

Communal Discernment: Knowing God Together

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ABSTRACT

A key part of Christian ministry to youth is nurturing discernment, that is, learning how to discern God's will. I assume in this essay that discernment is less about making good decisions *per se* and more about continual transformation and the overall shaping of character within a community. I thus reconceived the practice of discernment in two primary ways: first, from knowing God's will, to knowing God and God's story and then seeking to enact that story; and second, from the individual to the community. I frame discernment not in terms of one person making a good choice but as a community together seeking to shape lives around the character of God as revealed in the overall arc of Scripture and particularly in Jesus Christ. The role of the community in discernment is explored in terms of knowing God *through* others, knowing God *with* others, and investigating the role of the Holy Spirit in the community's decision-making process.

When I became a pastor several years ago, I entered the world of ministry to youth with high aspirations: I would teach my students the full richness of the Christian Scriptures and tradition; what's more, I would help them to *love* the church and the Bible. Along the way, I would shepherd their spiritual lives in a way that would bring them closer to God. These innocent aims quickly came into contact with the actual world of 12- to 18-year-olds. In that world, I spent quite a bit of time listening to their struggles about what sports to play, whom to date, whether or not to go to summer camp, where to go to college, how to prioritize their busy schedules, and how to please God in the midst of it all. In other words, I came to realize that a key

part of my youth ministry was going to involve helping students to sort through these decisions: in other words, to practice discernment.

I take it for granted that discernment, whether defined as “the art of making decisions” or more widely as “hearing and following God,”¹ is an integral part of a Christian’s life at any age. Thus discernment, as a spiritual practice of the church, ought to be a central component of ministry with students who wrestle with decisions they often see as shaping the trajectory of the rest of their lives. Yet framing discernment primarily as “making good choices” fundamentally limits discernment as a practice. Consider the question, “What does God want me to do?” Two words in particular can be held up to critical scrutiny in this query: *me*, and *do*. Already discernment is narrowed to an individual making a decision about whether or not “God wants” her to join the soccer team or the cheerleading squad.

This is not to say that existing youth ministry materials are devoid of guidance for students making decisions, or that they are all so narrowly focused. Resources exist that aid in vocational discernment (akin, in some ways, to any secular personality test or career-finder quiz) or that help students identify their spiritual gifts.² Frederick Buechner’s definition of vocation is sometimes referenced in these materials: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”³ While a reasonable beginning point, it proves to be inadequate for more thorough exploration of vocation. For one, a teenager’s deep gladness (or an adult’s, for that matter) may or may not overlap in any tangible way with the world’s need. For another, a significant strand of the Christian tradition suggests that finding deep joy in our jobs is not necessarily God’s primary concern. After all, since the way of Christ is cruciform, it might well involve suffering.

David White is a scholar and youth ministry practitioner whose 2005 book *Practicing Discernment with Youth* is an excellent example of reconfiguring the practice of youth ministry as a whole away from its dominant paradigm (loosely, one that seeks to mimic the prevailing secular youth culture) and toward a model aimed at healing youth fragmented by adolescent consumer culture. White calls this model of youth ministry discernment, in a broad sense construed as recovering youth’s whole selves to bring “their lives more fully into partnership with God’s work.”⁴

White examines discernment in four general movements: listening (loving God with your heart); understanding (loving God with your mind); remembering/dreaming (loving God with your soul); and acting (loving God with your strength).⁵ Of these movements, the first three (listening, understanding, and remembering) focus on developing skills in oneself and could broadly be characterized as formation or character development. Listening is primarily about developing intuition and prayer practices, understanding is a mode of critical and integrative reflection, and remembering is “attending through prayer and contemplation to the yearnings of our hearts and those of a broken world.”⁶ For White, “dreaming” is bringing to bear the full resources of the Christian tradition (Scripture, traditions, liturgy, and so on), which is where I will initially focus my attention. Finally, acting is loving God with all our strength, or “putting feet to faith.”

While not wishing to dismiss any of these movements, I place most emphasis on the final two (dreaming and acting). The Christian life is – as a whole – a lived enactment of a story (God’s story), and thus is already oriented toward certain kinds of action – actions shaped by Scripture and tradition, creatively improvised as we learn how to perform God’s story in our own contexts.⁷ Faith, if it is faithfulness,⁸ already has feet.

In this essay, I use discernment to mean something more narrow than White’s overarching scope: I mean assisting students in discerning God’s will for their lives, everything from “What should I do with my life?” to “With whom should I eat lunch in the school cafeteria today?” My exploration of discernment in this article is essentially grounded in the virtue ethics tradition commended by Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas by way of Aristotle and moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.⁹ That is, it attempts to resist the dichotomy between *doing* and *being*, and adopts the position that ethics is primarily about the long-term formation of character rather than the moment of decision. In other words, to paraphrase a line from Anglican theologian Samuel Wells, discernment is about learning to take the right things for granted.¹⁰

The question, of course, is what are the “right things”? That question occupies the bulk of this essay. I argue that the “right things” are what one might call the Christian virtues: the characteristics of a holy life commended by the Old and New Testaments, revealed first as the characteristics of the God of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth, and commended to the people of God through the *imitatio Dei* (the imitation of God) and the *imitatio Christi* (the imitation of Christ). It is these key characteristics that drive the four questions in the later part of this essay.

In order to broaden the scope of discernment as a spiritual practice for youth, I propose redirecting the question of what it means to discern God’s will in two primary ways:

1. From knowing God’s will, to knowing God. “Finding God’s will” is typically construed as choosing what God wants me to do in a particular circumstance. It is thus largely centered on the self, and potentially determined in large part by how the person feels about it (in addition to what the person’s friends think she should do). Instead, I suggest that discernment is more about learning to discern God and God’s character rightly, and—because the people of God are called to reflect that character—shaping our lives around that pattern. Part of this shift, then, will mean placing greater focus on overall transformation rather than decision-making. Instead of focusing attention on heart and soul transformation, this section concentrates on ways in which we might begin to pattern our lives after specific aspects God’s character. To that end, it walks through four questions that are drawn from Scripture. These questions are not intended to be exhaustive but simply to focus on key characteristics of the heart of God as revealed in the Old and New Testaments, and then on the implications of these core characteristics for discernment: First, *how might this decision lead to love of God and neighbor?* Second, *how might this decision lead to greater justice and mercy?* Third, *does this decision conform to the way of the cross?* Fourth, *how might this decision enable my life to produce fruit?*

2. From the individual to the community. Discernment of God and God’s will, instead of

being primarily an individual exercise, occurs most fruitfully and appropriately in the context of a community of faith.¹¹ There it is centered around Scripture and tradition and thus is situated within the long and rich history of the church's wrestling with Scripture in order to know God. There are important limits to the role of a community in discernment: communities, like individuals, are sometimes wrong. The community itself will thus also be sent back to Scripture and its own tradition to make sure it is discerning and knowing God in a faithful way. In the context of youth ministry, this means that the youth group itself could serve as a place of communal discernment. White rightly calls for youth ministry to be relocated from the fringes of church life and reintegrated back into the life of a multigenerational congregation. There may be, however, a healthy place for youth to have their own space to struggle and grow with one another. That space includes the important role of mentors.

From knowing God's will to knowing God

How can we know that we know God – and God's will? We need not rely exclusively on subjective or experiential measurements for knowledge of God, for Scripture presents its own guidelines for true knowledge of God. We know God as YHWH, who made covenants with Abraham and Israel, and who was revealed definitively in the person of Jesus Christ. We know God as Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit. In the Old Testament, the Lord's primary characteristics are given in Exodus 34:6-7—compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness—a refrain that is used repeatedly throughout the Old Testament as the definition of God's essential character. The themes of this refrain are also picked up in the New Testament (most obviously in John 1) and are reconfigured in light of Jesus. For the New Testament, it is above all the life of Jesus Christ that definitively reveals who God is.¹² The pattern of Christ's life, in turn, provides the pattern for ours: Why love one another? Because Jesus first loved us; because God first loved us in Jesus. To know God's character is to imitate that character as faithfully as we can.

Knowing God by knowing God's story

There is no one simple formula or criterion for knowing God, but I believe that the complementary criteria offered in Scripture about discerning God's essential nature can provide us with key questions to ask in the course of the discernment process. These questions are not an attempt to create a comprehensive or rigid formula for discernment; nor are they a sort of consequentialist ethic that attempts to make a decision based on best outcome. Instead, each question is a way of asking, Does the way I am living conform to the pattern of God's life, especially as revealed in Jesus? How might my story fit into God's story?

Each of these questions is envisioned as part of reasoning together with others (for example, with a youth group) about an individual decision or set of personal choices. It is hoped that framing

discernment in this way will lead students to start asking questions they had not previously asked of themselves, or to examine other parts of their lives formerly left unquestioned: e.g., Should I have significant relationships with people who aren't like me? Is Facebook a potentially healthy or a potentially destructive tool? Does it matter what kind of food I eat and how it is produced?

In addition, specific ways to explore the following questions will arise in different ways from particular contexts. In the model of practical theology espoused by Don Browning (et al.), theological reflection or theory arises first from the concrete practices of a particular community.¹³ For example, a 300-member church in inner-city Chicago, a 30-member church in rural Iowa, and a 3000-member church in suburban San Francisco will face significantly different challenges (and may be required to employ significantly different strategies) in introducing youth to questions of poverty and racism, or in thinking through what loving the neighbor looks like in one's own context.

The first overarching question is drawn from how Jesus summed up the heart of Scripture.

How might this decision lead to love of God and neighbor? According to Augustine of Hippo, the proper interpretation of Scripture is always that which leads to love of God and love of neighbor: "no interpretation can be true which does not promote the love of God and the love of humanity."¹⁴ Even a faulty interpretation that leads to the building up of love, while it certainly ought to be corrected, is not judged to be *maliciously* deceptive. What Augustine rightly saw is the principle expressed in Matthew 22:40 that "all the law and the prophets" (i.e., the whole of Scripture) flow from the two commandments to love God with all one's being and to love one's neighbor as oneself.

To ask if a decision will help me love God better is also a way of asking, Will this help me be a more faithful disciple? This is a complex question. On the one hand, being a faithful disciple—loving God to the best of one's abilities—might entail the choice to do something challenging or difficult, perhaps something that involves a smaller salary or a significant move or the relinquishment of a personal dream. As the apostle Paul wrote, it was when he was weak that he was truly strong, for then Christ's power was revealed in him.¹⁵ It is not always simply about our innate strengths. On the other hand, talents and aptitudes (and, of course, spiritual gifts) have long been understood in the Christian tradition as God-given gifts meant to be used for God's glory. One might not be enabled in love of God (or helpfulness toward the neighbor) if one is genuinely mismatched with a vocation, or if one sacrifices "for God's sake" but does so grudgingly or with bitterness.

In terms of loving our neighbor, in the interest of making the question more personal, one could ask if a certain decision might first help me love the neighbors closest to me. For most high school students, this might immediately mean their parents. Some youth ministry practitioners are shifting their focus from student ministry to family ministry – in other words, ministering to students in the contexts of their families.¹⁶ This is enormously important; perhaps one of the places teenagers struggle the most – but most long to be nourished – is in their inevitably complicated relationships with their parents (and sometimes stepparents).

There are two biblical principles to hold in tension in this case: the commandment to “honor thy father and mother,” and the reminder that “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37). In other words, even family bonds are trumped by allegiance to Jesus; but this does not mean one is allowed to dishonor one’s parents or lightly choose to go against their advice. A small group of students might spend time exploring the command to honor their parents, and then rewrite the commandment in their own words, perhaps with a particular situation or decision in mind; they might even share with their parents this rephrasing (and then ask parents to rewrite the instruction not to exasperate their children in their own words!)

Another aspect of loving the neighbor is, of course, the question of who else are the student’s “neighbors”? How might they love the neighbors in their congregation? A junior high Sunday school class might write get-well or warm-wishes cards to the sick and elderly in their congregation as a way of getting to know the larger body and building relationships that might not otherwise occur. Students might be prompted to think through who their neighbors are on the streets where they live or at their schools. Jesus had a special love for the outcast, the poor, the vulnerable, and the stranger: do we have any neighbors who are poor? Any friends who are outcast? If not, why not? Do we know in what parts of our city the poor and vulnerable live? One might even explore whether a tool like Facebook encourages or inhibits the love of neighbor (i.e., healthy relationships), and which kinds of “neighbors” (friends) it leads us toward – those like us, or those unlike us?

Perhaps most provocative of all is the related question: Will this decision enable me to love my enemies? At the very end of Jonah’s tale, God asks his sulking prophet, “Don’t you think I should care about all those people?” In other words, Jonah, shouldn’t *you* care about all those people (no matter how evil you think they are)? Who might our enemies be, and how might our decisions lead us toward greater or lesser love for them? Questions of national enemies might raise politically difficult questions, but can also serve as a place to guide students in reflection on the relationship between church membership and citizenship in a particular country. It might be difficult for students to think of personal enemies: but they will likely have people with whom they are in conflict, whether it be a friend or family member. A group might explore together how such conflicts might be resolved. Romans 12:20, for example, interprets love for the enemy as overcoming evil through acts of goodness and mercy toward that enemy. The emphasis on concrete acts of mercy leads us to the second question.

How might this decision lead to greater justice and mercy? Exodus 34:6-7 affirms the Lord as a God of both mercy (merciful and gracious, slow to anger) and justice (“by no means clearing the guilty”). That the Lord is just and compassionate, and that God requires the same of God’s people, is a theme that echoes throughout the Old Testament. God’s people are required to love justice and mercy because God does. Leviticus 19, the passage containing the command to love the neighbor (in addition to instructions to leave the harvest gleanings for the poor, to render justice impartially, to love the alien, and to honor the aged) opens with this instruction to Israel: “Be holy, because I

the Lord your God am holy.”¹⁷

Attention to justice, especially justice for the poor, is a part of Israel’s earliest life and laws, but this theme is most notably central in the preaching of the prophets. Isaiah declares that the kind of fasting God delights in is “to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke” (Isaiah 58:6). The “preferential option for the poor” is a way of saying the people of God are called to pay particular attention to the poor, the weak, and the outsiders, as a reflection of God’s own nature and priorities.

This theme is by no means restricted to the Old Testament. Jesus picks up this prophetic message by declaring his own ministry to be the proclamation of good news to the poor. How might a choice enable one to be more compassionate, act more justly, and pay greater attention and care to the poor and the outsider? Does the way I lead my life enable or hinder presence with the poor and the stranger?¹⁸ Perhaps here is where youth may begin to ask new questions about their friendships, their patterns of interaction (both online and face-to-face), and how their communities and neighborhoods are wrestling with (or avoiding) questions of poverty, homelessness, racism, and so on.

Perhaps the two most commonly used tools for addressing these issues in youth ministry have been the mission trip and the occasional service project (such as serving a meal in the local soup kitchen). Both these experiences can be valuable and occasionally even life-changing – but it is generally recognized that they can also be counter-productive or harmful. Such experiences can certainly be strengthened through greater education (teaching students about the realities of generational poverty and institutional racism, for example) but other more sustained experiences can also be fruitful – such as building long-term relationships with youth from a congregation different in class or race from their own. Or, a youth group (or a whole church) might enter into the issue by participating in an activity like the Offering of Letters sessions prepared by the anti-poverty group Bread for the World, which gives students a chance both to learn about hunger in the U.S. and to participate in a small way in the political process.

Does this decision conform to the way of the cross? Although Christians affirm the authority of both Old and New Testaments as sacred Scripture, the witness of Jesus Christ is privileged as the definitive key to knowing God.¹⁹ “Christian discernment will most affirm those patterns that are seen as intrinsically oriented towards that which is realized in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.”²⁰ Paul claims the criterion of “cruciformity” as a test of both genuine apostleship and authentic Christian faithfulness.²¹ A word truly spoken from God, as well as a life truly lived as a Christ-follower, will pattern itself after the cross, that is, after Jesus’ self-giving as traced in the gospel passion narratives. The shape of cruciform self-sacrifice is further exemplified in John 13:1-17 (when Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, in a reversal of master and servant) and in Philippians 2 (the famous hymn of kenosis or self-emptying).

We might also remember, uncomfortably enough, that the way of the cross is described as a demanding and narrow way, that some were asked to give up everything they owned in order to

follow it, and that it cost many in the early church their lives to conform to it. As Catholic theologian Nicholas Lash writes, “The search for God is not the search for comfort or tranquility, but for truth, for justice, faithfulness, integrity: these, as the prophets tirelessly reiterated, are the forms of God’s appearance in the world.”²² How might a decision reflect or lead to the kind of self-giving service and humility practiced by Jesus and imitated by the apostle Paul? In local terms, a youth group might consider together ways in which they can model Christ’s humble service with one another and with the rest of the congregation. This could be as simple as helping younger students with their homework or shoveling snow for the elderly or serving coffee at the fellowship hour after church. Students often have a startling amount of disposable income: can the ways they choose to spend this money enable them to live out the virtue of cruciformity (or the virtue of love of neighbor)? A note of caution is appropriate here: this criterion treads into particularly complicated territory with female youth, where the virtue of self-giving is too often interpreted as submission, or where self-sacrifice on behalf of others is expected of women but not of men.²³

How might this decision enable my life to produce fruit? In both the Old and New Testaments, the authenticity of a prophet is judged in part by the “fruits” of that prophet.²⁴ Fruitfulness is also the assumed product of a Spirit-filled Christian life.²⁵ The kind of fruitfulness we seek is not material blessings or personal gain, but that described by the Scriptures: truth, faithfulness, obedience, good works, gentleness, kindness, self-control. James employs a similar measure when he contrasts earthly and spiritual wisdom: while earthly wisdom is unspiritual, envious, and ambitious, wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, impartial, and full of mercy and other good fruits.²⁶ James describes heavenly wisdom in the same terms Paul uses to describe a life transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Asking this question steps into the territory covered ably by White in his first three movements of discernment. Experiences such as prayer labyrinths – increasingly popular in some youth ministries – can prove to be moving formative experiences in terms of a deeper spiritual life. A youth group or a church might pick one particular fruit to focus on for a time: for example, how does one display gentleness in concrete ways? What kinds of actions help us be gentler people? Does listening to *that* kind of music or using *that* vocabulary help me express less or greater gentleness?

This leads us to the second move in the refocusing of discernment: an emphasis on the transformation of a whole life.

From decision to transformation

Deciding whether or not to date a certain person, or to take or keep a certain job, or to move somewhere, or to go to college or spend a year traveling: some of these choices feel momentous. Some of them *are* momentous choices. I confess, nonetheless, that sometimes I want to say, “What God longs for is for you to be so overjoyed by God’s abundant love that it overflows both back to God and out to everyone else around you. The Giver of grace wants *you* to be a receiver and a

giver of grace, wherever you are. The Lord of life wants you to be transformed every day a little more, from glory into glory. This is the overarching theme of God's story: that he has decided to be always in relationship with us,²⁷ and nothing – *nothing* – can separate us from this love.”

This is not to say that these decisions are not important and pressing. It could be irrelevant or counterproductive to talk blithely to a student about being transformed when what she really needs to do is make a crucial, practical decision in the next few days. But I believe that the Scriptures presuppose that who we are precedes and helps determine what we do, and that what God is interested in is making us into who we were intended to be, shaping us to be a certain kind of person – a person formed by the Jesus-centered narrative of Scripture.

Much of conventional ethics focuses on the moment of decision. In the virtue ethics paradigm, the central matters are the events leading up to the point of decision, and (even more importantly) the character of the person making the decision. Old Testament scholar R.W.L. Moberly argues persuasively that the integrity of the prophet (in both Old and New Testaments) and a cruciform life (in the New Testament) are crucial keys to discerning the authenticity of a prophetic message.²⁸ In other words, Moberly displaces the criteria of discernment at least partially from the prophecy itself and onto the prophet. By way of analogy, this helps us displace discernment away from a decision and onto the decision-maker.

As the Apostle Paul lamented, however, he knows what is good but he does evil instead.²⁹ Human sinfulness, brokenness, weakness, and plain old stubbornness can get in the way of the discernment process. Sometimes the problem is not discernment but *will*; we know the good but we do not want to do it or find ourselves unable to achieve it. Theologian Brent Laytham claims, “many North American Christians are far too anxious about knowing God's will and far too optimistic about doing God's will. This gets things exactly backwards. Both Scripture and tradition teach that doing is the greater struggle. Not that God's will is always obvious; but we pray ‘thy will be done’ not ‘thy will be known.’”³⁰ Laytham suggests that part of discipleship is the submission and disciplining of our desires so that we are rightly ordered toward God's will. As the Psalmist says, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”³¹ This is why John Calvin can write, “Love God and do what you want.” Laytham concludes that “love has the power to transform us by reshaping our desires.”

There is obviously more than one force shaping the minds and desires of teenagers, a point increasingly explored by youth ministry practitioners.³² White argues, “Young people [in the twenty-first century] stand increasingly isolated from their own intuitions, their intellectual curiosity about the world, their souls that seek to love God and heal the broken world, and from their own agency, resources required to resist domestication amid a hostile culture,” a fragmentation intensified by “young people's isolation within their communities.”³³ Discernment then is partly a way of *healing* youth – enabling them to engage their whole selves.³⁴

The Ignatian spiritual exercises likewise pay close attention to the role of the will in discernment. According to Ignatius, the requisite conditions for discerning God's will include 1) a “sincere

intention to do whatever God wills, no matter what the cost”; 2) prayers of petition, with “intense desire” and faith that God will lead; and 3) detachment or purity of heart, that is, “indifference to all but God’s will.”³⁵ A key part of shaping character vis-à-vis discernment is the training of the will – to bend it gently toward desire of God – and the development of the intuition – nurturing it to become more sensitive to hearing God’s voice amid the clamor of the world.³⁶

Freedom and flexibility

The above questions and criteria might appear to be good guidelines for testing a prophetic word or even choosing a vocation, but less relevant for helping a high school student decide whether or not to date someone or how to choose a summer job. Yet perhaps this is because God tends to be more concerned with the overall patterns of our lives than with the minute details of our choices. Of course, there may be choices that are simply ruled out for Christians after testing them against faithfulness to the Christian story: i.e., something that promotes violence rather than peace; anything that degrades rather than protects or honors the created world; whatever hurts the neighbor or oppresses the poor.

The Ignatian pattern of discernment recognizes two different spheres of discerning God’s will regarding an individual choice: first, one asks if an alternative is morally commanded or forbidden; and second, if it is neither commanded nor forbidden, one asks which alternative is more for God’s glory.³⁷ For Ignatius, there is always a “best” choice, one that leads more to God’s glory than another. I propose, however, that within certain guidelines and limitations (such as the questions described above), there may be multiple “good” choices, none of which is obviously truer or more faithful than another. In that case, either choice could be freely and appropriately made.

We might think of this situation in terms of what Karl Barth calls God’s “holy mutability.” God is consistent but not mathematical or mechanical; God has a “mobility” and “elasticity” that confirms the divinity of God’s steadfast, persevering love toward fickle humans.³⁸ God exercises flexibility within the limits determined by God’s essential nature. As one of my friends likes to say, perhaps God looks at a decision we make and says, *I can work with that*.

The holy mutability of God also gives us room to make mistakes.³⁹ Deciding where to go to college or what to major in can be difficult in and of itself, without the added pressure of being forced to choose the *one* right path that God wants you to take. Perhaps one path is indeed more faithful or glorifying to God. Perhaps two or three paths might be more or less equally faithful choices. A right understanding of God’s flexibility should give a student a little room to breathe.

The role of community

There are at least 40 “one another” (allēlōn) exhortations in the New Testament epistles to the early churches: love one another, forgive one another, accept one another, show hospitality to one

another, and so on. In fact, one might argue that none of the exhortations in the New Testament are addressed to an individual,⁴⁰ but always to a community of people seeking to live and embody the Christian life together. As Nicholas Lash has demonstrated, right reading of Scripture entails lived enactment or performance of Scripture,⁴¹ and it is surely a community performance, not a solo act. The questions above (about loving God and neighbor, loving the enemy, practicing justice, etc.) are best asked and answered in a community that is seeking to shape its life along the same arc. In addition, if one thinks of discernment along the lines of transformation and the gradual disciplining of the will, rather than individual decision-making, it is to a great extent within the community and by the practices of the church that one is shaped and where one's desires are slowly remade.⁴²

When we make decisions specifically in the context of a community, we sometimes know God *through* others, we sometimes know God along *with* others, and we always attend together to the way the Holy Spirit works through the community, both the *present* living community of faith and the community of the *past* – that is, by what might be called tradition. If Scripture itself is part of the community's tradition, so also the way in which the community has read and sought to live out the story of Scripture throughout its history informs the way in which we in turn seek to conform to that story. By shying away from the church's tradition and history, some Protestant churches have neglected a rich resource for discernment. The witness of those who came before us reminds us that we are not the first people to make difficult decisions or seek to live faithfully to the Christian story.

In a setting like youth ministry, the role of mentors and models is particularly crucial.⁴³ At issue here is not simply the *imitatio Christi*, but knowledge of God through the example and presence of another. A text like 1 Samuel 3 demonstrates that knowing God or learning to hear God's voice can emerge through another person who knows God. When the Lord called out to Samuel, that voice sounded exactly like Eli's voice; at the time, Samuel only knew YHWH through Eli. Later, Samuel came to know the Lord for himself. God can speak to students (and to all of us) in the voices of other people, especially those older or more mature in faith (although God has also spoken rather convincingly to me through a seventh-grader!). The elders of Israel and the church are valued throughout Scripture for their wisdom—a value we have largely lost in our culture today. In Luke's Gospel, the elderly Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna are the first to recognize the astonishing new thing that God is working in their midst.⁴⁴ Especially for youth, the church can provide an irreplaceable opportunity for them to hear the stories of how their elders in the faith have heard and responded to God's voice.

For example, one church I know regularly puts on an event known as the “fancy hats tea” for women and girls, where everyone – from the 96-year-old great-grandmother to the energetic 2-year-old – dons a hat and shares an afternoon of tea, stories, home-baked goodies, and laughter. On the surface, it is an enjoyable social event; but in a more profound way, it connects young girls and teenagers to spiritual mothers and grandmothers in a way that can benefit and encourage both the young and the old.

Scripture also suggests that we know God alongside others who walk the same journey. The story of discovery on the road to Emmaus in particular teaches that God is revealed in the context of fellowship – of walking together, wondering together, and eating together. Part of the question of discernment in community is not, What does God want me to do; but, What does God want *us* to do? In the New Testament, the gifts and empowerment of the Holy Spirit occur most frequently—indeed almost exclusively—in the context of the community. Especially for Paul, the gifts of the Spirit are to be used for the building up of the church, not for personal enrichment. The activity of the Spirit, while it can be deeply personal, is inseparable from the life and common good of the church, the community of faith.

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in a community’s decision-making? One example is in Acts 15:28, the decision of the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem regarding requirements for Gentile believers: “For it has seemed good (edoxen) to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials...” Now this was a crucial decision in the history of early Christianity regarding Gentile converts to the faith. This verse is sometimes taken as a statement about the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those making the decision. I do not wish to downplay the way the Spirit can nudge a mind or burn in a heart in order to prompt a certain decision, but I also suspect this text gives us clearer criteria for how they knew what the Holy Spirit deemed good.

John McIntosh argues that discerning the Spirit’s movement in this case was based on a three-fold, objective testimony as offered in the earlier verses of chapter 15: 1) the witness of Peter to the Spirit’s descending on the Gentile Cornelius’ household; 2) the account by Paul and Barnabas of the miraculous signs God had performed through them to the Gentiles on their missionary journey; and 3) the witness of Scripture to the inclusion of the Gentiles, as cited by James from Amos and Isaiah.⁴⁵ In other words, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem were guided by the threefold test of transformation, fruitfulness, and tradition (in the form of Scripture).

The apostles discerned the direction of the Spirit from observation of God’s previous activity in Gentile lives and from Scripture itself. On the basis of the clear evidence that God was drawing Gentiles—not just Jews—into his kingdom through Christ, the leaders of the young church had to decide among themselves what kinds of requirements to place on the Gentile converts as they entered the community of faith. They reasoned together through the lens of what they had witnessed the Spirit already doing and what they read in Scripture. Unlike the elders and teachers of John 9, these apostles were willing to discern God doing a new thing.

Although the community can play a vital role in guiding discernment, there are obvious limits to this role. The story of Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings provides an important warning against oversimplifying the positive role of the community in discernment. Micaiah’s experience—as the only true prophet, speaking against the 400 false prophets—warns us that sometimes the “community” can be wrong. Again from John 9, Jesus upsets or radically reinterprets existing tradition in new terms, confounding the inherited wisdom of those present about sin and God. Teenagers are

perhaps more open to the new than other members of the congregation, and although tradition does not always require resisting or overturning, youth may sometimes serve as prophetic and creative voices to their congregations, especially if they are asked to serve on church councils, read the liturgy or the Scripture in the Sunday service, plan worship services, pray for one another and for the pastor, and participate in long-range planning committees.

New Testament scholar Markus Bockmuehl reads the temptation stories (the serpent in the Garden, and Jesus in the wilderness) as challenging Eve/Adam and Jesus to make decisions as autonomous reasoning subjects, isolated from the worshiping community and from “the ecclesial corrective of the chosen people reading Scripture.”⁴⁶ Thus the first point is the importance of the community for hearing God and rightly interpreting God’s word. Bockmuehl also notes, however, that in Jesus’ case “sanctified solitude [i.e., Jesus’ withdrawal into the wilderness] may also habituate him to hear the word of God *over against* the community.”⁴⁷

Sometimes the community can indeed be misled or mistaken, and sometimes it may not be able to reach a unified decision. Ron Hansen’s novel *Mariette in Ecstasy* tells the story of a young woman named Mariette who joins a convent and apparently begins to experience religious ecstasy, including the stigmata.⁴⁸ The sisters in her community are deeply divided over whether her ecstasy is genuine or not. Hansen brings all the ambiguity of the question into play: the complicated mix of divine and human factors in authentic religious experience. The community fails to reach consensus, and in the end Hansen allows the readers to make their own decisions about Mariette.

So, Pastor, how does this help me decide where to go to college?

My spiritual director in seminary frequently reminded me that making any decision—even when one is seeking to follow God’s will—involves a messy set of human and practical questions, as well as the divine element. As with Mariette, the psychological, the material, the spiritual, and the emotional are not always easy to separate. We pay attention not only to God but also to the context and stories of our lives. In the midst of this complexity, discernment is about seeking to know God, particularly in the community of the church, and then seeking to pattern our lives after the character and actions of God, especially as expressed in the life of Jesus Christ.

Those who minister to youth seem faced with a contradictory challenge: simultaneously to raise and lower expectations for their youth. In some ways, students need to have expectations lowered or altered: high school students in particular tend to feel enormous pressure to achieve good grades, wear the right clothes, win entrance to a prestigious college, compete with their peers for affection and popularity, and fill their résumé with multiple extracurricular activities. Perhaps the church can be a place where these kinds of burdens are eased. On the other hand, youth are often consistently underestimated and undervalued in terms of their unique gifts, their potential to contribute to the life of the church and the flourishing of God’s kingdom, and what they might achieve politically or socially. As White notes, a new and recent conception of adolescence has

dramatically lowered the bar on what is expected of young people.⁴⁹ We might say along with Paul, do not let anyone look down on you because you are young!⁵⁰ How might the church be a place where we challenge them to stretch a little higher?

In the end, what I want to say to high school students as they struggle to make decisions is this: God loves you. God is delighted by you. You have so many *good* choices in front of you. Don't be afraid to make a choice that might look a little odd by the usual standards of the world. You are on a lifelong journey of learning to know God. You will struggle along with other people about the best ways to be faithful to him. You will make mistakes, and that is okay. Your primary vocation is to be a disciple, which means to discern God as well as you can, and discern how your life can best be shaped after the pattern of God's own character, especially as revealed in Jesus' life. Find other people with whom to journey who hunger after knowledge of God, too, so you'll have people to help you hear God's distinctive voice and who will hold you accountable to the demands of the gospel and who will pick you up and dust you off when you fall down. Do everything you can to hold on to God, but never worry that God will ever let go of you.

Notes

1 David F. White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005).

2 E.g., Diane Lindsey Reeves, *So What Am I Gonna Do with My Life Groupware: Helping Your Students Find and Follow God's Calling in Their Vocations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), which proposes to "Stamp out stress with a Bible-based curriculum that helps kids identify their God-given talents and discern Jesus' calling in their lives!" (<http://www.christianbook.com>, accessed February 10, 2009).

3 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (New York: HarperOne, 1993).

4 White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth*, 6.

5 *Ibid.*, 63-85, 88.

6 *Ibid.*, 152.

7 See Sam Wells, *Improvisation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004).

8 As *pivstiV* can be rendered.

9 For introductions to the thought of Hauerwas and MacIntyre, see Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), and *The MacIntyre Reader* edited by Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998). Within the youth ministry field itself, practitioners such as Tony Jones are appropriating aspects of virtue ethics. Indeed, in *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, Jones cites with approval George Lindbeck, narrative

readings of Scripture (without naming Hans Frei directly), and Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, in an attempt to apply the insights of postliberal theology to the practice of youth ministry. See Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Creating Holistic Connections, Cultivating Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001). Jones' book is an example of an enthusiastic embrace of the positive aspects of postmodernity, in contrast to White's greater skepticism about the prevailing culture and the way it shapes youth.

10 See Wells, *Improvisation*, chapter 4.

11 Jones, e.g., identifies in postmodernity a shift from individualism to communal values, and calls upon youth ministry to adjust itself accordingly; see Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*.

12 John 1:17-18, 14:9; Hebrews 1:3.

13 See, e.g., Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991); and Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds., *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

14 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library (accessed at <http://www.ccel.org>).

15 2 Corinthians 12:9-10.

16 See Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry* (InterVarsity Press, 2004), which advocates building relationships between youth and both their parents and also other adults in the congregation.

17 Cf. Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect (*teleioi*), therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (*teleios*)" and Luke 6:36, "Be merciful (*oiktirmōnes*), just as your Father is merciful (*oiktirmōn*)," both of which occur in the context of Jesus' command to love enemies.

18 Along with the expert in the law (in the Good Samaritan parable), we might find ourselves asking uncomfortable questions about who *are* our neighbors. Ada María Isasi-Díaz argues that solidarity (rather than charity) is a key component of loving the neighbor in the context of oppression: Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s," in *Feminist Theological Ethics*, ed. Lois K. Daly, 77-87 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

19 However, one can neither truly "know" Christ nor understand who he is without the Old Testament. This means paying attention to the narrative arc of the whole of Scripture.

20 R. W. L. Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment* (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 225.

21 *Ibid.*, chapter 6.

22 Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (New York: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 179.

23 See Barbara Hilbert Andolson, "Agape in Feminist Ethics," in *Feminist Theological Ethics*, 146-59.

24 See, e.g., Deut 13:1-5; 18:15-22.

25 E.g., Matthew 3:8-10; 7:15-20; John 15:1-8; Romans 7:4; Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 1:10.

26 James 3:17.

27 A paraphrase of Karl Barth by Samuel Wells, *God's Companions* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 1.

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- 28** Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, 76, 175, 187-88, 194.
- 29** Romans 7:17.
- 30** Brent Laytham, "Searching for God's Will," *The Covenant Companion* (October 2002): 6.
- 31** Psalm 37:4.
- 32** See, e.g., Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); Ginny Olson, *Teenage Girls: Exploring Issues Adolescent Girls Face and Strategies to Help Them* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006); et al.
- 33** White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth*, 84.
- 34** *Ibid.*, 84-85.
- 35** Jules Toner, "Discernment in the Spiritual Exercises," in *A New Introduction to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, ed. Henry Birkenhauer et al (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 69.
- 36** Another important aspect of developing intuition is increasing attentiveness to one's own story, in all its complexity, and the ways in which this story shapes how one experiences God. This, however, is outside the scope of this essay.
- 37** Toner, "Discernment in the Spiritual Exercises," 68.
- 38** Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2 part 2, trans. G.W. Bromiley (London: T & T Clark Ltd., 1958; New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 495-99.
- 39** I am indebted to Jo Bailey Wells for this observation.
- 40** With the obvious exception of instructions to particular figures such as Timothy.
- 41** Lash, "Performing the Scriptures." Cf. also Wells, *God's Companions*, in which Wells seeks to demonstrate by examples what lives shaped by the church's story (especially its liturgical practices) might look like.
- 42** Fred Edie has thoughtfully and thoroughly explored the ways in which the practices of the church (Scripture, baptism, Eucharist, and liturgical time) can form youth, in *Book, Bath, Table, and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007).
- 43** Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 228.
- 44** Richard B. Hays and Judith C. Hays, "The Christian Practice of Growing Old," in *Growing Old in Christ*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas et al, 3-18 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).
- 45** John McIntosh, "For It Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit' Acts 15:28: How did the members of the Jerusalem Council Know This?" *Reformed Theological Review* 61, no. 3 (2002): 131-147.
- 46** Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 93-96.
- 47** *Ibid.*, 95.
- 48** Ron Hansen, *Mariette in Ecstasy* (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1992).
- 49** White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth*, chapters 1 and 2.

50 1 Timothy 4:12.