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Theocentric Vision: A Model for the Discernment of Congregational Vision as Spiritual Formation

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THEOCENTRIC VISION:
A MODEL FOR THE DISCERNMENT OF
CONGREGATIONAL VISION AS SPIRITUAL FORMATION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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BY
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
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for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation.

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
ABSTRACT.....	vii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
A Vision Formation Story	1
The Problem	3
Defining Discernment	19
Objections to Discernment.....	21
The Direction of the Dissertation	23
Summary	24
CHAPTER TWO: BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR A THEOCENTRIC MODEL OF VISION DISCERNMENT.....	26
Overview	26
Discerning Vision in the Old Testament.....	26
Jesus & the Discernment of Vision.....	34
Discerning Vision in the New Testament Church.....	40
Summary	45
CHAPTER THREE: THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR A THEOCENTRIC MODEL OF VISION DISCERNMENT	47
Overview	47
The Development of Trinitarian Theology	48
The Social Trinity.....	51
Trinitarian Ecclesiology	57
Characteristics of Trinitarian Ecclesiology	62
Eschatological.....	62
Incarnational	63
Pneumatological	64
Trinitarian Ecclesiological Values for Discerning the Vision of God	65
Summary	67
CHAPTER FOUR: THEOCENTRIC MODELS OF VISION DISCERNMENT IN IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY AND THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS.....	69
Overview	69
The Spiritual Theology of the Ignatian Exercises.....	71

The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius	74
Reflections on Spiritual Exercise for Theocentric Vision Discernment	77
Quaker Theology of Discernment	79
Quaker Discernment and <i>The Meeting</i>	83
Objections to Quaker Discernment	86
Reflections on The Meeting for Theocentric Vision Discernment	89
Summary	90
CHAPTER FIVE: THE MISSIONAL CHURCH AND VISION DISCERNMENT	92
Overview	92
Missional Discernment.....	94
Missional Vision	97
The Role of Leadership in Missional Vision Discernment	103
Processes for Missional Vision Discernment.....	106
Dave Daubert – Vision Discerning vs. Vision Casting	106
Craig Van Gelder – A Five Phase Discernment Process.....	108
Patrick Keifert’s Four-Phase Process	110
Discoveries Towards a Model of Theocentric Vision Discernment	111
Summary	113
CHAPTER SIX: A THEOCENTRIC MODEL OF VISION DISCERNMENT	114
Overview	114
Summary	115
Elements of Theocentric Vision Discernment	119
Proposal.....	122
Step 1—“Casting” the Vision of Shalom (2 Months)	123
Step 2—Listening to the Soul of the Congregation (2 to 3 Months).....	125
Step 3—Listening to the Soul of the Neighborhood (2 to 3 Months)	129
Step 4—Deciding in a Congregational Vision Meeting (1 to 2 Months).....	131
Conclusion.....	133
BIBLIOGRAPHY	135

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses the cultivation of a theocentric model of vision discernment that is spiritually formative for evangelical churches. This author will make the case that contemporary evangelical models of vision development possess an anthropocentric orientation that is individualistic, future-focused, and derived from business practices, thus subverting the spiritual formation of congregations. *How then can congregational vision be shaped in a way that is spiritually formative for the faith community as a whole?* This writer will posit that congregational spirituality will increase through the adoption of a theocentric model of vision discernment.

Chapter One sets the direction of the dissertation by carefully examining the problem of anthropocentrism in Christian leadership discussions concerning vision development. The author will also discuss the objections to discernment and provide clarifications.

Chapter Two provides the biblical foundation for a theocentric model of vision discernment. To this end, the chapter will attempt to identify the vision of God and how it was discerned within the Scriptural narrative.

Chapter Three describes the theological concept that supports a theocentric model, the chief concept being the social Trinity and its implications for the church as a Trinitarian ecclesiology.

Chapter Four considers the discernment models used for clarifying the leading of God for individuals and congregations within the Ignatian and Friends (Quaker) traditions. This chapter draws principles from these traditions for the final proposed model.

Chapter Five reflects on the contributions of missional theologians. This chapter is pivotal in providing a contextual understanding as to how congregations can corporately discern vision in a way that maintains theological integrity while promoting Christian spirituality.

Chapter Six synthesizes the material and proposes a final model.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

“In contemporary America, Christians have faith in God and, by and large, they believe and hold fast to the central truths of the Christian tradition. But while they have faith, they have also been formed by the larger post-Christian culture, a culture whose habits of life less and less resemble anything like the vision of human flourishing provided by the life of Christ and witness of Scripture.”¹

—James Davidson Hunter

A Vision Formation Story

Located at the intersection of urban and suburban Dallas, Texas is Crossroads Church, a medium-sized non-denominational evangelical church experiencing decline in the present post-Christian culture. Recognizing that his church is ill-prepared for the continuous cultural shifts, Daniel, the lead pastor, attended the latest church leadership conference with hopes of bringing back a plan for revitalization. During his time at the conference, Daniel’s excitement for ministry grew as he participated in various seminars led by some of the top Christian leaders in the country. Though he learned many things at the conference, one of his main takeaways came from a talk given by one of the premier facilitators on the power of “Visionary Leadership.” “As the pastor,” this presenter said, “you alone are responsible for forming and casting a captivating vision of the future that will stir the hearts of the people. God has entrusted these people to you and without a vision your people will perish.” Motivated by the presentation, Daniel left the conference in earnest prayer for a vision that would allow the church to flourish.

¹ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 227.

After spending the remainder of that summer in prayer, Daniel entered the fall having received what he believed to be a “captivating vision” for his congregation. Desiring to cast this vision on the first Sunday of the new year, just a few months away, Daniel decided he had to act fast. He quickly organized a retreat for the church elders, shared with them the vision, and worked to secure the necessary buy-in to his plans. The elders generally loved what they heard and after a few tweaks decided to lend their support to the pastor.

Fresh from this retreat, Daniel and the elders descended from their mountaintop experience, informed key lay leaders, and moved forward with presenting the five-year vision with the church at its first business meeting of the year. Standing before the congregation Daniel spoke persuasively about the vision God had laid on his heart. Using some of the vision-casting techniques he learned at the leadership conference, he painted a vivid picture of the various ministries, programs, and facilities the church would offer to the surrounding community. Some were persuaded by his confident presentation. Others applauded his visionary leadership, believing that the vision would revitalize the church. Some lay-leaders and volunteers, however, were somewhat despondent, feeling that in moving so swiftly the congregation was perhaps being robbed of the opportunity to consider what God might be up to. They questioned whether the vision truly reflected the people, the context, and the overall identity of the congregation. Likewise, they thought if the people were not involved in cultivating the vision, being left merely to “buy in,” such a process would not be spiritually enriching for individual believers and the congregation as a whole.

Trying to be sensitive to their views, Daniel listened quietly as the discussion ensued. After some time, however, he rose from his seat and said in a firm voice, “I understand everything that has been said and I greatly appreciate your input. But I have prayed about this for months and feel very strongly that this is the direction in which God is calling us. I do not claim to be a prophet, but in Scripture, God always gives the vision for the people to the leader. As the pastor, God has given me a vision and I believe we should follow it.” After his monologue no one could say a word. Within a few minutes the church voted to approve the new direction.

As the church began to implement the vision, some numerical growth did occur. Yet the process (beginning with the initial formation of the vision) failed to deepen the spirituality of the people both individually and collectively. In fact, the sense of community within the church fragmented even more, causing many to be only nominally involved in congregational life. This was the same fear expressed by many at the prior church business meeting. Noticing this, Jim, one of the elders and a regional manager for a local corporation, struggled to see any difference between the way corporations and contemporary churches envision their future. Though not knowing exactly how, he and several others wished that the process could be more communal and participatory. Whether others in the church recognized it or not, they believed that such an endeavor would prove to create a spiritually thriving community.

The Problem

If a person were to visit the average evangelical Church on the first Sunday of the new year, they would undoubtedly witness the lead pastor casting a vision or hear of an invitation to a church business meeting, where such vision-casting would take place.

There is nothing innately wrong with such presentations. When pastors vision-cast, this provides a clear direction for the church, establishes measurable goals, and generates much-needed energy.² These are things all organizations require from time to time. More often than not, however, the vision or future direction of the congregation has been crafted solely by the lead pastor, perhaps in conjunction with staff, and amended by key lay leaders. This top-down method of vision development leaves the average congregant with no way to participate in the future direction of the church except to either approve or reject the proposal. In many churches, particularly mega-churches, even this minimal participation is not an option due to the size and nature of the church culture. As a result, many churchgoers are only minimally engaged in congregational life, perhaps participating in accomplishing the vision but not helping cultivate it. While well-intended, this model of vision creation does not perceive the formation of the vision of the church as an opportunity for collective participation. Neither is the process seen as a congregational event that can be spiritually beneficial.

At its core, the problem is that contemporary evangelical models of vision development possess an anthropocentric orientation that is individualistic, future-focused, and derived from business practices, thus subverting the spiritual formation of the congregation. With the problem defined, the remainder of this chapter will consider each of these anthropocentric characteristics, identifying how they are subversive to congregational spirituality.

First, contemporary evangelical models of vision development are subversive to the spiritual formation of congregations in that they are functionally individualistic. That

² Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 45-49.

is to say, contemporary evangelical models focus primarily on the individual to the disregard of the community. This contention is founded on the theory that the vision of the church originates principally from the pastor, who serves as the executive or CEO.³ Once more, this is a popular perspective due to the writings of influential evangelical authors/pastors.

Bill Hybels is one of the many influential proponents of this leadership model. In his book *Courageous Leadership*, Hybels asserts that it is the leader who first sees the vision.⁴ The leader is the one who “sees that life-changing image of the future that makes his or her pulse quicken.”⁵ According to Hybels, “they feel so deeply about it that they inspire others,”⁶ with the vision they alone have gleaned.

Best-selling Christian author and senior pastor of Life.Church, Craig Groeschel, agrees when he writes,

Hopefully, the *leaders* of the church will seek God, find a divine burden, examine their resources and context, and present a Spirit-breathed, God-sized vision! Notice that I *italicized* the word *leaders*. If you’re the *leader* of a ministry, this is your role. This certainly doesn’t mean that you won’t listen to people, seeking their wisdom and input. But ultimately, the vision comes from the *leaders’* time of hearing from God.⁷

³ Gilbert R. Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003), 104.

⁴ Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, 32.

⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁷ Craig Groeschel, *It: How Church Leaders Can Get It and Keep It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 44. Italics in original.

Also concurring with this sentiment is Andy Stanley, a mega-church pastor outside of Atlanta, Georgia.⁸ In his book *Visioneering*, he answers the question of what vision is and where it comes from by saying, “visions are born in the soul of a man or woman who is consumed with the tension between what is and what could be.”⁹ He continues, “For a vision to become a reality, someone must put his or her neck on the line. Vision requires visionaries, people who have allowed their minds and hearts to wander outside the artificial boundaries imposed by the world as it is. A vision requires an individual who has the courage to act on an idea.”¹⁰

Contemporary leaders, like those mentioned above, frequently extrapolate their vision creation principles from the leadership moments of Bible characters (specifically from the Old Testament), as a way to “biblically” substantiate their claims. Moreover, the retelling of the narrative occurs in such a way that it allows the reader to envision the biblical character as a type of hero whose visionary leadership fosters transformation. Stanley, for example, does this throughout his book, using Nehemiah as the hero. In fact, he introduces Nehemiah (also mentioning Moses and David) under the sub-section entitled *Our Hero*.¹¹ This type of biblical storytelling only serves to further instill the idea that vision formation is the exclusive role of the primary leader.

⁸ North Point, “North Point,” accessed April 30, 2015, <http://northpoint.org/>.

⁹ Andy Stanley, *Visioneering: God’s Blueprint for Developing and Maintaining Vision* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1999), 17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹¹ Ibid., 23.

This focus on the individual is actually a type of lens or “mental model” that has captured the evangelical imagination of leadership.¹² According to Peter Senge, “Mental models are the images, assumptions, and stories which we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world...[L]ike a pane of glass framing and subtly distorting our vision, mental models determine what we see.”¹³ Moreover, they “depict the action a person will take.”¹⁴

In the case of vision conception, evangelicals have bought into the narrative that vision can come from no other source but the individual. This narrative is repackaged and sold at most pastoral leadership conferences, in best-selling Christian books, and reinforced by Christian leaders who work in the marketplace. The unfortunate reality, however, is that this lens has informed our reading of the biblical narratives for leadership principles. In fact, Daubert¹⁵ claims that our attraction to the hero type visionary leader is not grounded in Scripture at all, but rather finds its origin in the “Great Man” theory credited to the nineteenth century philosopher Thomas Carlyle.¹⁶ This,

¹² Scott Cormode, “Cultivating Missional Leaders: Mental Models and the Ecology of Vocation,” in *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2009), 102-103.

¹³ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990), 235, 237.

¹⁴ Cormode, *Cultivating Missional Leaders*, 106.

¹⁵ Dave Daubert, *Vision-Discerning vs. Vision Casting: How Shared Vision Can Raise Up Communities of Leaders Rather than Mere Leaders of Communities*, in *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2009), 149.

¹⁶ Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), was an essayist, historian, and philosopher of culture. “He possessed an anthropocentric ‘theology,’ believing that the ‘true history of an age is the biography of its great men.’ In this way leaders are heroes who are gifts from heaven who are able to embody what is needed in any particular moment. It is impossible to exaggerate Carlyle’s impact, for better or worse, upon all aspects of Victorian culture...In the absence of his father’s God, he chose what seemed to him the best substitute—the hero.” Michael Moran, “Thomas Carlyle,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Donald Borchert, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2006), 32-25.

Daubert claims, is partially responsible for the present problem within Christian leadership.¹⁷ The idea of the visionary actually has its roots firmly within anthropocentric philosophy rather than Christian theology.¹⁸

The affinity for this mental model has sacramentalized individual endeavors of visionary leadership to the neglect of the community. Practically, this means that if prayer is required for the discernment of vision, it is the primary leader who alone (perhaps with a few others) journeys to “the mountaintop” in search of God. It suggests that if “soul searching” must be done, only the leaders are worthy to be examined by the Divine. The community, in turn, does not have permission for their minds and hearts to “wander outside the artificial boundaries imposed by the world as it is.”¹⁹

More dangerously, it distorts a congregation’s pneumatology by implying that the leader alone has some special access to the Holy Spirit that is unavailable to others or to the community. In this way, visionary leadership becomes an opportunity for the leader to seek God, but not for the community. It is an occasion for the individual to be spiritually formed more into the image of Christ, while robbing others of this same grace.

To be clear, this critique is in no way attempting to malign the pastors mentioned by name or others who believe in and promote this approach. However, since they are among the featured names of the most popular Christian leadership conferences in America,²⁰ they best represent the dominant thinking that presently exists within

¹⁷ Daubert, *Vision-Discerning vs. Vision Casting*, 149.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Stanley, *Visioneering*, 18.

²⁰ Paul Sohn, “Top 8 Conferences Every Christian Leader Must Attend,” Paul Sohn-SaltLight, accessed April 30, 2015, <http://paulsohn.org/top-8-conferences-every-christian-leader-must-attend/>.

evangelical leadership discussions. As such, evangelical pastors will continue to default to a mental model of visionary leadership, which sees the individual as the primary progenitor of vision.²¹ This understanding is nothing new and has been advocated by evangelicals for well over twenty years.²²

It should also be noted that this critique is not an attempt to minimize the importance that key individuals play in vision development.²³ There should be no doubt that churches, today more than ever, are in need of strong and competent leadership. What is being challenged here is the presupposition that vision originates primarily from the principal leader in the community. At issue is not the omission of the chief leader in this process, but rather a new way of envisioning his or her role.

Second, contemporary evangelical models of vision development are subversive to the spiritual formation of congregations in that they are future-focused. Said another way, the creation and content of pastoral vision is almost always discussed in terms of movement towards a preferred future to the exclusion of attempting to increase congregational awareness in the present. This notion describes the evangelical understanding of vision as intrinsically being one of “seeing” and “forecasting” the future. This implies that when a pastor is in the process of visioning, he or she must attempt to “see” a future that does not presently exist.

²¹ Stanley does believe in shared vision. Yet he maintains the primacy of the individual leader when he says that “All God-ordained visions are shared visions. Nobody does it alone. But God generally raises up a point person to paint a compelling verbal picture.” Stanley, *Visioneering*, 85.

²² Aubrey Malphurs is a church growth consultant who was particularly influential in the late twentieth century. He writes, “Not only is the vision developed initially by a sole point person, but this individual needs to be a visionary type person as well. It takes a visionary leader to cultivate a profound, positive vision of the future.” Aubrey Malphurs, *Developing a Vision for Ministry in the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 43.

²³ Daubert, *Vision-Discerning vs. Vision Casting*, 149.

This is the prevailing view concerning the nature of vision held by many evangelicals, including George Barna, a well-respected author and market researcher. Writing about the nature of vision, Barna asserts that, “vision is a picture held in your mind’s eye of the way things could or should be in the days ahead.”²⁴ He says it “concentrates on the future. It focuses on thinking ahead rather than on dwelling upon or seeking to replicate the past.”²⁵ Supposedly, it is only these types of churches, the ones with visionary leadership, that are capable of accomplishing “something unique, meaningful and special because the Holy Spirit has enabled them to capture an image of the future and to chart a course of action to reach that goal.”²⁶

In one sense there is nothing inherently wrong with this view. Christian leadership, to some degree, should always be aware of the challenges and opportunities that may lie ahead. Following the shepherd motif, pastors should be conscious of the types of terrain that the “sheep” under their care must trod. The contention being raised here, however, is one of a formational nature. The questions are how can a leader (and by extension his congregation) cultivate spiritual maturity by focusing on the future when God’s Spirit is active in the present? And how can God’s vision of reconciliation (relationally, socially, environmentally, etc.) be accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit today, if the focus of the congregation is always on tomorrow? This future-focused view of vision prohibits the discernment of the work of God in the present, which is a prerequisite for a discernment of vision that nurtures spiritual vitality.

²⁴ George Barna, *The Power of Vision: How You Can Capture and Apply God’s Vision for Your Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992), 29.

²⁵ Ibid., 30.

²⁶ Ibid., 32.

Thomas Frank alludes to this problem, noting the fact that most of the books on church leadership are geared towards moving on instead of staying put.²⁷ In words of lament:

What bothers me most about many books on the church is that they do not feed my soul. They do not address the memories and hopes, gifts and arts that constitute my call to ministry. Nor do they touch the collective soul of the congregation. The soul is the meeting of place of self and world. It is the ground of expression, of friction among choices and standpoints, the place where I make a life.²⁸

Frank's comments are profound. He is speaking to the intellectual climate that currently exists in mainstream Christian leadership circles. This climate is averse to life in the present, while envisioning life in the future as more favorable. This is the mental model that most Christian leaders have inherited. This view undoubtedly informs the conception of vision and therefore vision formation.

This inclination towards a future-focused of vision, however, has other significant implications. Some, like Alan Roxburgh, perceive that the underlining issue with this concept of vision is not only one of disregarding the present, but also about the refusal to relinquish control. He writes,

For too long, church leaders have been obsessed with the search for the program, tactic, or strategic plan that delineates a goal, sets out a path, and aligns people in moving toward and realizing a predetermined future. Behind this obsession lurks the continued belief that leadership is not only about defining and shaping a preferred future but also making such a planned future happen. In this sense, no matter what words are used in regard to serving or nurturing, leadership turns into methods of controlling and manipulating others to achieve predetermined ends. In the end, people are ends to a leader's goals.²⁹

²⁷ Thomas Edward. Frank, *The Soul of the Congregation: An Invitation to Congregational Reflection* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 21.

²⁸ Ibid., 22.

²⁹ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 145.

The depth of what Roxburgh is stressing here cannot be dismissed. In attempting to make a planned future become a reality, he alludes to the inherent human desire to remain in control of one's own future and life. A desire, according to Luke Timothy Johnson, that is the "underlying resistance to spiritual discernment."³⁰ This proclivity, however, is merely an attempt to replace God with one's self, as the one who alone "sees" and "shapes" the future. Moreover, this attempt to control the future in leadership easily translates into the manipulation of people to help in the realization of that future. Subsequently, the spiritual growth of individuals and the community can become compromised.

This addiction to control is sometimes difficult to detect in Christian leadership literature, like Barna's, due to the use of the Christian "empowerment" language that is so often employed. Looking carefully however, this can be observed. "In suggesting that vision deals with that which is preferable" Barna writes, "we are insinuating that vision entails change. Vision is never about maintaining the status quo. Vision is about stretching reality to extend beyond the existing state."³¹ He continues, "To create a better situation in which to minister, you can either rely upon random circumstance and hope that the result is better than what has existed, or you can assert control over your environment, based on God's empowerment and direction, and make a better future."³²

³⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision-making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 110-111.

³¹ Barna, *The Power of Vision*, 29.

³² Ibid.

To be clear, it is not that vision—in the sense of seeing the future—cannot be somewhat helpful.³³ The drawback with this view, however, is that such a focus distracts from the work of God’s Spirit in the world and among God’s people in the present. Once more, it prohibits a relinquishing of the future into the hands of the Triune God, who we trust, by faith, has a future for his people. In fact, God’s future is not off in the distance but among the present people of God.³⁴ This practice then carries with it enormous implications for how a congregation conceives eschatology.³⁵ Furthermore, by constructing a vision of a “preferred future,” leaders are thus threatening the spiritual formation of congregations, in that they are not only shifting the visual orientation of God’s people but also diminishing congregational faith.

Third, contemporary evangelical models of vision development are subversive to the spiritual formation of congregations, in that they are derived from business practices. This is to imply that the concept of the visionary leader as one who individually forms and envisions the future is nothing short of Western corporate or market language baptized into Christian vernacular. Whereas methodological borrowing from the surrounding context is to be expected in a pluralistic culture, the dominant models of vision development fundamentally practice this while disregarding theological reflection as a source for cultivating vision.

³³ Daubert, *Vision-Discerning vs. Vision Casting*, 167.

³⁴ Roxburgh, *The Missional Leader*, 145.

³⁵ Different groups within the Evangelical tradition have varying eschatological understanding. Nonetheless, most Evangelical churches and denominations will agree with the “already and not yet” aspects of eschatology. Many groups place a primacy on the “not yet” aspects of eschatology. I am arguing that this primacy influences vision formation. This is also the conclusion of Daubert when he says, “The tendency is to think of eschatology (and with it, “vision”) primarily as something off in the future. But the radical call of Jesus was to recognize the reign of God that is already breaking in on us in the present. Jesus’ attitude toward the future was that we are to trust God for it.” Daubert, *Vision-Discerning vs. Vision Casting*, 151.

As was discussed above, popular models of vision development begin with vision being grasped by the top leader and “trickling down” to everybody else below, including the church staff.³⁶ They in turn trickle the vision downward to their lay leaders and volunteers.³⁷ The idea is that “by the time the vision has been cast among the congregation at large, they are likely to hear the vision being articulated in many forms and by many people.”³⁸ This model, without question, is an efficient way to communicate a single vision throughout an organization. Furthermore, it is the common mental model of how visionary leadership functions, not only in businesses, but in schools, hospitals, and even the YMCA. Yet this begs the question, if the words “church staff” were replaced with the word “employees,” and “congregation” with the word “business” or “organization,” would there be a fundamental difference in how vision was created and communicated? In contemporary evangelical Christianity, the answer, I think, would sadly be no.

This negative assertion is partly due to the underlying belief among evangelicals that there are more visionary leaders in the business community than there are in the church.³⁹ Envy of the “success” of bigger companies’ market-share and operating budgets, many American evangelicals have adopted their principles to achieve similar “success” without critically examining the fundamental assumptions of such techniques.⁴⁰

³⁶ Barna, *The Power of Vision*, 145.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁰ To be fair, Barna does see some danger in following the practices of the business world in relation to vision formation. He understands that for secular business leaders the bottom-line objective is

Barna again notes, “If you want to learn more about vision, interact with successful leaders to understand the content and description of that vision, how they arrived at it, how it has redesigned their activities and relationships, how they spread the ownership of the vision and the ways they champion the acceptance and practice of the vision.”⁴¹ With advice like this, it is no wonder that most Christian books for leaders and congregations share the basic market assumptions of the larger culture.⁴²

To be clear, the issue being raised here is not whether or not business principles are “effective.” Most Christians do, in fact, believe that they have value and add to the life of the church.⁴³ At issue is the implications that arise from employing such techniques in the church, chief among them being a market consciousness that threatens the identity of the church itself, and in so doing, shapes the way vision is formed. Observing the average church mission statement in search of this *market-consciousness*, Hunsberger notes that “the members are not conceived, in such a statement, as *being* the church... Instead, they are customers, the regular consumers for whom the religious services and goods produced by the ‘church’ are intended.”⁴⁴ He continues, “This kind of ‘church’ is in the business of religion, and its livelihood is dependent on having a sufficient number of satisfied, committed customers.”⁴⁵ If Hunsberger is correct about a “business of religion” in American Christianity today, then it stands to reason that

financial and their source for guidance is self. Thus, he suggests caution while acknowledging that much can be gained from studying their practices. Barna, *The Power of Vision*, 57.

⁴¹ Ibid., 167.

⁴² Frank, *The Soul of the Congregation*, 21.

⁴³ George R. Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision* (Cambridge, UK: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 36.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

business and market philosophies have also impacted Christian leadership, including our imagination of vision formation.

It is important to note that there is a central mental model or archetype that is undergirding this kind of thinking. Whereas mental models are main narratives and assumptions that guide our understanding of the world,⁴⁶ archetypes are the most important of those mental models.⁴⁷ *Archetypes* are such strong narratives that they act like precedents that are etched in stone as ideal and universal for all people and all time.⁴⁸ Beginning with the industrial revolution, the archetypal narrative of progress swept across America and later the world with the rise of globalization. Its effect, however, began to take hold of the organizational thinking of Protestant churches in late 1800s.⁴⁹ “Following developments in industry and business, churches incorporated specialization with a view towards an ‘economy of scale.’”⁵⁰ As the church entered the twentieth century, the grip of a progress narrative gained an even stronger hold within Protestantism as congregations and denominations turned to a market-conscious

⁴⁶ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 235, 237.

⁴⁷ Cormode, *Cultivating Missional Leaders*, 107.

⁴⁸ Using the term archetype in this way, I am building on Fiorenza’s understanding of how archetypes function. She uses the term to describe the male-dominated hermeneutic of Scripture. Similarly, I am using the term to describe how the narrative of progress has become the normative understanding of the modern era. She says, “A mythical archetype takes historically limited experiences and texts and posits them as universals, which then become authoritative and normative for all times and cultures.” Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 10.

⁴⁹ For further reading see, Roger J. Nemeth and Donald A. Luidens, “The Reformed Church in the Larger Picture: Facing Structural Realities,” *Reformed Review* 47, no. 2 (Winter 1993-94): 89. This article surveys the past of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) in hopes of providing a way forward for the denomination. Much of its research is based on the observations of the groundbreaking work, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America: 1776-1990; Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1997).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

strategies for relevance.⁵¹ It was not long before the church began to envision *religious economies* to be like commercial economies in that they “consist of a market made up of a set of current and potential customers and a set of firms seeking to serve the market.”⁵² This language of “economies,” “customers,” and “markets,” however, only serves to showcase how the churches in North America have embraced the philosophy that the church is a vendor of religious goods and services.⁵³ It is this archetypal narrative of progress that governs the imagination of Christianity, namely American evangelicalism.

Yet this narrative that governs American congregational life does not feed the soul or reveal the true nature of what the church is or why people associate with it.⁵⁴ Frank notes that “when participants recite a creed or sing a hymn from memory, when they kneel at an altar rail, when they give a Saturday to cook food for the homeless, something else is going on that can only be addressed with a narrative not of progress but of presence, not of productivity but of place.”⁵⁵

Therefore, when vision is formed under the narrative of progress, it cannot help but to be business/market driven. Congregations are then negatively impacted because such visions fundamentally shape the ecclesiology of the people. From this viewpoint, the church is no longer a worshiping community of people who are on mission with God and engaged in the theological reflection that is a part of discerning the meaning to God’s activities. Instead, the church is imagined as a contemporary institution. As such, it relies

⁵¹ Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us*, 36-37.

⁵² Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 17.

⁵³ Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us*, 37.

⁵⁴ Frank, *The Soul of the Congregation*, 22.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

on market principles and not theological reflection to help envision both the present and the future. When vision and its development occur in this way, it serves to undermine the spiritual formation of the congregation, in that it transforms the imagination of God's people from one of a church, called to be a beachhead of the reign of God, into a business. Visionary leadership is the propitiator of this problem.

These three characteristics reveal the anthropocentric orientation within evangelical models of vision creation. These models typically begin with the dreams or "visions" of the individual rather than the dream of God. The future-directedness of the vision identifies a preoccupation with creating a "preferred future" as opposed to participating in the present work of God. Once more, these models demonstrate how corporate principles, driven by the notion of human progress, shape congregational meaning rather than affording theological reflection the same opportunity. Consequently, these models originate with humanity at their epicenter, placing God and His will on the periphery. In this sense, God is no longer the object of evangelical vision development. If true, then the spiritual maturity of a congregation is nearly impossible because such growth can only occur as people pursue the Triune God together. In hopes of gaining some footing, the next section will offer a brief survey defining discernment⁵⁶ from the perspective of classical Christian spirituality.

⁵⁶ In this study the terms "spiritual discernment" and "discernment" may be used interchangeably.

Defining Discernment

Discernment comes from the Latin *discernere*, to separate, distinguish between, from *dis-*, “apart,” and *cernere*, “to sift.”⁵⁷ It carries with it the connotation of detecting with the eyes and the senses. Once more, the word means to recognize or identify as separate and distinct: to discriminate (right from wrong).⁵⁸ This English definition, however, betrays its Christian heritage.

In her book *Listening Hearts: Discerning God’s Call in Community*, Suzanne Fordham says that “in classical spirituality, discernment means identifying what spirit is at work in a situation: the Spirit of God or some other spirit.”⁵⁹ As such, she notes that discernment assists individuals in “sifting through” their interior and exterior experiences in order to determine the “origin” of experience.⁶⁰ This language of correctly “sifting” carries with it undertones of “seeing,” thus leading many, like Morris and Olsen, to suggest that “discernment creates the capacity to see... through to the essence of a matter.”⁶¹ “It distinguishes,” they suggest, “the real from the phony, the true from the false, the good from the evil, and the path toward God from the path away from God.”⁶² Agreeing with this sentiment is Elizabeth Liebert, who also understands discernment to be an act done “to discriminate between options and find the best choice at a particular

⁵⁷ Mish, “Preface,” in *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Suzanne G. Farnham et al., *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, 20th Anniversary ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub., 1991), 21.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 18.

⁶² Ibid.

time.”⁶³ Not to be mistaken, Liebert does, however, understand discernment to be more than mere decision making. For her, the practice of discernment is the result of a desire to primarily seek and glorify God.⁶⁴ It is from that place of desire, to first and foremost seek and glorify God, that decisions can be made.⁶⁵

Surveying these definitions raises a key observation about discernment that must be highlighted. Namely, that discernment attempts to distinguish “between the spirits” in a given situation. These spirits are personified in the *narratives*⁶⁶ that either “lead toward or away from God.” More will be said on this in chapter two. For now, it is sufficient to note that Christian discernment aids groups and individuals in identifying which avenue is consistent with the Christian story and identity.

It would take more space than is allotted here to offer a comprehensive definition of discernment. Some even discourage such attempts, arguing that finding a definition is challenging because it has not meant the same thing at different historical junctures or in different contexts.⁶⁷ Considering the above, however, it is not difficult to see themes of seeking God and self-denial running congruently. In fact, these explanations reveal that God, and not a “correct” answer or the “right” choice, is the object of discernment. This means that discernment is fundamentally theocentric, as it is anchored in the seeking of God for the benefit, glory, or sake of God’s self. With that said, discernment can broadly

⁶³ Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 10.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ The word “narrative” throughout this study conveys the idea of a coherent story or framework that establishes cultural and personal meaning. Narratives, in this sense, cultivate identity. It is also synonymous with “worldview.”

⁶⁷ Liebert, *The Way of Discernment*, 8.

be defined as *an intentional and reflective process of seeking the mystery of God, for the glory of God*. This desire to humbly pursue and seek to be molded by the story of God is at the heart of what it means to be further formed into the image of Christ.⁶⁸ The practice of discernment, therefore, is one that increases human finitude—faith, trust, and dependence on God as Creator.

Objections to Discernment

There are several objections to discernment that must be mentioned. First, it is true that many churches or traditions have successfully utilized autocratic and hierarchical models of leadership based on the primacy of a singular spiritual leader.⁶⁹ Among many examples is the abbot in Benedictine monasticism. Though autocratic, a style I do not consider to be conducive for discernment, the system is still very much a covenant relationship between the abbot, the oblate, and God.⁷⁰ This covenantal relationship, along with an inherited monastic communal spirituality, has allowed Benedictine monasticism to thrive for well over a millennium.⁷¹

Second, discernment in church leadership can negate the involvement and gifts of charismatic leaders. This is important to note, as the popular leadership type valued by evangelicals is the charismatic or CEO leader. Nonetheless, charismatic leaders are

⁶⁸ Is this not the example of Jesus, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8)

⁶⁹ Leon Kendell Cameron, Jr., *From Decision Making to Discernment: Using Ignatian and Friends Models of Discernment in a Baptist Context*, DMin diss., George Fox University, 2013, 5.

⁷⁰ Dwight Longenecker, *St. Benedict and St. Thérèse: The Little Rule & the Little Way* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2002), 89.

⁷¹ Cameron, Jr., *From Decision Making to Discernment*, 5.

similar enough to autocrats in that they can challenge corporate discernment due to the nature of their influential personalities.⁷² Nevertheless, Friedman believes that healthy, differentiated charismatic-type leaders indeed can exist in more consensus leadership contexts.⁷³

Finally, many evangelicals distrust any language of discernment, especially in relation to leadership, seeing it as nothing more than vague mysticism. Due to the modern evangelicals' "high-view of Scripture," many discard concepts of discernment in favor of biblical principles of instruction. They also reject the premise of hearing the "still small voice" of God. The fear being expressed in these sentiments is that such dependence on discernment for a community is dangerous because it can capitulate into subjectivism.⁷⁴ This is particularly true for Reformed Christians, who historically did not even use words like *spirituality*, favoring *piety* instead, fearing the former's association with Roman Catholic mysticism.⁷⁵ In short, some fear that discernment means to abandon the tradition of the Protestant Reformation. But if spiritual discernment is dangerous, then it raises the question whether it is even more dangerous to rely on other norms for making decisions.⁷⁶

As noted earlier, the real issue is that of relinquishing control. I posit, however, that one cannot truly possess obedient faith while remaining in control, as faith requires a

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 228-229.

⁷⁴ Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment*, 110.

⁷⁵ James Edward McGoldrick, "John Calvin, Practical Theologian: The Reformer's Spirituality," *The Outlook* 59, no. 6 (June 2009): 10.

⁷⁶ Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment*, 110.

surrendering of our lives to a mysterious God. In this sense, all faith is mysticism. The implication is that in rejecting spiritual discernment, evangelicals are actually threatening their own integrity. Is it not true that the relinquishing of control, through faith, is at the very core of evangelicalism? Here we find a possible connection between evangelicalism and spiritual discernment. In spiritual discernment we surrender, in obedient faith, to the will and presence of God in the world. As such, it can fit squarely within the evangelical tradition as an expression of our mysterious faith and trust in the Living God. Speaking about the mystery of faith, Johnson says,

But the obedience of faith offers no certainties, not even that of being certain of our own fidelity. We cannot know if the decisions we make here and now are correct. We only know that they are the best we are able to make, and in the future we might both regret them and need to change them. The reason has nothing to do with our sinfulness and everything to do with the fact that faith has to do with the Living God, who always moves ahead of us in surprising and sometimes shocking ways. As the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, business with this power by definition places us in a situation of being in the control of another; “It is the fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb 10:31).⁷⁷

The Direction of the Dissertation

The above observations have been made as an attempt to outline the anthropocentric nature within the evangelical imagination regarding vision creation. With this in mind, the central question of this dissertation can be raised: How can congregational vision be shaped in a way that is spiritually formative for the faith community as a whole? In light of the problem, this study will set out to construct a model of theocentric vision discernment. Re-orientating the discussion around this perspective implies that God, through His Spirit, is the primary leader of the church. Therefore, a theocentric model of vision discernment rests on becoming aware of the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 111.

vision of the Leader. As will be observed, this discernment takes place communally, within a present-focused and a theologically formed people. In this way, the topics of discernment and the nature of vision will be brought together.

Chapter Two will begin to lay the groundwork for such a model by considering the biblical basis for discerning the vision of the Leader—the *vision of God*. Searching the Old and New Testament, this chapter will seek to discover what the vision of God is, who discerns it, and how it is discerned. Chapter Three will attempt to establish the theological foundation for the vision of God, as well as discuss its implications for the church and its discernment. Chapter Four will probe two key discernment traditions within Church history to gain insights into their theocentric vision discernment. It will also draw from these principles what will be important in postulating a proposed model. Chapter Five will examine vision discernment from a missional perspective. This chapter will more clearly articulate the role of the missional leader. The sixth and final chapter will synthesize the themes and findings from the previous chapters, upon which a final proposal for a model of theocentric vision discernment will be offered.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to highlight the problem facing evangelical churches with regard to vision development. It began with a brief story that illustrated the problem, then transitioned to naming it more directly. To reiterate, the problem is that contemporary evangelical models of vision formation are individualistic, future-focused, and derived from business practices, thus subverting the spiritual formation of the congregation.

Seeking to deconstruct its separate aspects, I first discussed how the individual nature of these models, which disregards the role of the congregation, is detrimental to congregational spirituality. Next, I considered the implications of the future focus of vision, as assumed within these models, on a congregation's ability to be aware of the Spirit's activity in the present. Last, I outlined how business practices as opposed to theological reflection have been used as a tool in defining visionary leadership. Synthesizing these three aspects, I concluded that the problem, at its core, is the anthropocentric rather than theocentric nature of evangelical models of vision creation.

Since this model is one of discernment, a brief survey of some contemporary writings was helpful in providing a broad definition of discernment as an intentional and reflective process of seeking the mystery of God, for the glory of God. Brief consideration was also given to three common objections to discernment, those being: that autocratic leadership can be successful, discernment-centered models in leadership can negate the gifting of the charismatic leader, and that Christian mysticism leads to subjectivism. More or less conceding the first two objections, the argument was made that the last objection is based primarily on the fear of relinquishing control. Conversely, it was suggested that it is this same ability to relinquish control that lies at the core of evangelical faith and thus discernment. With this introduction, attention can now be given to developing a model that seeks to address the central question of this study.

CHAPTER TWO:
BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR A THEOCENTRIC MODEL OF
VISION DISCERNMENT

“‘The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,’ says the LORD.”¹

Overview

This project seeks to explore how congregational vision can be shaped in a way that increases Christian spirituality. In addressing this question, it is presupposed that a theocentric, rather than an anthropocentric, orientation, with regard to the creation of vision, is required. Thus, a model of theocentric vision discernment has been suggested.

This chapter will lay the groundwork for such a proposal by asking three questions of the biblical text. These questions are as follows: What is the vision of God? Who discerns that vision? How is that vision discerned? These will be discussed within the context of the Old Testament, the Synoptic Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles.²

Discerning Vision in the Old Testament

The concept of discernment appears in the Hebrew Scriptures,³ though in primitive form.⁴ In Hebrew, the word for discernment is mostly associated with the verb

¹ Isaiah 65:25.

² Throughout the remainder of this dissertation, Acts of the Apostles will simply be referred to as Acts or the Book of Acts.

³ Though recognizing the variance in their canonical structure, these terms may be used interchangeably.

⁴ By primitive form, I mean its root idea.

בִּינָה (*bîn*), a term (along with its derivatives) used some 247 times.⁵ The verb itself literally means to “understand,” “consider,” or “perceive,” and “refers to knowledge that is superior to the mere gathering of data.”⁶ Moreover, *bîn* implies “a power of judgment and perceptive insight,” thus making the background idea of the verb “to discern.”⁷

Again, since the English translation of the Hebrew word more commonly deals with “understanding,” a clear sense of *discernment* is hard to extricate. This idea becomes more apparent when considering the derivative nouns and the close relation derived from the substantive *bayin*, from which comes the preposition *bên*, meaning “between.”⁸ In fact, it is this combination that best expresses the meaning of discernment contained in Solomon’s infamous prayer in 1 Kings 3:9. There he prays, “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern [*bîn*] between [*bên*], good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?” Although, *bên* is also used with others verbs involving the notion of distinguishing (i.e., judging or knowing),⁹ its use with *bîn* brings the meaning of discernment squarely into focus. Seeing that *bîn* includes the concept of “distinguishment that leads to understanding,”¹⁰ as well as its consistent use with mystical concepts, such as wisdom and foolishness or good and evil,

⁵ Gleason Archer, Laird Harris, and Bruce Waitke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), s.v. “בִּינָה.”

⁶ This term is also distinguished from another Hebrew verb for knowledge or understanding, יָדָע (*yādaʿ*). Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

it can be posited that at its most primitive level, discernment in the Hebrew Scriptures is a distinguishing or understanding between mystical forces.

This basic concept of discernment in the Old Testament is critical to an understanding of what it means to discern vision within the entire Christian canon. Yet this begs the question: What is the Hebrew understanding of vision?

Any concept of vision, as it pertains to “visionary” leadership in its modern sense, is foreign to the Hebrew Scriptures outside of the vision of God, as articulated in His dream of *shalom* שָׁלוֹם.¹¹ Probably the most important theological concept in the Hebrew Scriptures, *shalom* appears over 250 times in 213 different verses. In English, it is commonly translated as “peace,” in the sense of “absence of strife.”¹² The true notion of *shalom*, however, conveys connotations of completeness, wholeness, harmony, and fulfillment.¹³ It is a persistent vision of joy, well-being, harmony, and prosperity that carries with it subtle nuances of love, loyalty, grace, salvation, justice, blessing, and righteousness.¹⁴ The only word in Hebrew vocabulary that is adequate at summarizing these meanings into one comprehensive term is *shalom*.¹⁵

This vision is the grand narrative that encompasses all of Scripture, beginning in the creation story. In Genesis 1:1-2, God creates “the heavens and the earth,” the latter being a “formless void” and “shrouded in darkness.” Though difficult to grasp, these two

¹¹ Please note that throughout this study the “vision of God” will be synonymous with the “vision of *shalom*,” and the “reign or kingdom of God.” (this latter term will be discussed below).

¹² Gleason Archer, Laird Harris, and Bruce Waitke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), s.v. “שָׁלוֹם.”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Living toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom* (New York: United Church Press, 1982), 16.

¹⁵ Ibid.

phrases paint a picture of confusion, disorder, disharmony, and chaos at the outset of the creation narrative. Over the next three days, days one through three, God brings form.¹⁶ In the days that follow, days four through six, He fills the emptiness.¹⁷ In His “filling,” with animals, sea creatures, and eventually human beings, no hostility or discord is evident. All of creation is envisioned as a harmonious whole, enjoying an interdependent relationship founded on humility and selfless love. This vision is perhaps best embodied in the seventh day, which culminates the narrative in Genesis 2:1-4, when all “lie down with none to make you afraid. (Job 11:19).”¹⁸ In this way, God is depicted not only as Creator but also as the harmonizing Agent of the universe, who brings the earth under His rule of shalom. “Creation in Genesis,” says Walter Brueggemann, “is the establishment of shalom in a universe that apart from God’s rule is disordered, unproductive, and unfulfilling.”¹⁹

Made in the image of God, human beings are therefore sent to “fill,” “subdue,” and “rule” the earth in the same way that God has created it.²⁰ In so doing, Adam and Eve are exercising dominion on behalf of God. They are ensuring that the will of God—His shalom—is done on earth as it is in heaven. All of this leads Brueggemann to conclude that “the central vision of world history in the Bible is that all of creation is one, every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy

¹⁶ Archer, Harris, and Waitke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, s.v. “תהה.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Living toward a Vision*, 18.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Genesis 1:28.

and well-being of every other creature...Israel has a vision of all people drawn into community around the will of God (Is 2:2-4).”²¹

The competing narrative to this God-centered vision is embodied in the self-centeredness of sin. Eating from the forbidden tree, Adam and Eve exchange their humility and selfless love for pride and selfishness. This attempt to “be like God”²² is an idolatrous action because it places self above God as central to existence. This re-orientation is the root of sin and is responsible for what Plantinga calls “the vandalism of shalom.”²³ In essence, the narrative that is always in competition with God’s is the one that pits human progress, ingenuity, and independence against reliance on God. This narrative breaks the harmony intended by God and is the antithesis of shalom.

This is why the theme of shalom is the *telos* that guides Israel as a people. It is at the very foundation of God’s covenant with the nation.²⁴ It is at the heart of the messianic vision where “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat...for the whole earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”²⁵ The prophets foresee it as the eschatological future of Israel, a reestablishment of Edenic shalom.²⁶ Once more, this vision is so pivotal that even during the Babylonian exile they are told to “seek the shalom of the city.”²⁷

²¹ Brueggemann, *Living toward a Vision*, 15.

²² Genesis 3:4.

²³ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 14.

²⁴ Leviticus 26:4-6; Ezekiel 34:25-29.

²⁵ Isaiah 11:6-9.

²⁶ Isaiah 65:17; 66:12.

²⁷ Jeremiah 29:7.

This is the “reality” that Israel was called to discern within the context of the competing narratives of the surrounding nations. In an era dominated by polytheism, each of the neighboring countries was committed to their separate religions with their own gods, histories, creations myths, *telos*, etc. These characteristics formed the unique lens by which the people of these nations perceived the world and the values they espoused. They communicated a specific narrative about how the world worked, what constituted reality, and who was creator. If these narratives were allowed entrance into the Israelite imagination, they would no doubt shape the people in ways that were self-centered and contrary to the will of God. This is why, for example, God prohibited intermarriage with the other nations.²⁸ He knew that being immersed in the narrative of others would lead to idolatry.²⁹ Thus, they were frequently called to remember their story and the direction it was headed as a way to deepen their faith, trust, and dependence on God. Their identity was reinforced by focusing on shalom. But how was this discernment done? Who were the leaders that aided the community in this endeavor?

The discernment of the vision of shalom in the Old Testament first begins with the recognition that God is King over all.³⁰ The Genesis narrative sets out to make this clear by illustrating that the God of Israel is sovereign over creation, including the created things that the surrounding nations called gods.³¹ The question remains, however, that if

²⁸ Deuteronomy 7:3; Malachi 2:1-13.

²⁹ 1 Kings 11:3.

³⁰ In fact, hearing that Adam and Eve are “made in the image of God,” ancient Israelites would have understood that they, like the physical image that a foreign king would establish in new territory to demonstrate his rule, were vice regents of God sent into the world on behalf of their King.

³¹ Barry D. Jones, *Dwell: Life with God for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 40.

God, who is invisible unlike other kings or god-kings, is King, how do the people come to understand the will or vision of their King?

Though the elders,³² judges,³³ priests,³⁴ and even kings³⁵ had some responsibility with regard to the discernment of God's will, this central task fell most notably to the prophets. Prophets were called to speak the will of God in the midst of a plethora of scenarios ranging from national and political tragedies to foreign military invasions.³⁶ As they entered each situation, the prophet sought to fulfill his or her role as seer of Israel, seeing the situation from the divine perspective.³⁷ In this way, the prophet was able to bring spiritual meaning to the situation. They "saw the big picture, Israel's vision of shalom, in which God would reign and neighbors would be at peace."³⁸ According to Fackre, "they are foreseers...who perceive the vision of this intended future of God with the inner eye, and declare its meaning to the chosen people in both word and deed. They portray in the most vivid colors and sharpest outline the goal of God—a world in which nature, humanity, and God dwell in peace and freedom."³⁹

Although the people knew that it was the prophets who could discern the will of God, the fact still remained that there were both true prophets, those who spoke within

³² Deuteronomy 1:15-17.

³³ Deuteronomy 1:16:18.

³⁴ Exodus 26:21.

³⁵ 2 Chronicles 19:5-11.

³⁶ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together*, 22.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mi: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1978), 84.

the narrative of God for Israel, and false prophets, those who spoke within the values and guiding narratives of the surrounding nations. Hence, the need to discern the “spirits” was necessary. Thus, while the prophets discerned the will of God, the people were to discern between the true and false prophets.⁴⁰ Robison notes,

The scope of discernment in the Old Testament was rather narrow growing out of a developing understanding of God as being involved in the ongoing history of creation. This involvement, being mysterious and obscure, needed to be discerned as it was made manifest through human agents who, being human, could, and would, allow their humanness to interfere and confuse, sometimes even oppose and contradict. Thus discernment in the Old Testament focused primarily on making judgments about God’s will as revealed through the prophet and making a decision regarding which prophet was false and thus could be ignored.⁴¹

Robison’s statement is key because it summarizes the role that discernment played in the Old Testament. Namely, discernment helped to distinguish between the true and false prophets. It assisted the people in identifying the direction that God was leading, based on the story and dream of God. Thus, when listening to the prophets the people were able to differentiate between the competing narratives.

In the pursuit to discover a model of theocentric vision discernment that seeks to answer the question of how congregational vision can be shaped in a way that is spiritually formative, the Old Testament has provided a strong foundation. Beginning with God, it illustrated that leadership need not be concerned with supplying a “unique” vision, as one—shalom—has already been provided as the guiding vision for the people of God. In similar fashion to the prophets, leadership can vision-cast from this perspective, with the goal of establishing shalom as the God-centered narrative that

⁴⁰ Martin McNamara, “True and False Prophets,” in *Discernment of the Spirit and of Spirits*, ed. Casiano Floristán Samanes and Christian Duquoc (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 10.

⁴¹ Stephen Daryl Robison, *God at Our Planning Table: Spiritual Discernment as a Viable Alternative for Church Planning and Programming*, DMin diss., George Fox University, 1989, 18.

shapes the identity. Focusing on this narrative, the people can better correct their internal motivations and distinguish between the competing spirits seeking their allegiance in vision development.⁴² The New Testament, beginning with the Synoptic Gospels, builds upon this central theme. This will be the topic of the next section.

Jesus & the Discernment of Vision

What is the vision of God, as demonstrated by Jesus, in the Gospel writings? Is there any continuity between the Old and New Testaments to support the claim that shalom is God's intended vision for His people to discern? Finally, how does Jesus discern this vision? In answering these questions, attention must be given to the *reign* or *kingdom of God* motif found throughout the Synoptic Gospels. According to Ladd, "the kingdom of God is the dynamic rule of God active in Jesus; it is also a present realm of blessings into which those enter who receive Jesus word."⁴³ This is the focus of the ministry of Jesus.

In fact, the earliest of the three Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of Mark,⁴⁴ can be structured around this entire theme.⁴⁵ The Gospel begins with the announcement, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."⁴⁶ In presenting this as the first sermon of Jesus, the Gospel of Mark highlights the

⁴² Think back to the Western "narrative of progress," as discussed in Chapter One. The practice of discernment creates space to for one to differentiate between that narrative and the one being written by God as He is being sought.

⁴³ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 70.

⁴⁴ For more on the Markan Priority, see D. A. Carson, R. T. France, and G. J. Wenham, eds., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 946.

⁴⁵ For an outline based on the kingdom of God in the Gospel of Mark please see Ibid.

⁴⁶ Mark 1:15.

importance that this theological idea plays throughout its narrative. For Mark, the kingdom of God is the in-breaking of a new reality that envisions Jesus as King (Mark 13:26). This is illustrated through the power and benefits of the present rule of God through the healings of Jesus (Mark 1:23, 30; 2:3; 3:1; 8:22; 9:20; 15:22, etc.).⁴⁷ These miraculous healings serve to demonstrate the beginnings of an era where the kingdom of God is victorious over Satan and the kingdoms of this world. It illustrates what reality looks like from God's perspective.

Consequently, the gospel of Jesus—the gospel of the kingdom—is nothing short of a continuation of the vision of shalom. In His preaching of the kingdom, Jesus links His ministry with the central message of the Old Testament (Psalms 145:11-13; 103:19). Moreover, it was in late Judaism that the kingdom of God came to be more closely associated with the rule or sovereignty of God.⁴⁸ Consequently, Ladd says,

Everything in the Gospels points to the idea that life in the Kingdom of God in the Age to Come will be life on the earth—but life transformed by the kindly rule of God when his people enter into the full measure of the divine blessings. Therefore, when Jesus proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God, he did so against the background of Hebrew-Jewish thought, which viewed people living in a situation dominated by sin, evil, and death, from which they needed to be rescued. His proclamation of the Kingdom includes the hope, reaching back to the Old Testament prophets, that anticipates a new age in which all the evils of the present age will be purged by the act of God from human and earthly existence (Matt 19:28).⁴⁹

The kingdom of God, therefore, is synonymous with shalom. Barry Jones echoes this sentiment when he writes that “the gospel Jesus came to proclaim and embody was

⁴⁷ This should not be taken to mean that the Gospel of Mark lacks adequate content with regard to the teachings of Jesus. For more on this Gospel's unique presentation of the teachings of Jesus, see Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 236.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 45-46.

the gospel of shalom, the gospel of salvation, the gospel of the reign of God. And Jesus claimed that in his ministry the reign of God was breaking into the world. His miracles were demonstrations of the in-breaking of the reign of God.”⁵⁰ In this way, the New Testament and, even more specifically, the Synoptic Gospels, illustrate mutuality between these twin themes.⁵¹

Did Jesus, like the Old Testament prophets before Him, discern this vision of shalom? The simple answer is yes. To be clear, this statement is not meant to address issues surrounding Jesus’ foreknowledge of His ministry or the lack thereof. Such questions are beyond the scope of this study. All that is meant here is that the scriptural evidence seems to support the position that Jesus, despite His divinity, discerned the will of the Father.⁵² Jesus implies as much when he says, “I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.”⁵³ He goes on to say, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all that He Himself is doing.”⁵⁴ This discernment is perhaps best illustrated in the narratives surrounding Jesus’ wilderness temptations.

⁵⁰ Jones, *Dwell*, 90.

⁵¹ Brueggemann, *Living toward a Vision*, 24.

⁵² Matthew 26:36-46; Luke 6:12-17.

⁵³ John 14:31. Thomas suggests that while these verses reveal that Jesus indeed knows the Father’s will, they do not, however, suggest how Jesus came to discern it. She correctly states that “obedience implies first knowing what must be done.” Vonna Thomas, *Relational Discernment: Moving towards a Holistic Approach*, DMin diss., George Fox University, 2013, 42-43.

⁵⁴ John 5:19-20. Thomas again is helpful, “Jesus’ dependence upon his Father indicates a truth that the Gospel According to John is revealing. Jesus acted and spoke in the ways in which he believed the Father was leading. Determining how the Father is leading is the work of discernment.” Ibid., 44.

While the Gospel of Mark only summarizes this narrative, the Gospel of Matthew devotes a full fifteen verses to the subject, beginning with the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:13. It is here in these verses that Jesus receives the Father's proclamation concerning His identity as God's beloved Son. The proclamation, however, is also an affirmation of Jesus' identity as the Messiah—the long-awaited prophet within whom God's Spirit dwells, and the promised King who will both embody and inaugurate the era of shalom.⁵⁵ But if Jesus' baptism reveals His identity as King, the question then becomes, how will Jesus rule as King? In other words, what is the vision of the King?

While the remainder of the Gospel of Matthew is dedicated to answering this question via the teachings of the kingdom, Jesus is seen as discerning this vision in the wilderness temptations of Matthew 4.⁵⁶ In this narrative, Jesus is presented with three “tests” or “temptations” that are designed to examine aspects of His baptismal identity.⁵⁷ These “tests” will present Him with an alternative vision, which appears, at first, to be synonymous with the vision of the kingdom.

The first temptation—to turn stones into bread⁵⁸—is the temptation for Jesus to misuse His power.⁵⁹ More specifically, it is the temptation for Him to use His God-given power in a way that is good but ultimately self-serving.⁶⁰ Likewise, in the second

⁵⁵ *New Bible Commentary*, 910.

⁵⁶ For more information on how discernment is a major motif in the Gospel of Matthew, please see Frances Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation in the Gospel of Matthew* (Oxford: P. Lang, 2007), 45-85.

⁵⁷ *New Bible Commentary*, 910.

⁵⁸ Matthew 4:3.

⁵⁹ Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation in the Gospel of Matthew*, 57.

⁶⁰ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus Is the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 30.

temptation—to jump off the roof of the temple⁶¹—Jesus is tempted to distrust His Father⁶² for the purpose of gaining popularity.⁶³ The final temptation—to rule the world⁶⁴—presents Jesus with a tantalizing proposal. In worshiping Satan, Jesus would be taking a pain-free shortcut to realizing the *vision* of His Father, which installs Him as King over all.⁶⁵ It is true that He would be ushering in a new kingdom, but only at the cost of false worship.⁶⁶ This last temptation encapsulates the principal problem found in the previous two. Namely, that each temptation desires to undermine the baptismal identity of Jesus. Such an alternative cannot correlate with the *vision* of His Father, because the temptations, by their very nature, ask Jesus to perform tasks that are removed from said identity.

Jesus, therefore, is left to discern between “the competing narratives” that are at play. On the one hand, Satan offers Him a vision that appears legitimate but is profoundly undergirded by the narrative of self-centeredness. On the other is the vision of the kingdom, pronounced upon Him through His baptismal identity. This narrative, in contrast, is selfless, God-oriented, and concerned about others. These are the “competing narratives” Jesus must differentiate between in His discernment. He must discern—a differentiation that leads to understanding—between two distinct visions, which at first

⁶¹ Matthew 4:5-7.

⁶² Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation in the Gospel of Matthew*, 57.

⁶³ Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 30.

⁶⁴ Matthew 4:8-9.

⁶⁵ Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 30.

⁶⁶ Shaw, *Discernment of Revelation in the Gospel of Matthew*, 57.

appear to be analogous, but are in fact dissimilar by nature. But how exactly does He do that?

The text does not give an answer, leaving only inferences. The first inference is the importance of several spiritual disciplines, namely silence, solitude, fasting, and “dwelling” with Scripture, both within this event and in His life more broadly. A cursory reading of the text quickly reveals the silence and solitude of the wilderness, the obvious mention to fasting, and His reliance on Scripture. The second inference the text offers is that Jesus’ baptismal identity was foundational for His discernment. In other words, Jesus’ ability to discern flowed out of His identity as the Beloved.⁶⁷ The text raises the question of how Jesus will use His power. Summarizing this point in his book, *The Jesus Way*, Eugene Peterson writes,

In the three great refusals, Jesus refuses to do good things in the wrong way... The devil’s temptation strategy is to depersonalize the ways of Jesus but leave the way itself intact. His strategy is the same with us. But a way that is depersonalized, carried out without love or intimacy or participation, is not, no matter how well we do it, no matter how much good is accomplished, the Jesus way. We cannot do the Lord’s work in the devil’s ways.⁶⁸

It is only after this discernment of spirits that Jesus is able to proclaim His vision in Matthew 4:17, where he says that “the kingdom of God is at hand.” This discernment also precedes Jesus’ vision-casting of His kingdom in the infamous Sermon on the Mount. “The temptations clarified at the very outset the ways in which Jesus would do his work as Messiah,” explains Eugene Peterson.⁶⁹ They allowed Jesus to “see” “through illusions of power, fame, and possessions and choose servanthood, humility and

⁶⁷ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together*, 24.

⁶⁸ Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 36.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

poverty.”⁷⁰ In sum, He was able to discern a path forward that fundamentally led towards, instead of away from, His Father. From the Book of Acts, we can observe how this theme surfaces in the New Testament church.

Discerning Vision in the New Testament Church

What is the vision of God in New Testament church, particularly as witnessed in the Acts of the Apostles? To answer this question, it must be remembered that Acts is the second volume to the Gospel of Luke,⁷¹ a work that presents the gospel of the kingdom as impartial⁷² and radically counter-cultural.⁷³ This theme continues throughout the Book of Acts, as the Holy Spirit continues to teach the disciples about the implications regarding the in-breaking reign of God.⁷⁴

In fact, Jesus speaks about the coming of the Holy Spirit within the context of a question that He was asked concerning the kingdom.⁷⁵ In saying that they “will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,”⁷⁶ Jesus is implying that the promised new or kingdom age is about to enter another phase.⁷⁷ In the giving of the Holy Spirit at

⁷⁰ Morris and Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together*, 24.

⁷¹ Luke-Acts are considered to be a two-part volume and thus must be considered in tandem.

⁷² Luke 4:18-19.

⁷³ The gospel that Jesus preached in Luke's account was a “practical” gospel, in that it presented the implications of the *kingdom of God* that was breaking into the world. Luke reinforces this sentiment through the liberation “manifesto” given by Jesus in Luke 4:16-21, the basis of which is taken from Isaiah 61:1-2. Here, Luke is able to illustrate how the “good news to the poor” becomes tangible and is a reversal of values based on Shalom as described in Isaiah.

⁷⁴ This reference is from Acts 1:3. However, the teaching of the kingdom of God will be a centerpiece of the apostles' preaching throughout Acts (8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:24; 28:23).

⁷⁵ Acts 1:6.

⁷⁶ Acts 1:8.

⁷⁷ Isaiah 32:15-17; 32:1.

Pentecost, Luke is demonstrating continuity with his Gospel and the theme of shalom in the Old Testament.⁷⁸ To realize this vision, God calls the church into being, as He did Israel, to bear witness to the in-breaking of His kingdom throughout the world.⁷⁹ Once more, it is an in-breaking symbolically centered in the Resurrection of Jesus. Thus Ladd concludes that “the ‘good news to the poor’ that Jesus brought works itself out in the formation of a new community, an alternative order, in which the conventional values of human society are set aside and internal divisive barriers are thus destroyed.”⁸⁰

All of this is the work of the Holy Spirit in the Acts. It is the Holy Spirit that is perceived as moving through the community and through the apostles who do the work of God. Paradoxically, however, the church is frequently playing catchup, as the Holy Spirit is observed as being ahead of the church. Therefore, like Jesus and the Old Testament prophets before him, the New Testament church is left to discern the implications and the realization of the vision. Exactly who, however, is responsible for such discernment?

Although the individual leadership of Peter is important, as will be observed below, Acts seems to portray the entire church—the corporate body in community—as discerners of the vision. While there are various examples of vision discernment in Acts,⁸¹ the most notable example is the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Confronted with questions regarding the activity of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles, the church is forced to deal with some tough questions. What kind of people should comprise the church? Where is the Spirit of God working? Furthermore, “is that work going to be

⁷⁸ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 238.

⁷⁹ Acts 1:8.

⁸⁰ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 243.

⁸¹ One such example is the choosing of Matthias in Acts 1:12-26.

acknowledged as it manifests itself, or only as it conforms to the church's own presuppositions?"⁸² These are the underlying questions being raised at the Council. They address the nature, identity, and future direction of the community. To be sure, they are fundamentally "vision" questions, as the church's identity is at stake.⁸³

However difficult the challenge, the biblical evidence suggests that it was the community that discerned a way forward together. First, the Church of Antioch sent representatives—including Paul and Barnabas—to Jerusalem to take up certain issues surrounding Gentile inclusion with the apostles and elders there.⁸⁴ These delegates were then welcomed by the apostles, the elders, and the whole congregation.⁸⁵ And although the ensuing discussion includes only the apostles and elders, the larger congregation remains present throughout.⁸⁶ As the discussion, which is a part of their discernment process, reaches its close, it is the apostles, elders, and the entire congregation who together select the men who will go to Antioch to communicate the Council's directive.⁸⁷ Even within the directive itself, the only rationale given by the Council is that "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."⁸⁸ More than mere rhetoric, however, this statement is evidence of the church's own self-perception. It reveals that the church

⁸² Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision-making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 100.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁸⁴ Acts 15:1-2.

⁸⁵ Acts 15:4.

⁸⁶ Acts 15:12,22.

⁸⁷ Acts 15:22.

⁸⁸ Acts 15:28.

believed its actions were a direct result of discerning the will of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁹

Moreover, because Luke portrays Acts 15 as the turning point within his text that portrays the gospel spreading from Jerusalem to Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth,⁹⁰ it can also be said that the will of God, in this case, is tantamount to the vision of shalom. This, again, appears to be the concern of the entire community.

The final issue of how a group or person, in this case the New Testament church, discerned the vision of God is always difficult to reconstruct due to very nature of discernment. Similar to Jesus discernment in the Synoptic Gospels, however, it would appear that spiritual disciplines such as prayer, silence, and “dwelling” in the Scriptures were key. In both cases, the entire community is portrayed as displaying a posture of prayer throughout their deliberations.⁹¹ At the Jerusalem Council, Luke seems to go out of his way to mention that the assembly practiced silence as they entered discernment together.⁹² Again, in both instances, Luke demonstrates the community as “dwelling” in Scripture, in the sense that the church is publicly reading the Scriptures for the purpose of gaining its orientation within the larger Scriptural narrative. More than mere proof texting, the reading of Scripture enabled the community to become grounded in the reality of God.

Also highlighted in the text is the role that listening plays in discernment. What is meant here, more specifically, is a type of listening that seeks to discern the presence of the Holy Spirit in the narratives of others. Though this emphasis is present in the

⁸⁹ Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment*, 106.

⁹⁰ Acts 1:8.

⁹¹ Acts 1:14, 24.

⁹² Acts 15:12.

selection of Matthias,⁹³ it perhaps takes more prominence within the events surrounding the Jerusalem Council. Luke stresses its importance at the beginning of the controversy all the way back in Acts 10. In that chapter, Peter receives a vision from God, which ultimately concerns the presence of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles. Its clear meaning, however, does not come until he listens to Cornelius' story, whereby both clarifying and verifying the working of God. In the next chapter, Peter shares this narrative to the Church at Jerusalem and they listen for the presence of the Holy Spirit within his narrative. This occurs again in Acts 15, in a scene that is dominated by the narratives of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. It is only after their narratives are shared that James can stand in affirmation of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Speaking about this type of listening, Luke Timothy Johnson says that "the church, in short, is able to discern what God is doing because it is silent and listens to the story of what God is doing in others. Without these narratives, the church cannot discern, and therefore cannot decide in a theologically responsible way."⁹⁴ In this sense, it can be said that in discernment, "the story of individuals becomes the narrative of the church."⁹⁵

Finally, the text highlights the role that Peter's "guiding" leadership played in the discernment of vision. One cannot read the Book of Acts without noticing Peter's influence at key points throughout the young church's story. And while it is true that he alone receives a direct vision from God,⁹⁶ he does not force that vision upon the Church

⁹³ This is apparent in the Acts 1 narrative, as the community attentively listens to Peter's narrative, emphasizing his change of heart and a reinterpretation of Psalms 69:25 and 109:8.

⁹⁴ Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment*, 107.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Acts 10:9-16.

of Jerusalem. Instead, he simply retells the story, always utilizing open-ended questions that are meant to spur more discussion.⁹⁷ In essence, Peter places the burden of the discernment of vision in the hands of the community. Additionally, his leadership does not cast a vision of the future, but one of the present. Peter, it appears, is content to leave the future in the hands of God while he orients his community towards the working of the Holy Spirit in the present. In this way, the leadership of Peter can be described as a type of “guiding” leadership. He is helping to cultivate a posture of discernment that follows the working of the Holy Spirit within the community.

Summary

In search of a model of theocentric vision discernment, this chapter has presented the answers to three basic inquiries made of the Scriptures: What is the vision of God? Who discerns that vision? How is that vision discerned? Since this model is one of discernment, this chapter began by examining the concept of discernment in the Old Testament. This brief survey revealed that at its most primitive level, it is a distinguishing or understanding between mystical forces.

Once determined, both the Old and New Testaments were probed to find answers to the primary questions. Although the people are tasked with discerning the “spirit” of the prophets, it is the Old Testament prophets themselves who are largely responsible for discerning reality from a God-centered perspective. This meant that they would discern the vision of shalom—a comprehensive vision of wellness, wholeness, and global harmony throughout all creation. The Synoptic Gospel writers build on this theme not only by introducing the “good news” of the kingdom as shalom, but also by envisioning

⁹⁷ Acts 11:1-18; 15:7-11.

Jesus as its discerner. Consequently, the church, as an alternative community, is called into being for the purpose of bearing witness to its in-breaking through the Resurrection. With the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, this vision is discerned in practical ways by the whole community with the help of “guiding” leadership. Furthermore, both Testaments explicitly suggest the importance of the classical spiritual disciplines, a grounding in one’s baptismal identity, and listening to the narratives of others when discerning vision.

In essence, this chapter has illustrated the importance of shalom as the God-centered narrative that informs the direction of the people of God throughout the Scriptures. Evaluating each potential direction by this narrative, believers were able to distinguish between paths that either led away from God (self-centered) or towards God (God-centered). Focusing on this narrative is therefore key for a discernment that seeks to maintain Christian identity.

In the next chapter, attention will be given to the theological foundations that support theocentric vision discernment. As will be discovered, these concepts will also inform a congregational ecclesiology and process of discernment.

CHAPTER THREE:
THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR A THEOCENTRIC MODEL
OF VISION DISCERNMENT

“The Church is...a ‘mode of existence,’ a way of being.
The mystery of the Church...is deeply bound in the being of [humanity],
to the being of the world, and to the very being of God,”
— Zizioulas¹

Overview

The previous chapter underscored the importance of the vision of God—shalom—as the guiding narrative that both shaped and called God’s people to utilize discernment-driven activities. Moving beyond the biblical evidence, this chapter will ask two primary questions: How does theology inform the topic of discerning the vision of shalom? And what are the implications for the local congregation in this discovery?

In response to these questions, the argument will be made that the theological basis for the vision of shalom rests in understanding the nature of God as triune. This is the link that Gabriel Fackre makes in his book *The Christian Story* when he writes, “the origin and purpose of revelation are in the Godhead. Whatever is disclosed to us has its source in the eternal Vision of God. This Vision is the intention and goal of God, Shalom.”²

In an attempt to bring clarity to the central argument, this chapter will begin by briefly considering the development of Trinitarian theology. This first section will help

¹ Jean Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 15.

² Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1978), 41.

identify the key concepts and boundaries of Trinitarian orthodoxy. It will also be important in establishing the historical Christian concept of God as Trinity. Next, the *social doctrine*³ of the Trinity will be explored as a way of defining the nature of the Triune God. This will be followed by a section examining how Trinitarian theology informs the ecclesiology of the church. Finally, the chapter will conclude by surveying two Trinitarian ecclesiological values that are vital to vision discernment.

The Development of Trinitarian Theology

A common approach in American Christianity is to dismiss a Trinitarian understanding of God, bemoaning that it has no practical applications for the Christian life today.⁴ While this might appear to be true on the surface, the doctrine of the Trinity has far-reaching implications for both the corporate and individual practice of Christian faith. Unlike some Christians, who characterize God within an abstract monotheistic framework,⁵ the Christian notion of the Triune God stresses the harmonious interaction between Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit as the very nature of God.⁶ This dynamic communion is the genesis of His intention for creation.

³ The word “doctrine” is being used here in the sense of perspectives, views, or certain emphases within Trinitarian theology. Whenever this term appears like this (behind an adjective describing the Trinity), it is being used in this manner.

⁴ See Richard J. Plantinga, Thomas R. Thompson, and Matthew D. Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 109.

⁵ This is the term Plantinga gives to nominal Christians who neither speak nor conceive of God as being triune in nature. The term itself finds its basis in natural theology. Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

The second century theologian Tertullian (c.160-c.220) is the person who is most responsible for the development of Trinitarian terminology.⁷ It was Tertullian who invented the word *trinitas*, from which we get the word Trinity.⁸ He also introduces the controversial term *persona* (from the Greek *hypostasis*), from which we get the term person, “to denote the threeness or differentiating terms for Father, Son, and Spirit, by which he means a distinct individual existence.”⁹ Lastly, he used the term *substantia*, or “substance,” to express what the Father and Son (and later developments would include the Holy Spirit) possessed in common—by their nature.¹⁰ This was to replace the dominant concept of the divine unity, embedded in the single monarchy of the Father.¹¹

It should also be noted that Trinitarian theology also helped correct several heretical notions about God, namely that of modalism and tritheism. Modalism attempted to safeguard the unity of the Godhead by insisting that the self-revelation of one God took place “in different times and in different ways and thus [God] has three manners (modes) of appearance rather than being one God.”¹² The problem with this view is that it does not properly differentiate the three “persons” of the Godhead, allowing each to “fold into one another,” as it were. The objection to tritheism, the belief in “three separate and

⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 321.

⁸ The word “Trinity” is not found in either the Old or New Testaments. As will be briefly discussed below, however, the early church fathers strongly believed that the Scriptures bore witness to the notion of a Triune God.

⁹ Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 119.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹¹ “History will show this development to be significant, in that western tradition would gravitated to the ‘substance’ language as the principal concept of divine oneness, while the eastern tradition would continue to incline to the Father.” This will be discussed in brief below. *Ibid.*

¹² Donald McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), s.v. “Modalism.”

individual gods,”¹³ is that it is polytheism in disguise. The doctrine of the Trinity comes to creedal formulation by the Councils of Nicaea (c.325) and Constantinople (c.381) as expressed in the Nicene Creed.¹⁴

Despite the unifying effect of the creed, however, there is still a variety of interrelated perspectives within orthodox Trinitarian theology that are important to note, including the economic, immanent, and social doctrines of the Trinity. The first—the economic Trinity—was initially used by the early Church Father Irenaeus to identify how the entire process of salvation bore witness to the actions of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹⁵ According to this perspective, the triune nature of God is only revealed to humanity through the salvific or “administrative” work of God in history.¹⁶ In contrast, the immanent Trinity sought to articulate God as eternally triune in nature, “even apart from creation.”¹⁷ This was the perspective of the great Eastern theologian Origen, who taught that both the Son and the Spirit are eternally begotten from the Father.¹⁸ This implies that God is triune “by nature, not by will or decision.”¹⁹

Though emphasizing different aspects of Trinitarian thought, it should be clear that these two views are not antithetical. As Moltmann explains, “statements about the

¹³ Ibid. 327.

¹⁴ More formally, the Nicene Creed is actually the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

¹⁵ He used the term “economy” (*oikonomia* in Greek), meaning “the law [*nomos*] of the household [*oikos*] to theologically describe the way God administers creation and salvation through the Son and the Spirit.” See Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 119.

¹⁶ This is also the claim of LaCugna when she says that “we must root speculation of the triune God in the economy of salvation (*oikonomia*). Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 2.

¹⁷ Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 119.

¹⁸ Ibid., 121.

¹⁹ Ibid.

immanent Trinity must not contradict statements about the economic Trinity. Statements about the economic Trinity must correspond to doxological statements about the immanent Trinity.”²⁰ Simply put, the God that is disclosed in salvation history as three Persons has always existed in the same manner. The historical Christian notion of God, therefore, is that He is intrinsically triune.

The social, or communal, Trinity²¹ will help identify how the Godhead functions. Since this is foundational for theocentric vision discernment, the entirety of the following section will be devoted to that discussion.

The Social Trinity

The social doctrine of the Trinity brings focus to the relationship, partnership, and communion found in the Godhead.²² This perspective finds its roots within the Trinitarian framework of the Cappadocian Fathers, who sought to maintain three distinct *hypostases* (Greek) or *personae* (Latin) within one *ousia* (essence).²³ While they certainly differed, to some extent, in their understanding of the divine nature,²⁴ they were all committed to the idea that “three *hypostases* manifest the unknowable *ousia* of God...through the

²⁰ Jürgen Moltmann and Margaret Kohl, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 154.

²¹ The latter—communal Trinity—was popularized by Eastern Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*.

²² For further reading on the social Trinity, please see Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*; Patricia Fox, *God as Communion: John Zizioulas, Elizabeth Johnson, and the Retrieval of the Symbol of the Triune God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), and Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*.

²³ It is true that the Latin West has prioritized the divine *ousia* over the *hypostases* or persons.

²⁴ The Cappadocian Fathers had two conjoining views as to the nature of God. First, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus expressed that “there are three *hypostases* that may each be called God; yet there is only one God...the deity of the Son and the Spirit, eternal and full as it may be, is received from the Father.” However, Gregory of Nyssa differed slightly by suggesting that it is the divine essence that itself unifies the Godhead. Rather than the Son and the Spirit’s deity being derived from the Father, each member of the Godhead equally and eternally shares in this divine nature.

economy of salvation.”²⁵ Clarifying their position, Basil (the Great) of Caesarea comments,

The distinction between ousia and hypostasis is the same as that between the general and particular; as for instance, between the animal [i.e., genus] and the particular man. Wherefore, in the case of the Godhead, we confess one essence or substance so as not to give a variant definition of existence, but we confess a particular hypostasis in order that our conception of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may be without confusion and clear.²⁶

The Cappadocian Fathers also contributed to the understanding of the communal nature or the unity of the Triune God amid the distinctions of the divine persons.²⁷ This description would later come to be known by the term *perichoresis*.²⁸ A Greek term, *perichoresis* can mean “penetration,” therefore indicating “the union, mutual indwelling, or mutual interpenetration of the three members of the Trinity with one another.”²⁹ One theological dictionary refers to it as “being-in-one-another, permeation without confusion.”³⁰ Many metaphors and analogies have been suggested to portray the communal mystery, mutuality, and interdependence that the term attempts to convey.³¹ Perhaps none have been more adequate, however, than the metaphor of “the divine dance,” as it fully expresses the personal, the interpersonal, the essence, and the unity of

²⁵ While this is a foundational Trinitarian understanding in the Greek East, LaCugna goes on to state that both the “Greek and Latin theology affirm communion as the nature of ultimate reality.” LaCugna, *God for Us*, 68.

²⁶ Basil of Caesarea, “Letter 236,” eds. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace, in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, trans. Blomfield Jackson, vol. 8, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 278.

²⁷ Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker, *God’s Life in Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 15.

²⁸ The term was first used in the Christological controversies to describe the divine and human natures of Jesus.

²⁹ McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, s.v. “Perichoresis.”

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 271.

³¹ Some include light of lamps, perfume sprayed into the air, and also the three dimensions of every single object: length, width, and depth or height. Please see LaCugna, *God for Us*, 271.

God.³² LaCugna comments that this image of choreography is most appropriate as it suggests

The partnership of movement, symmetrical but not redundant, as each dancer expresses and at the same time fulfills him/herself towards the other. In interaction and inter-course, the dancers (and the observers) experience one fluid motion of encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching. There are neither leaders nor followers in the divine dance, only an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, giving again and receiving again.³³

This powerful picture of choreographic dancing is a beautiful representation of the relationship, participation, and purposeful communion shared by the Triune God. This illustration, as well as the social Trinity more broadly, aptly illustrates God's nature as social or communal.

The social Trinity then allows for both the differentiation of persons as well as a communal unity based in love.³⁴ As Volf and Welker note, "God is neither a simple substance nor an indivisible self... [He is] a community of persons united in giving themselves each to the other and to the world. The Triune God is the inexhaustible life that the three persons share in common, in which they are present and with one another, for one another, and in one another. Everything is shared except their personal attributes and peculiar commissions."³⁵

³² Ibid., 272.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ The development of the social doctrine of the Trinity is mostly credited to be the Trinitarian theology of Jürgen Moltmann. Through his influence, the West has seen a considerable resurgence of Trinitarian thought in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Volf and Welker, *God's Life in Trinity*, 15.

³⁵ Ibid.

At this point it is important to note some criticism that has been levied toward social Trinitarianism, namely that it is the rebirth of tritheism.³⁶ More specifically, that it abandons the Jewish heritage of monotheism that Christianity affirms, thus being guilty of Arianism.³⁷ For Plantinga, however, this orientation to Trinitarian thought upholds monotheism, in that the Father, Son, and Spirit are all on the divine side of the Creator/creature divide. “It is the Father who creates through the mediation of the Son in the power and energies of the Spirit...a trinitarian act.” These three share in the same *homoousios* (essence) in a secondary sense,³⁸ in that “they are of the same sort, same class, same kind—persons who are all divine, who share a generic essence, each one manifesting the requisite divine attributes (eternal, almighty, etc.).³⁹

Moltmann also pushes back against such claims, suggesting that it is the *perichoresis* of the divine Persons itself that actually preserves Christian monotheism:

By virtue of their eternal love they live in one another to such an extent, and dwell in one another to such an extent, that they are one...The ‘circulation’ of the eternal divine life becomes perfect through the fellowship and unity of the three different Persons in the eternal love. In their perichoresis and because of it, the trinitarian persons are not to be understood as three different individuals, who only subsequently enter into relationship with one another (which is a customary approach, under the name of ‘tritheism’). But they are not, either three modes of

³⁶ See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996). See also Gerald O’Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

³⁷ Arianism can be defined as a fourth-century teaching “that Jesus is the highest created being but does not share the same substance as God the Father (Gr. *heteroousios*, “of a different substance”). It was declared heretical by the Council of Nicaea.” McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, s.v. “Arianism.”

³⁸ The distinction made by Aristotle with regard to the primary and secondary essence of a thing: “a primary essence is the thing itself, the single, particular things something is, a secondary essence is the sort of things something is—that is, its kind or class.” I believe this distinction, along with the complementary point about the triune perichoretic unity, is an adequate perspective that allows for the differentiating of persons within oneness (essence and unity). See Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 138, and Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 177.

³⁹ Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 139.

being or three repetitions of the One God, as the modalistic interpretation suggests. The doctrine of the perichoresis links together in a brilliant way the threeness and the unity without reducing the threeness to the unity, or dissolving the unity in the threeness.⁴⁰

Both of these responses would seem to satisfy the accepted Trinitarian framework laid out in the Athanasian Creed, which confesses that one must neither “confuse the persons”—modalism—nor “divine the essence”—Arianism.⁴¹ To be clear, this does not alleviate the mystery of the Trinity either.⁴² It helps to avoid the pitfalls of the abstract monotheism so common in American Christianity today.

It is this same perichoretic unity of the Trinity that serves as the theological foundation for the vision of God. The shalom that God desires for the world is, in fact, an extension of the harmony that exists within His own nature. This is at the heart of Moltmann’s social theological framework of the Trinity.⁴³ This also gets at the core of Fackre’s correlation between the two themes—the Trinity and Vision, thus leading him to confess that, “God, as three free Persons in perichoretic Unity, wills a world in kind. What God is in the divine nature is what God purposes, plans, intends in a derivative fashion for creation. The ‘vision of God’ so understood is ‘the hope of glory (Co 1:27).’”⁴⁴

From a theological perspective, then, it can be posited that the vision of shalom equates to the triune nature of God. It is the perichoretic or communal unity that exists

⁴⁰ Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 175.

⁴¹ Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 131.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 141-142.

⁴³ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 111-112.

⁴⁴ Fackre, *The Christian Story*, 2nd ed., 48.

within God Himself.⁴⁵ This is God's ultimate dream for the world that will come to its fullest revelation at the consummation of all things, when there is a "communion of all in all, all in God, and God in all."⁴⁶

Where does Jesus fit within the scheme? In many ways, the incarnation of Jesus is the manifestation of the Trinity. Not only does the life of Jesus reveal the presence of the other Persons of the Godhead, but it also testifies to Their very oneness through His words and deeds.⁴⁷ Jesus claims that He can do nothing without the Father (John 5:19). His final prayer of unity for the disciples is based on the communion, mutuality, and interdependence that He enjoys with the Father and the Spirit (John 17:6-26).⁴⁸ Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God as the in-breaking of shalom in the world, extending the invitation to individuals and entire communities into a new way of life. It is only through Jesus, the linchpin of the God's eternal plan for the world, that one can enter into shalom with God, others, and the creation. Jesus, then, through His life, death, and resurrection, not only spoke of and modeled shalom; even more, "He is our shalom" (Ephesians 2:14).⁴⁹ In light of all of this, those who believe in Jesus have been freed from the bondage of sin—the ultimate thing that divides—so that they can be harmoniously

⁴⁵ Interestingly, if the social nature of God is eternal, the same must be said for the vision of God. This is the conclusion Fackre later reaches: "There never was a time when the Word was not, so we may say there never was a time when the Plan, the Purpose, the Vision was not. God: the Purposer (Father) with a Purpose (Son), and the Power (the Holy Spirit) to fulfill it. God: the Envisioner, with a Vision and the Power to pursue it to the end." Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story*, 2nd ed., 47-48.

⁴⁶ This is the final outcome of the economy of the Trinity. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 249.

⁴⁷ Fackre, *The Christian Story*, 2nd ed., 47.

⁴⁸ Notice the distinct usage of "one" in this passage. "John uses the generic Greek word *hen*, which admits of a plurality, not *hies*, which refers to a strict numerical oneness." This syntactical choice, for Plantinga, suggests that the Trinitarian unity serves a model for the church's unity. This idea will be expanded upon below. For more see, Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 140-141.

⁴⁹ Fackre, *The Christian Story*, 2nd ed., 47-48

together with God, each other, and the creation, as God is free to-be-Together.⁵⁰ Through the incarnation of Jesus, the Triune God frees humanity to live into the vision of God—the perichoretic unity that He enjoys in Himself.

This section has considered the social doctrine of the Trinity as the theological foundation for the vision of shalom that congregations are called to discern in the world. The revelation of God in history has revealed an economic Trinity who, from eternity, had a vision based on the expression of His social, communal, and perichoretic nature. This is precisely “the dance” of participation, mutuality, and interdependence that the Triune God, through Jesus, has invited humanity to join. Thus, Grenz can say that “the salvific purposes are directed toward bringing God’s highest creation—humankind—to reflect the eternal divine nature, that is bringing us to be in actuality the image of God. And the image of God consists ultimately in love.”⁵¹ With this Trinitarian foundation firmly in place, the question of how the social doctrine of the Trinity informs the ecclesiology of a local congregation can now be addressed.

Trinitarian Ecclesiology

If God exists within a communal relationship and if it is His dream that the creation experience the same through Him, then it follows that His Church should be understood as a Trinitarian community or ecclesiology. That is to say that the church should innately be a diverse community bounded by love, partnership, and relational union. This image, rather than those imposed on the church via corporate business

⁵⁰ “The Word, Purpose, Plan, Hope, Vision of God—as made manifest in Jesus Christ—is the freedom from the powers of sin, evil, and earth that makes possible peace with God, neighbor, and nature. Jesus Christ is the source of our liberation and reconciliation. Christ is the light that ends the night. So is revealed to the eye of faith in Christ the God who is free...to be Together.” Ibid., 48.

⁵¹ Grenz, *Reinvisioning Evangelical Theology*, 185.

models, must be at the forefront of the self-imagination of congregations. Sadly, this has not been the case as Trinitarian theology has only recently begun to be applied to ecclesiology.⁵² Nevertheless, a Trinitarian imagination of ecclesiology is at the very core of both the calling and essence of the church.

To begin, it is the Triune God who “calls out” a people into fellowship. The first term that underscores this notion is the word “church” itself. The Greek term *ekklesia*, from which the English word “church” is derived, comes from the verb *kaleo*, “to call”⁵³ and the preposition *ek* “out of.”⁵⁴ Consequently, the consensus is that the church constitutes the idea of “the called out ones.” Used more widely in the Roman world, however, *ekklesia*, was also the image of a popular assembly within a Roman city.⁵⁵ It would appear, then, that early Christians borrowed the vocabulary of their surrounding culture to describe their new shared identity. Grenz says as much when he mentions that

The choice of *ekklesia* as the designation of the Christian community that the New Testament believers viewed the church as neither an edifice nor an organization. They were a people—a people brought together by the Holy Spirit—a people bound to each other through Christ—hence, a people standing in covenant with God. Above all, they were God’s people (2 Cor 7:16).⁵⁶

The second term associated with the church that helps underscore a trinitarian ecclesiology is *koinonia*, or “fellowship.” When God “called you into ‘fellowship’ (*koinonia*) with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:9), the Apostle Paul

⁵² Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 56-57.

⁵³ Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey Bromiley, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), s.v. “Ekklesia.”

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Grenz, *Reinvisioning Evangelical Theology*, 467.

writes, “He also called you into ‘fellowship’ (*koinonia*) with the whole family” (1 Corinthians 5:2). More than mere friendship, the term *fellowship* denotes characteristics of “participation” and “impartation.”⁵⁷ It finds its roots in the Greek word *koinos*, meaning *common*, in the sense of common ownership, property, or ideas. It is used throughout the New Testament to indicate the sense of “sharing in something.”⁵⁸ In 1 John, for example, it expresses the idea of the living bond that unites Christians, beginning as fellowship with the Father and the Son.⁵⁹ This idea, in fact, is so counter-cultural that according to Dietterich it challenges the “the old competitive order of independence, self-interest, and private privilege (*idios*).”⁶⁰

It is the church, called into *koinonia*, which indicates a new collaborative order of interdependence, shared responsibility, mutual instruction, and commonality (*koinos*).⁶¹ “By studying, sharing, eating, and praying together, the promised fulfillment of creation is visible, tangible, and experienced, even though not yet perfected.”⁶² In this way, the *koinonia* that the church is called into is a reflection of the social nature of the Triune God, or what Grenz calls “the passing of Trinitarian Communion.”⁶³

⁵⁷ Kittell, Friedrich, and Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “Koinonia.”

⁵⁸ Multiple examples are given, including: the sharing of partnership in work, fellowship with God’s Son, the Lord’s Supper, suffering, and the Spirit, to name a few. *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Inagrace Dietterich, “Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 145-146.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 484.

It is for this precise reason that many evangelical models of vision development are inept at congregational spiritual formation. The church, as imagined by God, is not to be swept away by the competing narratives of progress espoused by corporations or businesses. Rather it is a people who have been called into a unique fellowship that, through its being and doing, embody the image and nature of the Triune God to the world. This is how the church enters the life of the Trinity, through the practice of *koinonia*.

The Church is a creation of the Triune God. This is evident in two ways. First, the Church is created by the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom—the vision of shalom. This gospel is centered in the proclamation of Jesus’ Lordship (as constituted in His victory over death through the resurrection), which affords the Holy Spirit to both convict and invite individuals into a *koinonia* way of life.⁶⁴ “The church, therefore, is called forth by the proclamation of the kingdom of God.”⁶⁵ Second, it is also the creation of the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that “calls the community of faith into being, in order that it might proclaim Jesus’ kingdom message and live in the world as the company of those who acknowledge in the present the coming reign of God...[so as to] bear testimony by word and deed to the divine reign, which Christ will consummate at his return and hence will be present throughout the cosmos.”⁶⁶ In sum, it is the work of the Spirit in uniting the gathered community with the Triune God through *koinonia*, as well

⁶⁴ Ibid., 478.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

as the proclamation of the gospel that “constitutes an assembly into a church.”⁶⁷ One author goes as far as to say that “the church owes its origin, its destiny, its structure, its ongoing life, its ministry—in short, its mission—to the divine Spirit of life.”⁶⁸

Quite simply, there is no church before or without God.⁶⁹ This applies not only to the creation of the Church in the New Testament but to the various churches that spring up today. It is not the creation of human beings and therefore cannot be treated as such. It is primarily the activity of God in Christ through the Spirit. This, according to Eugene Peterson, is what “Paul wants us to understand and then participate in... church as it is, as the living Christ... He wants us to understand church first of all and primarily in terms of ontology, its being not its function.”⁷⁰ By employing secular values and images of what the church is, leaders run the risk of detaching congregations from the profundity, spirituality, and relationality of their Trinitarian roots. Gordon Fee’s summary of Paul’s ecclesiology is quite helpful here,

“To be saved” in the Pauline view means to become part of the people of God, who by the Spirit are born into God’s family and therefore joined to one another as one body, whose gatherings in the Spirit form them into God’s temple. God is not simply saving diverse individuals and preparing them for heaven; rather he is creating a people for his name, among whom God can dwell and who in their life together will reproduce God’s life and character in all its unity and diversity.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Volf and Welker, *God’s Life in Trinity*, 129.

⁶⁸ Dietterich, “*Missional Community*,” 145.

⁶⁹ Peterson’s metaphor is apt: “The preconditions of church are not unlike the preconditions of creation: ‘without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters’ (Gen 1:2 RSV). God speaks over that formless void, that dark and watery chaos, and brings forth the forms of creation.” Eugene H. Peterson, *Practicing Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2010), 121.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

⁷¹ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 72.

It bears repeating that the church—both universal and local—is not a business. When freed from this corporate imagination, the church can be envisioned as much more. It can be received as a gift from Christ and not controlled.⁷² It can bear witness to the Trinity, in that it is “relational in identity, unique in context, Christ-centered in orientation, dynamic in disposition, increasingly Christ-like in appearance, indivisible in constitution, cruciform in shape, missional in purpose, and narrative in character.”⁷³

Considering all the above, a Trinitarian ecclesiology can be characterized as being eschatological, incarnational, and pneumatological in nature. We turn now to briefly consider each these features.

Characteristics of Trinitarian Ecclesiology

Eschatological

Framing the church as a gathering of people called into present participation in the Trinitarian communion implies that the church is naturally conceived and shaped by the vision of shalom. Allowing the image and plan of the social Trinity to shape its imagination, the church becomes the miniaturized realization of the consummation of all things, though imperfectly. For Volf and Welker, the church is the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God, a people who, no doubt, also experience the eschatological unity promised by God that exists within His triune nature. Not only does Grenz believe that the link between ecclesiology and eschatology is unavoidable, but he also believes that the latter should shape the understanding of the former:

⁷² Peterson, *Practicing Resurrection*, 118.

⁷³ Greg Liston, “Towards a Pneumato-Ecclesiology: Exploring the Pneumatological Union Between Christ and the Church,” *Colloquium* 44, no. 1 (2012): 58, accessed November 9, 2015, EBSCO Host.

The people of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit is not called out merely to be an enclave of salvation or a ghetto of piety apart from or beyond the wickedness of the surrounding world. Rather, believers enter into covenant community with God and each other in order that they might be “the eschatological community,” the fellowship called into existence in order to pioneer in the present the principles that characterize the reign of God. They make up the church for the sake of the future of the world.⁷⁴

What “present principles” could Grenz be referring to that characterize the reign of God?

These are the principles of harmony, wholeness, and communion—all of which encompass shalom, the unity that exists within the social Trinity.⁷⁵ A Trinitarian ecclesiology then, corresponds to the vision of shalom.

Incarnational

Just as the Son was sent into the world as a manifestation of the Trinity, so also is the church sent into the world to do the same. What does this manifestation look like? To begin, it looks like humility. Moltmann suggests this was the posture of the Triune God in Jesus, who “humiliates himself, accepting and adopting threatened and perverted human nature in its entirety, making it part of his eternal life.”⁷⁶ As such, a Trinitarian community moves into the world in the same guise, humbly journeying into its context in self-giving. Not only does a Trinitarian ecclesiology envision the church humbly going into its surrounding context, but it also suggests that it does so in solidarity with the context.⁷⁷ This was the very posture of the Triune God, who was Immanuel—God with

⁷⁴ Grenz, *Reinvisioning Evangelical Theology*, 183.

⁷⁵ This statement is based on the context of his entire text.

⁷⁶ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 121.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

us. Consequently, it is in manifesting the humanity of the church that the divinity of the Triune God is displayed.

Pneumatological

A Trinitarian ecclesiology actually provides hope that a new reality is breaking into the world. “At Pentecost,” Dietterich notes, “with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, promise becomes actuality. God’s promised reign of love and hope, compassion and reconciliation, harmony and justice, is incarnated in a new humanity, a people commissioned to represent the gospel of peace to the alienated and hostile powers of the world.”⁷⁸ This hope, fostered by the Spirit in *koinonia*, provides the basis upon which the church can reject the fear of its own survival. Why? It is the Spirit that journeys with the church into the unknown country of the future. Once more, it is the perichoretic unity and foretaste provided by *koinonia* that serves as its inspiration. A Trinitarian ecclesiology allows for congregations to live into the reality that they are being shaped, sustained, and sent by the Spirit. Imagining the church in this way liberates congregations to follow the leading of the Spirit into mission:

Like the trinitarian God who gives us life and sustains it, our various communities offer us gifts that protect, sustain, and enable us to flourish. Just as the members of the Trinity work together for the good of the world that they love, so we, who live in this trinitarian image, work to structure our communities around concrete practices that recognize our comprehensive connectedness and responsibility to others in ways that enable them to be and become all God means them to be and become.⁷⁹

Herein lies the role of the Spirit in a Trinitarian ecclesiology. The Spirit is the one that creates, empowers, and sustains a united people who together seek God’s reconciliation

⁷⁸ Dietterich, “Missional Community,” 145.

⁷⁹ Jeannine K. Brown, Carla M. Dahl, and Wyndy Corbin Reuschling, *Becoming Whole and Holy: An Integrative Conversation about Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 119.

in the world. It is the Spirit, in other words, that leads the church to participate in and discern the vision of shalom.

Corporate imaginations of the church's ontology will not suffice. This section has provided a sketch on how the social doctrine of the Trinity informs ecclesiology. Just as the social Trinity serves as the theological basis for the vision of shalom, it is embedded into the heart of the calling and essence of the church. The best words to summarize this section, again, come from Grenz,

The Triune God desires that human beings be brought together into a corporate whole, a fellowship of reconciliation, which not only reflects God's own eternal reality but actually participates in that reality. Since the New Testament era the focal point of the reconciled society in history has been the church of Jesus Christ, the new covenant people. As that people, we are called to pioneer in the present the community of love and thereby to participate in and reflect the eternal relation of the Triune God, the community we will enjoy in the great eschatological fellowship on the renewed earth.⁸⁰

Trinitarian Ecclesiological Values for Discerning the Vision of God

What does a Trinitarian ecclesiology of perichoresis unity mean for the discernment of the vision of God? What practical inferences can be drawn for the purpose of this most sacred task? The following two values serve as an outgrowth of a Trinitarian ecclesiology and are critical for the discernment of the vision of shalom within such a framework. These values are communion and mutuality.

The first of these values, communion, expresses the idea that congregational vision cannot be formulated by a single person (or even a small group) but must be a united and communal endeavor. After all, if the Triune God neglects to conceive of vision outside of community, why should the practice of the church be any different?

⁸⁰ Grenz, *Reinvisioning Evangelical Theology*, 188.

Thus Stanley Grenz and Jay Smith suggest that, “our corporate life, including its decision-making structures, must reflect and facilitate community life.”⁸¹ A presupposition to communion, therefore, is participation. This is more than mere egalitarianism or a democratic polity. Rather, the virtue of communion speaks to a unity derived from mutual submission and a deep trust in the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. Leaning into these postures of discernment in communion or togetherness, Christian communities can partake in the Son’s communion with the Father through the Spirit. Only then can “we experience God’s heart...as we allow ourselves to be indwelt by God...able to listen to the still small voice of God.”⁸²

The second value of mutuality is closely related to, through differentiated from, communion. As a social Trinity, the members of the Godhead are “bound together, wholly interior to each other in such a way that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are dependent on each other for their very identities as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁸³ This type of divine mutuality or interdependence is incomprehensible. Nevertheless, this picture still serves as an invitation for leaders to guide their congregations into deeper bonds of relational interdependence. In the context of discernment more specifically, mutuality implies the necessity of embracing all of the diverse spiritual gifts that exist within the congregation as a pre-requisite for a faithful and corporate discernment. If Moltmann is right in saying that “the trinitarian Persons do not merely exist and live in

⁸¹ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*, 3rd Ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 206.

⁸² Vonna Thomas, *Relational Discernment: Moving towards a Holistic Approach*, DMin diss., George Fox University, 2013, 84.

⁸³ John R. Franke, “God Is Love,” in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, eds. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 116.

one another” but they also “bring one another mutually to manifestation to the divine glory,”⁸⁴ then it is also true that only as the church grows in mutuality or interdependence will it also be able to live into the vision of God here on earth.

Summary

Working to keep God in the center of the vision development, this chapter has sought to discover the theological foundation for the vision of God—shalom in the Bible—as the vision that churches are called to discern in order to increase Christian spirituality. Thus the questions of how theology could inform the topic of discerning the vision of shalom and the implications of this discovery upon the local congregation were asked.

As was mentioned from the outset, the theological support for the vision of shalom actually rests in the nature of the Triune God. This chapter first considered the development of Trinitarian theology in hopes of clarifying the historical understanding of God as innately triune. Once solidified, attention was given to the social or communal doctrine of the Trinity—a view that perceives the ontology of God as bearing witness to the perichoretic unity that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This “holy dance” of co-eternal Persons envisions God in interpenetration, participation, mutual interdependence, and communion. This image is the *telos* that God seeks to bring to fruition throughout all His creation and in which the church is called to participate. Thus the church—being created by the Triune God through the proclamation of the gospel of Christ and power of the Holy Spirit—is firstly a Trinitarian community or ecclesiology that seeks to participate in this Communion through its *koinonia* and its communal

⁸⁴ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 176.

partnership with God in the world. This, more than any business description of the church, should be the guiding imagination of the ontology of the church. Doing so provides significant implications for vision discernment, as was observed above. These findings will be central to the model developed in the final chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR:
THEOCENTRIC MODELS OF VISION DISCERNMENT IN IGNATIAN
SPIRITUALITY AND THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

“Christian leadership involves much more—and less—than trying to get people to bend to the will of a human leader or group. Effective Christian leadership ever facilitates helping others discern and mind the dynamic leadership of Christ, the living Lord of the church.”¹
—Paul Anderson

Overview

This dissertation is centered on a singular question: How can congregational vision be created in a way that is spiritually formative? In search of a framework to address this question, the development of a theocentric model of vision discernment has been suggested. With the principles of the previous two chapters in view, this fourth chapter will explore if there is any precedent for theocentric vision discernment within Church history.

To accomplish this task, this chapter will specifically evaluate the discernment models found within Ignatian spirituality and the Society of Friends,² two of the most prominent discernment traditions within Western Christianity. Beginning with the former, consideration will first be given to the spiritual theology³ that undergirds Ignatian

¹ Paul Anderson, “The Present Leadership of the Resurrected Lord,” George Fox University, 5, accessed August 7, 2015, http://www.georgefox.edu/discernment/present_leadership.pdf.

² From this point on, I will refer to the Society of Friends either as Quakers or simply Friends.

³ The term “spiritual theology” denotes the study of how the soul grows in the spiritual life as a result of divine revelation and experience. This summary denotes the view of Jesuit theologian Joseph de Guibert, who defines spiritual theology, “as the science which deduces from revealed principles what constitutes the perfection of the spiritual life and how man can advance towards and obtain it.” Joseph de Guibert, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Paul Barrett (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1953), 11, quoted in Greg Peters, “On Spiritual Theology: A Primer,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*

discernment. Afterward, attention will be given to Ignatius's process of discernment through the use of his Spiritual Exercises.⁴ This will be followed by a brief highlight of the lessons gleaned from this model.

This chapter will then shift to observing some tenants of Quaker discernment theology. This dialogue will inform the next section on the corporate discernment of Friends within their congregational Business Meetings, otherwise known as The Meeting for Worship in which Business is Conducted.⁵ Subsequently, some objections to Quaker discernment will be mentioned. This examination of the Quaker tradition will conclude by emphasizing several potential lessons for a contemporary model of theocentric vision discernment.

At this point, three caveats are important to note. Firstly, the Exercises have historically been used for both individual and group discernment,⁶ though not in a congregational sense. Secondly, these models are so large in scope that an entire dissertation could be written on each individually. Recognizing this reality, this chapter will provide a broad framework for these models within the context of the direction of this study. Finally, the Friend Clearness Committee—a group process used for individual formation—will not be evaluated. Though valuable to the overall discussion of Friend

1, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 11, accessed December 26, 2015, <http://journals.biola.edu/sfj/volumes/4/issues/1/articles/5>. For more about the development, definition, and use of this discipline, please see this reference.

⁴ Throughout this chapter, "Exercises" or "Ignatian Exercises" should be understood as being synonymous with the Spiritual Exercises.

⁵ This term is coined by Paul Anderson, a leading Quaker Scholar. At times throughout this chapter it may simply be referred to as "The Meeting." Paul Anderson, "The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted: Quaker Decision-Making Process as a Factor of Spiritual Discernment," George Fox University-Congregational Discernment Project, Introduction, accessed November 20, 2013, http://www.georgefox.edu/discernment/QRT_Essays.html.

⁶ Jules J. Toner, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision Making* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991), ix.

discernment, many of its principles—such as listening, open-ended questions, and guided leadership—can be found within the scope of the larger corporate discernment of The Meeting.

The Spiritual Theology of the Ignatian Exercises

In line with his Catholic heritage, Ignatius of Loyola (c.1491-c.1556) developed a spiritual theology that focuses on the cross. Ignatius promoted the Catholic spirituality of the Paschal Mystery—a theology that explores the deeper mysteries of Christ’s death. Based largely on John’s Gospel, the Paschal Mystery takes seriously the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the one, unified, and central mystery of the Christian faith.⁷ In Catholic theology, being united with Christ also means sharing in the glory and suffering of the Passion. The death and resurrection of Jesus is perceived as an invitation to the disciple to spiritually live and die with Jesus.⁸ But what exactly does this mean?

Since “neither death nor life...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord,”⁹ disciples are encouraged to see all of life as a mystery that reveals God’s grace and love. Light and darkness, joy and pain, life and death, are all two sides of the same coin. Each is necessary in the spiritual journey of the soul. It is in this sense that the spiritual life is a perpetual Easter where one continually experiences Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Resurrection Sunday. This is the spiritual rhythm of self-emptying that deepens faith in and dependence on God.

⁷ Maxwell E. Johnson, “The Paschal Mystery: Reflections from a Lutheran Viewpoint,” *Worship* 57, no. 2 (March 1983): 134.

⁸ Mark 8:34-38.

⁹ Romans 8:38, 39.

What has been mentioned thus far is the theological basis of the Ignatian model of discernment. In his classic work, *The Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius outlines a four-week process of discernment,¹⁰ governed by fourteen rules.¹¹ Describing their purpose, he states that the “Spiritual Exercises are methods of preparing and disposing the soul to free itself of all inordinate attachments, and after accomplishing this, of seeking and discovering the Divine Will regarding the disposition of one’s life, thus insuring the salvation of his soul.”¹²

In referring to the “Divine Will”, however, Ignatius does not necessarily mean God’s preferred choice in a situation. Instead, he presupposes that God’s basic will is the greater revelation of Himself in and through His followers.¹³ This is an important concept that he calls “the greater glory of God.”¹⁴ Toner explains,

For in its deepest Ignatian meaning, Glory means participation in God, transformation of created life by its union with God in Christ, in which God is present and revealed to his creatures. This glory of God in creation is for Ignatius praise of God, honor to God, declaration of his beauty and goodness and wisdom and power in a more fundamental sense than any human thoughts and words and affections about God... Thus, to will always the glory of God is to seek always the “salvation and perfection” of our own selves and of our neighbor. It is to grow and to help others to grow spiritually.¹⁵

¹⁰ The term “weeks” should not be taken to be taken literally (the fourth week alone consists of three weeks of prayer). What Ignatius is describing here is an adaptable process. Louis J. Puhl, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Based on the Studies in the Language of the Autograph* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951), 2.

¹¹ Ibid., 141-146.

¹² Ignatius and Anthony Mottola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1964), 37.

¹³ In Ignatian thought, this is God’s preferred choice in every situation. See discussion below.

¹⁴ Toner, *Discerning God’s Will*, 22.

¹⁵ Ibid., 15-16.

Toner does not want his readers to miss the point. According to Ignatian spirituality, the chief aim of discernment is the transformation of the disciple more into the likeness of Jesus. This likeness is exhibited through humble submission to God and greater dependence upon him as Creator. Practically, this implies when one is faced with a decision, the chief concern should always be how the various options will lead into further communion, participation, and faith in God. For Ignatius, this is what it means to seek the will of God.

The point being made here is that Ignatian discernment emphasizes an intentional movement away from self towards God through the downward trajectory of confession and repentance.¹⁶ This type of discernment leads to God's personal vision for the individual. Finding one's individual vision also implies discovering how that individual vision fits within the larger vision that God has for the world. Again, Toner is helpful in understanding Ignatius:

Within that relationship of personal communion, Ignatius believes, we are open to receive the divine influence, mediate or intermediate, on our discernment. By influencing our contemplation of Jesus in the Gospels and our meditation on his teaching, God's Spirit forms in us a certain vision of life common to every Christian but also colored by each one's individual personality and experience.... In all these ways, the Holy Spirit can lead our discernment to the conclusion he knows is in conformity with the Father's will for his greater glory in us.¹⁷

These words by Toner are key because they echo the *telos*, or goal, of Ignatian discernment—the greater revelation of God in and through the lives of His followers. This is God's basic will for believers in discernment.

¹⁶ Leon K. Cameron, Jr., *From Decision Making to Discernment: Using Ignatian and Friends Models of Discernment in a Baptist Context*, DMin Diss., 85, accessed July 15, 2014, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/47/>.

¹⁷ Toner, *Discerning God's Will*, 36-37.

But how exactly do the Exercises assist in accomplishing this task of spiritual formation? How do they manage to lead the disciple to focus on God? What all does this four-week model entail?

The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius

In the first week of the Exercises, the *exercitant*¹⁸ utilizes the practice of *Examination of Conscience*, commonly referred to as *Examen*. In this discipline, the discerner prayerfully reflects over the events of the day in search for evidence of God's presence. Ignatius hoped that this process would lead to receiving from the Holy Spirit the gifts of God. He also desired that such reflection would lead to greater revelation of the areas within one's inner life needing repentance and God's grace. A helpful outline of the practice can be found in Jim Manney's book *A Simple Life-Changing Prayer: Discovering the Power of St. Ignatius Loyola's Examen*:

1. Pray for light: Begin by asking God for the grace to pray, to see and to understand.
2. Give thanks: Look at your day in a spirit of gratitude. Everything is a gift from God.
3. Review the day: Guided by the Holy Spirit, look back on your day. Pay attention to your experience. Look for God in it.
4. Look at what's wrong: Face up to failures and shortcomings. Ask forgiveness for your faults. Ask God to show you ways to improve.
5. Resolution for the day to come: Where do you need God today? What can you do today?¹⁹

The second week moves away from reflections on the day to meditation on Scripture. Since the goal of the Exercises is increased Christlikeness, these meditations

¹⁸ This term is used to denote one who is engaged in the Spiritual Exercises. Please note this term and "discerner" may be used interchangeably.

¹⁹ Jim Manney, *A Simple, Life-changing Prayer Discovering the Power of St. Ignatius Loyola's Examen* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2011), 15.

center on passages that highlight the life of Jesus—i.e., the Incarnation, the baptism of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, the raising of Lazarus, and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem.²⁰ Texts like these allow the discernor to observe the humble model of Jesus as He submits to the will of the Father.

The third and fourth weeks offer more specific reflections on the Paschal Mystery. The third-week contemplations on the Passion focus on the term compassion, which literally means “suffering with.”²¹ Michael Ivens states that the third week’s contemplation on the Passion is itself “a passion for the one contemplating, a suffering which is ours but in and through which Christ makes us sharers in his own.”²² On the other hand, the fourth week’s contemplations pivot to focus on the *paschal joy* of the Resurrection—scenes beginning with Jesus’ appearance to his mother Mary,²³ then moving to the post-Resurrection events,²⁴ before finally concluding with the Ascension.²⁵ Within these, three emphases emerge:

1. Apparitions leading to personal faith and to witness [300-303.2].
2. Apparitions in which the details are more explicitly ecclesial: the sins, the blessing on the future believers, the miraculous catch of fish, the establishment of the position of Peter, the command to teach and baptize all nations [303.3-307].

²⁰ Puhl, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, 53-67.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

²² Michael Ivens and Ignatius, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises: Text and Commentary; a Handbook for Retreat Directors* (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 1998), 147.

²³ Puhl, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, 132-133.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 133-137.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

3. A final series of apparitions, founded on Scripture or apocryphal, which display the munificence of the risen Christ in showing himself [308-311].²⁶

By contemplating on these separate texts, Ignatius perceives the disciple as being invited into the Paschal Mystery—the single mystery of Christ’s death and mission.²⁷ He is hoping that individuals will be swept away into the grand metanarrative of Scripture embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This narrative culminates in the gospel invitation into the new reality of God’s in-breaking kingdom. Furthermore, it is a summons to join God’s mission in seeing His dream realized in the world. Ivens says this much when he writes, “Fourth Week joy will constitute an élan towards apostolic mission, a source of strength, energy and courage to participate in the work of the Kingdom.”²⁸ It is from this posture of submission and interaction with the story of God that a life of continual discernment can become possible.

Therefore, the journey of individual discernment within the Exercises is meant to lead to the deepening of faith in God. The Exercises do this by continually moving the *exercitant* away from self and towards God—via the story of God. This begins in first week with its emphasis on personal confession through the practice of Examen. It continues throughout the second week, as the discerner gives more attention to the life of Christ through meditation on Scripture. The hope at this juncture is that by observing the humble life of Jesus, one would be prompted to seek, find, and respond to God’s will out

²⁶ Albert Chapelle, ed., *Les Exercices Spirituels D’Ignace De Loyola: Un Commentaire Littéral Et Théologique* (Bruxelles: Editions De L’Institut D’études Théologiques, 1990), 404-409, quoted in Ivens and Ignatius, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 163.

²⁷ The term “apparitions” should be taken to mean the imaginative witnessing of biblical scenes. Ivens and Ignatius, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 164.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 162-163.

of a similar posture.²⁹ The third and fourth weeks shift the meditational focus from the life of Jesus to the Passion and Resurrection. This is done in the hopes that one's prayers might "shift from more *external* graces of knowledge, love, and committed discipleship [104] to graces of a more immediately participatory sort—suffering *with* Christ, joy *with* Christ [203, cf. 48]."³⁰ In sum, the movement leads to further entry into experiencing and participating in the life of Christ. As was witnessed above, this journey leads to participation in God's vision for the world.

Reflections on Spiritual Exercise for Theocentric Vision Discernment

Though mostly geared towards individual discernment, the contributions of the Spiritual Exercises could be helpful in vision discernment. The practice of Examen may be deeply formative for individuals and the community as a whole. It is in this prayerful posture of silence at the end of each day that God is invited to reveal where He has been present. This time allows one to ask "how was God present with me at work today? What promptings did I notice? How did I respond or not respond?"³¹ At this point, the Holy Spirit may choose to reveal the kindness of a neighbor or friend as symbolic of His love. In silence, an individual may pause to "consider for example, whether the boisterous neighbor of last night was more than just a rude interruption of a quiet evening. Maybe, just maybe, he was the voice of God urging us to be attentive to the pain and loneliness of

²⁹ Puhl, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, 61-62, 69.

³⁰ Ivens and Ignatius, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 146.

³¹ Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 95.

those around us.”³² Through such intentional awareness we begin to believe, little by little, that nothing can take us out of God’s presence.³³ This posture would serve the community well when it seeks to corporately discern what God is doing in the lives of its own people and the larger context in which the church is located.

Additionally, the frequent calls to meditate on the Scriptures would be beneficial in helping a church find its place in the unfolding story of God. This story has a particular *telos* that envisions God pouring his shalom over the cosmos. Contemplative involvement with this story could profoundly shape the corporate identity of a people as they learn to integrate their collective story into the ongoing story of God.

Even though there is no concept of visionary leadership within Ignatian spirituality, his model of discernment has much to contribute to the discussion surrounding the area of vision discernment. This is mainly because the model of Ignatius, as described in *The Spiritual Exercises*, is inherently theocentric in its orientation. Additionally, Ignatian spirituality has directly aided the recent resurgence of spiritual disciplines across varying streams of Christianity, including Protestantism. Any discussion about discernment, therefore, must take into account its contributions.³⁴

This study will now pivot to consider the model of theocentric vision discernment within the Friends tradition. As was indicated in the introduction, this discussion will begin by surveying the theological presuppositions supporting this model.

³² Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 28.

³³ Barton, *Sacred Rhythms*, 96.

³⁴ Toner, *Discerning God's Will*, 9.

Quaker Theology of Discernment

The first theological presupposition that is foundational for understanding Quaker discernment is the concept of the Inward Light. Early Friends experientially read biblical passages, such as Matthew 18:20³⁵ and Galatians 1:11-12³⁶ to mean that direct revelation from Christ was possible.³⁷ This correlated with the Quaker belief that the resurrected Christ still had a prophetic ministry to bestow upon His people. Similar to the Protestant doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers, where one can seek the forgiveness of God directly with no intermediary assistance, early Friends were convicted that they could receive direct prophecies, or “leadings,” absent of a physical prophet. Recognizing the central importance this idea carries in Quaker thought, Eden Grace writes,

The primary theological doctrine and spiritual experience of Friends is that the living Christ is present to teach us Himself. No priestly intermediary is necessary for Divine access, for “there is One, Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition.” Rooted in such texts as John’s prologue, Quakers believe that the Light of Christ is given in some measure to all people. This experience of the immediate presence of Christ, both personally and corporately, implies that we may be led by the Inward Teacher. Since Christ is not divided, the nearer we come to Him, the nearer we will be to one another. Thus the sense of being led into Unity with one another becomes a fundamental mark of the Divine work in the world.³⁸

In many ways, this statement summarizes the Quaker theology of discernment. It is important to note how foundational the concept of the Inward Light is to the wider idea of Quaker discernment. Even the idea of Unity, as will be discussed below, is understood

³⁵ “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst.”

³⁶ “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”

³⁷ Anderson, “The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted,” 28.

³⁸ Eden Grace, “An Introduction to Quaker Business Practice,” Quaker and Ecumenical Essays, 3rd paragraph, accessed August 8, 2015, <http://edengrace.org/quakerbusiness.html>.

within the context of the Inward Light. It is the reality of the Inward Light that makes Quaker Unity possible.

The second theological presupposition is the significance of silence. Douglas Gwyn, a scholar in George Fox studies, sees an eschatological focus guiding the Quaker understanding on the topic of silence. He suggests that Fox understood Quakers to be God's special people in the end times. Gwyn writes, "The judgments upon the earth that are described by John with the breaking of the seven seals are known in the practice of waiting upon the Lord. Here the birth according to the flesh is silenced and judged, so that the birth according to the Spirit may be raised up."³⁹ This "birth" is experienced at the breaking of the seventh seal, allowing the revelation of Christ.⁴⁰ Gwyn argues that this encounter with Christ is not private, but rather a corporate experience.⁴¹

Initially, then, early Friends adopted silence-based worship for believers to prepare themselves for the apocalypse through direct revelations from Christ. This leads Pink Dandelion, in his book *The Liturgies of Quakerism*, to conclude "the purpose of worship was not to sustain the faithful in the meantime but to help those in the vanguard of the endtime remain obedient, to hear God through Christ directly."⁴²

This perspective provides a critical insight into the relationship between silence and discernment in Quaker thought. Friends believed that the practice of silence led to a type of spiritual death and rebirth into greater union with Christ. It is out of this unity

³⁹ Douglas Gwyn, *Apocalypse of the Word: The Life and Message of George Fox* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1986), 187.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 187-188.

⁴¹ Ibid., 188.

⁴² Pink Dandelion, *The Liturgies of Quakerism* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), 30.

with Christ that guidance for decisions could occur. The practice of silence also exemplified the posture of submission to the Lordship of Christ. George Fox summarizes this point:

Now, thou must die in the silence, to the fleshly wisdom, knowledge, reason, and understanding...Keep to that of God in you which will lead you up to God, when you are still from your own thoughts, and imaginations, and desires and counsels of your own hearts, and motions, and will; when you stand single from all these, waiting upon the Lord, your strength is renewed.⁴³

These two themes of the Inward Light and silence naturally lead to a final Quaker theological assumption of the presence of Christ in the gathered community. Vital to this belief is the way that Friends interpret Matthew 18:18-20. In that passage, Jesus points to a deeper reality that happens when believers come to agreement. Jesus asserts that this is only possible because “two or three” are gathered in His name. The inference being made here, through the use of the phrasing “in my name,” is that those who are gathered do so in the humble Spirit of Jesus that leads to reconciliation. Therefore, the reconciled community—the one that can come to agreement through humility—bears witness to the presence of Christ in the world. Equally important, this type of humility also reveals the Spirit of the living Christ who is at the heart of the community. Interpreting the passage in this way reflects the high priority Friends place on “both Christ’s presence in the gathered community and His calling for the Church to be a community.”⁴⁴ When Friends, therefore, invite the community to humbly present their varying perspectives in

⁴³ George Fox, *The Works of George Fox*, vol. 4 (State College, PA: New Foundation Publ., 1990), 132, quoted in Pink Dandelion, *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 73.

⁴⁴ Cameron, Jr., *From Decision Making to Discernment*, 95.

discernment,⁴⁵ they do so while claiming the promise that Christ is present to transform the hearts of all. Anderson calls this type of coming together in worship “a sacramental reality—the topographical place where God’s presence is made manifest in the world incarnationally.”⁴⁶ This is the Quaker embodiment of a community centered in the Eucharist.⁴⁷

Finally, these three theological presuppositions directly correlate to the single theme of seeking God as the object of discernment. This is why Anderson calls the Quaker decision-making process the Meeting for Worship in which Business is Conducted. The use of this language communicates the core of Quaker faith and discernment.⁴⁸ Namely, that business (i.e., decision-making) is to be framed within the larger context of worship that glorifies God.

Quaker worship entails “attending, discerning, and minding the Divine Will.”⁴⁹ This is done through silence-based worship, which includes the expectation of God’s guidance as members listen to God and each other.⁵⁰ The degree to how well this is accomplished is the degree to which “success” can be claimed. Success, therefore, is redefined to mean something much more than finding the “right” course of action or answer to a question that has confronted the community. Success means coming to “unity

⁴⁵ This practice is done at The Meeting. Further description will be provided below.

⁴⁶ Anderson, “The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted,” 28.

⁴⁷ Quakers do not practice Communion or Eucharist.

⁴⁸ Grace, “Eden Grace on Quaker Business Practice,” 1.

⁴⁹ Anderson, “The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted,” 27.

⁵⁰ *Quaker Faith and Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline in the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1995), 3:02.

around a common sense of Christ's leading."⁵¹ Echoing this sentiment is Eden Grace when she writes, "our bold affirmation is that God does indeed have a will for us, that God is actively trying to communicate that will, and that we are capable, through corporate prayer, to discover that will. A sign that we have achieved our goal of discerning God's will is the experience of Unity which is recognized and affirmed by those gathered."⁵²

This is the goal of The Meeting and the true work of the people. "Rather than worship being drawn in as a facilitator of business, 'let's pray so we can be helped in our real work: the decisions at hand.'"⁵³ Friends see the business of their lives as ever pursuing the Lord together. Embodying this liturgical posture, each question or decision needing to be made is seen as an opportunity to perform this "central work" prayerfully and in community. Thus, it can also be posited that the Quaker model of discernment is theocentric. It is a process that primarily seeks God and His will as the object of discernment.

Quaker Discernment and *The Meeting*

It should be stated up front that Friends polity has historically been congregational in nature.⁵⁴ This means that traditionally speaking, the entire congregation was responsible for all major decisions and the overall direction of the church. This is the

⁵¹ Anderson, "The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted," 30.

⁵² Grace, "Eden Grace on Quaker Business Practice," 1-2.

⁵³ Anderson, "The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted," 31.

⁵⁴ Thomas H. Jeavons, "Doing the Unspeakable: Identifying Developing, and Supporting Leadership among Quakers," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 5, no. 1-2 (Spring-Fall 2006): 84, accessed September 17, 2015, <http://arl-jrl.org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/>.

observation of Friends theologian Paul Anderson when he asks, “How do Friends make decisions, plan for the future, manage budget and personnel decisions, and decide matters of faith and practice? ... They meet together in quiet waiting before the Lord.”⁵⁵ This statement implies that questions regarding vision within Quakerism are best observed within the larger context of Friends decision-making. As has already been alluded to above, this process is primarily one of discernment. Friends, therefore, possess a model for corporate vision discernment.

Paul Anderson reveals the four elements that constitute this decision-making process,⁵⁶ the first of which is adequate preparation. In this case, adequate preparation includes both an announcement of the agenda in advance and the commissioning of various reports. These two practices, combined with bathing The Meeting in prayer beforehand, allows attending members to enter informed and prepared to be fully present to the workings of the Holy Spirit.

The second element is the introduction of the issue under consideration. Before this is done, however, the Clerk⁵⁷ “calls the meeting together as a meeting for worship,”⁵⁸ by leading the group into prayer or silence.⁵⁹ Referencing the importance of this event, Douglas Steere says,

The Quaker meeting for business opens with an unhurried period of waiting silence, and if the meeting is properly carried through, there emerges something of this mood of openness not to my wishes and my designs and my surface preferences but openness to the deeper levels where the Guide’s bidding may

⁵⁵ Anderson, “The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted,” 26.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 41-43. Please note that I will not quote each element separately.

⁵⁷ The Clerk is the presiding officer who guides the preceding of The Meeting.

⁵⁸ Anderson, “The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted,” 29.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

have its way and where the problem may be resolved in quite a different way than ever occurred to me.⁶⁰

Following this time of “centering,” the Clerk brings the previously announced issue forward to the assembly. This is done with the simple goal of attempting to perceive all of the issues involved. The assembly follows by entering into deliberation with the Clerk, seeking input from as many sides on the issue as possible. The Clerk performs this task under the conviction that the fuel needed to produce a good proposal is better questions and more input. As a result, it is customary for the Clerk to resist cutting off certain perspectives too soon. Practicing this type of inclusion also seeks to dissuade the idea of “winners” and “losers,”⁶¹ as all are working toward the common goal of “attending, discerning, and minding the will of the present Christ.”⁶² During this phase, the Clerk may also call for additional times of silence or prayer.

The third element involves the Clerk seeking to weigh the considerations and to identify potential ways forward. At this point, the Clerk may offer his or her impression as to which direction the group is leaning. He or she may also try to establish what contributions are weightier than others. Sometimes clarity about a potential way forward can happen smoothly. If there are substantial differences between two or more potential ways forward, the Clerk may also guide the group into understanding how each of the proposals differ. During these types of deliberations, times of silence may often be utilized. Despite these efforts, clarity may still remain elusive. If new input has not been

⁶⁰ Douglas V. Steere, *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 37-38.

⁶¹ Anderson, “The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted,” 30.

⁶² Ibid.

offered to bring clarity and unity to the issue, the group can opt to table the issue until unity can be sought at the next Meeting.

Finally, once clarity is achieved, the Clerk will offer the Sense of the Meeting. This term signifies the “summary of where the group feels a oneness of accord on both the identification of the issues to be addressed and what might be ‘the mind of Christ’ in addressing those issues.”⁶³ Making sure to leave nothing out, the Clerk, at this point, may share concerns that have arisen throughout the deliberations. The idea is that the assembly understands not only the decision that was made, but also the factors that led to that decision. Providing greater depth on the Sense of the Meeting is Eden Grace when she writes,

Since our method of transacting business presumes that in a given matter there is a way that is in harmony with God’s plan, our search is for that right way, and not simply for a way which is either victory for some faction, or an expedient compromise. What we call “the Sense of the Meeting” is not the collected wisdom of those present, but the collective discernment of God’s will.⁶⁴

This statement aptly captures the *telos* of the Meeting. In essence, it is the desire of Friends to join with the Apostles in saying, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.”⁶⁵ This chapter will now shift to considering the objections to this model.

Objections to Quaker Discernment

One objection to Quaker discernment is that it simply promotes a type of communal compromise. Yet, compromise seeks to find a solution that is objectionable to none. It focuses on personal desires and abdicates “winners” and “losers.” While

⁶³ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁴ Grace, “Eden Grace on Quaker Business Practice,” 1.

⁶⁵ Acts 15:28.

compromise may be good for quick decision-making, what it does not cultivate is a unified community under the Lordship of Christ. This latter objective is nurtured by individuals from varying perspectives who seek the common purpose of humbly listening to God and each other. Thus, Quaker discernment is more than a commitment to the intellectual process of compromise⁶⁶ in which “we” decide.⁶⁷ It is a commitment to faith⁶⁸ in which God is allowed to decide.⁶⁹

Another objection is that this type of discernment and decision-making is practically inefficient. In today’s world, life is fast paced. Taking the time to enter discernment in this way can be an inefficient use of resources. Doing so may also permit the community to miss various opportunities under the guise of “waiting on the Lord.”

Anderson pushes back on this idea, suggesting that the process that Friends undertake is more efficient than the dominant models of authoritarian and majority rule. In his words,

While coming to unity around a common sense of Christ’s leading may take more time in the decision-making part of the process, if both the problem-identification and decision implementation are considered as part of the venture, it is much more efficient (and effective!) than rushing an issue and trying to get people to go along with something they did not own to begin with.⁷⁰

This statement rings especially true if a congregation has to revisit some particular decision months after initially setting on a direction. Perhaps all of the options were not thoroughly vetted. Maybe the community was ignorant to all of the issues involved.

⁶⁶ Grace, “Eden Grace on Quaker Business Practice,” 2.

⁶⁷ Barry Morley, *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1993), 3-4.

⁶⁸ Grace, “Eden Grace on Quaker Business Practice,” 2.

⁶⁹ Morley, *Beyond Consensus*, 3-4.

⁷⁰ Anderson, “The Meeting for Worship in Which Business Is Conducted,” 42-43.

Whatever the reason, having to reexamine a critical decision is neither efficient nor effective. Rushing the issue out of a sense of anxiety also reasserts the fundamental presupposition of this study. Namely, that it is businesses and not churches whose final *telos* is concerned with progress and quick results.

A final objection to be mentioned is that Quaker discernment lends itself to subjectivity. “Where,” they may ask, “is the counter-balance of the authority of Scripture?” While Quakers, too, share this concern, they respond by suggesting that it is the Scriptures themselves that “declare the reality of the ongoing inspirational work of the Holy Spirit.”⁷¹ Quakers, then, are only attempting to assert a posture of humility that invites the realization of the Holy Spirit’s work. At the same time, Quakers also believe that “leadings” should be governed by the authority of the Scriptures and the larger Christian tradition. Anderson speaks of guidelines to test leadings:⁷²

1. “Is this leading in keeping with the teachings of the Scriptures?” The Spirit who inspired the Scriptures will not contradict the truths contained in the Bible. The Bible serves as an authoritative and objective referent by which to check subjective leadings.
2. “Are there examples from the past that may provide direction for the present?” Because the Church is the body of Christ, his leadership can often be evaluated more clearly by hindsight, and such observations may provide parallels that inform present issues.
3. “Is a leading self-serving, or is it motivated by one’s love for God and others?” Most false leadings are revealed to be selfishly motivated, or at least tainted with self-interest, even if the goal sounds noble. The will of Christ is always perceived more clearly from the foot of the cross; as we release our needs to God we find that God is also freed to meet them in ways pleasing to him.⁷³

⁷¹ Ibid., 28-29.

⁷² Though these guidelines are given for testing individual leadings, the basic philosophy also applies to corporate discernment.

⁷³ Anderson, “The Present Leadership of the Resurrected Christ,” 3.

Reflections on The Meeting for Theocentric Vision Discernment

Although Quakerism remains void of any idea of visionary leadership, the Quaker model of decision-making does provide several important characteristics that may prove fruitful for the type of vision discernment this dissertation seeks to develop. First, Friends have nurtured a culture of *listening*. The use of the discipline of silence has cultivated within Friends a type of stillness that enables one to become more aware of God and others. By opening up to God in this way, Friends have also learned to distinguish their own voice from the voice of God. Taking into account the present culture of overstimulation, attempting to cultivate a culture of listening within congregations could serve to be profoundly formative.

Second, the Quaker model wisely utilizes open deliberations. These patient deliberations allow the community to better understand the totality of the issue or question being considered.⁷⁴ This type of inclusion may also lead to a deeper sense of God's leading through a better proposal for action. While it is true that this type of inclusion may come with risks, creating space for deliberations would allow greater participation from varying sections of the community.

Lastly, the Quaker model demonstrates the significance of guiding leadership. Notice that in the description above, the Clerk does not act out of a position of dominance. Instead, he or she is seen as coming alongside the community for the purpose of seeking God's will. This type of leadership was also typified in the leadership of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ These are very much like those witnesses in Acts 14 and 15. For further reading, see Chapter Two of this dissertation.

⁷⁵ See Chapter Two of this dissertation.

By not viewing “business” as being antithetical to worship, Friends have developed a model of discernment that is theocentric.⁷⁶ This, essentially, is the confession of Eden Grace when she writes that Friends demonstrate a “theocentric understanding of authority.”⁷⁷ Moreover, the goal of unity provokes the community to demonstrate greater humility and maturity, two characteristics that are pivotal for increased spiritual growth. In summary, the model attempts to cultivate a community that bears witness to the kingdom vision of a community embodying and seeking shalom.

Summary

While the Ignatian and Quaker models do not possess a concept of visionary leadership, this chapter has revealed that both still serve as precedents for theocentric vision discernment. This was first illustrated through the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, a process used to cultivate greater awareness of how various paths lead to communion, participation, and faith in God. While there are many elements to this model, this chapter highlighted the practices of Examen and Scripture meditation as potential features for congregational vision discernment. This chapter also observed the Quaker congregational model within the context of The Meeting for Worship in which Business is Conducted. The ultimate goal of this Meeting is to attend to the presence and will of God. This is accomplished through such practices as listening, open deliberations, and the guiding

⁷⁶ As has been noted above, the object of Friends discernment is God—i.e., His presence and His will.

⁷⁷ Grace, “Eden Grace on Quaker Business Practice,” 2.

leadership of the Clerk. All of this is done so that the community will be able to say, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.”⁷⁸

The next chapter will seek to gain new understandings of vision, discernment, and leadership from a missional perspective. It is the hope of this author that such an investigation will contribute to fresh approaches towards a theocentric model of vision discernment that is spiritually formative.

⁷⁸ Acts 15:28.

CHAPTER FIVE:

THE MISSIONAL CHURCH AND VISION DISCERNMENT

“When we surveyed the congregations, asking about their sense of their witness to the reign of God, we discovered that missional formation is happening through the experience of tension, struggle with change, dealing with resistance, and exciting breakthroughs into new understandings of vocation.”¹

—Darrell Guder

Overview

The word *missional*² has become a buzzword in the twenty-first-century world of American Christianity. Whether in the values of a church, a degree program at a seminary, or an upcoming leadership conference, the term missional and the idea of a missional church is unavoidable. While the term may be misapplied in many instances,³ the missional church movement has been successful in reshaping the self-understanding of the local church as the *sent* people of God who are on mission *with* God. This particular reorientation has helped many see that “God’s mission is calling and sending us...to be a missionary church in our own societies.”⁴ Recapturing the image of the church as a “collective missionary” will continue to be a vital aspect of the church’s

¹ Darrell Guder, “Pointing Toward the Reign of God,” in *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, ed. Lois Barrett (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 138.

² It should be noted that “mission” actually means “sending.” The term missional is meant to describe the theological idea that the Triune God is sending the church into the world. For further reading, please see Darrell L. Guder, “Missional Church: From Sending to Being Sent,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998).

³ There has been a lot of misunderstanding on exactly what the term “missional” means. For a comprehensive treatment of the various “branches” of the term, please see Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 67-98.

⁴ Guder, “Missional Church: From Sending to Being Sent,” 5.

ability to thrive in post-Christendom. By pivoting in this direction, the missional church has stressed various key elements, including spiritual formation, discernment, and the recasting of vision.

In search for understanding how congregational vision can be shaped in a way that is spiritually formative for the church as a whole, this chapter will examine the subject of missional vision discernment. The singular aim of this analysis will be to discover what contributions missional theologians have made towards a theocentric model. This analysis will begin by attempting to define the concept of missional discernment. Next, the closely related idea of missional vision will be surveyed. This will be followed by a brief discussion centered around the role of the leader in light of the previous two sections. This will lead to the examination of three separate processes of vision discernment that have been suggested by missional theologians. These three models are significant as they represent the primary models that have been outlined in detail by missional thinkers. Finally, the chapter will conclude by highlighting several discoveries towards a proposed model of theocentric vision discernment.

Before engaging the content of this chapter, one qualification should be made. Due to the above-mentioned use of the term missional, most of the research presented in this chapter will feature authors and missional practitioners⁵ either from or associated with The Gospel and Our Culture Network.⁶ This group is responsible for pioneering the

⁵ Throughout this chapter, the terms “missional practitioners” and “missional theologians” may be used interchangeably.

⁶ “The Gospel and Our Culture. A network to provide *useful research* regarding the encounter between the gospel and our culture, and to encourage *local action* for transformation in the life and witness of the church.” “The Gospel and Our Culture Network,” The Gospel and Our Culture Network, About, accessed October 14, 2015, <http://gocn.org/>.

missional discussion in North America since the late 1980s and best represents the essence of missional thinking and research.

Missional Discernment

Reframing the church as a sent people who are on mission with God has radically informed the missional perspective of discernment in two primary ways. To begin with, it implies that discernment is a communal process. This is key for missional theologians who subscribe to the notion that it is only in community that believers can truly live into the purposes of God.

Attempting to describe this conviction is Mark Lau Branson, when he insists that churches are learning communities that “gather inside a story being written by God.”⁷ Rejecting the competing narratives of the world around them,⁸ believers within the covenant community are “born again” into the story of Israel and Jesus.⁹ This rebirth comes with the obligation to re-learn what it means to live in the world in such a way that recognizes God’s sovereignty over all creation.¹⁰ “Gathering into the story,” therefore, means that there are texts¹¹ that must be learned. Once more, it is in the collective reading of these texts that the church gains insight into how to move in partnership with God’s

⁷ Mark Lau Branson, “Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church,” in *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 111.

⁸ AJ Sherrill writes an excellent article about how about the role of Scripture helps correct the modern tendency to “live from multiple scripts.” AJ Sherrill, “(Un)biblical: 3 Shifts Toward Reclaiming Scriptural Literacy,” V3 Church Planting Movement, accessed January 2, 2016, thev3movement.org/2015/02/unbiblical-3-shifts-toward-reclaiming-scriptural-literacy.

⁹ Branson, “Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church,” 111.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ These texts include “sacred texts and worldly texts, stories of neighbors and enemies, narratives of nature and church.” Ibid.

initiatives.¹² According to missional practitioners, this is the type of interpretive work that makes the church into a community of discernment.¹³ Speaking about missional ecclesiology, Van Gelder provides some insight:

As communities are created by the Spirit, so also congregations seek to be led by the Spirit. They do this by engaging in some form of a discernment process in order to understand their purpose to participate in God's mission in the world (*Missio Dei*). They explore and examine the texts of Scripture and their respective confessional traditions to determine how they believe God is leading them and what they believe God is requiring of them. They also explore their own identity as a Christian congregation to discern how God has been at work in their midst, in the past, in leading them into mission and ministry.¹⁴

A missional perspective also implies that discernment looks to attend to the presence of the Holy Spirit both inside and outside of the church. That is to say, that it aims at making the church more aware of the activity of God. This emphasis begins inside the church and highlights the practice of listening. Van Gelder and Zscheile claim as much when say, "listening attentively to the Word, to one another...is central to participating in God's mission."¹⁵ By suggesting that congregations first "listen to the Word," Van Gelder and Zscheile are alluding to the fact that it is the narrative, the central truths, and the original plan of God that dictate missional discernment. Their statement also highlights the conviction among missional theologians that God is present in those

¹² Ibid., 111-112.

¹³ Ibid., 111.

¹⁴ Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 107.

¹⁵ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 151-152.

moments when individuals are given the opportunity to hear not only the ideas, but also the joys and pains of others.¹⁶

The practice of listening in this way will also involve listening for the church's collective narrative. This can be discovered by listening to the reports of past initiatives, the minutes of the governing board, or a myriad of other ways that the collective story continues to unfold.¹⁷ For missional churches, tracing themes of faith, hope, and love from this data can provide a clearer picture of the Spirit's presence in the congregation. Furthermore, this entire emphasis of attending to the Spirit within the church is to be grounded in prayer.¹⁸

Outside of the church, missional discernment requires congregations to become more attentive to the work of the Spirit within their surrounding context. Daubert expounds,

Because a commitment to *missio Dei* means believing that God is already at work in the world, it also means that we are trying to discern what God is already pleased with and/or is doing in the community. Questions such as "What do you see that makes God rejoice?" and "Where do you see God already at work?" are the basis for this discovery work. Again, this element of the process is dialogical in character. Outcomes will involve not just the identification of problems to be solved, but also glimpses into the reign of God, which are to be celebrated, and the discovery of partners to connect with in doing God's work.¹⁹

¹⁶ Theologically speaking, these are the spaces where God can become present and experienced. When individuals share with others their hurts and hopes, it opens an opportunity for God to be found in vulnerability. For further reading, see Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014). Also see David Hahn for a discussion on how not including listening within a church visioning process is detrimental to discerning the personal action of the Holy Spirit. David C. Hahn, "Congregational Discerning as Divine Action in Conversation," in *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, ed. Dwight J. Zscheile (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2012).

¹⁷ David C. Hahn, "Congregational Discerning as Divine Action in Conversation," 163.

¹⁸ Dave Daubert, "Vision Discernment vs. Vision Casting: How Shared Vision Can Raise Up Communities of Leaders Rather than Mere Leaders of Communities," in *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2009), 163.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 164-165.

Missional churches following this philosophy study their contexts to discover the stories of the people living there.²⁰ They do this while continually pondering where the reign or kingdom of God is already present. “By partnering together to read the context, identify the shaping factors of the heritage and explore new norms to make, the pastors and key leaders of the churches are framing a new question for all in the congregations to learn to engage.”²¹

Considering all of the above, it can be said that missional discernment is the communal process of attending to the work of the Spirit both within and outside of the congregation. Under the assumption that the church is fundamentally “a people”—i.e., a community—missional thinkers perceive vision discernment to be a collective endeavor. They also insist that participating with God in the world means that congregations must grow in awareness of the Spirit by listening to Scripture, each other, and the surrounding context. With a missional understanding of discernment in view, this chapter will move on to consider the concept of vision from a missional perspective.

Missional Vision

Embedded with the missional concept of vision is the underlying assumption of the active reign of God as a defining reality.²² As discussed in Chapter Two, this term is synonymous with the in-breaking of shalom—the Divine vision for the world marked by wholeness, harmony, reconciliation, and salvation. This theological and eschatological

²⁰ For a further study in the patterns of missional congregations, please see, Lois Y. Barrett, ed., *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

²¹ Ibid., 128.

²² Daubert, “Vision Discernment vs. Vision Casting,” 153.

commitment infers several key elements that are important in any missional understanding of the subject.

The first element of vision from a missional perspective is the embodiment of the reign of God. Simply put, missional practitioners advocate that churches initially strive to personify the characteristics of unity, love, and reconciliation that comprise God's reign. Seeing this as an important missional function, the famous missiologist and father of the missional church conversation, Lesslie Newbigin, writes,

How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.²³

Keifert echoes, "If the church is to give itself for the life of the world, it will fail and need to seek reconciliation, not only in the world, but also in the very life of the local church. In this profound sense, the need to embody the ministry of reconciliation becomes the heart and soul of the missional church."²⁴

Embodying the reign of God allows the church to become a foretaste of what the world will finally look like when the kingdom comes in its fullness. Speaking to this idea, Hunsberger notes,

The church in mission may be characterized as the sign of the Messiah's coming. Our being, doing, and speaking are signs that his coming is "already" and "not yet"...Broken though they may be, the signs persist in the world by the Spirit's insistence, and they spell hope for the renewal of the human community in the final reconciliation of all things to God through the Lord Christ. In this respect,

²³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 227.

²⁴ Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era, a Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2006), 24.

the church is the preview community, the foretaste, and harbinger of the coming reign of God.²⁵

Hunsberger raises an important point about how embodiment connects to vision. In essence, the community that embodies the reign of God knows what to look for when it seeks to discern the activity of the Spirit in its context.²⁶ Learning how to interpret the reign of God in the world also contributes to a congregation's ability to observe reality from the Divine perspective. This way of viewing the world profoundly increases Christian spirituality. When it is "true to its calling," Newbigin observes, "it [the church] becomes the place where men and women and children find that the gospel gives them the framework of understanding, the 'lenses' through which they are able to understand and cope with the world."²⁷ In a missional sense, the local church that embodies the reign of God is the wheelhouse upon which believers come to understand and then collectively seek that reign in the world.

The second element of missional vision is that it conveys a shared understanding. Key to this element is the practice of conversation within the community. These conversations may take place at various levels. Groups may be organized across the congregation so that individuals may have adequate space to swap stories. A committee may also be organized to detect various themes heard in the many stories told. A congregational meeting may even be held where this takes place. Whatever the process, these conversations, undergirded by practices of dwelling in the Word and engaging the

²⁵ George Hunsberger, "Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 108.

²⁶ This is why Branson calls the church an interpretive community that "sees and receives the announced reign of God." Branson, "Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church," 99.

²⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227.

context in hospitality, help to clarify how the reign of God should be announced.²⁸ This is the conclusion reached by Keifert when he says that vision is a “communal enterprise...articulated by a community working missionally and dialogically together.”²⁹

The third element of missional vision is that it is conceived as a present calling from God. While not denying the aspect of sight in use of the metaphor—vision—missional vision is more concerned with where the focus of that sight is directed. Not submitting to the popular notion of a vision as that of “seeing a preferred future,”³⁰ missional theologians readily speak of entrusting the future into the hands of God. This simple suggestion shifts the outlook of the church from trying to create a future to looking towards God, who promises to journey with His people into the future.³¹ Seeking the Divine presence in this way means that vision is actually not about perceiving the future at all.³² Missional vision is about joining the work of God in the present.

The underlying argument to this present perception of missional vision actually has much to do with how many missional leaders have re-imagined eschatology. According to Roxburgh, missional churches are to be shaped by the vision of the closing images of Revelation, which serves as “the vision of what God is doing in the present and will bring to completion in the future: a redeemed creation characterized by a new people

²⁸ Patrick R. Keifert and Nigel Rooms, *Forming the Missional Church: Creating Deep Cultural Change in Congregations*, 22.

²⁹ Daubert, “Vision Discernment vs. Vision Casting,” 160.

³⁰ In his process of congregational spiritual discernment, Keifert does use this term when he suggests that a church need only answer a single question: “What is God’s preferred and promised future for our local church?” A complete reading of his text, however, suggests that the focus of the question is still on the present. Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now*, 64-65.

³¹ Daubert, “Vision Discernment vs. Vision Casting,” 160.

³² This should not be taken to mean that vision, in terms of seeing the future, is not helpful. Ibid., 167.

in a new city where God dwells in their midst.”³³ This is the vision that the Spirit is leading the people of God to adopt under the recognition that God’s eschatological future is among the people now, although imperfectly.³⁴ Vision understood in this way is actually more about “looking out” than “looking forward.”³⁵ That is to say, that it brings greater emphasis on recognizing the activity of God, rather than trying to fabricate a reality that does not yet exist. This view is “more faithful to the witness of Jesus, who emphasized engaging the world and God’s actions in the present.”³⁶ A perfect example of this can be seen in Acts 1:7-8. In that text, Jesus appears to be less focused on the disciples having a vision of the future and more concerned with conveying to them the “spiritual eyes” (through their receiving of the Holy Spirit) to see what God is doing in the world.³⁷ Hence, a missional vision “pushes us forward into the future rather than drawing us forward from the future.”³⁸ It reorients the identity of the church as a community on a journey with God.³⁹

The primary concern of missional vision, then, is not what a church is called “to do,” but rather what a church is called “to be.” The words of Hunsberger are again important:

³³ Alan J. Roxburgh, “Missional Leadership: Equipping God’s People for Mission,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 188.

³⁴ Ibid., 187.

³⁵ Daubert, “Vision Discernment vs. Vision Casting,” 156.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 151. Several other texts carry a similar theme, including: the sending of the seventy-two disciples (Luke 10:1-23); the sending of the twelve disciples (Matthew 10); and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20).

³⁸ Daubert, “Vision Discernment vs. Vision Casting,” 160.

³⁹ Ibid., 170.

Being a missional church is all about a sense of identity, shared pervasively in a congregation that knows it is caught up into God's intent for the world. It comes from having heard, one way or another, the still, small voice that says, "You are mine. I have called you to me. I join you to my compassionate approach to the whole world for its healing. You are witnesses to what I have done and what I will yet do."⁴⁰

Having a sense of this larger calling of God—to be caught up with Him for His intent for the world—the local congregation is invited to discern its specific vocation⁴¹ or calling within its present context. In sum, missional vision returns the definition of vision to vocation language.

To summarize this section, it can be posited that missional vision is a Christian community's shared understanding of God's present calling based on the discernment of God's active reign within a given context.⁴² This definition underscores the communal nature and present-directedness of missional vision. Once more, it accentuates the point that missional vision discernment is fundamentally theocentric. But what, if any, is the role of leadership in all of this?

⁴⁰ George R. Hunsberger, "Discerning Missional Vocation," in *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, ed. Lois Barrett (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 36.

⁴¹ Quoting Paul R. Stevens to define vocation, Hunsberger says that for him, vocation is "experiencing and living by a calling, in such a way that it 'provides a fundamental orientation to everyday life.'" Paul R. Stevens, *The Dictionary of Christianity in Everyday Life*, eds. Robert Banks and Paul R. Stevens (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), s.v. "Calling/Vocation," quoted in George R. Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision* (Cambridge, UK: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 113.

⁴² This definition takes into consideration a wide scope of research on the concept of vision in the missional church writings. Nonetheless, it is a somewhat expanded version of the definition offered by Craig Van Gelder. Please see, Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 147.

The Role of Leadership in Missional Vision Discernment

The initial role of missional leadership in vision discernment is to announce the vision of God as the guiding direction of the congregation.⁴³ While missional practitioners are appreciative of how others have viewed the practice of Christian leadership, they have envisioned a vastly different role for leaders in vision discernment. The concept of a pastor or leader arriving in a new place and quickly casting vision for a church is far from a model they would advise. In fact, it's quite the opposite. From their perspective, the pastor or leader is not called to announce the last word—some grand vision or goal. Rather the pastor is called to announce the first word—God's.⁴⁴ Missional leadership keeps God at the heart of church by inviting believers to be captivated by the transformative vision of God.

The second role of missional leadership is to model the Gospel. Just as the church is called to personify the vision of God for its local context, so also must leadership embody it to the congregation. This places the onus on leadership to be out front, "living out the implications and actions of the missional people."⁴⁵ One important way that missional leaders will do this is by embracing a pluralistic leadership structure⁴⁶ that

⁴³ Highlighting this, Roxburgh says, "Leadership in the redeemed community will be shaped by these understandings of humanity's original purpose and God's missional intention for creation." Roxburgh, "Missional Leadership," 198.

⁴⁴ Daubert, "Vision Discernment vs. Vision Casting," 157.

⁴⁵ Roxburgh, "Missional Leadership," 186.

⁴⁶ This may take the form of co-lead pastors, three or more pastors who share the responsibility of leadership within the APEST (Apostolic, Prophetic, Evangelist, Shepherd, Teacher) model, or even an Elder-led church where the lead pastor is one of the Elders. The point is for the congregation to witness a plurality of leaders who are submitting their authority to one another in humility and love. Most, if not all, of the contemporary missional writings suggest this model of leadership as necessary within the present Post-Christian context of North America. For further reading, please see Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken, *Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation* (Downers

bears witness to the relationality of the Trinity.⁴⁷ This type of embodying allows leadership to demonstrate what it looks like to be the people of God.”⁴⁸

This type of modeling further works to form a people who personify that same vision to their surrounding context.⁴⁹ This, according to Roxburgh, is the purpose of leadership, “to form and equip a people who demonstrate and announce the purpose and direction of God through Jesus Christ.”⁵⁰ This imperative is thrust upon leaders because it was also the mission of the ministry of Jesus to form a new community sent by God to be a sign and witness to the incarnation (and resurrection) of Jesus.⁵¹

The third role of missional leadership is to create spaces for the Spirit to operate. As was mentioned above, these spaces will be created through the practices of listening, dialogue, and engagement with Scripture. A key metaphor in missional literature to describe this type of leadership is cultivation,⁵² “as it reminds us that we can plant, water, and seek to provide good light and air, but it is God who gives the growth.”⁵³ Leadership, then, cultivates an environment that facilitates the people’s entry into the interpretative framework of the Spirit in and around them.

Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011). Also see J. R. Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012).

⁴⁷ Roxburgh, “Missional Leadership,” 186.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ As discussed in the previous section of this chapter.

⁵⁰ Roxburgh, “Missional Leadership,” 183-184.

⁵¹ Ibid., 185.

⁵² “Cultivation—is an ancient word taken from gardening and horticulture.” Please see Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 152-153.

⁵³ Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 155-156.

This leads directly to the fourth role of missional leadership: the weaving together of spiritual meaning. Using the metaphor of a “poet,” Roxburgh describes,

The pastor weaves together the people’s voices so that the story of who they are and what they actually experience is articulated, called forth, and owned. In this process the tapestry of their lives is made visible...Such poetry writing begins the process of calling out an alternative vision for God’s people...the poet writes so that the congregation hears their story as God’s pilgrim people.⁵⁴

In describing the pastor/leader in this way, Roxburgh is advancing the idea that a key function of leadership is to aid the congregation in weaving together, into one narrative, the various narratives swirling around it. This type of practice cultivates the necessary environment for a congregational calling to emerge.

The final role of missional leadership in vision discernment is to keep the community faithful to the Vision. Missional leadership encourages people “to keep their eyes open—engaging context in the journey, sharing gifts, assets, and passions in ways that meet each other’s needs, and staying focused on the purpose for their trip and the behaviors they will hold to along the way.”⁵⁵ Daubert says, “When this happens, a few might see far ahead, but all of us will be better prepared to engage in ministry and have the eyes to see that Jesus calls us to have now.”⁵⁶

In view of these findings, the chief aim of missional leadership in vision discernment is to keep God at the heart of the conversation. It models the Gospel and seeks to guide a community into naming, claiming, and living into a collective narrative

⁵⁴ Alan J. Roxburgh, “Pastoral Role in the Missionary Congregation,” in *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, eds. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1996), 330-331.

⁵⁵ Daubert, “Vision Discernment vs. Vision Casting,” 170.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

within a context.⁵⁷ This way of leading is faithful to the words of Lesslie Newbigin when he says, “the task of ministry is to lead the congregation as a whole in a mission to the community as a whole, to claim its public life, as well as the personal lives of all its people, for God’s rule.”⁵⁸ To see how all of the above can be put together, this chapter will now survey three separate models of missional vision discernment.

Processes for Missional Vision Discernment⁵⁹

Dave Daubert – Vision Discerning vs. Vision Casting⁶⁰

The book *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity* is a key text within the missional church movement. Writing a contributing chapter, Daubert proposes a congregational process for vision discernment grounded in prayer, Scriptural study, and intentional conversation. The role of leadership in this model is to create tension between three key segments: missional identity, contextual engagement, and the faith community.

The goal of the first segment—missional identity—is to help the congregation articulate its commitment to the mission of God and their identity within it. To accomplish this, Daubert suggests that leaders engage their congregations with a biblical study around missional texts like Luke 10:1-20. The process also calls for the identification of biblically defined values that act as guiding principles in discernment.

⁵⁷ For more on how missional leadership can cultivate a missional congregation, please see Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 143-170.

⁵⁸ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 238.

⁵⁹ Most, if not all, of the processes mentioned were designed for the transitioning of a traditional church to a missional church.

⁶⁰ Daubert, “Vision Discernment vs. Vision Casting,” 163- 171. Please note that I will not quote each element separately.

The hope is that through dialogue the community will begin to recognize the purpose of the church, within the context of the *missio Dei*.

The second segment—contextual engagement—is when the congregation engages the context both informationally (i.e., demographic studies) and relationally (i.e., talking and connecting with actual people in the context). One important element in this work is the assumption that God is already at work in the world. Therefore, the underlined question, “What is God up to?” is repeatedly asked throughout the contextual engagement.

In the final segment, the faith community is invited into deeper self-awareness. During this phase the people are called to consider their gifts, assets, passions, and even their needs. This is an important time for the church as they may discover latent spiritual gifts, unaddressed needs, or a passion that has been uncultivated. Whatever the outcome, the communal self-awareness enables the people to receive their unique vision.

A vital part of this process is the integration of peer coaching—a group of trained leaders within the congregation who aid the church in honoring and drawing out the expertise already present within the congregation and its context. These coaches accomplish this task by pushing the group to ask the right questions, rather than seeking the right answers. Daubert believes this cast of leaders is vital for modeling shared responsibility, as well as the long-term cultural change necessary for missional vision discernment.

In this process, the people are invited into conversations with God, Scripture, the context, and each other to discern what God is up to. According to Daubert, it is from the pressing together of these three areas that vision can arise. Additionally, this process is

spiritually formative in that it enables believers to grow in faith, unity, and awareness to the presence of God.

*Craig Van Gelder – A Five Phase Discernment Process*⁶¹

In light of what is called the “hermeneutical turn,”⁶² Van Gelder’s process seeks to give Christian communities a framework for how they might enter into discernment and decision-making. Undergirded by the conviction that the church is led by the Spirit, his model begins by recognizing four key interpretive dimensions—texts,⁶³ the context, the community (i.e., the church),⁶⁴ and strategic actions.

The integration of these separate facets allows for missional vision discernment. The initial engagement of the primary texts, for example, allows congregations to become more biblically and theologically formed.⁶⁵ This is followed by an examination of the context informed by social sciences, in the hopes that congregations can become more

⁶¹ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 95-120. Please note that I will not quote each element separately. Additionally, it is important to understand that his shared process is geared toward the communal discernment of a specific action needing to be made by the Christian community-congregation. He envisions this process as a tool that can be utilized for ongoing discernment. This proposal, however, can be understood as a process for discerning vision. This judgment is based on a full reading of his text. Therefore, the model as described here should be seen as the discernment process necessary for discovering the “vision” component of his larger framework of a congregation from an open systems perspective, as described in pages 121-152 of his book.

⁶² This term denotes “the shift that has taken place in our understanding during the past century that all human knowledge is situated, perspectival, and interpreted...no one has a privileged position of objectivity when it comes to knowing something.” Ibid., 20.

⁶³ These include the Scriptures, as well as, in some smaller way, the larger Christian tradition.

⁶⁴ He specifically means the nature of the church and the shared practices that contribute to its self-understanding.

⁶⁵ Van Gelder gives room for the theological variance found in different Christian traditions. However, the central missional truths, he suggests, are unabated. These profess that: God is a Triune God; God is a creating God; God is a sending God who seeks to redeem and reconcile the world through Jesus; the reconciling and redemptive work of God is present in the Kingdom of God; God is presently working out His redemptive reign in the world through the work of the Spirit; and the not yet redemptive reign will one day consummate in the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. Ibid., 110-111.

theoretically informed about the neighborhood. In addition, the practice of communal discernment brings the very essence of the community (or church) into the equation and solidifies the presence of God in the process an acting subject.⁶⁶ Acting strategically based on the all of the above helps the congregation to live into the unfolding vision. Framing this integration, however, are the several phases of communal discernment.⁶⁷

The first phase of *attending* involves giving careful attention to the context (both within and outside of the congregation) for the purpose of describing the reality of the situation. This is done through an intentional effort of collective listening centered on two questions: “What is God doing?” and “What does He want our church to do?”

The second phase, *asserting*, involves testing alternative strategic choices for action based on the initial integration of the biblical, theological, and theoretical insights—texts and context. For the purposes of discerning vision, this may involve further descriptions of the two attending questions.⁶⁸

In *agreeing*, the third phase, the congregation reaches a collective agreement of strategic action in light of the texts and context. Central to reaching this phase is the commitment of the congregation to corporate prayer throughout the process.

Acting is the fourth phase and contains aspects of implementation. At this juncture, a prayerful strategy can be developed, including plans for the congregation (or

⁶⁶ Guiding communal discernment is the reality that the Spirit of God is present in the midst of the congregation, coupled with a recognition that a congregation is comprised of a plethora of different values, biases, interpretations, and power dynamics. As such, an open and deliberative dialogue is essential in communal discernment. Ibid., 108-109.

⁶⁷ Van Gelder actually lists this as a five-fold process. I have chosen to exclude two of the phases of Acting and Assessing. While these are important to understanding his entire process, they would not be necessary for a communally discerned missional vision within his process.

⁶⁸ These questions are listed in the preceding paragraph as, “What is God doing?” and “What does He want our church to do?”

at least the leadership) to get back regular feedback of its implementation. Analogous to its name, this phase can be seen as continually ongoing.

The final phase of *assessing* involves a thorough review of what took place in the implementation process. Such a review may find areas that require recalibrating the strategy. It may even include a review of the entire discernment process. This could be beneficial to the community as they come to learn how the congregation responded during the process or what aspects of the process they could improve. In either event, this final phase may lead back to the beginning of assessment for continued discernment.

*Patrick Keifert's Four-Phase Process*⁶⁹

Patrick Keifert's entire process is presented as a journey of spiritual discernment that engages cultural change. More specifically, it could better be described as a framework for the renewal of a missional imagination within a congregation. The four phases of the process are: discovering, experimenting, visioning for embodiment, and learning.⁷⁰

Keifert's process is very similar to the models mentioned above, with some variance. The most serious modification comes in the second phase of experimenting, where Keifert advocates that congregations practice small missional experiments.⁷¹ For Keifert, these experiments are critical for discerning God's preferred future because they help clarify where God could actually be at work among the people.

⁶⁹ Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now*, 61-138. Please note that I will not quote each element separately.

⁷⁰ The last phase is actually "learning and growing." For the sake of brevity, I have opted to just use the first word.

⁷¹ These are small ministry projects carried out across the congregation based on the initial understanding of where God may be present.

All of these processes contribute greatly to the practice of missional vision discernment, though in different ways. Daubert highlights several things, including the clarification that vision discernment occurs through missional behaviors. Van Gelder adequately describes how communal discernment engages the four interpretive dimensions of texts, context, community, and strategic action. Though his project is somewhat larger in scale, Keifert's proposal to experiment with potential discernment "leadings" within pockets of the congregation could be a worthy endeavor. Perhaps more importantly, however, is his strong use of vocational language. In fact, he verbalizes a key theme that is also hinted at by the other two authors. Namely, that what needs to be discovered more than a "vision" is a "vocation."

The common thread throughout these three processes is that missional vision discernment is a journey. This posture can be spiritually formative for a congregation because it inherently creates an environment for faith, trust, and submission to God's will to be valued. These are all key requirements for discernment.

Discoveries Towards a Model of Theocentric Vision Discernment

This analysis has emphasized the theocentric nature of missional vision discernment. With this in mind, this final section will highlight several major discoveries that could be beneficial towards the model of theocentric vision discernment that will be presented in the next chapter. First, it was observed that missional vision discernment is a communal process, inviting the entire church into the vision journey. This finding could be helpful in creating a sense of community, inclusion, and ownership concerning the final vision. It would also aid in increasing congregational spirituality, since this type of

discernment is achieved through prayer, dwelling in Scripture, and missional engagement.

Second, it was discovered that missional vision discernment seeks to determine how the Spirit is working inside and outside the church. This point is critical as it underlines how leadership must equally engage the congregation and the surrounding context in an attempt to get a full picture of what God is doing. One of the ways this could be accomplished is through the telling of stories from various perspectives. This practice could be vital for discernment, as well as an easy way for church members to reconnect with each other and the neighborhood.

Third, this chapter recovered the notion of vocation, or calling, as the primary metaphor for vision discernment. Changing the metaphor from “vision” to “vocation” would help reinforce the notion that God already has a vision. What is needed is for churches to recognize how God is calling them to pursue that vision now within their local context. Simply put, God has a vision and churches have callings.

While this chapter has listed several functions of leadership in vision discernment, three warrant highlighting. The first is that leadership announces the vision of God. The second is that leadership strives to create an environment that forms and equips churches to demonstrate and announce God’s purposes, through Jesus Christ, to the world.⁷² The third is that leadership serves the congregation by helping it weave together a single narrative of meaning. Because the process requires the collection of data from a broad range of sources, this third task will prove to be critical. In all of these ways, the main

⁷² Roxburgh, “Missional Leadership,” 183-184.

objective of leadership is to keep God at the center of the congregation's conversation and imagination.

Summary

Recognizing the profound impact that the missional church movement has begun to have on the current practice of ministry, this chapter has sought to uncover if there are any contributions it has made towards a clearer understanding of theocentric vision discernment. This search began with an analysis on the concept of missional discernment, which was finally defined as the communal process of attending to the work of the Spirit both within and outside of the congregation. This chapter then moved on to outline the elements comprising a missional understanding of vision. Reaching a conclusion, it was suggested that missional vision primarily has to do with the Christian community's shared understanding of God's present "calling" based on the discernment of God's active reign within a given context. The next section went on to sketch the role of leadership within this framework as one that embodies the Gospel and seeks to guide a community into naming, claiming, and living into a collective narrative within a context. The following section illustrated how these components work in practice by outlining three distinct processes designed by missional practitioners. Finally, this chapter concluded by outlining four major discoveries towards a proposed model of theocentric vision discernment. In the next and closing chapter of this dissertation, a final model will be proposed.

CHAPTER SIX:

A THEOCENTRIC MODEL OF VISION DISCERNMENT

“Vision...is rooted in God’s plan for humanity and for the world. Vision is the big picture, God’s kingdom, offered by God as a gift. Once the community has a sweeping view of God’s intended future, it can begin to look at particulars through the eyes of spiritual discernment.”¹

—Morris and Olson

Overview

How can congregational vision be shaped in a way that is spiritually formative for the faith community as a whole? This is the central question that has driven and grounded this dissertation. The theocentric model of vision discernment proposed in this chapter will attempt to address the concerns that have raised this question. Thus, the proposal will seek to be communal, present-oriented, and theologically informed. Moreover, it will seek to invite leaders and their congregations into specific postures that allow them to reimagine their calling locally within the ongoing story of God.

The language of discernment is fundamental to this approach and has been used throughout this study as a way of re-orientating the imagination to a Christian philosophy of vision, namely, that the concept of vision is less about fabricating an idea and more about receiving a calling and identity within a present reality:

A key to discerning vision is the assumption held by Christians that the reign of God is a defining reality. Within God’s reign, pointed to and embodied in the ministry and person of Jesus, is the ultimate vision for humanity and for all of creation. Participation in the mission of God is a commitment to the content of this reign in the present—the church serving as a foretaste of what is to come.²

¹ Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997), 54.

² Dave Daubert, “Vision Discernment vs. Vision Casting,” 153.

With these thoughts in mind, this chapter will describe the proposal. Before doing this, however, the next section will briefly review what has been covered. This will be followed by a description of the elements that make up the proposal.

Summary

Noted in Chapter One, many evangelical churches have turned to the idea that having a compelling vision is the key to creating a thriving community. It is for this reason that lead pastors will spend time in prayer, study, attending conferences, and even personal retreats in search for a vision that will captivate their congregations. In the subsequent months, elders and some staff are brought into the process as a way to gain buy-in and perhaps even sharpen the vision. All of this leads into a vision-cast sermon or speech, when the lead pastor stands before the congregation in order to “rally the troops” into supporting the new goals and direction of the church. Pastors undertake this process with the best of intentions. However, this model of vision development fails to bring the congregation along into the journey of creating the vision itself. The process does not invite the people of God into deeper spiritual formation, the real key to a thriving community. It does not recognize, in other words, the time of visioning as an opportunity for spiritual formation not just for the leaders but for the entire faith community. Why is this the case? This is the primary question Chapter One sought to answer.

The problem, as noted in that chapter, is that evangelical models of vision development possess an anthropocentric orientation that is individualistic, future-focused, and derived from business practices, thus subverting the spiritual formation of congregations. It showed how prizing the individual leader as the sole progenitor of

vision is not only informed by anthropocentric philosophy, but also how the same is harmful to congregational spirituality. It highlighted how being pre-occupied with creating a preferred future can actually work against a congregation's ability to grow in awareness to the workings of the Holy Spirit in the present. It also observed how the business or corporate principles that many praise are actually shaped by notions of human progress rather than biblical theology. Subsequently, much of the discussion and practice of evangelical churches in vision development is not informed by God, theology, and Christian spirituality. Hence, it can be rendered as anthropocentric.

Chapter Two assumed that a theocentric approach was needed to resolve this problem. Beginning with a biblical foundation, Chapter Two sought to provide the building blocks for a theocentric model of vision discernment by asking three primary questions:

- What is the vision of God?
- Who discerns that vision?
- How is that vision discerned?

Probing the biblical text with these questions, the Hebrew concept of shalom—a comprehensive vision of wellness, wholeness, harmony, and salvation—was discovered to be the vision of God for the world. In the Old Testament, discerning this reality was the chief responsibility of the prophets. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as ushering in the reality of shalom through His gospel of the kingdom of God. In the wilderness temptations, even Jesus discerns between a self- or God-centered vision to inform the future direction of His ministry. Finally, the Early Church was witnessed discerning shalom through the help of spiritual leadership.

This analysis revealed several important outcomes. One such discovery was the prominent role that the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, Scripture meditation,³ and silence played throughout the narratives. Another was the significance of “guiding” leadership, as witnessed in Acts 15. The chief discovery of this chapter, however, was the retrieval of the vision of shalom as the driving narrative that informed the life of the people of God. This means that discerning shalom is at the heart of a spiritually formative theocentric vision discernment.

Chapter Three set out to provide a theological foundation for theocentric vision discernment. Building on the gains of the previous chapter, this third chapter showed how the vision of shalom is derived from the nature of God. This discovery was reached after considering the nature of God as a social or communal Trinity. The chapter then went on to explain the nature of the church as a Trinitarian ecclesiology as opposed to the popular notions of the church as a religious business organization. More specifically, it detailed how God’s primary imagination of the church is that of “a people” who have been “called out” to discern and bear witness to the workings of the Triune God in the world through its *koinonia* (“fellowship”). All of this is to see the fulfillment of the vision of shalom so that the world would come to enjoy the perichoretic Unity that God enjoys within Himself.

This examination also uncovered the two values of communion and mutuality as major contributors towards a model that embodies the notions of participation, unity,

³ I concede that there is no direct mention of Scriptural mediation in these passages. Mentioning this term here is an attempt to denote that both Jesus and the Early Church were immersed in the Scriptures. Furthermore, being immersed in Scripture was key in providing guidance in discernment.

submission, and relationality. These same attributes are critical for congregational discernment. In sum, they prioritize a church's ontology as gifts for discovering vision.

Chapter Four attempted to determine if there were any precedents of theocentric vision discernment within Church history. To satisfy this goal, the discernment models found within the Ignatian and Friends (Quaker) traditions were evaluated. While neither possessed a concept of visionary leadership, both still proved to be theocentric models. This was first illustrated by Ignatius of Loyola in *Spiritual Exercises*, a process that was used to support increased awareness of how various paths lead to communion, participation, and faith in God. The discernment model was also observed in the congregational model of the Quakers, the Meeting for Worship in which Business is Conducted, that sought to corporately discover the will of God.

That chapter also offered a brief reflection on several key features found within both models, which included the practices of Examen and dwelling in the Word,⁴ the culture of silence, the use of open deliberations, and the presence of guiding leadership. These characteristics aided the respective traditions in cultivating a spiritually formative way of discernment.

Chapter Five examined the subject of missional vision discernment. The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the contributions made by missional theologians towards a theocentric model. This chapter carefully defined the concepts of discernment, vision, and leadership from a missional perspective. It also illustrated how these terms functioned within three distinct processes.

⁴ Or Scriptural meditation.

The chapter concluded by highlighting several significant discoveries, the first being that vision discernment must not be done in isolation but within community. Additionally, it was observed that such discernment is not a search for a new idea, but rather a recognition of how the Spirit is working inside and outside the church. The third major insight was the recovery of vocation as a primary metaphor. Finally, the research discovered the critical role of leadership as announcing the vision of shalom, creating an environment that forms the people in demonstrating that vision, and weaving together a single narrative of meaning.

The purpose of this section has been to provide a useful summary of the findings of this study. This survey has been valuable in highlighting the important considerations when thinking through the issue of vision formation. With this in mind, the elements that support the proposed model can be considered.

Elements of Theocentric Vision Discernment

The first element of theocentric vision discernment is the reframing of the metaphor of vision to missional vocation. Within the context of this study, missional vocation could be defined as the “calling” a church receives in order to join God in His present work within a local community. This was a key discovery learned by examining missional discernment in Chapter Five. It carries with it enormous implications, as it brings attention to congregational identity instead of congregational activity. Shifting the metaphor in this way would remind churches that “doing” must be generated from their “being” as God’s people who are shaped by His story.⁵ Once more, reframing the

⁵ As Mark Lau Branson notes, “God does care about results, if by that we mean God’s initiatives toward a full orbbed shalom and the identity and agency of those who use God’s name.” Mark Lau Branson,

direction of the church around the metaphor of vocation would completely change the congregational posture from one of “creating a vision” to “receiving a calling.” With the future firmly in the hands of God, churches would be freed to simply journey into the future together in faith. In sum, this initial element would put the church in the best position to see the process as one that can be spiritually formative. This reframing is done by consistently raising the question: Who is God calling us to be?

The second element is the integration of spiritual disciplines. More specifically, this element incorporates the disciplines of dwelling in the Word, prayer,⁶ silence, the practice of Examen, and corporate worship. The significance of these spiritual practices was observed both in the discernment of Jesus and the Early Church in Chapter Two. They were also a major takeaway from the analysis of the Ignatian and Quaker traditions in Chapter Four. Integrating these disciplines throughout the process would be helpful as the congregation seeks after God individually and collectively. Dwelling in the Word, for example, would assist in shaping the imagination. Sitting in times of prayer would be a reminder of the need to depend on God. Moments of silence would quiet inner restlessness. The practice of Examen would create space for the workings of God to be more keenly observed. Incorporating corporate worship in the process would aid in fostering a greater sense that everyone is seeking God together. Simply put, the disciplines would keep the people in the most conducive posture for discernment.

“Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church,” in *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 94.

⁶ While there are appropriate times for petitionary prayer, this model encourages different types of prayer such as: silent, centering, unceasing, and meditative. Still, one of the best primers on prayer is Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

The third element is to make *koinonia* an integral part of the process. Seeing that the church is primarily a people who have been “called out” into fellowship with God and one another, it is important that the process be communal in nature. This priority is directly derived from the Trinitarian ecclesiology discussed in Chapter Three. Therefore, the process offered below encourages participation from across the congregation. More than merely a practical element, intentionally engaging the church in this way serves to acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit in its life corporately and individually. It also makes deeper relationality a priority. This is no easy task, but the words of Joseph Hellerman provide hope:

This practice of relationality, mutuality, community and interdependence springing a Trinitarian perspective should not be idealized. In reality, it is difficult to practice for reasons we have already seen. However, one way that Christians can develop this characteristic is by engaging in the practice of hospitality. This is an important concept for missional spirituality and once again connects discipleship with evangelism or mission as the people of God engage in hospitality practices themselves, while also connecting with what God is doing by his Spirit.⁷

Providing opportunities for hospitality where individuals are sharing their stories in each other’s homes over a meal will position the church to grow in unity.

The fourth element is listening. While gathering statistical information is important, the proposed model requires that faith communities listen in order to determine how the Holy Spirit is working among them. The importance of this simple practice was witnessed throughout Chapters Two and Four. There it was observed that listening for the themes of the Spirit’s presence⁸ in the narratives of church members, the surrounding context, and faith community, is itself a critical practice for congregational

⁷ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2009), 125.

⁸ i.e., Through greater experiences or evidences of grace, love, liberation, wholeness, healing, etc.

discernment. Listening to another person or a group of other people is not easy. Therefore, this element invites participants into increased dispositions of silence and open-ended questioning.

The final element is spiritual leadership. This type of leadership reflects the major findings in this study's discussion about the role of leadership. This type of leadership is exhibited by the Apostle Peter and James in Acts 15, the Clerk within the Quaker business meeting, and the missional pastor/leader. Its chief priority is to keep the church immersed in the story of God, as well as helping it to find its calling in light of that story. This fifth element also seeks to help the church make sense of what God is doing in the various stories heard throughout the community. Highlighted in Chapter Five, this is an act that Alan Roxburgh refers to as "weaving." According to Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, "spiritual leadership is occurring wherever members of the faith community are weaving new strands of connection between the source of meaning (as defined by their religious tradition) and their present situation—with all its perils, opportunities, and choices."⁹ In sum, spiritual leadership can be characterized as announcing the vision of shalom, weaving together congregational meaning, and non-anxiously guiding the process of discernment.

Proposal

Before proposing a model of theocentric vision discernment, a few presuppositions should be mentioned. First, this model presupposes the creation of a vision or steering team that will be responsible for organizing its various movements,

⁹ Gilbert R. Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003), 109.

collecting the data, and synthesizing the information. Second, this model assumes that the social sciences (i.e., demographic studies, etc.) will be utilized by the leadership. Third, though this proposal is intentionally communal, it recognizes that not every person will be willing to participate. Therefore, it assumes the volunteerism of church members. Last, it should be clear that there are three separate discernment gatherings (congregational meetings) throughout the process.¹⁰

After considering the aforementioned elements and presuppositions, this dissertation is ready to propose a model for theocentric vision discernment as spiritual formation. This process is meant to cultivate greater awareness of the Spirit's presence within the church and is designed to be completed within a seven- to ten-month period. Since discernment cannot be controlled, this time period is only intended as a framework.

Step 1—"Casting" the Vision of Shalom (2 Months)

The first step is for the senior or lead pastor to clearly articulate the vision of shalom. This single action brings God squarely into the center of the conversation and immerses the community in the story of God as found in Scripture. By doing this at the beginning of the process, the leadership is also confessing that the only compelling vision the church should have is that of the Triune God. Perhaps even more importantly, however, announcing the vision of shalom immediately sets the congregation into the posture of seeking God in discernment for their shared vocation. This step represents the integration of the first and fifth elements into the process.¹¹ How exactly might this look?

¹⁰ At the latter part of Steps 2 and 3. Also the entirety of Step 4.

¹¹ These elements are listed above.

Casting the vision of shalom might take the shape of a six- to eight-week sermon series at the beginning of the year.¹² Possible sermons series themes may include:

- Living into Shalom: A sermon series highlighting how to live into the four aspects of shalom—peace with God, peace with ourselves, peace with others, and peace with the creation.
- The Vandalism & Restoration of Shalom: Beginning with Genesis and ending in Revelation, this sermon series would seek to uncover the original intent God had for the world, how sin has vandalized it, and how God, through Jesus Christ, is making all things new.
- The Reign of God: A sermon series looking at the meaning of the reign or kingdom of God and how Jesus invites believers to participate in God’s kingdom in the book of Matthew.

Simultaneously, congregants could become more immersed in the concept of the vision of shalom in smaller group settings. Churches that have sermon-based small groups, for example, could develop small group lessons based on the topic just as they would usually do throughout a series. Others, who do not utilize small groups in this way, could do the same with their Sunday School or Bible classes. Addressing the sermon material in this smaller group setting would allow for further development of major themes, as well as promote dialogue around key questions raised by the sermon series.

In order to adequately reorient the rest of the process as one of missional discernment, it is vital that the following twin questions be raised throughout this step:

1) In light of this vision, who is God calling us to be? 2) What is He calling us to do? At

¹² This may also be done at any other time of the year where the pastor may traditionally do a “vision-casting” series.

this point, the non-anxious role of spiritual leadership must be exhibited. As has already been noted, the role of spiritual leadership is not to rush the church to the answer. By leaving these questions hanging in the consciousness of the congregation, leadership is creating space for the community to seek God for the answer together in discernment. This entire posture is made possible because the church is focusing not on its own BHAG,¹³ but the vision of shalom.

Step 2—Listening to the Soul of the Congregation (2 to 3 Months)

The second step is listening to the “soul,” or the internal and spiritual state of the congregation. This is done by leading the community in recalling where God has worked in their collective past. The other aspect of this step is allowing space for congregants to listen to the ways in which the Spirit has been working in the lives of other believers. The point is to help the church become more aware of God’s presence among them. Once more, this step is meant to aid in revealing how their collective story connects with God’s work of renewal. Listening to the community in this way can provide invaluable data for congregational discernment. Though the third element of listening is emphasized, this step also incorporates the elements of the spiritual disciplines, *koinonia*, and spiritual leadership throughout. Furthermore, it continues to reinforce the metaphorical shift towards missional vocation by asking the discernment question: Where has God been present among us?

The initial component to this second step is constructing the church’s corporate narrative through a Timeline Exercise. There are a variety of ways that leadership could

¹³ This is a common acronym, meaning “Big. Hairy. Audacious. Goal.”

proceed with this exercise, depending on the size of the congregation.¹⁴ No matter the format, the exercise should be communal and probably done on a weekend afternoon or evening. During this session, those who attend will participate in several practices including: a shared meal, prayer, and a brief time of dwelling in the Word. During this latter spiritual discipline, those present would be invited to prayerfully listen to a Scriptural passage that illustrates the vision of shalom.¹⁵ Once completed, the chosen facilitator can lead the group in identifying, on a 20-foot piece of butcher paper, the major events in the congregation's life. This notation should begin with the present pastor and work backwards through the rest.¹⁶ These events may include such things as:

- The addition or loss of specific staff members
- The buying or renovation of a property
- Major cultural shifts within the congregation
- The start and close of impactful ministries
- Times of financial abundance
- Major controversies

Additionally, participants could be prompted to identify when they joined or other significant moments in their own lives where the church played a supportive role. After an hour and a half of this type of dialogue, the facilitator can ask the participants if they

¹⁴ The church can be called to meet congregationally or in medium-sized groups.

¹⁵ When speaking about this exercise throughout the remainder of this chapter, I am referring to it as it is being described here. Examples may include texts like: Genesis 1; 2; Isaiah 65:17-25; 11; Jeremiah 29:1-14; Matthew 5:1-10, Ephesians 2:1-18; Revelation 21; 22. Whether one uses these or other related texts, participants should not feel the need to use a different text for every gathering or meeting. A couple texts or even a single text to be repeatedly used works as well.

¹⁶ This method is suggested only because most church members can recall events based on who was the church pastor at that particular time.

see any reoccurring themes that convey God's presence in the story of the church or the various stories they've heard. After the session, the timeline can be hung in a public area of the church (i.e., fellowship hall, town square, etc.) with instructions for others to add their memories.

The second component is the practice of a weekly Examen. Like the previous component, this practice should be done communally, utilizing a church's existing small group or Sunday School structure. Over a period of 6 to 8 weeks, groups could prayerfully practice this exercise as suggested by Ruth Haley Barton below.¹⁷ Participants could be signaled to move to the next part of this exercise by the use of a bell.¹⁸ The model is as follows:

- *Preparation:* Begin by lighting a candle representing God's presence within the group. Spend 5 minutes in silence, becoming still to God's love. End this time with a Scripture reading (i.e., a Psalm) or a written prayer that could be read corporately.
- *Invitation:* Each person can be directed to prayerfully invite God to show them His presence throughout the past week.
- *Review of the Day:* Participants identify and reflect on the events of the past week, allowing God to reveal times where his love, guidance, or grace was apparent. They may also ask God to show them the missed opportunities where they were invited to be loved or to show love to others.

¹⁷ R. Ruth Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 108-109.

¹⁸ The time allotted for this exercise should be between 12 and 15 minutes.

- *Give Thanks:* As they review their week, participants should thank God for his presence within the midst of their lives. If there were moments during the week that were confusing, anxiety-ridden, or unresolved, group members can thank God for the grace of His presence even within these tensions.
- *Confess:* A time where God is invited to reveal the moments where believers failed to exhibit Christlikeness. As these revelations emerge, members can confess them prayerfully to God.
- *Ask Forgiveness:* Following the time of confession, group members can now ask for and claim the forgiveness already afforded by Jesus.
- *Seek Out Spiritual Friendship:* This last part envisions members sharing their insights and experiences with the group. The leaders would then record the general themes heard over the time period and report it to the vision team.

All of the data gleaned from these two exercises is to be recorded and sent to the vision team. This data includes key stories that were told.¹⁹ Additionally, it also must include the prevailing themes of God's presence that have emerged.

The final portion of this step is to report the findings at a called Discernment Gathering.²⁰ This gathering should start with worship songs (15 min). This would be followed by a centering prayer of preparation²¹ (5 min). Next, is a time of dwelling in the word (10 min). Afterward, the discernment question considering where God has been present among the people can be brought forward. At this point, someone from the vision

¹⁹ This should exclude names and contain some factual changes when appropriate.

²⁰ What is mentioned here is an adapted version of the example found in by Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time*, 78-80.

²¹ As described above.

team would give a report²² that shares the narrative of the church, the stories of members, and the key themes discovered in this step (20 min). Most important in this report is the ability of the presenter to link how God's presence among the people correlates to the vision of shalom. Following this, responses would be shared from those who are present. They may opt to share their story, what these exercises have taught them, or where they have seen God throughout the process thus far (45 min). The meeting would then conclude with a prayer of thanksgiving (10 min).

Step 3—Listening to the Soul of the Neighborhood (2 to 3 Months)

The third step is to listen to the soul of the neighborhood. The aim for this step is to gather helpful information about what is going on in the surrounding context of the church.²³ While insights from demographic analyses are helpful, this step seeks to encourage the congregation to listen and observe where the vision of shalom is breaking in all around them. This phase, therefore, integrates the elements of listening, the spiritual disciplines, and *koinonia*. It also provides a relational link between demographics and the stories of real people. The metaphorical shift initiated at the beginning of the process continues here as well through the primary discernment question: Where is there evidence of the work of God around us?

Similar to the previous step, this third step can utilize the existing small group structure found in many churches. Instead of going through their regular curriculum, however, these small groups would gather over a 6- to 8-week period to listen to their surrounding context. After sharing a meal together, the group would practice the dwelling

²² Perhaps using video, PowerPoint, etc.

²³ For megachurches, within the city at large.

in the Word exercise—spending 5 to 10 minutes listening to a missional text.²⁴ Ending in prayer, the group can then spend the next 45 minutes to an hour walking or driving around the community. The first week may merely be one of observation. In the weeks that follow, however, the group should be encouraged to stop into a coffee shop, a bar, or any other third space²⁵ in order to engage people in conversation, after which, the group can reassemble and spend some time debriefing with questions similar to these:

- What types of buildings did you see?
- What was the condition of the streets?
- Are there things that surprised you?
- Who did you see?
- What were people doing?
- What was the attitude of the people you met?
- What are the names of the people that you met?
- What stories did people tell you?
- What single emotion would you use to describe some of the stories you heard?
- What did the people teach you?
- Where did you see evidence of the Spirit's work in the lives of people or throughout the neighborhood?
- How is the Kingdom of God breaking into this context?

At the end of the 6 to 8 weeks, the groups could synthesize the dominant themes and turn them over to the vision team, after which a report could be given at a second

²⁴ Two possible options would be the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37) or the sending of the seventy-two disciples (Luke 10:1-12).

²⁵ This is any place people usually frequent besides home and work/school.

discernment gathering so others could hear the themes and stories about what God is up to in their context. As stated before, the presenter sharing the discernment question must be intentional with communicating how the themes and stories connect to the biblical vision of shalom.

Step 4—Deciding in a Congregational Vision Meeting (1 to 2 Months)

The final step is to make a decision regarding the church's missional vocation, that is to say, their present calling within the vision of shalom locally. This action is to take place in a final congregational vision meeting. This last phase demonstrates all of the elements mentioned above. Therefore, the discernment question becomes: In light of all that we have learned in the previous three steps, who is God calling us to be? What is our present vocation?

First, the outline of the meeting should be similar to the aforementioned discernment gatherings, with some modifications. Like the other gatherings, the meeting should begin with times of worship singing, prayer, and dwelling in the Word (totaling 30 min). The time of sharing around the discernment question, however, should be divided into three reports of 7 to 10 minutes each. The first two reports are merely reminders about what was learned during Steps 2 and 3. These can be given by one of the leaders on the vision team²⁶ or a staff pastor/elder. It should include the significant stories that have been told and the major themes that have been observed. These two reports should each be followed by Scripture readings (2 to 3 min each)²⁷ and a prayer of thanksgiving (3 to 5 min) for what has been learned. The last report, however, should be made by the lead

²⁶ This should be someone who did not share the report at any of the previous two gatherings.

²⁷ See the examples above.

pastor. This report should clearly articulate a picture of the church's possible missional vocation based on the vision of shalom, God's past work among the people, and His present activity both within and outside the church walls.²⁸ Weaving all of these aspects together should provide a narrative of spiritual meaning that enables the people to live into what God is doing among them. Once more, it may also include some values and/or practices that are required for implementation. Offering the report in this way casts the lead pastor in the role of James at the Jerusalem Council, who, after hearing the discussions, offered a clear vocational direction.²⁹ This is a key function of spiritual leadership.

Second, the congregation can spend 5 to 10 minutes in silent prayer together. This silent prayer time should be a little easier due to the fact that the congregation has been cultivating this practice throughout. Still, some unease is probably to be expected. One option is to rotate passages of Scripture on the screen along with meditational music playing in the background.

Third, the floor should be opened for deliberation. Here, those present should be encouraged to share, but not to share their "opinions." The central question driving the conversation must be whether or not the direction effectively communicates a shared vocation. Does it adequately join in what God is doing? Thus, the community will be called to listen for and discern the Spirit in each other. Opening the floor in business

²⁸ The content of this presentation should be made collaboratively with the vision team, elders, and other key leaders. It should have taken into consideration the data collected by the vision team/leadership from across the congregation. A good idea would be for the lead pastor to take these leaders on a retreat for discernment. Within that setting, the pastor would have an opportunity to craft a missional vocation within community.

²⁹ More specifically, James is able to create a narrative of spiritual meaning concerning the working of the Spirit among them. He does this by listening to the stories of the present events within the context of the vision of shalom in Scripture. Weaving all of this together, he then offers a clear missional vocational direction with specific practices (Acts 15:13-21).

meetings can always prove contentious. It is the hope of this author, however, that the inclusive and spiritual nature of the process will have proven fruitful by this point. Though polity is varied among churches, the vocational direction should be given a chance to be officially affirmed by the body. Once affirmed, its overall thrust can be taken up by the leadership in their next meeting.

Finally, the meeting can end with a time of prayer of thanksgiving (5 to 10 min) for God's presence and guidance throughout the process. This could be followed perhaps with a meal or some other way for the community to celebrate the conclusion of the discernment process together.

Conclusion

As noted above, evangelical models of vision development are often inadequate at spiritual formation. It is the conviction of this author, however, that the spiritual formation of the people of God should be the highest priority in the church. This, after all, is the simplest expression of the Great Commission—"the task of 'making disciples,' of being formed into the image of Christ."³⁰ All of the church's endeavors should reflect this commitment. When this occurs, the development of congregational vision will be seen as a spiritually formative opportunity.

What has been outlined above is a modest proposal that attempts to reach this aim. It takes seriously the need for a theocentric orientation that informs the imagination and direction of churches. It wrestles with how the modern church can be shaped by its own theology and history. It considers recent contributions that have enabled many

³⁰ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 226.

communities to faithfully follow God in mission. In sum, it has attempted to keep God at the center of the vision discussion with the conviction that thriving communities are ones whose people are journeying more into the image of the Triune God together.

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