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# The Light of Christ Leads Followers in the Process of Individual and Corporate Discernment

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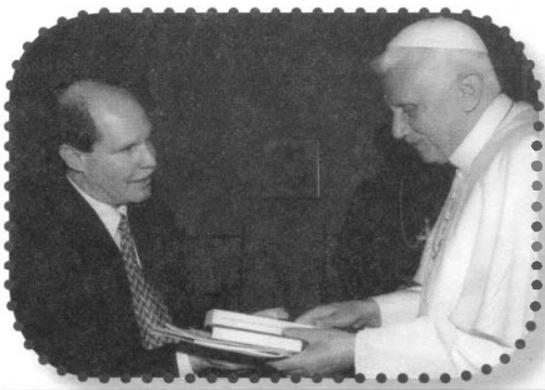
## THE LIGHT OF CHRIST LEADS FOLLOWERS IN THE PROCESS OF INDIVIDUAL AND CORPORATE DISCERNMENT

The Gospel of John declares that the Light of Christ, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world in the ministry of Jesus (Jn 1:9). God desires "truth in the inward parts" (Ps 51:6), and the New Covenant is written on hearts of flesh rather than tablets of stone (Heb 8:10; 10:16). In addition, Jesus promises that he will continue to teach and lead his followers through the workings of the Spirit of Truth (Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). Friends have found these promises to be true.

But how do we know the Lord's will, and does discerning the leadings of the Spirit happen only individually or also in community? George Fox and early Friends saw the Light of Christ and leadings of the Spirit as central to apostolic Christianity. Fox spoke of "the inward Light" (not the "inner Light") once in his *Journal*, but over fifty times he spoke of "the Light of Christ," which is at work in the hearts of all. He also referred to "that of God" in everyone around twenty times as a means of describing the work of Christ in the lives of people. Both images have a great deal of evangelistic appeal.

Thus, the effective evangelist is called to listen as well as to share. We may just learn something about Christ from the other, if we listen for "that of

*Paul Anderson shared his books and Friends literature with Pope Benedict at a meeting of Christian leaders in Rome.*



God" in others, as well as witnessing to it.

The explicit connection with Jesus Christ is most important. It is not simply an enlightened existence that Fox was talking about; rather, "that of God" is directly associated with the "Light of Christ" at work in the consciences of all persons, at least potentially. The work of the Holy Spirit furthers the teaching of Jesus (Jn 14:26; 15:26-27).

Several times, Fox connected these two images together directly. Upon returning home to Fenny Drayton after the beginning of his public ministry, he declared, "I appealed to that of God in their consciences, the light of Christ Jesus in them."

Christ leads us directly, through the Holy Spirit, but he also speaks through the Bible—an objective referent by which to test subjective leadings. Discerning the divine will is also assisted by reason, as thoughtful reflection helps distinguish wheat from chaff, and a robust knowledge of church history helps us abide in the truth as discerned within tradition.

In 1656, James Nayler felt that he heard a message from God to ride naked into Bristol on a donkey. After that embarrassment, Fox almost entirely dropped his references to "that of God" and "the Light" and began to organize structures of discernment so that leadings could be tested and affirmed in community. Therefore, discernment happens in solitude but also in community.

Several years ago, I was invited to write a letter to the Vatican in response to Pope John Paul II's letter to the churches citing the prayer of Jesus that his followers might be one (Jn 17:21). The thrust of my 16,500-word response ([georgefox.edu/discernment/petrine.pdf](http://georgefox.edu/discernment/petrine.pdf)) was

built upon the work of Everett Cattell, who in 1970 called for unity among Friends under the Lordship of Christ. As a fresh vision for Christian unity, forms and formlessness do not matter; the one essential feature is following Christ together in unity.

Two years ago, I was privileged to attend a meeting of Christian leaders in Rome, serving as an advisor to Nancy Irving, General Secretary of the Friends World Committee for Consultation. There, I was able to give Pope Benedict a personal copy of my earlier response to the Vatican. I also gave him my two books on the Gospel of John as well as a *Quaker Religious Thought* issue featuring "a dynamic Christocentricity." While I'd received a warm response from Cardinal Kasper about a vision for Christian unity under the Lordship of Christ, I think this was the first the Pope had seen.

On the way to lunch, I told Cardinal Kasper the story of how early Quakers, John Perrot and John Luffe, were imprisoned after witnessing to the Vatican in 1658. Perrot was released, but Luffe was hanged in the Inquisition. I shared with Cardinal Kasper that there has been some improvement over times past. In the past, Quakers sharing with the Vatican were hanged in the Inquisition. Now, their works are only hung up in committee! At that, we shared a laugh and a discussion about how Christ effectively leads within our lives and within community.

Whether it be the bishop of Rome or a Bible teacher in Newberg, the goal of every Christian leader is the same—to help people discern the will of Christ, individually and corporately, and to carry it out in responsive obedience. When that happens, authentic followers of the Light will indeed become Jesus' Friends (Jn 15:14-15).

**—paul anderson**

*surrender to Him who is within. In secret ejaculations of praise, turn in humble wonder to the Light, faint though it may be—Thomas Kelly*