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A Covenant Epistemology

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A COVENANT EPISTEMOLOGY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

LARRY TAYLOR

PORTLAND, OREGON

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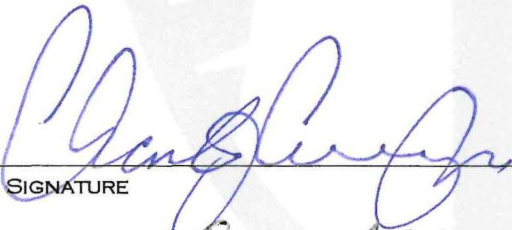
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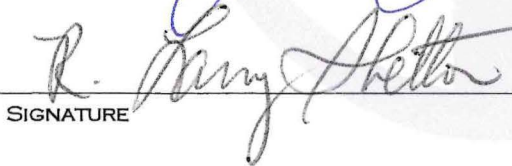
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To Phyllis

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us...

Acts 15:28

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ABSTRACT

The problem addressed in this paper concerns how large, charismatic-type churches practice their ecclesial epistemology. It is the position of this paper that the typical hierarchical approach to leadership has hindered the epistemological process by placing too much responsibility on one person, the senior leader, and too little responsibility on the congregation as a whole.

Covenant Epistemology is a response to this problem, by calling on the whole church to function in unity in the discernment process. Its core feature is the covenant that bonds members of a faith community together to a unique commitment to seek collectively knowledge and discernment. Chapter 1 sets the stage by establishing the claim and explaining the connection between the development and content of subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 presents the biblical materials to establish the background and the reason why charismatic churches often look to a single, senior leader for prophetic-like vision and exclusive knowledge, and to show further how God implemented a new plan in the New Testament.

Chapter 3 supports another major thread by illustrating three distinct Christian traditions, exhibited particularly in the lives of Ignatius Loyola, George Fox, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, each illustrating the importance theology and tradition has placed on the inclusive knowing community of faith.

Chapter 4 provides historical and philosophical materials that further support the thesis by discussing the failure of the Modern Period with its emphasis upon the individual, autonomous knower. A recent trend, “Social Epistemology,” warrants another major component by showing the strength of community discernment.

Chapter 5 reiterates the basic meaning and application of a Covenant Epistemology, the core of the thesis. In this final chapter, potential challenges and lasting benefits are addressed, concerning churches that are willing to apply the concept of a covenant epistemology to their particular congregations.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Narrative

It is cold and rainy on this gray Monday afternoon in January, not unusual for a Seattle winter. Inside Word of Life Church the thermostat reads 72 degrees but there is a noticeable chill in the air in the Conference Room where the board of elders waits for the senior pastor to arrive. The church recently passed a milestone tenth anniversary, proud to have had the same pastor during the whole time. Pastor Martin Zimmer planted the charismatic church and watched it swell to a congregation of over a thousand worshippers today, made up largely of suburban white professionals. As the digital clock on the wall clicks 1:07 P.M. Pastor Zimmer enters briskly through the exquisitely oak-framed antique double door clutching his briefcase in his left hand. Fashionably dressed in a dark suit and decorative silk tie, he glides into the room, his head poised and chin tilted upright and with an expression glowing with confidence. He takes his place behind the broad-framed Plexiglas pulpit and says, "Thank you for being here. God has great things in store for our church. Let's get started with a word of prayer." He pauses, then begins the slow but deliberate invocation, increasing volume as he goes; he calls upon the Holy Spirit's presence and the wisdom of God to direct this crucial meeting. Others join in, lifting their voices as they ring out enthusiastic prayers in agreement. But something else is noticeable: beneath the tone of the pastor's prayer lies a hint of resignation,

determination, and the familiar sound of closure that tells the elders he already knows what God wants because God has spoken to him personally.

Robert, a middle-aged businessman and land developer, sits quietly but intently as he awaits the unfolding announcement. He is soon disappointed but not surprised at the pastor's news, for the moment that the last whispering breath can be heard in the room agreeing, "Amen," Pastor Zimmer drops the bombshell. "The Central Eldership Committee and I believe God's will for our church is that we should purchase the 75th Street property and remodel the building that presently exists on site to serve as our future Christian education complex. I know it will involve some sacrifice, but in the long run if we don't take risks we actually run the greater risk of missing an opportunity and losing sight of the vision God gave us, which is 'to enlarge our tent and prepare to expand our borders.' "

"God's will for our church, indeed!" Robert thinks to himself. Yet, he notices that there are no visible signs of disagreement or discontent among the board members. In fact, the twenty to twenty-five men and women who are here today seem to nod and smile approvingly when Pastor Zimmer makes the announcement. They are prepared to do whatever they are asked to do because he is their pastor, he listens to God, and he has the role of perceiving the vision for the church and sharing that with the leaders and congregation. Usually this is sufficient for Robert too, but not this time, because his expertise and knowledge in the business of land development and building renovation make him doubt the wisdom of this move. "Too costly," he mutters to himself. Besides, the church recently completed a four-year campaign to raise money for the new

sanctuary, and it is not like the education department is bursting at the seams. No, Robert feels frustration because he feels that too few knowledgeable people were included in the process. This was Pastor Zimmer's vision.

Worse still is Robert's confusion. He feels that he has a pretty good handle on the fundamentals of his faith, but he realizes he is no theologian and lacks confidence to question the leadership. A similar event happened three years ago when the senior pastor had a vision that subsequently was a disaster. In the previous instance, the church spent over seventy thousand dollars for an outreach project that never panned out. Still the senior pastor is the head of the eldership board and Robert accepts the idea that the Bible supports this hierarchical structure of church leadership. The pastor serves as the prophetic voice of Word of Life Church, and it is the elders' job to implement that vision. The roles are written into the church constitution. He has been taught this reflects the biblical teaching. He believes that elders should be led by a head elder, a seer, or visionary much like Samuel or Moses in the Old Testament. "But what if the pastor's vision is wrong?" he thinks to himself.

Robert is uncomfortable about Pastor Zimmer's financial decision, but he understands that his role as an elder is to listen to and implement the decisions made by the Central Eldership Committee based on Pastor Zimmer's ideas. He would like to question aspects of this announced decision today and be honest about what he thinks is wrong with it. But he does not dare. The culture of the church is well established, and the participants understand and accept their roles and responsibilities. Roberts looks at the other elders, and he sees no obvious sign others think this is a bad decision. He considers

it disloyal to talk to others privately to see if his opinion is an isolated one. One of the elders and prophets, Betty Kirkpatrick, stands up and confirms the decision by sharing a vision she had the previous day. Robert's confusion sinks further as he shifts into his customary downward spiral of guilt and self-flagellation: "Maybe it's just me. Maybe I just need more faith to see it. After all, it is Pastor Zimmer's responsibility to know God's will for our congregation. It's not my responsibility."

Unfortunately Robert's initial doubts are not unique. Many large, god-fearing charismatic churches err when it comes to making major decisions. Often their leadership models, for better or for worse, limit the knowledge process and responsibility for knowing God's will to a single person: the senior pastor. Why do charismatic Christians believe it is the pastor's role to know God's will and share this information with the church instead of the pastor and the congregation striving together to know the will of God? This project addresses this and the following questions:

- If ideas of leadership are based upon the Bible, where does it say that the senior pastor is primarily or solely responsible for knowing God's will for the church?
- Are there clues or models found in the New Testament directing churches about how to discern the will of God?
- When facing major questions concerning doctrine, church values, risky decisions, shouldn't the whole church feel responsible for knowing the will of God?

- How can the biblical principle of the priesthood of all the believers be applied while still recognizing the gifts of leadership to the body?
- How can the position that the senior pastor has the prophetic leader's role of knowing the will of God be defended when there is so much biblical and philosophical evidence that shows knowledge depends more on social relationships than on leaders?

Problem and Claim

The specific problem addressed in this project has to do with how the church approaches the subject of the knowledge of God's will. I believe church organizations have adopted biblically unwarranted hierarchical models that depend too much on the responsibility of one person or a select few to know God's will. One person, or even a handful of persons, should not be responsible for making crucial decisions on behalf of the whole congregation. Churches should be concerned when authority to understand and communicate the will of God is being vested in a single ruler (monarchy) or a select few (oligarchy). However, this author further contends that church decisions should be decided neither by advancing the claim of majority vote (democracy) nor by chosen representatives of the majority (republic).

A better and more biblical model for knowing God's will for the local church depends on the gifts and calling of the individual members of the church, their unity in diversity, and their spiritual and social bond with one another. It is more biblical because first, God has made us social creatures; and second, the New Testament model is a

fulfillment of the Old Testament prediction of the coming new covenant. God explicitly foretold of the event of the outpouring of his Spirit. Once the Spirit filled each believer each person acquired a deposit of the knowledge of God. God lives within every believer today and conveys his own life in and through each person who in-turn benefits the larger body. Therefore it is every person's responsibility to seek knowledge of the will of God.

Too often churches unwisely and unknowingly neglect important and gifted segments of the church because they are hemmed in by the regularity of their unwarranted Bible-interpretation traditions. Regardless of whether the neglect is intentional or not, the net effect weakens the church's God-given power to make the best decisions that influence its destiny and fruitfulness. Most importantly, hierarchical models that depend on the authority of a single individual underestimate the New Testament concept of the authority and prophetic nature of the whole church, and undermine the natural flow of unity intended for Christ's body.

Churches deeply desire to know the will and purpose of God for the congregation. Leaders believe that the Holy Spirit speaks today and has a wonderful plan and direction for the church. Accurate knowledge of God is important to the leaders. The senior pastor seeks God's direction as he prepares to make crucial decisions about the church.

Most pastors are acutely aware that a major mistake in judgment can lead to serious consequences related to their positions. They realize the congregation's confidence in their leadership matters more than what a church's constitution states about who is in charge. There is no guarantee that people will follow the leadership, they might

choose instead to leave the church over a string of questionable decisions. Congregations and leaders stand to lose together when errors are made in knowing the will of God.

In response to the problem articulated above, it is the thesis of this paper that it is possible to facilitate the knowledge gathering and decision-making processes in corporate-size charismatic churches¹ by introducing an epistemological model that is more inclusive and based on a covenant of trust, which helps the congregation to collectively know the will of God. The paper will focus on the actual epistemological basis of congregational discernment and discuss it in biblical, philosophical, and theological terms, thus isolating the question of the church's capacity to verify knowledge of the will of God.

It is not uncommon for church leaders to claim to know God's will and make decisions based on that knowledge on behalf of the whole church. Church leaders should be able to account for the way they arrive at the knowledge and why others should believe it is the will of God. This paper introduces an alternative model which I call, a "covenant epistemology."² My hope is that congregations will seek knowledge together

¹ Generally, the standard that defines "corporate" size churches denote congregations of 350+. See Carl S. Dudley, "Process: Dynamics of Congregational Life," in Nancy T. Ammerman, *et al.* eds. *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 118-119.

² To date I have not found this precise terminology in anything published. I do not claim it as an original concept. For a general introduction to epistemology, however, there is seemingly no end to the published materials available. I offer a few suggestions here: Cf. Louis P. Pojman, ed., *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing CO., 2002); idem, *What Can We Know?: An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing CO., 1995); Richard L. Kirkham, *Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); Jonathan Dancy, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (New York: Blackwell, 1986); Stephen Cade Hetherington, *Knowledge Puzzles: An Introduction to Epistemology* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Peter Carruthers, *Human Knowledge and Human Nature: A New Introduction to an Ancient Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

on the basis of this social epistemology. If successful, this new model in congregational discernment will be more dependable in gauging knowledge of the will of God and thus save the church from poor decisions based on falsehoods and potentially protect both the congregation and pastoral leadership from serious harm.

Contextual Factors

Demographics

I am part of the leadership team of a large, 2,000 plus member congregation. Currently the congregation owns two campuses. The main campus sits on a large, beautiful, multi acre property on top of a small butte overlooking Portland, Oregon; this location is called the East campus. The West campus serves a few hundred people, and the senior pastor alternates preaching live between the campuses while beaming his message via satellite back to the other campus.

The church consists mostly of urban and suburban white middle-class families and individuals, with some Asians, Hispanics, and African Americans. A small portion of the population originated the congregation more than fifty years ago. The rest have been added gradually and with the typical transitional problems of new families joining the church while others, for various reasons, move on elsewhere. In many ways the church is typical of evangelical and charismatic churches in its programs, emphases, and core values.

Governmental Structure

Only three pastors have served since the church's founding and the current pastor has been the senior leader for more than a dozen years. The church leadership system is a functional hierarchy with the senior pastor serving as the head elder, along with a "Strategic Leadership Team," (SLT) consisting of six to eight other elders who make the most important decisions. The process of decision-making is quite clear and has been written into the church values statements and constitution. The senior pastor and SLT work with a larger body of elders who share the ecclesiastical and legal responsibilities for church doctrine and direction. Various levels of lesser leadership teams sometimes meet with the elders, but the constitution gives the senior pastor the responsibility to know the will of God and cast vision for the church. The constitution states the primary job of the body of elders is to implement the senior pastor's vision, though technically discussion and debate between the senior leader and the other leaders is assumed.

The church congregation is usually well informed by mail, email, public announcement, and weekly bulletins about any changes in the pastor's vision and major decisions made by the church elders. A body of lay leaders that serves in various capacities of the church, including home cell ministry, meets together with the elders and pastors two to four times a year to be informed of upcoming major decisions and past discussions among the elder board. The lay leaders lack authority to overturn decisions made by the elders, and it is customary for the senior pastor to communicate the most important and sensitive information to this group.

Historic Timelines

The church's heritage stems from the Pentecostal-Holiness movement in America that emphasizes the gift of the outpouring of the Spirit and speaking in tongues as a fulfillment of last days' prophecy. Over time the emphasis on speaking in tongues as the initial sign of the Holy Spirit's baptism has weakened doctrinally but is still practiced by many leaders. Perhaps this is due to the theological diversity within the Pentecostal tradition. Tongue-speaking has become more a matter of orthopraxy and less an issue of orthodoxy. The emphasis on the last days' doctrine has coincidentally diminished as well.

The church is typical of large charismatic churches that expect major decisions and knowledge of the will of God to be confined to the leaders, especially the senior pastor. Spiritual and biblical direction are both important, though both the prophetic and corporate emphases have helped to cement the idea that a church moves more efficiently under a pastor who serves as a chief executive officer (CEO). This type of ecclesiastical structure has influenced others and spread to smaller congregations and their leaders in the form of an association. The traditions are still quite biblical in the sense that many principles of leadership and authority have been derived from Scripture, especially based on the Old Testament models of leaders and prophets.

While the corporate business model has influenced corporate size charismatic churches in America, fundamentalist-type roots have influenced the ideas of leadership of this author's church even more. Nothing is presumed to be more important than the truth of the Bible, and it is important to examine what the Bible teaches on leadership and the church, especially when it comes to knowledge of the will of God. The importance of

biblical foundations of leadership models provides the impetus for examining the prophet model of leadership instead of the corporate model.

Symbolic Communication

In my church the pulpit commands notice and the man (usually) who stands behind it represents the authority of God to the people. In the church, members frequently hear the statement: “it is an honor to stand behind the pulpit.” The Reformers believed that handling the word of God in preaching is powerful and authoritative. But there is more to this statement than what the Reformers intended, in that the pulpit is a symbol of the office of the senior pastor who has a divine appointment to serve as head of the church leadership team. Therefore, in some ways the pulpit will always represent the authority of the senior leader who speaks on behalf of God for the congregation. The constitution says: “it is the leader’s job to know God’s will for this church.” One sign that indicates the significance of the pulpit is the fact that in more than ten years of my experience in the church, fewer than four leaders typically share the pulpit and preach to the main congregation despite the fact there are men and women in the church equally if not more capable of handling the preached word. Rarely does anyone preach behind the pulpit that is not directly tied to the senior leadership of the church and who is guaranteed to reflect his knowledge and will for the people.

A second symbol of the leadership structure is the standard way in which the congregational seating is arranged and the tables and chairs are set up for leadership meetings. In all meetings and leadership gatherings the senior pastor customarily sits at

the head. Often leadership meetings are set in the format of a church service, with rows of chairs facing the pulpit and the senior pastor presiding and speaking after a time of music and worship. On both campuses the services are organized with the standard setup of chairs and pews facing forward as is typical of most Evangelical and charismatic churches.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 2 discusses the biblical references on the subject of a proposed covenant epistemology. The discussion will establish the importance of the authoritative office and role of the Old Testament prophet, just as charismatic churches believe already. It will show that the prophet's original role was first to understand the will and purpose of God and then disclose the divine message to the people of Israel. The prophets were unique, Holy Spirit-led individuals whose service was crucial at the time but limited to the Old Testament period. The prophets actually predicted the day when their task of mediating the word of God to the people would close when all of God's people would be filled with the knowledge of God.

The individual prophet's voice of the Old Testament was superseded on the Day of Pentecost by the outpouring of the Spirit and subsequent prophetic endowment and authority of the church. The gift of leadership in the New Testament church relates specifically to the gift of pastor-elder and balances leadership with congregational discernment. The movement from the individual prophets to the prophetic endowment of the whole church represents a dramatic paradigm shift. Examples in the New Testament

teach that the church is responsible for discerning the will of God and that the job cannot be left to an individual leader, no matter how gifted. The story of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 serves as an appropriate biblical backdrop, offering procedural principles and an effective example of a covenant model for modern churches.

Church history provides additional support for the concept of congregational discernment as seen in the life and vision of the Spanish priest and Jesuit founder, Ignatius of Loyola, known for establishing a strict but effective epistemic methodology for individuals desiring to know the will of God in his classic, *Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatius made lesser known contributions, stemming from his self-doubts, indicating the need to consider discernment a matter that requires the help of a director and a community of seekers.

The leadership of George Fox and the founding of the Quakers provide a historic and substantial witness to the wisdom of corporate or congregational discernment. While different in many ways from the present corporate structure of most charismatic churches, this movement focused on the common value of each member of the community and placed emphasis upon the whole congregation's responsibility to discern God's will for the church.

Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of the more recent theological contributions of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the subject of community life and corporate discernment. His life and works offer rich support for the need to be inclusive in church discernment and the importance of openness within the community of faith, which is so vital to sound decision-making.

Chapter 4 turns to philosophy and how epistemology plays a role in the life of the church. It discusses specifically the changes that have occurred in the history of epistemology. It mentions the historic development of modern philosophy which over-emphasized the individual subject and the authority of reason and sense experience that undermined divine revelation and spiritual direction in the church. It also discusses the weakness of the modernist system while pointing out common sense criteria for truth and how churches may benefit from them.

The final segment of the fourth chapter describes one of the more recent and exciting new epistemic models based on community or social cognition. Recent social epistemology tends to dispel the notion of the capacity of a single individual to know the truth. Social epistemology reflects a refreshing and yet classical approach to knowledge. The chapter concludes by showing how this social philosophical model correlates with the New Testament ideal of covenant relations and the Holy Spirit's diverse gifting to the church.

The fifth chapter introduces the covenant epistemology model formally and delineates its content and essential features. Chapter 5 shows how this model could be adapted and implemented within the context of a typical corporate size charismatic church. It will further discuss the importance of enacting basic principles and teachings that are indispensable for the model to succeed. Chapter 5 discusses the problems related to authority and gifting based on the current cultural trends, the roles different people play in a local congregation, and the fine distinction between the responsibility of leaders and the entire church body.

Further, we have concluded with some of the potential hurdles that could stand in the way of successfully implementing a covenant epistemology, and considered what it will ultimately cost for a congregation to function effectively in the corporate task of discerning the will of God. In the final segment of chapter 5 we discuss the clear benefits of employing a covenant epistemology model in the local church and end with a basic challenge to contemporary churches.

Admittedly, at the heart of this project is a basic appeal as well as a set of specific principles and guidelines for church leaders. Ultimately it is an attempt to persuade leaders to accept the fact and understand the reasons that churches sometimes make poor judgments and harmful decisions because they have not yet realized the value of implementing a covenant epistemology model into their system of corporate discernment. We believe this congregational discernment project offers a potentially powerful and lasting practical benefit to corporate size charismatic churches. Doubtlessly it has implications for various size churches as well. Regardless, our hope is to positively affect as many church communities as we can, as many as are sensitive to the blowing winds of change.

CHAPTER 2

FROM THE PROPHET TO THE PROPHETIC CHURCH

Introduction

This chapter addresses the biblical materials to support the concept of a covenant epistemology by describing a paradigm shift. In the Old Testament God revealed his will and purpose to select individuals known as prophets of God. However in the New Testament he reveals his will and purpose directly through the church. God intentionally used autonomous individuals in the Old Testament to discern his will, even though he intended the communications to reach the entire community of Israel. A paradigm shift occurred between the Old Testament and the New as God poured out his Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Subsequently, God has spoken primarily to his people through the community rather than through Mosaic-like prophets. The Old and New Testament models for discernment and authority differ within the context of the faith community. Here we will make the important connection between understanding and knowing God's will (epistemic dimension) and having a right and obligation to represent God's voice in telling others what to do (authoritative dimension).

This chapter also addresses the problem of applying the Old Testament prophetic model to the New Testament concept of a pastor. If the Old Testament prophetic model were consistently applied today in the life and office of the senior pastor, as some

charismatic churches believe it should, then the pastor would be in a position to assume responsibility for discerning God's will for the church and speaking with authority on behalf of God to the congregation. The Old Testament model of the authoritative prophet, however, has been superseded by the New Testament model of the authorized community, not an authoritative pastor-prophet. This premise is warranted based on several key passages of the New Testament scripture, focusing especially on the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. We believe this passage reveals a crucial paradigm shift away from an individual oriented epistemological model to one based on the corporate body directed by the Holy Spirit. In conclusion, the chapter discusses how this paradigm shift affects the relationship between church leadership, particularly the office of a charismatic senior pastor, and the rest of the assembly.

The Prophet in the Old Testament

The Revelation to Moses

In the Old Testament Law, Moses was the first who carried the full responsibility to understand the voice of God and to declare God's commandments to the people. Moses did not seek the job. He was called by God and given the special covenant-keeping name of God, Yahweh, (Exodus 6:2-5).¹ As God's prophet, he had a unique relationship between himself and the people, Israel. Moses was truly an extraordinary gifted servant who experienced a profound revelation of God.

¹ Yahweh is the commonly accepted transliteration of the divine Hebrew name of God as it was revealed to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai. See esp. Walther Eichrodt's contribution on the divine name in *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 178-194.

God revealed himself to Moses in a particular way that was unknown to other men and women previously. The revelation of God to Moses sets the tone for understanding that God desires a more intimate relationship with humankind than simply awareness of God's existence. Even in the revealed name something special is disclosed concerning God's personality and characteristics. Moses shows little appreciation at first in understanding the fact that God has never shown anyone who he is with such clarity and intimacy before he reveals himself to this humble shepherd in the wilderness of Sinai. As Brevard Child's explains:

The importance of the phrase "I am Yahweh" for the entire passage emerges at the outset from its repeated usage (vv. 2, 6, 7, 8). It is the basic formula by which God identifies himself in an act of self-revelation. He does not merely inform Moses of his name, but by announcing the name he also makes known his essential character. Indeed...in the divine name is encompassed the whole redemptive power of God.²

Thus Moses set the pace for prophets to come, but he is also credited with establishing the office of the prophet in Israel. While this may be implied in Exodus 3 it is made clear in the book of Deuteronomy later. Hobart E. Freeman states, "The divine origin of the prophetic institution is set forth by Moses himself in Deuteronomy 18:9-22."³

Moses had knowledge of God that no one else had the privilege of knowing. God spoke to him about how Moses would be used to deliver the people, Israel, out of Pharaoh's grip. More importantly, he told Moses that a new nation was about to be

² Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 114-115.

³ Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 24.

birthed and that Moses would be instrumental in establishing it. From the beginning of Moses' career as a prophet of God, he understood that his role stood between God and the people of God, literally God's nation. This charge, like the nation itself, was a matter of being "elected" to this role and does not presuppose Moses' qualifications for the position.⁴ The prophet Moses had a job like no one else before him, because he spoke as one with absolute authority to the Hebrews and established a new nation on the basis of that knowledge.

According to the Scripture Moses was to be "like God" because he spoke for God; and his brother, Aaron in turn spoke for Moses (Exod. 7:1, 2). God revealed himself in mighty acts and power to Israel, but he reserved his words for Moses with whom he spoke, according to Scripture, like a man speaking to a friend (Exod. 33:11). Hence, while God's covenant was with the entire community or nation of Israel, he chose to disclose his thoughts and purposes exclusively to one man, Moses. The structure of the society Moses helped to found was established on a theocratic system of government. God alone was king. Nevertheless, practically speaking, Moses operated with autocratic powers to the people. As an earthly despot, albeit a righteous despot, he answered to no one but God.

Moses was unique among all the prophets by showing precisely the nature and unique mission that God communicated with him. Despite the fact that he predicted the coming of prophets of Israel after him (Deut. 18:15ff.) who would serve in similar

⁴ Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 471.

capacity, no one would go on to achieve what Moses accomplished in the founding of the nation of Israel on the basis of Torah. As Walter Brueggemann contends:

Moses is the historical agent in Israel who is foundationally linked to the authority, reception, and ongoing practice of the Torah. While there are difficult historical-critical issues related to the person of Moses, in the canonical articulation of Israel's memory and faith the cruciality and centrality of Moses are clear and unambiguous. Moses, confronted and summoned by Yahweh in an originary meeting (Exodus 3:1-4:17), is the one privileged and burdened at Mount Sinai to stand face-to-face with Yahweh in the inscrutability of the mountain, there to receive the tablets of the Torah, the materials that are linked as the disclosure of Yahweh's intention at Sinai. It is impossible to overstate or overaccent the pivotal role of Moses.⁵

In fact it would be difficult to find any biblical stories or principles more foundational to the Judaeo-Christian traditions than the material credited to Moses. No one ever matched his authority in the Old Testament; he was separated out from among his peers and closest siblings, Aaron and Miriam, according to Numbers 12. The latter pair faced God's considerable chastisement for even thinking they were Moses' equal. E. J. Young notes the significance of this seemingly direct encounter between God and Moses:

In the first place it is said that God will speak with Moses "mouth unto mouth." The phrase appears only in this present passage, and signifies that God will speak directly and immediately, without reserve, as friends converse together. So we read in Exodus 31:11a.: "And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh to a friend." In free personal intercourse, without any mediation, and with the same clarity and certainty that the spoken word carries, God would make known to Moses His will and ways. And in this connection it is of interest to observe the characterization that was made of Moses after his death: "And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10).⁶

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 578.

⁶ E.J. Young, *My Servants the Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1952), 51-52.

Though later in the New Testament, Jesus would tell his disciples: “You are my friends if you do what I command” (John 15:15), only Moses was mentioned in the Old Testament as the one who spoke face-to-face with God, as someone would speak to a friend. Moses was distinguished among the prophets and this explains why even among fairly liberal Jews today he is accorded particular dignity. George Robinson, a distinguished journalist writing for the American Jewish Press Association, speaks of Moses in the Hebrew canon as “...the chosen one of Adonai, the only human ever allowed to glimpse the Almighty, even from the back.”⁷

Old Testament Prophets beyond Moses

Moses was undoubtedly the most authoritative prophet in the Old Testament and this fact is confirmed by contemporary Jewish thought. However, many distinguished figures followed in his footsteps as God’s spokespersons. Throughout the Old Testament narratives and the books ascribed specifically to the prophets of Israel, we see the nature and role of a prophet’s work. Like Moses these prophets considered themselves called, or chosen, by God (e.g. Isa. 6, Jer. 1, Ezek. 1-3, and Hos. 1). Moreover they continued to receive revelation from God. Revelation refers to a particular mode of knowledge, separate from either the kind of ecstatic knowledge as ascertained by pagan prophets among Israel’s contemporaries or the kind of empirically discoverable knowledge as

⁷ George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 273.

gained by chemists and biologists among scientists today. Concerning the comparison with heathen nations, Freeman points out that,

[I]n contrast to the methods employed by the heathen for discovering the will of the gods and uncovering the hidden secrets of the spiritual realm, God declares...that Israel will learn the things that she needs to know, not by *discovery* through methods of divination and occult practices, but by *revelation*. Furthermore, the means of revelation, which would come unsought at the sovereign discretion of Yahweh, was to be by the word of His prophets through whom God would speak and make known His will.⁸

So the prophets of Israel did not need to fill Moses' shoes to be authoritative voices to Israel. They carried their own backing by the words they spoke. God spoke through them concerning his will for Israel, and when Israel disobeyed he spoke again through the prophets concerning his judgment.

These brave individuals stood in stark contrast to the prophets of pagan religions for several reasons that relate to the epistemic condition in which they received revelation from Yahweh. For one thing, these were neither shamans nor ancient soothsayers who mingled the art of divination with the skill of illusion. Second, they did not see their job as political, but rather religious and social; their job was to hear the word of the Lord and deliver it faithfully. Third, they did not choose the role of being prophets. God chose them and he could be persuasive even when they were disinclined to become prophets. At times they were reluctant to obey, realizing that their word would not be received and the people would slip into further judgment (e.g. 1 Kings 19:9b.-10; 22:12-28; Amos 7:10-15; Jon. 1:1-3; 4:1-3; Hab. 3:16). One of the most insightful passages showing the

⁸ Freeman, *Old Testament Prophets*, 25.

profound sense of calling each prophet felt to declare the word as he received it is found appropriately in Jeremiah 26:12-15:

Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: “The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God. Then the Lord will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you. As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the Lord has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing.”

Putting it in the present context, one might be tempted to expect all knowledge from God today to be encouraging, uplifting, even inspiring. The Old Testament conception of the prophets and their message is shaped by an entirely different picture. Evidently knowledge can be inherently powerful, even dangerous at times. The Old Testament prophets force consideration of the great weight of responsibility that underscores the holy undertaking of the prophet. Again, it is more typical to imagine that the more knowledge, the better. Nevertheless it is odd to think such knowledge might bring bad news. The prophets of old received as much bad news as good and sometimes they had to deliver their messages and run. For example, Elijah was accused of being a “troubler” in Israel and sometimes had to flee for his life (1 Kings 18:17). Micaiah was thrown into prison for prophesying only bad news to King Ahab (1 Kings 22:18).

The ancient prophets of Israel saw their role in relation to God purely as receptors of the word of God, never as experimenters or diviners like those who served in the royal courts. They sought knowledge from God at times when they feared the worst might come true, as for example when Habakkuk took his watch stating, “I will look to see what

he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint” (Hab. 2:1b.). The prophet could not afford to be casual, because he knew the answer he was waiting for would be an unpopular one. By contrast, it is quite apparent that in the ancient prophets’ day the false prophets often served the interests and wants of the selfish kings of Israel and Judah. Many prophets remained under the control of the king in the same way the kings often controlled the high priests.⁹ This was especially bad since the prophetic institution served as a counter-balance to the civil office of the king.¹⁰

The prophet who obeyed God spoke with authority whether or not anyone was ready and willing to listen. This was true of Israel’s kings as well as the lowliest peasant on the farm. As H. L. Ellison says, “...men had the right to question his claims to be a prophet (cf. Deut. 18:21 f.), but once this was granted they disobeyed his words at their peril.”¹¹ No one said “no” to a prophet lightly.

As a whole the prophets stood out from among the people, both because they often spoke words of condemnation as well as comfort, and because they were understandably a peculiar lot. As Brueggemann points out, “These originary individuals are odd and cannot be explained by any antecedent. In that regard the older notion of ‘lonely geniuses’ has an element of truth in it.”¹² These were frequently rugged

⁹ H. L. Ellison, *The Prophets of Israel: From Ahijah to Hosea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 27.

¹⁰ Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible*, With a New Introduction (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 96-100.

¹¹ Ellison, *Prophets of Israel*, 26.

¹² Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 622.

individuals who acted independently of societal attachments and some even reflected this in their apparent anti-social behavior. A few were members of the upper class, like Isaiah,¹³ but most were from lower or common classes including some who remained wanderers and wayfarers. What distinguished them most from the rest of the people was the message they preached, however unusual or noticeably eccentric their lives.

Against the argument that these prophets were “ecstatics” similar to their pagan counterparts, however, Freeman offers the argument: “Superficially considered, there may at times be discerned an *outward* resemblance between certain acts of behavior of the Hebrew prophets...But there is a real danger in mistaking...*a superficial and outward resemblance as indicative of the same prophetic psychology.*”¹⁴ In other words, while the Hebrew prophets could show a degree of outward ecstatic behavior and odd lifestyle, they were not understood to be possessed or overcome by the spirits, nor did they need to enter into a type of trance to connect with the message of God.

The prophets conducted themselves in ways that can hardly be called “normal” either. For example, Hosea was told to marry an adulterous woman, a prostitute, in order to demonstrate God’s love for Israel. The harlot was a living illustration by her adulterous actions of the way Israel acted toward her husband, Yahweh. Hosea was naturally heartbroken but the point was that God was heartbroken over Israel’s constant wanderings and willingness to seek comfort in the arms of another lover (Hos. 1:2-3;

¹³ Geoffrey W. Grogan, “Isaiah” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Vol. 6: Isaiah-Ezekiel, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 4.

¹⁴ Freeman, *Old Testament Prophets*, 59.

3:1). By failing to be true to God, Israel had turned to spiritual harlotry and this was demonstrated vividly in Hosea's repeated attempts to redeem his wife, even after she was unfaithful and did nothing to deserve redemption. But by being faithless, Israel not only rejected the covenant between God and herself, she had rejected the knowledge of the Lord, as Hosea states so forcefully: "my people are destroyed from a lack of knowledge" (Hos. 4:6a.).

Despite repeated warnings and vivid illustrations demonstrating the faithlessness of Israel, the nation continued to disobey the prophets. The danger was not so much in failing to heed the prophets. To reject the prophets as God's spokespersons was tantamount to rejecting the Lord. Refusing the voice of the prophets was a terrible thing because it meant choosing ignorance instead of knowledge of the truth. The prophets' role was destined to come to a close, not because they were unfaithful in carrying out the message but because their voices were ineffectual to a people who had stopped listening to the truth of the knowledge of God and no longer desired to do his will. As for the prophets, "...they clearly foresaw the time when Israel as such would have to come to an end...So the prophets looked for the day when Israel would truly be Israel."¹⁵

The form and nature of the prophetic message, too, was unique and contains a literary quality that few would dismiss even today. Remarkably, even when the prophetic literature is translated from the Hebrew into the various languages of the world it retains a rich, poetic quality. These men and women stood out as individuals who heard from

¹⁵ Ellison, *The Prophets of Israel*, 14.

God and cannot be seen as simply political agents, social activists, or culture changers in the ordinary sense, but rather as obedient servants who were given a vision of God's word and clarity concerning God's will for the people, Israel. Again, Brueggemann remarks, "They are most characteristically 'utterers,' and...they speak most often with all of the elusiveness and imaginative power of poetry. Their utterances are not self-evident in their relevance, but they speak in images and metaphors that aim to disrupt, destabilize, and invite to alternative perceptions of reality."¹⁶

The prophets played a crucial role in gathering knowledge of God and of his will, and speaking forcefully to Israel concerning God's instructions. Thus, from Moses to Malachi, the people were charged with hearing the voice of the prophets and doing what they were told or face the hard consequences disobedience entailed. The Old Testament as a whole stands as a testimony of the prophet's vocation, the prophetic imagination, the people's response, and the will and purpose of God to speak.

The epistemological nature of the history of the prophets is wide and varied, but all have one thing in common: the prophets were called to understand and know God's will for his covenant people, Israel, and called to deliver the message of God faithfully to the people. The voice of God was evidence in itself, the message having a veridical relationship to the prophet receiving the message. There were no doubts, no suspicions about where the voice came from, though this did not rule out their disappointment with the content of that message (e.g. Jon. 1:1-3; 4:1-3). These unique individuals were rarely accused of wrongdoing and never held accountable for the nation failing to obey the

¹⁶ Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 625.

Lord. They were responsible only to convey the truth of God's message to the nation. Rich in variety yet true in their calling, their mission is described perfectly by the author of Hebrews: "Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets" (1:1).

The Old Testament Anticipation of the New

The Old Testament concerns the origin of God's people, beginning with faithful nomads and patriarchs such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Beyond them is the story of the origin of a nation, built on the solid precepts and commandments of God, the establishment of a theocracy, and the institution of prophets as a means to speak the truth and hold the nation accountable. But as good as it was it was not good enough. Responsive patriarchs and faithful prophets were only part of the story, for the Old Testament chronicles the disobedience of Israel too. Thus the particular covenant God made with Israel in the wilderness of Sinai, under the hand of the greatest prophet of the Old Covenant, Moses, ultimately ran its course. It could not save the people because mere knowledge of the Law, upon which the covenant was based, was beyond the moral and spiritual reach of any nation to fulfill. The Old Testament is therefore a story of repeated failure to live up to the laws of God. This was no accident, nor was it a surprise to God despite the prolonged agony and series of warnings and subsequent judgment upon the nation's disobedience. The reason the original covenant was enacted was to

make a point, as Ellison states, “No amount of covenant renewal ceremonies in Israel could in fact renew the broken covenant, for that depended upon God, not man.”¹⁷

Instead of another covenant that depended upon human responsibility, Yahweh promised through the prophets that he would establish a new covenant some day. Several prophets refer to this wonderful promise (e.g. Isa. 11-12; Ezek. 16:59-63; Joel 2:28-32), but no one says it quite like Jeremiah:

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “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 a man teach his neighbor saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Thus the prophets envisioned a time when people would be able to worship God based on a new covenant, not like the old one, which was based on law, but based upon God’s promise to fill his people with his Spirit. The emblem of this fulfillment is registered in our minds today, reading the New Testament as Peter stood up on the Day of Pentecost and stated that Joel’s prophecy had been fulfilled: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams” (Acts 2:17; cf. Joel 2:28). This is what the prophets predicted and it implied the virtual demise of their own vocation with the advent of a whole generation of people who would be filled with the Spirit of God and

¹⁷ Ellison, *The Prophets of Israel*, 165.

knowledge. Accordingly, these Old Testament prophets envisioned a time when divine truth would no longer be limited to a few solitary individuals, but to a community of people. Imagine: a whole kingdom of people who could know the will of God because his Spirit lived within them.

This was clearly at the heart of Joel's vision: a people not divided by gender, by age, or by social class. Old men and young men, sons and daughters, rich and poor would be profoundly changed by the living knowledge of God. This was also at the heart of Jeremiah's vision: a people not dependent upon a secondary source, a lonesome mediator to crawl down the mountain to explain the will of God more plainly. For Christ became the perfect mediator who would inaugurate this new covenant based upon his obedience to the Law. Hence New Testament Christians are called by God directly through faith in the work of Christ, then given the precious knowledge of God. Paul says, "...God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts.... So you are no longer a slave, but a son..." (Gal. 4:6b.-7a.). Even better are recent translations that contemporize such passages, showing the fuller meaning to us today. In the New Living Translation Galatians 4:7 reads, "Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child."¹⁸ This expresses Paul's meaning as it is applied to the contemporary situation and faithfully reflects Joel's "egalitarian impulse"¹⁹ inherent in his prediction.

¹⁸ All biblical quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Corporation, 1996). For a good discussion on the merits of contemporizing Scripture see Clark H. Pinnock, "Biblical Texts—Past and Future Meanings," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 1, (March 2000):71-81.

¹⁹ Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible*, 314.

God established the institution of the prophet primarily to inaugurate the first covenant with a nation of people in the wilderness of Sinai. The prophet, beginning with Moses to the time of Jesus Christ, was principally the one people turned to in order to understand the mind and purpose of God. The prophet was the divine counselor in this sense. More than a simple representative, the prophet was God's spokesperson declaring the word of the Lord and bearing God's authority to speak it. The Spirit of God did not reside in the hearts of the people in any significant way that could help them realize and appropriate God's will. They depended solely on what they were told by the prophets. The first covenant was based upon the Law, not a promise that God would dwell inside the people's hearts and minds. Hence, their concept of the presence and power of God was limited to the Tabernacle (and Temple) and to the men and women with whom God spoke intermittently for the purpose of directing the nation of Israel. As a people they depended upon the prophets to explain the truth about God.

As the consummate prophet and fulfillment of Moses' prediction in Deuteronomy 18:15, Jesus Christ declared the truth of God, first to his disciples, then to the whole world through those who knew him (John 1:14-18; cf. 17). In a word, Christ has made God known (John 1:18b.).

The Prophetic Church

Authority to Speak for God

Jesus fulfilled the role of a prophet perfectly because he embodied all that God is and can be expressed to humankind (John 1:1-18; Gal. 4:1-7; Col. 1:15-23; 1 John 1:1-3).

He not only spoke the truth, he was and is the truth (John 14:6). He was and continues to be the "...exact representation of [God's] being" (Heb. 1:3). Yet, revealing God and proclaiming the truth in word and in life did not alter Christ's intent to enact a New Covenant that would bring countless others into the inner chambers of dialogue and intimacy with the living God. He predicted and then enacted by his finished work the establishment of a new people, the church (Matt. 16:18-19),²⁰ predicated on a new covenant based on faith and built on the promise that people would enjoy lifelong relationship with God through the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-21). This New Covenant promise was to be fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost. Just weeks after Jesus had risen and ascended to the Father, the promised Holy Spirit descended upon the believers. Among other facets of this new relationship, Christ foretold that the Spirit would guide them into all truth (John 16:13).

Even before the Day of Pentecost there were signs God was going to do something entirely different with respect to his prophetic word. In fact, Jesus' ministry recorded in the Gospels shows that he was preparing the way for the church community to be self-sufficient in the knowledge of God and his will. From the beginning of his ministry Jesus showed confidence in the disciples he called. He set them apart from the priests and other religious leaders of Israel by giving to them the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16:18). The distinction between professional ministry and laity was noticeably absent, as was the institution of the prophet among the disciples. They

²⁰ For a discussion on whether Jesus intended to establish a church see Scobie, *The Ways of Our God*, 488-490; cf. Ralph P. Martin, *The Family and the Fellowship: New Testament Images of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 17-21.

qualified because they responded to his call to join him in ministry, not because they had particular titles or knowledgeable backgrounds. These were common men with an uncommon ministry who were willing to devote their lives to the service of God. So Schweizer comments, “Thus, on principle, everyone is engaged in service, and there is no point in distinguishing between ordinary believers and those called to service; how could one do so in a band of people whose fundamental service is readiness for suffering and self sacrifice?”²¹

He required his disciples to know one thing for certain: who he was (Matt. 16:15). His consideration for them was further confirmed by the fact that he brought them into the mystery of God’s plan; he told them how God wanted them to understand the universal significance of his ministry, even after he was gone. He warned them that they would suffer as he had because of their message. He promised that the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, would teach them and stand with them no matter what transpired after he left (John 14:26). Before he departed from his earthly ministry, Jesus gave his disciples the most crucial component of the new revelation (John 17:14), the truth about himself as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. According to this instruction his disciples would receive the fuller meaning of God’s New Covenant when the Holy Spirit came. It was to be just as Jeremiah had predicted earlier, “...they will all know me” (Jer. 31:34). It happened on the Day of Pentecost, when they were all huddled together in one place. The

²¹ Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, trans. Frank Clark (Naperville, IL: A.R. Allenson, 1961), 32.

Holy Spirit came like "...a sound like the blowing of a violent wind," and they were filled with the Spirit.

Direct Access to God

From the Day of Pentecost to this day God has been filling believers in Christ with his Holy Spirit and communicating directly to the hearts and minds of his people. The Old Testament prediction that God would someday communicate knowledge about himself and his will directly to the people was fulfilled. In contrast to the former covenant when God's Spirit dwelled in the Tabernacle, in the new covenant God lives in his people. Because of Pentecost, "The outpouring of the Spirit extended to *all* believers... The result was to be more permanent, pervasive, and effective—so much so that nothing previous could be submitted as a genuine parallel."²² Every new member of the church since has received both the right and responsibility to seek the will of God.

Nowhere in the Gospels is there a hint about the need to establish an autonomous, Old Testament-like office of a prophet. Nor is there any suggestion of a pastor who has privileged communication from God. Indeed, Jesus had already rejected honoring one disciple above all the others, opting to teach them about being servants to one another instead (Matt. 23:11; Mark 9:35; John 13:16). It is a moot point and beyond the scope of this paper to consider whether the book of Acts or the rest of the New Testament supports the establishment of a church hierarchy once the Spirit came into the church. However, if we are to take Matthew 18:17 at face value and as an authentic reflection of Jesus'

²² Morris A. Inch, *Saga of the Spirit: A Biblical, Systematic, and Historical Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 85.

confidence that the church can handle most situations, it seems to the present writer the congregation should be capable of solving its own problems. If there is a problem, "...tell it to the church."

Arguably, the church is the prophetic voice to the world today. The church, which includes all the people of God, is filled with the Spirit of God and thus the knowledge of God and his will. This implies *ipso facto* that any local community of professing believers, no matter what size or particular Christian tradition, is conceivably able to discern the will of God for their lives, handle relational problems, and solve apostolic and missional objectives. Insofar as they have a clear vision of the person and work of Jesus Christ and testify concerning the truth about him, they have prophetic insight into the mysteries of God "[f]or the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10).

The New Testament church embodies a vision of Christ that fulfills the function of the Old Testament prophets. From the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-18), the church came to a new understanding of its relationship with God. It no longer depends on a single prophet to explain the ways of God. The community itself possesses knowledge of God through the Holy Spirit. The prophets predicted the day when the prophetic mantle was passed on to the church of Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament community of Israel depended on the prophets for their knowledge. However, the New Testament community is marked with an "Inward Torah,"²³ the truth of God's law is written upon their hearts. Charles Scobie refers to this

²³ Scobie, *The Ways of Our God*, 484.

dramatic paradigm shift when he points out that the people of the Old Testament had only a veiled knowledge of God, “But in the new age God’s people will not only know the Torah, they will know...God himself; i.e., they will enter into a close personal relationship with him.”²⁴ In the transition from the Old to the New Covenant God established a new epistemic pattern of relating directly to his people instead of indirectly through the mediation of the prophets of Israel. This did not cancel the role of prophecy in God’s community, but it changed the function of the prophet dramatically.

The church essentially superseded the Old Testament prophets and became God’s central medium and spokesperson. It has tremendous responsibility as guardian of the truth, particularly the truth about the proclamation of Jesus Christ. It is imperative, therefore, that each congregation realize this great task, seek “spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Eph. 1:15-18), and discern the destiny of the local congregation. Every member counts. Paul admonished the churches to think of themselves as a joint body of believers, not simply autonomous individuals who have been given access to God. Christ is the only true head of the church, and “...[f]rom him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph. 4:16).

The evidence presented thus far leads us to several important conclusions. First, everyone who becomes a Christian has possession of true belief and has access to

²⁴Ibid.

personal and direct knowledge of God (Heb. 4:14-16; cf. 12:18-24). Second, God wants to guide each church community and speak to everyone who serves him, including those whose gift is prophesying (1 Cor. 14:26-33; cf. 12:1-11). Third, all disciples are empowered to share the message of the Gospel, particularly when non-Christians inquire about the eternal hope (1 Pet. 3:13-15; 2 Cor. 5:17-19; 1 Thess. 1:7-8). Finally, while prophets continue to function in the church community, they no longer have the authoritative distinction that the Old Testament prophets were given. Today's prophets are on equal terms with the body. A prophet's words and authenticity today are accepted as valid after they are weighed by the Scripture, the church and by other gifted prophets (1 Cor. 14:29-33).

Lessons from the Jerusalem Council

A Paradigm for Church Decision-Making

The view of the church as a collective body of believers with access to knowledge of God does not preclude the need for leaders. We believe leaders have an important and particular job with respect to seeking and understanding the truth. Their role should not, however, be a contradiction to the whole church discerning the will and purpose of God. Leaders have been given as gifts to the church, and they facilitate unity and release ministry gifts from the whole body (Eph. 4:11-13). Difficulties arise in the balance between the church's capacity to know the will of God, and the leadership's gifting to guide the process. Some churches struggle in the discernment process and see it as an either-or proposition: either the congregation has the power to discern the will of God or the pastor or elders have the power. Neither of these answers fits the biblical picture.

Acts 15 provides a practical paradigm for church discernment and a clue about who has the power in decision-making. The picture of the early church shows the balance of gifted leadership working with the faith community. Those who gathered in Jerusalem recognized the importance of gifted leaders and the whole congregation participating to seek the truth in unity.²⁵ General observations of the flow of the information-gathering process suggest that there is an identifiable balance with respect to the authority of the whole church and the wisdom of the apostles and elders who drew final conclusions on the matter. At the end of the day, it was leaders who put the finishing touches on the documents but it was the whole church that authorized the decision.

A Spirited Debate

Consider how the church arrived at a decision based on its spiritual discernment of the issue. A problem arose in the early church (Acts 15:1-3) and the Jerusalem church was assembled along with other representatives to discuss the matter. It is not particularly relevant to discuss the details of the issue which had to do with the inclusion of Gentile Christians,²⁶ except to note the problem required a major decision-making process and involved the most serious kind of discernment any local church might face. The church faced questions concerning the will of God on the issue and they had no objective

²⁵ See Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998). Cf. C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 2, The International Critical Commentary Series (London: T and T Clark, 1998).

²⁶ Hans Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 114-124.

reference point for help. Their Bible was the Old Testament which offered no guidance on this matter. The church received various interpretations by a variety of representatives. Working corporately and cooperatively with the whole assembly, the apostles and elders led the process. But it is important to note that the whole church was committed to discern the will of God and draw conclusions based on the leading of the Spirit. In fact, bringing the issue to the whole church was the first stage in discerning the will of God and deciding what ought to be done.

Hans Conzelmann has noted, from the beginning one “plenary assembly”²⁷ that included leaders and the whole congregation met to address the issue. Verse six “...has often been taken to suggest there was a private meeting first in which the Jerusalem leaders considered the matter, which may be so, but in view of v. 4 Luke probably doesn’t think so.”²⁸ It was prudent for the entire assembly to hear the disputants and the testimonies from various representatives and church leaders. For example, when Peter spoke, he used his experience to support his position on the argument. From the assembly’s point of view, hearing arguments publicly was important because it supplied key information about (1) the relevant facts pertaining to the issue; and (2) positive conclusions that Peter drew about his past experience and its relation to the matter.²⁹

A third aspect of these arguments may have influenced the assembly: namely, what was the spirit of the disputants and could the assembly detect who had the right

²⁷ Ibid. 116.

²⁸ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 453.

²⁹ Ibid.

spirit on the matter? Only by observing the open discussions, arguments, and testimonies would the congregation be able to judge. The way the apostles and elders handled themselves in the meeting could be evidence for the congregation to judge the hearts and minds of the leaders on the issue. For example, Peter handled himself in a way that was evident to the whole church. His approach to the problem was very positive, as Everett Harrison observes, “Wisely, Peter did not take the floor at once, which could have given the impression of railroading. Rather, there was an opportunity for ‘debate.’ Only when thoughts and emotions had been expressed and energies had spent themselves did Peter come forward.”³⁰

A Weighty Decision

After testimonies were heard and considered by the assembly, a decision had to be made. Apparently the apostles and elders met to consider the issue and offer a definitive assessment. This did not take place until the “whole assembly became silent” (15:12) and allowed Paul and Barnabas an opportunity to speak. It is likely that the entire *ecclesia* (assembly) heard these arguments and that their silence indicated the church was drawing conclusions. C. K. Barrett points out that verse twelve could possibly mean that the crowd was hushed, “...but probably intends to suggest they were convinced and agreed.”³¹ Before the decision is finalized by James (Acts 15:13-21), it is important for us

³⁰ Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: the Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 231.

³¹ C.K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Volume II (London: T and T Clark, 1998), 721.

to note that a consensus was brewing among the assembly, and the leaders and whole congregation had discerned together what ought to be done.

Unfortunately the Scriptures are silent on how the entire assembly was able to participate. It is unlikely they voted during the process or at the end of the meeting. The ideas of the people apparently could be heard and the voice of the Holy Spirit was clear. The process for achieving consensus is unclear, however. One thing we do know: in contrast to Plato's ideal philosopher-king who makes decisions alone, the Jerusalem church's decision never fell into the hands of one wise man.³² On this point, there is little evidence to suggest that James needed to settle the dispute by his own wisdom.

Instead, it is apparent the early church discerned the will of God and allowed wisdom to emerge in the context of faith. The question of how the whole church may have participated is obscured by the simplicity and brevity of Luke's account and description of the events. Nevertheless, according to Ben Witherington, we can draw out a few aspects that highlighted the church's procedure.³³

A Work of The Spirit

Witherington identifies basic principles that emanate from the scriptural model of corporate discernment found in Acts 15. The present writer submits the following guidelines, adapted from Witherington, for churches that want to experience successful corporate discernment:

³² Plato, *The Republic*, 5.473.

³³ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 451.

1. Make a commitment to a steady process of discernment, recognizing God and the Holy Spirit's activity as it pertains to the issue.
2. Make a commitment to biblical interpretation, using appropriate contextualization and application to help make sense of the problem and know how to solve it.
3. Allow disputants to present their side in open debate, in an appropriate format, for the public viewing of the church.
4. Make a sincere attempt to reach finality and consensus on the ruling of the leadership of the church for the sake of unity.

The first principle (1) involves entering into a divine partnership. This is the *sine qua non* of successful corporate discernment on the most crucial issues in the church. "So it was that the decisions of the council of Jerusalem...were seen to be the decisions not only of the assembled apostles and presbyters...but also the judgment of the Holy Spirit..."³⁴ The story of the Jerusalem Council³⁵ serves as a model for operations in the church because it shows the church and the Holy Spirit working together to shape the solution. The Holy Spirit guided the Council in its interpretation and application of Old Testament scripture.³⁶ The Spirit and the Word function together, as Donald G. Bloesch says,

³⁴ John N. Suggit, "The Holy Spirit and We Resolved," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 79, no. 1 (June 1992): 39.

³⁵ Timothy Wiarda, "The Jerusalem Council and the Theological Task," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46, no. 2 (June 2003): 233-248.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 236.

“Indeed, it is the Spirit who makes the Bible efficacious, though the message the latter provides is indispensable for the Spirit in his work of conviction and persuasion.”³⁷

The second principle (2) acknowledges the basic contributions of the historical-critical method and addresses the importance of understanding current contextual vision and application of the Scripture. The early church interpreted Old Testament passages with reference to the contemporary situation, and modern Christians must seek understanding and application of the New and Old Testament passages to life in the twenty-first century. Clark Pinnock states, “Having listened to the text and having attempted to grasp what it is saying in its own context, we have to let it speak to us.”³⁸ The second principle implies commitment to the first principle since it is the partnership with the Holy Spirit that enables positive and successful scriptural application.

The third principle (3) calls for disputants to have an open debate in an “appropriate format,” leaving ample room for diversity of application and ingenuity in bringing people together to hear and to discuss arguments. Such a meeting should be held in the context of full church membership only, at a time other than a service associated with worship.

The fourth principle (4) is important enough to address in a separate chapter concerning guidelines on reaching consensus and the unique role gifted leaders play. The primary concern of this chapter, especially in light of the Acts 15 passage, is to assert that

³⁷ Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word & Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology*, Christian Foundations, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 13.

³⁸ Pinnock, “Biblical Texts—Past and Future Meanings,” 72.

the whole church is involved in discerning the will of God on important matters that affect the destiny of the whole church.

Prophetic Leaders and Prophetic Church

At this juncture it seems natural to suggest that a bifurcation exists between the prophetic church in the New Testament and the office of the prophet in the Old Testament. However, it would be a mistake to think that because the Holy Spirit dwells in the whole community, there is no further need for prophesy or gifted leadership. Every believer has been filled with the knowledge and power of God, and Old Testament prophets have been superseded by a Spirit-led community, but prophesy has not been obliterated. In fact, the Spirit-led church should have more people prophesying than in the Old Testament. The Apostle Paul clearly encouraged its continued and proper use in the church (1 Cor. 12:10; 14:1), and a number of well-known and reputable prophets and prophetesses are acknowledged in the early church (Acts 15:15; 21:10; 21:9). The question we must answer is whether there is a biblical connection between the role of the autonomous prophet and the office of senior pastor in the modern charismatic church?

Prophetic Leaders

The general nature and role of the gift of prophesy as it is discussed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14³⁹ lies outside the scope of this paper. However, the role of the prophet and prophecy has changed since Old Testament times. Prophets as functioning

³⁹ See Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 607-611.

members of the typical modern charismatic church are sometimes understood to be separate from the office of senior pastor. However, some of the qualifications and characteristics of prophets, such as hearing directly from God and receiving a vision for the direction of the people, are considered important qualifications for leading a church.

Two vital components of the gift of prophecy pertain to the thesis of this paper. First, senior pastors of congregations, being spirit-filled, should have insight and prophetic gifting that enable them to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church and derive spiritual knowledge about what the church should do. Second, the knowledge senior pastors derive from their own discernment concerning the vision or message from God should function only in connection with what the whole assembly, including other gifted leaders, perceives as the true message from God.

A pastor represents one of the gifts of Christ to the church for the purpose of overseeing and guiding it to maturity. Paul identifies a five-fold⁴⁰ model of church leadership when he says, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...” (Eph. 4:11-12). The role of pastors probably originated from the word for overseers or “elders” in the early church, and their function was important to the establishment of early congregations. Leaders were generally respected for their service to the whole assembly (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24; 1 Pet. 5:2). Paul customarily placed “elders” in the Gentile churches and he

⁴⁰ If the designation for pastors and teachers is meant to be only one leadership gift, i.e. “pastor-teacher,” then it would be a “four-fold” leadership gifting.

sometimes sent colleagues to follow up to ensure the appointment of new leaders (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5). Persons assuming leadership functions, including the pastors and teachers who often made decisions in the early church, were spirit-filled and gifted for such tasks.

Modern charismatic senior pastors are gifted according to this five-fold model and may even possess a gift mix.⁴¹ Some pastors may be stronger in the gift of teaching or the use of prophecy. They may be able administrators, singers, musicians, or good salesmen. The Spirit-given ability for insight and vision for the church is an essential trait to be effective church leaders.

These church leaders take the responsibility of discerning the will of God for the church seriously. In fact, they feel that discerning the will of God is tied to the work of a specific church leader, usually the pastor who is given a vision for the church.⁴² This overriding sense of responsibility and calling is indelibly printed in their minds due to the teaching legacy of the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement. They are Holy Spirit-directed leaders by definition. They are the children of Pentecost and the historic Azusa Street Revival as well as subsequent Pentecostal revival movements.⁴³ Charismatic pastors are

⁴¹ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow*, 15th ed. rev. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994), 31.

⁴² See e.g. Aubrey Malphurs, *Developing a Vision for Ministry in the 21st Century*, 2nd ed. Foreword by Haddon W. Robinson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).

⁴³ For a general overview and history of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movements in the twentieth century, see Vinson Synan, *In The Latter Days: The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the Twentieth Century*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1991); idem, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997); cf. A.C. Valdez, Sr., *Fire on Azusa Street* (Costa Mesa, CA: Gift Publications, 1980); Robert M. Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979).

quite familiar with the idea that God speaks and openly reveals knowledge of his will through messages and visions to each local church, and they are attuned to the idea that the job of knowing the mind of the Lord on church matters falls directly on their shoulders.

Vision has become foundational to the epistemological structure of charismatic church leadership. Some pastors use military-type examples from the Old Testament as a prototype for modern leadership. Joshua is a typical example.⁴⁴ Charismatic pastors sometimes write their own vision statements or borrow main points or statements from another church. The importance recently placed on leadership and vision in secular society has also led some charismatic pastors to reach outside the circle of church leadership manuals to include books by corporate executives. Corporations and government programs establish and implement vision and mission statements as much as churches and charismatic pastors draw from a wide assortment of literature, tapes, and other media from business, government, and church-related sources.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See Frank Damazio, *Crossing Rivers, Taking Cities*, Foreword by John Dawson (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1999).

⁴⁵ Charismatic pastors tend to widen their circle of authors on the subject of vision and leadership since so much has been written that pertains to the subject and so much can be applied to charismatic leadership. Cf. George Barna, *The Power of Vision* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003); idem, *Turning Vision Into Action* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996); Aubrey Malphurs, *Developing a Vision for Ministry* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999); Andy Stanley, *Visioneering* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1999); Leonard Sweet, *Carpe Mañana* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001); Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995); Cindy Jacobs, *The Voice of God: How God Speaks Personally and Corporately to His Children Today* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995); Frank Damazio, *Crossing Rivers, Taking Cities: Moving Into the Future God Has Prepared for You* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1999); John C. Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1993).

In corporate size charismatic churches much emphasis is placed upon hearing from the Holy Spirit and understanding the vision and purpose of each local church, and that task often is found in the senior pastor's job description. Some senior pastors believe God has a plan and purpose that cannot be altered, only obeyed. Usually it is the senior pastor's role to understand this purpose and hear from God on matters including mission emphasis, building projects, doctrinal clarity, and vision for the next year or next ten years for the church. How they decipher the voice of the Spirit and implement decisions affects how much confidence the congregants have in their leaders.

Shifting Authority

The real issue lies in the relationship between pastor-leaders and the rest of the congregation. Based on the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise, the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the whole church, not just the leaders or pastors. What does this mean for pastors and congregations working together to understand and discern the will of God for the church? It means everyone deserves information if it pertains to the wisdom of a decision. It means everyone should have a voice that reaches the ears and considerations of leadership. It likely means more time and patience should be given to making major decisions.

Becoming a member of the church is not a natural process; a person must be "born-again" (John 3:3). The Lord knows his sheep by name (John 10:3) and every member knows their Lord by virtue of his Spirit living within them (John 10:14; cf. 14:21; 20:20-23). Since the Lord dwells within the whole church, every member has the

same authority and right to enter into covenant to discern the will and purpose of God. The Old Testament promise fulfilled on the day of Pentecost intentionally shifted the focus from the authority of a single voice, to a kingdom of priests, a “holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:5). The powerful metaphor of the church as a kingdom of priests implies that the entire community must find new ways to work together if the Holy Spirit is given his rightful place to lead the church.

The Need for Openness

In Acts 15 it was the church, along with the apostles and elders, which was open and ready to meet together to discuss and argue points on a substantive matter. There was obvious order in the meeting so chaos did not reign. Apparently, everyone who had something to say and who should have addressed the assembly did so, especially those who had relevant testimonies and who were personally invested in the issue. Clearly, James wrapped up the meeting (Acts 15:13) and offered his counsel, but only after consensus was drawn.

It is most important that we see how the whole assembly came to singleness of mind on the issue.⁴⁶ Luke makes it clear that it was the *ecclesia*, the whole church, that first entertained and heard the matter, coupled with the oversight of the apostles and elders (Acts 15:4). Thus, in the end James could honestly state the wisdom and the outcome of the meeting in these words, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and *us*” (Acts 15:28, emphasis added).

⁴⁶ Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 721.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the role of the prophet in the Old Testament, making the observation that he had God's authority to know the will of God and to convey God's will to the nation of Israel. The precise epistemic conditions and the way the will of God was conveyed to the prophets, whether through an intuitive mode of knowledge or something entirely unique, remains an inscrutable mystery. The prophets understood these spiritual impressions to be from God and there was no hint of skepticism with regard to the truth of the disclosure.

A remarkable paradigm shift occurred between the Old Testament model of the individual prophet and the New Testament model of the prophetic church, born on the day of Pentecost. In the Old Testament, God spoke through the prophets. In the New, God speaks through his elect community, the church. Thus the New Testament church shares in this brilliant prophetic heritage: knowing God, hearing directly from God by his Spirit, and speaking with authority in the world. The trajectory of God's revelation has remarkably unfolded since he first began to speak through the Old Testament prophets.

Upon the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ he continues to speak in and by his church (Heb. 1:1-2; cf. Eph. 3:10) today. We contend that it is the presence of God within the church that constitutes its prophetic calling to the world. Admittedly, that is a research topic in its own right. Our crucial premise here shows that this authority to know and declare the will of God is what is meant by the words, the 'prophetic church.'

Finally, we examined several New Testament passages, focusing on Acts 15 where we delineated the central features of the corporate church's procedure in

discerning the will of God. Acts 15 reveals an apt model that supports our claim that the best and wisest church decisions are based on the commitment of the whole church and its leaders to know the will of God for the church. The biblical balance in the relationship between pastoral gifting, offering leadership and the Spirit-led community as a whole, works together to discern the will and purpose of God on any major issue the church faces. Knowledge is crucial in this context. This is the biblical foundation to establish a covenant epistemology model for the church.

CHAPTER 3

A HISTORY LESSON ON DISCERNMENT

This chapter examines materials from church history and theology. The phenomena of the historic faith community and Christian theology serve as a background for the covenant epistemology model advanced in this dissertation. Our historical examples in this chapter reflect important and positive contributions on the topic of spirit-led discernment in the context of a faith community. The three examples we have collected include first, Ignatius of Loyola, who serves as the foundational character upon whom the concepts of individuality and community discernment are based; second, George Fox and the Society of Friends, who expand upon the principles of community life; and, third, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who reveals the Christ-like essence within the Christian community. Collectively they provide substantive historical and theological background for the covenant epistemology model. These examples date from the period of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations¹ to approximately the mid twentieth century.

Hopefully, we will show that the story of these exemplary leaders support the basic idea of community discernment. Specifically we want to show that these leaders and theologians affirm the importance of corporately-shared responsibility in discerning the will of God for the faith community. Second, we point out that each envisioned the

¹ The term, "Catholic-Reformation," is used instead of the term, "Counter-Reformation," because the latter expresses an historical bias that discounts appreciable gains developed in the Catholic Church after the German Reformation began in 1517.

community as the normative context in which discernment of the will of God takes place for the local church.

As a disclaimer, we do not attempt to prove that individual discernment and personal spiritual direction without the aid of community is impossible. Rather, we want to show that if the faith community is the normative context in which discernment for the church operates, then this should be our epistemic focus. The three subjects of this chapter all seem to support the value of community discernment over individual discernment, and this, in turn, supports our covenant epistemology thesis.

The Value of Discernment

Ignatius of Loyola

Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556)² was born to a noble family from northern Spain and given the baptismal name Inigo in the parish church at San Sebastian.³ From the beginning of his life and throughout his adolescence, Ignatius was drawn to the social scene, both in the church⁴ and elsewhere. He was "...absorbing the traits of his Basque countrymen."⁵ The young Inigo had a bent for vanity and worldly affections, including dreaming of "ambitions for feats of arms and chivalry, interests in fine clothes and his

² Paul Van Dyke, *Ignatius Loyola: the Founder of the Jesuits* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1968).

³ George E. Ganss, *et al*, ed., *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, Classics in Western Spirituality, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 13.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

personal appearance, and romantic episodes.”⁶ His dream was dashed when a cannonball shattered his leg during a battle with the French, leaving him dependent on medical practitioners who understood nothing about anesthesia and little about infection. He endured a long convalescence interrupted by multiple surgeries that left him permanently scarred with a crooked leg. When he faced the world again, he had changed.

During his convalescence Inigo asked for books to pass the time. According to his autobiography he discovered a marked difference between secular books and books that told sacred stories of the saints.⁷ The story of the life of Christ most affected his life, and his former vanities were overcome with new “holy desires.”⁸ While still recovering from his wounds, he became convinced he should dedicate the remainder of his life in absolute service to Jesus Christ. In his autobiography as related to Camara, Ignatius explains his conversion. The passage is written in the third person since Camara is relaying the story:

One night while he was awake he saw clearly an image of Our Lady with the holy Child Jesus. From this sight he received for a considerable time very great consolation, and he was left with such loathing for his whole past life and especially for the things of the flesh that it seemed to him that his spirit was rid of all the images that had been painted on it. Thus from that hour until August '53 when this was written, he never gave the slightest consent to the things of the flesh. For this reason it may be considered the work of God, although he did not dare to claim it nor said more than to affirm the above. But his brother as well as all the rest of the household came to know from his exterior the change that had been wrought inwardly in his soul.⁹

⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁷ Ibid., 70-71.

⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁹ Ibid., 71-72.

The Society of Jesus

From the beginning of Ignatius' conversion he was a man of the community. His social life took on a new and sacred character. Others easily read his life, for he lived as an open book and eventually founded one of the most passionate mission societies in church history, the "Company of Jesus,"¹⁰ known as the Jesuits. Ignatius regarded the community as the context for knowledge and information. However, Ignatius was "bound by special oath"¹¹ to obey the Pope and submit to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Ignatius was a true Catholic reformer who remained faithful to his traditional roots, and he did not share the ideal of the priesthood of all believers preached by Protestant Reformers.

Ignatius began to grow in his awareness of a Spirit-directed community, and he formed the idea of a holy community, a literal Society of Jesus that brought people together under the rubric of divine mission and fidelity to Christ's love for the world. The concept of community, unity, and Spirit-led guidance advanced with Ignatius' leadership and organization of the Society of Jesus. He retained the notion that individuals should seek divine guidance. Only later he showed a tendency to promote the judgment of others while doubting his own isolated ability to judge the truth. Increasingly he held the community in higher esteem as an instrument for discerning the will of God.

¹⁰ Van Dyke, *Ignatius Loyola*, 130-145.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

The Spiritual Exercises

Despite his contribution to the idea of a Spirit-led community, St. Ignatius is best known for teaching believers to seek divine direction for themselves, for their own individual spiritual direction and formation. For this purpose he wrote his classic manual, the *Spiritual Exercises*, a complex self-help book in which he wrote step-by-step instructions to help individuals purify their souls and grasp the will and purpose of God for their lives. Recently, the *Spiritual Exercises* have become increasingly popular, as George Ganss observes, “Many exercitants have found treasures in Ignatius’ book of which he himself was unaware....”¹² From college students to seasoned Christian leaders, many individuals have found the manual time-consuming and rewarding as they have used the *Exercises* to guide penetrating analyses of their souls, rid themselves of selfish desires, and discern the will of God. Ignatius intended the *Exercises* to be flexible and adaptable to different situations. They can be adjusted to either an abbreviated or extended form and as the centerpiece for either personal devotion or for group spiritual formation retreats.¹³

Ignatius considered the epistemological aspect of individual spiritual formation to be important when he wrote the *Spiritual Exercises*, and his primary concern was for the individual’s understanding of the will of God. He believed the *Exercises* would be instrumental in the pursuit of the truth for individuals. He intended the exercitant to obtain a level of certainty about God’s will and, therefore, be wholly committed to God’s

¹² Ganss, *Ignatius of Loyola*, 120.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 117.

service. He wrote the classic *Exercises*, “To serve as a channel for the grace that will enable that person to put God’s will, once discerned, into actual practice in life.”¹⁴ The individual’s service to God was paramount in his thinking and Ignatius was a worthy example who put these principles to work in his own life. In time, however, Ignatius broadened this intense focus on the individual to include community.

Ignatius’ broadening awareness began with the observation that individuals can be wrong about God’s will, even when seekers express conviction about their spiritual enlightenment. Ignatius realized that mere subjectivity does not qualify as knowledge. An individual’s certainty was not easy to grasp, for one thing. Individuals must be in the right frame of mind, have the purest motives, and meet arduous prerequisites to begin to grasp such certainty. Ignatius was convinced that God grants understanding only to the person “...who exercises himself in humility.”¹⁵

Ignatius also advised the guidance of others, particularly advisors with life experience, those whom Ignatius deemed as having been “tested and tried.”¹⁶ These weathered and faithful individuals oversee the progress of the seeker. The idea of someone acting as a spiritual director, a trusted person who could serve as a sounding board guiding the exercitant through the *Exercises*, grew from the monastic tradition of personal mentoring. Monastics held the view that it was virtually impossible to become a

¹⁴ Barbara Bedolla and Dominic Totaro, “Ignatian Spirituality,” in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*, ed. Robin Maas & Gabriel O’Donnell (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 174.

¹⁵ Heinrich Bacht, “Early Monastic Elements in Ignatian Spirituality: Toward Clarifying Some Fundamental Concepts of the Exercises,” in *Ignatius Loyola: His Personality and Spiritual Heritage, 1556-1956, Studies on the 400th Anniversary of his Death*, ed. Friedrich Wulf (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), 230.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 230-31.

self-taught monk.¹⁷ Ignatius therefore believed that individuals seeking the will of God need a qualified listener or sounding board to aid the process. In ideal circumstances he believed there should be a trusted guide available, someone who can see through misgivings, tangents and spiritual blindness, a person who can provide “skilled direction.”¹⁸

Ignatius' Doubts

Ignatius himself lived these principles when retaining someone to guide him through the *Exercises* and when contemplating other personal matters. Discerning the will of God was immensely important to him, and seeking guidance was a holy undertaking. He held strongly that in every human act believers should seek to perform God's will alone, “that God may be glorified in everything we do.”¹⁹ Ignatius often sought the guidance of others, even if it meant subordinating his own view and entrusting himself to the advice of his confessor, accepting his confessor's advice as the “will of God.”²⁰

Ignatius realized at times his own judgment was based on presumption, and he intuitively turned to a faithful confidant, placing “his confidence in another person whom

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bedolla and Totaro, “Ignatian Spirituality,” 176.

¹⁹ Jules J. Toner, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision Making* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991), 12.

²⁰ Ibid., 56.

he should trust, setting aside his own judgment and accepting that of his adviser.”²¹ He considered it important to gain input from people who would be totally honest with him; he lacked regard for those who told him only what he wanted to hear. He became especially troubled on matters of extreme importance such as the appointment of a church official to a powerful position. He did not want his opinion to get in the way of God’s will. Even after praying and agonizing over the matter for days, seeking the will of God, he sometimes questioned his own presumption. On June 5th, 1552, writing to Father Francisco DeBorja, Ignatius shared some of his struggles about a particular church appointment. Fighting with his internal suspicions about the person being appointed for the position and doubting his own motives, he wrote: “During this period of three days I reflected and talked with others about it and felt certain fears or, at least, not that freedom of spirit to speak out against the appointment and to try and prevent it. I said to myself: ‘How do I know what God our Lord wishes to accomplish’?”²²

Ironically, the person who wrote the *Spiritual Exercises*, a profound instrument to help individuals obtain knowledge of the will of God for their own lives, sought counsel from others. Apparently he appreciated the fact that knowledge for one’s own self and knowledge that pertained to the broader community and affected others, were of vastly different natures. The consequences of community-wide decisions would be more extensive if the decision-maker turned out to be wrong. On matters affecting the whole church, Ignatius recognized a higher responsibility to know the truth clearly. Perhaps he

²¹ Ibid., 118.

²² Joseph N. Tylanda, ed., *Counsels for Jesuits: Selected Letters and Instructions of Saint Ignatius Loyola* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 60.

was aware of Paul's message to the Romans, when the apostle said, "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Rom. 12:4-5).

The need to look to others and seek God in the context of corporate discernment influenced Ignatius' decision to form the Society of Jesus. Paul Van Dyke observes that, "At first Ignatius and his colleagues had to decide a general question: should they or should they not found a company which should not end with their lives?"²³ It was a serious matter deciding to form a new order in the Catholic Church. In response he and his companions deliberated together on whether God had called them to begin a new religious order.²⁴ Jules Toner notes historically that, "One proposal was for a few to go out to a hermitage to pray and fast with the hope of finding God's will "...in the name of all."²⁵ Although they eventually rejected the proposal, it was not because they felt that they should not entrust themselves to the group. In fact, in certain cases Ignatius thought it would be acceptable to entrust the work of discernment "...to a group of three or five members."²⁶

²³ Van Dyke, *Ignatius Loyola*, 134.

²⁴ Toner, *Discerning God's Will*, 56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

Built-in Protections

Once it was settled that such a society should be formed for Christ's service the group encouraged Ignatius to set down the guidelines, and the first question was whether the Society should elect a leader.²⁷ Ignatius reluctantly accepted the position as the first superior general of the organization, then sought and received the Pope's approval for the new order.²⁸ It took three years for Ignatius to finish the Constitutions.²⁹ The Society answered first to the Pope, to whom they vowed their readiness to be sent "...to the Turks or to the new world, or to the Lutherans, or to any other believers or unbelievers."³⁰

The superior general's position had restricted powers and it is clear Ignatius of Loyola respected Church tradition, authority, and hierarchy. Beyond obedience to the Pope, however, and according to the rules set down by the Jesuits, "Every member shall promise obedience to the general in all things concerning the rule."³¹ There were built-in protections against tyranny. For instance, the general was never to rule as a selfish despot, but "must be always mindful of the goodness, the gentleness and the love of Christ."³² As founder of the Society and still loyal to the Catholic Church, Ignatius recognized blessings and benefits from individuals working together, striving together for the truth of Christ, and serving side by side in the context of a unified religious

²⁷ Van Dyke, *Ignatius Loyola*, 134.

²⁸ Bedolla and Totaro, "Ignatian Spirituality," 174; cf. Van Dyke, *Ignatius Loyola*, 136.

²⁹ Van Dyke, *Ignatius Loyola*, 146.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

community. Ignatius loved the communal life and he returned repeatedly to the problem of unity, focusing on “the principal enemy of that union...self-love.”³³ No one could become an island by himself; no one held absolute authority within the Society. Indeed, the Constitution was written with the provision to “depose a general and if necessary expel him from the Company.”³⁴

Ignatian Spirituality on the Value of Community

The Living Heritage

Ignatian spirituality is currently still being realized, still evolving, and still impacting lives. More direct to the concept of covenant epistemology is the fact that Ignatian spirituality is keenly felt on the matter of the Spirit-directed community. On reviewing the Ignatian spirituality material, woven into its fabric is the desire for communal life. Ignatius Loyola was a loyal patron of his Catholic tradition, but he stands out as a proven reformer in the heritage of other great reformers. Not surprisingly, Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* have found a home today among Protestants and Catholics alike who are seeking a more communal spirituality.³⁵

Ignatius lived during the time of the Protestant Reformation, an era marked by a growing sense of individual freedom, rapid change, and passion for religious adventure. Men took mortal risks for the sake of higher principles. European exploration opened the

³³ Ibid., 153.

³⁴ Ibid., 155.

³⁵ See John J. English, *Spiritual Freedom: From an Experience of the Ignatian Exercises to the Art of Spiritual Guidance*, 2nd edition, rev. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1995), 275-294.

door to new knowledge and the desire to find God in new dimensions beyond the doctrinal and institutional elements. Still, as John English points out, "...Ignatius attempted to unite the new individualism with a sense of the church as the community of Christ."³⁶ Ignatian spirituality seemed to anticipate the excesses of modern individualism. Could Ignatian spirituality and openness to community be a healthy antidote to the contemporary excesses of individualism? Some see the communal trend as a healthy one. According to English who is a Jesuit scholar:

Today we see a communal spirituality developing. This may be a result of the global awareness that is brought to us by radio, television, and high-tech communications. The media indicate that we live in a global village and are extremely dependent on each other. The new spirituality may also be a reaction to the obvious destructiveness brought about by exaggerated individualism and the resulting awareness of the benefits of working with the community.³⁷

Christians seeking God through his Spirit would do well to remember the Ignatian ideal of remaining open-minded and open-hearted with respect to the community. Community demands listening to others, respecting that the Spirit speaks through any of the individual members, because they are "members of one body" (Eph. 4:25b.). Communal discernment presupposes participants who are able to experience "discernment of spirits in themselves,"³⁸ and that "individuals can and will communicate to others their experiences in prayer and prayerful reflection."³⁹

³⁶ Ibid., 279.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ William A. Barry, *Letting God Come Close: An Approach to the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2001), 163.

³⁹ Ibid.

Learning to Trust Others

Trusting God seems easy compared to trusting other individuals or a group with advice and discernment concerning God's will.⁴⁰ Christians can choose to forsake corporate discernment and opt to seek God's will in private. One could even argue that Jesus said, "Go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matt. 6:6b.). Did he mean that we should always seek God privately? It is not likely. The context of this passage implies that Jesus was referring to the specific problem of pride and showing off in public. He was not addressing how to discern the will of God for oneself or the community. Therefore, the passage in Matthew does not signal that private interpretation and discernment are superior to corporate interpretation and discernment.

By contrast, Ignatius made it clear that the capacity of individuals to understand and discern God's will is, at best, limited and untrustworthy. He instead advocated a community of faith when considering major decisions that depend on knowing the mind of the Lord. This was reflected both in his life and in his teaching. This is why Ignatius is so important to the discussion of this paper. He remains a brilliant example of an individual who was wholly devoted to knowing God and God's will, but who also modeled a genuine trust in the community to discern the will of God corporately. In his quest for spirituality he did not ignore the value of the community to lift him higher than he was capable of lifting himself.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 166.

George Fox and the Society of Friends

George Fox's Leadership

George Fox and the Religious Society of friends provide the second example of a Spirit-led community. The transition from Ignatius of Loyola to George Fox may at first seem awkward since the only recorded interface between the latter and a group of Jesuit priests ended in an apparent stalemate.⁴¹ Yet they share something in common as we shall see. George Fox did not originate the Religious Society of Friends, but he fueled the movement known pejoratively by their despisers at the time (and more affectionately today) as “the Quakers.”⁴² He was, however, a natural and gifted leader who helped stir the spiritual movement and caused its membership to swell. A leather worker and shepherd by trade, Fox lacked formal theological education. Yet he had a prophet-like tone in his messages to those who heard him speak and was a saint to those who observed his life.

The Protestant Reformation spread amazingly fast throughout England and Scotland, and as violently and politically as in Europe. George Fox and William Penn observed the killings and the hatred perpetrated by the religious wars and the continued intolerance in the aftermath of Cromwell's England. The Society of Friends came to be despised and disenfranchised in this highly charged climate because they sought a simpler way of existence. They refused to participate in war or any violence and they

⁴¹ Interestingly, George Fox wrote in his journal that the Jesuits boasted that “of all the sects the Quakers were the best and most self-denying people, and it was great pity that they did not return to the holy mother Church.” See George Fox's account in Jessamyn West, ed., *The Quaker Reader* (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), 87.

⁴² See Douglas V. Steere, ed., *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings*, Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. John Farina. (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 6-7.

rejected the outward modes of religious institutionalism that they thought diminished the Spirit within the souls of Christians.⁴³

George Fox was an exceptional organizer and a man of deep pious devotion, who sought personal assurance and the pure lifestyle that follows such assurances. In fact some label him as a mystic or an existentialist.⁴⁴ An eccentric, he sought to know Jesus Christ personally and in a vital, transforming way. From the beginning Fox and the Society of Friends experimented with the inward light of the Spirit and the outward transforming lifestyle it produces.

Fox could be mystical, in that he believed the inner witness of the Spirit was more important to the Christian than external sensory or reason-based evidence. He loved listening to the Spirit perhaps more than reading the Bible. According to his journal he was accused of dissuading “men from reading the Scriptures telling them it was carnal.”⁴⁵ This charge was false, but he agreed with scriptural testimony that “...the letter is carnal and killeth, but that which gave it forth is spiritual and eternal and giveth life.”⁴⁶ Although Fox maintained that anyone can read the Bible, not everyone experiences the light and life through the reading of the Scripture. He knew that reading the Bible was not a doorway to an automatic relationship with God. Nor did he believe that a formal theological education was helpful in this regard. He often despaired of listening to

⁴³ See Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 65-68.

⁴⁴ West, *The Quaker Reader*, 39.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

educated clerics blather endlessly. So, with his Bible in his hand and his heart raised toward heaven, he walked alone “into the orchard or the fields.”⁴⁷ Stubborn but longingly and lovingly desiring to know the heart and mind of Christ, George Fox wanted to discern God’s will and respond in obedience.

The Legacy of the Friends’ Church

Fox’s legacy directly contributed to this paper’s emphasis on the importance of community. He was an individualist like Ignatius, with strong opinions and brassy courage in the face of persecution,⁴⁸ and his life vision ultimately focused on the community of Friends rather than himself. He had compassion for those who suffered unjustly, and a great vision for people to be free. Following his Lord, Fox could say, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Fox’s vision for free people with liberty to exercise their gifts in the context of the community resulted from his life of inward prayer. Consider, for example, this vivid, apocalyptic description that he shares:

And I had a vision about the time that I was in this travail and sufferings, that I was walking in the fields, and many Friends were with me, and I bid them dig in the earth, and they did and I went down. And there was a mighty vault top-full of people kept under the earth, rocks, and stones. So

⁴⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 88-93.

I bid them break open the earth and let all the people out, and they did, and all the people came forth to liberty; and it was a mighty place.⁴⁹

The history and theology of the Friends offers a uniquely fine example in the discussion on community discernment. They are committed to the simplest expressions of the biblical truth that every person who believes in Christ possesses the Spirit of truth. They value the unity of the assembly and believe that meetings should reflect a spirit of love and respect among all participants. They have fought spiritually for the truth that the church has no second-class citizens. As Douglas Steere affirms:

From the very outset, the Quaker movement was made up of laymen and had no place in its ranks for salaried, academically trained clergymen, which it designated “a hireling ministry.” Men and women shared in full equality all the rights and privileges of the group. The form of the Quaker worship was so simple that it could take place anywhere....The group sat together waiting on God to gather them inwardly, and all shared in the responsibility for helping the meeting to become a vessel of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰

The Society of Friends has maintained consistently a delicate tension between “group commitment and individual leading.”⁵¹ They consider this tension central to the discovery of the truth. When Friends meet to make major decisions, they first try to set aside personal ambitions, selfish desires, and other hidden personal agendas so that the Spirit can work through all the members. They are so committed to discovering the truth

⁴⁹ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁰ Steere, *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings*, 13-14.

⁵¹ See Monteze M. Snyder, et al, *Building Consensus: Conflict and Unity* (Richmond, IN: Earlham Press, 2001), 64-65.

together that they adopted a “clearness”⁵² principle, a traditional guideline that holds out the probability of unanimity.

Can any group of Christians, in an age that celebrates diversity, meet and discern the truth together, balancing the tension of individual and group expression, and rejecting petty contentions and divisiveness? Many groups of Friends testify to meetings where unanimity is the norm. How is this possible? Paul Lacey explains that some Friends’ meetings are characterized by several quite simple and practical guidelines. The following is a small sample of guidelines for making a decision:⁵³

1. What is the community’s guidance?
2. What is the gathered wisdom of historical practice and belief?
3. What is the biblical witness?
4. Can I be patient in deciding? (Self is often impatient, but true leading isn’t.)
5. Does it make demands on others but require little of me to carry it out?
6. Whom does it serve?

The clear conviction of the equality of every member and the gentle reliance upon individuals who see their roles as crucial to the corporate discerning process implies a non-verbal covenant epistemology. The commitment the Friends share to seek the will of God together and the conviction that God can speak to any person is a clear example that covenant-type epistemology models exist and have existed for centuries.

⁵² See Helene Pollock and Arlene Kelly on “Membership and the Clearness Process,” in *Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meeting*, ed. Patricia McBee. (Philadelphia, PA: Quaker Press of Friends General Conference, 2002), 43-50. Cf., Robert Barclay, “Turn Thy Mind to the Light,” in *The Quaker Reader*, ed. Jessamyn West (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), 227.

⁵³ Ibid. 65.

Applying the Friends' Principles

What Can the Charismatics Learn from the Quakers?

Several crucial guiding principles of the Friends' epistemology derived from their social experience are relevant and supportive of the covenant epistemology proposed in this paper. The applicable principles include the following:

1. Applying the truth of the priesthood of all the believers.

The doctrine of the priesthood of all the saints (1 Pet. 2:5, 9) is an essential pillar in a church's overall comprehension of itself. The New Testament teaches that every member is a priest unto God. This implies that salaried professionals, serving as church leaders, should not be regarded as the only members who minister before the altar and the Quakers have taken this truth to heart. Their continued application of this doctrine remains a living reminder of what the New Testament teaches about the priesthood of all the believers.

Surprisingly, the idea of the priesthood of all believers originates in the Old Testament. Just as grace appeared before the Law, the priesthood of all believers appeared before the Levitical priesthood. As Donald Bloesch remarks, "In the earliest known social pattern of Israel...priests as a class did not exist."⁵⁴ Some of the Old Testament prophets anticipated this full citizenship doctrine because they too were ordinary people who were given extraordinary knowledge of the will of God. Another factor is that the patriarchs were not official priests of their times, but they still prayed at the altars and listened to God as he spoke his word and directed their lives.

⁵⁴ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology 2: Life, Ministry, and Hope* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1979), 105.

The Reformers often spoke about the idea but had difficulty implementing it. The Friends practice the doctrine by elevating the importance of each member. Stuart Chase spoke of the Friends' practice when he said, "*Nobody outranks anybody*. Rich and poor, men and women, old and young, have equal status and are expected to participate equally."⁵⁵ In fairness to the Reformers, they partially adopted the doctrine, insisting that the church should not be structured upon a hierarchy that makes one man a leader and father (Pope) of us all. Martin Luther was adamant about this barrier between clergy and laity and railed against the Catholic Church in one of his pamphlets, assaulting what he called "...the first wall...an invention [of the] Pope, bishop, priests and monks."⁵⁶ Most of the Reformers seemed to have had a clear vision for this biblical truth but were either incapable or unwilling to see it through to its proper fulfillment.

2. Acknowledging the equal responsibility for members to seek the will of God.

According to one of the Friends' original thinkers, Robert Barclay (1648-1690), when the early members met together to seek the direction of the Holy Spirit as a community, "Seeing then that Christ hath promised his Spirit to lead his children, and that every one of them both ought and may be led by it,"⁵⁷ it was deemed incumbent upon each individual to discern the will of God during the meeting. If someone seemed out of order or if the person claiming to receive a word believed God was saying something that others felt was false or misleading, the early Friends concluded, "All these mistakes...are

⁵⁵ West, *The Quaker Reader*, 468.

⁵⁶ Martin Luther in *The Christian Theology Reader*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 267.

⁵⁷ West, *The Quaker Reader*, 226.

to be ascribed to the weakness or wickedness of men, and not to that Holy Spirit.”⁵⁸ By examining an individual’s revelation or thought in the context of community, its truth or falsity could be discerned corporately. Rejecting the message was not the same as rejecting the messenger, for unlike the judgment of the prophets in the Old Testament, it could be said of both individual discerners and corporate body, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor. 12:13).

Interestingly, Pentecostal and charismatic churches have earned a reputation for having implemented the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers more fully than traditional mainline churches. They share the legacy of Pentecostal history, including the movement’s early emphases upon Spirit-led community and God’s outpouring upon the least member of society. It was a remarkable movement that broke down many social barriers. At a time when Jim Crow laws in southern states forbade blacks and whites to intermingle in church services, the Azusa Street early Pentecostal phenomenon rejected the racial and class prejudices of the day.⁵⁹ Bloesch praises these kinds of social contributions of the Pentecostal and charismatic legacy, adding:

Pentecostalism has given poignant expression to the priesthood of all believers. The Reformation had rediscovered this biblical concept but was unable to avoid a hierarchical church in which all major responsibilities are assumed by the pastor. Pentecostals remind us that all Christians share in the ministry of Christ, including laity and women.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ See Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: the Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality & the Reshaping of Religion in the 21st Century* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

⁶⁰ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Holy Spirit: Works & Gifts*, Christian Foundation Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 205.

Indeed, Pentecostal and charismatic history has been more congenial to notions of inclusion based upon the all-believers principle. The outpouring of the Spirit has been understood to be egalitarian from the beginning of Pentecostal history.

Despite this heritage, many large charismatic-type churches are still intentionally or inadvertently hierarchical. Partly it may be that hierarchy is more efficient in decision making and it represents the typical model for business and evangelical churches today.⁶¹ In the observation of the present writer, who has spent years in Pentecostal churches, it is also because of the high premium Pentecostals place upon the gift of prophecy and the power of the *wordsmith*. Thus, the Old Testament model still looms in the background, even though this institutionalization of separation between priest and laity represents the reversal of the Pentecostal legacy. One argument for returning to some of their roots is so Pentecostals and charismatics could encourage a more people-driven church and perhaps obliterate once and for all the “caste distinction”⁶² between clergy and laity.

3. Highly respecting each individual member in the body.

It is virtually impossible to receive the truth from someone unless one respects the person who claims to have the truth. One of the leading principles among the Society of Friends since its inception has been unambiguous and equal respect for one another within the local fellowship.⁶³ Right from the beginning when a new member comes into a

⁶¹ See e.g. John C. Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers, 1993); cf. Lyle E. Schaller, *The Senior Minister* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988).

⁶² See Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990, 2003), 96.

⁶³ See Thomas Gates, *Members One of Another: the Dynamics of Membership in Quaker Meetings*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 371 (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2004).

meeting he or she learns that individuality is a good thing. Few modern religious or secular organizations achieve the level of equivalent respect among members.

Mutual respect grows among Christians who are connected to the body of Christ and functioning socially in the context of a faith community. Genuine connections serve as the conduit of spiritual exchange and community freedom in an environment of mutual respect. Respect builds bridges between listeners and the speakers, hearers and knowers. Mutual trust does not imply the absence of discrimination between good and bad ideas. Many people believe and say things they feel are from the Spirit and some ideas are simply foolish. However, maintaining a lack of respect for those who want to speak may make it impossible to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Some church members can earn respect based on time and their credibility. However, it is important that Christians show respect to one another from their hearts as members of the community. Tacit or disingenuous respect among members will likely quench someone's spirit. Weaker members may feel disenfranchised when it comes to having a voice in the church. They can become embittered and suspicious of leaders from whom they do not feel respect in return.

Leaders can become arrogant about their discernment and capacity to know God's will for the church. They may inadvertently assuage their insecurities by insisting their authority be recognized.⁶⁴ They may seem like team players but react defensively when crossed, considering any questions to be demeaning, acts of insubordination, or disloyal.

⁶⁴ Ogden, *Unfinished Business*, 114-122.

In reality their team is run like a sports team and they are the Coach.⁶⁵ They may show little respect for other voices in the church while demanding respect from everyone else. This type of hierarchy leads to a community where some parts are exaggerated and others are woefully diminished. The body of Christ becomes disfigured.

A well-proportioned body of Christ relies on the biblical truth that everyone deserves respect and everyone's voice should be heard. The strengths and weaknesses of individual members are not legitimate conditions for respecting some and rejecting or ignoring others. As to the question of whether weaker members need respect from the stronger, Paul says, "On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Cor. 12:22).

As Paul says, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!'" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" (1 Cor. 12:21). Leaders ought to realize they need all members and the members need all the leaders, and in their diversity they constitute Christ's body and God's Spirit flows through them as the body. In the body of Christ, as in the rest of life, there can be only one head. Jesus Christ shares his headship with no one (Eph. 1:10). If we take Paul's admonition literally, then all parts of the body are important to the health of the whole and all parts should be functioning accordingly.

4. Bonding in the spirit of koinonia before corporately seeking God's will.

Brothers and sisters who deeply love one another and are bound to the fellowship of their Savior Jesus Christ must lead the way and build community and what the ancient church termed, *koinonia*, or true fellowship in which people seek God together. The

⁶⁵ Ibid., 213-214.

Society of Friends demonstrates a model that shows authentic fellowship and love for one another in the church. True fellowship, as Scobie says, "...is not just something spiritual; it has to be expressed in concrete ways."⁶⁶

True fellowship depends upon the quality of relationships people work to maintain in the church. Leaders and laity must work together as one and avoid discord for the sake of Christ. Unity built on false hopes and a miscarriage of authority is ignoble. Fellowship demands integrity and integrity depends on honest relationships. The pursuit of unity and partnership in the presence of Almighty God demands full-faced relationships, devoid of duplicity, competition, and guile. Catholic writer Rose Mary Dougherty comments about the importance of this level of spiritual fellowship, which she contends is at the heart of any community seeking discernment:

In spiritual community, there is a bonding that goes beyond human expectations. It is a bonding of prayer and spiritual caring that is not dependent on the externals of similar personalities, tastes, or causes. Spiritual community is more than a feeling of warmth and comfort that comes in knowing that there are people with whom we can easily share the content of our lives, people on whom we can depend to meet our needs and alleviate our suffering. When those aspects of community are not present, we can think we are lacking community. In fact, that is essential for spiritual community, the respect for our relationship with God, may really be present for us.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Charles Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 501.

⁶⁷ Rose Mary Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 13-14.

5. *Practicing waiting and listening as forms of community discernment.*

One of the most distinct and controversial principles derived from the Quaker experience is the notion of “silent periods,”⁶⁸ waiting on the Lord to speak to someone in order to share with the rest of the group. The idea of having an “encounter with silence”⁶⁹ may strike the typical charismatic-type church as odd if it is more accustomed to noise. However, many Pentecostal and charismatic churches do value the practice of waiting on the Lord, and might easily apply this principle in meetings arranged to seek the will of God. Waiting quietly and intently fixed on the Holy Spirit’s presence lays a good foundation for groups that want to hear the voice of God.

Waiting quietly and intently means slowing down. Hurrying can lead to premature actions and decisions. Few decisions in the church need to be made in a hurry. Most decisions, especially important and costly decisions, should be made slowly, deliberately, and with input from many wise voices. Important and costly decisions take time and involve patiently waiting on the Lord.

Waiting quietly and intently also allows including as many people as possible to consider a decision. Is the decision important enough to wait? Can leaders and laity seek God together in unity? Fewer complaints and suspicions might prevail among the people if time were taken to pray, deliberate, and gain feedback from participants. Community discernment requires the congregation and its leaders to wait.

⁶⁸ West, *The Quaker Reader*, 468.

⁶⁹ See John Punshon, *Encounter With Silence: Reflections from the Quaker Tradition* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1987).

Waiting should not be confused with wasting time or avoiding difficult decisions. Waiting means letting God speak before making a decision. Leaders and laity must be patient in the process of discerning the will of God. Leaders willing to wait with the congregation are wise because it allows them to listen to the congregation who are also Spirit-directed.

The waiting period implies silence. Silence may relax enthusiasms and exhaust egos. God may speak to us when we are silent, as the Scripture says, “But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (Hab. 2:20; cf. Zeph. 1:7). How can someone hear the voice of God while talking or being filled with life’s anxieties? As the wisdom of Proverbs states:

Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the LORD. But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death. (Prov. 8:34-36)

Waiting and listening to other people air opinions and perspectives is crucial to discerning the Spirit of the Lord and understanding his will. Listening to others shows consideration and respect and shows openness to the Spirit who is able to speak through the body. Hearing what the Spirit says through someone else requires paying attention and granting serious consideration. As Monteze Snyder observes, we should “...Avoid devaluing someone’s ideas because [we] dislike that person or don’t trust their motives.”⁷⁰ The Friends have been modeling this kind of openness to others.

⁷⁰ Snyder, et al., *Building Consensus*, 12.

Some Friends churches are very liberal in the interpretation and application of these principles⁷¹ while others seek to apply the principles more literally in their own local congregations.⁷² In this chapter we have tried to show that the general principles involving respect and love for others are valid and consistent with the Friends' practice and remain a positive model for churches everywhere. Thus, the spirit and intent of the movement of the Friends and the history of their ideas and people like George Fox benefit us and support the spirit of openness to the whole body of Christ. This foundation is central to the thesis of this paper.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Life in Christ

Community Life is an Expression of Christ

Sixty years after his death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) continues to be a central topic in sermons, ethics courses, and table talk among Christians. He is remembered for being among many courageous pastors and theologians in Germany who refused to sign documents supporting the newly appointed Third Reich under Adolf Hitler. The result was a split between the state-sponsored Lutheran Church and the formation of a new Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer subsequently joined a secret and illegal seminary to train pastors for the Confessing Church.

⁷¹ See *Grounded in God: Care and Nurture in Friends Meetings*, ed. Patricia McBee (Philadelphia, PA: Quaker Press, 2002).

⁷² Charles Orwiler, "A Discernment-Based Model of Church Decision-Making" (D. Min. diss., George Fox Evangelical Seminary, 2003).

Bonhoeffer was unquestionably a man of deep conviction and moral judgment, and much of what he believed related to the importance of the faith community.⁷³ He lived, wrote about, and practiced his ecclesiology, his reflections on the essence of Christian relationships in the presence of the living Christ. He completed two manuscripts, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) and *Life Together* (1939), before being arrested by the Gestapo in 1943. The two works speak directly to the heart of what it means to be a Christian belonging to the faith community. *Life Together* provides the focus for Bonhoeffer's reflections relevant to this paper.

For Bonhoeffer, the community begins and ends in its relationship with the living presence of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. He once said, "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this."⁷⁴ He understood that without Christ at the center of the community individuals seek their own ego and not the interests of one another. Humankind is steeped in sin revealing itself in deep selfishness. Its only hope is Christ. According to Bonhoeffer, the sinful persons' discord between themselves and God cause rifts between them and other persons.⁷⁵ Persons can learn to be merciful to others only because God has been merciful to them.⁷⁶

⁷³ See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer : A Biography*, trans. Eric Mosbacher, ed. Edwin Robertson (Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 2000).

⁷⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1954), 21.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

Community Life is Spiritual First

The community of faith is more than a simple group of people joined by an ideal or brought together by the arbitrary will or raw enthusiasm of its members. The community has a spiritual nature and is based unequivocally upon grace⁷⁷ according to Bonhoeffer. The true church could not exist apart from God's creation for he is the one who creates community and creates human beings for the sake of community. Individual vocations are tied to relationships to the body of Christ, the community. God's call and connection to others who also hear the call of God are inextricably woven. Therefore it is impossible to be a Christian and lack vocation with respect to the faith community. In an unfinished work, *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer stated, "In the encounter with Jesus Christ man hears the call of God and in it the calling to life in the fellowship of Jesus Christ."⁷⁸

The community of faith therefore belongs to God. Persons cannot lay claim to it or call it their own. Nor can anyone set out to build a community based upon an ideal called "church", following Bonhoeffer's logic. Only God can bind people together spiritually.⁷⁹ Church planters and pastors of existing churches should pay heed to Bonhoeffer's humbling lessons. According to Bonhoeffer, "The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law,

⁷⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. and ed., Neville Horton Smith, Eberhard Bethge (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 76.

⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 28.

and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly.”⁸⁰ Everyone should enter community with few or no expectations except to be led by Christ. Therefore as believers with a common faith “we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients.”⁸¹

Community Life is Inviolable

The importance of respecting each individual member as a person whom God called, someone who is also a spiritual subject and not to be viewed as simply an object to be dealt with, someone to serve another one’s vision, is one of the most profound perceptions in Bonhoeffer’s thinking. The life of the community, bound together by the call of Christ, his real presence and his life in each member makes the community essentially inviolable and sacred. Bonhoeffer believed that the breakdown and denial of community begins when persons, leaders or otherwise, begin to use their sphere of power and influence over other individuals. This is a clear violation of God’s vocation for all believers because it ignores God’s gifting and God’s call upon each person. It happens “wherever the superior power of one person is consciously or unconsciously misused to influence profoundly and draw into his spell another individual or the whole community. Here one soul operates directly upon another soul.”⁸² According to Bonhoeffer, therefore, churches that operate on the basis of one person’s sense of vision cannot at the same time be functioning as Christ’s community.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 27.

⁸¹ Ibid., 28.

⁸² Ibid., 33.

The difference between the manner in which Christ intended the community to function and the way some communities actually operate is significant. Bonhoeffer observes that leaders who expect members to conform or answer to the leader's dream, shift focus from the gifts given to the church to the gifts groomed to serve the leader's vision.⁸³ Bonhoeffer might add, where is the vocation of Christ, who summons and gathers the church together and speaks to her? When is the Spirit of God allowed to speak freely through the body when members are already bound by the expectation of another's dream? Accordingly, the presumed truth of an individual leader who desires to shape the vision and direction of the church can subvert the higher vision of Christ's bride, the church. The result is a servile community tied to what the leadership decides.⁸⁴

Community Life shapes Knowledge

According to Bonhoeffer, "Human love has little regard for the truth. It makes the truth relative, since nothing, not even the truth, must come between it and the beloved person [the leader]. Human love desires the other person, his company, his answering love, but it does not serve him [the follower]."⁸⁵ If the walls that divide open spirited communication remain, the leaders who claim to know God's purpose for the church will lose the capacity to distinguish between their own spirit and the Spirit of Christ. Some leaders function autocratically and form practices motivated by "human love" rather than

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 34.

inspired by “spiritual love.” “Human love” as Bonhoeffer refers to it, runs contrary to the Spirit of God and naturally inhibits the work of Christ in his community.

Bonhoeffer may be speaking directly to the heart of the problem in many large charismatic churches, who frequently cast the job of the senior pastor as the vision seeker. It is easy for charismatic leaders, especially persons of great confidence and intelligence, to allow their thoughts and prayers to drift into their own aspirations and personal dreams. The pastor may begin to operate from the motivation of Bonhoeffer’s definition of human love, without respecting God’s call for each member of the body. Leaders must view each person in the community as Spirit-filled and able to respond to the leader’s voice truthfully. As Bonhoeffer explains:

Human love lives by uncontrolled and uncontrollable dark *desires*; spiritual love lives in the clear light of service ordered by the *truth*. Human love produces human subjection, dependence, constraint; spiritual love creates *freedom* of the brethren under the Word. Human love breeds hothouse flowers; spiritual love creates *fruits* that grow healthily in accord with God’s good will in the rain and storm and sunshine of God’s outdoors. The existence of any Christian life together depends on whether it succeeds at the right time in bringing out the ability to distinguish between a human ideal and God’s reality, between spiritual and human community.⁸⁶

Thus, the leader-dominated community has the power to shape the environments where knowledge is shared, both in leadership board meetings and informal sessions where Christ is presumably sought. In the present writer’s observation, the devolution from being an open environment to becoming a closed one may happen slowly. Individuals may barely recognize that anything has changed before it is too late. The change eventually produces an air of epistemic regularity, where everyone can anticipate

⁸⁶ Ibid., 37.

the next step. Standardizing behavior can squelch free communication, while the task of guarding the system of power begins to supplant dialogue. In this highly controlled environment it is difficult to imagine that people can hear the voice of Christ.

Community Leadership requires Self-Examination

Leaders need to reexamine their own motives to become more open to the whole community. Community is created on the premise that diversity among individual members tempers one-sided perceptions and the emergence of monolithic institutions. If we take Paul's body analogy seriously, individuality and differences are created for the sake of the whole. A healthy respect for those differences is the only pathway to authentic unity in the church. Leaders should periodically evaluate whether they truly respect the diversity they see in the body as much as they respect and desire the unity.

Bonhoeffer offers clear suggestions on how members might share a day together because ultimately his understanding of community was based on praxis rather than theory. Living the life with others helped him see the value of each from the greatest to the least. "Every Christian community must realize that not only do the weak need the strong, but also that the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of fellowship."⁸⁷ Pastors may drift into worlds of dreams and visions, because they lose connection with common people. Pastors and leaders must examine themselves and their motives often.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 94.

Reorienting to this form of discipline in leadership in the body first requires humble recognition that church leaders share humanity with their members. Bonhoeffer says, “Only he who lives by the forgiveness of his sin in Jesus Christ will rightly think little of himself.”⁸⁸ Pastors and leaders who appreciate great diversity in the church acknowledge each person’s divine origin, divine vocation, and grace.

Community Life Requires Listening

Listening to others is critical in the art of living in Christian community. Bonhoeffer says, “Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God’s love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear.”⁸⁹ Love is characterized and perfected by listening. Moreover, Bonhoeffer says that those who refuse to listen to others in the community will eventually be unable to hear God.

He who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words.⁹⁰

In a related passage, Bonhoeffer suggests listening when people confess their sins, identifying with their conditions, and learning to bear one another’s burdens. The ministry of leadership, which includes authority, always involves listening. Listening to others reveals what ultimately defines church leadership, namely, servants of Christ and

⁸⁸ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 97.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 98.

therefore servants to the church he loves. He tells us that, “Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only where the ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming is carried out.”⁹¹ With this comment Bonhoeffer has taken his cue from Christ’s teaching on leadership, where our Lord exclaims, “Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43).

Community Life Involves Authority

“The ministry of authority”⁹² according to Bonhoeffer, is based on the gifting and function of leadership rather than on authority. Authority, he states, “lies in the exercise of ministry. In the man himself there is nothing to admire.”⁹³ He recognizes that there are gifted and ungifted leaders and strong and weak Christians, but he rejects the idea that titles or personalities should draw people into dependent relationships with the ministry of leadership.⁹⁴ Rather leadership judges all things and corrects all things through the correct use of the Word of God.⁹⁵ Only as messengers, then, do we have authority.

The Bible plays a uniquely authoritative role in the entire community according to Bonhoeffer and that is why it must remain a centerpiece of worship and fellowship.⁹⁶ He urges all believers to study Scripture, memorize it and take time to visit it repeatedly.

⁹¹ Ibid., 108.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 109.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 91.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 54-57.

Bonhoeffer states that by standing on solid biblical ground, believers “attain certainty and confidence in [their] personal and church activity.”⁹⁷ Through the word of God one may correct, rebuke and instruct people in the ways of God more thoroughly and forthrightly. In Bonhoeffer’s epistemic picture, Christ the Lord is living at the center of the church community, calling each member, drawing each person to the center of himself. His calling and Spirit are vitally connected to and powerfully alive within each member of the community. Christ, therefore, functions within the gifted members of the body: he acts as his own witness to himself and speaks tenderly to each person.

God’s word plays a specific and crucial objectifying role as God’s authoritative voice for the whole community because it speaks to everyone. Bonhoeffer believes in the importance of pastoral calling and the role of someone to guide the sheep. He served in such a role, so he speaks from experience when he says of pastors, “Pastoral authority can be attained only by the servant of Jesus who seeks no power of his own, who himself is a brother among brothers submitted to the authority of the Word.”⁹⁸

Learning from Bonhoeffer

The principles drawn from Bonhoeffer’s work, particularly in his classic *Life Together*, are simple and powerful when applied to the contemporary situation. Many corporate sized charismatic churches in America would likely benefit from practicing Bonhoeffer’s principles related community.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 109.

Christ is the Only True Head

Modern churches need to remind themselves that Christ is the head of the church. Christ maintained his position as head of the church through his resurrection and ascension. The outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost was the product of Christ's coronation as the head of the church and he reigns supreme over his church to the end of time (Eph. 1:18-23). Bonhoeffer's works reinforce how deeply Christ-centered he was.⁹⁹

Jesus was not a proposition to this young German pastor, he was a person whom Bonhoeffer loved and it shows in his life's work. The modern Christian life too easily becomes busywork built on the tyranny of the urgent and the business of the church. Business meetings and board meetings can function without Christ at the head when leaders function as leaders of the people rather than followers of Jesus Christ. The Jesuits, the Friends, and Bonhoeffer remind pastors and leaders how non-negotiable the focus should be: Christ is the center of the church and the only one who can build an authentic Christian community.

Every Member Belongs to Christ

The church and its members belong to Christ and are, therefore, bound to fulfill the vision and calling of their only true Master. Paul says concerning the individual believer, "To his own master he stands or falls" (Rom. 14:4b.). Members of a congregation are servants and disciples of Christ first. Pastors and leaders must begin to appreciate all the members of the body and train them to become better discerners of the

⁹⁹ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

Spirit of God. The church is the community God puts together. He is alive within it because it is his “home” (John 14:23). No member of the church belongs to anyone other than Christ and no member of the church owes greater allegiance to any authority than to Christ.

The message Bonhoeffer leaves is that dreamers and visionaries can hurt the church when messages and directions for the church are born solely from human aspirations, or as Bonhoeffer warned, from “human love” as opposed to “spiritual love.” If the vision of one man or a small group of individuals guides the direction of a church, the question can be asked whether the congregation is functioning fully as God’s church. If charismatic leaders insist on navigating the church to places they believe they have the unquestioned authority to take it, God’s government will hardly have room to function. If, on the other hand, leaders learn to relinquish control and allow the will and purpose of God to surface through the body of Christ, they may all discern the direction Christ wants to take the church.

Christ is the Only Basis for Church Authority

Authority is not derived from leadership positions per se, nor does a specific office afford particular privileges and responsibilities for others’ vocations and in every situation. Leaders’ authority flows from their calling, depends upon their being connected to Christ’s body, and requires functioning as servants in the gifting in which they are called. Leaders are not truly shepherds if they are not serving as shepherds. Similarly

persons who do not prophesy are not prophets and teachers who do not teach should not be considered teachers. Bonhoeffer understood these requirements and had great respect for pastors for he knew Jesus' admonition well, and he practiced servant leadership ministry because he accepted the idea that, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:2b.).

Christ Creates the Vision

Bonhoeffer's writings provide a powerful side of the church and facilitate the view of the Christ-centered church, a critical piece in support of our thesis. Just as importantly, he offers a unique side of pastoral leadership. Bonhoeffer defines leadership as being connected to the body, functioning in the community, listening, learning, and searching the hearts and souls of the members of the community to identify a unity of vision. Vision comes from the whole church body and a spiritual connection among the body members; and the vision is not the pastor's alone; it rises from the whole congregation.

In Bonhoeffer's view, leaders must be humble and willing to let go of their own vision in order to capture the knowledge and will of God. Leaders should instead ask: Who are the people that make up this community? What are their special callings and giftings? How can the community of people begin to see the vision Christ has for the community? When should the community act?

Conclusion

This chapter examined three major strands of church history and theology. Each strand presented substantive background information concerning values and practices that pertain to the heart of this thesis, namely, that the faith community is the backbone for establishing a covenant epistemology. They urge the question: How can we begin to know God and his will apart from the believing, loving and Christ directed community? The example of Ignatius of Loyola served to demonstrate that knowledge is available to a community committed to the value of discernment. The example of George Fox and the Society of Friends showed us that each individual in the community possesses the light of the Holy Spirit, is unique and crucial to the discernment of the community, and that people's commitment to one another and respect for one another are the effectual means by which they hear the voice of God. Finally, the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church reminded us of the truth that, in order to hear the voice of God, the church must remain Christocentric and live in the context of Christ's *real presence* in the church.

These three brilliant examples show that Christians have historically met in communities of faith where they loved one another, bound themselves together to meet with God, and sought his will as a Christ-led community. And when the candles were snuffed out and the doors were closed, they left their meetings knowing that the word they received for the church was true. They knew they could look at one another and say honestly they had met with God in a vital corporate experience.

CHAPTER 4

ECCLESIOLOGY MEETS EPISTEMOLOGY

This chapter examines the philosophical materials and specific theological content that relate to major questions raised in epistemology. Several interrelated aspects will be addressed: first, what epistemology is and how its tests for truth are relevant to ecclesiology; second, the practical importance of epistemology and how it can be used in the context of the charismatic church; and third, the authoritative locus in ecclesiological epistemology in the postmodern climate. The authoritative locus addresses the questions: “Who has the right to speak for God?” and “How can the church guard itself from error?” The fourth aspect discussed is “social epistemology,” and how this emerging philosophical model may be useful to the contemporary church.

The material in this chapter supports the claim that the current hierarchical model of church government depends too much on the responsibility of the senior pastor to know the will of God. As a viable alternative we will recommend a more integrative and inclusive epistemology. An important link in this chapter is the connection between the historical evolution of the theory of knowledge and the contemporary concern for inclusive participation in the church.

Epistemology is a technical discipline in philosophy that deals with the theory of knowledge. However, the principal issues raised in epistemology can be uncomplicated

and reduced to two basic questions. The first question is: “What can we know?” which concerns the object or the content of our knowledge. A doctrinal truth such as a specific statement about the Trinity constitutes an “object” of knowledge. Other objects include the statements, “Our church ought to purchase this property at this time,” and its negation that says, “We should not.” The second question epistemology asks is: “How can we know?” which deals with the sources and methods of obtaining knowledge. Churches may seek answers in the Bible, through prayer, or from informed testimony to obtain knowledge about a decision to be made. These examples touch on the issue of epistemology because they relate to obtaining knowledge.

Friend or Foe?

In the period of modern philosophy,¹ epistemology has often been seen by church leaders as antagonist to the Christian faith instead of supportive. The criticisms are somewhat justified, according to philosophy historian W.T. Jones, who accurately observes:

Perhaps the most momentous element in the great change from medieval to modern times was the development of the scientific method. Indeed, if it can be said that classical philosophy was overthrown by the Christian’s discovery of God, then it can be said that medieval philosophy was overthrown by the scientist’s discovery of nature. This discovery was not a mere revival of classical naturalism and secularism; it was the discovery of a world of facts that seemed indifferent to man and his affairs.²

¹ See W.T. Jones, *Hobbes to Hume: A History of Western Philosophy*, Vol. 3, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1969), xvii-xix.

² *Ibid.*, xvii.

Changing methods of finding the truth and the emergence of the new science were not the only elements that surfaced. Philosophers of the modern period had a passionate interest that went beyond scientific discovery to the core of what it means to be a person who can isolate the truth and demonstrate the veracity of belief itself. They presumed a need for absolute certainty.

Descartes' Challenge

Modernism introduced the dawn of the relentless hunt for absolute and indubitable truth. Rene Descartes (1596-1650), French philosopher and mathematician, led the advance. According to his own testimony he began to experience doubts about everything he learned in school and every fact he had taken for granted.³ Descartes reasoned that existence itself, even his own existence, could be the result of a dream made up by an evil genius.⁴ How could anyone prove otherwise? In the face of this challenge he resolved that he would employ all the powers of his mind to know the truth with certainty. He began by drawing up four principles to guide his program of reason. The first was particularly significant to the history of epistemology. He resolved "...to accept nothing as true which I did not clearly recognize to be so: that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitation and prejudice in judgment, and to accept in them nothing more than

³ See Monroe C. Beardsley, ed., *The European Philosophers: From Descartes to Nietzsche*, The Modern Library, *Discourse on Method: Parts I-III*, by Rene Descartes (New York: Random House, 1988), 5-24.

⁴ Ibid., 7-11.

what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I could have no occasion to doubt it.”⁵

According to Descartes, we should be certain about what we believe, leaving no rock unturned and no reason for doubt. This he said holds true for belief about God too. Historically, church dogmatism held that it was enough to state the truth. Church authority backed up the claim. At the time Descartes was writing this foundation for truth was beginning to crack. Is faith sufficient? Is there room for doubt about God and the church’s teaching? More importantly, should the church’s claims be subjected to the same set of tests as in other categories of belief?

It is generally attested that pastors and other church leaders today share the view that being a Christian requires some use of intellectual faculties. This is why modern church members are being encouraged to know the reasons for their beliefs, learning how to demonstrate why they believe what they believe. Studying apologetics is one aspect of this concern and has become fairly popular among evangelical and charismatic Christians in recent years. Reasonable arguments fill textbooks in the art of defending the Christian faith. Logical syllogisms and inductive inferences are presented in the face of skepticism, including accumulative evidence supporting the credibility of the Bible and the authenticity of the miracles performed by Jesus. Josh McDowell⁶ and Norman Geisler⁷

⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁶ Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith* (San Bernardino, CA : Here's Life Publishers, 1979).

⁷ Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2002).

are two exemplary apologists who appeal especially to evangelicals, using this style of reasoning in their popular books.

Other Christian leaders think that presenting rational arguments miss the point, noting that the method of reason can only go so far and cannot prove that God exists or that the New Testament is true. Still, few leaders would deny some need to justify theistic truth and biblical claims when other disciplines, such as medicine and economics, are universally expected to present epistemic justification. Perhaps one interwoven position would be to acknowledge that Christian beliefs are subject to ordinary scrutiny as other truth claims are and that there ought to be some measurable or qualitative testing for claims concerning the will of God. Accordingly, Christians should be able to justify their belief system in some manner and engage in reasonable discourse concerning their specific truth claims. As David Wolfe explains:

I am a Christian, and this makes me mightily concerned about the truth of the beliefs on which my commitment is built. If I cannot bring intellectual honesty to bear on my Christian beliefs, then those beliefs are a fraud, for they claim to be true, not just dogmatic. On the other hand, if one can be both Christian and intellectually honest, then Christianity will have a cognitive as well as emotional appeal.⁸

Returning to Descartes, we should acknowledge at this juncture that he did not invent reason to justify knowledge. His predecessors, the medieval Christian philosophers, were concerned about the reasonableness of truth claims too, but they took for granted that truth could be known apart from independent certainty. For example, medieval arguments were often based on natural arguments concerning the existence of

⁸ David L. Wolfe, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief*, Contours of Christian Philosophy, ed. C. Stephen Evans. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 19.

God. In fact, scholasticism after the thirteenth century was especially renowned for its delivery of the natural arguments for God's existence. Thomas Aquinas' introduction of the "Five Ways" as proof for the existence of God represented the peak of this endeavor.⁹

St. Anselm's famous ontological argument is another case in point. His so-called rational proof for the existence of God has often been interpreted primarily as a means to reinforce the faith already held, not as a way to bring a skeptic to the indubitable conviction that *God exists*.¹⁰ However, Anselm likely accepted by faith the creed that, "God is known in experience, through personal encounter. Rational certainty was at best only a secondary concern to him. His aim was to understand the nature of this experience in depth."¹¹ Moreover, the medieval Christian scholar placed more authority on the church, supposing that tradition itself provides strong merit for justification of one's belief.

By contrast, Descartes looked instead for propositions that could stand independent from the revealed word of God and the authoritative claims of the church. In the transition from the medieval age to the modern, church dogma was no longer considered authoritative on matters of fact. Descartes became wrapped in concern with the lessons he had been taught by his Jesuit instructors, increasingly accepting the attitude that second-hand knowledge would never do. If something is worth believing in, then he

⁹ See W.T. Jones, *The Medieval Mind: A History of Western Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 2nd edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovonaovich, 1969), 216-223.

¹⁰ Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith: a Historical Sketch from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 20-24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

thought it should be tested. Let the outcome prove it to be true or false under the most rigorous examination. The ideas of God, the observable world, and the individual self were no longer immune from being placed on intellectual trial. The older Christian credo of “faith seeking understanding,” was unacceptable. The modernists called for ideas that would resist every attempt to doubt them and render faith superfluous.

Most important, however, was Descartes’ emphasis on the autonomous self, the individual knower. He found that he could not trust information given to him by others, no matter what their reputation, nor could he trust his senses. His doubts originated in himself, so his reason would have to begin in himself, and knowledge would have to be authorized by his autonomous self. He reasoned that knowledge had to be direct, immediate and absolute. With the classical philosophers, Descartes accepted the idea that opinion changes but true knowledge is immutable, incapable of being corrected by chance and circumstance.

Knowledge could no longer be accepted second hand, no longer accepted on the basis of simple observation, and no longer seen as a quest by the community. It had to have a certain deductive quality to it, something as clear and obvious as a mathematical fact. Ultimately, posing the problem in this light made the matter of knowledge a deeply personal problem, something only the individual could sort out for himself or herself.

Knowledge, like religious faith, had now become the quest of the individual, and Descartes was determined to discover absolute certainty no matter what the cost. Descartes' challenge ultimately defined the modernists' "foundationalist"¹² approach to truth. This demand for certainty in turn became basic to every aspect of knowledge, from every hallway to every laboratory. The demand would impact science as well as theology and political theory as well as metaphysics and morality. It would ultimately challenge every academic field, though the modernist became convinced that science would eventually replace religion as the basic framework for knowledge. For science contained the foundational methods that could test a hypothesis and could shoulder the burden of proof.

God was eventually expunged from the laboratory, no longer welcomed at the center of humankind's endeavor for truth and emancipation. Suddenly, it seemed acceptable to say that human beings stood *alone* in their search for certainty. Even worse, the modernists were not content to change the values or the beliefs once held, they changed the nature of inquiry, shifting attention away from the *object* of what may be *known*, to focus instead on the knowing *subject*. Thus, in isolating the truth from the separated and dispassionate observer, modern philosophy had cut the cord that once tied philosophers and theologians together to a common set of values.

¹² "Foundationalism" generally refers to any system of belief that is built on systematic reasoning. However, a more precise use of the term is the doctrine that knowledge is ultimately based on beliefs that are built on self-evident principles. Rationalism, a powerful philosophy of the Modern Age, taught that the human mind is capable of absolute certainty based on these fixed principles, and that a single individual potentially has the power to obtain certainty based on the rules of rational inference. See Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke's discussion of Foundationalism in *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 2001), 41-42.

Knowledge itself was sought solely on the basis of the human condition, as dependency on the historic self-disclosure of God disappeared. Rationalism could offer no justifiable basis for revelation. Thus, the traditional foundation of faith with its Christian worldview, its time-honored creeds and discourses on the correct exposition of Scripture, was swept completely aside. In their place was the modernist's empty quest for certainty. Even basic truth about God and the human capacity to know him was no longer evident. Helmut Thielicke rightly complained about this modernist shift in philosophy, which largely began with Descartes' challenge:¹³

In Descartes, interest shifts from objective being to the subject that stands over against this being, that does not integrate itself to it, that no longer wants to have a secure place in it [i.e. the world]. This landslide of thought—it is no less—is obviously possible only because uncertainty develops concerning objective being, God, and the world...Epistemological theory, like hermeneutics, is a sign of skepticism and a loss of certainty. The slogan "I think" replaces being and the act of thought replaces the content of thought. Thinking about thinking now becomes the theme. We are no longer at home in the structure of the world. There are shifts and cracks in the timbers. We have gone outside and are alone.¹⁴

Thinking about Thinking

No one seemed to notice that the modernists' concern turned to "thinking about thinking," having made the rules for knowledge so taut and inhospitable that it soon became too much of a burden to prove anything. Descartes' thesis found immediate reaction, but it was not the positive response that he had expected. A few like-minded

¹³ See W.T. Jones, *Hobbes to Hume*, 154-191; Descartes principal works can be found in *The European Philosophers: From Descartes to Nietzsche*, The Modern Library Series, ed. Monroe C. Beardsley (New York: Random House, 1992).

¹⁴ Helmut Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 53.

philosophers were captivated by his maze of deductions, but Descartes had many adversaries as well. Some questioned Descartes' pure rationalism as a sound basis for knowledge and some disputed his findings based on what they perceived was an errant rationalist methodology. One important example in subsequent years was a new and very different school of thought propounded by brilliant minds such as the Scotsman, David Hume, and the Englishman, John Locke. They answered the Cartesian challenge by arguing that knowledge can be afforded only by sense experience, or knowledge based on the methodology known as "empiricism."¹⁵ Sense experience was and continues to be the foundation for modern science, where observation and perception are the basis for all knowledge.

Other responses on the European Continent included rationalist philosophers such as Spinoza and Leibniz who agreed with Descartes' basic rationalist foundation for truth but disagreed with his conclusions.¹⁶ These quite diverse philosophers collectively carried out their own ambitious efforts to isolate and understand the truths of reason or sense experience, methods leading to truths that they believed could inform science, morality, and an ideal human government. Ultimately, whether or not they agreed with Descartes' rationalist methodology or metaphysical postulates, they agreed with his starting point: one can only begin with the autonomous self in the search for knowledge. It is the self alone that seeks the truth, they believed, and they were blindly optimistic to believe the self could accomplish this task.

¹⁵ See Roger Scruton, *From Descartes to Wittgenstein: A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 81-133.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50-79.

The Myth of Certainty

By the end of the nineteenth century, philosophy had almost completely tossed aside Descartes' initial hopes and hardly anyone talked optimistically about the prospects of discovering the so-called indubitable truth that Descartes sought. To begin, the Cartesian foundation for reasonable deduction was dealt a serious blow when reason itself was reinterpreted and categorized through the work of the Austrian philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1729-1804). Kant read from both schools of thought: those that held knowledge is based on pure deductive reasoning (rationalism) and those that held knowledge is based purely on sense experience (empiricism).

Noting the weaknesses in both methods to answer completely the problem of knowledge, Kant wedded aspects of British Empiricism and Cartesian Rationalism to form a final synthetic constructivism. Empiricism makes no sense, he argued, apart from the categories of reason that inform sense experience. For example, even to perceive a tree is to perceive it in a particular way, involving time and space in a certain location and from a definitive angle. The perceived objects are not convoluted mass to the mind's eye; they make sense primarily because of the categories of reason built into the mind. Conversely, reason alone can never shed light on what lies outside our mental perceptions, and all the logic in the world cannot give us the facts about what actually exists and what does not exist, according to Kant.¹⁷

Kant's dictum shattered the myth of certainty. One could only be confident of a couple of things and neither afforded any sense of absolute certainty. First, we know that

¹⁷ Ibid., 137-148.

perception provides the raw datum of experience and, second, that reason shows us that our perceptions must be caused by something outside ourselves, making sense of our perceived objects. Just the same, the content of knowledge remains *within* the individual and this does not afford any assurance that the world *exists as we actually perceive it*, let alone that God exists. All that remains is our perceptions, and data of experience, but neither provides certainty.

Pure reason, as Descartes proposed it, could never substantiate knowledge of God or the world outside us. Indeed, in the second part of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, as Roger Scruton observes, “Kant diagnoses the failure of ‘pure reason’, trying to show that the attempt to employ concepts outside the limits prescribed by their empirical application leads inevitably to fallacies—in the form of paradoxes, incoherencies, and direct contradictions.”¹⁸

In the post-Kantian world that followed, the foundations for certainty were further weakened. Pure reason, Kant decided, could never prove the existence of God, *though practical reason through moral consciousness could postulate him*.¹⁹ Empiricism, on the other hand, is not about *a priori* truths, and certainly not about establishing metaphysical truth, Kant believed. Insofar as science realizes its limitations and understands that its domain is restricted to matters of fact and not matters of absolute truth, it is a viable instrument of knowledge. Scientists can list all the observable properties of an egg yolk, for example, but they can offer us no information about the human soul. Words like

¹⁸ Ibid., 146.

¹⁹ Ibid., 158.

“soul” have no place in the science laboratory. It was not long before philosophers omitted such words from common discourse.

The only truths left standing at the threshold of the twentieth century were these: first, self-consciousness proves at least that something called perception exists; second, perceived thoughts, or what philosophers call the datum of experience, must have been caused by something, so the world outside of self must exist in some fashion; and third, since conscious perception is all that is known for certain, a thing can never be known as it actually is. According to these conditions and the limits of reasoning, philosophy had concluded that humans can speculate on abstract matters but can never prove anything about metaphysical, ethical, or religious truths. Less than half a century after Kant’s death, the philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) devised an innovative way to discuss knowledge as “phenomenology,” both as a method and as a philosophy wholly devoted to the examination of consciousness and its objects.²⁰ In some ways Husserl epitomized the end of the quest for certainty; and in some ways, he represented the beginning of a new worldview that said the quest for certainty is practically pointless.

In hindsight, we can now see that some of the major miscalculations of Descartes’ challenge were that he was too ambitious, made too many demands, and ignored too many factors related to common human existence as well as extraordinary faith and experience. His rationalist focus lured him to the obsessive absorption of thought and the study of individual human consciousness. It also led him to deductive conclusions about

²⁰ See Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

human perception and *a priori* certainty, leaving no room for an authentic encounter with The Truth, Jesus Christ. His pure rationalism formula was problematic from the beginning.

There will always be a place for seeking reasonable justification for beliefs. Demanding irresistible proofs, after the type of Descartes' arguments, however, leads to the insoluble paradoxes of reason.²¹ Moreover, Cartesian insistence on the autonomous knower sheds additional light on another reason why modernism failed in its quest for certainty. Descartes' trust in the individual went too far since he failed to see the context and value of social epistemology. This is reflected in his first major conclusion, "*Ego sum, ego existo.*"²² Thus, if the quest for certainty itself died in the end of the modern period, the hope that a single individual can possess certainty died along with it.

Testing Knowledge and Justifying Belief

Developing a Criterion

As David Wolfe correctly observes, "Genuinely certain starting points are pretty elusive, and those we *can* find are utterly skimpy."²³ Still, churches naturally insist that they know the truth, at least *some* truth. So there must be some practical means of judging between unjustified belief and justified belief. Why should we believe X instead of Y?

²¹ See Roderick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion*, The Aquinas Lecture, 1973 (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1973).

²² "I am; I exist," in *The European Philosophers: From Descartes to Nietzsche*, 34.

²³ David L. Wolfe, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief*, Contours of Christian Philosophy, ed. C. Stephen Evans. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 21.

What are the grounds for believing X is true? Even apart from the question of certainty, most Christians would imagine or think that there should be some criterion in the church to discriminate true statements from false ones and to distinguish wise decisions from unwise ones. There are degrees of certainty and showing some justification for our claims could conceivably protect the church from serious error.

Whether the church's beliefs relate to their decisions on doctrinal or financial matters, they should have some support for their ideas. Unless leaders wish to rely on an authoritarian position where no questions are asked, they should plan to make room for studied and careful approximations of the truth. By relying on practical criteria to justify the church's beliefs and positions they will nurture the congregation's conviction that it is okay to test the truth. But what does such a criterion for examining a church's belief system look like?

One helpful example comes from Mark Cartledge who takes an interesting and balanced approach to church epistemology.²⁴ Cartledge indicates that he understands the tense yet important alliance between traditional "theories of truth" and pentecostal and charismatic epistemology.²⁵ He makes a strong case in for the notion that knowledge can be justified if we use a combination of traditional tests and make reasonable assessments from the data. He shows that Christians need not evoke Cartesian foundationalism in order to establish practical knowledge in the church.

²⁴ Mark J. Cartledge, *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2003).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 42-52.

Cartledge begins by outlining the traditional tests for truth and showing how they may be applied in the church setting. Generally speaking, the traditional tests for truth have performed well within their proper limits.²⁶ Ecclesiologically, they could provide principles and guidance for churches wanting to justify knowledge of the will of God. What follows is an explanation of the principal theories.

1. The correspondence test for truth.

The correspondence theory is one of the oldest and simplest tests for truth. It is based on the fact that X is true if and only if X corresponds to fact. Using a simple illustration, if my car does not start and I say that “the starter is bad,” I will learn if my statement is true after the mechanic assesses the problem. “The starter is bad” will have been a true statement if it corresponds to the fact of the problem.

This method is basically a common sense practice, though it is also applied in the full-fledged scientific sense where the truth of a statement can only be verified or falsified under the most extreme testing conditions. For example, this is why modern researchers believe cigarette smoking can cause lung cancer, because of years of testing cause and effect. Of course not every statement intended to utter a truth needs to be proven by extreme methods. Sometimes a statement is verified by simple observation as in the car illustration.

²⁶ This is to say that the traditional theories have served an important role in the sciences, in business and economics, education and many other major human disciplines. For more thorough explanations on each of these traditional tests as well as other contemporary models, see Richard L. Kirkham, *Theories of Truth: a Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995).

Could the correspondence test for truth be beneficial to a church? If applied to the question of truth in the context of decision-making, it could be useful when a statement or claim is made in a meeting or when a tract is written supposedly from a biblical point of view. Empirical evidence supplies the methodology. In testing either case, we could ask whether the decision made in the meeting or the statement made on the tract *corresponds to the facts of what we already see in the Scripture*.

Admittedly, interpreting Scripture can be a tricky and sometimes complicated affair. Knowledge cannot always be judged at face value. The tools of hermeneutics are there to help interpret the meaning of a text in its historic, cultural and literary context. It is possible through these aids to determine whether the Scripture applies to the particular context in question and is relevant to the truthfulness of the claim. The task could be protracted and arduous but the basic principle is fairly simple. Ultimately we want to know whether the statement still stands after the evidence is compiled and this is why using the correspondence test for truth remains so practical and compelling.

2. *The coherence test for truth.*

The coherence theory's test for truth says, for example, that, "X is true," if it coheres or is congruent with other known factors and statements. In contrast to a correspondence test, a coherent truth is something that is justified by its connection or relationship to a group of ideas or paradigm theory that is already accepted as true. Applying this to a church environment, a statement or position is accepted as true if it agrees or coheres with other time-honored values and beliefs. Conversely, those statements that contradict claims that are already known to be true are rejected outright.

For example, evangelicals reject certain claims from the Mormon Church because the claims are inconsistent with the accepted testimony of the New Testament canon.

Logically, either Christ is full deity and equal with God or he is not. Since the New Testament reveals the full deity of Christ and the Book of Mormon rejects this claim, it follows that Mormonism on this issue must be false.

Another example of the test of coherence is the way churches approach some moral and ethical issues. A church might claim that physician-assisted suicide is wrong though it has no direct scriptural support. For there is no Scripture reference that deals with the issue head-on. Instead, an argument could be based on a set of interrelated suppositions all connected to scriptural values, principles, and injunctions. Connecting the various links and strands of biblical teaching in order to establish a coherent claim would therefore be crucial to any argument that purportedly teaches the biblical position on the issue. Let us use a contemporary line of reasoning, using doctor-assisted suicide as an example. Consider the following set of statements:

1. Physician-assisted suicide should be rejected on the grounds that God alone gives life and no person has the right to violate human life.
2. Life begins at conception and human beings are sacred and inviolable
3. Only God has the right to give and take life.
4. By providing someone with a prescription for a lethal dose of medication, the physician is actively participating in the patient's decision to commit suicide.
5. The physician is violating the sanctity of life whenever a lethal dose of medication is prescribed for a patient who uses it to commit suicide.

Note the connection between the ideas. Moral or theological arguments like these serve as examples of the overall construct of coherent reasoning and are usually based on some scriptural values or principles even when the Bible is silent on the particular issue.

Silence on a particular issue does not render the Bible superfluous. Admittedly, there are no biblical passages to turn to that speak directly to the ethics of insider trading, for example, but there is ample biblical testimony against lying and cheating. The biblical characters never had to wrestle with questions about whether to pull out a feeding tube or turn off a ventilator, but they did struggle with matters of life and death and the sacredness and inviolability of human life. Even when the Bible offers no direct advice, it is still invaluable in providing substantive and supportive evidence for a moral and theological opinion. The coherence test is so important in this case. A plausible argument can be construed on a network of logically connected ideas or a coherent set of values and beliefs, which are already clear from studying the Bible. The strength of any coherent argument lies in the logical tightness of its interlocking premises and conclusions and the standard presuppositions upon which it is based.

Similar to the correspondence test for truth, the coherence test has inherent limitations. Clearly it fails to address whether any of the axiomatic statements already held are in fact true. “God exists” is a crucial claim in itself that must be true for all the other premises in the above argument to be coherent. Note that the argument above against doctor-assisted suicide makes no sense if God does not exist. It is nonsensical or absurd to state: “God alone has the right to take life,” and “God does *not* exist.” Thus,

some statements must be accepted as true on other bases of conviction than the coherence test for truth.²⁷

3. *The pragmatic test for truth.*

The pragmatic test for truth maintains that there must be practical or pragmatic evidence for the statement, “X is true.” Charles Sanders Peirce and William James did more to popularize and strengthen this epistemology than anyone else in the history of philosophical inquiry.²⁸ Pragmatism as a distinct philosophy can be quite complicated when applied to global or scientific theories. Yet it can be understood as a simple and valid test for truth at a very practical level.

In some ways similar to the problems of the coherence test for truth, there is reason to believe that pragmatism is ultimately dependent upon other tests, particularly the correspondence theory.²⁹ Nevertheless it is a provocative theory in its own right and in some ways uniquely American in its approach to truth. Its core feature is the usability or worth of any particular idea. James liked to call the practicality of an idea or theory its “cash-value.”³⁰ He believed that modern philosophy had become too cumbersome in its search for the truth, too infatuated with *a priori* principles and abstract certainties. Many church leaders would agree with the spirit of James’ position, namely, that the truth of an

²⁷ E.g. In mentioning the coherence test for truth, Cartledge observes, “Verification, as it exists, is by consistency and harmony with existing beliefs only. Indeed, this reason gives rise to the potential problem that there could exist more than one distinct coherent systems of belief but which are *inconsistent* with each other,” in *Practical Theology*, 43.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See William James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 31-32, 169, 278.

idea will be shown in its “concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power.”³¹ In short, truth is revealed in life’s application.

The pragmatic test for truth can be detected in many American churches today, though it is not always easy to judge which idea or belief is false based solely on results. For example, consider a church that claims to have a theology of church government built squarely on Scripture. Suppose further that over time they see that their way of doing church business is followed by a weakened condition, eventually leading the church to bankruptcy and utter ruin. Something has obviously gone wrong. Was it the way the leadership was organized? Was the problem ethical, ecclesiological, or both?

In using the pragmatist’s model we should avoid jumping to conclusions. The failure of the church’s government may not be sufficient proof that its organizational model was wrong because the problem might have been the corruption of church leaders rather than the system. Thus, while pragmatism underscores the belief that success and failure are relevant to the truth of an idea, pragmatism cannot by itself prove truth or falsehood merely by assessing the results. Discussing the possible cause of something *ex post facto* can be misleading. Results still must be understood with respect to the whole picture. All the relevant factors come into play, but the success of an idea can still show that an idea’s workability or utility must also be factored into a complete theory of knowledge. Practical results really do matter.

A better example for church leaders using the pragmatic test for truth in a particular church would be to evaluate whether their way of deciding pastoral policy

³¹ Ibid., 31.

results in the kind of authentic unity in the body that is modeled in Scripture. Unity is not simply a desired result, it is a biblical value (John 17:11; 21-22; cf. Rom. 15:5; Eph. 4:3; 13). Testing the knowledge would include a combination of processes, blending pragmatism, correspondence and coherence as valid methods.

An abstract concept like unity provides a good example for our point. *How would we know when we had arrived* at biblical unity? In applying the pragmatic test, we might look first to the quality of personal relationships and authentic Christian freedom that characterizes and qualifies the community (Gal. 3:26-29; cf. 5:1). Second, unity should encourage people to love more. Is the congregation more charitable, more compassionate? Third, the leadership model should strengthen the whole community's faith and release individual gifting and ministry as expressions of the priesthood of all believers. Are leaders and lay members alike acting as full partners and citizens of the kingdom of God? Fourth, does the congregation have a voice in important and costly decisions and do they have a sense that the leaders are there to serve the people by example and by handling the word of God diligently? These would count as evidences or marks of unity and the pragmatic test for truth would help us to draw the conclusion that we know unity is present in the body *when these marks are evident in combination*. This concrete result-oriented test for truth is the kind of "cash-value" to which James referred.

Reasonable Applications

Churches and church boards can discuss these traditional theories and implement them in practical ways in their pursuit of knowledge, varying the methods to suit their

particular needs. There are also some questions that remain, pertaining to the differences in the way philosophers seek knowledge and in the way churches seek knowledge.

First, we should realize that it is not necessary to employ the language or nomenclature of philosophy in order to use these systems of reasoning to help verify a particular truth. Whether a church uses the terms, “correspondence theory” or “coherence theory” or any other philosophical term, the important point is that some reasonable discourse needs to be employed to discuss ideas thoughtfully and engage the problems of knowledge corporately.

Second, churches should use these theories only in a collective and related sense as they pertain to the specific epistemic endeavor. In short, they should make sure the test is relevant. Using a method incorrectly may cloud the truth further. There is no need to use a method if it is not relevant to the inquiry and it is rare that one theory will suffice in answering everything we need to know on a particular subject.

Third, as we have demonstrated, none of these theories stand alone or should be used in isolation from the others. Correspondence, coherence, and pragmatism: all are useful but generally depend upon one another to make sense of judgments about knowledge and verifications of truth. This becomes increasingly clear as one becomes familiar with how the methods work in practice and why the issue of ultimate authority will always play an important role.

Another example will serve to clarify the interrelationship of the theories. Consider the topic of divorce. If our method of obtaining knowledge as to whether it is right or wrong to get a divorce is based purely on the pragmatic test for truth, opinions

about divorce could conceivably be argued from either side. On the one hand, divorce *seems to work* for some people who were in a bad marriage. Using only results as our criteria, one could justify divorce. According to numerous testimonies and anecdotes, divorce helps some people live a more free and fruitful life, spiritually speaking. Does this outcome necessarily clarify the truth about divorce?

Consider Doris, as an illustration, who claims that since her divorce from Donald she has been a more devoted worker in the church and feels less inhibited by her ex-spouse's demands. In fact, she tells us that she is free and has even renewed her teenage dream to obey the calling to do mission work. Thus, one might conclude that divorce *worked for Doris*, therefore, it is okay. Should we then tell Barbara, based on Doris' testimony, that it would be *right for her* to divorce Ron? A shallow pragmatic approach as in this example might suggest such a simplistic conclusion.

We could, on the other hand, produce testimonies and anecdotes from people who tell us that divorce *does not work*, and is in fact *wrong* when chosen solely for the sake of personal happiness. In addition, we could offer statistics on divorce and several examples of social studies that point to a sizeable number of unhappy post-divorce people, proving that ending a marriage is not the right answer to a bad relationship. But can the question of divorce ever really be solved by pointing to anecdotes or statistics alone? Who is right and who is wrong? The answer seems clear that it cannot be solved so simply. There must be an unmistakable and often agonizing interface between theology, ethics, psychology and human behavior, to sort through the relevant data and arrive at *a just and good decision*.

What many Christians would say is missing in all these traditional tests for truth is an ultimate authoritative source. We need more than theologians scratching their heads and marital counselors scratching their chins. Some church member is bound to interrupt our inquiry at some point and say, “forget the anecdotes and statistics. What does God say about divorce?” This is why churches typically look for a guiding truth from Scripture before relying on anecdotes and personal testimonies for support. Statistics alone or conclusive scientific studies could never reveal all the facts about the particular morality of a decision either, since moral issues require something the pragmatic, result-oriented test for truth cannot provide, namely: *a word from God*.

In searching for a sufficient test for truth, the pragmatic approach would need to include a great deal more data and account for the interrelationship between all these factors: biblical teaching, contextualization and relevancy concerning the appropriate application of Scripture, practical alternatives including at times, choosing between the lesser of two evils, and using the expected results as a moral guide. Without a clear mandate from Scripture, all of these factors would play only a supportive role in the process of gaining knowledge to make a final decision about *what is right*.

Fourth, we should recall that there are no tests that provide infallible proof and absolute certainty, no matter how perfectly the tests are applied. Using these tests and methods will not solve every problem easily and confidently. Truth is not always simple. We can do a due-diligence plan before buying property and gather all the facts with the help of our epistemic theories, but they cannot tell us whether God said, “Buy it.”

To be sure, only God has all the right answers. However, the Bible does not indicate whether, when, or where we should buy property. This makes it all the more important to weigh judgments carefully. Church leaders and parishioners may not be certain whether their decisions were right even after employing the tests for knowledge and truth. No amount of praying, fasting, studying the Bible, or deliberating over a decision will lead us to believe that we hold an infallible opinion. So why employ these tests and work so hard to understand and know the truth? One reason is because *so many lives are at stake*. It is because leaders generally speak and act on behalf of others. So, we must pursue knowledge for the sake of others, employing reasonable tests for truth along with bold steps of faith, despite the possibility that uncertainty may prevail.

Finally, there is another, even more important, reason why church's need to test the truth. In addition to these important traditional criteria for testing truth is the bedrock of Christian theism: namely, the conviction that *God has spoken and continues to speak to his church*. Putting it another way, some truth can *never be discovered*, only known insofar as God has chosen to reveal this truth. We begin to realize that the traditional tests for truth as outlined above are subordinate to a Christian theistic worldview.

It is the Christian worldview that offers the perspective that God is willing to make his truth known. It is arguably the most decisive supposition in the Christian worldview, and consequently, the church's epistemology. Epistemologically speaking, God's revelation and subsequent illumination in the hearts of the believers are the keys to unlocking the doorway to the Christian's *assurance*.

The Word and Spirit

Since the Reformation, the protestant tradition has maintained that the Bible is God's principal means to impart knowledge to the church. Other means of knowing God are available, perhaps, but none more clearly than Scripture. The Hebrew and New Testament scriptures are the inspired word of God (2 Tim. 3:16), and they are intended for every Christian to read, pastor and lay person alike. Most charismatic and evangelical churches believe inspiration extends to the very words of Scripture, while protecting the individuality of the writers. So, Bloesch says, "In my view inspiration is the divine election and superintendence of particular writers and writings in order to ensure a trustworthy and potent witness to the truth. The Spirit of the Lord rests not only on the prophet but also on his words."³² In many respects, the word and Spirit form the epistemic bases for religious knowledge since the Reformation.

It is the Living Word and the Spirit together that act upon the believer who is not only the knower, but also the "hearer and doer of the word" (e.g. James 1:22-25). The believer *is* the knower, but the objective witness of Scriptures would have no independent power to penetrate hearts apart from the illuminating agency of the Holy Spirit. The writings themselves have no inherent power. Pen and ink do not bear the marks of the Spirit; life simply cannot be contained in dusty old scrolls. Assurance is rather sealed in the regenerating work that takes place in the heart of the hearers of the Word. God confirms his own word.

³² Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scriptures: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation*, Christian Foundation Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 119.

The Christian's interior life itself is evidence of the truth of God and knowledge of his word. There are no illusions about certainty here; assurance is connected to the self-authenticating experience a believer has with God who reveals himself. Knowledge in this case has a private dimension since it is wrapped up in the encounter. This is what the believer experiences as he or she remains open to the word inspired by the Spirit. As Donald Bloesch remarks, "The purpose of inspiration is not the production of an errorless book but the regeneration of the seeker after truth."³³ Word and Spirit: these are the two inseparable, indispensable vehicles in understanding what it means to hear the voice of the Lord. They are together the *sine qua non* mixture of God's voice and in-breathing into the life of the believer. They are like the combination of oxygen and petroleum that fuels an automobile.

More importantly, the Spirit animates and illuminates the church. Therefore, the epistemic context for the Spirit is primarily the community. Although the Spirit conveys truth to individuals, privately, his principal work resides in his relationship with the whole church. In fact, since the Spirit was given on the Day of Pentecost, his presence fills the church (e.g. Acts 2:4, 18, 31; cf. Rom. 8:15-17, 1 Cor. 12:4-6).

By "Spirit" we mean the "Holy Spirit" and Second Person of the Trinity.³⁴ He is God, although the full meaning of this was not clarified until the second century.³⁵ It was Gregory of Nazianzen who later said: "The New Testament revealed the Son, and hinted

³³ Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 118.

³⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit, Systematic Theology: Vol. 3*, (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, reprint 2001), 23-31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

at the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Now the Spirit dwells in us, and is revealed more clearly to us.”³⁶ The Spirit illuminates the truth of God from within our hearts. Basil of Caesarea added that the Spirit is “...a light perceptible to the mind, he supplies through himself illumination to every force of reason searching for the truth....From here comes foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of what is hidden, the sharing of the gifts of grace, heavenly citizenship....”³⁷

Thomas Oden correctly observes, “The Spirit is given [to the church] in the place of Christ’s bodily presence....”³⁸ Recalling Jesus’ words before he ascended, he promised to send the Spirit who would “...teach [us] all things” (John 14:26b). Oden adds that, “Afterward, when the risen Lord ascended, he promised that the Spirit would come as a helper and abiding companion of the people of God, and that the Spirit would accompany the witnessing community until he personally returned.”³⁹

The Spirit is the living, dynamic light who bears testimony of Christ and who communicates within our souls and especially within our spiritual community. So powerful is this truth that Paul could state that we (the church) have “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). Hence, the Spirit communicates to us more directly than we might

³⁶ Quoted in Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd, 1995), 99.

³⁷ Ibid., 98.

³⁸ Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 49.

³⁹ Ibid., 50.

first imagine. This is Spirit to spirit, an “I-thou” intimate relationship that we share with God, as Paul described so eloquently in writing to the Corinthians:

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” But God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: “For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:4-16)

Note the rhetorical devices in Paul's statements: who knows the thoughts of human beings? Only the people themselves! Who knows the thoughts of God? Only God's Spirit! Yet, note Paul's precise usage when he uses the first person plural pronouns, “we” and “us.” The Spirit is not given to us merely as individuals, but as we dwell together in God's Temple, the Church of the Living God (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:16-17, 2 Cor. 6:16, Eph. 2:21; cf. 1 Tim. 3:15). Thus we have been given wisdom and knowledge from God because God, himself, dwells in his church.

We have also been given the gift of his Word. Although Word and Spirit are distinguishable as abstract concepts, they are inseparable in terms of personal and corporate experience. Such knowledge transcends all categories of natural thought and perception. Word and Spirit combine and are a boundless mode of diverse expression and

deep communion with no human parallels. Therefore, they exceed the ordinary boundaries of the traditional tests for truth, though we have mentioned already that traditional tests may be relevant to certain aspects of confirmation.

It is essentially spiritual illumination or inner light that makes this truth plain to the people who experience it. One gathers in this context, in contrast to natural or secular wisdom, that the church's knowledge and unique sense of assurance depends upon people of God who seek to experience both an *inward and outward* encounter with Christ's living word. Thus, God speaks both in the inward person by the Spirit and through the objective written word of God, the Bible. As Donald Bloesch correctly observes:

The certainty of faith lies in the inward confirmation of the Spirit concerning the objective validity of the biblical revelation. We are given a spiritual, not a rational, certainty. The mysteries of faith remain incomprehensible, but the Giver of faith works within us a confident trust and assurance.

The basis of certainty is to be found in the unity of the internal and the external. The ground of certainty is Jesus Christ as perceived by faith, not God or the Son of God as he is in himself. The basis of authority lies in the promises of Scripture illumined by the Spirit, not in the Bible simply as a book, that is, in the letter of the Bible... The seat of authority is the living Christ, who implants and nurtures faith by his Spirit.⁴⁰

Another question concerns how the Spirit and word interact specifically in the life of the charismatic church. Charismatic leaders generally agree that the Spirit speaks to the community, especially and particularly through the Bible, but he is not bound to the literal meaning of the Bible nor tied to the text. They would add that the Spirit also speaks into the heart of the person praying as well as into the church through the voice of one with a gift of prophecy. The Spirit is alive in relation to the text but the Spirit is *not*

⁴⁰ Donald Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology*, Christian Foundation Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 202.

the text itself. One adversary to this line of reasoning is John MacArthur, one of the stronger critics of the charismatic movement in recent years. He has argued vehemently that charismatic Christians tie too much authority to the inner light of the Spirit and he is especially opposed to their public expression of the gifts of the Spirit and the use of prophecy.⁴¹ For MacArthur, and other similar conservatives, the “canon is closed.”⁴² So the public use of prophecy today is illegitimate unless the exercise is biblical preaching. Presumably, this is because the Spirit’s language is contained, confined and controlled by the canon. MacArthur’s problem is that he limits the Spirit to the product of Scripture.

Contrary to these arguments is the view of Greg Ogden, who says that the living Spirit speaks in a variety of ways to the church today.⁴³ Ogden believes that one of the main reasons for the church’s revitalization of faith today is that we are “...rediscovering that God continues to speak a direct word to the church through the Holy Spirit. This can occur through inward impression or an immediate word of guidance.”⁴⁴ Prophecy is one way the Spirit could speak a direct word to the church, though generally speaking, charismatic churches do not seek a prophetic word as their primary source of authority. They may, however, value the spiritual gift of prophecy or inner light as spiritual confirmation concerning knowledge they have already acquired through another means.

⁴¹ See esp. John MacArthur Jr., *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1992).

⁴² Ibid., 76ff.

⁴³ Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to the People of God*, Rev. ed. of *The New Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 20-25.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 23.

The Spirit and Prophecy Today

Charismatic and pentecostal Christians are usually at home and comfortable with the notion that God speaks to believers today and openly reveals knowledge of his will to each local church. They understand basically that the Spirit always speaks in general through his word, the Bible. The Spirit may also speak particularly and directly to the reader through Scripture with regard to a particular application or contextualization of his Word, or he may speak through prayer in the minds and hearts among the leaders and elders as they gather together for council.

Depending upon the particular circle or denomination, some charismatic leaders may even seek a confirmation by the Spirit through a gifted prophet in a leadership meeting or in the corporate worship service. It is important in all these contexts to understand that the New Testament teaches the need for judging prophecy. Supposed knowledge from a word of prophecy would be subject to the full measure of the canon of Scripture. Moreover, no prophet is given the right to act like an independent authority or exert autonomous influence upon the church meeting. Everything done “in the Spirit” is open to judgment. Love is perfect, but discerning a word of prophecy is not (1 Cor. 13:8-12). Thus, for worship to remain orderly, Paul taught that a prophet’s message should be weighed carefully by the other prophets (1 Cor. 14:29) since “[t]he spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets” (1 Cor. 14:32). In short, the New Testament prophet is subject to the whole church.

Pentecostals also believe that God can speak through a variety of other media, including miracles, signs, and a special word of knowledge. Ogden has pointed out that in

the early church the Holy Spirit spoke in a variety of ways: “(1) through an angel, (2) in a trance or vision, (3) in a direct message to Peter, (4) through Peter in the retelling of the gospel, and (5) in bringing to remembrance the words of the Lord.”⁴⁵ Above all other spiritual gift manifestations, however, charismatics often maintain that the Holy Spirit affirms and confirms knowledge through the gift of prophecy.⁴⁶ Perhaps this is one reason why Paul admonished the Thessalonians not to “treat prophecies with contempt” (1 Thess. 5:20) since they should remain an open vehicle of the Spirit.

In terms of authority or definitive knowledge, however, most Pentecostals claim that biblical truth trumps vision or prophetic inspiration every time, though admittedly in some cases the authoritative distinction has been blurred. Examples where prophecy and Scripture were treated equally or where prophecy was actually recorded in a church document and published are very rare. They have never been characteristic of the movement as a whole. James C. Logan has noted that the movement has depended largely on Scripture to justify their beliefs and not on prophecy. He writes:

[Charismatic-Pentecostals]...are people of the book. They see their experience as a revival of biblical Christianity...Most charismatic Christians claim to take the Bible literally. All charismatic Christians certainly claim to take it fully and seriously. On these scriptural grounds they seek to justify their experience of the baptism in the Spirit. While their religion is highly experiential, it is held to be equally biblical.

... The controversy with charismatic Christians is not that they are unbiblical, but they are not biblical enough.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Ogden, *Unfinished Business*, 23-24.

⁴⁶See esp. Ernest B. Gentile, *Your Sons and Daughters Shall Prophecy: Prophetic Gifts in Ministry Today*, Foreword by C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1999).

⁴⁷James C. Logan, “Controversial Aspects of the Movement,” in *The Charismatic Movement*, ed. Michael P. Hamilton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 34-37.

Generally speaking, charismatic leaders are reluctant to receive a prophetic message into the church or in leadership meetings if they believe it is clearly unbiblical or foreign to the spirit of the New Testament. They are even less likely to allow someone to address the congregation with a suspect word or vision. As to the specific relationship between the Scripture and the prophetic word, two excellent examples of elder Pentecostals who balance the prophetic word of the Spirit with the written word should be noted. Ernest B. Gentile, a former pastor, graduate of Fuller Seminary and a recognized teaching prophet in many charismatic circles, states this need for balance:

An unrestrained spirit of prophecy always poses a danger of fanaticism and exclusivism. In contrast, dead institutionalism poses the ever-present danger of stifling the breath of God's Spirit. Let us seek the balance that will join the strength of the institution (unity, order and stability) to the dynamic of the prophetic (freshness, spontaneity and life). These two forces become a workable team when the approach is changed from "prophecy versus order" to the positive idea of "prophecy *and* order."...The Church needs balance rather than polarization! It will prove detrimental to gravitate toward just emotional experience or intellectual ivory towers or programmed efficiency...or to an incomplete biblical position.⁴⁸

More poignant perhaps are the words of warning from Dick Iverson, founding leader of Ministers Fellowship International, who wrote to his constituency of pastors: "The first principle to remember is that if a teaching is worth devoting your life to, and especially worth affecting the Christian community at large, then it is going to be stated repeatedly and clearly in the Bible!"⁴⁹

⁴⁸Gentile, *Your Sons and Daughters Shall Prophesy*, 27.

⁴⁹ Dick Iverson, *Maintaining Balance When Winds of Doctrine Blow: Equipping the Believer to Discern truth* (Portland, OR: Bible Temple Publishing, 1989), 59.

Still, the Bible should not be treated like a Boy Scout handbook, or, for that matter, like a science textbook as it pertains to the truth. Rather, it is a book of human redemption. It unfolds the story of God who speaks through the events of history and climaxes in the testimony of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ—God’s Son and God’s ultimate witness. Scripture is the clearest and most objective reference the church can turn to when justifying its assertions and delivering knowledgeable answers on the most pressing questions of our day. It must be handled properly as sacred literature.

Practically speaking, the Bible provides an objective grid through which we can discern unambiguous knowledge about God and his will for humankind. It also teaches us emphatically how to live as followers of Jesus Christ and citizens of his Kingdom. However, we know to be extremely careful in how we interpret the book and we continue to work hard to articulate and verify our conclusions. There are complex historic and cultural matters to consider, complicated language nuances and literary constraints that require us to approach Scripture with some skill and educated proficiency. These tools require a community of knowledgeable people who are committed to getting at the truth of Scripture. The learning community is crucial in these matters.

The Holy Spirit continues to speak to the church, just as Jesus promised that he would. So whether we claim to hear from the Lord inspirationally by the Spirit in a word of prophecy, or discover something fresh that we had not seen before in Scripture, a social context is implied. Indeed, the social context is an inherent background to the very meaning of truth for the church.

Epistemology in the Everyday Life of the Church

All Decisions are Not Equal

There are various kinds of church decisions that depend upon sound belief. Of course not all decisions in the church are equal. Some are clearly more important than others are and some are very crucial to the survival of the church. Making a decision about whether to buy a laser printer for the copy room or keep the old model for another couple of months is not a serious decision. Counseling the Johnson couple who are advancing in their thirties and want to know if it is okay to seek the help of *en vitro* fertilization to have the dream baby they cannot have naturally, is an altogether different predicament that calls for intense prayer. But it is also a matter that requires collecting and disseminating moral information, studying the ethical issues carefully, and listening to a variety of arguments presented on both sides of the issue by various Christian ethicists. It is also a matter for many voices in the church. In fact, the bigger the issue the longer the process and the more people will be needed to understand and develop policy or guidelines for the church.

Daily administrative decisions and ethical advice as well as important financial options are just a few of the kinds of decisions that pastors and other church leaders make that require knowledge and sound judgments. The church's theological positions, mission statements and doctrinal statements are also important. How much of our ministry should be devoted to serving the poor in our community? What should our policy be toward church planting, domestic and foreign missions, and meeting social as well as spiritual needs in the church? These questions and more require the utmost scrutiny, the most

careful investigations, much prayer and patience with the data gathering and the decision-making process.

The Weighty Decisions

Our decisions as church leaders impact a wide range of people and touch many issues that offer great potential for church disasters. Money matters are only one example. Collateral damage can always be a problem and is a major factor in ministry when there are at least four spheres of relationships that are negatively affected by major errors.

First, if our leaders' claims turn out to be false and harm is the result, the congregation will unquestionably feel the brunt. Harm can be measured in terms of dollars and cents or in terms of costing the leaders the trust of the people. Second, if leaders are wrong, their personal homes and families will be impacted. Loss of a job, loss of reputation, enduring criticism: all of these elements are tough on a family. Third, pastors themselves will suffer loss, perhaps emotionally as well as professionally. A series of errors and the pressure of always being the person "where the buck stops," can take a toll on anybody's psyche after a while. Finally, if the errant church happens to be a mega-church, it is likely that other congregations in fellowship with it will also be impacted negatively.

Some decisions require more time and energy in the information gathering phase, forcing leaders to table discussion or deliberate for long hours and sometimes several weeks before arriving at a point where sufficient knowledge warrants a firm decision. Some of the areas that require careful scrutiny include basic doctrinal issues, like the ones

included in a church Statement of Faith. Other areas that involve weighty decisions are financial ones, such as how and where to spend church finances. The missions budget could be added, and what criteria should be used in hiring a youth pastor. All these areas require the support of good ideas, sound reports, and clear-headed decision-makers. They will also require men and women of sound reputation and who are known to follow the voice of the Spirit. Certainly, there are a myriad of issues a church must face in its given lifetime that require sound belief and confidence in the process of obtaining knowledge.

Professional Decision-Makers

In the contemporary charismatic church in America, as with mainline and evangelical churches, it has often been presumed expedient to hire a professional minister to read the Bible and study other resources as necessary during the week so that she may share truth from the Word of God on Sunday morning. In other words, churches hire professionals to ensure that the people are listening to the Word of God. Often this is a Word to the church. This is typical in many churches, even in Protestant congregations where the Bible is for everyone to read and some democratic form of government exists.

Congregations often hand the new pastor the responsibility of knowing what the Bible teaches. They accept the idea that it is his or her job and not theirs. The pastor in America is often viewed as a sort of religious specialist. Attendees often prefer to rely on the pastor to do the work of a practical theologian, church strategist and gifted ethicist. In some circles, a pastor is considered God's "anointed leader," implying that a sacred gap

exists between the leader's access to God and the people's access to God.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, even God's anointed leaders sometimes make serious mistakes.

Mistakes that have to do with weekly sermons and administrative decisions about computers and bulletin covers may not be that important to a congregation. However, mistakes that deal with very important matters like money and new programs could conceivably be colossal. Misquoting a Scripture verse by attributing it to Peter instead of Paul is forgivable; but leading the church into foreclosure may be viewed as a great offense in the minds of a few angry congregants. Some decisions should be marked with a "handle with care" sign, as for example, when it comes time for the church to know whether it should pursue a multi-million-dollar project, create a new policy on church planting, or issue an official press release on same-sex marriage. Church members may ask too late, "Why didn't our church leaders know?" or, "Why didn't they show some wisdom before writing the policy?"

Whether church leaders are making major decisions about the church or drawing major conclusions in a counseling setting, knowledge has consequences and so does a mistake. Advising a young couple to choose X rather than Y could alter their lives significantly, perhaps for eternity. One wrong business decision could mean the difference between putting the church on the map and wiping it out of existence. Making moral and theological decisions for oneself can be a major ordeal, but making decisions that will affect others can be monumental. After all, how much greater is the church leaders' responsibility to the truth if they claim to have heard from God?

⁵⁰ See e.g. Cindy Jacobs, *The Voice of God: How God Speaks Personally and Corporately to His Children Today*, Foreword by Jack Hayford (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995), 153-54.

Church Authority in the Postmodern Climate

A Culture of Individuals

Even if we were to claim to know the truth as did Luther, based on: “*Sola scriptura, Sola Christi!*” (Scripture alone, Christ alone!), we cannot escape the burden of responsibility. Since the church does the *work of interpretation*, it is therefore always subject to some uncalculated but inevitable human failure in judgment. Furthermore, if there really is a truth in heaven and church organizations contradict each other on various and sundry issues, it does not require a very robust imagination to know that all churches cannot be right. Holding an opinion is not tantamount to knowing. Nobody should appreciate this truism more than church leaders today. Pastors observe firsthand just how strongly people hold their opinions. Should leaders simply counteract this trend by reasserting their own opinions based on divine right?

Having private religious convictions is still quite common in our postmodern world. Telling others what to believe, however, is hardly tolerable.⁵¹ Individualism still reigns, long after Descartes’ philosophy first appeared. Despite criticisms aimed at Cartesian rationalism, individualism remains one of the last vestiges of the Modern period. Another fact is clear: skepticism of leaders is no less real in the contemporary congregation than it was many generations ago. But this newer rugged, irrational, and postmodern individualism makes it especially difficult for pastors to stand upon

⁵¹ See Brad Stetson and Joseph G. Conti, *The Truth About Tolerance: Pluralism, Diversity and the Culture Wars* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

authoritarian models of the pastoral office. It also means that the contemporary pastor will have to work harder on proving that what is said is also true and valid for today.

Although there are still many growing mega churches around the nation, disproportionately fewer Americans are attending church today compared to bygone eras.⁵² The trends point instead in the direction of an increasing interest in spirituality apart from institutional membership. George Barna has summarized this trend in America and has this to say about our culture's attitude toward institutional commitment: "Much of American Christianity is nominal in nature. Americans like to have a term to summarize their religiosity, and 'Christian' remains the label of choice, even if their commitment to biblical Christianity is waning. With loyalty rapidly becoming a cultural artifact, commitment to a local church is also on the decline."⁵³

Regaining Our Accountability

What happens when institutions lose accountability and place too much confidence in the authority of one leader to know the mind and will of God? History has generally shown that a bullish or heavy-handed approach to spiritual authority can sap the life out of a church, and even destabilize an established congregation if taken to the extreme. When conviction becomes a license to abuse authority, one can be certain that it is not knowledge that reigns. Churches in isolation are the greater threat. Left in isolation,

⁵² Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: a Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 209.

⁵³ George Barna, *Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1996), 4.

a congregation may indeed become prey to delusional thinking, especially if they begin to believe that their group has exclusive knowledge about God.⁵⁴

How can churches avoid drifting into authoritative entrenchment and the glare of blinding self-authentication? Happily, Stanley Grenz finds two distinct and powerful principles that could protect a church from these self-destructive habits. He calls the first principle “independency,”⁵⁵ which acknowledges the local church as an autonomous group of people who have the basic right to self-determination. Practically speaking, the local church has its own identity, character, and special needs. Like individual persons it must be respected as a single corporeal unit, sacred, and set apart in some ways from other congregations. As a unique and aggregate unit, it is positioned to know what God is saying with respect to its own affairs. Consequently, the local church itself is naturally in a position to decide many of its own issues. As Grenz points out, “Autonomy means that each congregation possesses what we may call ‘church powers.’”⁵⁶

The second principle is equally important and protects the church from leaning too far in the direction of independency. It is the principle of “interdependency.”⁵⁷ In contrast to independency the principle of interdependency calls the local church to a position of relationship with other local churches and Christian organizations. By relating to others outside itself, the local church avoids isolationism and provincial behavior that

⁵⁴ See Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*, 2nd ed. Foreword by Leighton Ford (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996).

⁵⁵ Ibid., 247.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 247-48.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 248.

often leads to the danger of presumption and self-deceit. Leaders need to know that they have some accountability to others beyond their specific service domain, even if the measure of such accountability is mitigated by loyalty to their particular parish.

Even if we applied these two principles of interdependency and independency to the relationship of local leaders to their congregations, it would be an improvement. Viewed properly in tension, local church leaders have a limited autonomy to afford them sufficient justification for acquiring practical knowledge for their own congregation. On everyday matters like office equipment, this should not be a major problem. On major matters, however, applying the principle of interdependency should force them to acknowledge leaders' vulnerability and limitations. This is especially true when it comes to matters of absolute certainty. In a sense, the local church is like us as individuals. We should always seek outside input and advice on the major issues.

Church leaders need to be accountable, just like everyone else. Accountability does not imply stupidity or weakness. It is necessary for all of us as human beings. No one is capable of knowing everything there is to know and no one is immune from the potential hazard of faulty reasoning. This principle is good for leaders as well as non-leaders. Accountability helps us to establish the truth by forcing us to live honestly before one another.

The Social Basis of All Knowledge

A Christian Social Epistemology

All knowledge is essentially social. This is one of the major premises of this paper and one which we turn to support in this section. Once more we consider the specific

context in which Christians are called to live, namely, as the believing community in a postmodern world. How should churches proceed today in their quest for knowledge? In addressing this issue, Grenz asks pointblank:

Specifically, who is in charge? Who should decide?...The idea of church decision-making immediately draws our attention to the local church. It raises some questions. How can we best facilitate the working together of individuals within the congregation? Who should decide matters of congregational concern?

Our basic answers lie already within the word we have repeatedly used to speak of the church. We are a *community*. Therefore, our corporate life, including its decision-making structures, must reflect and facilitate community life.⁵⁸

Our basic answers to the problems of epistemology in the church lie already within the word we have repeatedly used to speak of the church. We are a *community* of people who know the Living God. Hence, we are people who know together. Therefore, our corporate life, including its decision-making structures, must reflect and facilitate this epistemological community life. The local church is ultimately the knower, in the broadest sense of the word, and is in the best position to be the decision-maker. But how does this work in practical terms? Using Grenz's words above, we ask how can the church's "decision-making structures...reflect and facilitate community life" in a culture where truth itself is on trial and church authority is being chipped away day by day?

Here we submit our covenant model that is partly based on a recent philosophical movement known as "social epistemology."⁵⁹ For a social epistemology issues out of the postmodern realization that knowledge is too powerful and complex for any single

⁵⁸ *Created for Community*, 245-46.

⁵⁹ See Frederick F. Schmitt, (Ed) *Socializing Epistemology: the Social Dimensions of Knowledge* (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1994).

individual to obtain and claim as his or her own possession. A principal task of church leadership therefore is to guide and facilitate knowledge and direction in the church.

Moreover, the quest for knowledge and the process of directing the church according to a perceived word from God can no longer be charged to a single individual as it was with Moses. Moses' prophetic authority has been magnified in the New Testament church, for the glory of God resides within the church. Paul puts it this way, "...as the Spirit of the Lord works *within us* [the church], we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more" (2 Cor. 3:18b, emphasis mine). To put it symbolically, in terms of the contemporary church, "Moses does not speak for God here anymore; the presence of the Risen Christ now guides us." Moreover, if Christ is still the head then the church is still his body.

Delegated authority is unnecessary in the presence of the legitimate ruler, and Christ *is with us*. So close is this relationship between Christ and his church that Paul could speak of them as a union when he states, "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12).

As we look back on the history of philosophy we can see that the Modern Age built a sandcastle out of the mistaken ideal of the autonomous knowing self. This was a misdirected yet historic paradigm shift in Western civilization, a fact that Grenz refers to as a move away from the church to a "...shift to radical individualism."⁶⁰ So powerful was this misguided philosophy that for three hundred years the West was held hostage to

⁶⁰ Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 80.

the belief that a sole individual possesses the basic rational capacity to obtain absolute certainty. Secularism conditioned this postulate to include the necessity of following a rigorous “Foundationalism.”⁶¹

Many churches were perhaps indirectly but profoundly influenced by modernism as they adopted a similar rationalistic approach to truth. They even followed this rationale by advocating a model that supports an autonomous pastor. The mistake originated in the modern period but it spread to the life of the church, infecting ecclesial epistemology everywhere it went. Its chief error was to believe that a single autonomous individual is called and capable of knowing the will of God for the whole church.

Most scholars today realize just how indebted we are to social knowledge. Even before social epistemology was named, the realization that language has no ultimate meaning apart from its social context had already been pointed out by Wittgenstein.⁶² The social dimension and relationship between one person and another as well as language and meaning itself provides the basis for understanding virtually all the words we use, since as Wittgenstein noted, “...the teaching of language is not explanation, but training.”⁶³

Indeed, epistemology itself is undergoing a radical reformation in our final recognition that knowledge is a matter of social interaction. Knowledge from, by, and

⁶¹ See Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke’s discussion of Foundationalism in *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 2001), 41-42.

⁶² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Second Edition, Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2001).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 4.

through the group is at the heart of this newer revolution or social epistemology.⁶⁴ By applying many of the basic ideas from social epistemology to the problems of knowledge in the church, one can see how the concept of the learning community fits easily into an ecclesiological framework.

Learning to Trust Again

As many social epistemologists are quick to admit, trust and interdependency in the social context is an essential property in the process of knowing.⁶⁵ Yet the very idea of interdependency has introduced a new twist in the history of epistemology. Since the Age of Reason had largely convinced us to trust only ourselves and our own faculties, we have to reeducate ourselves and learn to trust one another. Modernism taught us that we ought *never to trust someone else* unless there are compelling reasons to do so. Although there is good reason not to believe and trust just anyone, knowledge is virtually impossible if we only trust ourselves. With modernism, the burden of rational proof became irrational. Eventually, modernism claimed that *no one could be believed but the self, and the self could know nothing beyond itself*. Note the mind-boggling twist of this initial innocent-sounding premise: distrust everyone until you have absolute reason to trust them! This was one of Descartes' major mistakes as he expressed it in his

⁶⁴ See esp. Alvin Goldman's *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), and Frederick F. Schmitt's edited work, *Socializing Epistemology* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994).

⁶⁵ John Hardwig, "The Role of Trust in Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 88, no.12 (December, 1991), 693.

Meditations—namely, that he had to *depend entirely upon his own faculties* to apprehend the truth. Only the autonomous self could furnish absolute certainty:

For, since God has given to each of us some light with which to distinguish truth from error, I could not believe that I ought for a single moment to content myself with accepting the opinions held by others unless I had in view the employment of my own judgment in examining them at the proper time; and I could not have held myself free of scruple in following such opinions, if nevertheless I had not intended to lose no occasion of finding superior opinions, supposing them to exist; and finally, I should not have been able to restrain my desires nor to remain content, if I had not followed a road by which, thinking that I should be certain to be able to acquire all the knowledge of which I was capable, I also thought I should likewise be certain of obtaining all the best things that could ever come within my power.⁶⁶

Descartes' haunting words here reflect one of many reasons why Western civilization has suffered from epistemic anemia and a pervasive sickness of soul. Strangely, even those contemporaries who vehemently disagreed with Descartes' emphasis on reason never thought to challenge his basic premise that *the individual alone* bears the privilege of certainty. On this basis, the search for knowledge became an exercise in futility. His monumental flaw consisted of placing human reason above God's ability and will to disclose knowledge. His equally disturbing flaw was that he placed too much confidence in his own faculties and too little in trusting anyone else.

Ultimately, Descartes was wrong for placing oneself and one's abilities above God, as Shelton suggests in his comment, "...only after he had established the certainty

⁶⁶ Rene Descartes, "Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth in the Sciences," in *The European Philosophers: From Descartes to Nietzsche*, ed. Monroe C. Beardsley (New York: The Modern Library, 1992) 21-2.

of human reason, did Descartes then move to prove God's existence."⁶⁷ Is it any wonder that Descartes and the rest of the modernist philosophers went astray with their reasoning and mental gymnastics? Happily, Social Epistemology has appeared like a breath of fresh air, reopening the windows of philosophical reflection and forcing us to take a hard look at ourselves as human beings—collectively. This development represents a deeper appreciation for who we are as human beings. *We are just as relational as we are cognitive*. Even from the moment we arrive as neonates we begin to absorb our social environment, understanding and learning things about ourselves, our world, and ultimately about our God through touch, sound, and even the affection we receive from those around us.

Still, many philosophers and scientists today are reluctant to let go of this modernist perception, denying the essential social makeup of knowledge and human interdependency, as John Hardwig complains:

Although epistemologists debate various theories of knowledge, almost all seem united in the supposition that knowledge rests on evidence, not trust. After all, trust, in order to be trust, must be at least partially blind. And how can knowledge be blind? Thus, for most epistemologists, it is not only that trust plays no role in knowing; trusting and knowing are deeply antithetical. We can not know by trusting in the opinions of others; we may have to trust those opinions when we do not know.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, while skepticism and arguments remain among philosophers concerning the elements of trust and social dependency, a growing number of them are beginning to realize that trusting others is essential to the knowing process. In fact, Hardwig

⁶⁷ R. Larry Shelton, "What is Truth? The Christian Witness in a Postmodern World" (faculty paper presented at George Fox University, 3 March 1998).

⁶⁸ Hardwig, "The Role of Trust," 693.

subsequently goes on to argue that this perception of settled distrust "...is badly mistaken. Modern knowers cannot be independent and self-reliant, not even in their own fields of specialization. In most disciplines, those who do not trust cannot know...."⁶⁹

This factor is further evident in the fields of science and math as we begin to see *teams* of researchers as well as individuals receiving Nobel prizes. Again, Hardwig comments about the application of social epistemology among the scientific fields today and where it seems to be headed, "...the trend is toward an ever-increasing number of authors per article. Modern science is collegial not only in the sense that scientists build on the work of those who have preceded them, but also in the sense that research is increasingly done by teams and, indeed, by larger and larger teams."⁷⁰

Among feminist scholars today the news that there is a crucial relational property to all knowledge seems more like old news. The idea of interdependency in human relations and communication and the arrival of social epistemology were anticipated by some feminist philosophers.⁷¹ It has been thought for some time that communication among women is an epistemological form quite distinct from communication among men. Women have been learning from each other in ways that have not often been understood by men. This is particularly true in the form of storytelling as "...the purpose of women's storytelling seems to be different from that of men, and may very well reflect differences in socialization, women's speech patterns in general, and even possibly

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 694.

⁷¹ Jane Duran, "Feminist Epistemology and Social Epistemics," *Social Epistemology*, 17, no. 1 (2003), 49, 45-54.

differences in cognition.”⁷² This idea has been further carried out as a type of holistic or relational epistemology, showing the interconnectedness between the social and individual cognition.⁷³ These exciting trends in philosophy simply constitute further evidence that knowledge is virtually impossible in our world apart from the social context. This has powerful implications for the church.

Conclusion

If these properties of social interdependency and teamwork are essential in the professional fields, and have long been understood to underscore feminine understanding, how much more should social epistemology play a vital role in establishing truth in the church? Our faith communities need to realize that our basic need for one another extends to our search for the will of God (e.g. Eph. 1:17-18). As individual servants of Christ we can understand certain aspects of God’s truth, but it is only together that we can gain a more complete understanding through the various gifting that is given to the church, as Paul states, “...joined and held together by every supporting ligament...” (Eph. 4:16b; cf. 1 Cor. 14:26). Accordingly, if Christ is in his church speaking in word and Spirit, these voices can only be fully identified and transformed into practical knowledge if we are willing to learn from each other and draw from one another’s spiritual gifts (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:12).

⁷² Ibid., 45-54.

⁷³ See Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, “Buddhism as an Example of a Holistic, Relational Epistemology,” *Encounter*, 16, no. 3 (Autumn, 2003): 27-38.

The evidence suggests that scientists can work together as teams, educators can work together as teams, engineers can work together as teams—all realizing that no one person has omniscience. Christians can also work together as teams, just as they did in the primitive church and illustrated by the Acts 15 passage. Seeking knowledge together and discerning the will of God together should be non-negotiable values in the church. Can we really expect any individual, no matter how gifted, to be responsible to collect exclusive spiritual knowledge? No charismatic pastor, no gifted prophet and no best intentioned leader should be given this illusion.

Instead, if the church is to stay in step with the Holy Spirit, it must be willing to dispense with its modernist emphasis on the individual knower, just as it must transcend the Old Testament models and the mosaic portrait of the lone prophet. We must learn to place trust in each other, learn to relate to one another as equals, and learn to listen to one another. Then perhaps as church leaders and congregation together, we will be united in the common quest for knowledge. We desperately need a social epistemology that depends on the relationships and commitments we share together as a church. We need to know the truth and understand its relationship to the will of the Lord for our church. Indeed, we need a covenant epistemology, a living organic system that directs our eyes on heaven and acknowledges the worth of all.

CHAPTER 5

THE CONTENT, CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS OF A COVENANT EPISTEMOLOGY

This fifth and final chapter focuses on the meaning and application of the central thesis of this paper. First, I reiterate what is meant by a “covenant epistemology;” second, I describe its central features; third, I discuss potential challenges to its application in the church; fourth, I describe expected benefits from its application to church ministry. I close this chapter by summarizing the previous chapters, showing how they support the major claim of this paper and conclude with a challenge for the contemporary church.

The Content of a Covenant Epistemology

Covenant Epistemology Defined

As I have already observed, the epistemic models of many church organizations depend too much on one person or a select group of persons to speak for God concerning his will for the congregation. These models are out of step with the New Testament teaching on corporate discernment.¹ In addition, I argued that the authority of the local church to discern the will of God was never intended to be vested in a single ruler (monarchy) or to a select few (oligarchy). I concluded that church decisions should neither be decided by majority vote (democracy) or by chosen representatives of the

¹ See e.g. Charles J. Conniry, Jr., “Toward an Understanding of Corporate and Individual Christian Discernment,” unpublished paper, George Fox Evangelical Seminary (2004).

majority (republic). Rather, the biblical model for discerning God's will is dependent on the gifts and calling of the collective members of the church and that it is their corporate responsibility to seek this knowledge cooperatively. Until now, I have limited the discussion of the precise nature of this model to establishing the need for its existence. Accordingly, I will now define exactly what is meant by the term, "covenant epistemology:"

Covenant epistemology is a formal agreement of a sacramental nature between members of a faith community who pledge that they will collectively pursue knowledge of God and his will for the sake of their corporate existence and vitality.

In the following I will endeavor to explain precisely how a covenant epistemology could look in a typical church situation. As I have defined the problem to this point, a covenant epistemology issues out of the same postmodern concern that many Christians have today, namely, that knowledge to lead a church is too powerful and too complex for one individual to obtain exclusively. Such knowledge is too great for any one person to handle. Therefore, leaders need the rest of the body to help them discern knowledge by the Spirit. Ideally, all the members will seek knowledge together. Further, I have argued that wherever the faith community gathers and recognizes its collective need for divine guidance and their desire for corporate discernment and unity, this is the main context for a covenant epistemology.

Since all the members of a faith community are interrelated, they should rely on the corporate membership as a whole, leaders and non-leaders alike, to know the will of

God. If Christ is indeed the head of the church then he will communicate to the whole community because it is *his* body. How he speaks is primarily through his Spirit, namely, the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-21; cf. 16:12-15). Putting it another way, Christ speaks by his Spirit through the members in particular for the sake of the whole. Indeed, the analogy Paul used in 1 Corinthians 12 would seem incomplete if we deny the fact that every part receives information from the head. As with a literal body, every finger and every toe, as well as the heart and pulmonary system, receive signals from the brain or the bodily systems could never be coordinated. This is how a body functions and knows what to do.

The Essential Features

1. An epistemology that is covenant-based

The first essential feature of a covenant epistemology is the covenant itself. As members of the same faith community, we are a covenant people who already share experience in the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Further, we realize that every person in our community is a full-fledged priest before the altar of God, able to approach his throne of grace with confidence (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; cf. Heb. 4:16). While this may not imply that every person has equal authority in their capacity to discern the will of God, it does imply that every person has the ability to hear the voice of the Spirit. In a faith community, every member who has the Spirit of Christ (i.e. true believers, Rom. 8:9) has also received a listening ear and a level of authority as God's child (1 John 5:1; cf. John 1:12, 13; 1 John 4:4-6). This has been God's intention and provision from the beginning, even though the Old Testament reveals Israel's dependency upon the prophets to lead and declare to people the counsels of God. It is clear that the Israelites frequently had neither

the heart to obey his commandments nor the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within them to listen to the voice of God within their hearts (e.g. Exod. 20:19). Thus, the Old Testament anticipated a powerful change wrought by a new covenant, when people would know firsthand the knowledge of their God, as Jeremiah put it, “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” (Jer. 31:33b).

Remarkably, Paul called the church the new “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16; cf. Eph. 2:12-22; 3:6). Indeed, since the outpouring of his Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, the church of Jesus Christ has been living under a very different covenant, a covenant that extends to every member, not only the right to citizenship, but the right to intimacy and communion. No longer prohibited by the law and the regulations pertaining to an ordained priesthood, every believer has been given the right of a priest and has direct access to the presence of God (Heb. 4:16). Access implies relationship and relationship, knowledge, direct knowledge. The members of a faith community relate to one another and with their God in Holy Communion. With communion then comes illumination, truth from God, so that Jeremiah’s prophecy concerning the new covenant would be fulfilled: “...they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest...” (Jer. 31:34b.).

The finished work of Christ accomplished this dramatic shift in the way God communicates to his people, the Holy Spirit bearing witness to the same and sealing the covenant (Cf. Eph. 1:13-14). Hence, as members of the church we are also connected *by Christ to one another* under the same glorious covenant. Christ is the undisputed initiator of the New Covenant (Luke 22:20; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25), just as Yahweh, the Revealer and

Lord of the Old Covenant initiated a covenant with Israel.² At that time the covenant was indeed delivered by Moses to the people. But in the New Testament Christ is revealed essentially as the one who makes covenant by his incarnation and sacrifice; he is the covenant *Maker* as well as the covenant *Keeper* (Ezek. 16:60; cf. Heb. 8:6-13). He is not just our Guide, he is our unequivocal Lord. One essential attribute from the Old Testament remains: the new covenant signifies "...the pattern of divine initiative and human response."³

In the Old Testament the people of Israel were bound to the covenant with Yahweh, who swore on the basis of an "oath" (e.g. Exod. 13:11; 22:11; 33:1; Deut. 4:31; 6:23; 34:4) that he would fulfill his promises to the patriarchs. Israel could only respond to the covenant by obeying or disobeying the Law set down. Their guidelines were mainly written on the stone tablets and confirmed by the voice of the prophets and the pillar of fire. In the New Testament the people of God constitute the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, delivered from sins' captivity and deep-rooted selfishness to follow the voice of his Spirit. It is no longer a nation under law but a community characterized by faith, created by the handiwork of Jesus Christ who "...redefined community membership in a new, inclusive way."⁴ We are his sanctuary, the Living Tabernacle of the Spirit. As such, the Spirit dwells in us and guides us—no one is excluded who belongs to God. The end of an exclusive priesthood and clerical autonomy has come.

² See Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: the Growth of the Community in the Bible*, With a New Introduction (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 39-41.

³ Ibid., 468.

⁴ Ibid., 400.

Practically speaking for the church, this means that faith communities may take deliberate and concerted action to insure spiritual knowledge as one body. It implies that they have the power, if not the will, to know the truth of God. Quite expectedly, in the church are many ideas, some false and some true. Therefore the church should "...test the spirits to see whether they are from God..." (1 John 4:1b; cf. 2 Cor. 13:5; 1 Thess. 5:21). As important as this step is, the real force of a covenant epistemology resides in the solidarity of the people, their close relationship together, their love for one another, and their corporate unity in relation to God. As individuals in social and spiritual relationship to one another, they have the proper New Testament context for seeking the face of God. Indeed, there may be no ultimate knowledge of God apart from this corporate union.

Increasingly, some scholars are recognizing that knowledge and covenant are essentially linked. Admittedly, this covenant property may not be sufficient grounds for knowledge but it does appear to be *necessary* grounds for knowledge, as J.D. Johns has so acutely observed,

All knowledge is covenantal in nature. The knower and the known must experience, honor and respond to each other according to the true nature of each. Truth is an expression of being and since God is the ground of all that is, he is the ground of all truth. God is thus the witness and guarantor of all knowledge.⁵

Johns goes on to show that knowledge between the individual believer and God is of this nature.⁶ If he is correct in his assessment that all knowledge is covenantal in nature, then it is one more reason to believe this covenantal concept should be extend to

⁵ J.D. Johns, "Pentecostalism and the Postmodern Worldview," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 7, (1995): 92.

⁶ Ibid.

include spiritual truth among the collective body of believers. For there is a unique interdependency that exists among the believers just as Paul teaches, "... each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Rom. 12:4, 5). Paul's analogy is clearly one of relational inter-dependency among the members for the body to function properly, and seemingly this inter-dependency includes knowledge. Thus, if Johns' inference is correct, and believers are bound together in covenant with God, knowledge of God is also likely connected to this union.

Admittedly, there is no record of Jesus instructing his disciples to form a covenant epistemology and there is no effort in this paper to place such a covenant on the level of the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Baptism. I believe that the community's agreement to seek knowledge together is nonetheless covenantal in character because the characteristics of that agreement meet the basic requirements of other covenants.

According to Charles Scobie, the basic covenantal features include the following:

- an agreement between two parties
- that establishes a special relationship between them
- with mutual but not necessarily equal obligations
- sealed by a special ceremony⁷

⁷ Charles Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 475.

Although a covenant epistemology involves many members of the community who are the parties to the covenant, there is an interesting correlation between the idea above of “two parties” making covenant and two groups of people being represented, namely, leaders and lay members. Not everyone is called to be a leader in a church, but a covenant epistemology calls everyone to be involved in seeking truth from the Spirit of God. Note, too, with respect to the words, “with mutual but not necessarily equal obligations,” leaders and lay people have different roles in terms of leading the church, but both groups have a responsibility and calling to discern the Spirit in the context of community direction.

In an average faith community such a covenant could be established with a formal oath in a special service, an exclusive congregational vote, or in an article to a church constitution signed by every member. Regardless of the means used to enact a covenant epistemology, the community should recognize that it has an inherent sacramental quality. God honors covenants since a covenant necessarily involves a formal promise between two parties. The Old Testament testifies to this truth, as various types of covenants were established. Some of the covenants depicted in the Old Testament include treaties, a bond of friendship and matrimony.⁸

2. An epistemology that is Christ-centered

The second essential feature is the core reality that Christ, himself, leads and speaks to the church by his Spirit. No other center will do. Christ promised the disciples that he and the Father would come to dwell in them by the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-21).

⁸ *The Ways of Our God*, 475.

In the Old Testament, the glory of God came down to the Tent of Meeting and God spoke to Moses “face to face”(Exod. 33:7-11). In the New Testament, the glory of God again comes down to speak, only this time God’s glory dwells in his temple: the church. The habitation of God is no longer the Tent of Meeting but the true temple of God’s people. As Moltmann remarks, “...when God puts his Spirit ‘into’ a people, his ‘dwelling place’ will be among them. To be filled with the Spirit is God’s Shekinah.”⁹

As Christ’s body we are also his “new creation,” and the Spirit is given to animate and light every aspect of our being. As a faith community we share a history with God’s universal church; from God’s perspective, we dwell together in unity in time and space. We also have a promising eschatology as his church and we are headed somewhere. We must therefore have direction corporately and the Lord is more than willing to supply us with understanding. The Spirit of Christ stands before us as the eschatological Lord and King and leads us on to our corporate destiny, as Jürgen Moltmann puts it so well:

The new people of God see themselves in their existence and form as being “the creation of the Spirit,” and therefore as the initial fulfillment of the new creation of all things and the glorification of God. The Spirit calls them into life; the Spirit gives the community authority for its mission; the Spirit makes its living powers and the ministries that spring from them effective; the Spirit unites, orders and preserves it. It therefore sees itself and its powers and tasks as deriving from and existing in the eschatological history of the Spirit. In this it experiences not only what itself is, but also where it belongs.¹⁰

⁹ Jürgen Moltman, *The Spirit of Life: a Universal Affirmation*, Trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 55.

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: a Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 295.

Once again we see this emphasis upon the Spirit communicating with the corporate body of believers. The Spirit gladly reaffirms Christ's teachings and conveys the words of Christ to the body, as Jesus promised, "...he will speak only what he hears...[and]...He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you" (John 16:14). Ultimately, it is both the work of the Spirit and the church that Christ should receive glory until the end of time (Gal. 1:1-5).

In the past, God spoke through the prophets. Now, Christ is the ultimate revelation of God, not only because he is the divine Logos—God's living Word—but also because he is the concrete fulfillment of divine revelation (John 1:1-3; Heb. 1:1-2). Christ's willingness to speak to his church is implied in the truth that he is its living head (Col. 1:18). Although our knowledge is never complete and never perfect (1 Cor. 13:8-9), spiritually speaking, when persons in the church speak by the Spirit they should speak as if they were speaking "...the very words of God" (1 Pet. 4:11b).

3. An epistemology that is based on members' interdependency

The third essential feature is the fact that we learn from and depend upon each other. We are not independent or autonomous; we are dependent and needy. We should not be totally surprised that this concept of interdependency of knowledge is evident in other aspects and academic disciplines. For example, we have seen how aspects of social epistemology and feminist epistemology support this New Testament concept of the interdependency of knowledge. Neither philosophy, however, represents an original epistemic ideal. God saw fit nearly two millennia ago to dispense knowledge through a social gathering, to a variety of individuals (cf. Gal. 3:28), literally to a faith community

gathered out of their unique relationship to the head, Jesus Christ. Community knowledge was a sacred idea long before it became known as a secular philosophy.

Accordingly, no individual or small group of individuals has either the capacity or right to claim they have exclusive access to knowledge about God and his will for the church. Generally speaking, prohibiting other qualified members of the body from access to the discernment process would be wrong. Imagine an organization like NASA only listening to half of its engineering staff and ignoring the other half. We do not really know when it is safe to send the rocket into space until every member of the team has been included and had time to contribute. The concept of interdependency suggests that there are significant properties that pertain to the nature of the covenant community, itself, including the diversity and expertise of each member that presents the necessary conditions and context for sound judgment. Even more practically important, it implies that the ultimate *authority* to make crucial decisions for the church rests in the hands of the church itself, the whole team, and is based upon the covenant agreement they share together.

Together as one church we form a unique band of knowledge and this is tantamount to a miracle. When the church gathers together to seek knowledge from God, he answers our prayers. Christ speaks and we are illuminated as a unified whole; we understand as one. Is it too mystical to say that the church becomes one in mind and spirit? Social scientists have entertained a concept called, a “group mind,” since the late nineteenth century.¹¹ Perhaps the notion goes too far, but it correctly points to the

¹¹ See Robert A. Wilson, “Group Level Cognition,” *Philosophy of Science*, Supplement, 68, no. 3 (September, 2002), S262-S273.

important distinction in the way individuals think by themselves versus the way they think when they participate in a group.

Group knowledge has been generally recognized by sociologists and psychologists for some time. Some professionals have intuited the process of group cognition. Teachers, for example, can sometimes tell when *the whole class seems to be getting the point*. One thing seems clear: this process of understanding as a group as opposed to our cognitive traits as individuals is quite unique and involves at least a couple of distinctive elements: first, groups of people have knowledge properties that individuals cannot possess; second, individuals have properties that are only manifest when those individuals form part of a group.¹² This latter point seems particularly interesting in light of the biblical emphasis on diversity.

4. An epistemology that is based on the church's unity in diversity

As already noted, diversity is a major key to growth in knowledge and understanding. As church members in particular, we have differing gifts according to God's grace (Rom. 12:4-6). The Spirit has planned our diversity as well as our unity. The Apostle Paul reminds us that "...God has arranged the parts in the body, everyone of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Cor. 12:18). This diversity implies differences on many different levels, including background, perspective, temperament, insight, motivation, etc. On the one hand, we may find these differences as obstacles for communication and at times this is certainly the case. On the other hand, they can lend strength and illumination to almost any particular issue under discussion. Even

¹² Ibid., S265.

differences of opinion are generally viewed as allies to the knowing process. For example, let us imagine a group of students and professors who gather together each Friday at lunchtime to discuss theology, politics, or whatever, enjoying fellowship and sometimes a lively debate. Each person brings a piece of knowledge to the argument and shares it with the group. As they contribute knowledge, they also receive new understanding and insight from the others. Generally speaking, knowledge is enhanced as each one participates, listens, responds, and offers his or her fragment of truth.

Interestingly, this type of reciprocity, sharing and receiving information in the knowing process is common in multiple-endeavors and evident in every phase of history. Aside from the New Testament witness, this dialectical process in corporate understanding dates back to the time of Socrates. Philosophers, generals, Supreme Court Justices and parents who meet together in support groups have at least one thing in common: they need one another to help work through the process of difficult issues. Each person's diverse personality and perspective is a necessary factor for ideas and solutions to be found. If knowledge is enhanced by diversity in other realms, it makes sense that diversity should play a role in a church's covenant epistemology.

5. An epistemology that balances relationship between leaders and non-leaders

Leadership will always remain important and distinct in the church, even though more emphasis has been placed on the equality of leaders and non-leaders in this paper. In chapter two we discussed how crucial the apostles and church leaders were in arriving at a decision that was recorded in Acts, fifteen. My purpose has been to challenge the older models that rely on organizational hierarchy and the autonomy of a senior leader,

because they stand in the way of the full implementation of the biblical ideal of the priesthood of all the believers. However, implementing a covenant epistemology will never render leadership obsolete because leaders are Christ's specific gift to the church (Eph. 4:8-15; cf. 1 Cor. 12:28). Gifted leadership will always be crucial in the church and especially as the church seeks guidance and direction from the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the leadership role must change and make room for the broader picture of the entire priesthood in order for a church's to mature epistemologically.

Further, a covenant epistemology will shift the leaders' focus from capturing the vision of the church to listening to the voices and hearts of the congregation, becoming more sensitive to people's needs and hearing from God through the people as a whole. This may require re-training of leaders in how to discern the leading of the Spirit by being in touch with the spirit of the congregation. Leaders will still need to guide discussions but they must be genuine discussions, not monologues coming from the hierarchy.

Casting vision and exerting authority through powerful hierarchical systems would hopefully be marginalized in our churches. There is already a mood in the country for leaders to facilitate a community rather than drive it. As Margaret Wheatley has correctly observed, "We have lived for so long in the tight confines of bureaucracies...that it is taking us some time to learn how to live in open, intelligent organizations."¹³ Stan Grenz adds that it is time for us to ask ourselves, "...how can the

¹³ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1999), 99.

church's "decision-making structures...reflect and facilitate community life."¹⁴ This is especially true today, in a culture where truth itself is on trial and many people have "...come to believe that reason and truth are subversive political disguises for power and oppression."¹⁵ Current trends indicate that the church's authority will continue to be challenged under the pressures of increasing cultural enlightenment,¹⁶ even though some church leaders will resist these trends, clinging to outmoded calls for more authority. It is becoming clear that "postmoderns value authenticity, not authority...."¹⁷ Many people are searching for leaders who are first, real and relatable and, second, leaders who can exert their influence. As Dan Kimball has correctly observed, "Leaders have a different place in this post-Christian culture than in the modern Christian era...Christian leaders no longer automatically have a right to be heard and respected."¹⁸

One could argue, however, that leaders will be even more necessary in this environment, since people still need expert and gifted guidance and help in their interpersonal relationships. Discussions need leaders to assist them in bringing clarity of

¹⁴ Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*, 2nd ed. with a foreword by Leighton Ford (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 245-246.

¹⁵ See R. Larry Shelton, "What is Truth? The Christian Witness in a Postmodern World," (Faculty paper presented at George Fox Evangelical Seminary, 3 March 1998), 7.

¹⁶ See Hans Küng, "The Pope's Contradictions," *Spiegel Magazine*, 26 March 2005 [journal on-line]; available from <http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/spiegel/0,1518,348471,00.html>; Internet; accessed 12 June 2005.

¹⁷ Tom Allen, "Postmoderns Value Authenticity, not Authority," *The Baptist Standard*, 16 April 2004 [journal on-line] available from <http://www.baptiststandard.com/postnuke/index.php?module=htmlpages&func=display&pid=1620>; Internet; accessed 12 June 2005.

¹⁸ Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, Forewords by Rick Warren and Brian McLaren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 228.

thought and direction and to manage group-sensitive interaction. Leadership can be less authoritarian and still be spiritually effective. Power still resides in influence, not control. Indeed, a covenant epistemology challenges leaders to step out of the back rooms to discuss more openly the search for knowledge of God's will. Doubtlessly this will involve a few major hurdles to overcome in order to be successful.

Changing Old Habits: Implications and Hurdles

Changing the way a church conducts its decision-making ventures and corporate discernment on important matters cannot happen overnight. It will take time to teach the meaning and implications of a covenant epistemology. It will take time to lay out the biblical examples and teachings about Christ's desire to speak to the church and reveal his purpose and will for her. The congregation, as well as the leadership, would need to change the way it thinks about church. For one thing it would have to revise its attitude about letting others make decisions, if the congregation has allowed the senior pastor and elders to hide vital information that the whole church needs to know. For example, a church's budget should be available to all the members.

Admittedly, details that need to be worked out as a result of a church's decision-making should still be handled by a manageable group of people, not necessarily the entire congregation. Every detail need not be presented publicly, but a covenant epistemology does imply that leaders could not simply spring a multi-million dollar project on the people without getting feedback from the people who will be expected to give. Every person who will be asked to reach into their wallet or purse has a right to ask questions and be given the time to discern God's will before taking part in the major

investment decision. Generally speaking, people place trust and confidence in their leadership. While this has its points, a covenant epistemology asks leaders to reciprocate by placing trust and confidence in the Spirit-led congregation.

Changing old habits can be difficult, especially when old habits have become ingrained in the traditions of the church. The particular challenges facing a covenant epistemology will be fought on three distinct fronts: leadership, community and practical application. But change is possible and with the right amount of determination and patience churches could begin to implement a covenant epistemology into their congregational life. Arguably, incorporating a covenant epistemology into a local church will only be successful *when change reaches the very foundation of a church's decision-making structure*. Therefore, this will have to include a change in the way the church looks at leadership, a change in the way it looks at community, and a change in the way it allows the Spirit to rule in the process. Taking these different aspects into consideration, a covenant epistemology could very likely affect the following changes.

1. A change in the way we include others

As leaders we would need to draft a full ecclesial plan that speaks to every leader's attitude toward including all the members of the local church. I would suggest following these simple rules in drawing up that plan:

- *The principle of inclusion*—every member should be welcomed to receive relevant information to discern God's way
- *The principle of information*—every member should be encouraged to help the church discern God's will

- *The principle of involvement*—every member should share similar responsibility, proportionate to their gifts and calling, to seek God’s will for the church

There is a variety of ways these concepts could be implemented into the church as a whole and in leadership meetings. At the very least, the success of implementing a covenant epistemology would depend on the senior leader’s personal willingness to think differently and move positively to change the existing hierarchical structure. As long as a senior leader feels that some members should be excluded in seeking God’s will, there is little hope for a workable covenant epistemology.

2. A change in the way we solicit honest answers

Realistically, a large church could begin to elicit information and knowledge from all the leaders and likely hear the heartbeat of the whole church. In an atmosphere where honesty is the rule of thumb, it is fair to expect a congregation to arrive at some agreement in the process of corporate discernment, if it is given the chance to participate in some effective way. Asking for honesty has a way of sounding attractive initially, but only the wise enjoy hearing an honest report when it goes against their feelings. This is why relationships within a church community have to be built on honesty and made as a core value of the church. We should recall that, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (Prov. 27:6). Only the truth can help the church in the discernment process and that will require being open to criticism and hard questions. As

Ben Campbell Johnson has observed, “Hard questions [from our friends] help our process of discernment.”¹⁹

For honesty to prevail, we would need to at least make a change in the way we solicit answers in leadership meetings and discussion groups during informal as well as formal get-togethers. Simply listening and being interested in what another person has to say and think is important in the learning process. Further, it is important that all the gifted leaders of the church need to be heard on matters of great importance, so that the full range of gifts and expertise is allowed to function.

One very practical way to help include the corporate body is to use small groups to enable church members to hear what the issues are. This would encourage leaders to spend time with members and invite honest responses, asking each group to discuss the plans and include a prayer time. Leaders could then turn in their reports, explaining how the discussions went, mentioning the pros and cons that were raised, including any creative ideas that surfaced in their meetings. Small group leaders could even be trained to streamline the information, focusing on the major points and highlights of the meeting.

3. A change in the way we allow diversity of opinion

As diversity is allowed to be expressed in the body, this does not mean that anyone can say anything or that no single direction or course is chosen when there are so many alternatives to choose from. Nevertheless, true diversity will be seen in the leadership’s allowance of diversity of expression in the appropriate context. Diversity of gifting means that different people are gifted for specific callings and service in the

¹⁹ Ben Campbell Johnson, *Hearing God’s Call: Ways of Discernment for Laity and Clergy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 89.

church. Naturally different perspectives, ideas and concerns correspond to the distinct and diverse gifts and calling of the individual members. Such diversity will force larger churches to divide into smaller cells or departments in order to receive a fair and distinct hearing from all the individuals. If the church has called for a general fast and prayer, a plenary session with all the members present may not be the appropriate time to hear from individual members, for practical considerations such as time.

Respecting the members' diversity still means there must be a proper way of listening to the congregation, even if it is in a forum or a survey, or some other effective means to learn and monitor the church's pulse in terms of the Spirit's direction. The idea of a church seeking knowledge together ideally implies reaching a unanimous voice. But even in a smaller church, seeking knowledge and the will of God could result in a few dissenters to the last. Practically speaking, a spiritual consensus and feeling *as one body* is all that is required. Certainly there could still be stragglers and dissenters, but the process itself should be rewarding. Unanimity may be unrealistic in some cases, but spiritual unity and a sense that the entire body is in the quest for truth is imperative.

Obviously, the viewpoints shared will be unequal in terms of coming from expert advisors and knowledgeable people, but all members should be given the opportunity to share their thoughts and to freely raise questions without fear of reprisal. We need every voice, even dissenters. For the truth of any given thing will ordinarily emerge in the context and tension of an open environment. As full citizens of the Kingdom of God and members of the body of Christ, however, *anyone* can and should be allowed to have an

opinion—even if it hopelessly fails to reflect the better opinion of either the majority of the congregation or the consensus of leadership.

Leaders and other congregants should meet in some fashion on mutual turf, on sacred ground as equal brothers and sisters in Christ. The church is called, “the family” or “God’s household” (Greek: *oikos*) because of the spiritually relational ties between the members. Holding different perspectives and opinions, even squabbling, cannot tear apart a truly loving family. Differences exist among church members too, because differences are inherently essential to the value of unity in diversity. Indeed, the Bible declares that church members belong to the same family, and those who do not recognize either the full value or rights of their spiritual siblings may be in danger of bringing judgment upon themselves for failing to “recognize the body” (1 Cor. 11:29b.). So a healthy church system of thinking, speaking, and searching for the truth must take one another seriously, always considering others “better” than themselves (Phil. 2:3). Of course, there will be rewards for the diversified faith community, just as Hanson says:

Paul was able to be equally realistic about the diversity that characterizes human community, for the unity that he envisioned was dynamic into the whole. Thus the body was not threatened by the individuality of its members, nor was the individuality of the members threatened by the corporateness of the body: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). The reality of Christ’s Spirit in its midst was enough to integrate the diversity of the gifts...and offices...into one harmonious agent, for all were derived from the same source, even as all members were baptized into the same Lord....²⁰

The same God who created one person to be frank and extroverted is the same God who made another person to be meek and introverted. God made some to be gifted in speech, and others gifted in wisdom. Some members were made especially to love

²⁰ Hanson, *The People Called*, 449.

children or the aged or neglected in ways that show a gifted touch of compassion. Others are endowed with skills that are made for the public platform: speakers and preachers, singers and musicians, and even actors and dancers. Everyone is given particular talents, a variety of skills, a set of personality traits and a basic temperament. All of these come from the selfsame God who has joined us to the body to be strengthened in our traits.

4. A change in the way we view ourselves as servant leaders

Simply changing the way we function as leaders will not be sufficient to facilitate a covenant epistemology in a church. The process necessarily entails a degree of soul-searching. Pastors should rethink their roles in terms of what it means to be a true shepherd. As leaders, they are called to a noble service, yet they should be willing to lay their lives down for the sheep and teaching the sheep how to hear the Ultimate Shepherd's voice.

Most importantly, while it is clear that the task of leaders is to serve Christ on behalf of the church, it is equally clear that their work includes serving the people.²¹ Christ is the supreme example of the type of service we need in the church today. In the Incarnation, Christ demonstrated what it means to be a servant. As Ray Anderson correctly observes, Christ's condescension was an act of "self-emptying."²² In terms of covenant epistemology, this implies leaders emptying themselves of exclusive authority and leading the congregation of fellow seekers in a joint quest for God's truth.

²¹ See e.g., Stacy T. Rhinehart, *Upside Down: The Paradox of Servant Leadership* (Colorado Springs: Navipress, 1998), and C. Gene Wilkes, *Jesus on Leadership: Discovering the Secrets of Servant Leadership from the Life of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1998).

²² Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 114.

Ordinary believers who seek knowledge from God on behalf of their church should expect to hear from God. There may be specific times when God uses someone of a lesser stature to administer a word of truth to another person who is or becomes the greater. One example in the Scripture was a God-fearer named, Ananias. He encountered the Lord in prayer where he was told to deliver an important message to Saul. He listened to Ananias, as if he were speaking the very words of God. Saul subsequently went on to become the great Apostle Paul (Acts 9:10-16; cf. 22:12). Interestingly, little more was said in the book of Acts concerning the obedient servant, Ananias; but in that moment he was an instrument in the hand of God. Imagine if he had been taught to disregard his religious experiences or to deny his ability to hear truly from God. The story reminds us that leaders should encourage every believer to remain open-minded and open-hearted to the voice of the Spirit. It may be that there are other Ananias-like disciples among us.

As natural visionaries, leaders should remain sensitive to the voice of God and nurture a discerning heart. If the leaders believe they have discerned the knowledge of God's will, this "truth from God" should pass the test of community discernment. But pastors should beware of acting like bosses who remain convinced that they should get their way by virtue of their position. A pastor's claim to autonomy in listening to the voice of God could prove to be disastrous. For one thing, pastors can be wrong in their independent discernment since they share human frailties like anyone else. For another, a strong boss-type role of the senior leader is more likely to cause greater problems than solve them in today's world. Even businesses gurus today view the type of boss who fails to listen to their employees as a weaker model. For instance, Margaret Wheatley has

observed that, “This world insists that we develop a different understanding of autonomy and self-determination, moving far away from the command-and-control approaches of the past.”²³ She then adds, “To many managers, autonomy is just one small step from anarchy.”²⁴

Robert Greenleaf agrees with this assessment. As a former executive at AT&T, he is credited with using the expression of “servant leadership” in the business sector in recent years and argues that “servant leadership will continue to increase in relevance.”²⁵ Along with trends in the fields of science, philosophy and education, the world is increasingly moving toward a corporate sense of knowledge and perception, and placing less confidence on a single individual’s wisdom and guidance. According to Jim Davis, a leading researcher on successful business, the best leaders “...never wanted to become larger-than-life heroes. They never aspired to be put on a pedestal or become unreachable icons. They were seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results.”²⁶ As focus begins to shift off the lonely shoulders of a single CEO in the corporate world, some are asking if these same trends should be shaking the older hierarchies in the church.²⁷

²³ Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, 166.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: a Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*, Foreword by Stephen R. Covey, Afterword by Peter M. Senge (New York: Paulist Press, 1991, 2002), 2.

²⁶ Jim Davis, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001), 28.

²⁷ Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to the People of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 212-17.

The church already has a beautiful example of the corporate discernment model.

The Acts 15 story is a practical illustration of the complexity of human dialogue, the back-and-forth motion of intra-church communication and the rhythmic quality of the type of effective servant-style leadership being discussed here. The story further illustrates the Spirit-directed congregation. Its greatest and lasting gift is in the way it shows us how a church *can* function, when the church allows the Spirit to direct the church. It offers hope that leaders and non-leaders can come together and decide the right course of action. As we have already pointed out in Chapter 2, the historic Jerusalem congregation likely followed the critical links in the dialogue from start to finish, from the earliest reports to the final decision, to the practical decision to elect representatives and ambassadors from their midst to share their decision with all the Gentile churches.

Listening to the voice of the Spirit can be a precarious assignment, of course.

Admittedly, there will be some who are unable to distinguish their own wants and desires from the will of the Spirit, but leaders and lay members both wrestle with these same problems because they are all human beings. I am suggesting, however, that servants and not “philosopher-kings” as Plato recommended,²⁸ are the best examples to lead others.

5. A change in the way leaders and followers work together in unity

The gifts and calling in the church are diverse, as we have mentioned already. In this vast and complicated portrait of the body of Christ, the head has given gifts to the church and made “...some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that

²⁸ Plato’s discord with democracy in fifth-century Athens is legendary, but his principal argument for the establishment of a state run by a philosopher-king is found in his work, *The Republic*, 5.473.

the body of Christ may be built up...” (Eph. 4:11). As gifted and called leaders, Christ has gifted the church with these men and women to guide and facilitate the church into its purpose and the maturity of a grown body under Christ. Let us discuss specifically a few aspects of this calling and gifting.

Leadership, like all the gifts given to the body, is a distinct as well as essential calling and is necessary for the vitality and progress of the church.²⁹ It is important to understand the special role assigned to leaders. Returning to the biblical analogy of the body, leaders do not take the place of the head, Jesus Christ, but they do act as neurotransmitters,³⁰ strategic connections in the body that carry vital information from the brain. This means first acknowledging that some individuals, both male and female, are gifted and called to be leaders in the church. Although a person who is called to lead has already been gifted and set apart by God to stimulate and lead the body of Christ, ministry today requires expert preparation. Another way of putting it, the sharpening of these neurotransmitters will include discipline, skill-training, mentoring, and even higher education.

Given the nature of our postmodern world it is conceivable that church leaders must *increasingly and continually be learning and growing* in their vital role in the church today. The world is more complex and so is the ministry. Generally speaking, we should encourage men and women who have been called to serve in the role of church

²⁹ See e.g., Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community*, with a foreword by Leighton Ford, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996) 248-50.

³⁰ See Arthur C. Guyton and John E. Hall, *Textbook of Medical Physiology*, 10th ed. (Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders Company, 2000), 515.

leadership to become more knowledgeable in the Scripture, church history and tradition, even philosophy perhaps. These preparatory measures should assist leaders in their main task: leading by preaching the word of God and by facilitating spiritual formation among the saints.

The deployment of church leaders for the job of establishing a statement of faith, finding a biblical solution to a hot moral topic, and discerning the direction of the will of God on other major matters, naturally falls mainly on their shoulders. Although the church itself must have the spiritual drive to search for the truth and the right to discern God's will corporately, skillfully articulating and fully delineating ideas is a particular gift of leadership. God's special calling and gifts are still necessary for leadership in the church.³¹ Pastoral gifting to the church carries with it a specific up-front ministry. As Stanley Grenz points out about the *functions* of pastors:

These are augmented by such activities as leading worship, teaching, preaching, and evangelism. By ministering in these various ways, pastors serve as visionaries among the people. Fundamentally, Christ intends that the pastoral office facilitate the spiritual growth of the community so that all can engage in the common task....To this end, pastors keep before the people the vision of community life embodied in the biblical narrative.³²

Once again, however, pastors do not and cannot bear the sole burden of knowing God's will and act as mere prophetic or priestly representatives for the whole body, since the body must interact with pastors and vice versa. Therefore we must beware of looking to the Old Testament for principles on how to set up such a government of prophets, as well as kings, princes and priests. Leadership books are continually being written that

³¹ Ogden, *Unfinished Business*, 196-99.

³² Grenz, *Created for Community*, 249.

draw characteristics and principles for leaders and especially “...about developing, or casting, vision by examining how God communicated vision to his people through his servant Moses.”³³ But we are not living in the Old Testament.

In a covenant epistemology the leader’s job is to identify the “vision of community life” as Grenz mentions above that becomes evident in and through the body. The leader is not to depart and seek God in isolation, then receive a vision from the mountain top and simply convey to the body what the vision is. In a true Christ-led Theocracy, or “Christocracy,”³⁴ Christ reveals his vision through the life and witness of the church. Every joint supplies an essential part of the overall life-giving knowledge. True, the neurotransmitter analogy refers to the electronic stimulation of the various bodily systems, but we must remember that the whole body receives information from its environment.

In contrast to the world, the Theocratic community is a sign of life and a force in this world that shows *God is present in his people*. As we are led by Christ we show that he is particularly present in his body, the church. It is the inheritance of the church as well as its legacy to be the eyes and ears, hands and feet of Christ in this earth. Thus, how we live, how we relate to one another in unity, how we love one another and serve one another, from the “greatest” to the “least” among us—are the signs that God was in

³³ See, e.g. Wayne Cordeiro, *Doing Church as a Team* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 127.

³⁴ This is Paul N. Anderson’s term for “...the effectual means by which the risen Christ seeks to lead the church...[as]...an egalitarian and spiritual modality rather than a hierarchical and structural one” in “Mark, John, and Answerability: Aspects of Interfluentiality Between the Second and Fourth Gospels,” a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Denver, Colorado, 17-20 November 2001; available from <http://myweb.lmu.edu/fjust/John/SBL2001-Anderson.html>; Internet accessed 14 August 2005; Internet; accessed 13 August 2005.

Christ and that God is with us (John 13:34-35). Unity is the extraordinary vestige of God's presence.

Where a true Christocracy prevails, unity will be the mark of the church. People will strive together spiritually as one body and learn to listen together to the Master, their one and only Lord. Following what has been called, "the rule of Christ,"³⁵ this type of government is open and free, never oppressive (Luke 4:18-19; cf. John 4:36). Ideally, it is a place where the people serve, the leaders serve, and the Spirit of Christ governs the spiritual knowledge and thought-life of the church. Thus, a covenant epistemology implies freedom to inquire, freedom to express one's true thoughts and freedom to be counted as essential to the whole. As Moltmann correctly observes, the church is not a "...theocracy, which legitimates a hierarchy... [Rather,] the charismatic rule of Christ in the community is essentially liberation from the violence and pressure of 'the powers of this world.'"³⁶ The servant role and function of the pastoral leadership, therefore, is to equip the members "...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. 4:13). At the end of the day, "...there are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but it's the same Holy Spirit who is the source of them all" (1 Cor.12: 4).

Educating for the Future

Ultimately we must decide that the church is worth our time and effort so that it may be properly informed, spiritually formed and fit for Kingdom service. Even a large

³⁵ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 293.

³⁶ Ibid.

church can change despite the inconvenience and difficulty of adjusting to a different model. Admittedly, the most convenient way to implement a covenant epistemology is to employ it at the start of a new church plant. Changing an established church's epistemological practices can be a tricky and perhaps monumental challenge. But given time and patience, progress can be made and people can implement a covenant epistemology successfully. Educationally, there will be several areas that will need to be addressed:

1. Reeducating the congregation to take responsibility

Introducing a covenant epistemology to the congregation will require leaders to preach and teach these truths. It is the task of leaders to explain to people the whole truth of the Scripture on this matter and to teach the congregation how to think differently about the church and their role in it. Many people today have abdicated this right and responsibility to know the truth, and have passed it on to their pastor and other church leaders. As Lyle Schaller has explained, people have been trained *not* to think today. Realizing this truth helps us to realize that pastors are not totally at fault for holding authoritarian roles as leaders. Many people would rather *let someone else* make their decisions for them. A long-time member of a prominent national church once asked the pastor, "Well Pastor, what do you have in mind for us?"³⁷ But the pastor shocked the member by returning the question. After a few anxious moments, the member finally blurted out: "You're the minister, I'm just the layman.... You're the one with all the

³⁷ Lyle E. Schaller, *The Pastor and the People, Revised* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1986), 89.

education and training. We're expecting you to tell us what we should be doing here."³⁸

Apparently, the congregant felt it was not his job to think. Sadly, this belief is pervasive in many charismatic churches today, though it does not reflect the New Testament concept of the duty of all believers to know the truth. To these members who fail to respond to their own responsibility to seek the truth, these basic points apply:³⁹

1. All the members of the church body should know they have some responsibility in seeking God for the church and praying with the leaders on the major issues that affect our church's destiny and progress.
2. All the members of the church body should pray frequently and as often as possible for the church, its leadership, and that the will of God will be established.
3. All the members of the church body should know they have a responsibility to listen to the Holy Spirit, to open their hearts to the word of God, and to be prepared to share the truth concerning God's will for the church.
4. All the members of the church body should consider whether they have relevant spiritual gifts or particular knowledge and understanding, either through natural experiences or profession, and to lend appropriate input and opinions to the leaders concerning specific knowledge the church is seeking.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ These points are drawn from my own observation and experience as a pastor and church leader for more than three decades. They are intended merely as general but also practical principles here.

5. All the members should seek unity of decision by the leadership and general agreement by the whole church upon arriving at any decision on a major issue.
6. All the members should respect the diversity of opinions and thoughts of other members who share alike the responsibility to understand and know the will of God for the church.
7. All the members should seek appropriate channels to discuss the will of God for the church with other members, and to do it prayerfully, constructively and thoughtfully.

2. Teaching the church to trust

Unity cannot exist apart from trust, and knowledge is hampered through conceit and selfish interest. We have already mentioned this value with respect to recent philosophical studies and the exciting new emphasis on social epistemology. Trust is as important as the ball-bearings are to a wheel. We cannot move apart from this essential connection. Fighting and one-upmanship creates a barrier to trust. Paul implies this in his letter to the Corinthians, as he pleads, “Now, dear brothers and sisters, I appeal to you by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ to stop arguing among yourselves. Let there be real harmony so there won’t be division in the church. I plead with you to be of one mind, united in thought and purpose” (1 Cor.1: 10). The church cannot be of “one mind” when division and distrust reign.

Love is the antidote for the poison of distrust. Even harsh disagreements are settled more easily in an environment where love is the norm. Indeed, the sweet savor of fresh knowledge can only emerge in the context of a joyful and loving church. But even

in the happiest church, dialectical and protracted positioning is not unreasonable. Having touched on this topic already, let us add that disagreements and contrary opinions do not destroy a church. Fear, insecurity, bitterness, strife, church politics—these are what destroy churches.

A loving and trusting community is a ripe environment for spiritual discernment. Spiritual and social knowledge happen only where there is a sense that people can trust those around them. Even open and honest disagreement can be healthy when the relationship is based on a personal relationship first, rather than a professional or organizational one. Speaking to the Corinthian church, Paul at one point remarked that they sometimes needed to experience “differences” in the church in order that the truth would be revealed (1 Cor. 11:19). The paradox is this: differences can either destroy the unity in a church, or they can create unity. Love tips the scale by promoting the notion that people can risk love by developing trusting relationships in the body of Christ.

3. Teaching the church selflessness

Christ taught us by example how to serve one another and treat one another with the utmost respect. However, in the quest for knowledge and in the church decision-making process it is easy to succumb to human nature and begin to think selfishly. Paul addressed this problem with the Philippians when he told them:

Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing. Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross (Phil. 2: 3-8).

Pride can afflict anyone, anywhere. As leaders, we may begin to teach others in not-so-subtle ways that it is not safe to tell us what we do not wish to hear. Our voice inflexion, our posture and body language, a blistering memo or inner-office email are just a few of the ways we can shut down a person effectively and teach them never to cross our authority again. Non leaders can be just as prideful, acting arrogant or being irrationally dissident. Generally speaking, selflessness has to be taught repeatedly. The Cross is a constant reminder that Christ showed us the way.

Pride can also destroy the fabric of freedom and it can effectively subjugate truth to the illusion of false spirituality. As Greg Ogden has correctly noted, “A characteristic of spiritual pride is that it is never content to remain secret in one’s heart. What good is the knowledge that you are better than everyone else unless everyone else knows it as well? Pride cannot be kept under wraps; it must find expression.”⁴⁰ Ogden goes on to list three very revealing characteristics of pride in the church, namely, false piety, people that love to be honored, and special titles that indicate important positions.⁴¹

If a covenant epistemology was in place members would already be bound to seek the truth together, work out differences in vision and personal conviction, and ultimately bring the issue to the whole church. Ideally, their covenant relationship together would overrule the prideful patterns of behavior. Theoretically, the church can learn to be less

⁴⁰ Ogden, *Unfinished Business*, 220.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 220-21.

selfish with time and practice. Practically speaking, however, it boils down to each individual and their choice as to whether they are willing to follow Christ's leading.

4. Teaching leaders to share responsibility and release ministry

Many church growth leaders today, such as Lyle Schaller, believe that the larger churches cannot function effectively without senior leaders who set themselves apart from the rest of the congregation.⁴² He says that large churches have too many people and so they naturally look to someone serving on a full-time basis to offer "direction, initiative, inspiration, and support... The pastor has to lead."⁴³ For practical purposes, Schaller defends the hierarchy model of leadership in the big churches, citing the need for efficiency and fewer headaches for the pastor and his family.⁴⁴

Admittedly, this process may indeed be more efficient, and resolves the issue of spiritual discernment and direction easily. If Schaller is correct, all the leader has to do is maintain a level of authority by proving he or she is right. It is wholly conceivable that a church could continue unhampered for a long time under a benevolent dictator, believing that the leader is God's special prophet who hears the word of the Lord for everyone. Practically and realistically, a one man or one woman show is unlikely able to discern God's clear will for an entire body of people consistently and for the life of the church. Lifting the leader to a separated position has damaged the health of the church. Greg

⁴² Lyle E. Schaller, *The Senior Minister* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 39.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 62.

Ogden correctly observes that this separation between clergy and laity is why ministers today are held in both “respect and contempt....”⁴⁵

Perhaps one could argue that every leader should be able to lead with confidence. Some would argue that, in fact, a leader’s authority is based on the inherent power of an office. Accordingly, some men and women are separated from among the sheep to become shepherds and authority comes with their position. Ephesians 4:11-12 states that Christ “...gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers...” Some leaders may believe this verse is teaching emphatically the *office* of leadership. Ecclesiastical *office*, however, is not a sufficient basis for authority. Biblical theologian, Gordon Fee, for example, argues that this text does teach several important aspects about leaders, but that it has nothing to do with the word, “office.”⁴⁶

First, he shows in the Ephesians 4 context that it is the *leaders themselves, not the offices* that are the gift to the church.⁴⁷ Second, it teaches that leaders have a particular *function, not title* that is assigned to them. Third, it is unlikely that Paul *intended for this list of five-fold ministry* (or four-fold if pastor-teacher are the same) to be viewed as an exhaustive list of leaders’ functions in the church. Fourth, the main purpose of leadership is specifically to serve as a catalyst in the church in order to launch others’ to growth, gift development and maturity in church ministry and Kingdom service. Arguably, the essential work of leadership is to raise and release all the body members into their

⁴⁵ Ogden, *Unfinished Business*, 89.

⁴⁶ See Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: the Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 706-07.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

respective ministries. Authority issues from the function of these roles and not from an inherent or fixed quality in an ordained office. Some biblical theologians like Greg Ogden have even proposed that we “...banish forever...the terms, *clergy* and *laity*.”⁴⁸

Nevertheless, the release of ministry begins with the leaders, those who model and share ministry responsibility with the rest of the people. They prove their capacity to release authority by remaining open and not defensive, and by modeling faith and entrusting ministry to other members of the church. Faith and obedience must also be exhibited by the people who respect and value their leaders’ discerning capabilities.

Retiring the Voiceless Systems

Everyone in the church should have an ear to hear the Spirit of the Living God and have a voice in matters affecting the faith community. However, it has been pointed out that it is not realistic to have a church of three hundred, let alone three thousand, in a plenary forum to debate together on certain facts of the matter.⁴⁹ So, the question leading the following discussion asks: to what extent is a covenant epistemology practical?

Is a Covenant Epistemology Practical?

The impracticality of such a project lies not in the innovation itself or its general consideration, but in the details of its implementation. For at some point, leaders will take action, for *someone must act*. As Ben Campbell Johnson has noted, “The final aim of

⁴⁸ Ogden, *Unfinished Business*, 96.

⁴⁹ E.g. Schaller, *The Senior Minister*, 39-41.

discernment is not information or knowledge but action!”⁵⁰ Practically speaking, only a few hands can scratch out an outline or type out a letter with talking points that draws out finality to an important issue. This may be why James stood up at the end of the discussion in Acts 15. It is likely that finality will be left up to the leaders. Hopefully, actions or decisions by then will not be at the expense of the people’s confidence.

If a unanimous consensus cannot be reached, some type of action may have to take place regardless. At times, even to decide *not* to make a decision is a decision in-itself. Leaders can still show deference and concern for everyone’s feelings in the congregation, even after a decision has been made. Time will test its wisdom. Still, grace will likely be returned to the leaders when people feel safe and think they can trust their leaders, even when the congregation is unclear about specific details about the decision. The people’s confidence is generally the leaders’ reward for loving the church.

Is a Covenant Epistemology Risky?

Changing a hierarchical epistemology to a congregational one could be risky. It could create a weak leader, someone who would be afraid to act because there might be criticism. In the face of criticism, leaders sometimes need to act. Still, there ought to be significantly discernable agreement in the body that supports a right move. At times, leaders may simply be wrong and realize, as Susan Hedahl has observed, “...that we have overlooked one of the most important areas of pastoral ministry in our training and

⁵⁰ Johnson, *Hearing God’s Call*, 101.

thinking [namely]...listening....”⁵¹ Bold changes of this magnitude take extraordinary commitment and inner strength. It also requires a specific inner witness of the Spirit, and as Hedahl notes, “...an act of faith.”⁵² Change also requires a special gift of grace since grace is the gift of God and we can do nothing apart from his strength.

Knowledge is precious and knowledge of the will and purpose of God is indispensable to the life of the church. It should be understood that discerning the truth is always worth the risk. The church will never rise to maturity as long as people are taught to memorize a set of dogma and turn off their brains. By contrast, a covenant epistemology would offer a free playing field where individuals can openly and honestly bring their spiritual and intellectual wares to the table: “Let us seek the Lord together.” If Christ is head of the church then he alone sets the vision; no human being has that right. It is up to the whole church to discern what those core values for their particular community should be, but there should be no negotiating on this matter of church leadership: Christ is the Chief Shepherd. He rules the church. Systems that shut out his light or keep one church member from directly hearing the Master’s voice deserve to be dismantled.

Is a Covenant Epistemology Iconoclastic?

Historically one of the greatest hindrances to knowledge in the church has been its institutional structure and bylaws that eventually acquiesce to the powerful, fending off

⁵¹ See Susan K. Hedahl, *Listening Ministry: Rethinking Pastoral Leadership* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 6.

fresh thought from those not welcomed in the inner-circle of the clique. According to Hans von Campenhausen, this became a problem because the church, the institution of church offices, and church dogma were all built on the power of “tradition.”⁵³ By the second century the church no longer entrusted even the tradition to “...any chance spiritual leaders, teachers, and prophets, but [formed] a group or class of responsible men who....[undertook] the work of teaching and instruction.”⁵⁴ The circle of authority was closed. Generally speaking, the institutional defenders were then, and continue to be, the very people who were camping on faulty biblical premises in support of church hierarchy, refusing to allow the spotlight of Scripture to revisit their house of cards.

Institutional challenges can come off as a small rebellion too. Sometimes even the most innocent and unpretentious would-be reformers have requested a reexamination of the biblical and theological support for beliefs and practices in the church. But suppose one or two inquisitive souls begin to see evidence of a biblical and cultural nature that could shake their church’s official positions to the core. Challenging the existing positions of a time-hardened institution, supposedly constructed on time-honored beliefs, can be an uphill battle. If the questioners even begin to slightly disagree with the old order publicly, it is likely to be viewed with suspicion. It is even more precarious to criticize the positions of the senior leader or his closest staff for fear of being accused as a rebel in the same spirit as “Korah” and “Dathan” (Cf. Num. 16). So, the questioners may

⁵³ Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997), 149-52.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

have to remain in secret, keeping their thoughts to themselves, despite the fact that the old hypotheses have been put to the light of new and challenging evidence.

If the avenues to change a hierarchical institution have already been sealed off by organizational entrenchment and fear, the would-be reformers are doomed in their undertaking already. In a hierarchical system, leaders on staff are expected to toe the line, remain loyal and not make waves. If they resist too loudly or even insist on an open forum to discuss the matter more closely, they could possibly lose their positions. Old wineskins are thick and crusty, often ill suited for new wine (Matt. 9: 17). Hence, a covenant epistemology could be viewed as iconoclastic, in the sense that it challenges existing systems that prohibit a Spirit-filled and free people from speaking their mind. Sadly, church hierarchies have the power to reduce gifted minds to voiceless pawns.

On the other hand, leaders are not the only obstacle in seeing a covenant epistemology model materialize, if the congregation insists on maintaining the status quo and remains convinced that it is the job of their senior leader alone to discern the will of God for them. Indeed, the hardest part may be convincing people to accept a “bottom up”⁵⁵ instead of top-down leadership model. They may even prefer a dictatorship as long as they experience its benefits. As Martha Stortz has correctly observed, “Community can serve either to enhance or destroy the capabilities of its leaders.”⁵⁶ Even tyrants cannot take power unless they have been *given it* by the people.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ See Robert E. Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 211.

⁵⁶ Martha Ellen Stortz, *PastorPower* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

The Benefits of a Covenant Epistemology

If the church were to begin to change its governing structure and become more inclusive in its practice to discern spiritual knowledge together and corporately seek the will of God, there would indeed be many new challenges. But the challenges and obstacles that stand in the way of implementing such a venture pale in comparison to the greater rewards that would eventually follow. Consider just a few of the benefits of implementing a program of discernment that includes the whole community of believers:

1. People will be more unified with the vision

Clearly the people who seek the voice and vision of Christ together and reach a consensus on what that means, are going to work harder and be more satisfied than a group that follows someone else's vision. As Ogden observes, "It is the joy of the empowering leader to be the catalyst to bring about that sense of teamwork at all levels of the church community...."⁵⁸ Teamwork and a sense of pride in ownership has a way of inspiring work. The more people who believe it is *their* church, the better. Just as there was a sense of satisfaction with the church resolution on what to do with the Gentile believers in Acts 15, there is always a sense of satisfaction that goes with feeling part of the discernment and decision-making process.

2. People will be more unified with the leadership

When people realize they are working together with the leaders in discerning the will of God and feel they have a voice in the matter, they will be in unity with that

⁵⁸ *Unfinished Business*, 174.

decision and the leaders who draw up a final and formal conclusion.⁵⁹ They will have respect and gather more confidence in their leaders knowing that their leaders have more confidence in them. It is a feeling of joint partnership that makes us all feel welcomed and important in the body of Christ.

3. The leaders will be more satisfied and fulfilled

Leaders often bear a heavy burden by feeling that they have the whole church and its future upon their shoulders. If they released joint responsibility to the people to discern God's will for the church and work with them to make key decisions, the leaders would feel less burdened. More importantly, they should equip the people to share the burden of responsibility. The rewards can be great, as Odgen notes, "What a joy to see someone move from being the stifling do-it-all pastor to throwing open the window to a fresh breeze and allowing the Spirit to engage partners in ministry!"⁶⁰ Pastors do feel better and more satisfied as leaders because they are doing what leaders *should* do, namely, helping the rest of the church mature and grow into responsible disciples by having them participate in ecclesial discernment.

4. The church will grow in joy and discernment

Discernment, like other spiritual disciplines, takes time to develop and grow. As Rose Mary Dougherty has observed, "In group spiritual direction people learn to listen to

⁵⁹ *Unfinished Business*, 175-77.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

God's Spirit at work in them for others in the group."⁶¹ Along with the practice of prayer, discernment is a source of strength and spiritual formation for the church, offering a kind of "collective wisdom."⁶² There is great joy in discovering truth together. Corporate knowledge emits a kind of spiritual potency that gives strength to the entire community. We no longer simply say that the pastor knows the truth; it is: "*we know*" and "this is the will of God *for us*."

Conclusion

At the beginning of this project I outlined the problem of church organizations adopting biblically unwarranted hierarchical models of church governance that depend too much on the responsibility of one person to know God's will for the whole congregation. My proposed solution to this problem is a basic concept called, "covenant epistemology," that includes the whole congregation and calls the church to seek discernment together as a unified corporate body. In the second chapter I produced biblical evidence from the Old and New Testaments that showed the paradigm shift from Spirit-directed prophets to the Spirit-filled church, strengthening the assertion that God's will is now to be revealed through the whole church. In the third chapter I gave evidence for ecclesial discernment through the combined testimony of the life of St. Ignatius of Loyola, Quaker history, and lastly, the contributions of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In the fourth chapter I described how Modern philosophy elevated the individual, autonomous knower and how the gradual erosion of this epistemic ideology led to the greater appreciation of

⁶¹ See Rose Mary Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction*, 36.

⁶² Ibid.

the knowing community and ultimately, social epistemology. Finally, I defined the solution clearly in this chapter, delineating the major features of a covenant epistemology and offering a proposal on how this epistemic model might look today in a practicing charismatic church.

As an additional feature, I introduced realistic challenges for implementing a covenant epistemology in the corporate size charismatic church. Doubtlessly, some of these challenges are relevant to the smaller and mid-size churches as well. I have pointed out that some of the problems to a full implementation of a covenant epistemology include obstacles such as changing a status quo system that has been in place for years. Another is changing the way people think about church and their responsibility in it. However, its greatest obstacle is perhaps changing the entrenched hierarchical structure itself, especially convincing the senior pastor to loosen his or her hold on the reins of the church. Indeed the challenges to a covenant epistemology are formidable in many current church situations.

Again, a covenant-driven epistemology is the proposed solution, where leaders and non-leaders bind themselves together in the pursuit of truth. The concept derives its main support from community life itself, lessons on how people normally live in the context of family-like relationships. I have defined the concept precisely, discussed its major implications, described core features entailed by it, and spent considerable time describing the relationship between a covenant-bound community and covenant-led leadership.

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