:22). Kidner notes, "a learned class came to be recognized alongside those of priest and prophet, with its own distinctive style and prestige. There was a popular saying which named all three of these callings and defined their separate kinds of pronouncement: 'The law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet' (Jer 18:18)."⁵⁶ As in Egypt, Babylonia, and Assyria, these officials were called "secretaries," "counselors," or "scribes,"⁵⁷ and Hubbard says, "By Jeremiah's time they had taken their place beside prophets and priests as a major religious and social influence."⁵⁸ McKane says they were "the policy-makers of the kings of Judah and were closely involved with them in making decisions at the highest level, decisions which were an expression of their political judgment as to how Judah might best survive and prosper in a dangerous world."⁵⁹ In contrast to the prophets, Murphy notes, "The sage had no divine call or mission to appeal to. Although some of them indicate certain spiritual experiences (e.g., Eliphaz in Jb 4: 12-21), their appeal is to experience, the way things have always been, or to examples from the created world

⁵⁶ Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes*, 16-17. Regarding the training of court officials, McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men*, 17, says, "Its [wisdom's] practitioners were therefore pre-eminently an élite who were in the higher echelons of government and administration and we shall see that the literature of this wisdom was directed particularly towards the training of statesmen, diplomats and administrators in the schools whose educational discipline was shaped to this end." But Murphy p, 18-19, says, "Under the impact of the discovery of Egyptian teachings that are similar to the Book of Proverbs, modern scholars have argued that there must have been a school for courtiers in Jerusalem similar to the school at the Egyptian court. The analogy is a reasonable one. There are several king sayings in Proverbs, and the men of [King] Hezekiah are described in Prv 25:1 as playing a role in the transmission of the work. ... However, we have no hard evidence for schools that were the centers of wisdom."

⁵⁷ See McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men*, 17.

⁵⁸ Hubbard, s. v. "wisdom," *IBD*, 1650. See Jer. 18:18.

⁵⁹ McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men*, 10.

which bear out their point. Sometimes the motives they offer seem simply pragmatic (Prv 3:9-10).⁶⁰ Consistent with the ethos of international wisdom, these royal court sages

were convinced that statesmanship could not be conducted in terms of the prophetic definition of “faith in Yahweh.” They probably drew a distinction between their private lives or their membership of Yahweh’s cultus and the public offices which they held. They were responsible for the safety and well-being of their country and were persuaded that they had to exercise a kind of political judgment which could not be reconciled with a prophetic, religious faith, or with an assumed undisputed sway of moral values.⁶¹

These sages would have considered themselves religious Israelites, but their approach to decision making brought them into conflict with prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah who had a different understanding of what it meant to wisely and faithfully follow YHWH:

Pagan wisdom, though it, too, may be religious, has no anchor in the covenant-God and, therefore, is doomed to failure, as the prophets frequently point out (Is 19:11ff; Ez 28:2ff; Ob 8). When secularism, materialism and disdain of the covenant-ideals squeezed the fear of God out of Israel’s wisdom, it became practical atheism, as vapid as its pagan counterpart, and drew Isaiah’s fire: Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes (5:21; cf. 29:14; Jer 18:18).⁶²

God’s prophets could not support the policies of Judah’s leaders who governed with international wisdom, trusting in their own abilities to protect and prosper YHWH’s people. Their intervention in political affairs was rarely appreciated as is illustrated by Ahaz’s reaction to Isaiah’s counsel not to make alliances against the kings of Israel and Syria (Is 7; 2 Kgs 16). McKane notes,

Ahaz is faced with the threat of invasion and so the interview takes place at a moment when the safety of the Judaeon state hangs in the balance and the king is confronted with a decision of the greatest delicacy and gravity. Yet it is just here—in this area of crucial political decision—that the prophet intervenes and tenders his advice. The prophet, as Yahweh’s spokesman, cannot avoid interfering in affairs of state and seeking to influence the policies of the king and his high

⁶⁰ Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 36.

⁶¹ McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men*, 10-11.

⁶² Hubbard, s. v. “wisdom”, *IBD*, 1650.

political advisers, because the most important things which he has to say deal with just those matters.⁶³

Ahaz viewed Isaiah's warnings as meddling, for Isaiah is "entering what the statesman believes to be his preserve and is challenging the authority and validity of well-trying and universally recognized crafts of political negotiation and diplomacy."⁶⁴ McKane says,

What Ahaz refused to do was just to abandon the well-charted routes of political negotiation and in this he would certainly have the backing of his professional advisers. Was he to scrap the ways of thinking and the attitudes which were universally current in diplomatic exchanges and political bargaining and to base the security of Judah on trust in Yahweh? We should not underestimate the revolutionary character of this demand nor wonder that the statesmen boggled at it and were moved to consternation and anger when it was formulated by a prophet of Yahweh.⁶⁵

Underlying this disagreement with the prophets was a fundamental difference of opinion about the king's role, stemming from the people's desire to have a ruler "like all the other nations" and the rejection of God's kingship (1 Sm 8). Judah's kings sought to operate with international wisdom as they ruled, negotiated, and made war. They were not unlike the leaders of many churches, Christian organizations, and denominations who view themselves as primarily business people. While having personal faith, they believe that they need to run their organizations according to "best business-practices" and are frustrated by those who, like the prophets, challenge them to seek another way. The prophets saw their kings as under-shepherds, set apart to rule according to God's law and counsel, and were greatly troubled by what they saw as the rejection of YHWH and his ways. They looked for the coming of the Messianic King who would "delight in the fear of the LORD," and be given "the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of

⁶³ McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men*, 114.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD” (Is 11:2). This king would be a “Wonderful Counselor” (Is 9: 6) and restore the nation.

The Development of Wisdom in the Inter-Testamental Period

However, before this Messianic King came there would be a time of judgment, exile, and partial restoration for God’s people. In the second and first centuries B.C. sages such as Jesus ben Sira, wrote the deuterocanonical books of the Wisdom of Sirach (also known as Sirach or Ecclesiasticus), and the Wisdom of Solomon. In contrast to earlier sages, who rarely referred to individuals and God’s covenantal acts,

Ben Sira and Ps.-Solomon were concerned with observing the nature of God’s activity by exegeting the Book: the sages’ repertory of knowledge now includes Scripture. Wisdom of Solomon, therefore, is not simply a commentary on Scripture but a search for Wisdom, a search for God’s overarching, eternal plan, on the basis of Scripture. God’s eternal wisdom is to be learned from the Bible, for it is Scripture that is the depository of wisdom.⁶⁶

In keeping with earlier writings such as Psalm 1, which assures prosperity for the wise righteous who meditate on YHWH’s law, Ben Sira in Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 24

explicitly identifies Wisdom with the Torah, or Law. For him Wisdom has become the particular revelation of the divine will in the Mosaic Law. This point of view is expressed also in Dt 4:6-8, where Moses urges the Israelites to fidelity to the “statutes and ordinances.” ... Many of the sayings in Sirach reflect this identification of Wisdom and Law (e.g., 15:1; 21:11, etc.).⁶⁷

For example, Sirach 19:20 says, “The whole of Wisdom is fear of the Lord, and in all Wisdom there is the fulfillment of the Law.”⁶⁸ This connection between fidelity to the

⁶⁶ Peter Enns, “Wisdom of Solomon and Biblical Interpretation in the Second Temple Period,” *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, eds. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000) 222.

⁶⁷ Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 105.

⁶⁸ Quoted by Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 78.

Law and wisdom became crucial for maintaining identity as God's chosen and called people.⁶⁹ Witherington notes,

Ben Sira was not just trying to reassert the old values of Wisdom thinking. He was also attempting to establish a new sort of conservatism among Jews, with Wisdom and Torah in tandem, that could withstand the challenges presented by Hellenism without giving up some benefits from and dialogue with Hellenism. To this end he felt it necessary to ground Wisdom not just in creation but also in the history of Israel, and in particular to connect it with Torah.⁷⁰

God's people continued to be tempted to adopt the "wise" beliefs and practices of nearby cultures, neglecting the covenant with YHWH who created, loved, and called them.

This pairing of wisdom with Scripture changed the search for wisdom's focus from the study of Creation to the study of the Law, and the work of the sage and scribe became the preservation and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Peter Enns comments,

Simply stated, Scripture is God's wisdom. It is rich in meaning and invites—even demands—that one search for that meaning. It is little wonder, then, that the exegetical traditions witnessed to in Wisdom of Solomon came to be so closely associated with the biblical text. Scripture must be properly interpreted in order for it to serve as a guide for living. A biblical passage is of little use if its meaning is unclear. But when it is "interpreted", its meaning becomes clear. . . . It is wisdom that is contained, yet hidden, in the text. It is to meet the challenge of bringing God's wisdom to God's people that biblical interpretation became a wisdom activity in the Second Temple period.⁷¹

In a time when it was widely believed that, "the prophetic Spirit had been withdrawn from Israel" the teachings of the sages provided a word from God.⁷² Ben Sira taught:

⁶⁹ Ibid., 79. He comments, "Ben Sira was not wrong to be concerned about Hellenism, for had he lived until 174 B.C. he would very likely have been horrified at some of the steps the new High Priest Jason/Joshua was prepared to take to accommodate Judaism to Hellenism, including building a Greek gymnasium in Jerusalem."

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Enns, "Wisdom of Solomon and Biblical Interpretation in the Second Temple Period," 222.

⁷² James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975), 304. He comments, 82, "The gift of prophecy was commonly thought to have ceased after the

(1) a sage's claim to be inspired like the prophets and so offer some new revelation from God in sapiential form: "I will again pour out teaching like prophecy" (Sir 24:33); and (2) the sage is said to study and draw on prophetic material (Sir 39:1). In Ws 7:27 one hears that when the spirit of Wisdom passes into someone's soul she makes them "friends of God, *and prophets*" (Ws 7:27). Here the sage is seen as the one who delivers the prophetic word. Consider also the later saying from the Talmud (*B. T. B. Batra* 12a) that God took prophecy from the prophets and gave it to the sages.⁷³

With this new role and supposed gifting, the Temple scribes became responsible for the teaching and defense of the written Scriptures and the oral Law.⁷⁴ They advised government leaders and served as administrators of the law and judges for the Sanhedrin. Because of their status, knowledge of Scripture, and education they were widely regarded as the dispensers of God's wisdom. That role was threatened by those who had a different perspective and taught the crowds authoritatively, such as Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus as Wisdom Incarnate

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus "grew in wisdom" (Lk 2:40, 52) and those who heard him preach as an adult "were amazed. 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?'" (Mt 13:54; Mk 6:2). Like other sages and teachers, Jesus gathered disciples to learn and transmit his teaching.⁷⁵ He quickly gained a reputation as

early post-exilic period; neither charismatic prophets nor cult professionals were recognized as exercising the prophetic charisma (cf. Ps 74:9; Zec 13.2-6; II Bar 85.1-3)."

⁷³ Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 158-159.

⁷⁴ C. L. Feinberg, s. v. "scribes", *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 3, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980), 1404.

⁷⁵ See Matthew 4:23; 9:35, 11:1. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 175, wonders, "Did Jesus, like earlier sages before him, engage in a programmatic transmission of his teachings to a group of disciples? We should recall the appendix to Qoheleth's book (Eccl 12:9-12) and Ben Sira's words in various places throughout his book (e.g. Sir 33:18; 39:1-3; 51:23-26). The appendix to Qoheleth indicates that the sage taught, and that in addition to creating *meshalim* of various sorts he studied and arranged and weighed them as well. The Assembler or Collector was one who deliberately sought to find pleasing words, words that

a man of godly wisdom and it is “likely that Jesus was perceived to be some sort of sage by the part of his audience that was conversant with the world of Jewish Wisdom traditions.”⁷⁶ Josephus calls Jesus a *sophos aner*, a “wise man,” saying, “He was one who performed surprising feats and was a teacher of the sort of people who accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews.”⁷⁷ Witherington proposes that Jesus intentionally

presented himself as a Jewish prophetic sage, one who drew on all the riches of earlier Jewish sacred traditions, especially the prophetic, apocalyptic, and sapiential material though occasionally even the legal traditions. His teaching, like Ben Sira’s and Pseudo-Solomon’s before him, bears witness to the cross-fertilization of the several streams of sacred Jewish traditions. However, what makes sage the most appropriate and comprehensive term for describing Jesus, is that he either casts his teaching in a recognizably sapiential form (e.g. an aphorism, or beatitude, or riddle), or uses the prophetic adaptation of sapiential speech—the narrative *mashal*. In either case, he speaks by various means of figurative language, thus choosing to address his audience using indirect speech.⁷⁸

At times the style and content of Jesus’ teaching seemed similar to that of traditional sages. “The so-called Sermon on the Mount, which in both Matthew and Luke is presented as a paradigmatic homily revealing the essence of the teaching of the sage, not only contains sapiential material but as Bultmann pointed out almost nothing else.”⁷⁹ But Jesus’ teaching was also unlike the traditional wisdom of the sages, for “many of the major themes of proverbial Wisdom are totally or almost totally absent from the Jesus tradition. For example there are no proverbs urging the seeking of Wisdom, or suggesting that the acquiring of it is difficult. Nor does Jesus urge that the fear of God is the

could be learned and remembered. The collected sayings of such a sage are said to be like goads on the one hand, and like firmly fixed nails on the other.”

⁷⁶ Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 155.

⁷⁷ From the “Testimonium Flavianum” from *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.63, quoted in Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 175.

⁷⁸ Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 158-159.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

beginning of Wisdom.”⁸⁰ Instead, his parables “were illustrations of what was happening or would happen as a result of God’s dominion breaking into Israel’s midst in the person and ministry of Jesus the sage. In this regard, Jesus’ *meshalim* are not Torah-centric like other early Jewish parables but are more prophetic in character, telling the truth about some present or future situation.”⁸¹ Jesus’ sayings were not only “paradoxical and counter-intuitive (is it always so that when a person tries to save their life they will in fact lose it?), but they often reflect an order that goes counter to traditional Wisdom.”⁸²

Just as Jesus’ teaching often did not fit the mold of traditional wisdom, so also his model of a sage did not meet standard expectations. For “while in Ben Sira’s day there was a virtual equation of scribe with sage, the Torah scholar with the wise man (and with the kings counselor) ... Jesus does not present himself as primarily a scribe or exegete of Torah, indeed he is repeatedly set over against such scribes in the Gospel tradition.”⁸³ Witherington suggest this was because “Jesus was ... a sage of counter order (like Qoheleth), but also a prophetic sage, like Ben Sira or Pseudo-Solomon in some ways (e.g. in his use of eschatology).”⁸⁴ Jesus is

the one like, yet greater than, Solomon. He is anointed with the plenitude of the Spirit, resists every temptation (unlike Solomon) and performs wonders that surpass what even Jewish folklore had predicated of Solomon. Even more strikingly, at the climax or end of several of the sections of Q, the reader is left with the suggestion that Jesus is the very embodiment of Wisdom, one who is

⁸⁰ Ibid., 161.

⁸¹ Ibid., 187. He notes further, 298, “Jesus drew on both sorts of Wisdom traditions (immanent and transcendent), but when he wished to speak of himself as Wisdom, or of the inbreaking dominion of God, he was drawing on the revelatory side of the tradition.”

⁸² Ibid., 164.

⁸³ Ibid., 165.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 233. On 143 he states that “there are some important parallels in both form and content between the Wisdom of Ben Sira and the Jesus tradition. On 143-144 he gives seven comparisons, and urges comparing of Ben Sira’s beatitudes with Jesus’ beatitudes in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

vindicated as Wisdom by his deeds, one who seeks the lost, one who laments over Jerusalem, as a mother over her children.⁸⁵

This self-identification of Jesus as Wisdom incarnate was deliberate. Not only did Jesus claim to be wise (Mt 12:42) and uniquely related to God (Mt 11:25-27), but in “Mt 11:29 it is Jesus, not Torah, that is identified or associated with the personification of Wisdom.”⁸⁶ Witherington points out that in the Gospel of John, “In the seven key ‘I am’ sayings Jesus is characterized variously as living bread, light of the world, the door, life, and the authentic vine (cf. 6:35, 51; 8:12; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). *All of these things are said at one point or another to come from or characterize personified Wisdom.*”⁸⁷ Jesus called his hearers to follow and obey him, just as Wisdom called all to choose her counsel in Proverbs 8 and 9.

No one before or after Jesus during the biblical era identified themselves with personified Wisdom. While Ben Sira could invite disciples to come and study with him, in the end he would point them away from himself to the yoke of Wisdom. He was a much more traditional and conservative sage. Jesus spoke as Wisdom, and his yoke amounted to binding his disciples personally to himself and his teaching, a teaching about a counter order of reality that he believed was being brought about through his ministry.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ibid., 233. See Mt 11:19 (Lk 7:35) and Mt 23:34ff (Lk 11:49).

⁸⁶ Ibid., 145.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 375. He says further, “in Prv 8:38 Wisdom says, ‘he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord.’ In Wis. 7:26 she is said to be a reflection of eternal light. The characterization of Jesus as vine should be compared to the characterization of Wisdom in Sir 24:17ff where it says, ‘Like the vine I bud forth delights, and my blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit. Come to me you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits ... those who eat of me will hunger for more and those who drink of me will thirst for more.’ This passage from Sirach also seems to inform John 4:4: ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water I will give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ Perhaps also one may compare ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’ (6:35). The latter text is also close to Prv 9:5 where Wisdom beckons ‘Come eat of my bread, and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity and live and walk in the way of insight.’ Wisdom is said to be a tree of life in Prv 3:18 and in the immediately preceding verse there is a discussion of her ways and paths.”

⁸⁸ Ibid., 208.

Jesus' claim to be Wisdom incarnate shocked and challenged those who understood its implications, and it is no wonder that his words elicited strong reactions.

Jesus' claims also implied new roles for his disciples. Rather than considering themselves as fully taught and worthy of titles and status, they were not to be called

rabbi or *kathegetes* (teacher, 23:8-10), for they have only one teacher—Jesus. The implication of this statement ... is not only that Jesus is the teacher as the one greater than Solomon, as Wisdom come from God, as the Davidic Messiah, but also that the disciples are and must remain learners and in some cases may become scribes. This exclusive pedagogical Christology has implications for ecclesiology in Matthew's community. When one is always to be seen as a learner or scribe at most, then servant leadership is the only viable sort a human being can offer in such a community, there is no room for asking for positions of honor or greatness (cf. Mt 20:20-28).⁸⁹

Jesus' disciples are to be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). They are commissioned to bring others

(presumably predominantly Gentiles, *ta ethne*) into the community of Jesus, and make them learners like themselves. They are to accomplish this: (1) by teaching their audience what Jesus had previously taught and commanded the first disciples (hence the transmission of the traditions is mandated and given divine sanction); and (2) by means of the ongoing strengthening and authorizing presence of Jesus in and with his community (cf. Mt 1:23; Mt 18:20).⁹⁰

As the disciples evangelized, they were to faithfully pass to others, through their spoken and written words, God's wisdom revealed to them through Jesus' teaching and life.

Wisdom in the New Testament Letters and Revelation

Like its Old Testament counterpart, much New Testament wisdom (*sophia*) is very practical, and gives advice how to live in godliness and God-honoring community.

As the Church grew and spread to the Gentile world, Jesus' disciples relied on the counsel of the Old Testament, even as they were guided in their decision making by

⁸⁹ Ibid., 367.

⁹⁰ Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 349.

Christ's teachings and the Holy Spirit's insight. Following the teaching of Ben Sira, the Apostle Paul affirms the Bible as a source of God's wisdom. He tells the Roman church, "everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope" (15:4; cf. 1 Cor 10:11). He encourages Timothy to

continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tm 3:14-17).

But wisdom comes not by the diligent study of Scripture alone, but by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and his gifts of knowledge and insight:

The truly wise are those to whom God has graciously imparted wisdom: Solomon (Mt 12:42; Lk 11:31), Stephen (Acts 6:10), Paul (2 Pt 3:15), Joseph (Acts 7:10). One of Christ's legacies to his disciples was the wisdom to say the right thing in times of persecution and examination (Lk 21:15). A similar wisdom is necessary for understanding the apocalyptic oracles and enigmas (Rv 13: 18; 17:9).⁹¹

The wisdom given by the Spirit is "a transcendent Wisdom which could not be found in creation no matter how long a human being looked (cf. Job 28), *unless* God revealed it.

... It is Wisdom for a world gone wrong, where it may be hard to discern any Wisdom immanent in creation or in immediate historical circumstances."⁹² According

Witherington, the Apostle Paul teaches

the old ways of reckoning what amounts to wisdom and what amounts to folly must be abandoned to understand the Gospel. There is no way the sort of advice found in Proverbs about human Wisdom and folly can help at this point. The spirit of what Paul says and the assumptions behind it seem very close to what one finds when Wisdom and prophecy are spoken of together at Qumran: "As one of the wise, I have knowledge of you, my God, by the Spirit that you gave to me.

⁹¹ Hubbard, s. v. "wisdom," *IBD*, 1651.

⁹² Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 298.

... By your Holy Spirit you opened to me knowledge in the mystery of your Wisdom (1 QH 12:11-12).”⁹³

This theme of the revealed wisdom is dealt with in various ways in several of Paul’s letters and the letter from James, which we will now look at more closely.

In Romans 1:18-23 Paul writes of God’s wrath being revealed against those who have rejected the obvious insights that creation gives about God’s existence and character. As a result of their unwillingness to recognize and worship God, “their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools” (21-22). Witherington comments, “Paul, like previous sages, still believed in an inherent reflection of God in creation, *but* he also believed in *human* fallenness that led humans to falsely evaluate or reject the evidence of God in creation, as did the author of the Wisdom of Solomon. (cf. Wis 2:23-24).”⁹⁴ Fallen humans twist wisdom and often insist that their own foolish prejudices, preferences, and interpretations of experience are correct, wise and will bring life, but they will not (Prv 14:12; 16:25). Even though they may think they are doing the right thing, God will impartially and justly judge the secret thoughts of all (Rom 2:16). Witherington points out, “This is much like what the sage says in Wis 1:6-8: “God is a witness of their inmost feelings, and a true observer of their hearts ... therefore those who utter unrighteous things will not escape notice, and justice when it punishes will not pass them by.”⁹⁵

But salvation from this terrifying state is not found in trying harder to follow human or even divine laws. Witherington remarks,

⁹³ Ibid., 310.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 322.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 321.

Both Paul, and writers like Pseudo-Solomon, reflect the concept of a human world gone wrong and hence the need for Wisdom to be revealed by God, for both reflect that convergence of sapiential and prophetic—apocalyptic thinking about God, history, Wisdom, and salvation. For Paul, it is Christ as proclaimed in the Gospel who is capable of setting things right, and thus Rom 1:18ff. as bleak as it may sound is meant to be read in the light of 1:16-17.⁹⁶

In the first eleven chapters of his letter to the Romans Paul explain how God’s wisdom in Christ has and is “setting things right.” In response to this revelation Paul exclaims, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Rom 11:33). This wisdom of God revealed in Christ is a theme that he also explores at some length in his first letter to the church in Corinth.

In 1 Corinthians Paul frequently uses the words “wisdom” (*sophia*) and “knowledge” (*gnosis*). Dunn points out that, “*gnosis* and *sophia* are the slogans of the faction opposing Paul in Corinth. It is because his opponents claim to possess *gnosis* and *sophia*, and deny them to others (including Paul), that Paul has to take up the concepts in the first place.”⁹⁷ In the first three chapters Paul seeks to counter the Corinthian understanding of wisdom, speaking of it in several ways. Dunn says, “Wisdom is used in a bad sense first as rhetorical skill or eloquence. ... The danger in this *sophia* is that faith becomes a matter of rational persuasion and superficial impression rather than of existential encounter with the Spirit and power of God (1:17, 22ff.; 2:4f.).”⁹⁸ Paul apparently had been criticized for not preaching eloquently and some were enamored of the flashy rhetorical skills of others, such as Apollos. According to Acts 18:24-26, “Apollos is said to be from Alexandria and an *aner logios* which can mean he was

⁹⁶ Ibid., 324.

⁹⁷ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 217-219.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 219.

eloquent and possibly implies he was one who used Greco-Roman rhetoric in the presentation of the Gospel.”⁹⁹ Paul affirms in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.” Paul was concerned they were being seduced by a dangerous human wisdom which did not understand or appreciate the wisdom of God. It was “worldly wisdom (... 1:20ff.; 2:5f., 13; 3:19; 2 Cor 1:12; cf. Col 2:23); that is, the wisdom which judges the gospel and all claims to truth by human standards ... by the values of this age (2:6), in terms of what a purely this-worldly appetite and ambition counts as important.”¹⁰⁰ Paul warns the Corinthians against being “wise in their own eyes”: “If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a fool so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness;’ and again, ‘The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile’” (1 Cor 3:18-21). As Witherington notes, “the only Wisdom that is salvific is that revealed by God, not that discovered by humanity. This puts human Wisdom properly in its place and makes clear there is no place for human boasting about Wisdom in the presence of God and in view of God’s mighty Wisdom.”¹⁰¹

Paul also warns them against thinking that they have more spiritual knowledge than they really do: “knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know” (1 Cor 8:1, 2; cf. 13:2, 8; 2 Cor 8:7; 11:6). Dunn explains,

⁹⁹ Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 300.

¹⁰⁰ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 219.

¹⁰¹ Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 312.

It was evidently the Corinthian's proud boast that they possess knowledge (8:1). ... The knowledge in this case is that idols count for nothing in the world; there is no God but one (8:4). ... this knowledge was not purely speculative but had a practical outworking. In the Corinthian case knowledge enabled the Corinthians to join in the social activities and feasts of the pagan temples (8:10) without qualm or reservation.¹⁰²

But, Paul was not rejecting all wisdom for he says in 2:6, "We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing."¹⁰³ For Paul, and other New Testament writers, wisdom is intimately connected to what God has revealed and done in Christ through his life, crucifixion and resurrection. It is "Wisdom about God's eschatological plan of salvation in Christ for all the world."¹⁰⁴ Witherington says that Paul is drawing on

late Jewish sapiential traditions which stressed that God's counsel or plan could only be known if God revealed it, which in turn meant that one could only know such Wisdom through God's Spirit coming down and revealing it or inspiring the receiver (cf. Ws 7:27; 9:17; Sir 24:33). The connection then between godly Wisdom and the Holy Spirit then became an important one and the connection between being a *sophos* and being a *pneumatikos* was a natural further development.¹⁰⁵

This wisdom is "a Wisdom of God in a mystery, a Wisdom that involved a revelation from God through the Holy Spirit (2:10). For Paul, receiving the Spirit seems to be the

¹⁰² Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 217-219.

¹⁰³ Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 313, says, "The rulers in the Ancient Near East were those most often assumed to be gatherers and purveyors of true *sophia*. Paul's point could be that his Wisdom is no conventional Wisdom, the sort associated with courts and generated by the rulers retainers—sages, scribes, counselors and the like. It was traditional in Wisdom literature to address and even admonish rulers to seek Wisdom (cf. Ws 1; 6:1; Sir 10:1-4). Christ was crucified in part because the rulers of this world relied on their traditional and conventional forms of Wisdom, not on the revelatory message about the Wisdom of God, and so crucified Christ in ignorance. This echoes the idea of Wisdom being rejected by the nations (cf. Sir 24:6-7)."

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 331.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 313-314.

primary thing and Wisdom and knowledge comes through the Spirit.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, as Dunn says, this wisdom “it is not merely a rational acknowledgment; it includes experiential participation in that salvation-history, the actual experience of God’s saving power in the here and now—the demonstration of the Spirit and power (2:4).”¹⁰⁷ This wisdom is not just good advice for living a successful life; it is the revelation of the eternal mystery of God’s redemption and active restoration of the world.

Paul’s letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians are “filled with Wisdom language, concerned with words like Wisdom, mystery, knowledge, creation theology, rulers of this age and the like.”¹⁰⁸ Through God’s revelation in Christ, “With all wisdom and understanding, He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. (Eph 1:7-10). Paul says God’s intention in revealing the gospel is that, “the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph 3:10-11). He desires his converts “may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2: 2-3). Hubbard says,

Paul’s wisdom Christology (1 Cor 1:24, 30) was probably influenced both by Christ’s claims and by the apostolic consciousness (grounded in Christ’s teachings in Matthew) that Christ was the new Torah, the complete revelation of God’s will, replacing the old law. Since the commandments and wisdom are linked in Dt 4:6, and especially in Jewish thought (e.g. Sir 24:23; Apocalypse of

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 301.

¹⁰⁷ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 220.

¹⁰⁸ Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 330.

Baruch 3:37ff.), it is not unexpected that Paul would view Jesus, the new Torah, as the wisdom of God. That Paul saw in Christ the fulfillment of Prv 8:22ff. seems apparent from Col 1:15ff., which strongly reflects the OT description of wisdom.¹⁰⁹

Paul prays for wisdom for his converts so that they may know Christ who is wisdom incarnate and the fulfillment of Torah, understand the great blessings that they have been given in Jesus, and live appropriately. In Colossians 1:9 he prays that God would “fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding” and in Ephesians 1:17-19 he asks that God “may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.” J. I. Packer, reflecting on Paul’s teaching says,

Christians should “walk”—live their lives, behave—in wisdom,” not as unwise but as wise” (Eph 5:15; *cf.* Col 4:5). In Ephesians this admonition is reinforced by a reminder that “the days are evil,” after which Paul begins a detailed presentation of Spirit-filled living and family ethics, all irradiated by the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. This shows that “wise” here is being used in a fully theological sense, so as to imply a responsible living out of Christian conviction and discernment. Wisdom in the New Testament sense is a matter of learning to imitate Christ in selfless love and humility; to make and keep peace in all relationships; to serve the real needs of others; and to submit to pain, grief, and disgrace when circumstances inflict them. It is a mark of wisdom to aim at full Christlikeness in each of these respects.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Hubbard, s. v. “wisdom,” *IBD*, 1651. Witherington, 331, disagrees, “Paul does not equate Christ with Torah, but he does believe that Torah, rightly interpreted, points not to itself but to Christ as the locus of God’s Wisdom. Paul parallels the Torah and the Gospel as instruments and is willing to say, unlike previous sages, that the Wisdom they were looking for and thought they had found in Torah is actually to be found in Christ.”

¹¹⁰ J. I. Packer, “Theology and Wisdom,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 10.

In Colossians 3:15-17 Paul reminds the Colossian church that they were “called to peace” as one body in Christ, and that they are to “teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.”

Wisdom is a major topic in the book of James and the author, “is heavily indebted not only to the Wisdom material found in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly Proverbs (cf. e.g. Prv 3:34 and Jas 4:6; Prv 9:30 and Jas 3:18; Prv 10:12 (LXX) and Jas 5:20), but is even more heavily indebted to the writings of Ben Sira and Pseudo Solomon.”¹¹¹

Witherington calls James, “a piece of Jewish-Christian sapiential material, probably a very early one.”¹¹² He notes, “the Wisdom that is from above in James produces or at least leads to good and godly character and behavior (Jas 3:13-18).”¹¹³ James promises, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him” (1:5) He challenges the one claiming to be wise to “show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (3:13) because, “the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (3:17-18). But he also warns, “If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.”(3:14-15). Apparently, some of his readers, who claimed to be wise and speak for God, were instead contentious and arrogant. Webster points out,

¹¹¹ Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 237-238.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 247.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

The shocking truth of this passage is not the contrast between worldly wisdom and heavenly wisdom, but the fact that professing Christians were in danger of substituting envy and ambition for true spirituality. They were confusing the Christian faith with their petty desires, personal opinions and selfish expectations. They were in danger of commending envy and selfish ambition as consistent with a Christian lifestyle.¹¹⁴

James diagnoses the source of the disharmony in the church as wrong desires, covetousness, prayerlessness and praying for the wrong things (Jas 4:1-3). Douglas D. Webster warns, “When Christians are not at peace with themselves, how can they be at peace with others? They are driven by impulses and ambitions that belong to the earthly, unspiritual and demonic wisdom described earlier. For James it is not an overstatement to call these professing Christians murderers. Jesus used similar language in the Sermon on the Mount ... (Mt 5:21-22).”¹¹⁵ He continues, “Who can measure the devastating impact of broken relationships among Christians, and the resulting fallout from split churches? Who can gauge the anger seething below the surface of respectable Christianity? Who can estimate how much pain has been produced by disorder and disunity?”¹¹⁶ Underneath the power struggles, manipulation, and political ploys often found in churches, especially when making decisions, is the reliance on human wisdom to get what one wants (of course in the name of God), and the neglect of humbly seeking God and his will in a particular matter. James’ remedy for this dreadful situation is for his readers to repent, humbly submit to God, and do what they should have done in the first place (4:7-10).

The book of Revelation tells of the ultimate triumph of God and his wisdom over the rebellious ways and wisdom of the nations and his angelic enemy, Satan. In heaven

¹¹⁴ Douglas D. Webster, *Finding Spiritual Direction: The Challenge and Joys of Christian Growth*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 103-104.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

angels rejoice, singing, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (5:12), and "Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (7:12) in a triumphant thank offering for the salvation of the world. John also tells his readers that one needs God's wisdom to fully understand the messages and visions that he describes, "This calls for a mind with wisdom" (Rv 17:9; 13:8).

Wisdom's Promises and Pitfalls for Congregational Discernment and Decision Making

The use of wisdom is crucial for skillful discernment and godly decision making. From this study we learned God created the world through wisdom, giving it an ordered shape which can be seen by the careful observer, and insights from Israelite and foreign sages were recorded in Scripture for the benefit of all. Thus, as Van Leeuwen says, "all human work needs to be congruent with or 'in tune with' the normative order and character of God's cosmic house in its ongoing existence. Israel's Torah, Prophets, and Wisdom writings remain faithful, normative, and divinely authoritative guides for life in God's house."¹¹⁷ God, the loving Creator, gives all wisdom, no matter its human source. The wise dependently seek the counsel of God and others who are wise, but the foolish disregard both in favor of their own limited insights and plans.

But that does not mean that planning is wrong. It is part of the God-given human responsibility of exercising dominion, bringing order out of chaos. Allender and Longman point out,

Planning involves using our mental power in order to control what will happen to us. Planning is never precise and is always full of risks, according to Proverbs, but failing to plan is simply irresponsible: "Plans go wrong for lack of advice; many

¹¹⁷ Van Leeuwen, "Building God's House," 208.

advisers bring success” (Proverbs 15:22). And when we submit those plans to the Lord, He will bless them: “Commit your actions to the LORD, and your plans will succeed” (Proverbs 16:3).

God wants us to plan. He wants us to think of the consequences of our actions. Generally speaking, no one can have a significant measure of success without foresight and the ability to affect the shape of the future.¹¹⁸

It is only self-sufficient rationalistic planning that ignores or rejects God that is problematic. God remains sovereign over his creation, and those who would be wise and avoid disaster in our naturalistic culture must remember that true wisdom and understanding is a divine gift, not merely a human achievement. It is not dependant upon human intelligence, or the lack of it, and it allows all to contribute to the discernment decision-making process, not just the select few.

New Testament teaching also affirms the importance of wise living and decision making, but stresses the revelation of God’s mysterious purposes for Creation in Christ, who is wisdom incarnate. Packer says,

wisdom is at every stage and in every aspect God’s gift, received through his word by the agency of the Holy Spirit. It should now be said specifically that the word that brings wisdom is the apostolic message about Jesus Christ, which the canonical New Testament sets before us. This message consists of historical facts plus a detailed theological explanation of those facts that presents them as, among other things, fulfilling Old Testament predictions and promises. ... This was God’s secret wisdom (1 Cor 2:7), which turns all the worlds alleged wisdom into foolishness.¹¹⁹

Wisdom gained by observing Creation, passed on by sages, and revealed by the Gospel and Holy Spirit, is a blessing, the gift of a loving God who has our welfare at heart.

¹¹⁸ Allender and Longman, *Breaking the Idols of Your Heart*, 28-29.

¹¹⁹ Packer, “Theology and Wisdom,” 9.

But we also know, “as a result of the Fall, our world is wired for chaos. To bring an element of control to that chaos, we need wisdom.”¹²⁰ As fallen humans our fearful attempts to manage our world and avoid disaster (including decision making), are marred by spiritual blindness, prejudice, suspicion, hatred, self-focus, and personal autonomy. Our search for wisdom is colored by our individualistic narcissism and pragmatism.

Allender and Longman note,

The way of wisdom presented in the Bible ... seems to support our desire for control. If that is the case, then the next logical step is to master wisdom, to learn the principles embedded in books like Proverbs, and then simply to apply them to the right situations. The book of Proverbs, after all, appears to be a list of insightful statements about how we ought to live life, a kind of divine self-help book that will take us through the turmoil of relationships and all the struggles of life.¹²¹

In our state of restless impatience and information overload the temptation is to “assume that the solution to our lack of control is to find new systems, new rules, new methods, new laws for doing things. We think that if only we have the right systems, we can control the chaos.”¹²² In our prayerlessness and functional atheism we, like Solomon, succumb to the “act-consequence mentality” and attempt to figure-out life by human effort. We search worldly wisdom for the flashy “winning formula,” thinking that it will help us overcome divine inscrutability and human limitations.

And yet, God, in his loving grace, “will not let us achieve what would block us from himself. He actively orchestrates life so that we are continually presented with minor and major disruptions—and reminded that we are not in control.”¹²³ He calls his

¹²⁰ Allender, and Longman, *Breaking the Idols of Your Heart*, 29.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 35.

¹²³ Ibid., 34.

people to find true wisdom in fearing and following Him, rather than seeking to be self-sufficient, self-determining, and “wise in their own eyes” (Prv 26:12). Allender says,

we can affirm that, although life is not tamable, it is purposeful—if we surrender to God’s control and power. Surrendering doesn’t mean that we spend less energy, but it does mean that we spend less nervous energy. We can live with a confidence that does not presume on our ability to rope life in but rather grounds itself in the strength and power of the One who made us.¹²⁴

We can release our anxieties to be successful and live in dependence as learners, allowing God to be our expert and sustainer. What according to the Bible is heart of true wisdom?

Packer says,

It begins with (derives from, is rooted in) *the fear of the Lord* (Ps 111:10; Prv 9:10; cf. Prv 1:7). It comes our way through reverence toward, dependence upon, humility before, worship of, and obedience to the God who presents himself in covenant to his people. He is the object of their faith, hope, love, and enjoyment, and He promises to fulfill for them the role of guide, benefactor, helper, and sustainer as they set themselves to meet his covenant claims upon them. To honor, adore, and trust God in this way, and to acknowledge in prayer that wisdom comes from Him alone (Jas 1: 5), is to be wise at the most basic level.¹²⁵

The congregation that truly wants to discern God’s will and make wise decisions that honor Him must individually and corporately cultivate this “fear of the Lord,” believing that He not only can but does reveal needed wisdom from many sources to those who seek Him. In the next chapter we will explore in more depth how God reveals wisdom and insight for decision making through special revelation and personal encounter.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 38-39.

¹²⁵ Packer, “Theology and Wisdom,” 7-8.

CHAPTER THREE

The Promise and Pitfalls of Spiritual Guidance

I am plagued by doubts. What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists? In that case I definitely overpaid for the carpet. If only God would give me some clear sign; like a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank

Woody Allen, "Selections from the Allen Notebooks"¹

Send me your light and your faithful care, let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell.

Psalm 43:3

I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.

Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

Joel 2:28-29

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh ...
Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Galatians 5:16, 25

We are often plagued by doubts when seeking to know God's will both individually and corporately. As seen in the last chapter, wisdom is both a gift of God and the result of diligent study of the created world and human nature. It can help people make good choices and live skillfully, but it also has limitations. Finite humans cannot probe God's mind and know his will apart from Biblical revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit. With minds darkened by disobedience humans often use God's wisdom for self-sufficient control of the world. Scriptures such as Ephesians 2:10 assure God's people that He does have a plan for their lives, but how are they to discover it? If they pray for insight, how do they discern if God is speaking, or if they only hear their own thoughts, or worse, demonic voices? How to discern God's will for their congregations

¹ Quoted in Robert McAfee Brown, *Is Faith Obsolete?* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1974), 86.

and deal with egos, opinions, and personal concerns long enough to reach communal agreement? It can be tempting to stay with a traditional wisdom approach in pursuing God's will, avoiding the supernatural in favor of the rational, but Gordon Fee notes,

for Paul the Spirit, as an experienced and living reality, was the absolutely crucial matter for Christian life, from beginning to end. . . . For the contemporary church it seems much less so, both in the academy, in its understanding of Pauline theology, and in the actual life of the church. I do not mean that the Holy Spirit is not present; He is indeed, or we are not of Christ at all. Nonetheless, despite the affirmations in our creeds and hymns and the lip service paid to the Spirit in our occasional conversations, the Spirit is largely marginalized in our actual life together as a community of faith.²

How then do God's people follow the Apostle Paul's urging to "walk by the Spirit," be "led by the Spirit," and "keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal 5:16, 18, 25)?

As mentioned in the first chapter, Western culture has become more receptive to the possibility and desirability of mystical experiences.³ Elizabeth L. Hillstrom discerns a "contrast between our present very open and accepting attitudes toward such events and the skeptical, even sarcastic manner in which they would have been treated just a few years ago."⁴ Drawing on his extensive research, Donald Miller discusses how this new openness to mystical experience has affected "new paradigm churches":

Religion is a full-bodied experience that includes all the receptors—all the senses—with the rational mind being only one locus of information about reality. Right-brain activities (typically associated with nonlinear thought, and in this case with the Holy Spirit) are acknowledged as legitimate.

Whatever the actual reality of the Holy Spirit, new paradigm Christians describe experiences that simply do not conform to the norms of logic and

² Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 1.

³ See Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium*. (Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles, CA; London, UK: University of California Press, 1997), 22-23, where he points out, "From an Enlightenment perspective, these experiences are echoes from the primitive side of our nature. Sigmund Freud reduced them to infantile wish fulfillment. For Freud and other scientific theorists, it was time to grow up and live according to the cold logic of rationality and empiricism."

⁴ Elizabeth L. Hillstrom, *Testing the Spirits* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 217.

rational discourse. They detail visions, dreams, and other non-rational encounters with the holy. These Christians talk about feeling the presence of God during worship and of having a relationship with Christ. A relatively high percentage have spoken in tongues, a nonrational form of communication with God that they attribute to the Holy Spirit. Ecstatic joy and profound peace are also experiences that they attribute to a divine presence. In exceptional cases, supernatural healing occurs, demons are expelled, and prophecies are uttered.⁵

Along with the experiential exploration of “new paradigm” church members there is “an emerging movement within the Protestant mainline to rediscover the value of the ancient tradition of various spiritual disciplines, including silent retreats, spiritual direction, fasting, and spiritual exercises associated with the traditions of Saint Ignatius, Saint Benedict, and other pioneers of probing soul and psyche.”⁶ While there are benefits to this new cultural and ecclesiastical openness to mystical experience, there also are dangers. Orthodox Christian theology can be traded for false teaching, emotionalism mistaken for spirituality, and not all that is supernatural has its source in God.⁷ In light of this, Chapter Three will explore supernatural guidance in the Bible, and how God’s people tested their mystical experiences to discern if and how YHWH was guiding them.

The Birth and Corruption of Supernatural Guidance

The Old Testament assumes that God communicates directly and powerfully with his creation, which is able to clearly understand what He speaks. The book of Genesis is full of God’s personal interactions with his people. He created the world, including humans, through his word, “And God said,” (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). He instructed

⁵ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 22-23. These churches are Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and Hope Chapel.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁷ Hillstrom, *Testing the Spirits*, 217, warns that the New Mysticism “retains the idea of a personal, loving Creator God but minimizes or ignores his holiness, righteousness and justice. In this system God does not punish sin and accepts everyone unconditionally (universalism). Jesus is also retained as a great spiritual leader, but he is no longer the Redeemer, nor was his death on the cross necessary for salvation.”

Adam and Eve to procreate and have dominion over the earth (1:28), and restricted their access to the tree “of the knowledge of good and evil,” (2:16-17). God’s unhindered communication with humans did not last long. After eating the “forbidden fruit” Adam and Eve experienced broken relationships with God and each other, and following a difficult conversation with God they were judged, clothed and driven out of Eden (3).

Their children also experienced painful sinful relationships, but significantly, God continued to communicate directly with them, even in their fallen state. Cain was warned by God to master sin’s temptation, but instead jealously murdered his brother and left God’s presence (4:6-16). Some of Adam and Eve’s descendants “walked with God” (Enoch, 5:4) but most did not. God spoke to “righteous” Noah about his planned judgment, gave instructions for the preservation of Noah’s family and the animals (6:8-7:10), and after the flood made a verbal covenant with them (8:15-9:17).

God personally addressed Abram, the father of the people of Israel, assuring him of descendants, great blessing, and personal guidance for his journey to the Promised Land (12:1-3). As Abram traveled, he “called on the name of the LORD” (12:7, 8; 13:18) and God repeatedly spoke and declared his covenant with him, changing his name to Abraham (13:14-16; 15:1-7; 17:1-16; 18:16-33). He supremely tested Abraham’s faith by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, the promised son (22), and Abraham’s servant received guidance in his search for a wife for Isaac (24). Isaac prayed for Rebekah to become pregnant and God told her why her twins struggled inside her (25). During a famine, God instructed Isaac to not leave and reiterated the Abrahamic blessings (26:2). Isaac’s shrewd and crafty son Jacob encountered God in a dream (28:10-17), but sought to improve his lot by wisdom and magic (30:37-43). Fearing retribution from his father-in-

law Laban and responding to a dream from God, Jacob and his family fled (31:3, 10-13). His wife Rachel stole her father's *teraphim* (household gods used for divination, 30:27; 31:19, 30-32), but Laban was warned in a dream to let Jacob's family go. At Mahanaim Jacob spent the night wrestling with God (32:22-32) and then followed God's instructions to settle in Bethel where God verbally renewed the covenant promises (35:1-15).

Jacob's son Joseph was given prophetic dreams about his leadership in the family (37:1-11). While enslaved and in prison he was given understanding of the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, and told them, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" (40-41). Pharaoh recognized that Joseph was "one in whom is the spirit of God" (41:38) and asked him to interpret some troubling dreams. Joseph responded, "God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires. . . . God has revealed to Pharaoh what He is about to do" (41:16, 25, 29). Disclosing himself to his brothers, he also spoke of God's guidance:

it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God (Gn 45:5-8; cf. 50:19-20).

God had led and brought deliverance for his people, in spite of their evil intentions.

Supernatural Guidance in the Ancient World and Israel: Divination, Prophecy, Dreams

The ancient world of Joseph had prophets who spoke God's words, but also augurs, wizards, soothsayers, astrologers, and priests, all seeking to "divine" correct courses of action for individuals and their communities.⁸ They were held in high esteem

⁸ J. S. Wright, s. v. "divination," *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 1, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980), 391: "The usual Heb. word translated divination and 'diviner' is the root *qsm*. The root *nhs* is used in Gn 44:5, 15, and elsewhere this is translated 'enchanter', 'enchantment', 'use

for “of all the voices of antiquity, none had more power or authority than those who could speak for God or, in a pagan culture, for the gods.”⁹ While both divination and prophecy were considered supernatural communication, they differ in a variety of ways. Witherington says divination “is a human attempt to obtain an answer from God, presumably at a time when there is no spontaneous revelation from the deity about the matter. In other words, in Israel at least, it seems to serve in lieu of spontaneous prophecy. It also potentially involves an element of human manipulation.”¹⁰ Wright further defines “divination” as an

attempt to discern events that are distant in time or space, and that consequently cannot be perceived by normal means. A similar definition could be given for the seership aspect of prophecy, as exercised in, e.g., 1 Sm 9:6-10. Hence the term could be used occasionally in a good sense, as we might speak of a prophet having clairvoyant gifts without thereby approving all forms of clairvoyance. Thus Balaam is a diviner as well as being inspired of God (Nm 22:7; 24:1).¹¹

Various types of divination widely practiced among the peoples of Asia Minor, North Syria, and Palestine are spoken of in the Old Testament. Wright elaborates,

One can make two broad divisions, namely, internal and mechanical: the former is either the trance inspiration of the shaman type, or direct second sight; the latter makes use of technical means, such as sand, entrails of a sacrifice, or in modern-

enchantments.’ The root *’nm* is sometimes coupled with the former words, and is translated observe vs. the “word of the Lord” times (RV ‘practise augury’), and twice ‘soothsayings.’”

⁹ Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1999), 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 6-7.

¹¹ J. S. Wright, s. v. “divination”, *IBD*, 391. K. A. Kitchen says on 935, s. v. “magic and sorcery” in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 2, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980): “Balaam of Nm 22-24 is apparently a diviner turned prophet under divine constraint. Thus Balak sent emissaries to hire Balaam ‘with the fees for divination in their hand’ (Nm 22:7; cf. v. 18), and at first Balaam went ‘to meet with omens,’ their nature unspecified (Nm 24: 1). Balak evidently required of Balaam evil omens wherewith to curse Israel.”

times tea-leaves. These divisions cannot be pressed, since the objects may release the clairvoyant faculty, as with crystal-gazing.¹²

There was divination through examining the position of fallen sticks or arrows (*rhabdomancy*, Ez 21:21, Ho 4:12); evaluating a sacrifice's liver/entrails (*hepatoscopy*, *extispicy*, Ez 21:21); observing the movements of the sun, moon, planets, and unusual conjunctions (*astrology*, Is 47:13; Je 10:2; Mt 2:9ff); water/crystal gazing (*hydromancy*) or interpreting oil designs on water in a cup (*lecanomancy*, Gn 44:5, 15). Casting of lots was widely used (Jo 7:14; 18-19, Lv 16; Jon 1:7; 1 Chr 24:5; Est 3:7; Mt 27:35; Acts 1:15-26).¹³ Spiritualism included the use of *teraphim* (ancestor images, 1 Sm 15:23, Ez 21:21; Zec 10:2) and consulting the dead through a medium (*necromancy*, Lv 19:31; Dt 18:11; 1 Sm 28; 2 Kgs 21:6, 1 Chr 10:13, Is 8:19-20).¹⁴ Divination by omens (unusual or abnormal events in the natural world) was, "based on the conviction that any event, good or ill, may be announced or accompanied by some portent observable by men. Learned priests systematically compiled long series of omens with interpretations in veritable reference-manuals."¹⁵ K. A. Kitchen describes Egyptian "diviners": "Learned in sacred writings, rituals and spells, trained in the House of Life (temple schools where this and other literature was composed, copied and taught), Egypt's greatest magicians were the chief lector-priests. ... Thus the association of magicians with wise men generally in Gn

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 391-392.

¹⁴ See Kitchen, s. v. "magic and sorcery", *IBD*, 934, where he discusses how "Joseph play-acts the learned Egyptian, master of the divinatory art, before his brothers" (Gn 44:4-5, 15).

¹⁵ Ibid., 935. See also J. S. Wright, s. v. "divination", *IBD*, 391-392.

41:8 and Ex 7:11.”¹⁶ The interpretation of omens and divination could be taught, and it is likely that Moses received this training as a member of Pharaoh’s court (Ex 2:10).

During the Exile, Daniel and other young nobles entering the Babylonian king’s service also would have been trained in divination.¹⁷ In Assyria and Babylonia

magic was practised by priestly scholars attached to the temples. Exorcisms were performed by the *asipu*-priest (cf. Heb. *assapim*, “enchanters,” Dn 1:20) by virtue of the gods Ea and Marduk, the master-magicians. The elaborate apparatus of divination was the province of the *baru*-priest; he had to be physically perfect, undertake long studies and be initiated. Those attached to the royal court were called upon at any time to interpret all manner of things.¹⁸

Although common in the surrounding cultures, divination was generally condemned in the Old Testament, and sorcerers, mediums, witches, spiritists, and pagan practices (Is 47:9-13) were not allowed among God’s people (Ex 22:18, Lv 20:6, 27; Dt 18:9-15; 1 Sm 28).¹⁹ However, “if one was going to rule out all, or almost all, forms of divination, one needed to have the assurance that there was still a way to receive guidance from God on an ongoing basis. That means would be prophecy.”²⁰ Witherington says further,

Israelites were forbidden to consult necromancers perhaps not merely because of the potential for erroneous information or charlatanism but because Israel was called to a higher and more intimate relationship with God through prophets and

¹⁶ Kitchen, s. v. “magic and sorcery”, *IBD*, 934. See also Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 127-129.

¹⁷ See Kitchen, s. v. “magic and sorcery”, *IBD*, 935: “In Dn 1:4 the procedure for educating the well-favoured Heb. youths in Bab. learning as laid down by Nebuchadrezzar accurately reflects that which was usual for the *baru* scholar-magicians.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Lv 19:26; Dt 18:9-14), 2 Ki 17:17; 21:6; Is 8:19; 44:25; Jer 14:14; 27:9-10; 29:8-9; Ez 12:21-24; 13:6-7; Mi 3:6-7, 11, Zec 10:2. See J. S. Wright, s. v. “divination”, *IBD*, 391. Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 6, asks in this regard, “But what, then, is one to make of the sacred dice or lots, the consultation of Urim and Thummim for either yes or no answers (1 Sm 23:8-13; cf. Ex 28; 39)?”

²⁰ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 33.

intermediaries (e.g., Moses). Seeking after mediums was taken as a clear sign of a spiritual breakdown in that intimate relationship.²¹

God would speak directly to his people in response to prayer, rather than by divination.

Like divination, prophecy was widely practiced and understood in similar ways throughout the ancient world. Witherington explains,

Prophecy did not begin with the period of the Israelite monarchy, nor did it end when that monarchy was eclipsed, for even in Israel forms of prophecy carried on beyond that period of time. Nor were the prophets of Israel, any more than the NT prophets, operating in a cultural vacuum. A Balaam or a Jonah or a Paul could step over cultural boundaries and still be recognized as a sort of prophetic figure, because the social functions and roles, and to a degree even the forms and contents of the messages of prophets, were the same throughout antiquity at the eastern end of the Mediterranean.²²

Prophecy differed from divination in that “Prophets are the receivers of compelling and demanding communications within themselves; diviners are the exegetes of external phenomena. Prophets offer oracles grounded sometimes in auditory, sometimes in visual, experiences; diviners give interpretations of things seen in the material world.”²³ A prophet “received a revelation from God by dream, vision, or verbal communication. He then declared that revelation as a messenger in the special service of God. What the Lord put in his mouth he spoke. He acted consciously, not in some trance.”²⁴In spite of the

²¹ Ibid., 61. See also. J. G. S. S. Thompson and J. S. Wright, s. v. “dreams,” *Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 1, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas, rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980), 394: “The Israelites were to reject divination because their God was a god who spoke directly to his people.” See Nm 12:6-8; Dt 34: 10.

²² Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 8. On 10 he says, “Whether one is talking about the Mari prophets, or Israelite prophets, or the later Christian prophets, their chief and distinctive task was to speak for, or even as the instrument of, the deity.”

²³ Ibid., 44. On 11 he quotes H. B. Huffmon, “The Origins of Prophecy in Israel,” in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God*, ed. F. Cross et al., 172 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976): “a prophet is ‘a person who through non-technical means receives a clear and immediate message from a deity for transmission’ which is to be contrasted ‘with learned, technical divination and the use of interpretive skills.’”

²⁴ Leslie B. Flynn, *19 Gifts of the Spirit: Which Do You Have? Are You Using Them?* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, SP Publications, Inc., 1981), 49. He elaborates, “Watching out for the spiritual interests

implication of this quote, in the ancient Near East women were also prophets (Miriam, Ex 15:20; Deborah, Jgs 4:4; Huldah, 2 Kgs 22:14-20; Noadiah, Neh 6:14).²⁵

Spontaneous dreams were also considered a significant source of supernatural guidance.²⁶ Kitchen explains in Egypt, “Dreams and their interpretations were gathered into manuals, veritable handbooks of dream-interpretation. . . . The common pattern is, that if a man sees himself in a dream doing or experiencing such-and-such, it is good or bad, and means that so-and-so will befall him.”²⁷ He points out, “To ‘dissolve doubts’ (Dn 5:12, 1 6, AV), i.e. to dissipate anxiety caused by a (yet unexplained) dream or omen (cf. Dn 4:5), was the purpose of interpreting or resolving dreams. Then a good dream’s benefits could be accepted and the threat from a bad one averted magically.”²⁸ Thompson and Wright point out often,

among the Hebrews there was a close association between dreams and the function of the prophet. The *locus classicus* is Dt 13:1-5, where the prophet is

of his hearers, the prophet reminded of the Mosaic Law, restated divine commands, and warned of judgment to come. Prophets instructed, warned, exhorted, promised, rebuked. They protested the mere formalism of perfunctorily offering sacrifices without obedience. They stressed moral duty, promoted righteousness, thundered coming terror on the wicked, and repeated God’s gracious promises for the future. Though the future was often part of their prophetic utterance, their emphasis was historical, practical, and relevant to contemporary conditions, such as when they warned Israel and Judah of the coming Assyrian and Babylonian invasions, plus the doom and desolation that would follow.”

²⁵ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 6. He also mentions, 229, the *Sibylline Oracles*: “The earliest extant evidence of a prophetess named Sibylla comes from the fifth century BC. Her words were collected and added to, over the course of time, by professional oracle collectors, known as ‘chresmologues’. One notable feature of her oracles seems to have been their conditional nature, in the form of conditional and final clauses. The gist of such oracles was that ‘when certain conditions arise, something will happen.’ There is perhaps only one fragment of the original oracles that has survived intact the burning of the Temple of Jupiter in 83 BC. It is preserved by Phlegon Trallianus and details the relationship of the sibyl with Apollo (her inspiring deity).”

²⁶ Gn 20:3-7; 28:10-17; 37:1-11; 40; 41:1-32; Dt 13:1-5; 1 Sm 28:6; 1 Kgs 3:5-15; Jb 4:12-16; Jl 2:28. Thomson and Wright, s. v. “dreams”, *IBD*, 349, comment, “Jeremiah censures the false prophets for treating the dreams of their own subconscious as revelations from God (Jer 23:16, 25-27, 32), but he admits that a true prophet can have a genuine prophetic dream (v. 28), the proof being the hammer like message it contained (v. 29). Jeremiah himself certainly knew the dream form of prophetic inspiration (31:26).”

²⁷ Kitchen, s. v. “magic and sorcery”, *IBD*, 934.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 935.

mentioned along with the dreamer without betraying any sense of incongruity. The close connection in Heb. thought between dreaming and prophesying is again revealed in Jer 23:25-32. It is also clear that in the days of Samuel and Saul it was commonly believed that the Lord spoke through dreams as well as by Urim and prophets (1 Sm 28:6). Joel 2:28 (quoted Acts 2:17) links prophecy, dreams and visions with the outpouring of the Spirit.²⁹

Witherington notes the Bible's mixed assessment of dreams: "On the one hand, dreams seem to be treated rather negatively in Jer 23:27-32 and 29:8; on the other hand, Daniel and Zechariah treat the matter rather differently, as does the book of Acts in the NT. It is perhaps possible to make a distinction between message dreams and symbolic dreams, the latter of which require more interpretation."³⁰ Dreams were associated with prophecy perhaps because they came unbidden, and were less likely to be manipulative.³¹

YHWH Guides His Flock

God chose Moses to lead his enslaved people out of Egypt into the Promised Land and spoke with him in the burning bush on Horeb. Moses was appointed as a prophet to Pharaoh (Ex 3) but in spite of repeated miraculous demonstrations and divine assurances, Moses declined the call (Ex 4:1-13). Angry, YHWH declared Aaron would be Moses' "prophet" (Ex 4:15-16). As Moses saw YHWH's miraculous works in Egypt, he began to understand God had initiated this rescue mission and was the real leader of his people, visually demonstrated by YHWH's presence in "a pillar of cloud to guide them on their

²⁹ Thompson and Wright, s. v. "dreams", *IBD*, 394.

³⁰ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 7.

³¹ See David Allan Hubbard, *Joel & Amos: An Introduction & Commentary*, vol. 22b of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 70: "The abuse by false prophets of these modes of revelation, especially the dream (cf. Jer 23:25; 27:9; 29:8) does not prohibit their use in the new age when God's spirit has full-play. The New Testament, even before Pentecost, gives ample evidence of this (e.g. Mt 1:20; 2:12). The basic difference between *dream* (Heb. *halom* cf. Gn 20:3, 6; Nm 12:6; Dn 2:1-3) and *vision* (Heb. *hizzaon*; cf. 2 Sm 7:17; Is 22:1, 5) is that the dreamer is usually asleep, while the visionary is awake during the reception of the revelation." For further discussion of visions see Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 168.

way and by night in a pillar of fire” (Ex 13:21-22, cf. Ex 40:36-38).³² Moses’ position was “first-follower”³³ as “God led the children of Israel out of bondage *as a people*. Everyone saw the cloud and fiery pillar. They were not a gathering of individuals who happened to be going in the same direction; they were a people under the theocratic rule of God. His brooding presence covered them with an amazing immediacy.”³⁴ Moses demonstrated his recognition of God’s leadership when he pleaded with YHWH, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here” (Ex 33:13, 15-17). God, the shepherd, “brought his people out like a flock; He led them like sheep through the wilderness. He guided them safely, so they were unafraid” (Ps 73:52-53, cf. Ps 23; 78).

Sadly, the people of Israel wanted a leader with “skin on.” They didn’t trust God and begged, “Let not God speak to us, lest we die” (Ex 20:19). So Moses became their mediator. Thus began the great ministry of the prophets whose function was to hear God’s word and bring it to the people. It was a step away from the corporate leading of the Holy Spirit but there remained a sense of being a people together under the rule of God.³⁵

Moses found this responsibility overwhelming (Nm 11:14), so YHWH instructed him to bring seventy elders to the Tent of Meeting so that He could “take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them” to share the responsibility (Nm 11:16-17). The Spirit led the elders to prophesy, prompting Joshua’s concern for Moses’ leadership

³² Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), says on 220, that as a result of the Exodus, “The claims of Pharaoh and the other gods of the state must bow to the fact that Yahweh is God as much over Egypt as over Israel, his own people. Indeed, the claim is lodged that Yahweh is God over the whole earth. The climax of the song of Moses, after the sea has sealed the reality of Israel’s deliverance, is that Yahweh is king for ever; and not, as a *sotto voce* implication, Pharaoh, (Ex 15:18).”

³³ See Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus*. Nashville, Dallas, Mexico City, Rio De Janeiro: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2012. 3-14.

³⁴ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, revised* (New York, NY, San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2002), 151.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 151. See also Dt 18:16-19.

security. Moses responded, “I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!”(Nm 11:29).³⁶ He assured the people of God’s provision of Spirit-led prophetic leadership for them after his death, beginning with Joshua, and gave them guidelines for evaluating prophets (Nm 27:18, Dt 18:15-22):

(1) if they prophesy in the name of other gods, they are false prophets; (2) if they speak in the name of the true God but say what God has not commanded, they are false prophets. . . . The only secondary criterion listed is that if a prophecy does not come true (lit., “if the word is not,” i.e., has no substance), the spokesman has not spoken under Yahweh’s inspiration or guidance. . . . The penalty for false prophecy, whether in the name of another god or in Yahweh’s name, was severe—death.³⁷

Throughout the tumultuous period of the Judges the elders and their successors continued to judge and guide the people. As needed, especially in times of threat or attack, YHWH would raise up a leader and fill him/her with his Spirit.³⁸ While Eli was chief priest in Shiloh “the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions” (1 Sm 3:1; 1:3; 4:13). Eli discerned that YHWH spoke to Samuel (1 Sm 3), who later became Israel’s judge/leader similar to Moses and Joshua.³⁹ Samuel’s story illustrates,

³⁶ This wish became the basis for the hope expressed by the prophecy of Jl 2:28-29 which was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 20).

³⁷ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 31-32. He comments, 32, about prophets speaking presumptuously: “This suggests that a prophet might undertake to speak under his own initiative for Yahweh and this created the need for criteria to determine what had and had not come from Yahweh. The prophet must be commanded to speak before he should speak, but in fact sometimes he acted on his own.”

³⁸ God occasionally puts his Spirit on some to carry out specific tasks. John White, *When the Spirit Comes with Power: Signs and Wonders among God’s People* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 232, says, “He is shed on or upon; he comes on; he is poured on; he is poured out on or upon them (1 Sm 10:6; 19:20, 23; Is 32:15; Ez 39:29; Jl 2:28-29; Zec 12:10; Acts 2:33; 10:44). The term *filled with* also seems usually to refer to this empowering or enabling. In Exodus 31:3, you may remember, Bezalel was enabled to do skilled work because he was filled with the Spirit. Micah was empowered as the Spirit filled him. ‘But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD . . .’ (Mi 3:8). As Zechariah reminds us, God’s work is done, ‘not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit’ (Zec 4:6).”

³⁹ See B. O. Banwell, s. v. “king,” *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 2, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980), 852.

The prophet is not an initiator of this particular relationship with God, nor of the particular tasks that he will undertake, nor of the words he will speak. He is a person under authority who can only speak and act at the behest of his Master, just as in the normal slave-master relationship. The initiative, like the source of the communication, lies outside the prophet. Being a prophet is not so much a vocation pursued as something that happens to a person quite apart from his or her plans or will. In the case of Samuel, there is no preparation for this prophetic role. To the contrary, he is being prepared to be a priest. Yet the experience is compelling enough that the prophet feels he must speak or act as instructed.⁴⁰

In 1 Samuel 8 the elders of Israel asked Samuel for, “a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (8:5). The God who delivered and led them was being forsaken. YHWH told Samuel, “They have rejected me as their king.” (8:7). It was “a rejection of theocracy and ... the adequacy of God plus judge/prophet as a plan for ruling God’s people.”⁴¹ Christopher Wright suggests that YHWH’s grant of “the institutional state, like certain other human conditions which the law permits, is a concession to human hardness of heart: permitted but transient.”⁴² The role of the prophet also changed: “From that point on, the prophet was the outsider. He was a lonely voice crying in the wilderness, sometimes obeyed, sometimes killed, but always on the outside.”⁴³

Yet Israel was not a nation “like all the other nations.” She was God’s chosen people and her leaders could not be just like other rulers. The people were commanded to “appoint over you the king the LORD your God chooses ... from among your own

⁴⁰ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 48.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 50. See also C. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 226-227: “According to the same texts, it was Yahweh himself who gave Israel a king, choosing, anointing and (for a while) blessing him. It is Yahweh who goes on to exalt David, embarrassing him with the multiplicity of victories, the gift of a city, rest from his enemies, and a covenant for his posterity ‘Solomon in all his glory’ suffered no embarrassment, but his greatness is still attributed to Yahweh’s generosity. In other words, Yahweh takes the human desire and resultant institution and makes them fit in with his own purpose. Indeed, he goes further, and tries to mould the monarchy, for all its origins as a rejection of theocracy, into a vehicle for theocracy by subsuming the reign of the king under his own reign.”

⁴² C. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 228-229. For critiques of monarchy see Jgs 8:22f.; 9:7-15; 1 Sm 8:10-18.

⁴³ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 151.

brothers” (Dt 17:15), who would not “consider himself better than his brothers” (Dt 17:20). Her kings were to be YHWH’s under-shepherds, set apart to rule according to his law and counsel, following his ways.⁴⁴

Because of the free and direct contact between man and God in Jewish monotheism ... the Jewish idea of kingship differed from that of the pagans. The pagans attributed divine descent to their king; he was the state, the state religion, and the center of their religious cult. Not so with the Jews, who never thought of any of their kings as descendants of God. The Jewish king was as accountable to the law for his judicial, moral, and religious conduct as any ordinary citizen. There were no special laws, no special exemptions, for the Jewish king.⁴⁵

Saul, Israel’s first king and able warrior, was anointed and confirmed (1 Sm 9-11), but rejected by God (1 Sm 13) because he impatiently defied YHWH’s law by offering burnt sacrifices, forgetting he was to follow YHWH’s leadership, not his own inclinations. Saul prophesied by the Holy Spirit twice (1 Sm 10:10-11; 19:23-24), and his plans to secure his descendants’ “right” to the throne were thwarted by the Spirit coming repeatedly upon his soldiers, and then on himself so that he was humiliated and incapacitated (19:24).⁴⁶ He had “expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land.” (1 Sm 28:3) but after

⁴⁴ Banwell, s. v. “king,” *IBD*, 852. He says, “The main responsibility of the king was the maintenance of righteousness (Is 11:1-4; Jer 33:15) possibly signified by the possession of the testimonies or law or *tora* (Dt 17:18ff.; 1 Sm 10:25; 1 Kgs 9:4ff.; 2 Kgs 11:12), with the duty not only to act as judge (1 Kgs 3:28) but to preserve justice and proclaim the law (2 Kgs 23:2; cf. 2 Chr 17:7ff.; cf. also Jgs 17:6).” See also Jer 22:3-5; Ps 72:1-4, 12-14. C. Wright, 231-232, says, “even when the socio-political contours of the people of God had changed radically from the early theocracy to the institutional, royal state, the controlling paradigm was still that of the law and the covenant. This meant that royal theocracy could never be rightly regarded as ‘the divine right of kings’ *per se*. Being the LORD’s anointed was not an unconditional guarantee. The king was subject to, and correctable by, the covenant law.”

⁴⁵ Max I. Dimont, *Jews, God, and History* (New York, NY: New American Library), 1962, 47-49. C. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 230-231, says, “The law in Deuteronomy which permitted (note, not commanded) monarchy, laid down strict conditions for it, including the requirement that the king should know, read and obey the law. He was to be, not a super-Israelite, but a model Israelite among his brothers and equals (Dt 17:14-20). As one entrusted with the law, the king was committed to the maintenance of justice in a spirit of compassion (*e.g.* especially Ps 72). Jeremiah could proclaim this strong tradition of the legal, covenantal requirement on the king at the very gates of the palace in Jerusalem. His words are really a statement of the conditions of legitimacy and indeed for survival of the Davidic monarchy. Zion must conform to Sinai, or face ruin.”

⁴⁶ See White, *When the Spirit Comes with Power*, 232.

Samuel's death became desperate for divine guidance when "the LORD did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets" (1 Sm 28:6). His depravity is shown by his visit to a female medium in Endor (1 Sm 28:7-25), instead of humbly repenting.

In contrast, as leader and king, David regularly inquired of the Lord for guidance and assistance (1 Sm 23:2, 4; 30:8; 2 Sm 2:1; 5:19, 23; 1 Chr14:10) and was terrified after his adultery with Bathsheba that, like Saul, the Spirit's presence would be taken from him (2 Sm 12; Ps 51:10-12). He submitted to the prophet Nathan's rebuke (2 Sm 12:13-14) and God called him, "a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22, 1 Sm 13:14). David's son Solomon initially sought YHWH's guidance but succumbed to the pressure to be like the kings of "all the other nations."

Divination in Israel was in theory restricted to casting lots and the priestly use of the Urim and Thummim, but to be like other nations Israel needed court prophets and diviners providing daily oracles and advice.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, the interests of Israelite court prophets "were similar to, sometimes even nearly identical with, the military and political concerns of prophets elsewhere in the ancient Near East."⁴⁸ Witherington says it is important to "distinguish, however, between a court prophet as a regular day-to-day functionary of a king and a prophet who had the ear of the king and was from time to time consulted by, or brought a message to, the king."⁴⁹ He notes, "Beginning with the Elijah and Elisha cycle and continuing on into the period of the writing prophets, there

⁴⁷ See Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 43. "Priests seem to have fulfilled the role of providing answers to specific inquiries through the use of Urim and Thummim (see Dt 33:8; Nm 27:21). One of the sorts of inquiry that seems to have been made is about the selection of goats for the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement (see Lv 16:7-10). A king, such as David, could also consult the priest for answers to specific questions in the absence of a prophetic figure (1 Sm 23:9-12). It is interesting that there is no evidence that Urim and Thummim were used for divination after the reign of David (cf. Neh 7:65)."

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

were a series of peripheral prophets who were often critical of the behavior of the monarch and provided an independent audit of the spiritual state of affairs in the palace and in the nation in general.”⁵⁰ Independent prophets did not totally reject the sages’ teaching, and used “wisdom” in their proclamations, but often claimed the court prophets, sages, and priests, spoke only what the king wanted to hear (which was usually true).⁵¹ Yet it was not the source of their authority—they claimed to be sent by YHWH. In spite of divine commissioning, “in practice the authority of the prophet may well have ranked below that of the sage, if one may judge from the reaction of Israel to prophets like Isaiah who did have an apparently small coterie of disciples (Is 8: 16), or Jeremiah who spent considerable time in stocks, in house arrest, and in jail (Jer 20:2; 36:5; 37:15).”⁵²

Immediately after Solomon’s death the kingdom split and there were many wicked and unjust kings both in the Northern and Southern kingdoms who ignored YHWH and his ways, worshiping pagan gods.⁵³ Especially dramatic examples of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 62. He says, 33, “God from time to time had to raise up a prophet in the land when a late or urgent word was needed, especially in times of crisis. It was precisely this lack of an institutionalized, and so controllable, nature of many, if not most, prophets and prophecy that made it necessary to have instructions such as we find in Dt 13 and 18. Prophets (or at least peripheral rather than central, institutionalized ones) were always the wild cards in the deck of regular religious functionaries.”

⁵¹ Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to Wisdom Literature*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 16-17. Kidner, 16, notes, “we find Ezekiel weaving elaborate allegories in, for example, his chapters 16, 17 and 23; and before him Isaiah and Jeremiah (to name no other prophets) had used the kind of extended illustration from daily life—in this case the arts of the farmer and the potter (Is 28:23ff.; Jer 18:1ff.)—with which the men of wisdom loved to make their points.”

⁵² Murphy, *Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 36. C. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 230, says, “Amos, however, like Ahijah at the very start of the northern kingdom, and also like his anonymous fellow Judean who came to speak for God at Bethel (1 Kgs 13:1-6), refused to be silenced by the surrogate divine authority of the new political regime. God may have permitted it to come into existence, but that did not bind him to serve its self-interests. The prophets refused to allow the authority of God or his prophetic word to be hijacked to legitimize human political ambitions—a sometimes costly opposition.”

⁵³ See Banwell, s. v. “king”, *IBD*, 852. He says, “It was above all the prophetic movement which provided a check upon the waywardness of the kings (2 Sm 12:1ff.; 1 Kgs 18:17-18; Jer 26:1ff.).” A furious

confrontations between a king and God's prophet are found in the life of King Ahab (1 Ki 16: 29-22:40). He was unrepentant even after Elijah's "show-down" with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel (1 Ki 18:1-40), and followed prophetic guidance when it suited him (1 Ki 20:1-43). After court prophets predicted success for a joint military campaign, King Jehoshaphat of Judah asked to inquire of a prophet of the LORD (1 Ki 22:5-7). Ahab suggested Micaiah, but said, "I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad." (1 Ki 22:8). Ahab rejected Micaiah's prophecy, imprisoned him, and died in battle as predicted. This story points out the difficulty of discerning true from false prophets, especially if they are paid by the king:

All claims to be a true prophet are not equally valid. Charlatans were just as much a regular social type as true prophets in antiquity. ... One can not divide true from false prophets purely on the basis of who claims to speak for Yahweh. ... True prophets can, on occasion, speak beyond or against what God wishes them to say, and on the other hand, nonbiblical figures such as Balaam can offer true prophecy.⁵⁴

As seen previously, a conflict also developed between YHWH's prophets and the "wise" statesmen of the kings' courts. At the heart of this struggle was disagreement over the fundamental identity of the nations of Israel and Judah. Were they one chosen people led by YHWH and his prophets, as those who heard and spoke his words claimed? Or were they independent nations ruled like all the others, as often the statesmen and kings believed? Would Israel and Judah turn for guidance to the international wisdom and divination practices of the pagans, or to YHWH and his word? Wright notes, "The state, like humans, tends to make its god in its own image. As Israel itself moved from the radical, alternative, surprising theocracy of Yahweh to the institutional state of the

Jehoiakim responded to Jeremiah by destroying the prophetic scroll of doom for Judah and Jerusalem, perhaps hoping to eliminate disaster (Jer 36:2-26). See also McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men*, 121.

⁵⁴ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 2-3.

monarchy, they did just that, in spite of being reminded by the prophets of their true identity and calling.”⁵⁵ Jeremiah calls YHWH, “King of the nations” and declares, “Among all the wise leaders of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no one like you” (Jer 10:6-7). Isaiah and Jeremiah “rejected the basic assumptions of international diplomacy—because they denied that the historical process was a power struggle—they had no time for foreign alliances or for political bargaining which aimed at securing the maximum advantage for Judah in the contest for power between the great nations.”⁵⁶ Judah’s survival and prosperity rested in YHWH’s hands. For Jeremiah “this conflict between prophet and statesman becomes intolerably sharp; the prophetic word is held to be treasonable, the prophet is subjected to violence and imprisonment and is threatened with death (36:26; 37:15, 20-21).”⁵⁷ Not only did YHWH’s prophets have to deal with unbelieving and unfaithful kings and statesmen, but they had to contend with false prophets and priests. They harshly critiqued national leaders as presumptive godless adulterous liars, and spoke of God’s judgment on all “bad shepherds” who only seek their own welfare rather than YHWH’s or the people’s (Is 56:9-12; Jer 10:21; 22; 23:1-2; 25:34-37; 50: 6-7; Ez 34:1-8; Zec10:2-5, 11:17).

As the leadership of God’s people went further and further astray, and “the more Israel faced crisis, the more need there was for reflection on Israel’s future, and thus the

⁵⁵ C. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 223-224, see his footnotes 11 and 12.

⁵⁶ William McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men*, Studies in Biblical Theology, no. 44 (Naperville, IL: A.R. Allenson, 1965), 115. In the debate with Ahaz, McKane, 114, notes that Isaiah’s “demand is that the king’s attitudes and actions at all times must demonstrate that this covenant [with YHWH] is for him the deepest reality that he knows, on which his existence and that of Judah depends.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 117. Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 137, says, “Jeremiah is caught in an intolerable bind. Whenever he proclaims violence and destruction, it leads to his being continually reproached and an object of derision, but this also means it has become a horror to Jeremiah himself to proclaim it, precisely because of his great love for his people and for Jerusalem. Yet just when Jeremiah decides not to proclaim doom and gloom any longer, God’s word burns within him and will not leave him alone. It is like fire in his bones, and Jeremiah becomes weary trying to hold it in, trying to refrain from pronouncing judgment.”

need for prophecy. The plethora of prophetic works from the eighth century BC on indicates the ongoing social dysfunction of life in Israel and especially of political and economic life.”⁵⁸ The prophets lamented that God’s people did “not know the way of the LORD, the requirements of their God” and acted rebelliously in their spiritual blindness (Jer 5:4-5, Dt 16:19; 28:28; Ex 23:8; Is 42:18-19; 43:8; 56:10, 59:10; 44:9; Zep 1:17). They warned that YHWH’s longsuffering had limits and there would be punishment for disobedience and idolatry if there was no repentance. They also prophesied that God, in his loving-kindness, would forgive his people, bring them back from captivity, restore them in the Promised Land, and heal their “blindness” (Is 29:18; 35:5; 42:7, 16; Mi 7:19). God would shepherd and guide his people (Jer 23:3; Ez 34:10-24).

The Promise of the Spirit

The promised age of restoration in the “last days” would bring many blessings besides renewed prosperity (Hos 14:4-8; Ez 34:23-31; 39:21-29). YHWH would give them godly leaders (Jer 3:14-15; 23:4) and a new Davidic king, the “Servant of the LORD,” would rule full of the Holy Spirit, in the knowledge and fear of YHWH (Is 11:1-5; Jer 23:5-6; 33:15-16; Ez 34:23-24), teaching nations (Is 2:1-3; 11:10-13; Zec 8:23), healing and preaching good news, and bringing freedom (Is 61:1-3). God would make a new covenant with his people (Jer 31:23-34) for the old had failed to bring

a truly meaningful righteousness, a righteousness coming from an obedient heart, rather than finding expression primarily in observances—as though God’s people could be identified by circumcision, the observance of days, and food laws. The Old Testament itself is abundantly clear that God’s intent with Torah was for his character to be revealed in the way his people worshiped and lived, hence the

⁵⁸ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 141.

crucial role played by the Spirit. The Spirit, promised as part of the new covenant, would effect the righteousness the former called for but failed to produce.⁵⁹

Witherington notes, “God has no obligation to recovenant with this people once the old covenant sanctions were brought into play. Yet God chooses to restart this relationship on the basis of God’s unmerited forgiveness of past sins and so to institute a new arrangement that would not require a continued payment for past sins.”⁶⁰ This covenant

will involve the placing of God’s law in, or the inscribing of God’s law on, human hearts. ... The result of this process of changing the manner in which, and the degree to which, God’s people will know God is that all of God’s people, without regard to social status or standing or educational background, will know God intimately and He will truly be their God. This, in effect, would put priests, prophets, diviners, teachers, and other mediators out of business.⁶¹

Isaiah prophesied that “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD” (11:9).

Also, God would again be present with his people, revealing himself by gift of his Spirit (Is 63:10-14; Ez 39:28-29; Hg 2:5). Through his Spirit He would purify and transform their hearts (Jer 32:38-41; Ez 11:19-20; 36:25-28), giving them new life and empowerment (Is 34:16-17; 44:3-5; Ez 37:1-14; Zec 4:6). All would prophesy and have dreams and visions (Jl 2:28-32).⁶² Hubbard comments on Joel’s prophecy,

⁵⁹ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 813.

⁶⁰ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 140.

⁶¹ Ibid. He says further, “It needs also to be kept in view that by heart the author means the control center of the human personality—the seat of thought, will, and emotions. He is, then, not talking just about an inward experience of God, although that is part of the matter, but also about an actual inward knowledge of God and God’s will, motivating the human will to respond accordingly.” See Is 54:13; Jer 9:23-24; 24:4-7; Ez 28: 25-26; 34:30; Jl 3:17; Zep 3:9-13.

⁶² Hubbard, *Joel & Amos*, 69, says, “In Joel the emphasis is on fellowship with God and communication of his word and ways, as the references to prophecy and vision suggest.” This passage is repeatedly used in the New Testament: Mt 24:29; Mk 13:24-25; Lk 21:25; Acts 2:17-21, 39; 21:9; 22:16; Rom 10:13; Ti 3:6; Rv 6:12. Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, vol. 31, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN, Dallas, TX, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Beijing: Word Inc., Thomas Nelson, 1987), 260, notes the verbs used in this passage all “describe revelatory functions associated with the fullness of God’s Spirit.” He adds, “on the ‘fullness’ of the Spirit as a heightening of obedience and revelatory powers, cf. Dt 34:9; Acts 7:55; 11:24; Eph 8-20.”

Whereas the gift of God's spirit had previously been restricted to chosen leaders like Gideon (Jgs 6:34), the early kings, Saul and David (1 Sm 10:6; 16:13), and the prophet Micah (Mi. 3:8), now all God's people will become prophets, and Moses' wish will be fulfilled. ... *All flesh* is defined as comprehensively as possible: sons and daughters, old people (cf. 1:2, 14; 2: 16) and young men (lit. "choice men;" cf. Dt 32:25; Jer 31:13), servants and handmaids. No exclusion will be made on the basis of gender, age or social station (cf. Paul's glorious expansion of this openness in Gal 3:28). ... superficial distinctions are set aside and even outcasts become core members of God's new fellowship (Ez 39:29).⁶³

Fervent hope in this coming age sustained the people of Judah during exile in Babylon.

Hebrew prophecy's character changed with the Exile, although it "was still about political matters and the rise and fall of rulers and realms and times and seasons."⁶⁴ It became more apocalyptic, focused on visions of the future, the world's end, and God's eschatological salvation revealed/interpreted by angels.⁶⁵ Witherington notes,

The very fact that this sort of information is only conveyed through visions and dreams and oracles makes clear that without revelation, without the unveiling of divine secrets and mysteries, humans would be in the dark about such matters. It is the message of apocalyptic literature that the meaning and purpose of human history can not finally be discovered simply by an empirical study or analysis of that history. This does not mean that the author has given up on history, as is sometimes asserted, but that he is placing his trust in what God can finally make of history rather than in what humans can accomplish in history.⁶⁶

He also points out, "the turn to more visionary and otherworldly prophetic forms is not surprising. An Israelite prophet in Babylon had no monarch or court or temple or holy city to focus on or prophesy to, no religious pilgrimages to go on while there, and no

⁶³ Hubbard, *Joel & Amos*, 70. See also Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 260-261: "all of God's people will have *all* they need of God's Spirit ... in the blessing of the Spirit's outpouring, no societal restrictions being able to limit the power of God to give himself to his people."

⁶⁴ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 357.

⁶⁵ See *Ibid.*, 182-245 for a discussion of the development of apocalyptic literature. See also Dn 7, Zec 1, and Rev as examples of angelic interpretation.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 364.

people in charge of their own destiny to speak to.”⁶⁷ After the Exile this apocalyptic form of prophecy continued to develop for Judah’s restoration had not brought about the golden age of God’s Kingdom as had been hoped.⁶⁸

A belief developed that classical oracular prophecy had ceased after Daniel, but would break forth again with the messianic age (Jl 2:28-32).⁶⁹ At least by the second century before Christ there was a growing anticipation of this new age dawning, and a different kind of prophet developed to herald it, the eschatological prophet.⁷⁰ They were

prophets of sign and word about the inbreaking activity of God. None of them seem to have proclaimed their message in the form of the ancient oracular prophets, using the messenger formula and the divine “I.” They were part of a new breed of prophets, yet they shared with the ancient classical prophets the use of sign acts to convey or dramatize their message. None of them left behind apocalypses either.⁷¹

The most well know of this “new breed” was John the Baptist (Lk 3:1-20). His father was told in an angelic vision that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit before birth (Lk 1:15) and would “go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Lk 1:15). John’s manner of dress, lifestyle, and fiery sermons reminded fellow Jews of past

⁶⁷ Ibid., 145.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 183, says, the restoration had not “turned out like the glorious vision one sees at the end of Ezekiel, despite the best efforts of Ezra, Nehemiah, and others. . . . The social climate from 525 BC or so until the time of the Maccabees was such that it could quite readily produce apocalyptic visions and literature.”

⁶⁹ Ibid., 244 and also 238 where he says, “There is no more oracular prophecy where Yahweh is quoted by a known historical prophet who gives his own name. This is indeed a remarkable fact, and it has led to the suggestion that prophecy ceased before the Second Temple era. But there were not just prophets in antiquity; there were also seers, visionaries, and it appears they kept one sort of prophecy alive throughout the period under evaluation here.”

⁷⁰ See Ibid., 194: “Clearly, in 1 Mc 9:27 and 1 Mc 4:46, it was believed that a certain kind of prophet, in particular the court prophet who confronted the king, had disappeared from the landscape. But 1 Mc 14:41 makes quite clear that they were looking for another sort of prophet to arise and that Simon would be the leader pro tempore until he did. Eschatological prophets were of a different ilk than court prophets, as were peripheral prophets. Seers were of a different ilk than traditional oracular prophets.”

⁷¹ Ibid., 239.

prophets (2 Ki 1:8; Zec 13:4). His call (Lk 3:1-2), and his challenge of Herod Antipas also marked him as a prophet (Mt 14:1-12, Lk 3:19-20).⁷² Witherington says,

John is presented in both Josephus and the Gospels as a man of both sign and words, but in neither case are John's words presented as either (1) like the oracular utterances of ancient prophets using the divine first person or (2) like the words of apocalyptic seers. Rather, his message is eschatological in content, much like what one finds at Qumran, and spoken apparently on his own authority, without messenger formula or citation of human authorities. His words were about preparation for the coming divine redemptive judgment or reign of God in the people's midst.⁷³

And yet John was not just a prophet, he was the herald of the coming King and his Kingdom (Lk 7:26-28) and Jesus honored him "as the greatest of prophets, as the final eschatological prophet, the Elijah figure."⁷⁴ In his imprisonment and martyrdom (Mt 14:3-12, Mk 6:14-29; Lk 3:19-20) he shared the fate of many prophets of the past.

Jesus the Prophet

Jesus, like John, was also "a prophet, ... and more than a prophet" (Lk 7:26). He was "a messianic prophet, a northern prophet, an apocalyptic eschatological sage, a Son of Man. ... The Elijah-like eschatological and messianic prophet was also the apocalyptic Son of Man."⁷⁵ Like John his birth was accompanied by supernatural occurrences (Mt 1-3;

⁷² See Flynn, *19 Gifts of the Spirit*, 49. See also Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 248: "John ... is a peripheral prophet—the sort that made rulers most nervous. Since he had a following, John can certainly also be called a leadership prophet. John and Jesus seem to have had a relationship with Herod Antipas rather like Elijah had with Ahab, except that neither Jesus nor John seems to have confronted Herod in his own capital city or court. They both seem to have condemned Herod's incestuous marriage."

⁷³ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 239.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 241. He says on 249, "It is, frankly, surprising how many scholars have paid attention only to the second half of this logion—'and more than a prophet.' This phrase is important, but the whole enigmatic saying needs to be taken together: 'A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.' Jesus high estimation of John is clear here and elsewhere (cf. the logion in Lk 7:28; Mt 11:11). He affirms that John is indeed a prophet, but lest the crowds simply rank John as another in the long line of Hebrew prophets, Jesus adds, 'and more than a prophet.'"

⁷⁵ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 291.

Lk 1:1-2:20). His mother received an angelic visitation (Lk 1:26-38), his earthly “father” Joseph had message dreams (Mt 1:19-24; 2:13-15, 19-23), and prophets rejoiced at his presentation in the Temple (Lk 2:21-38). Through the power of God he healed and exorcised demons, claiming to fulfill Isaiah 61:1, 2 (Lk 4:16-21). Like prophets from the south he proclaimed woe oracles (Lk 19:41-44; Mt 18:7; 23), taught with unprecedented authority (Mt 7:29; Mk 1:22; Lk 4:32; Lk 20:1-2), and “apart from parables most of Jesus’ sayings fall into the prophetic and apocalyptic category.”⁷⁶ Like the great northern prophets Elijah and Elisha⁷⁷ Jesus acted dramatically and symbolically (walking on the water, the feedings of the multitudes in the wilderness, the cursing of the fig tree, his Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem, the cleansing of the Temple, the Passover/Last Supper, etc.), and John calls his miracles “signs” (Jn 2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:48, 54; 6:14; 9:16; 11:47; 20:30). Through the Spirit Jesus was given

prophetic foresight. ... Jesus certainly foresaw his death, and probably vindication too, even though his predictions have almost certainly been given greater precision in the light of events. But this particular expectation seems to have been part of his wider apocalyptic expectation—that the consummation of the kingdom was at hand, and so also the messianic woes involving himself and his disciples (e.g. Mk 8:31; 9:1; 14:22ff., 27; Mt 23:37-9 Lk 13:33; 22:35-8).⁷⁸

Like John, Jesus was popularly regarded as a prophet (Mk 6:14-15; 8:28; Mt 21:11, 46; Lk 7:16, 39; 24:19; Jn 4:19, 39; 6:14; 7:40, 52), and the Gospels present him

⁷⁶ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 82. Witherington, *Jesus, the Seer*, 251, says, “there was a very strong tradition of oracular prophets in the south. If Jesus wanted to present himself as any sort of prophet when he visited Judea and Jerusalem, he would need to use some conventional prophetic forms—such as woe oracles and the like. This is precisely what the synoptic tradition suggests Jesus did.”

⁷⁷ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 251, says, “Jesus’ self understanding is that he was also presenting himself in Galilee as some sort of eschatological and messianic prophet in the Elijah mold. It is believable that a Galilean, such as Jesus, would take precisely such a tack, considering his *Sitz im Leben*, Elijah and Elisha were northern prophets. Indeed, they were the great northern prophets.”

⁷⁸ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 83. See also John 5:42.

as such.⁷⁹ Jesus was leading “a movement prompted and led by God’s Spirit and the revelations God gave. To be disobedient to the leading and guidance that came from the heavenly realms would have been folly.”⁸⁰ However, some were not convinced (Mt 26:68; Lk 7:36-50; Jn 8:52). While his enemies recognized his supernatural abilities, they attributed them to the work of the demonic (Mk 3:22-30; Mt 12:24-29; Lk 11:15-22; Jn 8:48-53; 10:19-21). Jesus charged them with acting under Satan’s influence (Jn 8:33-47) and being foolish “blind guides” (Mt 15:14; 23:13-26, Lk 6:39) who did not know God and were unable to “see” because of unbelief (Is 6:9-10; Jn 9:41; 12:40).

Yet, unlike John, who pointed away from himself, “Jesus consistently centered the final revelation in himself and his ministry and nowhere else. . . . In short, *there is a clear sense in which Jesus the prophet was unique*—because in his ministry alone the final revelation, the end-time had come (Mt 13:16f./Lk 10:23f.; Mt 12:41f.)—and it was a uniqueness of which Jesus was conscious.”⁸¹ John recognized this uniqueness when Jesus came to be baptized by him in the Jordan River (Mt 3:13-7; Mk 1:9-11; Lk 3:21-23), testifying that Jesus had been anointed by the Holy Spirit and was the one who would

⁷⁹ See Ibid., 82. He says, Jesus “was certainly vividly aware of his anointing and empowering by God’s Spirit . . . and within Judaism “to possess the Spirit of God was to be a prophet”. His exorcisms and definitive apprehension of God’s will were evidence enough of his prophetic charisma, but the reaction and hostility to him by his own townsfolk and the religious authorities confirmed that he stood fully within the prophetic tradition.” See Mt 23:29-39; Mk 6:4; Lk 11:47-51; 13:33-35. Also see passages where Jesus claims to be sent by God: Mt 10:40; 15:24; Mk 1:38; 9:37; Lk 4:43; 9:48; 10:16.

⁸⁰ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 331. He says further, “The purpose of the proof-from-prophecy motif in Luke-Acts is to explain two major things: (1) why Jesus was crucified if indeed he was whom the Gospel claims him to be; (2) why Judaism, to a large extent, had not accepted Jesus as the Messiah either during his life or through the later Christian proclamation of him. These would be major concerns of any person interested in the Christian movement. If Jesus and his movement were indeed a fulfillment of Jewish prophecies given to and by Jewish people, why had things turned out as they did? Thus, Luke seeks to show not only how Jesus death and resurrection correspond to the prophetic Scriptures (Lk 24:32; Acts 8:27-30) but also how the rejection of Jesus by Israel was foretold (Lk 9:22; 13:32-34; 17:25; 18:31; 24:7), as were Jesus delivery over to, and death by, the hands of Gentiles rather than Jews (Lk 9:44; 18:32), the future coming of the Spirit of prophecy to Jesus followers (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:4-8; 11:16), and finally the destruction of Jerusalem (Lk 11:49-51; 13:5, 35; 19:27, 43-44; 21:5-24; 23:28-31).”

⁸¹ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 84.

baptize God's people with the promised Spirit (Mt 3:11-17; Mk 1:7-11; Lk 3:15-18, 21-22; Jn 1:19-36). Jesus claimed to be the "light of the world" who revealed God, bringing true knowledge of Him, dispelling spiritual darkness and blindness (Jn 1:18; 6:43-46; 8:12; 12:44-46) and giving eternal life (Jn 3:15-16, 36; 6:54; 10:28; 17:2-3).

It appeared the hoped-for eschatological age was dawning. Yet James Dunn asks,

What on earth could make Jesus think the kingdom was already present, when the claim was contradicted on every side? The answer lies in the presence of one element, a key characteristic of the end-time—the plenitude of the Spirit's power. Jesus sense of power was so overwhelming in his consciousness, so manifest in his ministry, that he could reach no other conclusion than that the end-time prophecies were already being fulfilled in his ministry, the kingdom was already present.⁸²

Yet, how did he know the way to use the Spirit's power to accomplish his Father's will?

Jesus was a man of prayer. In particular, we see Jesus praying before important events in his life and ministry. Ben Campbell Johnson and Glenn MacDonald comment:

Even a cursory review of his prayer life indicates that he prayed during his days in the desert, before he chose his disciples, after he had performed the feeding miracle, and on the mountain before facing his great test in Jerusalem. He taught his disciples to pray and he struggled in prayer before he was betrayed, tried, and crucified. Prayer punctuated his whole life and ministry.⁸³

However, prayer was more than this—spending time in communion with his *Abba* was a passion and way of life for Jesus. In response to the Pharisees' and scribes' demands to know by what authority he taught (since it wasn't by theirs), he claimed his Father's commissioning. He declared his mission was "to do the will of Him who sent me and to

⁸² *Ibid.*, 89.

⁸³ Ben Campbell Johnson and Glenn MacDonald, *Imagining a Church in the Spirit: A Task for Mainline Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 62. See Mt 14:23-32; Luke 4:1-2; 6: 12-13; 9:28-32; 11:1-4; 22: 39-46. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 20-21, notes that on "each of the three occasions recorded by Mark [1:35; 6:46; 9:2] seems to have been a time of stress and crisis; while Luke portrays Jesus consistently resorting to prayer on occasions of great moment and decision (Lk 3:21; 6:12; 9:18, 28f.; 22:41-5). It is therefore more than probable that *prayer was Jesus regular response to situations of crisis and decision.*"

finish his work (Jn 4:34; 6:38; 9:4; 10:37; 17:4). His discernment was true for “I judge only as I hear. . . . I seek not to please myself but Him who sent me” (Jn 5:30; 18:15-18). He claimed to “do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me” (Jn 8:28; cf. 8:26; 12:47-50) and “always do what pleases Him.” (Jn 8:29; cf. 14:31), keeping his commands (Jn 15:10).

Jesus modeled for his disciples what it meant to pray, “be led by the Spirit” and “live in response to the voice of the Father individually and corporately.”⁸⁴ He promised they would receive the gift of the Spirit to comfort, teach, and empower them for ministry (Jn 7:37-39; 14:15-31; 15:26-27; 16:5-16; 20:22-23).⁸⁵ The Spirit would guide them “into all truth” and tell them “what is yet to come” (Jn 15:12-13), and they were to wait in Jerusalem for the Spirit’s baptism (Acts 1:4-5). Richard Foster says that Jesus’ promise to be “in the midst of them” by his Spirit (Mt 18:19, 20)

gave His disciples both assurance and authority. There was the assurance that when a people genuinely gathered in His name His will could be discerned. The superintending Spirit would utilize the checks and balances of the different believers to insure that when their hearts were in unity they were in rhythm with the heartbeat of the Father. Assured that they had heard the voice of the true Shepherd, they were able to pray and act with authority. His will plus their will plus unity equaled authority.⁸⁶

They would need that assurance and authority as they shared the good news of God’s Kingdom coming through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus with a pagan world.

⁸⁴ Full of the Spirit he had been “led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness” (Lk 4:1-2).

⁸⁵ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 344 says, “Jesus is not only a prophet; he is the one who, in the church age, sends the Spirit of inspiration and prophecy to Christians so that they may offer prophetic witness as well.”

⁸⁶ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 151-152.

His pledge to be with the disciples “even to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20) would have reminded them of the Exodus promises of God’s presence with the Israelites (Dt 31:8).⁸⁷

Supernatural Guidance in the Greco-Roman World of the New Testament

The Greco-Roman world of the New Testament, like the pagan world of the Old Testament, was full of wonder-workers, mediums, and spiritists, and fascinated with supernatural and mystical experiences. The charismatic Apollonius of Tyana, almost a contemporary of Paul, was described by his biographer Philostratus as remarkable for his prophecies, dreams, predictions, and unlearned language abilities.⁸⁸ Dionysus’ followers were well known for their mad dancing where in a “condition of ecstasy (*ekstasis*) they became full of the god, possessed by the god (*enthousiasmos*); as *entheoi* they were completely in the god’s power, their words and actions were the god speaking and acting through them.”⁸⁹ Dunn points out,

According to Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, “Our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness provided the madness is given us by divine gift.” And he goes on to distinguish four types of this divine madness: prophetic madness, whose patron God is Apollo; (2) telestic or ritual madness, whose patron is Dionysus; (3) poetic madness, inspired by the Muses; (4) erotic madness, inspired by Aphrodite and Eros.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ See Darrell Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 15. He says, “Just as God sent Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Jesus sends out his disciples to lead a new exodus out of spiritual slavery. The parallels here are remarkable. Christ echoes the very words of God to the Israelites, promising his eternal presence and power (see also Ex 4:12-13; 33:14-17).”

⁸⁸ See Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 305-306. He says, 306: “Philostratus refers to ‘Apollonius’s frequent presentiments and prophecies’ (I.2), and includes accounts of dreams from which Apollonius is able to determine the will of the God’s (I.23; IV.34), and various instances of clairvoyance and pre-vision (IV.18, 43; V.11-13, 18, 24, 30; VI.3.32 VII.10, 41; VIII. 26; cf. III.16). Lastly we may mention his charismatic authority (I.17—his sayings had the ring of commandments issued from a throne), and his gift of interpretation of tongues (I.19—‘I understand all languages, though I never learned any of them’).”

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 305. He continues, “The parallels between such madness and the ecstatic behaviour of the Corinthians (1 Cor 14.23—‘You are mad’) should not be ignored.”

⁹⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a-245a-b, quoted by Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 304.

Mystical and ecstatic experiences and utterances were also found in Judaism during this period. Philo in *Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres*, “discusses the ‘ecstasy’ of Abraham (Gn 15:12 LXX).”⁹¹ Also, “Philo saw himself as a prophet, for he speaks of having been seized from time to time by the divine, leaving him unconscious (*Migr.* 35). He goes on to liken himself to a person possessed with divine frenzy ‘even as prophets are inspired’ (*Her.* 69f.).”⁹² Dunn says “Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai ... was credited with understanding the speech of the angels, and in the *Testament of Job* 48-50 Job’s first daughter raised to God ‘a hymn after the angelic hymnody,’ the second ‘received the dialect of the principalities,’ and the third spoke ‘in the dialect of the Cherubim.’”⁹³

Supernatural guidance through spontaneous dreams or visions remained common (Mt 1:20; 2:12-13, 19, 22; 27:19; Acts 16:9-10; 18:9-10). Dunn says,

in Judaism of course the epiphany would be that of an angel, whereas in Hellenism it could be one of the ancient God’s or the deity of the mystery cult. As to the “visions and revelations” ... we may mention *The Ascension of Isaiah* 6-11, where Isaiah ascends through the seven heavens and receives revelation of future redemption through Christ; and particularly the vision of *Poimandres*, the first tractate of the Hermetic writings.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 304. He quotes Philo from the Loeb edition, vol. 4 (259-66): “A prophet (being a spokesman) has no utterance of his own, but all his utterance came from elsewhere, the echoes of another’s voice ... he is the vocal instrument of God, smitten and played by his invisible hand. ... This is what regularly befalls the fellowship of the prophets. The mind is evicted at the arrival of the divine Spirit, but when that departs the mind returns to its tenancy. Mortal and immortal may not share the same home. And therefore the setting of reason and the darkness which surrounds it produces ecstasy and inspired frenzy. ... The prophet, even when he seems to be speaking, really holds his peace, and his organs of speech, mouth and tongue, are wholly in the employ of Another, to show forth what he wills. Unseen by us that Other beats on the chords with the skill of a master-hand and makes them instruments of sweet music, laden with every harmony.”

⁹² Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 294.

⁹³ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 304. He refers to these works in his endnote: “See also *The Apocalypse of Abraham* 17, where Abraham is taught a song by an angel; *Ascension of Isaiah* 8:17, where in the sixth heaven Isaiah sings praises with the angels ‘and our praise was like theirs’; cf. Enoch 71:11.”

⁹⁴ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 303.

Witherington notes, “The interpretation of dreams was a major part of Greco-Roman prophecy, and there were even handbooks, such as Artemidorus Daldianus’s *Onirocritica* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*), that served as guides.”⁹⁵

The most valued experiences were the gifts of foresight and insight, and prophets were regularly sought out for oracles.⁹⁶ There were Jewish “sign” and eschatological prophets including, “Jesus ben Ananiah, who began in AD 62 to offer oracles of woe against Jerusalem until the fall of the city in AD 70, despite persecution and torture. ... (cf. Josephus, *War* 6.300-309).”⁹⁷ Witherington says Flavius Josephus asserted he was

a seer, a receiver of night visions or dreams, and a diviner of the meaning of obscure utterances. He not only prophesied that Vespasian would be emperor (as apparently did Johanan ben Zacchai as well) but believed that it had been revealed to him that he was to willingly surrender to the Romans and agree to go on living so that he could be God’s minister and witness (*War* 3.351-354, 399-408).⁹⁸

In Greco-Roman society the term “prophecy” covered both divination and the utterance of oracles. Dunn notes that,

Plato carefully distinguished two kinds of prophecy. One was mantic prophecy, the prophecy of *inspiration*, where the prophet was possessed by the god and became only a mouthpiece for the divine utterance. The other was the prophecy of *interpretation*, the conscious art of the augur, where prophecy was an acquired skill, the ability to interpret signs and omens, and where the prophet remained quite self possessed.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 297. See also 353-357.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 298, says: “there was an expectation of oracular performance from a prophet. One needed to speak like or as a prophet if one was to be recognized as such, and this meant, among other things, making pronouncements about the future in poetic form.”

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 294. In footnote 5, 295, he says, “Acts 19:11-20 does provide a brief glimpse of some Jewish exorcists, but notice that even they are said to be itinerant. We cannot rule out Jewish prophets appearing elsewhere in the empire than in Israel and its borders (down into Egypt as far as Alexandria, and north perhaps as far as Antioch, and west into the regions just beyond the Jordan), but the evidence for Jewish prophets being widespread throughout the empire is lacking.”

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁹⁹ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 228. On the other hand, concerning “possession” by the god, Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 298-299, notes “Plutarch puts the matter quite plainly when he says that the

The famous Delphic prophetess' oracles, "were always given it the first person, never the third—the god being understood to take possession of the Pythia's vocal organs and speak immediately through her."¹⁰⁰ Unlike much Jewish prophecy,¹⁰¹

it seems to be regularly assumed that the person who had close contact with a god was not necessarily able to speak clearly about or at least properly interpret what had been heard, and so needed a second person to interpret the messages received. This need not mean that the oracle had spoken in strange or foreign languages or had simply uttered nonsensical syllables; it simply meant that the prophecy, though in plain speech, required further explanation to make sense. It had a vague or multivalent quality to it that could be interpreted several ways. For this reason, it is not surprising that it is frequently the interpreter of the oracles who is called the *prophetes* in Greek literature.¹⁰²

The messages given by such oracles often had to do with the concerns of everyday life:

The questions most frequently asked of the Pythia fall into three categories: (1) religious matters, such as whether a sacrifice should be offered, a temple built, or a certain rite followed; (2) public matters, such as whether a city or colony should be founded, a war undertaken, and statements about rulers and ruling; (3) domestic matters, such as ones birth or origins, career or profession, whether one should buy some land, and death and burial.¹⁰³

voice of the prophet is *not* the voice of the god, nor is the utterance or diction or meter from the god. Plutarch says the god puts visions in the mind of the Pythia and a light in her soul in regard to the future, but the voice, the utterance, the meter, the diction all come from the Pythia herself. This poetic utterance then must be interpreted by a *prophetes* (Mor. 397B-C). Plutarch is very insistent that God's do not enter human bodies and act like ventriloquists, using human mouths as instruments (Mor. 414E)."

¹⁰⁰ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 305. J. S. Wright, s. v. "divination", *IBD*, 391, comments, "In Acts 16:16 a girl has a spirit of divination. The Gk. here is *python* . . . and the term evidently was used loosely for anyone supernaturally inspired, as was the priestess at Delphi."

¹⁰¹ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 296, says: "apocalyptic literature manifests some of the same qualities as Greco-Roman prophecy in this respect: further interpretation of the meaning of the revelation was often required, indeed required by the seer himself, to make sense of it. The angelic interpreter in apocalypses plays a role somewhat similar to the Greco-Roman interpreter of prophecies."

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 295-296. On 298 he says, "On the day when the Pythia would give oracles, the seeker sacrificed outside the shrine and choruses sang hymns to the gods. It was the role of the *prophetes* to go in to the Pythia's shrine and ask her the questions that the one who came for consultation had asked. Once the Pythia responded, the *prophetes* would then go forth and interpret the oracle to the client. Notice that if one had come to the shrine on behalf of another, the prophecy was written down and sealed, to be opened only by the original inquisitor. The agent would be warned of dire consequences if he opened the written-out prophecy in advance of its being seen by the originator of the request (Iamblichus, *Myst.* 3.10-12). It is also worth stressing that the oracle was written down in verse by the *prophetes*."

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 320. He continues: "One of the most frequent sorts of question in the legendary sources, however, was about marriage and childbearing, and the papyri from Egypt show that questions and answers

If one could not afford an oracle, one could “divine” through the casting of lots/dice (Mt 27:35; Acts 1:15-26)¹⁰⁴ or consult an oracular book such as the *Sortes Astrampsychi*.¹⁰⁵

Not everyone considered all prophetic claims and ecstatic experiences to be authentic.¹⁰⁶ Origen quotes Celsus as saying:

There are many who, although of no name, with the greatest facility and on the slightest occasion, whether within a without temples, assume the motions and gestures of inspired persons. ... They are accustomed to say, each for himself, “I am God; I am the Son of God” or, “I am the Divine Spirit.” ... To these promises are added strange, fanatics, and quite unintelligible words, of which no rational person can find the meaning: for so dark are they, as to have no meaning at all.¹⁰⁷

In light of these ancient non-Christian claims to supernatural guidance/experience and questions about authenticity, a Christian’s assertion to have “a word from the Lord” was no guarantee that the Lord was actually its source and not some other “spirit.” Fee notes, “It was probably a misguided but heeded prophetic utterance that the Day of the Lord had already come (2 Thes 2:2) that led to the distress in Thessalonica.”¹⁰⁸ Dunn concludes:

about marriage, separation, and the death of a spouse were not uncommon at other locations. It is this third category—domestic questions—that most likely would have been asked of prophets in the Corinthian congregation.”

¹⁰⁴ See *Ibid.*, 296-297: “One such device was the lot oracle, which Cicero speaks of with contempt (*Div.* 2.41.86-87). Yet clearly it was very popular, as is shown by the lot oracle (found in P. Mich. 1258) from Egypt in which Isis is petitioned for health. We may also refer to the use of dice by all sorts of people to make decisions or gain knowledge (cf. Suetonius, *Tib.* 14.3; Pausanias, *Desc.* 7.25.10).” See also J. S. Wright, s. v. “divination”, *IBD*, 391-392: “The last occasion in the Bible on which the lot is used to divine the will of God is in the choice of Matthias (Acts 1:15-26), and there may be a significance in that this is before Pentecost.”

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 297-298, says, “This book was enormously popular, and it contained ninety-two standard questions ... and, in the second part of the book, a series of answers arranged in groups of ten. The seeker would first pick a numbered question, then pick a number from 1 to 10, then add the number of the question to the number picked, and so one had one’s answer. Since the second number was picked at random, it was thought that the god had placed that number in ones mind.”

¹⁰⁶ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 306, mentions, “Lucian of Samosata (second century AD), particularly in his attacks on naive belief in wonders (*Philopseudes*, *Lover of Lies*) and the techniques of oracle prophecy.”

¹⁰⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum* VII.9, quoted by Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 305.

¹⁰⁸ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 891.

(1) there was no lack of claims to phenomena outside early Christianity which paralleled the Pauline charismata in varying degrees of closeness; (2) Christian claims to charismatic experience would very likely be accepted uncritically by large numbers at the popular level and measured against the parallel phenomena in other cults; and (3) the philosophical critique of miracle would find no greater credibility in the Christian claims than in those of other religious propagandists (cf. Acts 17:32).¹⁰⁹

Thus, the continued need among God's people to "discern the spirits" (1 Jn 4:1) and "test everything" (1 Thes 5:21), as well as to insist on order and self-control in situations that may have gotten out-of-hand, given cultural expectations (1 Cor 14:13-33).¹¹⁰

Prophecy and Charismatic Leadership in the Early Church

With the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2), and the widespread experience of his presence in their community gatherings, the early Christians were convinced that that the long awaited Kingdom had been inaugurated, and Moses' wish and Joel's prophecy of all God's people prophesying was being fulfilled. Fee notes,

In place of the totally future eschatology of their Jewish roots, with its hope of a coming Messiah and the resurrection of the dead, the early church recognized that the future had *already* been set in motion. The resurrection of Christ marked the beginning of the End, the turning of the ages. However, the End had only *begun*; they still awaited the final event, the (now second) coming of their Messiah Jesus, at which time they too would experience the resurrection/transformation of the body. They lived "between the time;" *already* the future had begun, *not yet* had it been consummated.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 307.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 281, says, "The authority of the prophet was authority to prophesy under inspiration; his authority was the authority of his inspiration and did not extend beyond his inspiration. Hence the injunction that prophecy should always be in accordance with the measure of the prophets faith (Rom 12:6)—that is, he should not speak beyond the limits of his inspiration, without the (divinely given) confidence/faith that his words were God's words. . . . Hence, too, one prophet must give way to the inspiration of another (1 Cor 14:30; 14:32)—the individual prophet as prophet was subject to the charisma of prophecy." Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 891, says of prophecies, "That they were spontaneous is certain from the evidence in 1 Cor 14:29-32, since a 'revelation' comes to another while one person is still prophesying. Those who prophesied were clearly understood to be in control."

¹¹¹ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 803.

While they waited for Christ's return believers filled with the Spirit taught with power, healed, exorcised, prophesied, spoke in tongues (Acts 2; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 10:46; 13:9; 19:6), had message dreams and visions, and were given special knowledge to reveal secrets (Acts 5:1-4; 1 Cor 14:24-25, cf. Mt 16:17, Jn 4:19, 39).¹¹² In this context, Dunn notes,

Although it was assumed that all had received the prophetic Spirit and could be inspired to prophesy (cf. 1 Cor 14:1, 5, 24), it appears that, as would be natural, some emerged as having the gift of prophecy in greater measure; these were called “prophets”—not because the gift of prophesying was confined to them, but presumably because their inspiration was more regular and more frequent.¹¹³

Some Early Church prophets “wandered” (Acts 11:27; 15:32; 21:10), “without a settled community to which they belonged and in and for which they exercised their gift—rather like some of the early Israelite prophets (e.g. Elijah and Amos).”¹¹⁴ Others, both men and women, regularly participated and prophesied in their community's worship.¹¹⁵ Prophets also helped select and commission leaders and missionaries (Acts 13:1-3; Gal 2:2; 1 Tm

¹¹² See Charles Stanley, *Ministering Through Spiritual Gifts: Recognizing Your Personal Gifts and Use Them to Further the Kingdom* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 23, and Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 232. For a “gift of knowledge” definition see Bruce Bugbee, Don Cousins and Bill Hybels, *Network: The Right People ... In the Right Places ... For the Right Reasons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 43: “The divine enablement to bring truth to the body through a revelation or biblical insight. People with this gift: receive truth which enables them to better serve the body; search the scriptures for insight, understanding, and truth; gain knowledge which at times was not attained by natural means; have an unusual insight or understanding that serves the church; organize information for teaching and practical use.” See also 1 Cor 1:5; Col 1:9.

¹¹³ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 171. See also James F. Cobble, Jr. *The Church and the Powers: A Theology of Church Structure* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1988), 87. See 1 Cor 14:31.

¹¹⁴ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 171.

¹¹⁵ For example, see the Corinthians (1 Cor 12: 28; 14: 26-40) and Philip's daughters (Acts 21:9). Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 396, notes, “Prophecy was not ... a gender- specific phenomenon, and this is especially evident in Christian contexts, whether we think of Philip's daughters, or Corinthian prophetesses, or someone like Perpetua or Maximilla. The attenuation of women and their roles in general in the church as we get further and further from the first century, except insofar as they practiced extreme asceticism, apparently helped to accelerate the marginalization of women prophets in the church.”

1:18; 4:14).¹¹⁶ Howard A. Snyder summarizes their influence: “It is obvious by Paul’s usage of the term in Ephesians and elsewhere that prophets, like apostles, were recognized as having a general and pre-eminent ministry throughout the Church.”¹¹⁷

Their calling was to offer “messages from God that comfort, encourage, guide, warn, or reveal sin in a way that leads to one’s repentance and spiritual growth.”¹¹⁸ Dunn says, “the word of revelation would shed new light on the salvation event of Jesus Christ, or on the relation between the exalted Lord and his community or the cosmos, whether present or future, or would reveal some practical course of action for an individual or group. It would include both fore-telling and forth-telling.”¹¹⁹ He suggests they “helped to interpret the prophecies of the OT and the sayings of Jesus in the light of what had happened (death and resurrection of Jesus, and outpouring of the Spirit), and in relation to their own (changing) situations.”¹²⁰ Like their Old Testament counterparts they spoke

¹¹⁶ James Tunstead Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 300. On 304 he points out how churches were affected when “apostles and prophets and teachers left in their wake stories of impassioned evangelizing that had brought whole new communities of believers into being; uncanny discernment that read the hidden character of human hearts; wise and convincing teaching that guided communities in their most troubled first ventures of conversion. These people were like amulets or talismans: they could speak with the authority and the conviction—even the first-person syntax—of the Lord himself. One would naturally hesitate to make major decisions in the councils of the various communities without consulting these charismatics or, more appropriately, without consulting the Lord’s wishes through them.” See also 294.

¹¹⁷ Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 90. See also Eph 2:20; 3:5, 4:11, cf. 1 Cor 12:28. The Jerusalem church had several prophets (Agabus, Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11; Judas and Silas, Acts 15:22, 32). Acts 13:1 mentions five “prophets and teachers” in Antioch, including Saul and Barnabus (Acts 9:27; 11:22-30; 12:25; 13:1-15:39; 1 Cor 9:6; Gal 2: 1-10).

¹¹⁸ Doug Fields and Erik Rees. *Congratulations ... You’re Gifted!: Discovering Your God-given Shape to Make a Difference in the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, Youth Specialties, 2008), 179.

¹¹⁹ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 230

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 172. Mt 2:23; 27:9; Acts 1:20; 4:11; Rom 12:19; 1 Cor 15:54; Eph 4:8, 1 Pt 1:10-12.

oracles, “the words of the Lord” (Acts 16:7; 1 Thes 4:15, poss. 2 Cor 12:9; Rv 2-3).¹²¹

They also shared their dreams and visions, perhaps the most well known is the book of Revelation. In using apocalyptic for presenting his prophetic insights, and relying heavily on Old Testament prophetic imagery, John would have been using forms and material familiar to many of this readers.¹²² They would have seen Revelation “as some sort of symbolic but nonetheless real prophetic or visionary material involving the history of the period in which the audience lived and the future of that period.”¹²³ Witherington suggests that Revelation has an “epistolary framework” because “one normal way to communicate with an audience at a distance in antiquity was through a letter or letters. ... we might well not have an apocalypse at all if John had not been at a distance from his audience. He might have simply shared one or more of his visions orally with his churches as they came, without resorting to a literary creation.”¹²⁴ This also may explain

¹²¹ See *Ibid.*, 173. Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 330, notes, “in the two clearest oracles in Acts, by Agabus, the matters that are dealt with are (1) a particular crisis for Christians, caused by a famine and the resulting food shortage, and (2) an even more individual crisis that Paul alone would face when he went up to Jerusalem. Such prophecies, in order to be words on target, had to be either very generic in form, as the one above is, or so situation-specific that they could not readily be reapplied to other situations.”

¹²² Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 379 says, “If one was going to be critical of the powers that be and the existing historical situation, one would need to look above and/or beyond it for solutions and perhaps use coded language to communicate ones message of triumph over evil and darkness. Apocalyptic provided a vehicle to meet some of the social needs of early Christians and offer them hope as the first century concluded and the second century began. In a largely pagan environment where dreams and visions were regarded highly, it is not surprising that visionary literature such as apocalyptic was popular among the largely Gentile congregations of early Christianity at the end of the first century.”

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 357. He says further, “The seer experienced visions. Revelation is not merely a transcript of those visions, in all likelihood, but instead an incorporating of those visions and some oracular and epistolary and other material into a literary whole. John the seer did not likely experience an apocalypse. He had apocalyptic visions and then fashioned an apocalypse to express what he had seen, as he felt it had bearing on his audiences.”

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 357-358.

why we do not have more written Christian apocalypses/visions from the Early Church—local prophets spoke them to their congregations and did not record them.¹²⁵

Paul, Eschatology, and Prophecy

Like other Jewish disciples, Paul would be convinced that the visible and powerful experiences of the Spirit signaled the new age of restoration had begun and the “world in its present form” was “passing away” (1 Cor 7:31).¹²⁶ For Paul the Spirit was the “down payment” (2 Cor 1:21-22; 5:5; Eph 1:14), “first fruits” (Rom 8:23), and “seal” (2 Cor 1:21-22; Eph 1:13; 4:30) of the promises of the new age. Fee asserts,

Absolutely central to Paul’s theology of the Spirit is that the Spirit is the fulfillment of the promises found in Jeremiah and Ezekiel: that God himself would breathe on us and we would live; that He would write his law in our hearts; and especially that He would give his Spirit “unto us,” so that we are indwelt by him. What is crucial for Paul is that we are thus indwelt by the eternal God. The gathered church and the individual believer are the new locus of God’s own presence with his people; and the Spirit is the way God is now present.¹²⁷

The great hope of this “new age” was for all God’s people to know Him and his ways (Jer 31:34). Peter’s and John’s epistles emphasize this knowledge of God (2 Pt 1:2-3; 1 Jn 2:14; 3:1b; 4:6-8) and to fully know Christ was Paul’s passion (1 Cor 13:12; Phil 3:8-11). He speaks of the “surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,” praying that his converts will increasingly know God and the hope to which He has called them (Eph

¹²⁵ See Witherington’s discussion of Perpetua’s vision, *Ibid.*, 390-391.

¹²⁶ See Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 801, 894. On 806 he says, “The promises of the new covenant had been put into an eschatological frame by Jeremiah and Ezekiel and had become thoroughgoing in later Jewish expectations on the basis of Joel 2:28-30. This is why the Spirit is so crucial to Paul’s understanding of Christian existence. The gift of the out-poured Spirit meant that the messianic age had already arrived. The Spirit is thus the central element in this altered perspective, the key to which is Paul’s firm conviction that the Spirit was both the *certain evidence* that the future had dawned, and the *absolute guarantee* of its final consummation.” See also Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 314.

¹²⁷ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 6-7.

1:17-18)¹²⁸, be filled with the knowledge of his will (Col 1:9-10), and “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:18-19).

In contrast, those belonging to the “present age” reject and suppress the truth and clearly perceived knowledge of God, refusing to worship Him, resulting in futile depraved minds and foolish dark hearts (Rom 1:18-21, 28). Those of “the world,” not knowing God, live in “passionate lust” (Rom 1:24-27; 2 Thes 4:5), “do not obey the gospel” (2 Thes 1:8), deny God by their detestable disobedient actions (Rom 1:29-32; Ti 1:16), and are enslaved by idols (Rom 1:22-25; Gal 4:8-9). Spiritually blinded by Satan and unbelief, they hate others, and walk in darkness (1 Jn 2:11). Unaware of their blindness (Rv 3:17) they reject the gospel (2 Cor 4:2-4), yet think they can wisely guide others (Rom 2:9; 1 Cor 1:21).¹²⁹

Through Christ God rescued people from spiritual darkness and oppression, bringing enlightenment and a restored ability to know God and his ways (2 Cor 4:6), even the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:7-16).¹³⁰ In 1 Corinthians Paul says the Spirit reveals

to those who love God what was formerly hidden (2:9-10), namely, what God in Christ has freely given us (v. 12). It is not esoteric wisdom that has been revealed by the Spirit, but the content of the gospel, God’s “mystery.” The need for

¹²⁸ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 221-222, says, “Paul envisages experiences or insights or utterances unveiling some aspect of the mind and plan of God (Spirit of wisdom and revelation—cf. 1 Cor 12:8; 14:6, 26; Rv 4ff.), which arise out of a living relationship with God and deepen that relationship existentially (‘in the knowledge of him’), and which result in a fuller cognizance and experience of (‘that you might know’).”

¹²⁹ Paul’s life is an example of this as his blindness at his conversion symbolizes (Acts 9:9; 22:11) See also the judgment of blindness on Elymas (Acts 13:4). See Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 852.

¹³⁰ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 878, says, “the ethics of eschatological salvation in Christ starts with a renewed mind (Rom 12:1-2; cf. Col 1:9; Eph 1:17), because only in this way may one determine what God’s will is and thus be pleasing to him. Not only does the mind renewed by the Spirit lead one to understand that love must rule over all, but only by such a renewed mind may one determine how best to love. ... Only dependence on the Spirit can enable one to know what is pleasing to God.”

revelation by the Spirit at this point is considerable, since it requires an understanding that merely human wisdom could not penetrate in ten thousand years.¹³¹

The Spirit revealed the gospel to the disciples, and then to others as they heard it preached and saw it lived (Rom 10:14-15; 2 Cor 2:14; 10:15).¹³² 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 sheds light on how the Spirit used prophecy in evangelism, and the gift of the Spirit's indwelling qualified new believers to be God's children (Rom 8).¹³³ White says,

The indwelling both defines the status of believers and gives them immortality. As Paul puts it, "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, He does not belong to Christ. ... And if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you" (Rom 8:9-11). In this sense all of us are jointly and individually God's temple (1 Cor 3:16).¹³⁴

The Spirit orchestrates the process of renewing the believer's mind so that he/she can "test and approve what God's will is" (Rom 12:2). Dunn says that this testing is not "by some norm or standard whether implanted once for all within or inscribed on tablets of stone without. It denotes rather a spontaneous awareness of what is God's will in the concrete situation and the ethical dilemma of the ever new here and now, and a recognition and approval of that will as good, acceptable and perfect."¹³⁵ While

¹³¹ Ibid., 851.

¹³² Ibid., 853, says, "What all of this means, then, is that for Paul both the *understanding* of the gospel and the *event of preaching, including the hearing that leads to faith*, are the work of the Spirit. In this sense one may legitimately argue that faith itself is also a prior work of the Spirit in the life of the one who becomes a believer, since 'we have the same Spirit who inspires faith' so that 'we believe' (2 Cor 4:13)."

¹³³ Ibid., 864-865, says for Paul, salvation "means to be joined to the people of God by the Spirit; and to 'be saved' means 'to live the life of the saved person.' Conversion by the Spirit involved a commitment to a life of walking in the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, sowing to the Spirit. The Spirit who engenders the faith by which one believes (2 Cor 4:13) is the same Spirit whose fruit in the believer's life includes 'faith' meaning now 'faithful walking in his ways'."

¹³⁴ White, *When the Spirit Comes with Power*, 231.

¹³⁵ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 224. On 223, he says, "for Paul the primary driving force was no longer obedience to a written law, but *obedience to an inward compulsion* (the law written on the heart, the law of the Spirit)." See also 224 where he says for Paul, "love is not so much a moral principle to be

recognizing the Mosaic Law as a helpful standard for righteous personal conduct (Rom 3:31; 7:12-14; 8:4; 13:8-10),

Ethical life ... does not consist of rules to live by. Rather, empowered by the Spirit, we now live the life of the future in the present age, the life that characterizes God himself. ... Believers have tasted of the life to come; and the full and final realization of the future is so certain that God's new people are completely radicalized as they live "already" but "not yet."¹³⁶

Christians are to "live in accordance with the Spirit" and "have their minds set on what the Spirit desires ... governed by the Spirit" (Rom 8:5-7). They experience a new kind of existence living "in the realm of the Spirit" because He lives in them (Rom 8: 9, 11). The Spirit circumcises and writes God's Law on believer's hearts (Rom 2:29; 2 Cor 3:3-6; Phil 3:3), and empowers them to fulfill it and do his will.¹³⁷ They will experience the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22-23), and "live a life worthy of the Lord" (Col 1:9-12). They are to live according to the Spirit (Rom 8:12, Gal 5:25) and "walk," be "led by," and "keep in step with" Him (Rom 8:14, Gal 5:16-25). If they do, they will not "indulge" or "live by the flesh," but patiently "serve one another humbly in love" (Gal 5:13; cf. 2 Cor 12:18; Eph 4:1-6).

discerned and then applied in each individual case. It is much more the inner compulsion of God's Spirit coming to concrete expression in loving word and act. ... a lifestyle and conduct worthy of the Lord is possible only for the man who is filled with the knowledge (*epignosis*) of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding."

¹³⁶ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 804. See also 378-379. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 225, says, "The Spirit here cannot be reduced to some rationally construed claim of God, nor love to a generalized ethical principle. Both denote the particular conviction and compulsion in a given situation, not necessarily independent of external norms but not necessarily dependent on them either. In a similar way the attempt to reduce Paul's concept of guidance to the level of Bible study misunderstands Paul at a fundamental level and runs a grave risk of falling back into the Jewish formalism from which Paul's experience of the Spirit liberated him."

¹³⁷ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 812, says, "The Spirit, and the Spirit alone, Paul argues in Galatians, identifies the people of God under the new covenant. The failure of the former covenant, the covenant of Law, was that even though Paul considered the Torah to be 'Spiritual' in the sense that it came by way of Spirit-inspiration (Rom 7:14), and even though it came with glory (2 Cor 3:7), it was not accompanied by the empowering Spirit." See 898, and Rom 6:14; 8:2; 7:6; 2 Cor 3:14, Gal 1:6; 5:1, 13.

“Hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy” (Gal 5:20-21, cf. 1 Cor. 3:1, 3; Phil 3:3; 2 Pt 1:9) among God’s people are signs that they are “walking by the flesh,” not the Spirit, living in the “old age,” as if they had not believed and experienced the Kingdom’s coming. Paul chastises the Corinthians for taking their disputes to “ungodly” officials for resolution instead of to the church (1 Cor 6:1-11). He asks “Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?” How can that be, since they “have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge” (1 Cor 1:4-7, cf. Rom 15:14)? They have been “completely defeated” since they act as if they had not experienced the washing, sanctifying, justifying work of Jesus “by the Spirit of our God.”¹³⁸ Fee says,

Living according to the flesh belongs to our existence *before* and *outside* of Christ; it is totally incompatible with life “according to the Spirit.” ... Nor again does Paul’s view represent triumphalism, as though people who lived by the Spirit were never tempted by the old life in the flesh or that they never succumbed to such. They have, and they do; and there is forgiveness for such, and gracious restoration.¹³⁹

Paul looks forward to the consummation of this new age in the return of Christ when all things will be completely restored, recognizing that the new age has not yet fully come.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Ibid., 804, remarks, “Paul appeals to present and future eschatological realities as the reason believers may not adjudicate present grievances before pagan courts (1 Cor 6:1-4). Their eschatological existence trivializes such grievances—and puts believers in the awkward position of asking for a ruling by the very people that they themselves will eventually judge.”

¹³⁹ Ibid., 817. On 816, he says, “The coming of the Spirit to replace Torah by effecting its intended righteousness is itself both already and not yet. That is, the coming of the Spirit means not that divine perfection has set in, but ‘divine infection.’ Our lives are now led by the one responsible for inspiring the Law in the first place. But that does not mean that God’s people cannot still be ‘overtaken in a fault’ (Gal 6:1). The resolution of such ‘between-the-times’ trespassing of God’s ‘righteous requirement’ is for the rest of God’s Spirit people to restore such a one through the Spirit’s gentleness. It means forgiveness and grace; but it does not mean constantly living in sin, as though the Spirit were not really sufficient for life in the present.”

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 895. He says, Paul “could keep the two together; the empowering Spirit, visibly manifest among them often and regularly in giftings and empowerings of an extraordinary kind; while at the same time Paul was filled with the joy of the Spirit in the midst of suffering and weaknesses of all kinds.”

Thus believers live “between the times”. The already crippled flesh will be finally brought to ruin at the coming of Christ. The Spirit, already a present possession, will be fully realized at the same coming. To the degree that the old aeon has not yet passed away, we still must learn “to walk by the Spirit,” to behave “in keeping with the Spirit,” and to “sow to the Spirit.”¹⁴¹

In this “in between time,” to help believers learn to “walk by the Spirit,” mature, “reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” and the “fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11), the Spirit gifts the Church with leaders and abilities (Eph 4:11-13; Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor 12:12-11).¹⁴² Among these are prophets with the gift of prophecy (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-14:40; Eph 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; 1 Tm 1:18; 4:14; 1 Thes 5:19-22, cf. 2 Thes 2; 2, Gal 2:2). Paul greatly valued this gift for strengthening the church, and when he “makes any attempt to classify the gifts in terms of importance, prophecy is given preference over all the rest ...; only in the two passages where Paul speaks of gifted men (prophet) rather than of the gift (prophecy) do prophets fall into second place—behind apostles (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11; cf. Eph 2:20).”¹⁴³

It is important to recognize that charismatic leaders such as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers were not necessarily the same as church officers, as we

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 822. He continues, “In Paul’s view, we live ‘in the flesh,’ meaning in the body and subject to the realities of the present age; but we do not walk ‘according to the flesh.’ Such a way of life belongs to the past, and those who so live ‘shall not inherit the [final, eschatological] kingdom of God’ (Gal 5:21).” See also 379-380.

¹⁴² Ibid., 891, comments, “In the case of believers the Spirit speaks encouragement and edification, and in the case of unbelievers he lays bare their hearts in such a way as to lead to repentance. All of this suggests that ‘prophecy’ was a widely expressed and widely experienced phenomenon, which had as its goal the building up of the people of God so as to come to maturity in Christ (Eph 4:11-16).” He comments further on 893 about whether “Paul expected the *charismata* to cease within his lifetime, or shortly thereafter. This particular ‘answer’ to the issue is raised not on the basis of reading the biblical text, but from the greater concern as to their ‘legitimacy’ today. But this is a hermeneutical question, pure and simple, and one that Paul could not have understood. His answer is plain: ‘Of course they will continue as long as we await the final consummation.’”

¹⁴³ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 227-228. He suggests on 230 it was so valuable because it was revelation: “The frequency with which Paul speaks of revelation in 1 Cor 14 indicates that it was a regular feature of the assembly and a typical form of the inspired utterances for Paul. Indeed prophecy and revelation are near synonyms in 14:26-32.”

will see in Chapter Four.¹⁴⁴ They were “gifts” to benefit their congregations (Eph 4:11-13) and their gifting and authority derived from God (even though it was validated, affirmed, and regulated by the congregation).¹⁴⁵ Church officers were usually initially appointed by the founding apostles or their delegates, and thereafter, chosen by the congregations (1 Tm 3; Ti 1). Both officers and charismatic leaders could have had several spiritual gifts recognized by the community and necessary for ministry.

It is also important to recognize that each gifting retained its unique purpose, even if one person was given several spiritual gifts. Witherington says,

It is true that early Christians affirmed that all believers had the Spirit and that the Spirit could, on various occasions, inspire dreams, visions, or prophecies (Acts 2). It is not true that they believed that this was all the Spirit inspired people to do or that it was acceptable to amalgamate all Spirit-inspired activity under the heading of prophecy. There was pneumatic teaching, pneumatic praying, pneumatic preaching or evangelizing, pneumatic speaking in tongues, pneumatic prophesying. But Paul is quite clear that not all are prophets (1 Cor 12:29), even though he wished for the Corinthians to seek for the gift of prophecy (14:1).¹⁴⁶

There has been much controversy and confusion over the definition of New Testament “prophecy.” Some focus on the “black-and-white, right-or-wrong” character of the prophet,¹⁴⁷ or on the prophetic message’s content: foretelling future and “end-time”

¹⁴⁴ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer* 327, says, “in the Jewish prophetic tradition, prophets were not rulers; at most they were the consultants to rulers. They were not leaders in the sense of those who controlled the structures or sacred traditions of Israel. One should not have expected them to do so with the Jesus tradition either, which largely bears a non-prophetic shape. Indeed, to judge from a figure like Agabus, Christian prophets filled the role prophets had always fulfilled for God’s people—they offered, from time to time, a late word from God. They did not lead unless they were also apostolic figures or elders, nor should we conflate them with the teachers or Christian sages or the historians, such as Luke, who were the likely bearers, with the apostles, of the Jesus tradition.”

¹⁴⁵ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 303. speaks of teaching in similar terms. For teachers see Acts 13:1; Rom 2:20; 12:7; 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11; 1 Tm 2:7; 4:13; 5:17; 2 Tm 3:16; Heb 5:12, Jas 3:1.

¹⁴⁶ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 323-324.

¹⁴⁷ Stanley, *Ministering Through Spiritual Gifts*, 22.

events (this is especially true of Revelation).¹⁴⁸ Others see it as a form of preaching, making the “Word of God relevant to a particular situation in a current context” (usually dealing with sin and injustice) to reprove, correct and warn of judgment, and bring repentance.¹⁴⁹ Yet Witherington asserts, “Although preaching and prophesying both involve proclamations, their origins and their form and character differ from one another. Preaching from prophetic texts or on prophetic themes, such as justice for the poor, was still preaching; it was not prophecy.”¹⁵⁰ Dunn insists that Paul considered prophecy to be

a word of revelation. It does not denote the delivery of a previously prepared sermon; it is not a word that can be summoned up to order, or a skill that can be learned; it is a spontaneous utterance, a revelation given in words to the prophet to be delivered as it is given ([1 Cor]14:30). At this point Paul stands wholly within the (Hebraic) tradition of prophecy as inspired utterance.¹⁵¹

Fee points out that the difference between Old and New Testament prophecy was not in origin but in its kind or nature, “A prophet who speaks encouragement to the church in its “between the times” existence speaks a different kind of word from the predominant

¹⁴⁸ Fields and Rees, *Congratulations ... You're Gifted!*, 179. The works of popular writer Hal Lindsey come to mind.

¹⁴⁹ Flynn, *19 Gifts of the Spirit*, 52: “As prophets of old poured forth their warnings of coming invasion because of national declension, so we need prophets today to inveigh against decadence in national life: racism, materialism, immorality, scientism, and a host of others, lest we suffer the decline and fall of our nations. Prophets are God’s loudspeakers. How they are needed in national and local politics, education, journalism, family life, sports, and science!” See also Bugbee, Cousins and Hybels, *Network*, 45.

¹⁵⁰ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 321. See M. Eugene Boring, *The Continuing Voice of Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster, 1991), 38: “The early Christian prophet was an immediately inspired spokesperson for the risen Jesus, who received intelligible messages that he or she felt impelled to deliver to the Christian community or, as the representative of the community, to the general public.”

¹⁵¹ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 228. He says previously on the same page, “there has been a tendency in some quarters to understand prophecy in the Pauline churches more in terms of the second kind of prophecy distinguished by Plato—that is, prophecy simply as preaching, as exposition of previous revelation, as interpretation of traditional material (OT and traditions about Jesus) for the new times and situations of these churches.” This interpretation is usually held by those who believe that the “supernatural” gifts were to authenticate the preaching of the apostles and died out with the closing of the canon of Scripture. See Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 892.

word of judgment on ancient Israel.”¹⁵² New Testament prophecy also differed from the ecstatic prophesying common in Greco-Roman culture for Paul “never uses words like *mantis* and *enthusiasmos* for Christian prophecy. On the contrary, it is clear from 1 Cor 14:15, 19 that he prizes prophecy because it is a speaking with the mind in contrast to the non-rational utterance of glossolalia (and the unutterable utterances of 2 Cor 12:4).”¹⁵³

Dunn says further, “prophecy communicates at the level of the mind; it does not absolve the believer or the believing community from reasoning about their faith; on the contrary, where prophecy is active the community is compelled to think about its faith and life even more.”¹⁵⁴ For it is God who speaks through prophecy, not just the prophet.

There has been much discussion among scholars as to whether Paul was a prophet, and if he saw himself as one.¹⁵⁵ Even though Paul does not identify himself as a prophet, and Luke does not speak of Paul as “prophesying,” Witherington asserts,

There is solid confirmation from the author of the book of Acts that Paul was a prophet. It is in Acts that very little is said about Paul being an apostle (but see Acts 14:4, 14), but Paul is rather clearly identified as a prophet (13:1) and then

¹⁵² Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 892.

¹⁵³ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 228. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 892, says that some mistakenly understand the prophesying in Pauline churches as “not of the same kind as that in the ‘classical prophets,’ but of the more ecstatic kind found, for example, in 1 Sm 10:5-13 or Nm 11:24-25; or ... that the apostles and teachers stand in the line of ‘authority’ with the Old Testament prophets, while New Testament prophecy is simply of a different kind altogether.”

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁵⁵ See Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 303, who says, when Paul “unfurls his various charismatic titles—apostle, teacher, tongue-speaker—never once does he lay claim to the title of prophet. Also, although his nomination by the band of prophets in Antioch might have given him the claim that his apostleship was a divine charism, not a mere church office, he never alludes to his prophetic sponsorship, ignoring it until his later claim to have been commissioned by the Lord personally. Apart from only two brief allusions elsewhere in the proto-pauline literature, everything he has to say on prophecy—and it is mostly cautionary—is in his letters to that most antagonized church, the community at Corinth.” See also Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 171-172 who says, “*didaskhein* (teach) is regularly used for his ministry within Christian communities (11:26; 15:35; 18:1; 20:20; 28:31).”

portrayed as one in 13:9-11. We may further point to Paul's receiving revelations in 16:6-10, 23:11, and 27:23-25."¹⁵⁶

Paul speaks "in tongues more than all of you" (1 Cor 4:18) and "boasts" about his mystical visions (2 Cor 12:1-10).¹⁵⁷ Similar to Northern Kingdom Old Testament prophets he is able to perform miracles, which he mentions as proof of the Spirit working through him (2 Cor 12:12, Rom 15:18-19; cf. Acts 13:11; 14:10; 16:18; 19:11; 28:3-6).¹⁵⁸

Like Jesus and John, Paul was "an eschatological prophet both in the character and in the content of his prophecy. Witherington points out Paul occasionally used apocalyptic imagery (2 Thes 2) and "believed that it would take nothing less than direct divine intervention to finally and forever change the world and humankind into what they ought to be."¹⁵⁹ Paul understood his preaching, teaching, and evangelizing

was not with words of his own choice and their effect on his hearers owed little or nothing to him. The key passages here are 1 Thes 1:5f. and 1 Cor 2:4f. 1 Thes 1:5—the gospel came to the Thessalonians not in word only but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. . . . their experience of the gospel was not simply that of hearing Paul speaking, or of being persuaded by the logic of what he said. Paul spoke, it was his words that were heard; but the experience was that of being addressed by God's Spirit, of being grasped by divine power, of being convinced beyond doubt of the existential truth of what Paul said quite apart from any considerations of reason or logic.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 314. For the full discussion see 301-316. See also Acts 9 for Paul's vision at his conversion.

¹⁵⁷ See *Ibid.*, 304, 306. Also see Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 868.

¹⁵⁸ See Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 306. He says further on 315, "It is the combination of prophecy and the work of the Spirit that, among other things, made Paul a powerful figure to reckon with. Paul could deliver more than just spiritual words; he was a conduit for spiritual works as well. He was, in some respects, like the charismatic performance prophets of old, such as Elijah or Daniel. The reaction to Paul as depicted in Acts 14:8-18, as the true Hermes, the true messenger of God, was surely not all that untypical. If indeed Paul came with powerful words and powerful or even miraculous deeds to a Greco-Roman world starved for, and in need of, both, it is not surprising he was often welcomed with open arms."

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 315.

¹⁶⁰ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 226. See Rom 1:16; 15:8; 1 Cor 2:1-4; 2 Cor 3:12-18; 4:4-6; Gal 3:5; Eph 6:17-20; Col 4:3; 1 Thes 2:2; cf. Phlm 8. Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 307, says, "Paul was a person who manifested both life in the Spirit and the life of the mind, and in fact one sees a marriage of the two in passages such as Rom 8. No doubt, Paul might have said that the only persons really in their right

Paul also made predictions (1 Thes 3:4, 4:2-6, Gal 5:21b) and commanded in the name of Christ (2 Thes 3:6, 10, 12). In 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 he began his oracle with “For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord.” In Romans 11:25 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-55 he used “the term *mysterion* in an introductory clause as a signal that what follows is a quoted oracle. ... There follows an explanation of this oracle, backed up by a supporting quotation from the OT.”¹⁶¹ In 1 Corinthians 2 Paul said the Spirit has

revealed what was formerly hidden—and is still hidden to those without the Spirit. Only by the Spirit (v. 10) could he and his converts possibly understand what the human mind could not so much as conceive (v. 9), namely, that God in his own wisdom had chosen to redeem our fallen race through the crucifixion of Christ. Thus Paul’s preaching of the cross came with “words taught by the Spirit” (v. 13), which included “explaining spiritual things by spiritual means” (= the things *taught* by the Spirit with *language appropriate* to the Spirit). To have the Spirit in this way means not to be subject to merely human judgments; rather, it means to have the mind of Christ (vv. 15-16; cf. 1 Cor 7:25, 40).¹⁶²

As one entrusted with God’s “secret things” (1 Cor 4:1) Paul desired to bring his converts “some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching” for their benefit (1 Cor 14:6)¹⁶³

minds are those who are filled with, and inspired by, the Spirit to think God’s thoughts after God has revealed them. ... Paul was indeed a man of the Spirit, a ‘charismatic’ individual not just in the secular sense of that term. His Christian life was punctuated and enriched with notable spiritual and ecstatic experiences.”

¹⁶¹ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 312. See also 313.

¹⁶² Fee, *God’s Empowering Spirit*, 851-852. See 908-909, where he says, “This motif of the revelation of mysteries by the Spirit is picked up especially in the apocalyptic literature and Qumran. Paul also obviously fits within this tradition by the way he argues in 1 Cor 2:9-12; but it is scarcely a dominant motif in the apostle, and what he does with it is to take all the ‘mystery’ out. The ‘hidden mystery’ of God that is revealed to those who have received the Spirit of God is the ‘wisdom’ in God’s folly, salvation through a crucified Messiah.” See also Eph 3:2-7 and Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 305.

¹⁶³ See Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 307, where he says, “Perhaps even more revealing is what Paul says about himself in 1 Cor 13:2: ‘And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.’ Here the ‘if’ with the present-tense verb does not connote a purely hypothetical possibility but rather, in all likelihood, a real condition. Paul has prophetic powers and understands mysteries and matters of spiritual knowledge.”

The Problem of False Prophecy and Teaching

Ancient Israel struggled with discerning false prophecy and teaching in her midst and the New Testament Church had similar difficulties.¹⁶⁴ “Despite the very respectful treatment given Christian prophets in the New Testament, mild misgivings do begin to appear. Not all those who say, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name?’ will find admission into the kingdom.”¹⁶⁵ Leslie B. Flynn points out Christians might

have to confront false religion promoted by seducing spirits. Such false teachings Paul dubs “doctrines of devils” (1 Tm 4:1). Lying spirits, whose aim is to deceive, are mentioned in the Old Testament. Paul sums it up, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph 6:12).¹⁶⁶

Some false prophets and teachers were probably charlatans seeking personal gain, like Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24). Others, coming from pagan backgrounds were eager for spiritual experiences and ecstasies (1 Cor 14:12) and presumptuous in their attempts to prophecy.¹⁶⁷ New converts with zeal and charismatic personalities, but little scriptural knowledge or understanding could easily attract a crowd. Some believed that they were genuinely inspired by God, but were unwilling to submit to the guidance of the

¹⁶⁴ See Mt 7:15; 24:11; 2 Thes 2:1-12, 1 Tm 4:1, 2 Pt 1:21; 2; 1 Jn 4:1-3; 2 Jn 7-11; 3 Jn 9-12; Rv 2:2, 14, 20. Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 304, says at times, “God seemed to speak in diverse ways and sundry manners through his chosen, and as a result his communities began to be divided by the pull of competing charisms.”

¹⁶⁵ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 299-300.

¹⁶⁶ Flynn, *19 Gifts of the Spirit*, 152. See also Eph 4:14; 2 Tm 4:3-4.

¹⁶⁷ Donald Bridge and David Phypers, *Spiritual Gifts and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 91, say, “Although they were exercising genuine spiritual gifts, the Corinthian converts nevertheless brought over into their exercise tendencies from their nationality and culture. A Greek tendency to exalt eloquence and worldly-wisdom, a carelessness about morality that was proverbial in this sea-port, and a confusion between prophecy and the exciting and ecstatic activities associated with the pagan ‘oracles’—all of these were intermingled to a greater or lesser degree with their exercise of spiritual gifts.”

community and its leadership.¹⁶⁸ Donald Bridge and David Phypers warn it is possible to “fall into the error of thinking that a prophecy, or a tongue, or a prayer for healing have something so supernatural about them that it would be impious to question them or to submit them to any test. Yet clearly the Christian’s own limitations, prejudices and mixed motives can be operative here as in any other area of service.”¹⁶⁹ Because, “the experience of inspiration in itself was no guarantee that God was its source (1 Cor 12: 2f.), the practical problem was know when an inspired utterance or action was a charisma and then not.”¹⁷⁰ Further, what was one to do with authentic charismata which “*when exercised without love made for strife within the community and stunted the growth of the body. ... How then were even the genuine charismata to be controlled?*”¹⁷¹

It is significant that Paul did not expect his converts to accept his teaching on the basis of his miracles and claims to ecstatic experiences, but challenged them to test his words, even as the words of the Old Testament prophets needed to be tested.¹⁷² He felt

¹⁶⁸ See Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 305: “From their Jewish origins the Christian assemblies had inherited a robust tolerance for debate and they knew reasonably well how to massage a quarrel into a consensus. What complicated that tradition now was the presence of these new charismatics: all accountable to no one but the Lord, and all claiming to be possessed by God’s own Spirit.

Understandably, it was community leaders who encountered the problem most keenly. Paul had been the first to confront it, and this he did largely by invoking his own credentials and condemning those who read the divine signs differently. But in the average community the presence of truly gifted apostles, prophets and teachers would attenuate or obscure the need for and development of effective officers and discursive, responsible policy discussion. And the presence of charismatics in whom the Spirit was somehow garrulous, askew or even spurious could, in the presence of a credulous community, make a dedicated officer despair.”

¹⁶⁹ Bridge and Phypers, *Spiritual Gifts and the Church*, 91. Flynn, *19 Gifts of the Spirit*, 152, likewise warns, “When a Christian is faced with the supernatural, he is not to mistakenly identify the supernatural with the divine and thus uncritically accept all spirits. Nor is he to be overcritical lest he despise prophesying and quench the Spirit (1 Thes 5:19, 20).”

¹⁷⁰ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 271.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² See *Ibid.*, 292.

it necessary to back such revelations up with explanations and quotations from the Scriptures. It comports with what we hear in a text such as 1 Thes 5:19-21, where Paul feels compelled to urge his converts not to quench the Spirit or despise prophecy but instead to test it and hold fast to the part of it that is true and good.¹⁷³

He assumed “The community as a whole are ‘taught by God’ (1 Thes 4:9), they all participate in the one Spirit (*koinonia*), they are all men [and women] of the Spirit (*pneumatikoi*). As such they have authority to regulate and exercise judgment concerning the charismata (1 Cor 2:15).”¹⁷⁴ Dunn says further,

not only the prophets have responsibility to evaluate individual prophecy (1 Cor 14:29) but the community also has responsibility both to encourage prophecy and to “test everything,” including prophecy (1 Thes 5:20f.). ... In the light of these considerations 1 Cor 14:16 gains a new significance. The “Amen” which the congregation utters after a prayer or prophecy is not just a formal liturgical assent; it indicates rather the importance Paul attaches to the community’s members being able to understand and to give assent to what is said in its worship.¹⁷⁵

Assuming that early Christian congregations largely followed the synagogue pattern of managing their own affairs in the context of worship, Dunn suggests Paul gave

his guide lines for the ordering of congregational affairs in 1 Cor 14:26ff. That is to say, in meetings where there was confusion or uncertainty over some issue, some individual might feel himself inspired to give a lead—for example, by a word of practical wisdom (cf. 1 Cor 6), a word of counsel (*kubernesis*), a prophet speaking in the name of the risen Lord, a teacher referring to some word in the kerygmatic tradition. Alternatively the community might call on those who had already demonstrated their spirituality by their hard work, love and service, like Stephanas, to give some lead. The counsel would then be assessed and discussed, presumably until the congregation felt that they knew the mind of Christ in the

¹⁷³ Witherington, *Jesus the Seer*, 312

¹⁷⁴ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 292. On 281-282 he says, “While, “the individual’s own sense of inspiration might be authority enough for his speaking out; but the authority which that utterance carried for the community depended on a wider sense of inspiration—on its source being recognized as the Spirit of Christ and its significance recognized as the mind of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 2:16; 7:40).”

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 292. On 281 he says, “The authority of the prophets therefore included *authority to evaluate the oracle of another prophet*, or indeed, no doubt, any other prophecy—evaluation involving discussion (presumably) leading to some sort of agreed judgment on the origin and significance of the oracle.”

matter (cf. 2 Cor 2:6; also Rom 1:11f.; 12:1f.; 15:14; Phil 1:9-11; 2:1ff.; 1 Thes 4:18; 5:11, 19f.).¹⁷⁶

The confirmation of the community was required to validate prophecies and counsel.

The New Testament writers suggest several ways to evaluate prophecies, teaching and other “spiritual” utterances to “control the threat posed to community by a selfish inspirationism.”¹⁷⁷ Each test does not stand alone but works in conjunction with the others, providing a fuller basis for discernment than if they were only used individually.

- The Test of “Sound Teaching”: Consistency with the Gospel (1 Cor 12:3; Gal 1:8-9; 1 Tm 4:6; 6:3; 2 Tm 1:13; 3:14-17; 2 Pt 1:20-21; 1 Jn 2:23; 4:2-3; 2 Jn)
- The Test of Fruit: Character and Lifestyle Matter (Is 5:1-7; Mt 3:8-10; 7:15-23; 12:15-37; 13:24-30, 46-43; 16:6, 11-12; 21:18-22, 33-46; 23:1-36; Mk 3:20-30; 12:1-12, 38-40; Lk 6:43-45; 11:14-26; 12:1-3; 13:6-9; Gal 5:16-26, cf. 1 Cor 6:9-11; 2 Cor 6:3-10; Eph 4:17-5:21; Col. 3:1-14, Js 3:9-12; 1 Pt 2:11-12)
- The Gift of “Discernment of Spirits”: Test Everything (1 Cor 12:10; 14:27-29; 1 Thes 5:9-22; 1 Jn 4:1-6)
- The Test of Love: Sacrificial Caring (Jn 13:34-35; Rom 12: 9; 14:15; 1 Cor 13; 2 Cor 6:6; 1 Thes 1:6-4)
- The Test of “Building Up”: Congregational Edification (Rom 15:2-3; 1 Cor 3:9-17; 8; 10:14-11:1; 14:3-19, 31; 2 Cor 10:8; 12:19; 13:10; Eph 4:29; Phil 2:1-11; 1 Thes 5:11)¹⁷⁸

The Promises and Pitfalls of Spiritual Guidance for Congregational Discernment and Decision Making

This chapter has explored how God gave his creation the ability to interact and communicate with Him, but as a result of rebellion that ability was hindered and human knowledge of God and his will was diminished. People’s attempts to restore that

¹⁷⁶ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 292-293. See also Phil 3:15; 1 Jn 2:20-27.

¹⁷⁷ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 282.

¹⁷⁸ Each of these tests is discussed more fully in Appendix B.

connection with the divine resulted in various forms of divination and sorcery. YHWH continued to speak directly with his people through personal encounter and the prophets, but since the Spirit was given only to certain individuals, to know God's will on a matter not covered by the Law, one needed to consult a prophet. Yet the people of Israel in their willful desire to be "like the other nations," rejected God's leadership in favor of human wisdom and pagan insight. The prophets were ignored and abused as they pleaded with God's people and their leaders for repentance. They looked for the day when God would restore his people and make a new covenant, bringing them the blessings of renewed relationship with Him. His Spirit would fill and empower them to know Him, remove their spiritual blindness, and write his law on their hearts so that they would do his will.

Jesus inaugurated this new age of the Kingdom through his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit was poured out on his disciples as promised on the Day of Pentecost. Christians now live in the "in between" times, after Pentecost but before the second coming of Christ when the new age will culminate. God's Kingdom has come but the old age has not yet passed away, and that presents some difficulties as believers try to live and "walk by the Spirit." It is easy to revert to "walking by the flesh," the way of the naturalistic narcissistic culture around them, since their minds have not been fully renewed in Christ. False teachers, prophets, and miracle workers both inside and out of the Church can and do lead people astray. Our culture's forays into mystical spirituality are in part an attempt to discover new ways of making our world "work" experientially, like divination, apart from God. Egocentric church leaders and members promote their own agendas rather than Christ's, in the name of guarding and promoting their people's welfare, and spiritual gifts can be abused. Yet,

the possibility that gifts may be misused or their place in the Church misunderstood is never allowed by the New Testament writers to constitute a reason for their exclusion from Christian lives and fellowships. Rather, difficulties associated with the exercise of the *charismata* are squarely faced, so that Christians may be alive to possible dangers and thereby able to avoid them.¹⁷⁹

All believers need to learn to hear more clearly the voice of their Shepherd Jesus (Jn 10:1-18), exercise their gifts according to his direction, and avoid divisive arguments. In all of life, not just when making decisions, they need to prayerfully strive to discern the will and wisdom of the Spirit who both lives within them individually and in their midst corporately, uniting them in the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:6-16; Jas 1:5).

That is easier said than done. Sometimes in the midst of controversy and the abuse of spiritual gifts it seems easier and more pragmatic to revert back to the old “wisdom” model of making decisions. Sometimes in this very busy world, it seems that “waiting” on the Lord for his insight just takes “too long,” and like Saul, it seems efficient to plunge ahead. Sometimes in the desire to enforce and protect congregational unity quenches the Spirit. Prophecy and other supernatural speech meant to guide and bless is despised (Rom 12:6; 1 Thes 5:19-20). If all who are in Christ have the Spirit, are his priests and members of his body, and all can theoretically hear his voice, then all contributions should be welcomed, and the participation of all in discernment and decision-making encouraged. The focus of the next chapter is examining how God’s people in the Bible corporately discerned his will and made decisions. It will also look at how their thinking about congregational decision-making, and the structures and practices that they used were similar to or different from the nations around them.

¹⁷⁹ Bridge and Phipps, 91. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 894, agrees: “Paul’s response is never to eliminate such phenomena—they are the manifestations of the Spirit, after all—but to correct by urging proper use.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Deciding Together: Communal Discernment, Leadership, and Decision Making in the Bible and Ancient World

“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 31:33-34a

Because God is a plurality-in-unity, the ideal for humankind does not focus on solitary persons, but on persons-in-community. God intends that we reflect the divine nature in our lives. This is only possible as we move out of our isolation and into godly relationships with others. Consequently, true Christian living is life-in-relationship or life-in-community.

Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community*¹

The life and growth of the Early Church can be seen best as a community of Spirit-filled Christians exercising their spiritual gifts.

Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King*²

As seen in Chapter Three, God continues to speak directly to and guide people by His Spirit as promised, but they sinfully distort and manipulate insights given to them, getting off of His path.³ Human limitations and differences in perspective also prevent people from seeing clearly and fully, especially when they are not willing to ask others to evaluate the “guidance” given, and confirm their decisions. Seeking others’ prayerful insights improves one’s ability to discern correctly and make wise Spirit-guided decisions. This chapter explores the biblical and theological basis for the third element of

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co., 1996), 50-51.

² Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 76-77. See also William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew’s Press, 1966), 172.

³ For the idea of following God’s “path” see Dt 30:15-19; Ps 1:6; 16:11; 18:20-36; 119:30-35, 101-105, 127-128; Prv 2:6-22; 4:10-22, 26-27; 14:12; 15:9; 28:18.

our proposal: that a congregational Christian community will make better, more God-focused decisions faithful to its identity as the “body of Christ” if it uses a model of discernment and decision making that includes contributions from the entire group or sub-group. Except where does it find such a model? As Howard A. Snyder notes, “we face the problem of wineskins—the necessity of dealing with practical structures in order to permit and encourage true community.”⁴ James S. Jeffers points out,

the New Testament has little to say about the organization of the church. The Gospels record very few comments by Jesus on the subject, beyond acknowledging its existence, the need for leaders and its mission to spread the message. The epistles give only the outlines of a model for how Christians are to meet, organize and appoint leaders. How then did the churches develop forms of organization? It appears that the churches borrowed from the society models that they considered compatible with their identity as Christians. It makes sense that, in putting together an organization from scratch, the early Christians would use and modify forms with which they were familiar.⁵

Therefore, this chapter will also examine Jewish and Greco-Roman models of community organization to see how they may have influenced Early Church decision-making structures and practices. James T. Burtchaell asserts, it is

natural to assume that the pattern of community organization in those earliest churches may also have been an heirloom from the Jewish past. . . . since the first Christians were Jews who took a long while to reflect and admit to themselves reluctantly how their faith might be leading them away from their fellow Jews, they would instinctively create communities in the way familiar to them: following the patterns of the hellenistic Jewish synagogue.⁶

⁴ Snyder, *The Community of the King*, 59-60.

⁵ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 71-72. See also Charles Ringma, *Catch the Wind: the Shape of the Church to Come—and Our Place in It* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1994), 129 who says, “no ecclesiastical structures are created, but familial relationships are emphasised (Acts 2:46 and Acts 16:15). This particularly comes to the fore in the New Testament’s emphasis on the church as the ‘body of Christ’ and the ‘household of faith.’”

⁶ James Tunstead Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xii. On 199 He uses *Roberts Rules of Order* as an example of this principle: “The book is a traditional item of community organization, entirely familiar to the nation, and for that very reason it is so taken for granted that it is rarely mentioned. By the same token, any familiarity which we can gain with similarly familiar antecedents

In addition this chapter will examine New Testament teaching and how it confirmed or modified the models of community organization chosen by the Early Church. But first two theological concepts foundational for our understanding of Biblical community, the “Trinity” and “this world,” must be examined.

The Community of the Trinity

As noted in Chapter Two, humanity was created in God’s image (Gn 1:26-27).

But the One whose image people reflect is “not a solitary God. The living God is not an isolated God. From all eternity the living God has lived in relationship—indeed, has lived as relationship.”⁷ Darrell W. Johnson says the “most fundamental truth” he knows is:

At the center of the universe is a community. It is out of that relationship that you and I were created and redeemed. And it is for that relationship that you and I were created and redeemed! And it turns out that there is a three-fold-ness to that relationship. It turns out that the community is a Trinity. The center of reality is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁸

Johnson says that human relationships mirror this “‘us-ness’ of God.”

God does not exist alone; and neither do we who are created in God’s image. Thus God says of Adam in the garden, “it is not good for the man to be alone” (Gn 2:18). Why? Because Adam will be lonely, yes. But more importantly because “Adam alone” is not Adam in the image of God. God is not a solitary God. Adam does not reflect who God is until Adam shares life with Eve.⁹

of the earliest Christians will help us to construe better the ways that they were following—because they were the only ways they knew of forming a community.”

⁷ Darrell W. Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 61. See 21-31 for biblical evidence for the Trinity.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37. On 73-74 he comments, “Because of the work of the Son on the cross, and because of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, you and I who say yes to Jesus as Savior and Lord are adopted by the Father into the Trinitarian Family. We become real sons and daughters in relationship with the only begotten Son. We enter into the Only Begotten’s relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit.” See Gal 4:3-6; 1 Jn 1:3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 52. He is referring to what is known as the “social” analogy of the Trinity. Along the same lines, Paul K. Jewett in *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 46, says, “Man’s existence in the fellowship of male and female is the mode of his existence in the image of God. ... In the

People were made to be in relationships with each other and God. Stanley J. Grenz notes,

God created the first human pair in order that humans enjoy community with each other. More specifically, the creation of the female was designed to deliver the male from his isolation. This primal community of man and woman then became expansive. It produced the offspring that arise from the sexual union of husband and wife and eventually gave rise to the development of societies.¹⁰

As those societies grew they developed organizational structures to facilitate interactions among members and the accomplishment of tasks. In and of themselves these structures are not bad, for as Christopher J. H. Wright notes, “the proper and harmonious ordering of relationships between individuals and communities, locally and internationally, is part of human accountability to God as creator of all. The political task of maintaining a morally acceptable social order is a human duty under God.”¹¹ The Apostle Paul commends the Colossians for their orderliness (Col 2:5) and warns the Corinthians that their chaotic worship is not good for “God is not a God of disorder, but of peace” (1Cor 14:33). God himself created “thrones,” “powers,” “rulers,” and “authorities” (Col 1:16).

Unfortunately, because of disobedience human beings are unable and unwilling to live in loving fellowship with each other, and our societies reflect our relational dysfunction.¹² Sinful people individually and corporately fail to reveal God’s image:

Genesis narrative it is not declared expressly that God’s creating man in his image means he created him male and female. Yet the latter is brought into such close conjunction with the former as to imply the most intimate relation between Man’s existence in the image of God and his fellowship as male and female.”

¹⁰ Grenz, *Created for Community*, 79. See Gn 1:28.

¹¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 213.

¹² See D. Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity*, 52-53. He notes, “It is because we are created in the image of the Trinity that loneliness is so crushing, that broken relationships are so debilitating, that death is so painful. Lack or loss of relationship violates our essential nature, created to reflect the relational essence of God.” He says further, “That is why Jesus emphasized ‘righteousness’ so much. Righteousness simply means ‘right relationship.’ He came to reconcile us to the Father, and he came to reconcile us to each other and to ourselves. Nothing grieves the Triune God more than people who will not work at relationships.”

because we are created for community—sin is a failure of “community.” This failure displays its presence in what we do. We see it in our active rebellion against God, our quarreling with each other and our misuse of creation. But it is equally present in what we don’t do. It permeates our passive apathy toward God and others.¹³

Thankfully, God has been unwilling to give up on his desires for human community.

Biblical history reveals his active involvement to achieve his restoration plans of:

the calling and creation of a people for his own possession, a new, redeemed humanity with whom He can dwell in his new, redeemed creation. Biblical ethics are therefore inescapably social, for the people of God exist as a society within society. And their reason for existence is to bear witness to the kind of social relationship between persons that God desires and, in the eschatological vision, will ultimately create in perfection, under the headship of Christ and through the reconciling power of his cross.¹⁴

This communal witnessing responsibility is crucial for “we come to find our true identity only as we participate together with others in the community of the followers of Christ. In so doing, we bring honor to our Creator by reflecting the very character of the Triune God.”¹⁵ But living out this calling is not easy for we live in “this world” that is determined to continue in its rebellion against God.

“This World”

Living in *shalom* became problematic after Adam and Eve sinned (Gn 3). Human society, intended to be a place of loving God and others, became the idolatrous and

¹³ Grenz, *Created for Community*, 90.

¹⁴ C. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 24. Grenz, *Created for Community*, 79, says, “What began in the Garden of Eden finds its completion at the end of history. The Bible envisions a day when God’s will for creation will come to completion. One day God will bring to pass a human society in which God’s children enjoy perfect fellowship with each other, the created world, and the Creator (Rv 22:1-4).”

¹⁵ Grenz, *Created for Community*, 80.

violent “this world,” where human society organized itself apart from God.¹⁶ The Greek word *kosmos* (“world”) has a variety of New Testament meanings: “the ‘universe,’ the created world, described in the OT as ‘all things’ or ‘heaven and earth’ (Acts 17:24),” also “a synonym for *he oikoumene ge*, the inhabited earth.”¹⁷ The *kosmos* became

a *disordered* world in the grip of the evil one (1 Jn 5:19). And so, very frequently in the NT, and particularly in the Johannine writings, the word *kosmos* has a sinister significance. It is not the world as God intended it to be, but “*this* world” set over against God, following its own wisdom and living by the light of its own reason (1 Cor 1:21), not recognizing the Source of all true life and illumination (Jn 1:10).¹⁸

Being “of the world” or “worldly” means to arrogantly displace God as the supreme center of one’s life.¹⁹ Defying God’s command to “fill the earth” (Gn 1:28) the proud “worldly” people of Babel sought to develop community apart from God (Gn 11:4):

Humanity, having long ago left the living God out of the equation, seeks its unity in a tower that rises to heaven. “Let us build a name for ourselves” (11:4). Meaning, let us build a new society without God. We will be our own lord. We will rebuild the world ourselves. The story then tells of how God confused their languages so that humanity cannot find its unity apart from God. Babel—Babylon—is a code word for humanity seeking to build the city without God.²⁰

¹⁶ See Charles Ringma, *Catch the Wind: the Shape of the Church to Come—and Our Place in It* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1994), 121. He says, Paul “speaks of people being in slavery under the basic principles of the world (Galatians 4:3). While he recognises that all authorities, systems and structures in heaven and on earth were initially created good by Christ ... they were subject to the Fall. Thus all forms of human rulership, ideology and structure were infected by the distorting reality of human sinfulness.”

¹⁷ R. G. V. Tasker, s. v. “world,” *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 3, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980), 1655. Mt 4:8-9; 16:26, Jn 1:10; 3:16; 11:27; 16:21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* See Rom 5:18.

¹⁹ See *Ibid.* Tasker says that one of the marks of worldliness is, “*pride*, born of man’s failure to accept his creaturely estate and his dependence on the Creator, which leads him to act as though he were the lord and giver of life.”

²⁰ Darrell W. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 298-299. See also 302-303.

In “this world,” human society chooses idolatry, encourages sin, and destroys loving community (Rom 1:19-32; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Eph 4:17-5:18; Gal 5:19-21; Rv 22:15). R. G.

V. Tasker points out mankind’s inability to rectify the problem:

This world is pervaded by a spirit of its own, which has to be exorcized by the Spirit of God, if it is not to remain in control over human reason and understanding (1 Cor 2:12). Man[kind] is in bondage to the elements which comprise the world (Col 2:20) until he is emancipated from them by Christ. He cannot overcome it till he is himself “born of God” (1 Jn 5:4). Legalism, asceticism and ritualism are this world’s feeble and enfeebling substitutes for true religion (Gal 4:9-10); and only a true knowledge of God as revealed by Christ can prevent men from relying upon them.”²¹

Paul tells the Colossians that God has rescued them “from the dominion of darkness,” and brought them “into the Kingdom of the Son He loves” (1:13). They are not to live as if still enslaved to the rules and regulations of “this world” (2:8-22). Their lifestyle, including making decisions, must be built on Christ rather than human wisdom and tradition.

In “this world” human organizations become “bestly.”²² Johnson asserts, “Political powers do not set out to be bestial. They set out to be their own master, and in the process they turn bestial. No one can be God but God. When the state seeks to be God, it does not become divine, it becomes demonic. . . . Power that is no longer exercised under God seeks to play God.”²³ This is true not only in “secular” society, but also in religious organizations which claim to serve God, but which in reality, by their attitudes and practices, seek to build their communities apart from God and his empowering guidance. Johnson says, “When religion loses its way, it puts its trust in

²¹ Tasker, s. v. “world,” *IBD*, 1655.

²² D. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge*, 233, says of the “Beast” in Rv 13, “What then is the beast from the sea? It is the state—human kingdoms that have ejected the living God from the center of their lives. At the time John wrote Revelation, the beast was manifested in Rome (as we will see in Revelation 17). But not just Rome. Before Rome the beast is manifested in Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. And after Rome the beast is manifested in empire after empire.”

²³ *Ibid.*, 233-234.

power, not in the living God anymore, but in the power of human institutions to save and heal the world. It happens subtly ... When religion loses its way, it worships power. It seeks salvation in human systems rather than in the grace of God in Jesus Christ.”²⁴

Though beastly false prophets in Revelation 13, “encourage us, in the name of God, to seek salvation in human resources, human technology and human ideology,” all of these will be judged by Christ and “Babylon the Great” will be destroyed (Rv 18, 19), replaced by the new Jerusalem where God will live with his people (Rv 21).²⁵ But until that day believers will continue to struggle with the temptation to follow the ways of “this world.”

Ancient Jewish Communal Government, the Sanhedrin, and the Synagogue

In the midst of “this world,” out of fallen community, God called Abram, not just to be an individual worshipper, but to be the progenitor of a great nation that would follow God and his ways, revealing Him and bringing blessing to all nations (Gn 12:1; 15:4-5; 17:3-8; 18;18-19; 22:17-18; 26:2-4; 28:13-15; 35:11-12; Ex 3:6-8; 6:2-8).²⁶ The early Israelites, as tribal nomads, were guided by elders responsible for administering

²⁴ Ibid., 251.

²⁵ Ibid., 245. He says further, “Is this not what we see in our time? There are forces at work in the churches encouraging us to take our guidance for ethics from the way things are, instead of from the way things are supposed to be, as revealed in Jesus Christ. There are also forces so enamored with the powers at work in our culture that they encourage us to embrace as God’s new work cultural norms which are clearly contrary to the reign of God.”

²⁶ See C. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 215, who says, “It was not that God elevated an existing people to a chosen status, but that God called Israel into existence as his people, as an entity distinct from the surrounding nation states from their very beginning. ... Corresponding to this given status, there was the requirement of faith in the promise of God and obedience to God’s command. Here again a distinctiveness emerges with the surrounding peoples.” See also Milne, *We Belong Together*, 19, who asserts, “The whole sweep of Old Testament history and experience is in the setting of the story of a *people* and all the variety of God’s dealings with them.”

justice.²⁷ It is likely their independent governance continued to a certain extent while in Egypt, although limited by Pharaoh's power. With the Exodus, "and the covenant and the gift of the law at Sinai (Ex 20-24), God began to mould for himself his own people. They would be a 'priesthood'—a model people called out from among the nations, for the sake of the nations, to be a 'light to the nations,' as the vehicle and paradigm of God's redemption (cf. Ex 19:4-6)."²⁸ In obedience to YHWH they were not to follow the oppressive idolatrous political ways of surrounding kingdoms but be a new and "a wholly distinctive kind of human society under the direct rule of God,"²⁹ which "reflected Yahweh's character, values, priorities and goals."³⁰ They were to have no king for

Yahweh took to himself entirely the two major functions and duties of kings in the ancient world, namely the conduct of war and the administration of law and justice. Indeed, in the exercise of these two functions, human kings in the ancient Near East were at their most sacral—*i.e.* acting on behalf of the god they represented (or embodied). But in Israel, Yahweh himself took over these roles, and human political leadership was thus decisively demoted and relativized. Instead, Israel was a covenant nation, with Yahweh, as lord of the covenant,

²⁷ C. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 215, notes that the nomadic life had the advantage of "maximum independence from the socio-political and economic structures of their day. ... Genesis records plenty of occasions of social and economic intercourse between the patriarchs and their contemporaries. But they remained a pilgrim people, called out and called onward."

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18. On 221 he says, "At Sinai God provided the bonding and moulding institutions and laws by which they were to progress from a mass of freed slaves to an ordered and functioning society. It is there, in the Torah, that we find the bulk of those features of Israel's polity that made them so distinctive: the kinship rationale of land-tenure; the jubilee and sabbatical institutions; the ban on interest; the equality of native and stranger before the Law; the civil rights of slaves; the diffusion of political leadership and authority among the elders; the limitation on the economic power of cultic officials." See 1 Pt 2:9. See also Snyder, *The Community of the King*, 58.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 222. On 223 he says, "That Israel regarded Yahweh as king from the earliest period of their settlement (and not just from the time of her own monarchy) is clear in several very ancient texts (e.g. Ex 15:18; 19:6; Nm 23:21; Dt 33:5). Belief in the kingship of a deity is not at all unique to Israel, and existed in the ancient Near Eastern world long before Israel emerged. But if theocracy in the general sense of a nation regarding its god as a king was not unique, Israel's particular manifestation and experience of it certainly was. For in Israel theocracy excluded, for several centuries, a human king."

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

responsible both for their protection, by war if necessary, and for the just ordering of their social life in every aspect.³¹

During this period of theocratic governance Moses and Joshua served as Israel's God-appointed leaders. Wright notes, "*The model of political authority is servanthood.* 'Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house' is not an Old Testament text (Heb 3:5), but the Israelites would have agreed with it (*cf.* Ex 14:31). Though an outstanding leader, among the greatest in human history he could be soberly described as 'more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth'" (Nm 12:3).³² Since the burden of judging and leading the people was too great for Moses alone (Nm 11, Dt 1:9-18), God established the "Council of Seventy Elders." Similarly, Moses followed his father-in-law's advice to train capable trustworthy judges to hear simple cases, while he retained the difficult ones (Ex 18:13-26). He also admonished the people to appoint tribal judges and officials when they entered the Promised Land (Dt 16:18).

This model continued during the period of the Judges or *Shoftim*, as Israel was established as a nation. Like Moses and Joshua, Judges were divinely empowered men and women who God raised up to unite, lead and deliver his people. Max Dimont describes how early Israel was governed, comparing it to Western systems today:

The Elders dispensed justice within each tribe, just as municipal and state courts dispense justice within each state. However, above the authority of the Elder was that of the Judge, just as above the authority of the state is the federal Constitution. The Judge was the Commander in Chief in times of war and the Chief Executive in times of peace. His powers were limited by law, but he could delegate responsibility. . . . The Judge could summon the "Senate" and "Popular Assembly" and propose subjects for deliberation. The function of the "Senate" members was the same as that of our Senators today. Like the House of Lords in England, the "Senate" was not only the legislative but also the judicial arm of

³¹ Ibid., 223-224.

³² Ibid., 243. See 220-22. See Banwell, s. v. "king," *IBD*, 852. See also Ex 4:29; Nm 16:1.

government. ... The Popular Assembly resembled our House of Representatives.³³

In the Old Testament, “the assembly = ‘*edah* = *synagogê* is a common synonym for the people, especially in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Joshua. ... But in the later postexilic literature an even stronger expression for assembly = *qahal* = *ekklesia* is used to designate the people.”³⁴ Other terms used were *tsibur*, *keneset*, and *chaberah*.

Burtchaell says, “The gathering was no mob event. It was convened by elders or other public officers to address some issue which tradition would not permit them to resolve on their own unrati ed authority.”³⁵ Reasons for calling a popular national assembly were: the consecration of Aaron and his sons (Lv 8:1-13), military decision-making (Jgs 20:2; 21:5, 8; 2 Ch 20:5, 14; 28:14; Neh 8-10), God’s covenant ratification (Dt 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; 23:1, 2; 31:30); Ez 10:1, 8, 12, 1 Neh 8:2, 17), religious dedications (1 Kgs 8:14, 22, 55, 65; 1 Ch 13:2, 4; 2 Chr 6:3, 12-13; 7:8; 2 Chr 30:2, 4, 13, 17, 23-25), national communication (Dt 31:9-13); Jer 25), judicial action (Nm 15:32-36; Prv 5:14, Ez 23 :46), and honoring kings (1 Chr 28:2, 8; 29:1, 10, 20; 2 Chr 10:3; 23:3).³⁶ This governmental/ judicial system of local elders, Judges, and assemblies functioned while Israel remained

³³ Max I. Dimont, *Jews, God, and History* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1962), 47-48. On 49 he claims, “The constitutional monarchy formed by the Twelve Tribes of Israel about 1000 B.C. was the first of its kind in the world.” On 79 he also sees the Sanhedrin as the basis for American legal structures: “The remarkable resemblances among Roman law, present-day American law, and Jewish jurisprudence in Biblical days is more than mere coincidence. The Jews devised, four centuries before Christ, a legal system based on the dignity of man and individual equality before the law, while Europe still had trial by ordeal as late as the fifteenth century.”

³⁴ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 209. He also notes that these terms are used in apocryphal writings (1 and 2 Enoch, Psalms of Solomon, 1 Mc 5:16; 14:19, 28; Jdt 6:14-20, Sus 28, 41, 60; Sir 31:11; 39:10; 44:15) as well as in Philo (*Exod.* 1:10, Armenian version).

³⁵ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 211. He notes Josephus speaks of Herod’s use of assemblies to deal with “succession” and tax issues, and also claims his own commissioning by the Sanhedrin (*B.J.* 1:457-460; 1:540-551; 1:665-669; *Vita*, 341, 393; *Ant.* 16:63-65 16:367-394). On 213, He says Josephus speaks of assemblies called by Simon the Ethnarch, Petronius, and Gessius Florus, the High Priest Ananus, and Titus (*Ant.* 13:215-217; 18:279-283; *B.J.* 1:150; 2:319-320; 4:151, 162ff; 7:46ff, 106ff).

³⁶ See Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 210.

faithful to YHWH. But as she regularly strayed, this period was tumultuous, with cycles of faithfulness, apostasy, repentance, and deliverance.

Later, when granting Israel's desire for a king, YHWH imposed restrictions, reminding her that "all human, relative, authority is accountable to, and addressable by, God. Hence the importance of the prophetic gift and ministry."³⁷ Wright notes,

the deuteronomic law of kingship strictly forbids a king to exalt himself above his brothers, but rather to set an example in embodying the demands and values of the law (Dt. 17:14-20). ... whatever a king in Israel is to be, he is not to be like any king known on earth: enjoying neither weapons (military prestige), wealth, nor wives (harem). In the context of the day it might have been wondered whether it was worth being king at all on such terms. It was a very different model indeed, a model which David scarcely adhered to, and Solomon forgot altogether.³⁸

Although Israel transitioned to monarchical governance, the people continued meeting in assembly, and "it is interesting how often the people play a decisive part in the making or breaking of kings (*e.g.* 2 Ki 11:17ff; 14:19-21)."³⁹ During this period difficult legal cases were brought to the king for resolution (1 Sm 14; 1 Kgs 3:16-28) but it is hard to say how effective or lasting this system was. King Jehoshaphat of Judah, after his disastrous alliance with King Ahab, embarked on judicial renewal (2 Chr 19:1-11),

superimposing upon the time-honored administration of customary law by village elders a system of royally appointed judges installed in key cities—the judges probably at first being selected from among the local elders themselves. At the same time, there was set up in Jerusalem what might be called a court of appeals, presided over by the chief priest for religious matters, and the *nagid* of Judah for civil matters. ... Its purpose was clearly to normalize judicial procedure, to root

³⁷ C. Wright *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 242.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 243. He comments further, "The pattern of true political leadership in Israel is nowhere more succinctly expressed than in the advice given to Rehoboam by his older advisors in 1 Kings 12:7: 'If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them ... they will always be your servants.'"

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 242. He also comments, 243, "A majority has no more divine right than a monarch, in Old Testament terms."

out injustice and also to provide—what had previously been lacking—adequate machinery for the appeal of disputed cases.⁴⁰

With the Babylonian Exile the people of the Kingdom of Judah lost the right of self governance, which was partially restored by the Persians. It is claimed the Sanhedrin, the governing/judicial body of seventy-one elders, had its roots in the Great Synagogue (*Keneset ha-Gedolah*) of 120 nobles and elders, founded about 400 BC by Ezra to study and teach the Mosaic Law (Neh 2:16; 4:8-19; 5:7; 7:5; Ezr 5:5, 9; 6:7, 14; 10:8).⁴¹ The Sanhedrin was also thought to reflect the heavenly court where God was “surrounded with elders and notable-spirits: in fact, they envisioned a heavenly *ekklêsia* with whom their earthly assembly was in communion [Sir 24:1-2; Ws 5:5, Enoch 47:3; Bar 56:3].”⁴² The faithful looked forward to the “age to come” when the “Messiah ... would judge nations and tribes in solemn assembly.”⁴³ During the intertestamental period

the Greeks permitted a body known as the *gerousia* (senate) which was made up of elders and represented the nation (Jos., *Ant.* 12.142; 1 Mc 12:3, 6; 14:20). In the days of the Seleucids this *gerousia* had dealings with such rulers as Antiochus

⁴⁰ John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1972), 248. Ringma, 118-119, suggests that, “Israel’s disastrous experience of kingship” was a “classic example of a guardian structure gone horribly wrong. ... Samuel in 1 Samuel 8, verses 11 to 18 could not have spelt out more clearly the fatal consequences. ... Not only did Israel not listen to these warnings, but subsequent societies—as Max Weber has noted—have walked a similar road. The movement has been towards greater organisational controls, greater government intervention and the development of a technological elite.”

⁴¹ Charles Souvay, *Catholic Encyclopedia (CE)*, s. v. “Sanhedrin” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13444a.htm> (accessed January 26, 2012). W. B. J. Z. L., the author of “Sanhedrin,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13178-> (accessed January 26, 2012) says, “According to Talmudic tradition it originated in the Mosaic period, the seventy elders who were associated with Moses in the government of Israel at his request (Nm 11:4-31) forming together with him the first Sanhedrin (*Sanh.* i. 6). The institution is said to have existed without interruption from that time onward (comp. *Yer. Sanh.* i. 18b, where, in a comment on Jer 52:24 *et seq.* and 2 Kgs 35:18 *et seq.*, it is said that Nebuzar-adan brought the Great Sanhedrin to Riblah before Nebuchadnezzar); but the fact that no passage whatever in the pre-exilic books of the Bible refers to this institution seems to indicate that it was not introduced before the time of the Second Temple.” See also J. A. Thompson, s. v. “Sanhedrin,” *Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980) 1502-1503.

⁴² Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 267.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 214. *Ps Sol* 17:44.

the Great in 208 BC and with Antiochus V (Jos., *Ant.* 12.128), and was then apparently composed of elders drawn from the aristocracy (1 Mc 12:6; 2 Mc 1:10; 4:44; 11:27).⁴⁴

Although “*gerousia*” continued to be used by Greek-speaking Jews (Acts 5:21),

“Sanhedrin,” (Gk *sunedrion*), was the Hebrew-Aramaic name during the Greco-Roman period for the Jewish supreme council (Mt 26:59; Mk 14:55; Lk 22:66; Jn 11:47; Acts 4:15; 5:2; 6:12; 22:30; 23:1.; 24:20).⁴⁵ The New Testament also uses the terms *presbyterion*, “body of elders” (Lk 22:66; Acts 22:5), and *boule*, or “council.”⁴⁶

The “Great Sanhedrin” in Jerusalem was responsible for “religious and ritualistic Temple matters, criminal matters appertaining to the secular court, proceedings in connection with the discovery of a corpse, trials of adulterous wives, tithes, preparation of Torah Scrolls for the king and the Temple, drawing up the calendar and the solving of difficulties relating to ritual law.”⁴⁷ It also served as the nation’s “Supreme Court,”

appealed to when the lower courts were unable to come to a decision (*Sanh.*, vii.1; xi. 2); moreover, it had the exclusive right of judgment in matters of special importance, as for instance the case of a false prophet, accusations against the

⁴⁴ Thompson, s. v. “Sanhedrin,” *IBD*, 1390. He says further, “In the days of the Maccabean revolt it was this council that united with Jonathan, the high priest and leader of the people, to make an alliance with Sparta (1 Mc 12:Sff.), and it was they who advised him about building fortresses in Judaea (1 Mc 12:35; cf. 13:36; 14:20, 28, 47).”

⁴⁵ Souvay, s. v. “Sanhedrin,” *CE*, states, “the first undisputed mention we possess touching the *gerousia* of Jerusalem is connected with the reign of Antiochus the Great (223-187 B.C.; Jos. *Antiq.*, XII, iii, 3). From that time on, we are able to follow the history of the Sanhedrin until its disappearance in the overthrow of the Jewish nation.” W. B. J. Z. L., s. v. “Sanhedrin,” *jewishencyclopedia.com*, claims that there were actually two different Sanhedrins: “in Jerusalem two magistracies which were entirely different in character and functions and which officiated side by side at the same time. That to which the Gospels and Josephus refer was the highest political authority, and at the same time the supreme court; this alone was empowered to deal with criminal cases and to impose the sentence of capital punishment. The other, sitting in the hall of hewn stone, was the highest court dealing with the religious law, being in charge also of the religious instruction of the people (*Sanh.* xi. 2-4).”

⁴⁶ Thompson, s. v. “Sanhedrin,” *IBD*, 1390.

⁴⁷ Shira Schoenberg, “The Sanhedrin,” *The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise*, 2012, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Judaism/Sanhedrin.html> (accessed January 16, 2012). She says it was, “the final authority on Jewish law and any scholar who went against its decisions was put to death as a *zaken mamre* (rebellious elder).”

high priest, the sending out of an army in certain circumstances, the enlarging of the city of Jerusalem, or of the Temple courts, etc. (*Sanh.* i.5; ii.4; iii.4). ... in short, all religious matters and all civil matters not claimed by Roman authority were within its attributions.⁴⁸

How much power the Sanhedrin actually exercised at a particular time, including its ability to inflict capital punishment, depended upon the restrictions placed upon it by the Roman government and its representatives.⁴⁹

It is unclear how the members of the Great Sanhedrin were chosen. They were expected to be older men of noble character: modest, reputable, scholarly, dignified, and multi-lingual.⁵⁰ Thompson notes, Sanhedrin members included the

high priests (*i.e.* the acting high priest and those who had been high priest), members of the privileged families from which the high priests were taken, the elders (tribal and family heads of the people and the priesthood), and the scribes, *i.e.* the legal experts. The whole comprised both Sadducees and Pharisees (Mt 26:3, 57, 59; Mk 14:53; 15:1; Lk 22:66; Acts 4:1, 5ff.; 5:17, 21, 34; 22:30; 23:6).⁵¹

The Sanhedrin was led by two officials: “the actual president with the title ‘*nasi*’; the other, the second president or vice-president, who bore the title ‘*ab bet din*’ (father of the court).”⁵² Its president was the acting high priest (Mt 26:57; Jn 11:49, Acts 23:2; Jos. *Antiq.*, XX, ix) although others may have had that title as well.⁵³ It appears initially the

⁴⁸ Souvay, s. v. “Sanhedrin,” *CE*.

⁴⁹ Souvay, s. v. “Sanhedrin,” *CE*, says, “only capital sentences pronounced by the assembly perhaps needed confirmation from the Roman officer before they could be carried into execution. Such was the state of things during the public life of the Saviour and the following thirty years (Mt 26:57; Mk 14:55; 15:1; Lk 22:66; Jn 11:47; Acts 4:15; 5:21; 6:12; 22:30; 23:1 sq.; 24:20; *Antiq.*, XX, 9:1; x; *Bell. Jud.*, II, 15:6; *Vita*, 12, 13, 38, 49, 70).” Schoenberg, “The Sanhedrin,” says, “In about 30 C.E., the Great Sanhedrin lost its authority to inflict capital punishment.”

⁵⁰ See W. B. J. Z. L., s. v. “Sanhedrin,” jewishencyclopedia.com.

⁵¹ Thompson, s. v. “Sanhedrin,” *IBD*, 1391.

⁵² W. B. J. Z. L., s. v. “Sanhedrin,” jewishencyclopedia.com.

⁵³ See Souvay, s. v. “Sanhedrin,” *CE*, and Thompson, s. v. “Sanhedrin,” *IBD*, 1390-1391 for further discussion.

Sanhedrin was convened by the high priest or the Jewish king, but may have operated under its own authority. It met during the day, but not on the Sabbath and holy days.⁵⁴

The gatherings followed a defined process and members

sat in a semicircle in order that they might see one another (*Sanh.* iv. 2; *Tosef.*, *Sanh.* viii. 1). The president sat in the center (*Tosef.*, *l.c.*). Two secretaries recorded the various opinions expressed by the members; according to one tradition there were three secretaries (*Sanh.* *l.c.*). When a question was raised and a member of the college declared that he was in possession of a tradition according to which the question might be decided, such tradition was decisive. When no member knew of any tradition relating to the question at issue, discussion followed and a ballot was taken (*Tosef.*, *Sanh.* vii. 1).⁵⁵

When deliberating “on matters of civil or ceremonial law the voting began with the principal member of the assembly, whereas the younger members were the first to give their opinion in criminal affairs.”⁵⁶

While decisions of national religious and legal importance were made by the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, many judgments affecting the lives of ordinary Jews were given by local leaders and elders. Shira Schonberg says, “There were also smaller religious Sanhedrins in every town in the Land of Israel, as well as a civil political-democratic Sanhedrin. These Sanhedrins existed until the abolishment of the rabbinic patriarchate in about 425 C.E.”⁵⁷ Also, “Local Sanhedrins consisted of different numbers of sages, depending on the nature of the offenses it dealt with. For example, only a Sanhedrin of 71

⁵⁴ See Schoenberg, “The Sanhedrin.” See also Thompson, s. v. “Sanhedrin,” *IBD*, 1390-1391.

⁵⁵ W. B. J. Z. L., s. v. “The Sanhedrin,” jewishencyclopedia.com.

⁵⁶ Souvay, s. v. “The Sanhedrin,” *CE*.

⁵⁷ Schoenberg, “The Sanhedrin.”

could judge a whole tribe, a false prophet or the high priest. There were Sanhedrins of 23 for capital cases and of three scholars to deal with civil or lesser criminal cases.”⁵⁸

The “synagogue,” the local community assembly, made decisions by majority vote.⁵⁹ “Subject to the law of the land, the synagogue had its own government (Jos., *Ant.* 19. 291). The congregation was governed by elders who were empowered to exercise discipline and punish members.”⁶⁰ Synagogues facilitated communal meals, marriages, traveler hospitality, tax and levy collection, important documents preservation, and served as schools, worship centers, ritual bathing facilities, and welfare/social centers.⁶¹ They met in homes or a community building, held services three times a day, as well as Sabbath and festival observances, and traditionally were known by three names, “*bet ha-tefilla* (“house of prayer”), *bet ha-kneset* (“house of assembly”), and *bet ha-midrash* (“house of study”).”⁶² Burtchaell concludes, “the instrumentality for virtually all communal aspects of life beyond the family—religious, civic, economic and educational—was found in their local synagogues. For most Jews it was perhaps the only organization to which they would ever belong.”⁶³

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ See C. L. Feinberg, s. v. “synagogue”, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary (IBD)*, vol. 3 org. ed. of *The New Bible Dictionary* J. D. Douglas; rev. ed. N. Hillyer (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980), 1499. He says the term synagogue comes from the Greek word *synagoge* which, “is used frequently in the LXX for the assembly of Israel, and occurs 56 times in the NT. The basic sense is a place of meeting, and thus it came to denote a Jewish place of worship. The Heb. equivalent of the Gk. noun is *kneset* a gathering of any persons or things for any purpose. In the Scriptures it is a gathering of individuals of a locality for worship or common action (Lk 12:11; 21:12).”

⁶⁰ Feinberg, s. v. “synagogue”, *IBD*, 1502. See Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 206-207. he notes, “Punishment was by scourging and excommunication.”

⁶¹ See Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 205, 220-224, 227, 281.

⁶² *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “synagogue,” <http://0-www.britannica.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/EBchecked/topic/578206/synagogue> (accessed February 1, 2012),

⁶³ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 227.

The institutional origin of the synagogue is unclear but it likely developed after the destruction of Solomon's Temple (586 BC), as exiled Jews met together privately for worship and teaching.⁶⁴ Men and women were seated apart, and establishing a synagogue required a quorum of ten adult males. Without it, Jews met at a designated location for prayer only (Acts 16:13-15). Organizationally Burtchaell suggests they

cross-bred their ancestral polity with such international forms as seemed to be harmonious and, to boot, publicly appealing. There was no lack of models. The hellenistic and the Roman city = *polis*, the army = *stratia*, the sovereign's court and those of his subordinates and emissaries = *sunkletos/philoi/consilium*, ethnic enclaves = *politeumata*, civic associations = *thiasoi/eranoi/collegia*, settlements = *katoikiai*, villages = *komeis*: all were familiar examples of social organizations to which Jewish communities everywhere could and did conform themselves, with rather parallel results in the homeland and in the dispersion.⁶⁵

By the 1st century AD there were synagogues all over the ancient world (Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1). "Large cities, such as Jerusalem and Alexandria, had numerous synagogues. ... The Gospels speak of the synagogues of Nazareth (Mt 13:54; Lk 4:16) and Capernaum (Mk 1:21; Jn 6:59) as places where our Lord ministered. The apostle Paul found them wherever he went in Palestine, Asia Minor and Greece."⁶⁶ Former Jewish slaves, now Roman citizens, met in Jerusalem's "Synagogue of the Freedmen" (Acts 6:9). In Revelation 2:9, 3:9 John refers ambiguously to the "Synagogue of Satan."

During this period a variety of male officials with differing terms of office provided synagogue leadership. Elders (*zeqenim, presbyteroi*) or shepherds (*parnasim*) were elected, "duly examined as to their knowledge, and ordained to the office. But their election depended on the choice of the congregation; and absence of pride, as also

⁶⁴ See Feinberg, s. v. "synagogue," *IBD*, 1502-1503. See also *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s. v. "synagogue," and Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 202-204, 263-267.

⁶⁵ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 208

⁶⁶ Feinberg, s. v. "synagogue," *IBD*, 1502-1503.

gentleness and humility, are mentioned as special qualifications.”⁶⁷ Those chosen were usually from prominent families with wealth, education, and training and their election would not have been unexpected.⁶⁸ Sometimes there was also a group of unordained elders (*gerousia*) who had “charge of outward affairs, and acted rather as a committee of management.”⁶⁹ The chief ruler of the synagogue was the *Archisynagogos*, or *Rosh ha-Keneset* (cf. Mk. 5:22; Acts 13:15; 18:8). While he was

the first among his equals, there can be no doubt that the virtual rule of the Synagogue devolved upon him. He would have the superintendence of Divine service, and, as this was not conducted by regular officials, he would in each case determine who were to be called up to read from the Law and the Prophets, who was to conduct the prayers, and act as *Sheliach Tsibbur*, or messenger of the congregation, and who, if any, was to deliver an address. He would also see to it that nothing improper took place in the Synagogue, and that the prayers were properly conducted.⁷⁰

In Rome and in her colonies, following the Republic tradition of dual leadership, there may have also been a “political chief of the elders, or *Gerousiarch*.”⁷¹ The *Hazan* (attendant, Lk 4:20) “brought the scrolls of Scripture for reading, replaced them in the ark, punished offending members by scourging and instructed children to read.”⁷² The *Phrontistes* was the financial commissioner and “dispenser of alms”, and the

⁶⁷ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Part 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 438. See also, Burtchaell, 211-212, 228-237, 241.

⁶⁸ See Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 259-263.

⁶⁹ Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 438.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 438-439. On 439 he describes the *Sheliach Tsibbur* as the, “delegate of the congregation—who, as its mouthpiece, conducted the devotions.” Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 244, sees the *archisynagogos* as, “the executive of the local community, acting under the formal oversight of the elders but the more active superintendence of the notables. He presided over the community, he convened it for its activities, he superintended its staff. It was a position of some permanency.”

⁷¹ Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 438-439. See also Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 237-240, who sees this official as the president of the local council of elders.

⁷² Feinberg, s. v. “synagogue,” *IBD*, 1503. See also Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 438, and Burtchaell, 246-249.

Methurgeman translated “the Law and the Prophets into the vernacular Aramaic.”⁷³

Qualified congregation members were asked to read Scripture, help conduct services, and preach (Mt 4:23; Lk 4:16, Acts 13:15).⁷⁴

Although the various responsibilities were carried out by elected or appointed officials, the assembly retained the authority for a local synagogue⁷⁵ and

the community created ways of popular expression and decision-making and accountability which kept even the most technical services as a communal concern. And the diverse activities leant upon one another: scripture understanding governed jurisprudence, leadership affected prayer, the prosperity of the treasury was a function of inter-familial politics. . . . It was a society where various people were in charge—often many people—but ultimately they answered to the community for the entirety of its needs and interests.⁷⁶

At least that was the ideal. “In theory . . . the local assembly was competent to resolve virtually any issue it decided to address, and any local deputies had to act in the name of the assembly.”⁷⁷ But by the time of Christ, the authority of the local assembly

had been hedged by superior claims of superior synagogues and occasional synodal bodies, and had effectively been exercised locally by various officers, collegial and individual. . . . there were echelons of select people on whom most of those prerogatives had effectively devolved. It was the responsibility of those personages to convene the assembly when they thought it appropriate, and to control its agenda and the freedom of the floor.⁷⁸

Synagogue independence was also limited by a traditional “hierarchy of jurisdiction”:

“larger settlements had a relationship to their subordinates that was described as parental.

⁷³ Feinberg, s. v. “synagogue,” *IBD*, 1503. See also, Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 256-257.

⁷⁴ Feinberg, s. v. “synagogue,” *IBD*, 1503. See also Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 439, Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 258-259.

⁷⁵ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 215.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Thus there were mother cities = *metropoleis*, with towns called ‘daughters.’ Larger towns, in their turn, could be called ‘mother towns’ in relationship to their village dependencies.”⁷⁹ Burtchaell notes,

The mother of mothers, of course, was Jerusalem, and all synagogues looked to the Great Council there as to an ultimate authority. . . . the Sanhedrin enjoyed a sort of eminent domain that permitted it to bypass intermediate cities. Thus, in sending Saul with orders to the Damascus community to expel any Christians there—an undertaking in which Antioch, as metropolis of Syria, had a clear right to function as the intermediary—Jerusalem was ignoring the normal chain of command, as was apparently within its power to do.⁸⁰

Some Jews opted out of this hierarchical network (often because of frustration with the corruption and arrogance of religious “superiors”) but separatists such as the Essenes retained many traditional synagogue structures and practices.⁸¹ It seems that for Jews of the first century the synagogue pattern of communal life was so familiar that it was taken for granted. But Hellenistic Jews, and certainly Gentile converts, would also know the organizations of their Roman neighbors and rulers.

Greek and Roman Voting Assemblies and the Roman Senate

The Roman Republic had its roots in a form of democratic government that developed during the era of Classical Greece (5th-4th centuries BC). Burtchaell points out,

Odysseus, “sharing the wine of council,” had journeyed through a saga marked by great community deliberations. The story opens with one assembly of Ithacans,

⁷⁹ Ibid., 216. See Jo 15:32, 36, 41, 45, 47; Nm 21 25, 32; 2 Sm 20:19; 1 Chr 7:28-29. 52.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 217. He says, “the book of Judith portrays the council in Jerusalem directing military defenses in Galilee, and receiving requests for variances from the requirements of the Torah [Jdt 4:8; 11:14]. . . . the books of Maccabees, show the insurgent leadership consulting with the Jerusalem elders about defensive measures that would affect the entire province [1 Mc 12:35-37; 2 Mc 13:13].” See also Acts 9:1-2, 21; 22:5; 26:12.

⁸¹ Ibid., 268. He says, “There are a popular assembly (rather stronger), a select group for both policy and discipline, a single presiding officer, common meals, regular scripture reading and exposition, a system of discipline with accountability, a welfare program, a distant superior authority, a common treasury (though more bountifully supplied), baths, a prayer house, a cemetery.” See also 1QS 5:2-3; Josephus, *B.J.* 2:146.

crests with an assembly of Phaeacians, and closes with another assembly in Ithaca. Indeed, in the great Greek communities it was in the assembly of enfranchized men (*apella* in Sparta; *ekklesia* in Athens) that the greatest decisions were to be made: about war, or bonds with other peoples, or elections.⁸²

This was especially true in Athens. But, even though citizenship “was hereditary, extending to anyone who was born to parents who were themselves Athenian citizens, membership in the *demos* was limited to male citizens 18 years of age or older (until 403, when the minimum age was raised to 20).”⁸³ Those in the 10 to 15 percent of the population allowed to participate gathered in “the Assembly (Ecclesia), which met almost weekly—40 times a year—on the Pnyx, a hill west of the Acropolis. Decisions were taken by vote, and, as in many later assemblies, voting was by a show of hands. . . . the votes of a majority of those present and voting prevailed.”⁸⁴ Controlling the Assembly’s agenda was the Council of Five Hundred, “chosen by lot from each of 139 small territorial entities, known as *demes*, created by Cleisthenes in 507. The number of representatives from each *deme* was roughly proportional to its population.”⁸⁵ There were also powerful *dikasteria* (*popular courts*) with “jurors chosen by lot from a pool of

⁸² Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 265. He refers in note 168 to: “Homer, *Odyssey*, 13:9; 1:372-373; 2:10; 8:16-17; 16:376-377; 24:420. The assembly in Homer is the *agori* (epic form of *agora*).”

⁸³ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “democracy,” <http://0-www.britannica.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/EBchecked/topic/157129/democracy> (accessed January 26, 2012).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* Burtchaell, 265, says, “In time the effective governance devolved upon the council of elders (*gerousia* in Sparta; *boule* in Athens). Administration was in the hands of magistrates elected by and from the people (*ephoroi* in Sparta; *archontes* in Athens), who in turn superintended various commissioners for specific public projects (*epimeletai*), and stipendiary officers who carried out their policies. The magistrates, or notables, functioned by division of duties: one protecting family affairs; another, military affairs; another, the welfare of foreigners; others, the judiciary.”

citizens over 30 years of age.”⁸⁶ This system continued independently until the Macedonian conquest of 321 BC, and it was demolished by Rome in 146 BC.

The early settlers of Italy organized themselves into clans (*gentes*) which were led by their male patriarch (*pater*). The patriarchs (*patres*) would jointly make decisions and elect a king (*rex*).⁸⁷ It is claimed Romulus, the first king (mid 8th century BC) established the Senate (from *senex*, “old man”). During Rome’s Monarchical Period, the Senate was “vested under certain circumstances with supreme authority, as a legislative body coordinate with the people assembled in the curiae, and as the council of the king.”⁸⁸ It elected new kings and initially had 100 members (increased to 300, then 600) whose descendants became the privileged patrician class. The Romans called their system of government “a *respublica*, or republic, from the Latin *res*, meaning thing or affair, and *publicus* or *publica*, meaning public—thus, a republic was the thing that belonged to the Roman people, the *populus romanus*.”⁸⁹

During the Republic governmental powers were split “between the Senate, the magistrates, and the people (*populus*)” and the Senate advised the consuls (annually elected high magistrates), who called it into session and appointed its members.⁹⁰ Usually, its decrees (*senatus consulta*) were accepted, unless they conflicted with laws.⁹¹

⁸⁶ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “democracy.”

⁸⁷ Frank Frost Abbott, *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*. Boston, New York, Chicago, London: Ginn & Company, 1901, 1907), 1-21.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁹ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “democracy.”

⁹⁰ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “comitia,” <http://0-www.britannica.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/EBchecked/topic/127672/comitia> (accessed February 20, 2012). “Originally the *populus* consisted only of the patricians.”

⁹¹ Abbott, *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*, 233.

By the 4th century BC it was “a self-perpetuating, automatically constituted body, independent of the annual magistrates, and a recognized factor in the Roman constitution, with extensive powers.”⁹² To qualify as a senator, a man must be of age, a citizen, an ex-magistrate, and not work in certain occupations (gladiator, actor, banker, merchant, etc.). Since senators did not receive salaries personal wealth and property was necessary.⁹³

The Senate directed government, negotiated foreign policy, arbitrated conflicts between communities, gave religious advice, controlled finances, and conducted military campaigns, “although the formal declaration of war and ratification of treaties were referred to the people.”⁹⁴ It could “assign duties to the magistrates, ... determine the two provinces to be entrusted to the consuls, ... prolong a magistrate’s period of office, and ... appoint senatorial commissions to help magistrates to organize conquered territory.”⁹⁵ It usually met from dawn to dusk inside the *curia Hostilia* at the Forum, led by a presiding magistrate (often a consul).⁹⁶ After the necessary sacrifices were made and omens evaluated, the magistrate presented a report or an issue for discussion. “Each

⁹² *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Senate,” <http://0-www.britannica.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/EBchecked/topic/534333/Senate> (accessed February 20, 2012). “About 312 BC the selection of senators was transferred from the consuls to the censors.”

⁹³ Abbott, *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*, 221-223. See also Robert C. Byrd, *The Senate of the Roman Republic: Addresses on the History of Roman Constitutionalism* (WA. D. C: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1995), 35-36.

⁹⁴ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Senate.” For summaries of the Senate’s responsibilities see also Byrd, *The Senate of the Roman Republic*, 85, 161.

⁹⁵ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Senate.”

⁹⁶ Abbott, *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*, 225-226. See also Byrd, *The Senate of the Roman Republic*, 43.

senator was asked for his opinion in the order of rank. The senior patrician—the *Princeps Senatus*—was given precedence.”⁹⁷ Frank Frost Abbott notes,

a senator was not required to confine his remarks to the question before the house, but could, if he wished, speak on matters entirely foreign to it, and could request the presiding officer to bring these matters before the senate. . . . Senators spoke on a question as long as they saw fit, so that the opponent of a measure could prevent action on it by talking until sunset.”⁹⁸

A tribune could “veto” any measure at any point before the voting by interposing his *intercessio*.⁹⁹ Voting was by voice vote or show of hands, but most commonly by division (lining up *pro* and *con* on opposing walls to be counted). Magistrates did not vote, and a measure that passed by a majority was known as a *senatus auctoritas*.¹⁰⁰

The Senate’s power brought it into conflict with tribunes and military leaders who sought to enhance their own. By the end of the Republic Rome’s system of government had become quite complex, and during the Empire the Senate’s influence was limited. The emperor assumed authority upon himself, and “could convene and preside over the Senate, his report and other communications taking precedence; his name also headed the list of senators. He could also select new senators virtually at will.”¹⁰¹

Although the emperor did not share his basic power with the Senate, he did allow it to cooperate with him in most of the spheres of government. It was left at the head of the ordinary administration of Rome and Italy, together with those provinces that did not require any military force or present special administrative difficulties. It continued to administer the treasury but was soon overshadowed by the emperor, who allowed it to supervise the copper coinage alone.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Byrd, *The Senate of the Roman Republic*, 34.

⁹⁸ Abbott, *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*, 228.

⁹⁹ See *Ibid.*, 198-199, 229.

¹⁰⁰ See *Ibid.*, 229-230.

¹⁰¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Senate.”

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

Rather than use the Senate for counsel, “beginning with Augustus, emperors formed for themselves a select *boule/ synedrion/ consilium* = council of aristocratic advisors called *amici* = friends.”¹⁰³ Gradually the legislative, electoral, and judicial duties of the assemblies were transferred to the Senate, allowing the emperor to control them and limiting the power of the *populus*. Roman democratic government essentially ceased.

Under the Republic citizenship/voting rights were granted by birth, naturalization, and manumission, but “most citizens who did not live in or near the city itself were unable to participate and were thus effectively excluded from the *demos*.”¹⁰⁴ The people were organized in different ways for voting, but because of Senatorial power, the authority of the three legislative/electoral/judicial assemblies, the *Comitia Curiata*, *Comitia Centuriata*, *Comitia Tributa* (in theory open to all Roman citizens) and one council, the *Concilium Plebis* (open to members of a specific group) was limited.¹⁰⁵

The *Comitia Curiata* developed from the thirty original patrician clans (*curiae*). Its duties included clan concerns, and electing two consuls to provide national leadership.¹⁰⁶ After the early Republic much of its power was given to the *Comitia Centuriata* and *Comitia Populi Tributa*, “and its chief functions were simply to confer the

¹⁰³ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 265.

¹⁰⁴ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “democracy.” Roman women had a limited form of citizenship and could not vote or hold public office. Slaves could become citizens through manumission.

¹⁰⁵ See Lily Ross Taylor, *Roman Voting Assemblies from the Hannibalic War to the Dictatorship of Caesar* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1966, 1990), 3.

¹⁰⁶ See Abbott, *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*, 250-253; Byrd, *The Senate of the Roman Republic*, 33; and Taylor, *Roman Voting Assemblies*, 3-4.

imperium (supreme executive power) on magistrates and to witness wills, adoptions, and the inauguration of priests.”¹⁰⁷ Its president was the *Pontifex Maximus*.

The *Comitia Centuriata* was a military assembly of 193 “centuries” (military units) founded about 450 BC by King Servius Tullius.¹⁰⁸

All Roman citizens were registered in *tribus* (tribes), and a census was made of their property. They were then assigned to classes and *centuriae* (centuries) according to their wealth and the equipment they could provide for military service. Voting in the *Comitia Centuriata* proceeded by centuries according to precedence, starting with the *equites*, followed by the first and wealthiest class; these groups constituted a clear majority over the combined votes of the other four classes if they voted as a block.¹⁰⁹

In 107 BC the “Fifth Century” (*proletarii*) was created for unarmed soldiers with no property. Although they were the majority of the army, their votes had little impact. The *Comitia Centuriata* “decided issues of war and peace, enacted legislation, elected consuls, praetors, and censors, and considered the appeals of Roman citizens convicted of capital crimes”¹¹⁰ Made up of soldiers, it could not assemble within the city limits and at the Republic’s end in 27 BC, Emperor Augustus transferred its powers to the Senate.

The *Concilium Plebis*, founded in 471 BC, was the major gathering for the common people (*plebeians*) was. It

voted by tribes, and it consisted exclusively of *plebeians* and could be summoned and presided over only by the *plebeian* magistrates, *i.e.*, the tribunes. The *Concilium Plebis* was originally a relatively small and informal advisory assembly, or *concilium*, but after the passage of the *Lex Hortensia* (287 BC) its resolutions, or *plebiscita*, had the force of law and were binding upon all Roman citizens. The assembly became, in effect, the *Comitia Plebis Tributa*. ... Its

¹⁰⁷ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “comitia.”

¹⁰⁸ See Abbott, *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*, 20-21, 74-76, 107, 253-258; Taylor, *Roman Voting Assemblies*, 3-4, 85-86.

¹⁰⁹ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “comitia.” The tribes were based on geographic location, even though they were hereditary, rather than clan membership.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

judicial functions, however, were basically limited to fines for noncapital offenses.¹¹¹

The *Comitia Populi Tributa* (founded c. 357 BC), similar to the *Concilium Plebis*, was “an assembly of the whole Roman people, plebeians and patricians, who were organized by tribe. This comitia elected the minor magistrates (*curule aediles*, *quaestors*, and military tribunes), held minor trials, and eventually became a regular organ for laws passed by the whole people.”¹¹² In this assembly, voting order was determined by lot.

Roman Republic citizens spent much of their time voting in these assemblies:

Every year at a stated period they elected all the regular and the plebeian magistrates, amounting, after Sulla, to some seventy men; there were also special elections of commissioners of various types. Besides, the citizens voted on every law proposed and often, particularly before the gradual development of the public courts in the last century of the Republic, on the guilt or innocence of men accused of crimes against the state.¹¹³

The process for assembly voting was quite elaborate. “Shortly after midnight on the day of the proposed meeting the prospective presiding officer, accompanied by an augur, took the auspices. If the interpretation of them by the augur was unfavorable, the meeting was postponed another day.”¹¹⁴ The day of the advertised vote citizens would gather in a public meeting (*conventio*, *contio*) to hear news of public welfare, campaign speeches, debates, bills read aloud, and the questions to be acted on. Then they would divide into

¹¹¹ Ibid. See also Byrd, *The Senate of the Roman Republic*, 30-31; Abbott, *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*, 51, 261-264.

¹¹² *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “comitia.”

¹¹³ Taylor, *Roman Voting Assemblies*, 1.

¹¹⁴ Abbott, *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*, 254, also 158-60. See also Taylor, *Roman Voting Assemblies*, 62-63.

voting units at appointed locations for formal discussion and the vote.¹¹⁵ As in the Senate, a Tribune could veto bills. It is important to note, “Votes were counted by units (centuries or tribes) rather than by individuals; thus, insofar as a majority prevailed in voting, it would have been a majority of units, not of citizens.”¹¹⁶ Unit voting initially was done by *rogatores*, “askers” who recorded the stated vote of each citizen. Later, a candidate’s name was written on a small waxed wooden tablet. For judicial actions, one selected a tablet marked “L” (free, *libere*) or “D” (condemn, *damno*); and for legislation, one chose a tablet marked “V” (affirmative, *uti rogas*) or “A” (negative, *antiquo*). Ballots were placed in an urn or basket (*cista*) and counted by the guarding officials.¹¹⁷

Outside of Rome, assemblies in other cities (*municipia*) and colonies (*coloniae*) elected magistrates and passed local legislation, but under the Empire officials were usually appointed by Rome,¹¹⁸ and governors consulted a court of advisors (*assessores*) rather than the assembly.¹¹⁹ Ramsay MacMullen notes, “What we would today call ‘votes’ seem to have been the most frequent business of civic assemblies, *vota* or

¹¹⁵ See Abbott, *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*, 252, 254-255, and Taylor, *Roman Voting Assemblies*, 2-5, 15-33.

¹¹⁶ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “democracy.” Taylor, *Roman Voting Assemblies*, 83 notes, “The unclassified vote in the *comitia tributa* was more democratic, and the officers selected came from a wider group than did the consuls and praetors chosen by the centuries. But even in the tribes there was a second-class vote for the urban masses without property, for the freedmen, and for the men under a stigma in the four urban tribes. The ideal of ‘one man, one vote’ simply did not exist at Rome.”

¹¹⁷ See Abbott, *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*, 255-256, and Taylor, *Roman Voting Assemblies*, 34-44, 70-83.

¹¹⁸ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “comitia.”

¹¹⁹ See Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 265. He says in a footnote, “Porcius Festus took counsel with his *symbolion* before deciding what to do with Paul, Acts 25:12.”

psephismata offering welcome, praise, or grateful honors to high personages.”¹²⁰ If some independent governance was allowed, the goal was unanimity in decision making:

in Egyptian town council meetings we find no sign of a division being taken, but instead, discussion until everyone has fallen into line or, alternatively, postponement of a decision until, we may suppose, the back-room arrangements have been better nailed down. It may be supposed, too, that the back-rooms could help in advance of a meeting.¹²¹

During assembly deliberations political and personal agendas could run rampant, and it was understood that being on the “loosing” side meant shame and a serious loss of face.

Better to sense which way the wind blew; better to make out just who wanted what action taken on a given day. One could stand silent if one chose, or even shout twice, after an ill-judged support of a first, defeated opinion. No one need know the error. So it must have been in Rome; so it evidently was in local town-council meetings.¹²²

At times, pressure to decide “correctly” was applied by the *populus* and discussions of councils were interrupted and overshadowed by the massed vocal participation of the rest of the citizens.¹²³ This expression of “the will of the people” was an accepted, although not necessarily appreciated way of exerting political power by common citizens.

The Power of the *Demos*

MacMullen defines *kratos*, or Roman political power as “a claim on compliance

¹²⁰ Ramsay MacMullen, *Voting about God in the Early Church* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2006), 16.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ See *Ibid.*, 15, where he discusses the record from a later 3rd century council meeting at Oxrhynchus in Egypt. Footnote 11: “*POxy.* 407 (ca. 270?), with a little uncertainty whether it is a usual council meeting”). The minister’s report is “interrupted often by the meetings repeated acclamations; then more business, with protests and disagreements and wavering by the speaker. ‘The assembly cried, “Yes! Yes!”’ to move the debate in one direction, as more arguments were offered in another—only to be overridden by still more massed exclamations, ‘That’s the way! That’s the way!’ *houtos! houtos!* In effect a majority had voted and so determined the outcome.”

by or upon those in public office.”¹²⁴ While mostly “exerted from the top down by the few ... from the bottom up the many wielded power, too—the *demos*. To this extent the empire was democratic.”¹²⁵ Crowds would mass in public places where important officials were in attendance and begin to shout or protest, “behaving just like a political assembly and getting what they wanted. Lung power was people power, however informal it all appears.”¹²⁶ MacMullen explains the well-known conventions used:

From the *demos* due deference was required as a sort of introduction to whatever they had to say. In Greek settings, they would perhaps add a word or phrase in Latin to show respect for the language of the conquerors of long ago, the masters now. ... And they would make an attempt at unison, so as to be both loud and intelligible.

Those who shouted would try to follow the phrase first called out by one of their number, their leader. By the third century the practice had been taken up even by the Roman senate in its more subservient transports; less surprisingly, it had long been common and in later centuries it continued at theatrical productions applauded by hired clagues. ... After the civilities, next the demands. These easily took on a sharper, noisier quality as they were reiterated.¹²⁷

This process could put considerable pressure on government officials to do the people’s bidding. “In Antioch ... the assembled citizens chanted their demands rhythmically and got their way; in Alexandria the governor yielded to them in disregard of the law; in

¹²⁴ MacMullen, *Voting about God in the Early Church*, 12.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 12-13. He mentions 3 examples of crowd decision making: “Constantius in Rome in AD 355 intervening in a church dispute to recall one of the contestants for the see from exile” (Theod., *HE* 2.17.4); Emperor Leo I (457-74) and the freeing of Isokasios; and the interchange between the crowds and the Emperor Justinian’s herald which resulted in the infamous “Nike” Riots of AD 532. In footnote 32 he also says, “similarly in Rome in AD 551, the Roman crowd intervenes successfully in support of the local bishop and against the urban prefect and the emperor’s commands, cf. Sotinel (2000) 283.”

¹²⁷ MacMullen, *Voting about God in the Early Church*, 14. See footnote 7 for references to this sort of crowd-initiated decision making.

western cities as well as eastern, unspecified by the jurist Ulpian, a governor might yield to shouts when he knew he should not properly do so.”¹²⁸ MacMullen points out,

It is a short step to the best known moment in Jerusalem (Mk 15:8ff.; Mt 27:15ff.) where the crowd began their demands as they usually did, for a prisoner to be released, and the governor wanted to give them one man but agreed to release another, just to keep them quiet. It was a moment with its rules: the crowd spoke and he listened.¹²⁹

Greco-Roman Voluntary Associations

While Jews turned to their local synagogues to meet communal needs beyond their families, in Greco-Roman society people looked to voluntary associations (*thiasoi/eranoi/collegia*). Associations had regular meetings (*ekklesiai/synodoi/synagogai*) and there were groups for merchants, youth, laborers, artisans, athletes, professionals, burial associations, and worshippers of a variety of deities.¹³⁰ People gained admission to an association either by recommendation or election, and joined for various reasons. Burial associations guaranteed an honorable burial, even if one’s family couldn’t afford it. Other groups “made it possible for foreigners and members of the lower classes to follow a social life better adapted to their tastes and social conditions. They also gave people an alternative to the social exclusion practiced by the larger society.”¹³¹ Participation in activities and election to office granted social status, and

¹²⁸ Ibid., 15. He refers in footnote 10 to, “*Chron. pasch.*, 454 in Dindorf (1832) 1.464; Philo, *In Flaccum* 43; Ulpian in *Dig.* 49.1.12, cited by Colin (1965) 144.”

¹²⁹ MacMullen, *Voting about God in the Early Church*, 15.

¹³⁰ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 73.

¹³¹ Ibid. MacMullen, *Voting About God*, 12, comments, “Everywhere one saw the sure, known signs of office or of social rank displayed in dress, behavior, accent. Everywhere one’s sense of one’s place was acted out in gestures grand or humble, in deferring to or insisting on titles or ones mere name, a name with connections.

deliberative business was left to a council of elders = *gerousia* = *presbyteroi*, who in turn left much management in the hands of the annually elected officers = *archontes*. In the Greek tradition, the president was entitled *archisynagogos* or *prostates*. The Romans preferred the corporate presidency of a college of masters = *magistri*. Commissioners for ad hoc projects were *epimeletai*. Each association would have a secretary = *grammateus* and a treasurer = *lamias*. Fathers and mothers = *patres* and *matres* were elected as an association's affectionately honored patrons. All of these personages were elected regularly by a show of hands = *cheirotomia*. The servant of the association was variously called *hyperetes/diakonos/pais*.¹³²

Wealthy socially-influential patrons, essential to the financial stability of associations, gained status by paying for banquets, hall rentals, etc. as part of their "civic" duty, thus gaining more "clients" dependant upon them.¹³³ Expenses were met by "contributions from members, proceeds from fines levied on members who disobeyed the rules, gifts of patrons and benefactors, and return on the group's investments. ... the group spent its resources on funerals for members, sacrifices, and gifts to patrons."¹³⁴

These associations also served as a stabilizing force in society. The Roman government, ever vigilant about insurrections, "used voluntary associations (*collegia*) as a way to exercise some control over gatherings of persons within the Empire. ... The Romans neither encouraged nor discouraged membership in an association. They allowed the groups to meet freely, to collect funds and to hold various rituals, but they prohibited the clubs from undertaking any kind of political activity."¹³⁵ If an association posed no threat to the government's authority it was left alone. But if it claimed another Lord (*kurios*) besides Caesar, as did the early Christians, it was sure to feel Rome's wrath.

¹³² Burchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 265-266.

¹³³ See Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 79.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 73.

Greco-Roman Households

Perhaps the most basic model of communal organization in any culture is the family. Jeffers describes the typical family structure in the Greco-Roman world:

The oldest male in the blood line of the family, was called the *paterfamilias* by the Romans. Every living thing over which he held authority was part of the household: relatives by blood, women who married blood relatives, slaves, former slaves, even livestock. A number of laws protected and maintained the position of the father and husband. . . . The head of the family in all ancient Mediterranean societies . . . exercised very strong control over his wife and children. The Roman family head (*paterfamilias*) controlled all the finances of the home. His wife might give him advice, but all family decisions were his to make.¹³⁶

This was because Greeks and Romans “disputed the ability of any but a free man to make decisions, as Arius Didymus wrote in describing the emperor Augustus’s position that ‘a man has the rule of this household by nature, for the deliberative faculty in a woman is inferior, in children it does not yet exist, and in the case of slaves, it is completely absent.’”¹³⁷ Each household member was expected to behave according to their station and “codes of behavior written by Romans usually were only addressed to the head of the household. Women, children, and slaves normally were addressed in the third person.”¹³⁸

The People of God and Early Church Structure

The Early Church began as the association of a group of men and women called to be disciples of their Rabbi Jesus. Through his teaching and the choosing of *twelve* disciples (reminiscent of the tribes of Israel) Jesus made it clear that those he called were

¹³⁶ Ibid., 82.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 86-87, quoting from Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 119. On 87 Jeffers says, “Aristotle says that the husbands rule over the wife is like an aristocracy, because he is more capable to rule and thus superior to her. But the husband still gives her areas to control within her ability (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.10). He also says that ‘the male is by nature fitter for command than the female’ (*Politics* 1.12).”

¹³⁸ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 86.

the nucleus of the new Israel, the new people of God whom he will bind to God in the new covenant through his redemptive mission. Jesus makes explicit reference to the ‘church’ which will arise beyond the climax of his ministry (Mt 16:18; 18:17), and the terms of his final commission carry an implicit reference to a continuing community of faith and witness (Mt 28:19f.).¹³⁹

While with them in the flesh, he was their one teacher and Lord (Mt 23:8-10; Jn 13:12-16). He led the group and made its decisions. Although there seemed to be a few officers (Judas as treasurer, Jn 12:4-6) and natural leaders among the Twelve (Peter, James and John, Mk 5:37; 9:2), echoing Dt 17:14-20, Jesus strongly discouraged their seeking of power and priority over each other (Mt 18:4; 20: 20-28; 23:1-12; Mk 9:33-37; 10:35-45; 12:38-39; Lk 9:46-48; 20:45-46; 22:24-27). They were to treat each other equally as brothers and sisters, not following the common Jewish and Greco-Roman patterns of “lording it over one another.” Grenz asserts, “The foundation for democratic governmental structures resides in Jesus own teaching concerning how his disciples should relate to each other.”¹⁴⁰ Instead of acting like aristocratic policy-makers or earthly kings, leaders were to be the “shepherds” of God’s flock, His people (John 21:15-19).

A shepherd had a responsible job, but a fairly lowly status. He existed for the sake of the sheep, who were not his own, but for which he was accountable to their owner. So when Jesus not only claimed to be the model shepherd but also affirmed that true greatness is a matter of servanthood, not status, he was recovering an authentically Old Testament perspective on leadership and authority.¹⁴¹

After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension the group’s natural leaders (Peter in particular) shepherded them as all waited for Pentecost and the Spirit’s empowerment

¹³⁹ Bruce Milne, *We Belong Together: The Meaning of Fellowship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 18.

¹⁴⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 722. In his opinion, “This egalitarian strand in Jesus’ teaching is best lived out in church life through democratic congregationalism.”

¹⁴¹ C. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 243.

for witness and disciple-making (Matt 28:16-20; Acts 2:1, cf. Jn 20:21-23).¹⁴² Pentecost was a communal experience and “from that point onwards the disciples’ developing experience is unfolded in corporate terms (cf. 2:44-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16; 6:1-7).”¹⁴³

Initially, Jesus’ disciples remained members of synagogues as well as meeting together in homes for Christian worship. They were tolerated as another Jewish *hairesis* or sect (like the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, Therapeutae, etc.). But as the tensions grew between them and those who didn’t follow Jesus, believers formed their own communities, “replicated much of the customary Jewish practice and ... were a network of *synagogai*.”¹⁴⁴ This was costly, considering the benefits of synagogue membership, and “we must not underestimate the social, economic, emotional and political costs incurred. ... those who departed from established communities, with vested wealth and recognized status in the larger society, were taking their chances with a new community that had little stored wealth but many new obligations.”¹⁴⁵ Burtchaell says, “the Jews who formed the archetypical churches followed the basic structural lineaments of community

¹⁴² See Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 342. He comments about the issue of apostolic succession: “The ministries of disciple and apostle vested in Peter and Paul are like the messianic, royal and prophetic ministries of Jesus: unable to be transmitted to certain designated successors because they are to be inherited by all who live in Christ. One cannot deny that bishops succeed to the charism of Peter and Paul; but it is a gift they share with all of their communicants. Nor were the apostles the first bishops. We have no historical evidence that Paul was bishop anywhere, or that Peter was bishop in Jerusalem (where James sat in that chair) or Antioch (a well established church already, and hardly one to his tastes) or Rome (also well established before he arrived). In footnote #2 He says further, “As Irenaeus says, Peter and Paul were the foundation pillars of the Roman church, and they established Linus as its *episkopos*. *Adversus Haereses*, 3,3,2-3. This understanding of Peter and Paul as having a ministry more foundational than that of bishop is obscured by the later notion that they were themselves bishops.”

¹⁴³ Milne, *We Belong Together*, 19.

¹⁴⁴ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 279. See Jn 16:1-2, Acts 5; 15:5; 24; 26:1-5; 28:22.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

organization already familiar to them in the synagogue. This would not be unnatural, since it was synagogues they thought they were forming—at first.”¹⁴⁶ Jeffers agrees:

Like the synagogues, the early churches were overseen by elders. Their meetings included the reading of Scripture, prayer and singing. Visiting teachers were invited to address the group. Like the synagogues, the Christian churches provided a place of belonging and a place for newcomers to a city to make contacts. In cities where multiple congregations existed, the churches, like the synagogues, cooperated with one another in a variety of ways.¹⁴⁷

Like synagogues they assembled to discuss and decide church policies (Acts 14:27; 15:21:22), read letters (Col 4:16; 1 Thes 5:27; Heb 6:10; Js 1:27), provide for the needy (Acts 6), eat fellowship meals (Acts 2:42), commission church representatives (1 Cor 16:3-4; 2 Cor 8:16-24; 9:3-5; Acts 15:1-2, 25-30; Phil 4:18), determine church discipline (1 Cor 5:4; 2 Cor 2:6), and mourn and bury the dead.¹⁴⁸ Grenz notes in the book of Acts

many decisions pertaining to ministry and structure were made by an entire congregation. The whole people were involved in the choosing of Judas’ replacement (1:23-26), the selection of the first deacons (6:3-6), and the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas (13:3). Similarly, the Jerusalem council did not involve merely a select few, but the entire congregation (15:22).¹⁴⁹

Up until at least the persecution mentioned in Acts 8:1 the Apostles were based in Jerusalem and, along with “the Seven” (Acts 6), provided leadership for the church.¹⁵⁰ But as they went on preaching and pastoral missions (Acts 8:14-25; 9:32-10:20) and were

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 339-340.

¹⁴⁷ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 72.

¹⁴⁸ See Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 286-287, 313, 336, 339.

¹⁴⁹ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 722.

¹⁵⁰ See Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 329. He says, “At first the authority of the apostles was seen to reside in Jerusalem. The church there spoke with secure *kyriotes* = ruling power: ‘It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves.’” See Acts 15:1-16:4.

imprisoned or killed (Acts 7:54-60; 12:1-19) others were selected to assist or replace them in their community responsibilities.¹⁵¹ Burtchaell remarks

Already when Paul and Barnabas were called before the authorities in Jerusalem, the apostolic claim of that community was largely an anachronism. Only Peter and John were there, and they might decamp at any time. The stable establishment there was not one of apostles, even though the decrees were issued in the name and authority of the apostles. They were assembly officers.¹⁵²

Acts 15:2 mentions elders as well as Apostles, and James, the brother of Jesus, apparently served as the *archisynagogos* (Acts 12:17; 15:13; Gal 1:18-19; 2:9).

While it seems the Jerusalem church followed the synagogue pattern of popularly choosing leaders, for churches in the *diaspora* that does not appear to be the case in the first generation (1 Tm 5:22; 3; Ti 1:5). Hellenistic churches recognized the authority of the Apostles but were shepherded by their founders or their co-workers. Grenz claims Paul's choosing of church elders in Acts 14:23 "may have included the ratification of the choice by the churches. If not, it may have been a temporary expediency at the founding stage of the new congregations."¹⁵³ As the churches matured and needed to choose their own leaders, they were instructed about appropriate leader qualifications (1 Tm 3:1-13,

¹⁵¹ See Ibid., 350. Speaking of charismatic leaders he says, "The people who bore most powerfully in their persons the force of divine conviction and transformative impetus were people who, without community screening or authorization, did God's work. They spoke with authority. But that does not mean that they presided." He says further on 351, "It requires saying that there is not a single text which describes an apostle or a prophet or a teacher presiding within an established Christian community, or filling the roles which were characteristic of the overseers, elders or assistants." See also Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson Inc., 1959, 1961), 50: "What is vital, however, is that the old order was no longer regarded as legally binding—it had become to a certain extent loose and open. The prophet, a Church member called by the Spirit, can again become the decisive voice in everything. On the other hand, the supernaturalness of a phenomenon is not an indispensable condition. The facts that James was Jesus brother, and that the twelve were companions of the earthly Jesus, are not overlooked; and such natural circumstances play a particularly large part where the elders appear in the Church order."¹⁵¹

¹⁵² Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 330. In footnote 233 he says, "Peter alone is present in Paul's narratives of his first visit to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18-20); Luke mentions none (Acts 9:26-30). No apostle is present for Paul's final visit (Acts 22:15ff)."

¹⁵³ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 722.

Ti 1:6-9).¹⁵⁴ Burtchaell notes, “The Christian documents, though indistinct and late, place a marked and insistent importance on the recollection that their officers were chosen and installed by the missionary founders.”¹⁵⁵ Later Christians emphasized “the notion that a Spirit is passed on, a succession is maintained, a spirit and a grace are there to be tracked back through the missionaries to the apostles to Jesus.”¹⁵⁶ Perhaps this was because

the officers of the local community carried a dual identity. They were creatures of the community (unlike the charismatics, even local ones), but the community itself was also their handiwork (as it was of the charismatics). This was embodied in the twofold manner of their mandate: elected by a show of hands within the community, they also required the laying-on of hands from someone in the charismatic discipleship/descent from the Lord.¹⁵⁷

Many of the first Hellenistic churches were made up of household members so it would be logical for them to organize themselves like the Greco-Roman family.¹⁵⁸ Jeffers says if a congregation had this structure it would be controlled by the oldest male and

have no place for participation by the members of the congregation in decisions. A Christian congregation following this model should also exhibit certain

¹⁵⁴ See Ibid., 294. He notes, “The vocabulary of appointment is consistent, whether by community insiders or outsiders, and it follows faithfully the terminology that had been conventional for synagogue appointments.”

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 341-342.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. He says in footnote 1: “Subsequent to the New Testament texts cited in the previous chapter, we note that Eusebius, relying on several ancient sources, reports that James was chosen as chief of the Jerusalem church by the apostles (*Historia Ecclesiastica* [hereafter *H. E.*], 2,23,1); Simeon, his successor, by the surviving apostles and disciples of the Lord (3,11-12); their successors down to the time of Hadrian, however, by those who had the power to judge such questions (*pros ton ta toiade epikrinein dunaton*, 4,5,2); Polycarp by eyewitnesses and servants of the Lord (3,36,1); Linus by apostles (5,6,1). John occasionally ordained chiefs/bishops in Asia, and some officers who had already been designated by the Spirit (3,23,6). Robert M. Grant points out that in his account of continuity from apostles to bishops in the sees, Eusebius is affirming the authentic anchorage of the churches through the historical character of the episcopate, not a continuity of apostolic charism: ‘The First Theme: Apostolic Succession,’ *Eusebius as Church Historian* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 45-59.”

¹⁵⁷ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 343. In footnote 61, on 294, He says, “All such texts in 1 & 2 Timothy undergo the difficulty that we cannot be sure just what Timothy’s status was supposed to be. Was he an apostle of the assembly in Lystra or of a band of prophets there (2 Cor 8:19-23; Ac 16:1), or a factotum for Paul (1 Cor 4:17; Phil 2:19; 1 Thes 3:2), or an elder (1 Tm 4:12-14)?” See 1 Tm 1:18; 4:14.

¹⁵⁸ See Acts 16:31-34; 18:7-8; 1 Cor 1:14-16.

attitudes about the various members of the group. It should make clear distinctions between men and women, and between slave and free. Slaves in particular should be second-class citizens within the congregation.¹⁵⁹

However, this does not seem to be the case:

Unlike the Greco-Roman family, the members of Christian congregations participated to some degree in decisions made by their leaders. For example, Paul tells an entire congregation to expel an unrepentant sinner (1 Cor 5:5) and to keep away from backsliders (2 Thes 3:6, 14-15). In addition, the Epistles are nearly all addressed to the general members of congregations, not to its leaders.¹⁶⁰

Also, distinctions between gender and socioeconomic class which were expected and affirmed in both Jewish and Greco-Roman society, were condemned as unfitting for Christians who experienced life in the Spirit (Js 2:6; 1 Cor 11:22).¹⁶¹ Paul made it clear in Galatians 3:26-28 that “in the new age, salvation will not only be available to all who turn in faith to the true God, but there will be no distinction of spirituality on the basis of age, gender, or social status. God’s spirit will be available to both young and old, to both male and female, and to both slave and free.”¹⁶² All believers share in the same Spirit and as brothers and sisters “all have the same standing before God; all have the same relationship with Christ. This flatly contradicts assumptions in Greco-Roman society that

¹⁵⁹ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 83.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 83-84. Grenz, 722, says, “The practice of addressing epistles to entire churches rather than to their leaders reinforces the impression of the ultimate importance of the people as a whole in the life and decision-making of the local congregations.”

¹⁶¹ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 85, says, “Such distinctions permeated all ancient institutions. The synagogues clearly made distinctions on the basis of gender. So while we cannot conclude that the Greco-Roman family model brought such discrimination into the church, it probably encouraged the temptation to fall back into patterns of behavior that people in that day had accepted from childhood, long before they became Christians.”

¹⁶² Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, vol. 31, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, Dallas, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Beijing: Word Inc., Thomas Nelson, 1987), 262. He adds, “the significance of this expectation should be clear. Those who live in the age of the Spirit cannot expect God to restrict any ministry of the Spirit from anyone simply because he or she is old or young, male or female, or of high or low standing socially. Where churches attempt to do this, they risk missing the fullness of God’s blessing.”

some persons were by nature superior to others.”¹⁶³ The New Testament “household codes” (Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-6:9; 1 Pt 2:13-21; 3:1-7; 1 Tm 2:1-6:2; Ti 2:1-10)

address wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves and masters in the second person. This suggests a recognition of the basic equality of various classes of humans before God, even as it lays out specific roles for them. By analogy, it suggests equality among the members of the Christian congregation, regardless of position, race, gender or status. Such a belief is in harmony with Paul’s emphasis on the basic equality of members of the body of Christ although they may perform different functions (1 Cor 12).¹⁶⁴

In God’s household, the Church, the Father is the *paterfamilias*, and Jesus is the “first-born son,” elder brother, Lord, cornerstone (Eph 2:19-20), and source of the Church (Eph 1:22; Col 1:18).¹⁶⁵ God appoints leaders and delegates tasks through his Spirit, instead of the oldest male member. For a homeowner, leadership in the church that met in his/her house was not guaranteed, even if he/she was also a financial patron.¹⁶⁶

Early Greco-Roman believers probably would have participated in voluntary associations before and after conversion (1 Cor 8; 10:14-32).¹⁶⁷ Christian churches used the voluntary society designation to strengthen their legitimacy and

were officially organizing as burial associations by the third century. Christian writers, such as Tertullian, argued that Christians should not be persecuted since they had organized as legal burial associations entitled to assemble. Tertullian says that the Christian groups follow the law for such groups: they require a

¹⁶³ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, 85.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁶⁵ See *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁶⁶ See *Ibid.*, 83-84. Jeffers says, “in contrast to the Greco-Roman patronage model, the New Testament establishes no connection between financial patronage and congregational authority. Those who contributed to the group’s financial support were not thereby entitled to a place of leadership in the group. Undoubtedly, churches at times experienced conflict when a patron felt entitled to lead even if he or she was not a recognized spiritual leader of the church, but the New Testament never endorses such a feeling.” See Lydia, Acts 16:14-15; Priscilla and Aquila, Rom 16; Acts 18; Stephanus, 1 Cor 16:15; Titius Justus, Acts 18:7; Crispus, 1 Cor 1:16; Acts 18:2-8; Gaius, Rom 16:23.

¹⁶⁷ See *Ibid.*, 73. He says, “After all, these were people who came from humble origins for the most part, and whose beliefs and practices would make them feel excluded from the larger society.”

monthly contribution from each member, and they eat a common meal together (*Apology* 38-39).¹⁶⁸

The Church was voluntary, and had rituals and worship activities like associations, but their structure and practices were not fully adopted.¹⁶⁹ Churches were more inclusive of the marginalized in society, more connected to other congregations, and demanded more commitment. “Baptism into Jesus Christ meant a total resocialization, in which loyalty to the Christian group was supposed to replace every other loyalty. The only parallel in that era was conversion to Judaism.”¹⁷⁰ They also did not adopt association language:

Paul does not use the terms for leaders used by associations. The chief officer in an association was called a *magister* (Latin) or *archon* (Greek)The terms that Paul uses for his congregations, such as “ecclesia,” “the holy ones,” “the elect,” and “the beloved of God” do not appear among the titles used by associations. The only term Paul uses that may have been borrowed is *episkopos* (“overseer” or “bishop”; Phil 1:1), a term that appears for officers in voluntary associations.¹⁷¹

Early Christians may have adapted parts of association structure for their own use but did not allow it to dictate their organization. Instead their community was shaped largely by their Jewish heritage and understanding of themselves as the new humanity that the Father was creating in and through and by Christ and the Spirit.

God’s New Humanity

The New Testament continued the Old Testament theme of God calling a people to himself, “among whom God can dwell and who in their life together will reproduce

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 76-77.

¹⁶⁹ See Ibid., 87 Jeffers asserts, “The early Christian congregations found value in borrowing from both voluntary associations and Greco-Roman households, but the nature of the churches was not fundamentally changed as a result.”

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 79-80.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 80.

God's life and character."¹⁷² Milne points out, "Increasingly the New Testament church saw itself as the true inheritor of the promises to the people of God in the Old Testament. Peter in 1 Peter 2:9 for example cites Exodus 19:5-6 and Deuteronomy 7:6 (cf. 10:15) as finding fulfillment in the Christian communities scattered round the Gentile world (cf. also Ti 2:14; Rom 9:25; 1 Pt 2:10)."¹⁷³ Grenz emphasizes,

early believers understood themselves as those who had been personally incorporated into the larger community (Acts 8:14-17; 18:24-27; Rom. 15:26-27). ... The idea of a self-sufficient, isolated Christian was inconceivable to first-century believers. In their understanding the individual believer and the community were intertwined.¹⁷⁴

What bound this very diverse community of former cultural enemies together? In the Jewish synagogue adherents of a variety of ideologies lived side-by-side. The diversity in political/religious viewpoints among Jesus' own disciples attests to that. "As a community defined by ethnicity they had had no choice but to live and let live among fiercely partisan factions. ... One must bear in mind that the principal identity of a Jew was comments, to be son or daughter of Abraham and Sarah. All ones loyalties and debates were functions of that identity."¹⁷⁵ Initially, the Early Church, was able to maintain its Jewish ethnic "glue," but once the Gentiles joined, it could only rely on unity

¹⁷² Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 872.

¹⁷³ Milne, *We Belong Together*, 19.

¹⁷⁴ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 708. Milne, *We Belong Together*, 19, agrees saying, "Scripture then knows nothing of solitary religion. The salvation it witnesses to is emphatically one which has corporate dimensions. No man can be reconciled to God without being reconciled to the people of God within whom his experience of God's grace immediately sets him. Thus soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, is indissolubly bound up with ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church."

¹⁷⁵ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 287. He says, "We see no such willingness to tolerate diversity within the circle of the new movement. Paul inveighs against faction-building in his communities and considers it grounds for expulsion. The pastoral epistles are also intransigent about doctrinal unity, and Jude, Clement and Ignatius are, if anything, more peremptory. As the social analysts would remind us, this insistence on unity is strong evidence that there was diversity and factional dispute in early days."

in Christ to bond them (Eph 2:18). Because of this, fidelity to the apostolic gospel was essential. Thomas Dubay notes, “the remarkable insistence of the New Testament on perfect unity in community (Jn 17:23), on having oneness of mind (1 Cor 1:10; Phil 2:1-2), on agreement regarding doctrine (Acts 2:42; 4:32).”¹⁷⁶ As Jesus had reminded his hearers, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.” (Mt 12:25). On the night of his betrayal Jesus fervently prayed for God’s oneness among his present and future disciples (Jn 17). Unity was critical for God’s people to survive, let alone reflect his image, bring Him glory, and convince the world of the truth of the gospel.¹⁷⁷ “The fact that God is one provides the foundation for the New Testament emphasis on the unity of the gospel and of the Church. ... (Eph 4:4-6).”¹⁷⁸ The Church is not a collection of volunteers joined in a friendly social contract to support a cause, or “produced by human techniques or plans. The Church is constituted the people of God by the action of Jesus Christ, and this reality opens the door to the possibility of true and deep community.”¹⁷⁹ As Dietrich Bonhoeffer declares,

if, before we could know and wish it, we have been chosen and accepted with the whole Church in Jesus Christ, then we also belong to Him in eternity with one another. We who live here in fellowship with Him will one day be with Him in eternal fellowship. He who looks upon his brother should know that he will be eternally united with Him in Jesus Christ. Christian community means community through and in Jesus Christ.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Thomas Dubay, *Authenticity: A Biblical Theology of Discernment*. Ft. Collins, CO: Ignatius Press; 1997), 32-33.

¹⁷⁷ Snyder, *The Community of the King*, 173, says, “Christ prays for the unity and the witness of his disciples in order that God may receive glory. Jesus says of his followers in verse 10, ‘Glory has come to me through them.’ This is, above all else, the purpose and aim of the Church. God’s people are called to live ‘for the praise of his glory’ (Eph 1:12); ‘to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus’ (Eph 3:21).”

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁸⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, Evanston: Harper & Row Pub., 1954), 24.

Thus, congregational involvement is essential for Christians since in the local church we are drawn together to reflect this unity for Christ's glory and purposes, and our benefit.

The New Testament uses several metaphors to speak of God's people: his "family," his "temple," a "fellowship (*koinonia*) in the Spirit", and the "body of Christ." Jesus taught his disciples to pray "Our Father," called them his brothers (Jn 20:17), and declared his family was "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 12:49-50). Jews commonly called each other "brother" and "sister" (Acts 1:16; 2:27; 7:2; 13:15; 22:1; 23:1, 5, 6) and in the book of Acts Jewish and Gentile Christians address each other similarly, as do Paul, James, John, Peter and the author of Hebrews in their letters.¹⁸¹ Believers are members of God's household (2 Cor 6:18; Eph 2:19-22; 1 Tm 3:15; Ti 1:7; 1 Pet 4:17).¹⁸² Charles Ringma emphasizes the importance of these family ties: "While the Old Testament itself signals the failure of the kingship and the priesthood, the New Testament does not promote a new guardianship. Instead, it promotes a new brotherhood and sisterhood with an emphasis on relationships rather than a particular institutional structure."¹⁸³ However, Bonhoeffer warns against "the danger of confusing Christian brotherhood with some wishful idea of religious fellowship, of confounding the natural

¹⁸¹ Acts 6:3; 9:17; 11:12, 29; 12:17; 14:2; 15:7, 13, 23; 16:40; 18:18, 27; 21:17, 20; 28:14, 15, 17. Paul's references are too numerous to list here. Hebrews: 2:11, 12; 3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:1, 22, 23. James: 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14, 15; 3:10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19. John: 1 Jn 2:19-11; 3:10-16; 4:20, 21; 5:16; 3 Jn 1:5; Rev 1:9; 6:11; 12:10; 19:10. Peter: 1 Peter 5:12; 2 Peter 1:10; 3:15.

¹⁸² See Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 873.

¹⁸³ Ringma, *Catch the Wind*, 126. He says further, 127, "early Christianity rather than replacing its rejection of the priestly guardianship with an institutional model of its own, opted for an interpersonal focus based on sharing a common life in Christ. Thus redemption in Christ does not redeem the old guardianship, but calls for new ways of social existence."

desire of the devout heart for community with the spiritual reality of Christian brotherhood.”¹⁸⁴ Instead he insists,

Not only the other person who is earnest and devout, who comes to me seeking brotherhood, must I deal with in fellowship. My brother is rather that other person who has been redeemed by Christ, delivered from his sin, and called to faith and eternal life. Not what a man is in himself as a Christian, his spirituality and piety, constitutes the basis of our community. What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us.¹⁸⁵

Paul also spoke of church members individually and corporately as God’s “Temple” (1 Cor 3:9-17; 6:18-20; 2 Cor 6:16-7:1; Eph 2:10-22; 1 Tm 3:15; cf. Heb 3:6; 1 Pt 2:4-10; Rv 3:12). Just as God tabernacled among his people in the Tent of Meeting and Temple, so now He dwells even more intimately in and with them through His Spirit, particularly as they gather for worship. Fee comments, “With this imagery in particular Paul picks up the Old Testament motif of God’s ‘presence’ with the people of God. . . . the motif of the divine presence, as outlined here was actually equated with ‘the Holy Spirit of the Lord’ (Isa 63:9-14).”¹⁸⁶ Closely tied to the Temple motif is the image of the “priesthood of all believers” which will be discussed below.

One of Paul’s most influential metaphors for the Church is the “body of Christ” (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 10:16-17; 11:29; 12:12-27; Col 1:18; 3:15; Eph 1:23; 2:16; 4:3-16; 5:23). In contrast to views of the Church as a collection of individuals or a “religious corporation employing clergy to work, and inviting laity to come along,”¹⁸⁷ the Church is “a living organism. It is a body whose Head is Christ and whose members are individual

¹⁸⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 26.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸⁶ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 7.

¹⁸⁷ Donald Bridge and David Phypers, *Spiritual Gifts and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 149.

Christians. Indeed it is a supernatural body for, unlike natural organisms, it is not subject to death. Its Head, Christ, is alive for evermore (Rev 1:18), and its members too through their faith in the Head will never die (Jn 11:26).¹⁸⁸

Importantly, Christ is the “head/source” of the Church, the one who gives the vision and sets the agenda for each congregation. This is different from a corporate business model which sees the pastor as the “head.” Ringma asserts,

Unlike other social institutions which are characterised by hierarchical structures or social differentiation, the Church is to be different. ... roles and functions in the Early Church are emphasised rather than offices and position. ... Church structures are not spelled out in the New Testament, but caring relationships are. Every-where in the Pauline epistles is the call to love, serve, care, and support each other (Rom 14:19; 15:7; Gal 6:2; 10; Eph 5:21; Col 3:12-17). Power relationships are deliberately transmuted into servanthood priorities.¹⁸⁹

Historically, this teaching led to the idea of the “priesthood of all believers,” (1 Pt 2:5; Rv 1:6; 5:10; 20:6), not just leaders. Grenz notes,

All may approach the throne of grace through Christ (Heb 4:15-16; 10:19-20). For this reason, the disciples of Christ were to acknowledge no mediatory hierarchy among them (Mt 23:8-12; Mk 10:42-44; 1 Tm 2:5). On the contrary, each believer has the privilege and responsibility to engage in priestly functions, such as offering spiritual sacrifices to God (Heb 13:15; Rom 12:1; 1 Pt 2:9) and interceding for others (1 Tm 2:1, 2; 2 Thes 3:1; Jas 5:16).¹⁹⁰

All believers have been “baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor 12:13) and have begun to know God as promised in Jeremiah 32:34, although that knowledge remains imperfect until God’s Kingdom fully comes (1 Cor 13:12). That “knowing” is the basis

¹⁸⁸ Bridge and Pypers, *Spiritual Gifts and the Church*, 15.

¹⁸⁹ Ringma, *Catch the Wind*, 128-129. See also 124. Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, 99, says, “The Church is a new entity, established solely by God’s action and not to be regarded as a historical development. The miracle of this newness is shown by there being no fundamental organization of superior or subordinate ranks, because the gift of the Spirit is adapted to every Church.”

¹⁹⁰ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 723.

for participation in the Church's discernment and accomplishment of the will of its "head," Jesus. All have been given gifts by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:7; Eph 4:7) and

as the health of the whole depends on the proper functioning of each member, so the health of each member depends of the proper functioning of the whole. No personal flights of spirituality can free the individual from his responsibility to the community or from his dependence on the community. Thus the emphasis of Rom 12:5—"We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another."¹⁹¹

Each person is a crucial part of this body thorough faith in Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. As Dunn reminds,

The many members who make up the one body (1 Cor 12:14) are not simply individual believers, but individual believers as *charismatics* (vv. 4-11, 27-30)—that is, believers through whom the Spirit of grace may manifest himself in diverse ways at any time. ... It is of central significance to Paul's concept of the body of Christ then that each member has his own gift (Rom 12:3ff.; 1 Cor 7:7; 12:7, 11 ... ; so 1 Peter 4:10); no member lacks a manifestation of grace; no member can refuse the contribution to the worship or the life of the community which the Spirit would make through him without thereby quenching the Spirit (1 Thes 5:19) and thereby ceasing to function as a member of the body.¹⁹²

He adds, "Hence the exhortations to all the members of different communities to teach, admonish, judge, comfort (Rom 15:14; 1 Cor 5:4f.; 2 Cor 2:7; Col 3:16; 1 Thes 5:14)."¹⁹³

As part of Christ's eschatological triumph over the "dominion of darkness" (Col 1:13) He gave his people gifts to equip them for service, and growth in maturity and unity (Eph 4:7-13, Col 1:27-28) until his return.¹⁹⁴ Gifts flows out of the abundance of the

¹⁹¹ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 265.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 292.

¹⁹⁴ See Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 893, who in response to questions about Paul's expectations of the *charismata* ceasing after his lifetime says, "This particular 'answer' to the issue is raised not on the basis of reading the biblical text, but from the greater concern as to their 'legitimacy' today. But this is a hermeneutical question, pure and simple, and one that Paul could not have understood." See Flynn, *19 Gifts of the Spirit*, 20. See also Snyder, *The Community of the King*, 76: "The New Testament gives clear teachings regarding spiritual gifts and states emphatically that the exercise of such gifts is part of the normal life of the Christian community (1 Cor 12-14)."

Spirit in believers' lives and enable them "to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Zech 4:6; Jn 14:12-17; 15:26; Eph. 2: 10). There is a link between these foreordained 'good works' and spiritual gifts."¹⁹⁵ While gifts are given individually,

God's plan ("that now, through the Church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known") is to be realized, at least in part, through the Church's doing those works "which God prepared in advance." ... It is to be accomplished "through the Church," not as so many isolated individuals, but precisely as "a new kind of community leading a radically new kind of life."¹⁹⁶

Eduard Schweizer points out that giftings and callings are "tasks given by the Spirit", and

therefore, fundamentally equal, and superiority and subordination are to be regarded as only incidental. Thus the enumerations of the different kinds of gifts are quite unsystematic, with no sort of hierarchical character. There is only one standard for measuring their relative importance: whether they testify to Jesus as Lord, or not (1 Cor. 12.3)—or, to look at it from the other side, whether they edify the Church or not (12.7; 14.1ff.).¹⁹⁷

There has been much confusion about the nature of spiritual gifts and "many Christians either deny the validity of gifts, limiting them only to the Early Church, or reinterpret them in a way that robs them of their impact and sees them as synonymous with native abilities."¹⁹⁸ But as Dunn points out, "charisma is not to be confused with human talent and natural ability; nowhere does charisma have the sense of a human capacity heightened, developed or transformed. ... Charisma is always God acting,

¹⁹⁵ Snyder, *The Community of the King*, 77.

¹⁹⁶ See Ibid., 70-71, quoting John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 63.

¹⁹⁷ Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, 100. See Rom 12.3 ff.; 1 Cor. 12.8 ff., 28 ff.

¹⁹⁸ Snyder, *The Community of the King*, 76. He says on 77, "The basic question is not whether specific spiritual gifts, such as those of apostle, prophet or tongues-speaking, are valid today. The question is whether the Spirit still 'gives gifts to men,' and the answer is yes. Precisely which gifts he gives in any particular age is God's prerogative, and we should not prejudge God. Interpretations as to specific gifts may vary. But we have no biblical warrant to restrict the *charismata* to the early church nor to ban any specific gift today. Arguments against gifts generally arise from secondary, not biblical, considerations and a fear of excesses or abuses."

always the Spirit manifesting himself. Charisma emerges from the new life begun by the gracious act of God and as an expression of that grace.”¹⁹⁹

Besides giving believers a diversity of gifts for the common good and God’s purposes, the Spirit unites them in a common experience of God’s grace and personal knowledge of Him (Rom 8:14-17).²⁰⁰ It is the Spirit’s revealing work that enables an individual to participate in communal discernment and decision-making. All believers have access to “the mind of Christ” (Rom 15:5; 1 Cor 2:16; Phil 2:5) and the Spirit can speak through all. Therefore all can and should participate, instead of only those with natural ability and wisdom (although these are gifts from God), or designated leadership positions. As all members live by the Spirit and cooperatively and humbly share their various gifts, abilities, insights, and experiences, unity is promoted, spirituality is tested, and communally the will of Christ is discerned and done.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 255. He reiterates on 256, “the charisma itself can properly be exercised only when it is recognized as the action of the Spirit, for *charisma is characterized not by the exercise of man’s ability and talent but by unconditional dependence on and openness to God.*” In contrast to Charles Stanley’s discussion of “motivational gifts” in *Ministering through Spiritual Gifts: Recognizing Your Personal Gifts and Use Them to Further the Kingdom* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), vi. On vii, Stanley asserts, “*you* have been given a spiritual motivational gift by God. *You* bear this as part of your identity. *You* are responsible for identifying your gift, developing it, and then using it for the glory of God. The more you use your motivational gift, the more you will grow in it, and the more the Holy Spirit will be able to use you in it.” See also Bugbee, Cousins and Hybels, *Network*, 139, and Flynn, *19 Gifts of the Spirit*, 22 for a discussion of the differences between talents and spiritual gifts.

²⁰⁰ See Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 265. He says, “To put it another way, the church consists of *koinonia* (sharing) in both its passive and active senses—sharing in the sense of the shared experience of grace which brings different individuals together into community in the first place, and sharing in the sense of each contributing the different charismata to the common life of worship and service.”

²⁰¹ See James F. Cobble, Jr., *The Church and the Powers: A Theology of Church Structure* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1988), 91. He says, “While certain gifts, such as apostle and elder, played a strategic role in the organizational life of the church, the overall emphasis was on the contribution of all members. In part, whatever organization there was emerged out of the spiritual life of the community as individuals expressed God’s grace through specific forms of service and commitment. The flow and content of meetings, the daily interaction of believers, and the decision-making process could not be separated from the leading, guidance, and expression of the Spirit of God in the life of the church. This was not a formal or static process, but one which was alive, creative, dynamic, and often spontaneous as individuals responded to the Spirit of God.”

Paul speaks a great deal about the Church as a united fellowship in the experience of the Spirit.²⁰² Speaking of 1 Corinthians 12: 12-26, Fee notes,

The people of God as a community of believers owe their existence to their common, lavish experience of the Spirit. Thus, the question Paul answers in 1 Cor 12:13 is not, how do people become believers—although in a sense that is being answered as well—but how do the many of them, composed of Jew and Gentile, slave and free, make up the one body of Christ. Paul’s answer: *All* alike were immersed in the same reality, Spirit, and *all* alike were caused to drink to the fill of the same reality, Spirit, so as to form one body in Christ.²⁰³

The Church is no mere gathering of religiously interested individuals. It is drawn together, empowered and enlivened by the Holy Spirit. As Dunn remarks,

fundamental to Christian community for Paul was the shared experience of Spirit of grace. Without this, fellowship (*koinonia*) lacks all substance; it remains a jargon word or ideal and never becomes an existential reality. So too unity hinges on this common experience. There can be structural unity or formal unity; but without a common experience of grace (emphasis on both experience and grace) unity can never be a living reality.²⁰⁴

This has significant implications for as a church makes decisions, the key question is not, “What do I/we want?” but “What does the Spirit want?” and keeping “the unity that the Spirit has given them” (Eph 4:3) is obviously the will of God. Fee notes that all the sins mentioned in Ephesians 4:25-31 “are sins of discord. By giving in to sin, they grieve the Holy Spirit (v. 30), who has formed them into a body and whose continuing presence is intended to bring the body to full maturity. Hence the need to

²⁰² Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 872-873, says, “The concept of Gk text *koinonia* (fellowship) is a broad one in Paul. It begins as fellowship with God through Christ (1 Cor 1:9), which in turn brings believers into fellowship with one another. In the Trinitarian benediction of 2 Cor 13:13 [14], Paul selects [*koinonia*] to characterize the ministry of the Spirit. Although this refers chiefly to a participation in the Spirit himself, such participation is common to them all and thus also includes the ‘fellowship’ created and sustained by the Spirit. So also in Phil 2:1-4, part of the basis of his appeal to unity and harmony in v.1 is their common participation (both Paul’s and theirs together) in the Spirit (cf. 1:27, ‘stand firm in one Spirit’). And common love brought about by the Spirit serves as the basis of an appeal to the Roman believers to Support him with their prayers (Rom 15:30; cf. Col 1:8).”

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 872. See also 875. See 1 Cor 10:16-17; 11:29; 2 Cor 3:1-3.

²⁰⁴ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 262. See also Snyder, *The Community of the King*, 59-60.

‘keep filled with the Spirit’ (5:18), so as to ensure proper worship (vv. 19-20) and proper relationships (5:21-6:9).”²⁰⁵ Paul urges the Philippians to “stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel” (1:27), and be “like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind” (2:2; cf. 4:1-3).

But this fellowship unity is not unanimity, where all believers are expected to think and act identically. God’s new humanity is made up of Jews and Gentiles, men and women from all nations and walks of life (Rom 10:12-13; Gal 3:28). Fee says, “for Paul the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles in God’s family is the most remarkable aspect of this newly formed fellowship; God had triumphed over the former prejudices on both sides (Eph 2:14-18).”²⁰⁶ He says further, “Just as Christ’s death made the “one body” a possibility by abolishing what divided Jew and Gentile, so now through Christ both have access to the Father *in one Spirit*. Jews and Gentiles have been formed by the Spirit as one body (4:4), and as they dwell together in the one Spirit they have common access as one people into the presence of God (the temple imagery now played in reverse).”²⁰⁷ In Ephesians 3:6 Paul stresses Gentile Christians are co-heirs with Jewish Christians, and “members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” Wright says this oneness does not mean cultural differences are eliminated, for

ethnic diversity and the multiplicity of nations are part of God’s creative intention for humanity and not in themselves the result of sin. This seems to be evident from texts such as Deuteronomy 32:8, echoed in Acts 17:26, and the eschatological vision that the redeemed humanity will include, but not obliterate, the distinctions between every tribe, language and nation.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 875. See also 1 Cor 12:14-26 and Phil 1:27-2:1.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 873.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 873. He says on 352, “For Paul both the revelation of it and the actual inclusion of Jews and Gentiles together in Christ (1:13-14; 2:18, 22) are the work of the Spirit.”

²⁰⁸ C. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 213.

Also, the Spirit also creates and maintains diversity in the Church by giving individuals different gifts of grace. Fee points out that in 1 Corinthians 12

God himself as three Persons illustrates—and serves as the basis for—this diversity-in-unity (vv. 4-6); and the Spirit in particular is responsible for its being evidenced among them, especially in the many manifestations of his presence “given to each one for the common good” (vv. 7-11). A body cannot be only one part (v. 14); that is a monstrosity (vv. 15-20). The Spirit who is responsible for their being *one body* is also the basis for the *many parts* necessary for the body to function at all.²⁰⁹

So diversity in the fellowship of believers, rather than being a problem to be solved, is a God created and Spirit endowed blessing to be affirmed. Differences in gifting, experience, and perspective must be valued and used for the body of Christ to operate and make decisions in a healthy manner. The book of Acts provides examples of how these principles worked in practice for the Early Church.

The first instance of corporate decision making among the disciples was the choosing of Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:12-26). After Jesus’ ascension the Apostles returned to Jerusalem and joined with others in prayer waiting for the promised baptism of the Holy Spirit (1:5). At some point while praying with a larger group of believers Peter suggested that the group choose someone to replace Judas in bearing the apostolic responsibility for witness. The group chose two candidates and after praying for guidance, they used a method of decision-making that they were used to, casting lots. Perhaps it is significant that after Pentecost there is no mention of lots being used again.

In Acts 6 a potentially explosive problem arose: the Hellenistic Jewish believers in Jerusalem complained that their widows were being neglected. The Apostles, as the congregation’s leaders, called an assembly of all the local believers and asked them to choose men to take over that ministry. The assembly agreed, selecting seven to be

²⁰⁹ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 875.

brought to the Apostles, “who prayed and laid their hands on them.” (6). In this very brief story we see both the leaders and people solving the problem according to a process that was very similar to the synagogue election model. Cobble says, “Although this should not be construed as democracy, it does point to the importance of the shared life and mission of the Church in decision making and problem solving.”²¹⁰ It is noteworthy that those selected were authorized by the Apostles, and were “known to be full of the Spirit *and* wisdom” (3). Stephen, in particular, is singled out as a being “full of God's grace and power” and a wise powerful speaker (10).

Acts 13:2-3 records a time of worship and fasting when the Antioch Church heard the Spirit tell them to commission two leaders for service. Richard Foster remarks, “Perhaps the most astonishing feature of that incendiary fellowship was their sense of corporate guidance. ... Having become a prepared people they received the call *together*.”²¹¹ The guidance given (probably through prophecy) was clear and specific. Jim Cymbala notes the Spirit said,

“Set apart *for me* Barnabas and Saul.” The Spirit was claiming these two men for a special mission. Think of the spiritual drama as the living Spirit put his finger on these two individuals in the midst of the other leaders and possibly the whole congregation.

The Spirit has his own strategy and plans for the church. Notice the wording of verse 2: “... for the work to which *I* have called them.”²¹²

He concludes,

No Bible doctrines, precious and vital as they are to us, can replace this kind of daily, specific leading by the Spirit of God. The leaders in Antioch could have read the whole Old Testament, inspired by God as it is, and yet never have known

²¹⁰ Cobble, *The Church and the Powers*, 81.

²¹¹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 152.

²¹² Jim Cymbala, *Fresh Power: Experiencing the Vast Resources of the Spirit of God*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 143.

that the Holy Spirit wanted to send out Paul and Barnabas specifically. It took a direct intervention by the Spirit to get God’s work going God’s way.²¹³

Before laying hands on them, the church members prayed and fasted again, and verse 4 says Paul and Barnabas were “sent on their way by the Holy Spirit.” “The commissioning of the church was merely the outward expression of the divine commissioning.”²¹⁴

On Paul and Barnabus’ return from their missionary journey they shared with the church the good news about how God had used them to bring Gentiles to faith in Jesus. But these conversions raised many issues and there were numerous opinions as to what was needed to incorporate them into an ethnically Jewish church. “Some free-lance Christians had gone up to Antioch and had begun preaching the necessity of circumcision for all Christians. The issue was far from trivial. Paul saw at once that it was tantamount to the Jewish cultural captivity of the Church.”²¹⁵ This conflict had the potential to divide the fledgling Church into two—one Jewish and one Gentile. Nelson Kraybill outlines the process that the Church went through in Acts 15 to resolve it:

1. *There was a big argument:* “Certain individuals” differed with Paul and Barnabas on the question of circumcision, and “no small dissension and debate” arose (Acts 15:1-2).
2. *The Church sought out a forum in which all parties could be heard:* The local faith community took action, and appointed “Paul and Barnabas and some of the others to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders” (Acts 15:2).
3. *People in conflict had opportunity to tell their stories:* The delegation of disputants arrived at Jerusalem and “reported all that God had done with them” (Acts 15:4).
4. *There was enough time to air convictions, feelings and perspective:* There was “much debate” (Acts 15:7).
5. *Leaders, after careful listening, proposed a way forward that took into account concerns raised by both sides on this issue:* “After they finished

²¹³ Ibid., 144.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 146.

²¹⁵ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 152.

speaking, James replied, 'My brothers ... I have reached the decision that we should not trouble [with circumcision] those Gentiles who are turning to God ... but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication ...' (Acts 15:13-21).

6. *The proposed solution was ratified by consensus:* With the “consent of the whole church” the leaders at Jerusalem sent a delegation to Antioch to convey the agreements reached (Acts 15:22, 25).
7. *The entire decision making process was handled with sensitivity to all participants, under Holy Spirit guidance:* The end result “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28).²¹⁶

Richard Foster points out the significance of this outcome for the Early Church’s discernment and decision-making practice: “As a people they had decided to live under the direct rulership of the Spirit. They had rejected both human totalitarianism and anarchy. They had even rejected democracy, that is, majority rule. They had dared to live on the basis of Spirit-rule; no 51 percent vote, no compromises, but Spirit-directed unity. And it worked.”²¹⁷ Communal discernment, relying on input from wisdom sources, the Holy Spirit, and church members and leaders, had resulted in the Early Church discerning that God was at work in the conversion of the Gentiles, and that they needed to join Him in what He was doing and accept them as full brothers and sisters in the faith.

²¹⁶ Nelson Kraybill, “At 11: Conflict and Church Decision Making: Be Clear about Process and Let Everyone Be Heard,” *Anabaptism Today*, Issue 11, February 1996, <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/book/export/html/166> (accessed June 8, 2011). Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 343, notes, “Peter and Paul, gifted with the prophetic and apostolic spirit, set forth the policy and rationale that carried the day. James, the community chief surrounded by the elders, presided and pronounced the verdict. Both authorities—the charism of *apostolos* and the order of *episkopos*—seem integral to the welfare of the church in crisis.”

²¹⁷ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 153. Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, 211-212, agrees: “in the New Testament there are no majority decisions, but that efforts are made to arrive at a right judgment, even though the discussions are by no means easy or harmonious, till those of differing views can unite. Where no such understanding can be reached, the matter is taken so seriously in the New Testament examples that the Church has to summon up the courage to point out to the dissident(s) that they are repudiating the gospel, and to warn them of God’s judgment, or even to pronounce it.”

Disunity

In theory, ethnicity, gender, economic status and race were not to be barriers to Christian fellowship and sources of conflict (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). Ringma asserts,

The New Testament forges a new social order where structures are replaced by inter-personal relationships based on a common faith relationship in Christ Jesus. This new relationship not only explodes the old racial and cultural boundaries along with economic and gender discriminations, but also creates a community of mutual care, encouragement and economic sharing (Rom 15:1-6; 2 Cor 8:13-15).²¹⁸

But from the epistles we see that the early churches were divided by many things.

Perhaps most obvious were the cultural/religious differences between Jew and Gentile.

Burtchaell points out that early Galilean and Judean Jewish Christians

were obliged to incorporate new classes of membership that were increasingly alien to the charter disciples: first Greco-Roman Jews, then proselyte Jews (converted gentiles), then Samaritans, then God-fearers (sympathetic gentiles admitted to “associate status” with Jews), and finally out-and-out gentiles who had no previous nexus with the people of Israel.²¹⁹

And Gentiles had to associate with Jews who had once looked upon them as “dogs” with self-righteous superiority (Mt 15:21-28). The rich and privileged participated with the poor and outcast, and James warns his readers against economic prejudice (Jas 1:9-11; 2:1-13; 5:1-6). Spiritual gifts, *charismata*, also were a source of discord. Raymond Brown discusses the problems caused by differences in “Spirit-led” teaching and prophetic revelation within the community:

Jesus who sends the Paraclete never tells his followers what is to happen when believers who possess the Paraclete disagree with each other. The Johannine Epistles tell us what frequently happens: they break their *koinonia* or communion

²¹⁸ Ringma, *Catch the Wind*, 123.

²¹⁹ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 195. He continues, “After some decades of strain and dispute the gentiles began to gain the ascendancy over the Galilean and Judaeian proto-Christians, a shift that was consolidated by the transfer of primacy from the church at Jerusalem to the church at Rome. This metamorphosis took up much of the first century, a period that later Christians have consistently regarded as privileged, even normative.”

with each other. If the Spirit is the highest and only authority and if each side appeals to him as support for its position, it is nigh impossible (particularly in a dualistic framework where all is either light or darkness) to make concessions and to work out compromises.²²⁰

Dunn also comments on these struggles within the Early Church:

Paul's theory of a Christian community bonded together into a developing unity by the diversity of charismata did not translate very well into practice. Out of the sparse information which comes to us from this period it would appear that three out of the four churches with whom Paul was in correspondence were in one degree or other threatened by the presence of (certain) charismatic phenomena. Charismata which were intended for the building up of community seemed rather to be destroying it (cf. 2 Cor 10:8; 13:10).²²¹

Paul's apostolic authority, and the authority passed to his co-workers, Timothy, Titus, and others, enabled them to stabilize churches and challenge false teachers and unfaithful living. But Schweitzer insightfully wonders if

the looseness of this order, which entrusts so much to the working of God's Spirit, can be maintained in a period when Paul's personal influence has ceased. Or is it inevitable that the Church does not sustain this freedom that subordinates itself to God, and that it either develops the momentum of Church order one-sidedly into a Church with an organized hierarchy, or just as one-sidedly turns the momentum of freedom into a system, 'till it dissolves in gnostic individualism?'²²²

These are serious questions and not to be taken lightly. But the reason for difficulties with the *charismata*, lies not in the gifts themselves but in the attitudes with which they were exercised. Early believers were not yet mature in Christ. They were transitioning from their old way of life to the new and had not fully grasped the implications of it. Their

²²⁰ Raymond Brown, *The Church the Apostles Left Behind*. 121-122. Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 330, says, "Those who rule with the force of the Spirit are always open to challenge by a new contender who claims the same Spirit in stronger measure."

²²¹ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 270. On the same page he says of the church in Thessalonica, "Paul was regarded in a rather condescending manner by those who enjoyed striking charismatic experiences and who took such charismata as a criterion of spiritual worth; the church was divided on the value of experiences of Spirit and particularly on the value of prophecy, because its most frequent manifestations lacked control; a section of the congregation had been so impressed by some inspired utterance (s) that they had adopted a manner of life which dishonoured Christ and made them a burden rather than a benefit to the community." Similar things could be said about the church in Corinth.

²²² Schweitzer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, 104.

“this worldly” thinking and behavior, including “idolatry and witchcraft, hatred; discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy” (Gal 6:20-21), caused much trouble. James chastises believers for worldly quarrels and fights caused by jealousy and wrong desires (James 4:1-12). Paul warns the Corinthians against pride and selfishness (1 Cor 4:18-5:8; 12:21), factionalism (1 Cor.1:10-4:7), disorder and confusion (1 Cor 14:33).²²³ Dubay comments that from Paul’s perspective,

a community that is split into diverse ideologies is immature. The members, or at least some of them, are not living the Gospel, are not led by the Holy Spirit. The apostle argues that he knows the Corinthians are worldly because they are divided (1 Cor 3:1-3). Division is a proof of communal immaturity, for the Spirit brings peace and harmony (Gal 5:22), whereas worldliness brings factions and dissensions (Gal 5:19).²²⁴

The solution to immaturity is maturity in Christ, and the whole body “healthy, growing, and full of love” which is why God gave the Church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers gifted with the Spirit (Eph 4:1-16). In spite of disagreements and struggles believers were to keep meeting together and encourage each other (2 Cor 13:11; Heb10:24-25). Believers were to exercise charismata in love (1 Cor 13) and prayerfully strive to discern the will of the Spirit who lived within them individually and corporately, uniting them in the “mind of Christ” (Rom 15:5-6; 1 Cor 1:10; 2:16; Eph 4:23).

That is easier said than done. In fact some like Raymond Brown think that it cannot be done. He says of the problems reflected in the Epistles of John,

the author ... is bound by the Johannine tradition that the Paraclete is the one who guides people along the way of truth (Jn 16:13). Consequently, even in the midst

²²³ See Snyder, *The Community of the King*, 171, where he says, “Many groups ‘profess to be followers of the Lord but they differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ Himself were divided,’” quoting from the Second Vatican Council, *Decree on Ecumenism* (Washington, D. C.: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1964), 1.

²²⁴ Dubay, *Authenticity*, 32.

of this great schism, he must write, “The anointing you received ... abides in you; and so you have no need for anyone to teach you” (1 Jn 2:27).

Noble as it is, his principle did not and will not work. ... In my judgment there is no way to control such a division in a Paraclete-guided community of people.²²⁵

Brown’s solution to this problem is: “If the author were a presbyter-bishop in the model of the Pastorals, he could silence his adversaries by his own authority (Ti 1:11). One of his tasks as an appointed teacher would have been the discernment of sound doctrine (Ti 2:1).”²²⁶ Brown supports reestablishing a guardianship over the congregations by wise church leaders (according to his Pauline model of eldership) and the suppression of dissent. He promotes ecclesiastical control as a safeguard against heresy. However, John is not the only advocate of Paraclete-guidance in the community. Paul, also urges all his converts to test claims to spiritual guidance in a variety of ways. While the problem of discerning and exposing false teaching was real, perhaps a greater danger in the Early Church was the attempt to control the uncontrollableness of the Spirit and eliminate charismatic expression in favor of dependence upon familiar, less-threatening and perhaps misleading human systems of decision-making and government. As will be seen in the next chapter, the Church succumbed to this danger many times during its history. However, the Church’s primary identity as the People of God had, and continues to have significant implications for how congregations make their decisions. Selecting the latest or most popular cultural models for decision making (especially business models) will not do—the Church is not primarily a religious business. It is the gathering of those called and gifted by Christ to God’s family as brothers and sisters, and its decision making practices should reflect that identity and facilitate loving relationships and unity.

²²⁵ Raymond Brown, *The Church the Apostles Left Behind*, 122-123.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

APPENDIX B

The Tests of Authentic Spiritual Guidance

The New Testament writers suggest several ways to evaluate prophecies, teaching and other “spiritual” utterances to “control the threat posed to community by a selfish inspirationism.”¹ Each test does not stand alone but works in conjunction with the others, providing a fuller basis for discernment than if they were only used individually.

1. The Test of “Sound Teaching”: Consistency with the Gospel.

Paul considers adherence to the teaching of the gospel to be of the utmost importance. He emphasizes his call to be an apostle and preach the good news of what God has done for humanity in Christ (Rom 1:1-17; 2 Tm 1:8-12). He rebukes the Galatians for so quickly deserting the true gospel, reminding them, “The gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (1:11-12). He tells the Corinthians, “I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3).² He reminds Timothy he was “nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed” (1 Tm 4:6, cf. 2 Tm 3:14-17). He charges him, “What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching,” (2 Tm 1:13) and warn anyone who “teaches false doctrines and does not agree with the sound instruction of the Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching” (1 Tm 6:3). Paul wants his converts to test everything (1 Thes 5:21) and know, “If an inspired utterance confirms or is in accord with the gospel

¹ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 281-282.

² For a full discussion of this verse see *Ibid.*, 234-235.

by which they are converted it can be concluded that the oracle is of God. If however, the utterance runs counter to that gospel it is to be rejected.”³

Peter defended the Gospel by tying it to scriptural prophecies which originated in God, not the prophet’s will and mind, implying that contemporary prophecies and teaching “inspired by the Holy Spirit” should not contradict either the Gospel or Scripture (2 Pt 1:20-21). John likewise encourages the recipients of his letters to test prophecies by a doctrinal standard: “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God” (1 Jn 4:2-3). He warns the readers of 2 John, “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son” (9). His readers have been anointed with God’s Spirit and should recognize, “No one who denies the Son has the Father” (1 Jn 2:23).⁴ Dunn summarizes the perspective of John, Paul, and the other Apostles:

That which remained normative was the *kerygmatic* tradition—the gospel and teaching which brought their Church into existence (1 Cor 11:2, 23; 15:3; 2 Thes 2:15) Earlier and other charismatic interpretations of that tradition might provide guidelines and limits for fresh interpretations of that kerygmatic tradition in different circumstances. *But the authority, belonged in an unparalleled way to the message of the first witnesses.*⁵

Any prophesy or teaching is to be tested against the Biblical teaching of the Gospel.

2. The Test of Fruit: Character and Lifestyle Matter

The image of bearing fruit has repeatedly been associated with discernment and judgment in among God’s people (Is 5:1-7; Mt 21: 33-46; Mk 12:1-12; Lk 13:6-9; Js 3:9-

³ Ibid., 293.

⁴ See 1 John 2:18-27 for the full discussion on discernment.

⁵ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 293-294.

12). Godly lifestyle and character should match claims to divine inspiration and commissioning. John the Baptist warned those who came out to see him, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. . . . Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Mt 3:8-10). Likewise, Jesus uses the imagery of trees and plants producing fruit when he talks about discerning and responding to the Kingdom of God (Mt 7:15-23; 13:24-30, 46-43; Lk 6:43-45), demonstrating God’s judgment on a fruitless fig (Mt 21: 18-22; Mk 11:12-21). He warns his disciples against the Pharisees’ hypocrisy, “yeast,” (Mt 16:6, 11-12; 23:1-36; Mk 12:38-40; Lk 12:1-3) and to those convinced that he is exorcising and healing through Satanic power, he shows the fallacy of their thinking, challenging them to examine the “fruit” of his ministry (Mt 12:15-37; Mk 3:20-30; Lk 11:14-26).

John White develops several principles for discernment from these passages that are helpful for evaluating the validity of spiritual gifts and experiences:

We cannot say that manifestations are good because of this, or that visions are of the devil because of that. . . . what God does, the enemy mimics, and can mimic superbly. Therefore, it is wrong and dangerous to attribute to God the work of Satan (Mt 12:31-32). . . . If we see good fruit follow the manifestations in someone’s life, we must assume that the source was good. We judge visions by what they lead to. God has his aims, and the devil has his. The aims are utterly different. Therefore, the results of their actions will differ *morally and spiritually*. . . . We must judge any manifestation, be it in the form of a vision or of an outburst of weeping, by its fruits. We must judge an expression of emotion by what it leads to. If bitter tears lead to a holier walk, then we may be sure the Holy Spirit produced the weeping.⁶

Donald Bridge and David Phypers add,

If the impression gained from seeing gifts exercised is primarily one of noise or emotional excitement; if those exercising gifts seem more concerned with promoting the idea of their own holiness, or spirituality, or ability than with

⁶ White, *When the Spirit Comes with Power*, 148.

exalting the Lord Jesus Christ; if gifts are seen as a means merely of inducing personal thrills, then Christians will be fully justified in doubting their reality.⁷

Paul's discussions of Christian character, the "acts of the sinful nature," and the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:16-26, cf. 1 Cor 6:9-11; 2 Cor 6:3-10; Eph 4:17-5:21; Col 3:1-14, 1 Pet 2:11-12) are also relevant here. Burtchaell notes that to combat heresy, "The pastorals begin to specify "sound," "good" and "devout" teaching. And how, when every teacher is carrying a divine license, does one tell who is sound and who deceitful? By what the teachers *do*."⁸ Claims of divine empowerment and inspiration should be considered suspect if they are not matched by godly character and lifestyle.⁹

3. The Gift of "Discernment of Spirits": Test Everything

Like other spiritual gifts, the "discernment of spirits" (1 Cor 12:10) is both a responsibility of the whole community and a specific gift given to particular individuals to aid in "testing everything" (1 Thes 5:21).¹⁰ Some commentators view it as the gift of "testing the spirits" (1 Jn 4:1) or "the ability to discern what is truly of the spirit of God and what comes from other spirits."¹¹ Others see it as "the phenomenon of 'discerning,

⁷ Bridge and Phipers, *Spiritual Gifts and the Church*, 92.

⁸ Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 304. See 1 Tm 5:17; 6:3; 4:16; 2 Tm 3:3; Ti 1:9-10; 2:1, 7.

⁹ Flynn, *19 Gifts of the Spirit*, 152: "Interestingly, an early Christian writing from the end of the first century (the *Didache*) gives advice on ferreting out a false prophet, though he speak the truth. If he stays three days, takes anything with him except bread, asks for money, teaches the truth but does not do what he teaches, he is a false prophet."

¹⁰ See Bugbee, Cousins, and Hybels, *Network*, 38 for a definition of the gift of "discernment of spirits": "The divine enablement to distinguish between truth and error, to discern the spirits, differentiating between good and evil, right and wrong. People with this gift: distinguish truth from error, right from wrong, pure motives from impure; identify deception in others with accuracy and appropriateness; determine whether a word attributed to God is authentic; recognize inconsistencies in a teaching, prophetic message, or interpretation; are able to sense the presence of evil." See also Flynn, *19 Gifts of the Spirit*, 153, and Fields and Rees, *Congratulations ... You're Gifted!*, 171. For examples see Acts 5:1-10; 8:20-23; 13:6-12; 16:16-22.

¹¹ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 171.

differentiating, or properly judging' prophecies."¹² Dunn asserts, "It is important to realize at the outset that *this gift* ("discerning of spirits," AV) *forms a pair with prophecy*. It is not to be thought of as an independent gift; rather it provides a *test* of prophetic utterance and a *control* against its abuse (so 1 Cor 14:29)—the equivalent in fact to the role filled by 'interpretation of tongues' in relation to glossolalia (12:10; 14:27f.)."¹³ Most likely this gift can be used in both ways to determine if the inspiration for "spiritual utterances" is from God or another source, human or demonic and Paul encourages this kind of discernment in 1 Thessalonians 5:9-22.¹⁴ Dunn summarizes this gift saying it "is to be understood as *evaluation of prophetic utterances, an investigating and interpreting which throws light on their source and their significance*. The importance of this charisma as a regulative force within the charismatic community can hardly be overemphasized."¹⁵

4. The Test of Love: Sacrificial Caring

Jesus commanded his disciples to "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another (Jn 13:34). He followed that command with a statement on discernment: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:35). Love is an important test of the validity of spiritual experiences and gifts because "The problem and the danger of charisma is that it can function purely at the level of the emotional and non-rational (glossolalia) or of the emotional and rational

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 233.

¹⁴ See Ibid., 236, where Dunn says, "'Test everything' obviously provides that cautionary qualification (cf. I John 4:1 and *Didache* 11.11, where *dokimadzein* is used in the same sense of a control to which prophets and prophetic utterances must be subjected)."

¹⁵ Ibid., 236.

(prophecy) and lack all moral and ethical character.”¹⁶ Thus, in the midst of Paul’s discussion of the use of spiritual gifts in the congregation (1 Cor 12-14) he inserts his “hymn to love.” Dunn says, “It is clear that love for Paul is a crucial test of charismatic phenomena. . . . *In short, even man at his religious best, at the limit of charismatic possibility, if in all that he lacks love, does neither himself any good (nor presumably his community).*”¹⁷ Using himself as an example, Paul seeks to help the Corinthians, who are eager for spiritual gifts and experiences, to understand that gifts are not important in and of themselves—they are to be used in loving service of others. As Paul knows, “It is impossible to experience love without charisma, since the loving character inevitably expresses itself in loving action, of service or whatever, and that is charisma as much as glossolalia or prophecy. *But it is only too possible to experience charisma without love* (1 Cor 3:1-4; 13:1-3; cf. Rom 14:15), or for love to be hypocritical (Rom 12:9; 2 Cor 6:6).”¹⁸ Paul speaks in tongues and prophesies (14:6, 18), experiences mysteries (2 Cor 12:1-10), has accepted poverty and suffering for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor 9; 2 Cor 11:16-33), *and* has obviously demonstrated his love for God and his converts (1 Thes 1:6-12). Dunn says,

*The proof of the spiritual man is not so much charisma as love. Both are necessary to the individual (as a member of the church) and to the church; but only when charisma is the expression of love of neighbour is it to be welcomed and valued; whereas when charisma lacks love it becomes a threat to community and a spiritual menace to the charismatic himself.*¹⁹

¹⁶ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 293.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 295.

5. The Test of “Building Up”: Congregational Edification

The fourth test is closely related to the third: authentic prophesy, teaching or other spiritual gifts should “build up” the congregation through words or actions that instruct and encourage (1 Cor 14:31). Paul describes the Church as a “temple” or “house” and

sees his own task essentially as a founder and builder of churches (Rom 15:20; 1 Cor 3:9f.; 2 Cor 10:8; 12:19; 13:10; cf. Eph 2:21) and his readers are reminded to ensure that what they do helps build one another up towards the ideal of a community whose mutual concern wholly expresses the Spirit and love of Christ (Rom 14:17ff.; 15:2ff.; 1 Cor 10:24 Eph 4:29; Phil 2:4; 1 Thes 5:11).²⁰

Paul also views the Church as a “body” (1 Cor 12:12-31), not just a collection of individuals, and is concerned to maintain the health and unity of the whole congregation. Therefore, he uses the test of “building up” (*oikodome*) several times in 1 Corinthians to address issues troubling that community (3:9-17; 8; 10:14-11:1; 14:3-19).²¹ To those who are arrogantly proud of their ecstatic worship, Paul affirms worship with both the spirit and with the mind, encouraging the Corinthians to promote unity and mutual edification (1 Cor 14:15-17). In addition, Dunn points out “the missionary dimension of proclamation and prophecy is integral to Paul’s concept of *oikodome* (cf. 1 Cor 3:5ff.; 2 Cor 10:8; 12:19; 13:10).”²² He concludes, “*Whatever does not build up, whatever word or action destroys the congregation’s unity or causes hurt to its members or leaves the outsider merely bewildered, that word or action fails the test of oikodomē, and should be ignored or rejected, no matter how inspired, how charismatic it seems to be.*”²³

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See Ibid.

²² Ibid., 296.

²³ Ibid.

APPENDIX C

Summary of Seven Models of Congregational Guidance

Guidance from Wisdom (Tradition, Bible, Natural Wisdom) Model Characteristics:

- *Sources of decision making authority:* Bible, tradition, experience, “natural” wisdom.
- *Leadership roles:* Teacher, preacher, knowledgeable authority, skilled expert, coach, planner, problem-solver, executive, disciplinarian.
- *Roles of Members:* Students, disciples, workers.
- *Processes/Structures:* Education, logical argument, Bible teaching; worship service as “teaching time;” goal to apply wise principles to give guidance; developing and presenting plans to solve problems.
- *View of the Church:* Gathering of those who have chosen to follow God’s wise law found in nature, Scripture, and tradition.
- *Strengths/Benefits:* Values wisdom, Bible knowledge, tradition, education, and learning from experience; provides objective standard/guidance for discernment between the wise/good and the evil/foolish; uses business skill to promote efficiency, success.
- *Weaknesses/Problems:* Lack of guidance by the Spirit, congregational involvement, and accountability; Bible as a “rule” book of moral principles; provides general but not specific guidance; anxiety over limited knowledge (information overload); can be static, legalistic, individualistic, rationalistic, naturalistic, pragmatic with a tendency towards self-sufficiency; promotes guardianship by the leaders over less wise and informed members, and a search for quick magic formulas to deal with problems.

Guidance from the Holy Spirit Model Characteristics:

- *Sources of decision making authority:* “Spirit” anointing that can be confused/ associated with a leader’s dynamic “charismatic” personality.
- *Leadership roles:* Prophet, “anointed” preacher, Spirit-led leader, individuals chosen based on perceived “anointing.” Leader as visionary.
- *Roles of Members:* Follow the leadings of the Spirit individually and corporately, follow the leaders as they follow the Spirit, test the “spirits.”

- *Processes/Structures*: Open times of prayer and prophecy in worship services and other occasions; sharing of individual guidance. Leader as “vision-caster” for congregation.
- *View of the Church*: Gathering of those called, gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- *Strengths/Benefits*: Allows room for God to make his will known to his people; promotes dependence upon God and the possibility of specific guidance for a given situation. Lessens the information overload pressure to “know everything.” Appeals to those who long to experience God in their lives, countering rationalism, pragmatism, and naturalism. Encourages dependence and waiting on God which helps counter restless impatience.
- *Weaknesses/Problems*: Can lead to individualized narcissistic “spirituality,” the hierarchical guardianship of the “visionary,” competing leaders/visions claiming God’s leading, a lack of responsibility for decision-making (Spirit dictating action), “cult” leadership, and false teaching if there is little training for and means of “testing the spirits.”

Guidance from the Community Model Characteristics:

- *Sources of decision making authority*: the “will of the people” or more accurately the “will of a collection of individuals.”
- *Leadership roles*: initiator, facilitator, and organizer of the process, guide, promoter of a position, or leader of the opposition.
- *Roles of Members*: voters, deciders.
- *Processes/Structures*: voting, consensus, debate, negotiation, *Robert’s Rules*, parliamentary procedure, democratic congregationalism.
- *View of the Church*: gathering of believing individuals who come together for support and encouragement in the pursuit of mutually decided-upon goals.
- *Strengths/Benefits*: affirms the equality of the members of the body (body of Christ) and allows all to contribute and participate in decision-making, variety of opinions/perspectives/insights expressed. Increased ownership of decisions by members. Guardianship is discouraged and the congregation is involved in decision making at many different levels.
- *Weaknesses/Problems*: disunity due to frustrations about losing or not being heard. Inability to resolve differences as it tends to be oppositional in nature. Voting blocks and silo mentality. Can emphasize narcissistic individualism and

self-seeking (each person voting for what they want) with a focus on the will of the people and the will of God being neglected. Pressure to conform. Information overload can be a problem with discussions being just a sharing of ignorance and prejudice. Voters can be relativistic, open to manipulation, false teaching, and misinformation since there is no objective wise standard for measuring against. Can be rationalistic, pragmatic, and naturalistic, but also involve false mystical spirituality.

Guidance from Wisdom and the Holy Spirit Model Characteristics:

- *Sources of decision-making authority:* anointing of the Spirit plus traditional, natural, and biblical wisdom.
- *Leadership roles:* Individual chosen on basis of tradition, Bible knowledge, wisdom, and spirituality. “Anointed” by the Spirit and set apart by the church for ministry.
- *Roles of Members:* learners, doers of the pastor-defined or traditional vision.
- *Processes/Structures:* pastor/leader focused, monarchical/hierarchical.
- *View of the Church:* Gathering of those who have chosen to follow God’s wise law, and are called, gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so.
- *Strengths/Benefits:* values wisdom and learning from experience, tradition, Bible knowledge, as well as encouraging dependence upon God and allowing for the possibility of specific divine guidance for a given situation. Can be efficient and make decisions quickly. Provides checks on mystical spirituality, rationalism, naturalism, and pragmatism.
- *Weaknesses/Problems:* Weak in community involvement. Tendency to elevate the “wise” and “spiritual,” which can lead to “divine right” to rule, domination and abuse of power. Conflict between wisdom sources and Spirit guidance; limited perspective due to individualism; strong tendency towards guardianship. Leader burnout due to information overload and unrealistic expectations to be all-knowing and all-spiritual.

Guidance from the Holy Spirit and the Community Model Characteristics:

- *Sources of decision making authority:* “inner light,” the guidance of the Spirit, community agreement, the “will of the people.”

- *Leadership Roles*: initiator, facilitator, and supporter of process; encourager of member involvement and openness. Special recognized role of “weighty” influential people.
- *Roles of Members*: discerners, deciders.
- *Processes/Structures*: Meeting to worship and do business, silent listening prayer and deliberation, sharing of “leadings,” consensus building, use of lots.
- *View of the Church*: Gathering of those called, gifted, empowered, and guided by the Holy Spirit who come together to support and encourage each other in the pursuit of mutually discerned goals.
- *Strengths/Benefits*: Consensus building is unifying for the congregation. Increased ownership for decisions by members. Slower process challenges restless impatience and allows for more consideration of relevant wisdom input and for all to share opinions and insights, dealing with information overload. Discourages rationalism, naturalism, pragmatism, and narcissistic individualism, and guardianship because of emphasis on seeking God’s will together. Can be very creative in problem solving.
- *Weaknesses/Problems*: can be weak on use of wisdom and the Bible which can lead to a lessened ability to “test the spirits” and evaluate mystical experiences and guidance. Avoidance of decision-making responsibility. Decision making takes time and can be less efficient.

Guidance from the Community and Wisdom Model Characteristics:

- *Sources of decision making authority*: combination of wisdom from tradition, the Bible, experience and the “will of the people.”
- *Leadership Roles*: elders, leadership team members, council member, delegated responsibility, often chosen because of wisdom and expertise.
- *Roles of Members*: participate in meetings, elect or choose those with delegated authority, abide by leaders’ decisions.
- *View of the Church*: Gathering of those who have chosen to follow God’s wise law, recorded both in nature and in Scripture, and embodied in tradition, who come together for support and encouragement in the pursuit of mutually decided-upon goals.
- *Processes/Structures*: discussion and debate, logical argumentation from wisdom sources, group evaluation of problems and solutions, councils, elder boards, leadership teams, prayers to make good decisions.

- *Strengths/Benefits:* diminishes guardianship and increases ownership of decisions as it values community input; checks and balances on power of leader; variety of insights/perspectives/giftings (body of Christ); affirms value of wisdom, including Bible; can be more efficient than just community guidance model; counters narcissistic individualism by community involvement, and false teaching and mystical experience with wisdom; less of a problem with information overload as evaluation responsibilities are shared.
- *Weaknesses/Problems:* Weak on guidance from God, can be quite naturalistic, rationalistic, impatient and pragmatic. Can lead to guardianship by leaders if there is a lack of input from congregation; silo mentality; no specific guidance. Can have conflict between Biblical teaching and “will of the people.”

Proposed Model: Guidance from Wisdom, the Holy Spirit and the Community

- *Sources of decision making authority:* A combination of wisdom from tradition, the Bible, experience, the “will of the people,” and guidance by the Holy Spirit; communal discernment.
- *Leadership Roles:* Individuals chosen on basis of tradition, Bible knowledge, wisdom, and spirituality. “Anointed” by the Spirit and the church for ministry as part of the body. Initiators, supporters, and guides of discernment process.
- *Roles of Members:* Exercising gifting as part of the body of Christ, sharing insights from the Holy Spirit and wisdom from experience, tradition, and study of Scripture. Learners, discerners and decision makers.
- *View of the Church:* The people of God, created in his image with reasoning and governing abilities for exercising dominion, empowered and gifted by the Holy Spirit for discernment and ministry.
- *Processes/Structures:* Discussion, dialogue, argumentation from wisdom sources, silent prayer and discernment, consensus building about the will of God for the community. Education and experience of all valued. Spiritual guidance through listening prayer also valued. Goal to communally share wisdom, experience, knowledge, and insights from the Holy Spirit to develop and agree together on solutions for problems and vision for the future.
- *Strengths/Benefits:* Values wisdom, Bible knowledge, tradition, education, and learning from experience; provides objective standard/guidance for discernment between the wise/good and the evil/foolish. Also is able to use business skill and insights when appropriate to promote efficiency and effectiveness. Promotes unity and increased ownership of decisions. Individualism and information overload are countered as it affirms the equality of the members of the body (body of Christ) and allows all to contribute and participate in decision-making and express a

variety of opinions/perspectives/insights/giftings. Guardianship is discouraged, community input is valued and the congregation is involved in decision making at many different levels. Rationalism, naturalism and pragmatism are countered by the involvement of the Holy Spirit who may give specific supernatural, creative, and unexpected guidance which goes beyond human wisdom. Allows room for God to make his will known to his people, with the possibility of specific guidance for a given situation. Encourages dependence and waiting on God which helps counter restless impatience as one cannot “force” God to speak. False mystical spirituality is countered by the community’s “testing of spirits” using the sources of wisdom and discernment.

- *Weaknesses/Problems:* Each of the three components (guidance from Wisdom, the Holy Spirit, and the Community) acts as a balance for the other two and helps counter their weaknesses. If one or two of the components is devalued or neglected then model can have the weaknesses associated with those lacks. Difficulties in gaining the balance between the three sources of guidance and understanding the relationship between them: Is one superior to the other? Are they to be ordered sequentially? Or is there a continual back-and-forth movement where the two are interspersed? Or is there an “incarnating” of God’s Spirit in human wisdom so that they operate simultaneously and cooperatively? Also, there may be questions about when and how much the congregation should participate in various decisions.

APPENDIX D

Congregational Decision Making Questionnaire

Adapted from “A National Survey of Ministry Student Spiritual Discernment 2007” by Dennis J Horton, in “Discerning Spiritual Discernment: Assessing Current Approaches for Understanding God’s Will”, *Journal of Youth Ministry* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 30-31. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed November 24, 2009).

This survey can be used either by a leadership/staff team to evaluate their congregation’s discernment and decision making practices, or to survey the congregation and assess its understanding and feelings about the current practices.

1. In your congregation who has the authority to make decisions about:

Vision for the Congregation as a Whole

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Vision for Program Areas (children, youth, adult, etc.)

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Scheduling

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Finances

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Programming

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Day-to-day Operations

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Pastoral Staffing

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Church Discipline

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Worship Service Content and Style

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Outreach/Involvement in the Local Community

congregation	members	leadership board	staff	lay leader	pastor(s)
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Pastoral Care

congregation members leadership board staff lay leader pastor(s)

2. When your congregation makes decisions concerning God's will for them how important are the following in their considerations?

Common sense

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Bible Study and biblical support

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

"Doors of Opportunity"

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Inner peace from the Holy Spirit

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Advice from experts

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Prayers for wisdom to make godly decisions

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Congregational interests and desires

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

The desires and interests of the congregation's leaders

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Confirming signs from God

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

The strengths, talents, gifts and abilities of the congregation

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Specific guidance or prophetic answers from God

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

The needs of the congregation

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

The needs of the local community

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Theological arguments

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

“Business” wisdom

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Consistency with the character/ethics of Jesus

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

Denominational traditions, history, advice, concerns, interests, etc.

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

The opinions, rulings, and decisions of denominational leaders or groups

Not Important Somewhat Important Important Very Important

3. How often is “business” or practical wisdom used to make congregational decisions?

always often occasionally rarely never

4. How often is guidance from the Holy Spirit used to make congregational decisions?

always often occasionally rarely never

5. How often are decisions made by majority vote?

always often occasionally rarely never

6. How often are decisions made by consensus?

always often occasionally rarely never

7. What processes/activities are used to discern God’s will and make decisions in your congregation?

research on the issue discussion/debate Robert’s Rules of Order

consensus development voting listening prayer sharing of stories

sharing of “leadings” corporate prayer getting advice from an expert

Bible study evaluating the congregation’s giftings, resources, and history

considering the congregation’s needs considering the local community’s needs

discernment meetings surveys requests for congregational input

8. How satisfied are you with the way your church makes decisions?

Very satisfied somewhat satisfied neutral somewhat unsatisfied unsatisfied

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