

1-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Conniry, Charles J. Jr. (2006) "Discernment- Corporate and Individual Considerations," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 106, Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol106/iss1/2>

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DISCERNMENT—CORPORATE AND INDIVIDUAL CONSIDERATIONS

CHARLES J. CONNIRY, JR.

My assignment is to consider Christian spiritual discernment, which I define as a distinguishable assortment of processes by which Christians attempt to perceive and understand “God’s way” in the light of a particular set of circumstances. Much has been written on discernment over the last two decades and the field of literature is broad and diverse.¹ Accordingly, I will consider this subject along the lines of “corporate” and “individual” discernment as a means of bringing order to an otherwise bewilderingly diffuse body of literature. One phenomenon that becomes apparent in this analysis is that there are various conceptions of discernment that extend across the boundaries of discrete religious traditions. A study of this kind therefore does more to highlight the Church’s similarities than its differences. I do not cover every aspect of Christian discernment or even treat the aspects that I do cover here in a comprehensive way. Rather, I take up a more modest goal—namely, to organize the discussion of discernment around the two primary modes in which the Church attempts to perceive and understand God’s way in response to a particular set of circumstances, and to underscore the fact that Christian community plays an essential role in almost every instance of discernment. Another point that may be seen between the lines is that discernment falls properly within the domain of the Church at large and is not the exclusive property of any select group.

Analyzing discernment along the lines of “the corporate” and “the individual” fits well with other works dealing with spiritual practices more generally. Patricia Loring, for example, has written a fine two-volume treatment of spiritual practice among Friends. The first volume addresses “listening spirituality,” which pertains to the “personal;” the second addresses the same along the lines of the “corporate.”² Both modes of discernment, the individual and the corporate, play an indispensably important role in spiritual formation. For Loring, as well as for many outside the Friends tradition, the interplay between corporate practice and individual practice “support one another, support us on our way to and with God.”³ The quest to discern corporately and individually arises out of the conviction so

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poignantly articulated by Thomas Kelly—that “God still lives and moves, works and guides, in vivid immediacy, within the hearts of men [and women]. For revelation is not static and complete, like a book, but dynamic and enlarging, as springing from a *Life* and *Soul* of all things.”⁴

CORPORATE DISCERNMENT

Corporate discernment is a broad umbrella under which many different discernment practices can be cataloged. Therefore, it may help to consider this category from two vantage points: its form and its function. In terms of institutional form, there are at least two levels at which corporate discernment is carried on, which I call “episcopal” (referring to a single leader with oversight responsibilities) and “congregational” (referring to a group with shared responsibilities). In terms of practical function, there are at least two purposes toward which discernment is directed: decision-making and spiritual health assessment. In what follows, I will consider the two institutional levels at which corporate discernment is practiced and then look at the two practical examples of corporate discernment.

TWO INSTITUTIONAL LEVELS OF CORPORATE DISCERNMENT

The two institutional levels on which corporate discernment is typically conducted include the “*episcopal*” level and the “congregational” level. I am using the term episcopal here to point to church structures that lie outside (most often “above”) local faith communities. Denominational leaders or committees, whether appointed by ecclesial “higher-ups,” as is the case among Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and magisterial Protestants, or commissioned by a group of constituent congregations, as is the case among pastoral Friends and certain other Baptist and free-church fellowships, are often expected to ascertain what is best for the individuals and congregations under their purview. Even unprogrammed Friends may have committees of “overseers,” which is another word for the biblical word *episcopos*, as are the terms “superintendent” and “bishop.”

One of the earliest instances of discernment on the episcopal level was the first-century Council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15), which by

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most scholars' reckoning is not counted among the twenty-one general councils of the Roman Catholic Church that followed.⁵ The results of this early council were considered normative for Christians from that point on. Subsequent councils were organized during the fourth century C.E. and were both ecumenical, including as many representatives of the entire church as possible, and local, including only representatives of a given geographical locale.⁶

While episcopal structures are less pronounced among Protestant churches, they still exist, exerting varying degrees of influence among their constituent congregations. Among Protestants the term "council" is mainly reserved for entities like the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches of Christ. However, most Christian denominations hold annual or biennial conventions that function as venues in which decisions affecting the entire fellowship are made.

The institutional level at which the greater part of corporate discernment occurs is that of the local church or meeting—the "*congregational*" level. Theologian James Wm. McClendon, Jr. underscores the importance of local congregations in his treatment of the reading of Christian Scripture. He considers the primary source of this interpretive (discerning) activity "a local community of readers who meet and work together, readers who face the interpretive task from a shared context of witness in a particular place."⁷ McClendon acknowledges that discernment at the local level does not diminish the value and significance of national conventions or ecumenical councils or the worthwhile contributions of biblical scholars and theologians. However, "none of these" he argues, "can replace concrete common reading by an assembly of disciples."⁸ Thus conceived, local faith communities function as the primary point of reference (or "locus") of all discernment—both corporate and individual. But before I turn to individual discernment, a consideration of the practical purposes of corporate discernment is in order.

TWO PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF CORPORATE DISCERNMENT

Discernment activities at the level of the local church are engaged in for a variety of reasons, but two of the most common ends toward which such activities are directed are "corporate decision-making" and "strategic planning."

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Corporate Decision-Making. One liability of the term “decision-making” is the ease with which it may be conceived merely as “making the right choice when faced with a given set of options,” or “finding God’s will in a given instance and acting on it.” For example, Ben Campbell Johnson and Andrew Dreitcer contend that discernment in the biblical sense “always involves a decision, a judgment between alternatives.”⁹ Conversely, while Luke Timothy Johnson claims to equate discernment with decision-making, his conception of the latter is complex, including what he calls “*task* decisions” and “*identity* decisions,” which arguably encompasses much more in the way of discernment than merely judging between alternatives.¹⁰ Decision-making *as an instance of corporate discernment* seeks to locate its authority in the risen and present Christ. It is precisely “who we are as a local gathering in relationship to Jesus Christ” (identity decisions) that guides “what we do” (task decisions) in terms of engaging in collective work and witness.

Strategic Planning. Here particularly, questions of order and authority come into view. Who in the church, for example, has the authority to facilitate the strategic planning process or to cast a given vision? Some contend that this responsibility falls to the pastor and other key leaders to discern and communicate the vision to members of the local church or meeting.¹¹ Others envision the matter differently, insisting on a form of “communal spiritual discernment” in which “it is the effort of an entire faith-community to find God and, therefore, to find his actual word here and now to the whole community, to which the whole community as one is called to say ‘Yes, Father’ with one voice.”¹²

Tensions between institution and charisma, between church governance and the Spirit’s gifting, are not new. Such are attested throughout Christian history. One of the most notable cases in the New Testament, as Ray Anderson points out, is “the conflict between the Pauline concept of order grounded in Christ as ministering Spirit and the Jerusalem concept of order grounded in historical continuity with the apostolic office coupled with a hierarchical concept of ‘church’ over ‘mission.’”¹³ The point to be made here regarding the happy blending of structure and Spirit is sounded by McClendon, who states that the strength of congregational polity

lies not in a mechanical democracy of yes or no votes taken upon some leadership ukase or majority report; it lies rather in the mutual trust of brothers and sisters who can and will assem-

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ble; it lies in a diversity of gifts, of which leadership in one while discernment of spirits is another; it lies in listening to concerned outsiders; it lies in obedience to the Spirit. And the strength of connectional polity lies in the extension of these very elements of trust, diversity, openness, obedience to the wider peoplehood of which each congregation is but a part. What justifies any polity is not its effectiveness, for on occasion any may crumble, nor its convenience, for any may cause trouble: it is justified by the Spirit that indwells such communities of concern.¹⁴

In a word, communal discernment that is carried on at the congregational level enables local gatherings of disciples to perceive Christ's presence and to follow him in the collective experiences and expressions of the Christian life.

INDIVIDUAL DISCERNMENT

Like corporate discernment, "individual discernment" is a broad-based category that touches many facets of the Christian's personal spirituality. While it is appropriate for disciples to apprehend God's way as individuals, it is important as well to guard against an overestimation of one's ability to discern God's voice. This is where one's faith community plays an indispensable role. Simon Chan reminds would-be discerners that the work of discernment arises out of a deep relationship with God, which is at once rooted in redemptive community:

It is [from] that living organism called the church that we receive our true identity. Discernment, therefore, is ultimately a communal undertaking, based not on some private revelation that gives us access to privileged information about ourselves, others and the world but on the corporate reality that shapes our identity. In short, the church is the locus of all discernment because God's will is truly revealed there.¹⁵

Individual discernment thus shares much common ground with corporate discernment in that the locus of both is the same: the believing community. What distinguishes the latter from the former is its respective *focus*.

Moreover, while it is helpful to consider corporate discernment in light of its (institutional) form and (practical) function, individual dis-

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cernment is perhaps best accounted for in terms of three discrete emphases, which are called forth by different circumstances. At times, the disciple is confronted by the need for greater personal intimacy with God. Discernment is thus directed toward *personal spiritual formation*. At other times, one is faced with the need to choose between one path and another. Discernment in such instances essentially functions as *personal guidance*. There are also moments when the disciple encounters conflicting teachings. In such cases, one can be said to engage in *the discernment of spirits*.

Discernment and Personal Spiritual Formation. Discernment whose aim is spiritual growth is well described by John C. Futrell as a “conception, which involves choosing the way of the light of Christ instead of the way of the darkness of the Evil One and living out the consequences of this choice through discerning what specific decisions and actions are demanded to follow Christ here and now.”¹⁶ Peter Lord identifies four avenues of discernment whose goal is growth in the Spirit: Scripture reading, prayer life, ministry, and what he generally terms “life.”¹⁷ Regarding the latter, he says, “If we open our hearts and minds to the Lord’s guidance in all facets of our lives, we will discover that he is interested in everything about us. We can hear his voice and enter into fellowship with him, knowing that he cares about each of the day-to-day happenings that come our way.”¹⁸ In each instance of discernment, the aim is greater personal intimacy with God. Activities associated with discernment are not to be considered a one-sided affair, in which humanity alone searches for greater intimacy with the divine. It is quite the opposite, as Calvin Miller observes: “It presumes that deeper living is possible because God is near. Not only is he near, he longs to empower us in a deeper way and lure us ever deeper into the splendor of our affair with him.”¹⁹ One instance in which discernment and the focus on one’s personal spiritual formation converge is that of spiritual direction. It is a spiritual director’s principal goal to assist his or her directee in perceiving Christ’s presence in the day-to-day activities of life.²⁰

Discernment as Personal Guidance. Christians are often faced with the need to make choices. In each instance, as H. Edward Everding, Jr. and Dana W. Wilbanks observe, guidance for the disciple must take into account the role played by the *self*, by *Scripture*, and by the specific *situation* calling forth the need for discernment.²¹ Such guidance, moreover, is not done in isolation, for indeed “the individual *cannot* be isolated. . . . The individual is always a person-in-community.”

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One's "community" in this sense may be a combination of social constellations with which a person is associated, including one's family, social club, school, neighborhood, place of employment, and local church. But, say Everding and Wilbanks, "the important point is that the individual's decisions are crucially linked to the community with whose values and convictions he or she identifies."²²

The underlying assumption is that God's will can be known and therefore *should be followed*. However, this emphasis has generated debate as to the specificity of God's will for the individual. Is there a tailor-made plan or path that one must discern and follow in order fully to realize God's best intentions for one's life? Writers like Sinclair B. Ferguson answer in the affirmative: "The assurance of God's guidance is one of the characteristics of the Christian. It marks him out from his fellow men. Why should this be so? Because the very idea that God guides us implies that we live according to the *path* which he has laid down, that our lives have a *purpose* in the present, as well as a *destiny* for the future."²³ Garry Friesen dubs such a conception of God's guidance "the traditional view" and argues that God does not have "an ideal individual will" for each person. Such an approach, he says, "cannot be established by reason, experience, biblical example, or biblical teaching."²⁴ Furthermore, this view proves inadequate on several fronts: (1) it does not account for the so-called "minor decisions" of life, (2) it fails to offer a satisfactory way of choosing between genuinely equal options, (3) it engages "immature" approaches to decision-making, and (4) it relies solely on subjective sources of knowledge, thus ignoring the possibility of objective certainty in discovering God's will.²⁵

Simon Chan highlights the faith crisis that is often precipitated by the so-called traditional view among over scrupulous Christians who "worry themselves sick about missing God's 'perfect will' and settling for God's 'permissive will.'"²⁶ What such persons usually mean is that God at one point called them to a given vocation, which they in turn refused—thus forfeiting God's ideal purpose for their lives ever after. Chan offers the following pastoral comfort:

First, a person who is really concerned about God's will is probably already in it. The willingness and desire after God *is* the will of God. Second, making a mistake in one choice does not mean forever missing out on God's perfect will. God's will for one's life is found in the process of living in love and obedience, not in one crucial choice we made or failed to

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make. Third, the wrong choice may be the very means that God is using to bring the Christian to the place of contrition and humility that enables him to be the honest stockbroker that he is now. God's will is better served by an honest stockbroker than by a bad pastor!²⁷

One example of discernment as personal guidance is that of the Quaker "meetings for clearness," in which a group of people is convened to assist an individual in making a decision that is deemed to be of monumental import. Such persons are qualified to serve on the clearness committee by virtue of their spiritual maturity and wisdom as well as their familiarity with the person who is seeking their guidance. Meetings for clearness also demonstrate the vital role that community plays in the process of individual discernment.²⁸

Discernment of Spirits. One of the most significant works on the "discernment of spirits," is Ignatius' classic, *Spiritual Exercises*, which has influenced every subsequent generation. Ignatius conceived of discernment as the capacity to distinguish between the influences in life that come from God and those that come from the Evil One. While God imparts "spiritual comfort" when one's thoughts or activities are godly, "spiritual distress" is imparted by the enemy when one's thoughts or actions are less noble.²⁹ There may be times, however, when the Evil One feigns spiritual comfort in an effort to deceive the disciple. Alternatively, one may be misled by the soul's own activity, "based on established habits of mind or the implications of ideas or judgments previously formed" and be the product of either "the good or the evil spirit." In every instance, therefore, such impressions must "be very carefully scrutinized before we can give them complete credit and put them into effect."³⁰ All in all, the goal of discernment for Ignatius was more spiritual growth than it was the distinguishing of authentic religious experiences from the inauthentic and true teaching from false, which is how many writers conceive the task of discerning spirits today.³¹

What constitutes "evil spirits" for many contemporary writers, however, depends largely on the person engaged in a given instance of discernment. In speaking of the "welter of experiences" that people encounter in the Charismatic Renewal, Morton T. Kelsey observes that many in religious circles dismiss miraculous phenomena as either nonexistent or as coming from Satan. "What is needed," he says, "is some discernment or clear recognition of the value and source of

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these experiences.”³² Amidst such experiences the discerning of spirits must necessarily address several questions:

Where do they come from? Are they illusions that are only disguised physical experiences? Do they arise from the depth of the human psyche? Are they therefore merely human experiences? Do these phenomena arise from contact with a neutral spiritual environment that extends beyond the borders of the human psyche? Or do they come from some malignant spiritual reality bent upon destroying us human beings? Or are they actually signs of God’s action in our lives?³³

For some writers, evil spirits are lurking in the teaching of many contemporary radio and television evangelists.³ For others like Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, such evil is even more ubiquitous, constituting “toxins” in the belief systems of many professing Christians that show up in such forms as conditional love, instant peace, guaranteed healing, irreproachable clergy, investment tithing, salvation by works, spiteful God, irrational submission, and the like.³⁵ Such discernment is serious business for those so engaged. But in the end, it is perhaps most fruitfully appropriated by individuals and local faith communities to assess the authenticity of their own faith journeys, and, as Lesslie Newbigin writes, to do so with the confidence that “the Holy Spirit is free and sovereign, able to work in ways that demand rethinking of our own traditional categories....”³⁶

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to organize the diffuse subject matter relating to Christian spiritual discernment and to show that both corporate and individual discernment are conducted amidst local faith communities. What distinguishes corporate discernment from individual discernment is not the communal context in which it is conducted, but the *focus* to which a given instance of discernment is directed. Corporate discernment focuses on matters pertaining to congregational life. Individual discernment focuses on matters pertaining to personal faith. In drawing my observations from a broad cross section of Christian traditions, I have tried to show that practices associated with corporate and individual discernment extend across the boundaries of many faith communities and thus cannot be construed as the sole property of any particular group.

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Corporate discernment is carried on at two levels—the episcopal level and the congregational level—and is directed toward at least two purposes: corporate decision-making and strategic planning. Individual discernment is to be distinguished from corporate discernment more by its *focus* than by its *locus*. For while it is grounded in the believing community, it is focused on at least three dimensions of personal spirituality: spiritual growth, personal guidance, and the discerning of spirits. Matters to be studied in greater detail include instances of Christian discerning that extend beyond the parameters of corporate and individual discernment, such as is proper to “Christian social ethics,” for example, and the degree to which the modern-to-postmodern shift in epistemic categories has impacted the contemporary church’s perceptions and practices of discernment.

NOTES

1. My research on discernment has led me to produce a typology that organizes the literature on the subject along the lines of ecclesial discernment (whose focus is on a given aspect of the church), formational discernment (whose focus is directed toward one’s individual spiritual formation), and moral discernment (whose focus is on one aspect or another of moral judgment). The dichotomy between “corporate” and “individual” is generally more appealing to the conceptual palates of westerners than it is to non-westerners.
2. P. Loring, *Listening Spirituality Volume 1: Personal Spiritual Practices Among Friends* (Bethesda, MD: Bethesda Friends Meeting, 1997); idem, *Listening Spirituality Volume 2: Corporate Spiritual Practices Among Friends* (Bethesda, MD: Bethesda Friends Meeting, 1999).
3. *Ibid.*, Volume 2, 7.
4. T. Kelly, *The Eternal Promise* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966), 20.
5. Two other early instances of corporate discernment include the choosing of Matthias (Acts 1:12-26) and the selection of the seven to minister to the church’s widows (Acts 6:1-7). Institutionally speaking, however, both instances occurred at the “congregational” rather than “episcopal” level.
6. J. H. Hall, “Church Councils,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Second Edition, Ed. W. A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 297-98.
7. J. W. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Doctrine, Volume II* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 41.
8. *Ibid.*
9. B. C. Johnson and A. Dreitcer, *Beyond the Ordinary: Spirituality for Church Leaders* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 99.
10. Cf. L. T. Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision-Making in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 13-14.
11. J. Herrington, M. Bonem, and J. H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 49.

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12. J. C. Futrell, "Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 4, 5 (November 1972), 162.
13. R. S. Anderson, *Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 125.
14. McClendon, *Doctrine*, 479.
15. S. Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 208.
16. J. C. Futrell, "Ignatian Discernment," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 2 (1970): 47.
17. P. Lord, *Hearing God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 209-41.
18. *Ibid.*, 235.
19. C. Miller, *Into the Depths of God* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 18.
20. Cf. Loring, *Volume 1*, 180-82.
21. H. E. Everding, Jr., and D. W. Wilbanks, *Decision Making and the Bible* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1975), 23.
22. *Ibid.*, 50.
23. S. B. Ferguson, *Discovering God's Will* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 15 (his emphasis). Pictured on the front cover are several sets of railroad tracks, which illustrate well the author's conception of God's will for the individual; later editions show two people walking together along a path.
24. G. Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, 427.
25. *Ibid.*, 427-28.
26. S. Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 201.
27. *Ibid.*, 201-02.
28. Cf. Britain Yearly Meeting (Society of Friends), *Quaker Faith and Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain* (Warwick, UK: Warwick Printing Company Limited, 1995), §§ 12.22-12.25.
29. St. Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola*, trans. T. Corbishley (Weathamstead, Hertfordshire, UK: Anthony Clarke, 1973), 314-36.
30. *Ibid.*, 336.
31. One of the earliest examples of a well reasoned theologically informed attempt to substantiate authentic religious experience is embodied in Jonathan Edwards' *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746). Cf. also William Wilberforce's *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country* (1829).
32. M. T. Kelsey, *Discernment* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 4.
33. *Ibid.*, 4-5.
34. Cf. M. Horton, ed., *The Agony of Deceit: What Some TV Preachers are Really Teaching* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1990); J. E. Adams, *A Call to Discernment*.
35. S. Arterburn and J. Felton, *Toxic Faith: Understanding and Overcoming Religious Addiction* (Nashville, TN: A Division of Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991).
36. L. Newbiggin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (New York, NY: Friendship Press, 1954), 106.