

BETHEL UNIVERSITY
BETHEL SEMINARY ST. PAUL

SPIRITUAL FORMATION, CORPORATE SPIRITUALITY,
AND THE LEADERSHIP TEAM:
SEEKING THE VOICE OF GOD
ON THE DEACON BOARD OF A BAPTIST CHURCH

THESIS PROJECT
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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BY
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ABSTRACT

In this project the researcher sought to increase the understanding and integration of corporate spirituality into the decision making processes of the deacon board of Whitepine Baptist Church (WBC). The researcher did this by creating, implementing, and evaluating a program designed to raise the deacons' levels of understanding of leadership, spiritual disciplines, and decision-making, and integrating this knowledge into ministry practice by creating and observing a leadership covenant.

Following a leadership retreat weekend, which involved study sessions in the areas listed above and the formation of a desired leadership covenant, the researcher and deacons sought to integrate the knowledge gleaned from the sessions into their ministry over a three year period. Following the implementation period, the deacons were interviewed to assess the results of the project.

Overall, the final evaluation of the project revealed several strengths, including a growing bond of unity and appreciation for the unique giftings of the participants. The reading program and increased emphasis on prayer were also beneficial. However, the failure to follow through with the commitment to an annual retreat and the lengthy period of time allowed for the project implementation proved to be weaknesses noted by all the participants. It was generally agreed that simply by being more faithful to the leadership covenant, the deacons would continue to grow in their commitment and ability to faithfully seek, discern, and obey the voice of God in their ministry.

CHAPTER ONE

THE NEED FOR CORPORATE DISCERNMENT

The problem addressed by this project is the need for an adequate understanding and integration of corporate spirituality into the decision making processes of the deacon board of Whitepine Baptist Church (WBC). The project will study the Bible and other writings on corporate spirituality, leadership, spiritual disciplines, and decision-making, and will then create, implement, and evaluate a program designed to raise the levels of understanding and integration of corporate spirituality as a basis for decision-making by the deacon board of WBC.

Delimitations of the Problem

This study will only address issues related to individual spirituality or individual spiritual formation if and when they relate to the ability of a group to grow in the practice and experience of corporate spirituality and spiritual formation.

This study will not address the various debates concerning qualifications for deacon ministry such as marital history, gender, etc.

This study will not address the level of authority or decision-making power a deacon board should or should not have, or how a deacon board is to implement the decisions it makes.

This study will only refer to secular leadership philosophies or decision-making processes when making general comments as to how they have had an influence on the understanding and practice of the deacon board of WBC when making decisions.

Definition of Terms

Spiritual formation: the process of growing by grace in Christ-likeness through willful surrender to the Spirit and work of God and the practice of various spiritual disciplines. It is the process of growing in spiritual maturity and holiness which God initiates and invites all believers to participate in with Him, and which enables individuals to relate and respond to God, others, and themselves in love.¹

Corporate spirituality: the ability of and means by which a group of individuals relates as a unit to God, others, and themselves. The whole of the group is greater than the sum of its parts in that the spirituality of the group is more than simply a compilation of each member nor is each part fully defined or described by the qualities of the group as a whole.

Spiritual disciplines: activities or practices engaged in on a regular basis for the purpose of better enabling one to respond to God, others, and oneself. These practices include: fasting, meditation, solitude, silence, simplicity, worship, journaling, etc.

Corporate discernment: the group activity of seeking to know and participate in the will of God.

Decision-making: activities carried out in the process of evaluating, planning, and initiating the details of ministry projects, addressing crisis, conflict, or discipline issues in the fellowship.

Spiritual decision-making: the process of making decisions in response to the will of God as revealed in the Word and by the Holy Spirit.

Deacon board: a group of individuals chosen and set apart by the congregation to provide spiritual direction, vision, wisdom, and to lead in decision-making processes that affect the life and ministry of the congregation as well as to carry out various church rituals such as the Lord's Supper and the welcoming of new members.

Baptist congregation: a Christian fellowship characterized in its polity by an emphasis on believer's baptism, congregational government, and autonomy of the local church within a denominational organization.

Assumptions

The first assumption is that spiritual formation, as revealed in the Word of God, is a process God intends for His people corporately as well as individually.

The second assumption is that a group of believers, whether it be a congregation or a group within that congregation, has a corporate spirituality unique from that of the individuals that form the congregation or group.

The third assumption is that corporate spirituality is fostered and strengthened through many of the same disciplines as individual spirituality.

¹ Ephesians 4:11-16; 5:25-27; Philippians 1:6.

The fourth assumption is that God desires to make His will known in a corporate setting, and will do so as an act of grace to those seeking His direction.

The fifth assumption is that the decision-making process of the local church needs to be understood and practised in such a way that recognizes and affirms the activity of God within the process.

The sixth assumption is that the process of developing corporate spirituality has a direct impact upon a group's understanding of and ability to discern the will of God when making decisions.

The seventh assumption is that there is a disparity between the understanding of how to seek the will of God and the integration of that knowledge in the decision-making processes of those serving on the deacon board at WBC.

The eighth assumption is that the deacon board of WBC will be willing to participate in this project.

The Subproblems and Their Treatment

In order to create and implement a program to raise the level of awareness of corporate spirituality and its role in making decisions in the deacon board of WBC, several subproblems will need to be addressed. The following explains these subproblems and the steps that will be required to address them.

Subproblem One

The first subproblem is developing a biblical paradigm for individual and corporate spirituality and its integration with the decision-making process in Scripture and

theological tradition. The researcher will use various translations of the Bible and the interpretations, opinions, and information shared by writers of various biblical commentaries and other Bible study tools to develop this paradigm. Interpretations and opinions expressed by writers in Christian books, articles, and periodicals addressing various aspects of individual and corporate spirituality and decision-making will also be used.

Only those passages of Scripture which are understood to have a direct application to spiritual formation and which provide insight as to the nature of corporate spirituality and spiritual formation will be examined in depth. Only those Christian writings, articles, and periodicals on various aspects of spiritual formation that address or influence the development of a paradigm for corporate spirituality and its integration with the decision-making process will be used.

The data will be secured by studying various Scripture passages, commentaries, Bible study tools, and Christian literature on spiritual formation. Many of these resources are in the researcher's possession, while others will be borrowed from the Bethel Seminary Library and the library of Atlantic Baptist University (ABU) in Moncton, New Brunswick or obtained by computer through inter-library loans elsewhere.

The researcher will approach the study of the Scripture passages with a firm belief in their authority and reliability. Information gleaned from all other materials will be used and interpreted in light of the authority of Scripture. The data collected will be evaluated and used based on its ability to positively contribute to the formation of a paradigm for the corporate spirituality and its integration with the decision-making process.

Subproblem Two

The second subproblem is developing an understanding of how contemporary Christian literature addresses the integration of corporate spirituality and the decision-making process in the local church. The researcher will examine the interpretations, opinions, and information shared by writers of Christian books, articles, and periodicals addressing various aspects of church leadership and decision-making to develop this understanding.

Only Christian literature which is understood to have a direct application to church leadership or which addresses corporate spirituality as it relates to the decision-making process will be examined in depth. Literature related to decision-making in non-religious voluntary organizations may also be reviewed to a limited extent.

The location, means of securing, and testing/interpretation of the data will be as described in subproblem one.

Subproblem Three

The third subproblem is developing a program to (a) raise the levels of understanding and integration of corporate spirituality as a basis for making decisions, (b) initiate revisions in the decision-making process based upon input from the deacons of WBC.

The data needed are the findings from subproblems one and two, as well as data from the deacons of WBC. The criteria for the data are the same as for subproblems one and two. The data are in the researcher's possession as a result of the work in subproblems one and two, and located in the deacon board of WBC.

This data will be secured as described in subproblems one and two, and by meeting with and receiving input from the deacons of WBC. The data will then be synthesized to provide a model for the corporate nature of spiritual formation and the decision-making process in a leadership team.

Subproblem Four

The fourth subproblem is implementing and evaluating the program designed in subproblem three.

The data needed are the data from subproblem three plus responses from personal interviews with the deacons of WBC. Only data obtained by interviewing those actively serving as deacons for the duration of this project will be used. The data will be in the possession of the researcher and located in the deacon board of WBC.

The data from the deacon board will be secured by personally interviewing each deacon following the implementation of the program. This questionnaire will be designed according to accepted standard research science theory patterns.

The data from the first interviews with the deacons for subproblem three will be compared to the data from the second interview with each deacon.

The Setting of the Project

This project will take place among and with the members of a deacon board in a specific Baptist Church.² The particular congregation is Whitepine Baptist Church, a

² The information for this section of the report concerning the setting of the project was written in the summer of 2001 for the Project Proposal. The actual thesis report, however,

twenty-five year old fellowship, located in a growing and affluent white-collar suburb of 17,000 residents in Riverview, New Brunswick, Canada, and a member of the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Church (CABC).

During the past six years, church attendance and membership at WBC has dropped significantly, with the average Sunday morning worship dropping from 160 to 115. In response to this decline, several attempts have been made to develop a new direction and vision for ministry in the church , but the impact has been negligible.

The present deacon board consists of four male individuals: two of whom will be serving as deacons until February 2003, one of whom will be serving until February 2002, and a third individual will finish his term in February 2001. Vocationally, the board consists of a retired teacher, the chancellor of the CABC liberal arts university, a semi-retired technician, and a blue-collar worker for the city of Moncton.

In February 2001 the chancellor of the CABC liberal arts university will be leaving the deacon board, and a new member will replace him at that time. There is also a possibility that there will be additional deacons appointed, thus increasing the total number of deacons on the board. The project will be implemented with the deacons who are on the board as of February 2001.

was written in the fall of 2004. During that time interval, some aspects of the setting changed, including the composition of the deacon board. The retired teacher, the chancellor, and the semi-retired technician were no longer serving as deacons, while another blue-collar worker was added. Ultimately, only two deacons were able to participate in the project for the full term.

The Importance of the Project to the Context

The congregation of Whitepine Baptist Church is in the process of redefining itself, rediscovering who and what it is supposed to be. As a result, questions concerning church vision and mission, what ministry programs to operate or cut, and even the present structure of church government are being raised. It is imperative that as the fellowship goes through this process of evaluation, envisioning, and making decisions for the future, those in leadership positions--and the deacons in particular--both understand their roles and responsibilities in this process and carry out those roles and responsibilities in a manner that is faithful to the leading of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God.

The Importance of the Project to the Researcher

As a pastor the researcher believes it to be his responsibility to set the tone and example for leadership and spiritual formation and to educate and encourage those in the congregation and in leadership roles to grow in and live out their faith in ways that are pleasing to God. The researcher believes that all Christians need to learn how to listen to God in order to know and do His will; yet he also believes that many individuals--and groups or congregations--struggle to integrate what they know with what they practice in this area of the Christian life. It is the desire of the researcher to grow in his understanding of how to discern the voice of God both as an individual and corporately with others, for the sake of his own spiritual health as well as that of those he ministers to and with.

The Importance of the Project to the Church at Large

The integration of corporate spirituality and the decision-making process of leadership boards in local churches is not a prominent subject in many of today's church leadership books or seminars. The denomination in which the researcher ministers has not placed much attention or emphasis on the role of spiritual disciplines in such processes in its various publications and programs. Thus, the results of this project may prove helpful and insightful to pastors and deacon boards who are struggling to know God's will for their specific ministry contexts and how they can seek that will together.

The project may also challenge and encourage other pastors and deacon boards to evaluate their present decision-making processes and possibly consider placing a greater emphasis on developing corporate spirituality as a basis for making decisions.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The following primary and secondary data will be required for this project.

Primary Data

The primary data will be the interviews with the deacons, the program to implement corporate spirituality into the decision-making process of the deacon board of WBC, and the evaluation results of the project.

Secondary Data

The secondary data will be the Bible, commentaries and other study aids used in the study of the Scriptures, and Christian writings on spiritual formation and on church leadership.

Research Methodology

The first phase of the project will be to examine the corporate nature of leadership in the early church and how those leaders participated with God and each other in the decision-making process. The researcher will study the Scripture passages relevant to this area, using commentaries and other study tools.

The second phase of the project will be to examine the relationship between individual and corporate spirituality and the role of both in the decision-making processes of the church. The researcher will examine various writings on Christian spirituality and spiritual formation, especially those making reference to corporate spirituality.

The third phase of the project will be to examine contemporary perspectives on leadership and decision-making in the church. The researcher will read various contemporary Christian writings related to church leadership and the decision-making process.

The fourth phase of the project will be to educate the board concerning the corporate nature of biblical spirituality and its role in making decisions.

The fifth phase of the project will be to revise the decision-making process of the deacon board based upon the integration of a biblical corporate spirituality and the reflections/insights of the deacons at WBC.

The sixth phase of the project will be to evaluate the effectiveness of the program at the end of the project. This will be accomplished by personally interviewing each deacon.

CHAPTER TWO

THE IMPORTANCE OF HEARING THE VOICE OF GOD CORPORATELY

In this chapter, the researcher will explore the Biblical evidence that God speaks both to individuals and to corporate bodies in many and diverse ways for many and diverse purposes. The researcher will also examine the relationship between individual and corporate spirituality, the place of various spiritual disciplines in developing both, and the relationship between spirituality and the ability to discern the voice and will of God. Finally, the researcher will suggest implications for understanding the decision-making processes of a leadership team that will arise from this research.

God Speaks

Both the Old and New Testaments-- indeed, the fact of their very existence-- provide ample evidence to conclude that God is a relational Being who desires to reveal His nature and His will to humanity. Summing up the record of God's activity of revealing Himself to His creation, the writer of Hebrews says,

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Hebrews 1:1-2 NIV).

In Acts, the writer repeats a prophecy of Joel which describes some of the exceptional and dramatic ways in which God would speak during the last days:

“In the last days,” God says, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.” (Acts 2:17-20 NIV).

This desire and willingness of God to reveal Himself to humanity reflects both God’s interest in the lives of His creation and humanity’s need for such revelation in order to enjoy fellowship with the Creator. Far from simply being a mere show of power, the revelation of God is absolutely essential for the establishment of relationship with Him, as true saving knowledge of God exists only in so far as there is a self-disclosure or a self-manifestation of God.³ This revelation is a supernatural act of self-communication, “pregnant with purpose and significance.”⁴ Neo-orthodox theology goes even further to declare that revelation from God is never the mere communication of knowledge, but a “life-giving and life-renewing communion.”⁵

The Christian faith has consistently understood the revelatory acts of God to be the expressions of a personal God to persons He has created.⁶ Throughout the history of God’s interactions with humanity, His manifestation of Himself to particular persons at

³ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God- Dogmatics, Vol. I.* Translated by Olive Wyon. The Westminster Press: Philadelphia, PA, 1949, p. 14.

⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology.* William B. Eerdmans’ Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1941, p. 34.

⁵ Brunner, p. 20.

⁶ Millard J. Erikson, *Christian Theology.* Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1985, p. 177.

definitive times and places has been the basis of the Church's knowledge, understanding, and experience of Him.⁷

God Speaks in Many Ways

Having established the truth that God desires to and does speak, the question naturally arises as to the nature of this speech or revelation. In other words: How does God reveal Himself and His will to humans? As previously noted in Hebrews 1:1-2, God has spoken and continues to speak in a wide variety of ways to humanity. In all of His communications, God reveals Himself in anthropic form, making use of human categories of thought including human language, action, and images.⁸ These revelations often came in forms and images that were a part of everyday, ordinary human experience.⁹

Direct Speech, Visions, and Dreams

In the Old Testament God often spoke directly to individuals in order to bring a message to a larger group of people. God declared Himself to be the God of the patriarchs -- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses -- because it was they who personally received the word of God.¹⁰ At times, this "word" came to them directly as an audible

⁷ Erikson, p. 175.

⁸ Ibid, p. 178.

⁹ Ibid, p. 179.

¹⁰ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward An Old Testament Theology*. Academie Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 1978, p. 44.

speaking voice, as when God called Abram to leave his country and go to a land that He would show him.¹¹ Later, In Genesis 15:1-17, God promises to make Abraham the father of many descendants. Whether through an audible voice or a silent, inner hearing of His message -- the placing of His thoughts in their mind -- God often chose the direct approach to make His plans known.¹²

Another method employed by God to speak in the Old Testament was the use of dreams and visions. When God spoke to Abraham concerning his descendants in Genesis 15, He did so through a vision. The use of dreams and visions was one of the most common methods of God's communication in the Old Testament: the vision of Jacob who saw the stairway with ascending and descending angels;¹³ the vision of Moses who heard God speak from the burning bush;¹⁴ the vision of the Israelites when they saw the manifestation of the glory of God at Mount Sinai;¹⁵ the vision of Isaiah when he saw the Lord and His glory in the temple;¹⁶ the vision of Jeremiah when he saw the almond tree and the boiling pot as symbols of judgment against Judah;¹⁷ Ezekiel's vision of winged creatures and spinning wheels representing the glory of the

¹¹ Genesis 12:1-3. See also Genesis 13:14; 21:12; 22:1.

¹² Erikson, pp. 187-188.

¹³ Genesis 28:12-15.

¹⁴ Exodus 3:2- 4:17.

¹⁵ Exodus 24:10, 17.

¹⁶ Isaiah 6:1-13.

¹⁷ Jeremiah 1:11-16.

Lord,¹⁸ and his vision of the dry bones coming back to life;¹⁹ and the futuristic visions of Daniel concerning war and judgment.²⁰

The vision was a distinct mode of communicating new knowledge to the patriarchs and other chosen leaders or spokespersons of God. Dreams, however, were more widely distributed to other persons.²¹ The dreams of Abimelech warning him that Sarah was another man's wife,²² and of Pharaoh whose dream foretold of coming famine,²³ are but two examples of this.

In the New Testament, God continued to speak directly through audible voices, dreams, and visions. When Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, a dove-like vision descended and a voice from heaven declared the Father's pleasure.²⁴ When Peter, James, and John accompanied Jesus up a high mountain, they witnessed the transfiguration of Christ and the appearance of Moses and Elijah.²⁵ In Acts 2:2-3, the disciples were gathered in an upper room during Pentecost, and together witnessed a vision of tongues of fire descending upon those present. When Stephen, the first

¹⁸ Ezekiel 1:1-28.

¹⁹ Ezekiel 37:1-14.

²⁰ Daniel 7:9-27; 8:1-27; 10:1- 12:13.

²¹ Kaiser, pp. 85-86.

²² Genesis 20:3.

²³ Genesis 41.

²⁴ Matthew 3:16.

²⁵ Matthew 17:1-9.

Christian martyr, was being stoned, he saw a vision of Christ at the right hand of God.²⁶

Paul, the fiercest enemy of Christ and the early church, was converted as a result of his vision of the risen Christ on his way to persecute Christians in Damascus.²⁷

Perhaps the most dramatic series of visions was received by John on the Isle of Patmos where God used him to write the Book of Revelation.

As the gospel was spreading in the days of the early church, its travel was due in large part to visions declaring the need to share the Good News with the Gentiles: the vision of Ananias who was told to lay hands on Paul, the man who would become the great missionary of the gospel;²⁸ Paul's vision of a man of Macedonia, saying, "Come over into Macedonia, and help us";²⁹ and Peter's vision of the sheet coming down from heaven, and God's declaration that everything He made -- including the Gentiles -- was "clean."³⁰

Prophets and Judges

Of the variety of forms of revelation in the Old Testament, the decisive and standard one is that of the prophetic word, given to one of God's prophets or judges.³¹ The prophet – a person who spoke for God and who communicated God's message

²⁶ Acts 7:55, 56.

²⁷ Acts 9:3-6; 1 Corinthians 9:1.

²⁸ Acts 9:12.

²⁹ Acts 16:9.

³⁰ Acts 10:9-18.

³¹ Brunner, p. 16.

courageously to God's Chosen People, the nation of Israel -- had the often unenviable position of speaking words of judgment from God. Their authority came from God alone whose message they bore.³² Judges were military heroes or deliverers who led the nation of Israel against their enemies during the period between the death of Joshua and the establishment of the kingship. As God's agents for justice and deliverance, they would act decisively to free the nation from oppression.³³

When God spoke to people through the prophets and judges, He used several of the mediums described thus far in this chapter; there is, however, a distinction made in the Old Testament between God's speaking in dreams and prophecy, as only in chapter two of the book of Daniel is prophecy received through the medium of a dream.³⁴ The unique prophetic gift of Moses is described by God Himself as being received by direct word of mouth revelation rather than dreams or visions:

“When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD.” (Numbers 12:6-8 NIV).³⁵

The prophets had a consciousness that their message was not of their own creation,

³² *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “the prophet.”

³³ *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “the judges.”

³⁴ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 2. Harper Torchbooks: New York, 1962, p. 241.

³⁵ Walter Elwell, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 2. Baker Book House: Grand Rapids. MI, 1988, p. 1768.

but was in fact from God.³⁶ Often their message is prefaced with the phrase “... the word of the Lord came to me saying...”³⁷ At the same time, the prophet was more than just a mouthpiece or instrument that God used; he was a partner with God in that his heart was consumed by and filled with the passions of God.³⁸ The prophet would hear God’s voice and feel His heart, and try to impart “the *pathos* of the message as well as the *logos*.”³⁹ The prophets themselves asserted that many of their experiences were not moments of passive receptivity, but dialogues with God. By response, pleading, and counter speech, the prophet reacted to the word he received from God.⁴⁰

Visible Signs

In addition to direct and indirect speech, visions and dreams, prophets and judges, God also used historical events, visible signs and miracles to make His word and will known. When God wanted to guide the people of Israel out of Egyptian bondage, He did so with a visible pillar of smoke in the day and a pillar of fire by night.⁴¹ When Gideon was seeking confirmation of victory in battle from God, God used the visible

³⁶ Erikson, p. 187.

³⁷ Jeremiah 18:1; Ezekiel 12:1, 8, 17, 21, 26; Hosea 1:1; Joel.

³⁸ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 1. Harper Torchbooks: New York, 1962, p. 25.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 26.

⁴⁰ Heschel, vol. 1, p. 146.

⁴¹ Exodus 13:21-22.

signs of the fleece to guide.⁴² When the people wanted to choose a new king, God made His choice known through the casting of lots;⁴³ in the New Testament, God used a similar method in choosing Matthias to replace Judas as an apostle.⁴⁴ The call of Abraham, the provision of Isaac, the Exodus from Egypt, numerous healings and resurrections -- especially in the New Testament -- all were events that revealed God's will, power, and heart to those who witnessed them or heard the stories told.⁴⁵

Angels

One of the most fascinating methods God used in both the Old and New Testaments to speak was through His angels. The word "angel" -- both the Hebrew *mal'ak* and the Greek *angelos* -- have the basic literal meaning of "messenger."⁴⁶ In the Old Testament, it was an angel who told Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son.⁴⁷ It was also an angel who spoke to Jacob in a dream, telling him to leave and return to his homeland.⁴⁸

The Angel of the Lord is a striking, recurring figure as a messenger of destruction in

⁴² Judges 6:36-40.

⁴³ 1 Samuel 10.

⁴⁴ Acts 1:26.

⁴⁵ Erikson, p. 181.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 437.

⁴⁷ Genesis 18:1-10.

⁴⁸ Genesis 31:11-13.

both the Old Testament and the New Testament.⁴⁹

In the New Testament, the activity of angels seems to increase in both frequency and importance.⁵⁰ It is an angel who brings Zachariah the news that his wife Elizabeth will have a son in their old age, and he will prepare the way for the coming Messiah.⁵¹ Both Mary and Joseph are blessed by the ministry of angelic messengers: Mary with the incredible news that she would conceive and give birth to the Messiah,⁵² and Joseph with the encouragement not to divorce Mary, as well as the warning to flee to Egypt from King Herod and then to later return after Herod's death.⁵³

Angels also played a critical role in revealing God's direction to the apostles during the time of the early church. After the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, it was an angel of the Lord who sent Philip out into the desert for his divine appointment with the Ethiopian eunuch.⁵⁴ When God wanted Cornelius to visit the apostle Peter, He made His wishes known through an angel in a vision.⁵⁵ Later, when Peter was in prison awaiting trial and the other apostles were praying for him, an angel appeared to him in

⁴⁹ Walter Elwell, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 1. Baker Book House: Grand Rapids. MI, 1988, p. 88.

⁵⁰ Erikson, p. 444.

⁵¹ Luke 1:13-20.

⁵² Luke 1:26-38.

⁵³ Matthew 1:19-21; 2:13-14; 2:19-22.

⁵⁴ Acts 8:26-38.

⁵⁵ Acts 10:3-7.

jail and freed him from his chains, escorting him to freedom.⁵⁶ Even the apostle Paul received a message from God through an angel: while sailing for Italy to stand trial, the ship Paul was being transported in was caught in a storm and everyone thought they were doomed; yet Paul was given assurance by an angel that no lives would be lost.⁵⁷

While angelic messengers play an important role in the Bible, some people believe that their revelatory ministry ceased when the full scriptures were given.⁵⁸ In similar fashion, some believe that with the passing of the Old Testament prophets, the days of signs from the Lord also ceased.⁵⁹ Some even refer to the apparent testimony of the Bible itself to support this belief.⁶⁰ Yet these convictions are by no means universally held to be true by biblical theologians and scholars.

The Incarnate Jesus

The most profound and significant revelation from God came to humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The author of Hebrews writes:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:1-3a NIV).

In the person of Jesus, His life and ministry as recorded in the gospels, humanity has

⁵⁶ Acts 12:7-11.

⁵⁷ Acts 27:23-25.

⁵⁸ Berkhof, p. 148.

⁵⁹ Elwell, p. 1961.

the most complete revelation of the character and nature of God,⁶¹ and everything needed to know God can be found in Christ.⁶² Through Jesus Christ, God revealed His design for salvation and proclaimed His justness as well as His love for humanity. For all who longed to see God, Jesus Himself declared that if anyone saw Him, they saw the Father.⁶³ In the miracle of the Incarnation, the Word of God -- the *logos* -- became visible and tangible, revealing the heart and desire of God for His creation.⁶⁴ Through His teaching ministry, Jesus further revealed the truths of God by fulfilling and explaining them, even though most people did not recognize Him.⁶⁵

The Holy Spirit

When Jesus Christ completed His earthly ministry, God continued to speak to humanity through the activity of His Holy Spirit. Jesus said that the Spirit would come and continue to teach the believers and remind them of what they had learned during Christ's time with them.⁶⁶ It was this revelatory ministry of the Holy Spirit -- a continuation of Christ's ministry and function -- that guided the apostles through the

⁶⁰ Psalm 74:9.

⁶¹ Erikson, p. 190.

⁶² Colossians 1:19.

⁶³ John 14:9.

⁶⁴ John 1:14.

⁶⁵ John 1:9-11.

⁶⁶ John 14:25-26.

early years of the Church as recorded in the New Testament.⁶⁷

In the New Testament, the continuing witness of God to humanity is described in part as His Spirit “bearing witness” to the spirit of believers.⁶⁸ It is the Spirit of God who fully comprehends the depths of the knowledge of God, that lies inside the Christian in such a way that it may be said that they have “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:9-16 NIV).⁶⁹

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament -- with the exception of the qualitative difference between the Incarnation and all other forms of revelation -- there is no distinction made between the spiritual value of direct and indirect guidance from God. Throughout the biblical witness, both forms of revelation -- to a group or individual directly, or through a person or group to others -- serve to confirm the truth that God is a personal God who desires to reveal Himself and His will to His creation, and that He does so in a variety of ways.⁷⁰

God Speaks for Various Reasons

Having examined the primary means by which God communicates with humanity, the next logical question concerns the purpose of these communications. Why would

⁶⁷ Bruce Metzger and Michael Coogan, ed., *Oxford Companion to the Bible*. “Revelation” by William B. Nelson, Jr. Oxford University Press: New York, 1993, p. 651.

⁶⁸ Brunner, p. 30. See also Romans 8:16.

⁶⁹ Metzger and Cooper, p. 651.

⁷⁰ Alan R. Cole, *Galatians: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. Revised ed. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1989, p. 101.

God want to reveal Himself to His creation? What reasons could He have for communicating with finite human beings? Just as God's methods of speaking are varied and numerous in the Bible, so, too, are His reasons for doing so. While the specific details of every message and revelation are too numerous to list in this project, most fall into a few general categories. These categories reveal not only the general nature of the revelations, but the heart of the One who shares Himself through them.

The Call to Repentance

As humanity in general, and the people of Israel more specifically, repeatedly rejected God and His ways, a frequent theme of His revelation to them was the call to repent of their sins and return to Him. This message was part of a cyclical pattern: The people would turn to sinful ways, God would send a message calling for repentance, the people would eventually repent and follow Him for a time, only to gradually compromise their relationship with Him and slide into sin, and the cycle would start again.⁷¹

When God chose to call His people to repentance, He usually did so by sending a prophet to them with His words.⁷² These prophets spoke at a "stricken hour," where mounting tension existed between God and humanity.⁷³

⁷¹ Kaiser, p. 137.

⁷² Berkhof, p. 36.

⁷³ Heschel, vol. 1, p. 23.

Words of Warning

God also spoke to humanity with words of warning in the Bible. At times, this was part of His message of repentance through His prophet, who would bring a call to repentance followed by a warning of impending judgement if the people chose to ignore him and their God. At other times, the warning was to protect the faithful from God's judgment of others. When God decided to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, He first warned Lot to flee the area with his family.⁷⁴ In like manner, God's interactions with Noah prior to the flood could be considered warnings that had to be heeded if he and his family were to survive the flood.⁷⁵

In the New Testament, God said that He would warn of the coming end of the age by revealing specific signs to humanity.⁷⁶ Jesus spoke such warnings to His followers concerning the last days:

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. (Matthew 24:30-31 NIV); Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven... There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. (Luke 21:11, 25-26 NIV).

⁷⁴ Genesis 19:15.

⁷⁵ Genesis 6:1-7:23.

Guidance and Protection

The communicative activities of God often served to offer guidance and protection to His people. At times, God spoke in order to reveal practical details for certain assignments He had given.⁷⁷ An example of this type of direction is in God's detailed revelation concerning the design specifications of the Tabernacle and the role of the priests in it.⁷⁸

At other times, God's guidance was geographical as well as directive. The story of how Israel originally failed and then finally succeeded in entering the promised "rest" of God is found in her prophetic history. The word of God through His messengers led the way, and the people followed in obedience or repentance, or in failure.⁷⁹ For parts of this journey, God even sent an angel ahead of the people to guide as well as protect them.⁸⁰ This protective ministry of angels sent from God was also active in the life of Daniel when he was saved from death in the lion's den.⁸¹

Words of Encouragement

God often spoke words to encourage His listeners. In both the Old and New Testaments, hearing from God proved to be an event that brought courage and hope.

⁷⁶ Elwell, p. 1962.

⁷⁷ R. K. Harrison, *Old Testament Times*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1970, p. 142.

⁷⁸ Exodus 25:9- 40:16.

⁷⁹ Kaiser, p. 142.

⁸⁰ Exodus 23:20-21; 32:34.

In the words of H. Richard Niebuhr concerning the word of God both in biblical and modern times, “a revelatory moment makes our past intelligible- we understand what we remember, and remember what we have forgotten.”⁸² At other times, this word of encouragement was to reveal God’s desire to be united with and love His people in relationship, thus revealing their value and worth in His eyes. With His salvation decrees God had repeatedly surprised and blessed Israel as He guided them with His visitations.⁸³

In the first chapter of the book of Joshua, God’s appearance to His servant was primarily to affirm his calling and to encourage him at a point of decision.⁸⁴ God’s revelatory activity in the New Testament also included elements of encouragement. The angelic messenger sent to deliver the news of the coming Messiah to Mary also shared words of comfort and courage to accompany the news of her unique and blessed place in history.⁸⁵ Decades later, while arriving at a tomb to continue mourning the death of her son, an angel brings the astounding news that Jesus is alive; and as if

⁸¹ Daniel 6:22.

⁸² Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, ed., *Readings in Christian Theology*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, PA, 1985, p. 113.

⁸³ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom In Israel*. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1986, pp. 289-290.

⁸⁴ Harrison, p. 156.

⁸⁵ Luke 2:30.

that were not amazing enough, moments later she actually sees Him and hears His voice.⁸⁶

The Establishment of Covenant

A central function and purpose of God's revelatory activity in the Bible was to establish terms of covenant relationship between Himself, His chosen people, and humanity. In the Old Testament, it was the revelation of God to Moses that established the covenant between Israel and Yahweh. Subsequent covenants with David and other leaders formed the basis of the agreement of the relationship between the true King of Israel and His people.⁸⁷ Throughout their history, God repeatedly spoke to remind Israel of the terms of this covenant relationship with Him. Angels were a common method of bringing these messages, often mediating these special revelations of God, communicating blessings to His people, and executing judgment upon His enemies. They appeared most active during key points of salvation history: the days of the Patriarchs, the time of law-giving, and the period of exile and restoration.⁸⁸

In the New Testament, God clearly spoke with the intent of establishing the new covenant with His creation. Through miraculous signs, angelic messengers, and other miracles, God was declaring to the world that a new time had come and a new life and relationship was now available. Through the earthly life and ministry of Jesus Christ --

⁸⁶ Matthew 28:5-10.

⁸⁷ Harrison, p. 140.

⁸⁸ Berkhof, p. 148.

His miraculous birth, literal resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension -- God made possible and clearly established His new covenant.⁸⁹ After Christ's ascension, God continued to reveal how the terms of this new covenant were to be understood by sending His Holy Spirit, the written word, and even using angelic mediators of the law.⁹⁰ Through these mediums, God actively pursues covenant relationship with people by seeking to draw them to faith in Him.⁹¹ The establishment and maintenance of covenant relationship with humanity is the common thread of God's revelatory activity in both the Old and the New Testaments. As the apostle John said of the miraculous signs of Jesus recorded in the gospels, "... these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31 NIV). Throughout the whole of the biblical witness, this appears to be the ultimate purpose of God's revelation to humanity.

Relationship Between Individual and Corporate Spirituality

When examining the various forms of God's revelation and their purpose, a critical biblical truth emerges concerning the nature of the relationship between revelation and spirituality, both individual and corporate. It becomes apparent that God's interactions and activities with individuals usually have an impact on and are in fact for the ultimate purpose of speaking to and affecting the lives of a corporate body. From Abraham,

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2.

⁹¹ Elwell, p. 1962.

through the times of the Patriarchs to Moses, continuing through the prophets and finally through the Church in the New Testament, there is a growth of understanding of the people of God as nation, family, and community.⁹²

After the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, God reveals that the punishment and promise of a coming redeemer was not only for Adam and Eve, but for all those who would be descendants of them.⁹³ These two people served as representatives of the entire human race, and the promised Redeemer would become the representative person for the redeemed.⁹⁴

When Abraham comes on the scene, his personal relationship with God serves ultimately as the basis for blessing the peoples of the earth.⁹⁵ After telling Abraham to leave his dwelling and go to a land not even specified yet, God makes this remarkable promise: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:2-3 NIV). Here the first covenant is presented -- the establishment of a particular relationship and the commitment to a particular cause of action, which is sanctioned by

⁹² Kaiser, p. 100.

⁹³ Genesis 3:15.

⁹⁴ Kaiser, p. 102.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 88.

an oath.⁹⁶

The relationship between individual and corporate spirituality and God's revelatory activity continued in the time of Moses. In the twelfth chapter of Exodus, God refers to Israel as a congregation -- *edah* -- for the first time as preparations began for the Passover meal in each family.⁹⁷ As a result of the subsequent Exodus of the people from Egypt, led by Moses who received direction from God, the people of Israel had the event by which they became the people of God and the primary example of His redemptive purposes for them.⁹⁸ Later, in Exodus 19:3-8, Israel as a nation is summoned to a spiritual relationship with God: a special possession among all peoples; a kingdom of priests; a holy nation.⁹⁹

Yet another example of God's revelation of blessing and covenant to a people being expressed through an individual is found in King David.¹⁰⁰ God's covenant with David had a corporate focus in that the prophet Nathan promised David a great name, stability for his people in the land, and an everlasting dynasty.¹⁰¹

The connection between individual and corporate spirituality in the Bible was not

⁹⁶ William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1982, p. 115.

⁹⁷ Kaiser, p. 105.

⁹⁸ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, p. 143.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 144.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 247.

¹⁰¹ 1 Samuel 7:1-3.

always concerning positive matters. In the Old Testament, while the word of God to an individual often brought blessing to a group or nation, it could also bring judgment. In the nation of Israel God repeatedly emphasized a strong sense of corporate responsibility in regard to sin.¹⁰² In Daniel 9:1-21, for example, the prophet prays a prayer of confession that apologizes for the past sins of his people, with the hope that God will hear his prayer and begin the process of forgiveness and restoration.¹⁰³ The prophet Daniel is brutally honest in his acknowledgement of the responsibility of God's people for their own suffering.¹⁰⁴ In hearing God's word through the prophets and scriptures, the people were constantly forced to see the general in the particular. This is evident in their view of corporate personality, in which the entire nation may be treated as a singular personality, and a single person -- a king, Patriarch, or prophet -- may symbolize the nation.¹⁰⁵

In the New Testament, the connection between individual and corporate spirituality continues. Jesus looked upon His disciples as the nucleus of Israel who accepted His proclamation of the kingdom of God; thus they formed the true people of God, the spiritual Israel.¹⁰⁶ In Matthew 23:37-39, Jesus declared that Jerusalem had rejected

¹⁰² LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, p. 471.

¹⁰³ Tremper Longman III, *Daniel: The NIV Application Commentary*. Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 230.

¹⁰⁴ Longman, p. 223.

¹⁰⁵ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, p. 441.

¹⁰⁶ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1974, p. 342.

and killed the prophets and rejected Christ's efforts to save them; as a city -- and the nation represented by this city -- they would suffer the consequences of that rejection.¹⁰⁷ Jerusalem symbolized the nation whose capitol it is, while the "house" seems to refer to the temple, which is where God's presence is symbolized for them as a people.¹⁰⁸

In the book of Revelation, Jesus continues His reference to individual churches as representatives of the Church universal. In the first three chapters, the letters from the glorified Christ are written to specific congregations; yet each message ends with the universal application, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."¹⁰⁹ Each letter is a prophetic word from Jesus through the Spirit who is inspiring John, and applied to God's people dispersed in different cities and, ultimately, different generations.¹¹⁰

The life and ministry of the early church in Acts reveals a developed understanding of the corporate nature of spirituality. In Acts 2:44, 47, statements referring to the early church as being "together" reveal their consciousness of being bound to one another

¹⁰⁷ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew: New International Biblical Commentary*. Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, MA, 1991, p. 219.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, pp. 331-332.

¹⁰⁹ Leon Morris, *Revelation: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. Revised ed. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, p. 58.

¹¹⁰ Craig S. Keener, *Revelation: The NIV Application Commentary*. Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, p. 105.

because they were together bound to Christ.¹¹¹ To be a believer meant to share with other believers the life of the coming age, to be a believer in fellowship, to be in the *ekklesia*.¹¹² Beginning with baptism -- the outward sign of admission to the Christian fellowship -- believers perceived themselves to be inextricably bound to, responsible for, and accountable to one another.¹¹³ They were, as Peter wrote:

... a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. (1 Peter 2:9-10a NIV).

Role of Various Spiritual Disciplines In Developing Both Individual and Corporate Spirituality

It is evident in the biblical witness that God spoke in a variety of ways for various purposes. His interactions with and revelations to individuals was usually meant to be dispersed to a larger body, and the corporate responsibility of earthly life was a major emphasis of His activities. God would choose and use individuals to strengthen the corporate body, which then enabled both individuals and corporate entities to grow in maturity. In examining these themes, are there any ways in which individuals and corporate entities prepared themselves to hear from God? Did they simply go through the same daily routine as the rest of the people on the planet? Or did those God spoke

¹¹¹ Ladd, p. 350.

¹¹² Ibid, p. 351.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 350.

to make themselves available in any way to receive a message from the Lord?

An examination of both the Old and New Testaments reveals that those who received messages from the Lord often exercised various spiritual disciplines in their effort to remain open and available for such communications. The prophets and judges often spent time fasting and praying for various reasons. For example, when Daniel was seeking a word of forgiveness for his people, he did so with prayer and fasting.¹¹⁴ At other times, God would prepare individuals for encounters with Him by bringing them to places of solitude, as He did with Moses at Mount Sinai.¹¹⁵ The New Testament also records examples of individuals engaged in spiritual disciplines as they seek a word from God, including the fasting of Paul while he awaited the restoration of his sight,¹¹⁶ and the times of retreat and solitude practised by Jesus during His earthly ministry.¹¹⁷ While the exercise of these disciplines does not appear to be an effort to force God to speak, they reflect an apparent understanding of the need to prepare oneself to be receptive when God chooses to speak.

Of even greater importance to the purpose of this project, however, are the times when groups of people participated in spiritual activities and disciplines together as preparation for receiving a message from God. One example of this from the Old Testament is the Day of Atonement, which was the only Divinely-ordained public

¹¹⁴ Daniel 9:3.

¹¹⁵ Exodus 19:3-31:18

¹¹⁶ Acts 9:8-9.

¹¹⁷ Matthew 14:23; John 6:22.

fast.¹¹⁸ Another was the practice of sin sacrifices including the scapegoat which were corporate confessions of sin.¹¹⁹ At other times when great national calamities overtook Israel, great national needs arose, or great national sins were to be confessed, a day of public fasting and repentance was proclaimed.¹²⁰ Examples of this include: Israel's journey to Bethel with fasting and sacrifices, seeking God's word as to whether or not they should go to war with Benjamin;¹²¹ the prophet Samuel gathering the people together at Mizpah to confess their sin to God with fasting;¹²² Jehoshaphat declaring a day of fasting as he sought the Lord's direction concerning the advancing Edomites.¹²³ Whether it was a fast or sacrifice for confession of sin or direction, a call to feast and celebrate and worship, the spirituality of individuals was closely tied to the spirituality of the corporate body, Israel.

In the New Testament, just as individuals and spiritual leaders practised spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, solitude, worship, service, etc., so, too, did corporate bodies participate in these activities. At times, the church was seeking the protection or release of a fellow believer, such as the group prayers offered on behalf

¹¹⁸ Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: It's Ministry and Services*. Updated ed. Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, MA, 1994, p. 271.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 82.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 271.

¹²¹ Judges 20:26-28.

¹²² 1 Samuel 7:5-6.

¹²³ 2 Chronicles 20:1-12.

of Peter when he was in prison.¹²⁴ At other times, churches were given direction from the Lord to appoint missionaries as leadership after times of prayer and fasting, such as the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas by the believers in Antioch¹²⁵ and the appointment of elders in the churches at Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch by Paul and Barnabas.¹²⁶ The discipline of service and giving was practised by churches when they gave financial gifts to help poverty-stricken fellowships.¹²⁷ As in the Old Testament, the New Testament believers understood their common lives and faith not to be options, but central to Christianity itself. As Luke wrote in his record of the early church:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. (Acts 2:42-47a NIV).

Implications for Understanding the Decision Making Processes of a Leadership

Team in the Church Today

What useful information does this study thus far have for the contemporary church, if in fact it is relevant at all? Why should a leadership team in a local church be concerned with what the Bible says about the nature of revelation, spiritual disciplines, and corporate spirituality? What are the implications of this research on the decision-

¹²⁴ Acts 12:5-14.

¹²⁵ Acts 13:2-3.

¹²⁶ Acts 14:21-23.

making processes of the leadership team?

Firstly, this research affirms the Christian belief that God does indeed desire to and actively communicate with His people. For a leadership team, this is encouraging as part of their ministry is seeking to understand God's will when making decisions that affect the life and ministry of the local church. God makes the promise through James that whenever wisdom is needed, He will provide it if His people will but ask.¹²⁸

Secondly, this research affirms the truth that God must take the initiative in revelation. In one sense, receiving knowledge of God and His will is more passive than active; that is, more a matter of being known than knowing. The church's primary activity is to permit God to do His work through the local fellowship.¹²⁹ God Himself must sense the desire or need to "speak." Thus, a leadership team cannot in any way plan or hope to force God's hand, or conjure some mystical direction from Him. Rather, they must trust that God would move and speak when the need is present and the time is appropriate. In other words, the leadership team is forced to concede that God is in control.

Thirdly, while it is true that God must take the initiative in revelation, He repeatedly invites participation by His people in His activity. While He could make His will known whenever and to whomever He desires, God has prescribed activities-- spiritual disciplines -- throughout history that better prepare individuals and corporate groups to

¹²⁷ 2 Corinthians 8:10-19.

¹²⁸ James 1:5-6.

¹²⁹ Hodgson and King, p. 63.

hear His message. A leadership team cannot simply sit back, go through the daily routines of life that everyone else does, and expect that they will automatically sense God's voice and leading. Spiritual leaders must be practitioners of habits and disciplines that help foster spiritual sensitivity, openness, and availability. The renewed mind Paul writes of in Romans 12:1-2 is the disciplined, discerning mind that is able to approve what is "good, pleasing, and perfect."¹³⁰ This is absolutely critical in the ministry of a leadership team. It is also clear in this passage that there is a necessary assent and cooperation of the human free will with the work of grace; an exercise of our will in order to live in the truth and the mind of Christ.¹³¹

Fourthly, while many of these disciplines can be practised by individuals, all of them have greater impact and significance in the life and spiritual health of the corporate body. In fact, some disciplines cannot be practised alone, such as confession and service; they require interaction with and dependance upon others. As these spiritual disciplines are practised by individuals and groups together-- such as a leadership team in a local church-- the group becomes healthier and better prepared to hear and obey the voice of the Lord. This in turn strengthens the individual, which strengthens the group, creating a mutual cycle of encouragement in spiritual formation.

In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul writes these words:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes

¹³⁰ James R. Edwards, *Romans: New International Biblical Commentary*. Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.: Peabody, MA, 1992, p. 285.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, p. 284.

through Jesus Christ-- to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9-11 NIV). The phrase “depth of insight”-- *aisthesis*-- can also be understood as “perception,” “discrimination,” or even “fact,” and is the employment of the faculty which makes a person able to make a moral decision.¹³² The word “discern”-- *dokimazo*-- means to “put to the test” and then, as a result of such examination, “to accept as tested, to approve.”¹³³ This growth in discernment is the need for growing insight into the character and will of God.¹³⁴ Not only is it needful in the process of decision-making by a leadership team in a local church, but a better knowledge of God and His ways will promote greater harmony within the fellowship.¹³⁵ So while this is a prayer for discernment in the fellowship, it is also an affirmation that what helps make that discernment possible is a true love and shared life in the Christian community, which then is more likely to lead to greater spiritual perception.¹³⁶ The fulfillment of the apostle’s prayer will be that his friends will have a common love and shared experience of spiritual formation that will result in the ability to discern, and then to practice in

¹³² Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. Revised ed. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, pp. 66-67.

¹³³ Ibid, p. 67.

¹³⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Philippians: New International Biblical Commentary*. Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.: Peabody, MA, 1989, p. 37.

¹³⁵ Martin, p. 66.

¹³⁶ Bruce, p. 36.

Christian living, the truly important issues of Christian community.¹³⁷ For the leadership team in a local church, this is the ultimate goal.

¹³⁷ Martin, p. 67.

CHAPTER THREE

**SEEKING AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CORPORATE NATURE OF THE
CHURCH, SPIRITUAL FORMATION, CHURCH LEADERSHIP, AND DECISION-
MAKING**

In this chapter, the researcher will examine historic and contemporary perspectives on the corporate nature of the Church, as well as the role of spiritual disciplines in corporate spiritual formation. The researcher will then briefly examine various leadership models practised in contemporary church settings. Finally, the researcher will examine the decision-making activities recorded in the New Testament with emphasis on the Book of Acts, as well as contemporary models for decision-making in the local church..

The Nature of the Church

Both historical and contemporary theologians have affirmed the corporate nature of the Christian faith. Hippolytus, an early Church Father, wrote: "It is not a place that is called church, not a house made of stones and earth.... It is the holy assembly of those who live in righteousness."¹³⁸ Referring to the unity of the Church, Cyprian wrote:

¹³⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 464.

He can no longer have God for his Father, who does not have the Church for his mother.... He who does not hold this unity does not hold God's law, does not hold the faith of the Father and the Son, does not hold life and salvation.¹³⁹

In the words of John Owen, "To be a Christian is, by definition, to be within the Church."¹⁴⁰ For a more contemporary expression of this important truth, one can turn to the eloquent words of Bruce Milne:

Scripture knows nothing of solitary religion. The salvation it witnesses to is emphatically one which has corporate dimensions. No man can be reconciled to God without being reconciled to the people of God within whom his experience of God's grace immediately sets him. The doctrine of salvation is indissolubly bound up with ecclesiology, the doctrine of the Church. The theme of fellowship... is therefore a matter of supreme importance and takes us close to the very heart of biblical religion.¹⁴¹

Whether it be a classical or contemporary perspective, it is almost universally understood within the Christian Church that to be a Christian means being gathered out of isolation into the corporate life of the body of Christ. For this reason, the quality of a Christian's relationship with other believers -- particularly in a local church -- is one of the primary indicators of the quality of his or her relationship with God.¹⁴²

It is worth noting that this doctrinal perspective can be traced all the way back to the biblical writers. For example, references to the "saints" in the New Testament are never

¹³⁹ Hodgson and King, pp. 238-239.

¹⁴⁰ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*. The Banner of Truth Trust: Edinburgh, 1987, p. 159.

¹⁴¹ Bruce Milne, *We Belong Together: The Meaning of Fellowship*. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 1978, p. 19.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, p. 7.

made concerning an individual, but a local church fellowship or fellowships.¹⁴³ While individuals were sometimes pointed out for commendation or correction, the writers of the New Testament understood their primary audience to be corporate bodies of believers. In making reference to these bodies of believers, several key words and images were used that emphasized the corporate nature of the faith.

The Church as “Ekklesia”

One of the most significant words used in the New Testament when referring to the Church is the word *ekklesia*. In the secular sense of the word, it refers simply to a gathering or assembly of persons.¹⁴⁴ The choice of *ekklesia* as the designation of the Christian community, however, suggests that the New Testament believers viewed the Church as neither an “edifice nor an organization” but as a people -- a people brought together by the Holy Spirit and bound to each other through Christ.¹⁴⁵ Thus, whether *ekklesia* is used to designate a local church, a house church, or a group of churches in the New Testament, the corporate nature of the Church is always emphasized.¹⁴⁶

Strictly speaking, the Christian *ekklesia* was born at Pentecost. Consisting of more than just human fellowship bound together by a common religious belief and experience, it was and is the creation of God through the Holy Spirit.¹⁴⁷ Central to the

¹⁴³ Ladd, p. 544.

¹⁴⁴ Erikson, p. 1031.

¹⁴⁵ Grenz, p. 465.

¹⁴⁶ See 1 Corinthians 16:1; Colossians 4:15; Acts 9:31.

¹⁴⁷ Ladd, p. 347.

New Testament doctrine of the Church is the understanding that each local congregation is not simply regarded as *a part* of the Church, but is fully the Church in its local expression.¹⁴⁸ This view is supported throughout the New Testament as the individual congregation, or group of believers in a specific place, is never regarded as merely a part or component of the whole Church. In other words, the Church is not a sum or composite of the individual local groups; rather, the whole is found in each place.¹⁴⁹

A final note of worth relating to the term *ekklesia* and the New Testament's use of it to designate the Church is the important link it provides connecting the Church of Jesus Christ and the Old Testament nation of Israel. The Jewish scholars who translated the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek Septuagint chose *ekklesia* to render the Hebrew word *qahal* – translated as “assembly” -- which the historical writers used to refer to Israel as “the congregation” or “assembly of the Lord.”¹⁵⁰ This parallel between the corporate nature of the nation Israel and the corporate nature of the New Testament Church affirms the continuing design of God's calling of individuals into a corporate body for His ultimate purposes and glory.

The Church as “Soma”

In Paul's letters to the Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, and the Colossians, he uses the word soma -- translated as “body” -- more than thirty times to illustrate a

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 537.

¹⁴⁹ Erikson, p. 1033.

¹⁵⁰ Grenz, p. 464.

functioning local church. In about half of these references, he applied the term to the Church calling it “the body of Christ.”¹⁵¹ In using this metaphor of the body, Paul expresses the oneness of the relationship of the Church to her Lord; the Church it is not a body or society of believers, but the body of Christ.¹⁵² This image also helps to emphasize that the Church is the focal point of Christ’s activity now, just as was His physical body during His earthly ministry, and is used both of the Church universal and individual local congregations.^{153 154}

A key passage in understanding Paul’s doctrine of the Church is found in his letter to the Corinthian church: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:27 NIV). Here Paul speaks of the interconnectedness between all persons who make up the Church. The Christian faith is not to be defined merely in terms of an individual relationship to the Lord;¹⁵⁵ like the human body, the Church is also a unit made up of many unique, diverse, but complementary parts.¹⁵⁶ Not all members have the same function, but all have the same goal; all are to be

¹⁵¹ Gene Getz, *Building Up One Another*. Victor Books: Wheaton, IL, 1989, p. 7.

¹⁵² Ladd, p. 545.

¹⁵³ Millard J. Erikson, ed. By L. Arnold Hustad, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*. Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1992, p. 332.

¹⁵⁴ See Ephesians 1:22-23 and 1 Corinthians 12:27.

¹⁵⁵ Erikson, 1985, p. 1037.

concerned for the other parts of the body, and to use their gifts in service to the greater whole.¹⁵⁷

The Church as the “Laos” of God

The Church is constituted of God’s people: they belong to Him and He belongs to them, and the Church enters into this relationship because God has chosen her.¹⁵⁸

This understanding of the church as God’s people or “*laos*” is significant not least of all because it is a title used of Israel in the Old Testament. Paul makes this connection in his letter to the Romans:

... even us, whom He also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As He says in Hosea: “I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one,” and, “It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’” (Romans 9:24-26 NIV).¹⁵⁹

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul again uses this image:

“What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.’” (2 Corinthians 6:16 NIV).

In these and other instances, reference to the Church as the people of God is an extension of the use of the term from Old Testament references.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ See 1 Corinthians 12:1-31.

¹⁵⁷ Grenz, p. 467.

¹⁵⁸ See 2 Corinthians 6:16.

¹⁵⁹ Ladd, p. 538.

¹⁶⁰ Erikson, 1985, p. 1035.

From the Old Testament to the New Testament

Why is the use of Old Testament terms to describe the New Testament Church so significant? In the Old Testament, Israel was originally depicted as the elect people of God called to be "... a kingdom of priests.. and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:6 NIV).¹⁶¹ In calling Israel, God voluntarily entered into a binding obligation toward them and called upon them to accept the reciprocal obligation. Thus they became a "chosen" or "elect" people.¹⁶² Both the Hebrew words *qahal* – a general term meaning "to call a gathering or meeting" -- and *'edhah* – meaning "to appoint" -- were used to refer to both Israel and the Church as the called people of God.¹⁶³ The Shema of the Old Testament is a call to a people,¹⁶⁴ and implicit in the New Testament word *ekklesia* is the claim that the Church stands in direct continuity with the Old Testament people of God.¹⁶⁵

The Church as the Temple of the Holy Spirit

Yet another image of the church can be found in Paul's letter to the Corinthian believers: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple." (1 Corinthians 3:16-17 NIV). In the New Testament,

¹⁶¹ Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology- Vol. 2: Life, Ministry, & Hope*. Harper and Row Publishers: San Francisco, CA, 1978, p. 132.

¹⁶² Dow Kirkpatrick, ed., *The Doctrine of the Church*. Abingdon Press: New York, 1964, p. 31.

¹⁶³ Berkhof, p. 555.

¹⁶⁴ Kirkpatrick, p. 183.

the Christian community takes the place of the temple as the eschatological temple of God, as the place where God dwells and is worshipped. This is because the Holy Spirit now indwells the corporate fellowship.¹⁶⁶ In the New Testament, each and every believer becomes a priest -- a “brethren among other priests” -- by being united by faith in Christ. By His Spirit all believers are able to intercede, sacrifice, and counsel on behalf of others, as Christians share in the kingly rule of Christ as well as His priestly intercession, as a “holy nation and royal priesthood.”¹⁶⁷ As Peter writes of the Church in his letter: “... you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:5 NIV).

What does all of this mean as believers seek to understand their place in the Church of Jesus Christ? It affirms the truth that all believers are one, not merely in sentiment, not merely in aspiration, but sacramentally, for all believers have been made partakers of the one body of Christ.¹⁶⁸ The early Christians were conscious of being bound together because they were “together bound to Christ. To be a believer meant... to be a believer in fellowship, to be in the *ekklesia*.”¹⁶⁹ Stanley Grenz puts it this way:

¹⁶⁵ Ladd, p. 537.

¹⁶⁶ Ladd, p. 540.

¹⁶⁷ Bloesch, p. 106.

¹⁶⁸ Kirkpatrick, p. 37.

... the Church is formed through the coming together of those who have entered into covenant with God in Christ and thus with each other.... in fact, because we all confess Jesus' lordship, the bond between us is greater than all other human bonds.¹⁷⁰ As the believer's union with Christ is at the heart of the covenant and fellowship is based on union, the divine and human covenants belong together so that the one is the foundation of the other.¹⁷¹ As the fellowship of believers, Christians enter into relationship with God and with one another. This covenantal relationship is in many ways a foretaste of the future community which all believers will share in the new creation, and a sign of the eternal community of the triune God Himself.¹⁷² The Holy Trinity is the mysterious community of God, and God invites the Church to be transformed into such a community.¹⁷³ The covenant which inheres in the Church, therefore, is the agreement to walk together, to be a people in relationship with one another and with God.¹⁷⁴

Understanding the Corporate Spirituality of a Congregation

Beyond the reality of the connection in Christ between individual believers, is there

¹⁶⁹ Ladd, pp. 350-351.

¹⁷⁰ Grenz, p. 480.

¹⁷¹ Ferguson, p. 155.

¹⁷² Grenz, p. 461.

¹⁷³ John Ackerman, *Spiritual Awakening: A Guide to Spiritual Life in Congregations*. The Alban Institute: Bethesda, MD, 1994, p. 81.

a unique corporate spirituality within local groups of believers? Some writers believe so, and point out that this spirituality or character may be positive or negative, formed by the moving or dysfunction of the church's "spirit." In other words, a group spirituality may be organized around shame, religious nostalgia, or the experience of the living God.¹⁷⁵ When Paul writes to Colossae, he explains that their "new nature" is a corporate experience in which the whole Christian community at Colossae had come to share; that God is reproducing the quality of togetherness, integration, and abundant living that is seen in Jesus Christ.¹⁷⁶ This unity was not something expressed in ideological terms, either, but in very practical visible ways. Economically, for example, the early Church was essentially a commonwealth in which members were not being pulled apart from one another by the pursuit of individual goals of success; rather, they were devoting everything they were and owned to the strengthening of one another and the cause of Christ.¹⁷⁷

All this is to say that the early church saw themselves as a special people, a people united together because they had been called out of the world by the gospel to belong to God. The New Testament writers referred to the Church as a new nation, a body, a people, a temple. And although this people transcends spatial and temporal

¹⁷⁴ Grenz, p. 481.

¹⁷⁵ Ackerman, p. 77.

¹⁷⁶ David Prior, *Creating Community: An Every Member Approach to Ministry in the Local Church*. Navpress Publishing Group: Colorado Springs, CO, 1992, p. 10.

¹⁷⁷ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of*

boundaries, according to the Scriptures it is chiefly manifested in a visible, local group of believers who covenant to be the local expression of the Church. All these things point to the same fundamental idea: the Church is a community.¹⁷⁸ To quote Stanley Grenz: “Humans are beings-in-fellowship.... the focal point of community can only be the community of Christ expressed in His church.”¹⁷⁹

The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in Corporate Spiritual Formation

In many contemporary writings on spiritual disciplines, great emphasis is placed on instructing individuals in the understanding and practice of spiritual exercises. This makes sense, in that individuals must practice the disciplines for themselves if they are to receive any benefit from them. But is there a connection between the spiritual disciplines of individuals and the spiritual formation of the corporate body? What in fact is corporate spiritual formation, and what role if any does the practice of spiritual disciplines have in its growth and health? If the Church is primarily a corporate entity, how are individuals within it to understand the ultimate goal of practising spiritual disciplines?

Poetically describing the process of spiritual formation, Susanne Johnson writes: “Christian spiritual formation is a matter of becoming the song that we sing, the story we tell. The task is to let the story so live through us that we are transformed to be as

Renewal. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 1979, p. 161.

¹⁷⁸ Grenz, p. 480.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 180.

the story is.”¹⁸⁰ In more concrete terms, Maxie Dunnam is quoted in Frank Stanger’s book *Spiritual Formation in the Local Church*:

Spiritual formation is the dynamic process of receiving by faith and appropriating by commitment, discipline, and action, the living Christ into our lives to the end that our lives will conform to and manifest the living Christ in the world.¹⁸¹

Spiritual formation involves a gradual change in the believer’s character, the most basic determination of who they are as persons. This change involves the whole created person, including his or her intentions in the world, the shape of his or her attitudes and affections, and his or her understanding of the gift of community.

This process of spiritual formation is a lifelong one, sometimes described using the term “sanctification,” and requires continual education and growth in matters of faith and Christian living.¹⁸² For this reason, spiritual formation must be intentional, structured, and disciplined.¹⁸³ This often involves the making of a “rule,” which is a medieval word for “a specific daily pattern for maintaining spiritual awareness,” and can include work, study, and other creative disciplines.¹⁸⁴ For the sake of both mutual support and benefit, the Church has been and continues to be the decisive context for

¹⁸⁰ Susanne Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and in the Classroom*. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1989, p. 103.

¹⁸¹ Frank Bateman Stanger, *Spiritual Formation in the Local Church*. Francis Asbury Press: Grand Rapids, MI, 1989, pp. 14-15.

¹⁸² Johnson, pp. 112-113.

¹⁸³ Stanger, pp. 55-64.

¹⁸⁴ Corrine Ware, *Connecting to God: Nurturing Spirituality Through Small Groups*. The Alban Institute, Inc.: Bethesda, MD, 1997, pp. 70-80.

Christian spiritual formation, as the Church is involved in what it does to us, for us, and with us.¹⁸⁵ Many of the classic spiritual disciplines thus take on a new depth of meaning when appreciated and experienced in their corporate context, and only produce the true depth of fruit possible when exercised corporately. The researcher will now examine some of these disciplines in their corporate context.

The Discipline of Corporate Worship

When defining worship in part as celebration, and the act of honoring the goodness and character of God, it clearly becomes something naturally practised in a corporate setting.¹⁸⁶ To worship is to know, to feel, to experience the resurrected Christ in the midst of the gathered community. It is “breaking into the Shekinah of God; better, being involved by the Shekinah of God.”¹⁸⁷ As early believers gathered, they realized they were entering into “the Holy of Holies. They were coming into the awful, glorious, gracious presence of the living God.”¹⁸⁸ They gathered with a sense anticipation and expectation, knowing that Christ was present among them and that He would teach and touch them with His loving power.

In the early Church, believers were gathered for worship physically and in a unity of Spirit that took them beyond their individual contributions and activities to become, as

¹⁸⁵ Johnson, p. 121.

¹⁸⁶ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: A Path to Spiritual Growth*, revised ed. HarperCollins Publishers: New York, NY, 1988, p. 197.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 158.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 161.

Paul describes, “like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.” (Philippians 2:2 NIV).¹⁸⁹ When more than one or two enter into worship with a sense of holy expectancy, it can, as Foster puts it, “change the atmosphere of a room. People who enter harried and distracted are drawn quickly into a sense of the silent Presence. Hearts and minds are lifted upwards, and the air becomes charged with expectancy.”¹⁹⁰ Thus, when believers are truly gathered together in worship, things occur that could never occur when they participate in solitary worship. What the biblical writers refer to as *koinonia* becomes a reality, and a deep inward fellowship in the power of the Holy Spirit is experienced.¹⁹¹

The Discipline of Corporate Prayer

The discipline of prayer is also a spiritual exercise that takes on new dimensions when practised corporately. Central to the purpose of prayer in its various forms is the goal and desire that all believers come to know and reflect the divine will of God. Following the New Testament pattern of the corporate ministry of prayer, believers are to pray for one another, requesting that the Spirit might be at work in each other’s lives, causing them to grow and be built up in the faith and in the knowledge of Christ. The corporate ministry of prayer includes interceding on behalf of other believers so that

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, pp. 163-164.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 163.

they may hold fast to correct doctrine, and that personal character may increasingly conform to that of Jesus.¹⁹²

It is worth noting that when Jesus taught the disciples to pray, He started with the words “*Our Father*” and not “*My Father*.” This suggests that there is an essential corporate dimension to prayer, which lifts the believer out of the narrow, limited perspective of his or her own individual needs and desires, as valid as these may be.¹⁹³ Whether the prayer be formal or conversational, making the use of imagery and sacred symbols, or any other forms, all types of prayer can be practised corporately and release the potential for unique spiritual insights and experiences typically undiscovered when praying without the support and participation of community.¹⁹⁴ As John Ackerman writes: “Our prayers, our loves, our relationships- oriented toward God- will have this pattern of unity. They will be interdependent.”¹⁹⁵

The Discipline of Corporate Guidance/Listening

The spiritual discipline of guidance or “listening” is one that has obvious corporate dimensions. The task of spiritual “listening” as a corporate discipline is to “pay

¹⁹¹ Ibid, p. 164.

¹⁹² Grenz, p. 498.

¹⁹³ M. Robert Mulholland, Jr, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 1993, p. 108.

¹⁹⁴ Ware, pp. 32-36.

¹⁹⁵ Ackerman, p. 81.

attention, to listen, and to be prayed through.”¹⁹⁶ Also referred to as group spiritual direction, the practice of meeting together prayerfully to enter into God’s presence on behalf of others for a wide variety of needs is really about being present to God for others within the spiritual community of faith.¹⁹⁷ Jesus promised that “... where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (Matthew 18:20 NIV). The premise of spiritual guidance or listening as a corporate practice is that His presence is an active one, to guide, love, encourage, etc. In other words, when people are gathered in His name for His purposes, His will can be discerned.¹⁹⁸

The prerequisite to the success of this discipline is the need to have discerning persons within the spiritual community who have made it a practice to regularly and faithfully enter into God’s presence on behalf of others, as individuals but most certainly in small groups.¹⁹⁹ Just as the role of a spiritual director is to simply and clearly lead another to the real Director, the practice of corporate listening on behalf of another or others can offer an even greater sense of dependance, objectivity, and consensus.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 76.

¹⁹⁷ Rose Mary Dougherty, S.S.N.D., *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment*. Paulist Press: New York, NY, 1995, p. 74.

¹⁹⁸ Foster, p. 177.

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Green, S.J., *Weeds Among the Wheat- Discernment: Where Prayer and Action Meet*. Ave Maria Press: Notre Dame, IN, 1984, p. 178.

The Discipline of Corporate Confession

The command of James to corporately deal with the confession of sin strikes an odd chord to many within various Protestant traditions: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” (James 5:16a NIV). While most if not all Protestant denominations and groups rightly believe that sins must be confessed to God in order to receive forgiveness with no mediator required between an individual and God to accomplish this, historically there has been a helpful element of mutual confession that brings an added and beneficial component to the process of forgiveness, healing, and restoration. In mutual confession, rather than seeking someone to be an intermediary between an individual and God, believers encourage individuals to give voice to their confessions to God and to others for the purpose of releasing the power of grace that heals and restores, both the one injured and the one who has committed the sin. That believers have been given the authority to encourage and receive the confession of sin and to forgive it in Jesus’ name seems to be implied in the words of Jesus Himself: “if you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” (John 20:23 NIV).²⁰¹ Quite clearly this the act of confession to another is corporate in nature as it requires the presence and participation of more than one person. The wise and prudent practice of this discipline, apart from encouraging forgiveness, healing and restoration within the fellowship, also

²⁰⁰ Foster, p. 185.

helps bring an end to pretense; honesty leads to confession, and genuine confession can then lead to genuine change.²⁰²

The Discipline of Corporate Fasting

While individuals certainly receive benefits from participating in spiritual fasts and are encouraged to do so scripturally and traditionally, evidence is also found in the Bible that supports the practice of corporate fasts.²⁰³ Two examples of these are the fasts declared during the annual Day of Atonement, as well as those pronounced during times of national emergency for God's chosen people.²⁰⁴

The benefit of support and solidarity in a group fast can be a wonderful and powerful experience, provided there is a "prepared people who are of one mind."²⁰⁵ The potential to allow God's Spirit to work through earnest hearts and minds through fasting can also manifest itself by relieving serious relationship problems in churches or other groups as the members together seek His presence and power.

The Discipline of Corporate Study

Believers are repeatedly encouraged to immerse themselves in the Word of God for wisdom, guidance, and spiritual nurture. The liturgy of study provides believers with a

²⁰¹ Foster, p. 146.

²⁰² Ibid, p. 157.

²⁰³ Ibid, p. 50.

²⁰⁴ See Leviticus 23:27; Joel 2:15; 2 Chronicles 10:1-4.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 50.

means of offering themselves to God, willing for God to do with them as He chooses.²⁰⁶ A new dimension is added, however, when believers meet together to study the Word, as they open themselves up to the wisdom and truth of God revealed through each other through mutual reflection and discourse. This discipline practised corporately helps limit the hindrances of overt subjectivity, as well as limited perspective and knowledge. By studying together in a group, each person within the group is exposed to various perspectives and insights, and is also in some measure more accountable to respond appropriately to the truth discerned.

The Discipline of Corporate Service

Acts of service can be carried out as spiritual disciplines, as they require the sacrifice of self-centredness and pride. By their very nature, they are corporate in that they also require the involvement of another person or persons to be at the very least the recipients of the service rendered.

The discipline of service must be carried out with a corporate spirit in a corporate setting if it is truly to be considered a spiritual discipline; if it is not done for the sake and benefit of others, it is no longer a spiritual exercise.²⁰⁷ While this does not mean that recipients of the service must know who has offered the gift to them in the name of Christ, the one serving must see his or her act as one carried out in Jesus' name, for those He loves, and ultimately for Him. The benefits of this discipline are only multiplied

²⁰⁶ Mulholland, p. 118.

when groups of individuals together participate in acts of service, as they are united in bonds of unity and a common desire to help others.

The Need to Re-emphasize the Corporate Nature of Spiritual Disciplines

Speaking of the role of corporate spiritual practices in the overall growth and health of spiritual formation on the local congregation, Stanley Grenz writes:

The community focus indicative of the New Testament images is sharpened by the reciprocal relationship between the individual believer and the corporate fellowship indicative of the Church as a covenant people.... the corporate fellowship fosters the faith of those who come to participate in it.²⁰⁸

Grenz is simply reiterating the truth that once an individual enters into a covenant relationship with God as believer, his or her ability to maintain a healthy growing relationship with Him requires an intentional acknowledgment of and participation with others in the Christian community. The “normal Christian life” is not simply a function of an individual believer’s relationship to God. If a believer is isolated from Christians around him or her who are designed and called to be part of the fellowship through which he or she receives grace, he or she simply cannot be as strong and as filled with the Holy Spirit as he or she otherwise would and should be. “Individual spiritual dynamics and corporate spiritual dynamics are interdependent, just as the health of the body and the health of its cells are correlative.”²⁰⁹

The community of faith is the living reality within which the classical spiritual

²⁰⁷ Foster, p. 142.

²⁰⁸ Grenz, p. 480.

²⁰⁹ Lovelace, p. 168.

disciplines nurture and provide the support structure for personal disciplines. When an individual doesn't feel like worshipping, the ministry of the community is to encourage and carry that individual along in its worship. When a believer is having difficulty with his or her prayer life, the prayer support of the community should lift that believer before God, seeking his or her spiritual refreshment and encouragement. When the Word of God seems to be offering little hope, direction, or meaning to someone in need, the community needs to continue reading, studying, affirming, and incarnating the Word around that person until it becomes fresh and alive once more.²¹⁰ The relationship between individual spiritual disciplines and corporate spiritual disciplines and their contribution to the spiritual formation of both is indispensable: "Our growth toward wholeness in Christ is for the sake of others within the body of Christ, that we might nurture one another into the wholeness of Christ."²¹¹

Church Leadership

Within such a unified and mutually interdependent organism as the Church, there arises the need to understand the unique roles and challenges of leadership. In the corporate body of Christ, how is leadership to be exercised? What is a leader and what role does he or she play in the life of the fellowship? What should leadership look like in light of the examination thus far in this study of spiritual disciplines and spiritual formation?

²¹⁰ Mulholland, p. 146.

Contemporary Church Leadership Models

There seems to be a never-ending production of leadership books and publications in the Church today. While recent years have seen some changes toward a more holistic and character-based approach, much of what has been used in creating and implementing contemporary models of Church leadership are simply the models used in the secular business world. Within many of these books leadership is generally defined as an action-oriented, interpersonal influencing process. In essence, it involves vision and initiative.²¹² John Maxwell defines leadership this way: “After more than four decades of observing leadership within my family and many years of developing my own leadership potential, I have come to this conclusion: Leadership is influence. That’s it. Nothing More; nothing less.”²¹³ In Myron Rush’s book *The New Leader*, he describes a leader as “one who recruits people to follow his example and guides them along the way while he is training them to do what he does.”²¹⁴

While this researcher is certainly not claiming that there is no value in such writings and models, it does seem as if there is something missing in the overall impression given in many contemporary models of Church leadership. Writers like John Maxwell have much helpful insight into the pragmatic and even Scriptural concepts related to

²¹¹ Ibid, p. 140.

²¹² Robert D. Dale, *Pastoral Leadership*. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1986, p. 14.

²¹³ John C. Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You*. Thomas Nelson Publishers: Nashville, TN, 1993, p. 1.

²¹⁴ Myron Rush, *The New Leader: A Revolutionary Approach to Effective Leadership*.

effective leadership, yet many of his models and those of other authors seem incomplete; little mention is made of how to faithfully nurture the inner self and the spiritual character of the community of leaders and the fellowship as a whole. The assumption seems to be that these issues are either irrelevant to the topic of church leadership, or they are already understood and incorporated into the practice of the reader.²¹⁵

It may be argued that these topics are not the primary issues being addressed in most Church leadership books; but it seems that both the pragmatic issues of Church leadership and the spiritual health and dynamics of individuals and groups are intertwined. While rules of order for business meetings have a valid place in Church leadership or business meetings, the preparation for such gatherings must surely involve the spiritual formation issues examined thus far in this project. When moments of decision arise for leadership groups, more is involved in the process than that outlined by Robert Dale:

Decision-making sessions deserve careful planning, a competent chairperson, an appropriate occasion or need, an agenda, and broadly selected participants. Effective leaders of meetings apply a meeting management model to the issues their group is exploring. Then their group can proceed confidently and productively.²¹⁶

Victor Books: Wheaton, IL, 1987, p. 16.

²¹⁵ John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader: Becoming the Person Others Will Want to Follow*. Thomas Nelson Publishers: Nashville, TN, 1999, pp. v-vi.

The Leadership Model of Jesus in the New Testament

In examining the teachings of the New Testament, it becomes apparent that the Church is to function with radically different methods than the secular world. Jesus Himself points this out when He says: “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave to all.” (Mark 10:42-44 NIV). Usually people measure status and prestige by the power to demand service from others. However, power in the kingdom of God is discovered in submission and service to others.²¹⁷

This servant leadership model is best exemplified by Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry. Not only did Jesus outline the model of leadership His followers were to pursue, but He lived it before them.²¹⁸ Paul describes this focus of Christ’s ministry as our example in his letter to the Philippian church:

(Jesus) being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to death- even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8 NIV).

Summing up this message, Bill Hybels writes:

²¹⁶ Dale, pp. 134-135.

²¹⁷ Henry Webb, *Deacons: Servant Models in the Church*. Convention Press: Nashville, TN, 1980, pp. 113-114.

²¹⁸ Dale, pp. 30-31.

If you want to be truly great, then the direction you must go is down. You must descend into greatness. At the heart of this paradox is still another paradox: Greatness is not a measure of self-will, but rather self-abandonment. The more you lose, the more you gain.²¹⁹

As modelled by Jesus, the attitude of humility or meekness in Church leadership does not reflect low self-esteem or a lack of initiative and strength. On the contrary, it reveals a disciplined gentleness which grows out of an inner confidence in God, the giftedness of the leader, and the ability of the Holy Spirit to move in and through all those involved and affected by the ministry of leadership in a local fellowship.²²⁰

The Ministry of Deacons as Leaders in the Contemporary Church

It is valid at this point to specifically address the ministry of deacons in the contemporary Church, as it is this particular ministry team in a local church that was involved in this research project. In many churches, deacons have been assigned primarily business management responsibilities.²²¹ While there may need to be some elements of such roles in the structure of the Church today, it is probably not wise to exclusively make it the domain of the deacons, as it encourages some members of the congregation to see deacons as *the* leaders of the Church.

Fortunately, more and more churches are moving away from that approach and are asking their deacons to be members of a broader leadership team in which the

²¹⁹ Bill Hybels, *Descending Into Greatness*. Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1993, pp. 16-17.

²²⁰ Webb, p. 113.

²²¹ *Ibid*, p. 110.

members share their influence and abilities in a spirit of cooperation.²²² In such a team ministry setting, deacons can then exercise their enabling leadership by helping members discover opportunities to develop and use the talents, skills, and abilities God has given.²²³ To a degree, roles are then free enough to shift back and forth between leading and following in congregations, as the relationship between leaders and followers remains constantly fluid, dynamic, and vital.²²⁴

In summary, concerning leadership in both the biblical and contemporary setting, the benefits of servant and team leadership ministry are apparent. To quote Robert

Dale:

Religious leaders have to use a wide range of resources and materials to deepen their spiritual lives. Their sense of the holy in their spiritual lives keeps them from callously treating their vision of the kingdom of God as a possession and a leadership lever instead of spiritual empowerment.²²⁵

Corporate Discernment in the Bible

At various times in the ministry of a leadership team, decisions and choices have to be made that affect either individuals within the fellowship, or the fellowship as a whole. In light of this truth, what processes should be involved in this part of the leadership's ministry? How have leaders and leadership teams faced situations requiring decisions

²²² Webb, p. 116.

²²³ Ibid, p. 115.

²²⁴ Dale, p. 16.

in the New Testament Church? What are helpful models for leadership teams today?

The Apostle Paul's Letters

While this project deals primarily with the decision-making processes of ministry teams, from a biblical perspective it is helpful to first examine the teachings of Paul on decision-making, as he was such an influential figure in the early church with his writings comprising a good portion of the New Testament.

That Paul felt it important for leaders in local churches to exercise discernment is apparent in his commands for them to do so. One example of this is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22: "Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil." (NIV). In this admonition, the command to "test" is plural; it is required of the church as a group.²²⁶ Similar commands are given to churches to exercise discernment and judgment in Corinth and Colossae, as well as to Titus and Timothy.²²⁷

In truth, Paul's writings reveal little about the actual decision-making process, probably because such procedures were sufficiently practised and understood as to require little underscoring.²²⁸ However, one recorded occasion from his ministry experience may give some insight as to how discernment was practised by those who

²²⁵ Ibid, pp. 191-192.

²²⁶ Luke T. Johnson, *Decision Making in the Church: A Biblical Model*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, PA, 1983, p. 39.

²²⁷ 1 Corinthians 14:29; Colossians 2:8; 1 Timothy 5:19-20; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 3:9-10.

ministered with him. In Galatians 2:1-10, Paul describes the events leading to his commissioning at the hands of James, Peter, and John to take the message of the gospel to the Gentiles. How Paul received the “revelation” he speaks of is unclear: it may have been a direct voice from God or through a prophet, or perhaps even through the guidance of a local church.²²⁹ What is clear is that in reaching their decision as to whether or not they should send Paul and Barnabas on this mission, the other apostles based their decision on Paul’s vision and the witness of God’s activity and blessing in his work. In sharing how God had spoken to him and blessed his ministry, the other leaders were able to discern that this was in fact the will of God.²³⁰

The Book of Acts

The most significant New Testament passages concerning group decision-making by a leadership team are found in the Book of Acts. As a history of the early Church’s growth in ministry and structure, the Book of Acts records situations in which the leaders of the Church and individual churches were called upon to make critical decisions that affected the larger corporate body of believers.

The challenge of referring to the record of Acts, however, is this: How does one determine what-- if anything-- is normative, as opposed to simply narrative?²³¹ As Fee and Stuart state, “Our assumption is that unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do

²²⁸ Johnson.. 38.

²²⁹ Cole, p. 101.

²³⁰ Johnson, p. 45.

something, what is merely narrated or described can never function in a normative way.²³² In no way does this mean that the narrative accounts of Acts or other portions of the Bible are less inspired or of little value:

This does not negate what is incidental or imply that it has no word for us. What it does argue is that what is incidental must not become primary, although it may always serve as additional support to what is unequivocally taught elsewhere.²³³ Fee and Stuart do acknowledge, however, that "... in matters of Christian experience... biblical precedents may sometimes be regarded as repeatable patterns- even if they are not to be regarded as normative. This is especially true when the practice itself is mandatory but the mode is not."²³⁴

There is also the reality that most of the passages about decision-making are only fragmentary, in the sense that they come at the issue only partially or indirectly.²³⁵ The reader is therefore left to determine how much importance can be given to these fragments, and how these narrative passages can be freed to become vehicles for theological reflection.²³⁶

²³¹ Johnson, p. 36.

²³² Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*. Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1982, p. 97.

²³³ Ibid, p. 99.

²³⁴ Ibid, p. 101.

²³⁵ Johnson, p. 37.

For the purposes of this project, the researcher recognizes these challenges and will present the events of the Acts narrative as patterns and guidelines which serve as useful models that-- when combined with didactic material from other sections of Scripture-- support the use of various spiritual disciplines that are presented as commands elsewhere. Again, quoting Fee and Stuart, "Luke has certain intents and concerns in writing Luke-Acts. Yet behind it all, we believe, was the superintending work of the Holy Spirit."²³⁷

For the purpose of this study, the researcher will restrict the focus of examination to three particular incidents recorded in the Book of Acts: The selection of Matthias as a replacement for Judas in Acts 1:15-26; the choosing of the seven in Acts 6:1-6; and the Gentile question presented to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1-35.

Acts 1:15-26

Following the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the floundering disciples were seeking direction and purpose. While spending time in prayer together, a practical issue was apparently raised: After losing Judas by suicide, was there a need to replace him? If so, with whom? After Peter shared his insights and reflections from Scripture, the rest of the gathering took part by nominating two individuals, praying for direction, and casting lots. As a result of this activity, Matthias was selected

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Fee and Stuart, p. 88.

and enlisted as the twelfth apostle.²³⁸

Several factors contribute to the discovery of God's will in this situation. First of all, there is a general leading from Scripture that a replacement for Judas was in fact needed. Secondly, common sense played a part in that it was felt that the replacement should have the same qualifications as his predecessor. After these considerations were taken into account, the group then participated in prayer and the casting of lots.²³⁹

Two of these activities do not seem unusual, namely the reference to Scripture and prayer. Scripture was and still is the gift of God's revelation to humanity, and was valued as such; therefore, to use it as a basis for decision-making by God-fearing individuals seems logical. In Psalm 119:98-100, the psalmist declares, "Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts." In the New Testament, James warns his readers to not only hear the word of God, but to obey it as well.²⁴⁰ In Ephesians 6:17, in an effort to prepare the believers to be strong and able to fend off the attacks of the enemy, Paul tells them to take up the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (NIV) The Bible contains numerous instances where God's people are commanded to observe the written laws of God, and Jesus Himself declared in John 14:15 that "if anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching." (NIV)

²³⁸ Johnson, p. 62.

²³⁹ Ware, pp. 58-59.

In like manner, prayer was a significant part of the corporate activity of the early Church. This reference to the group being gathered together for prayer was consistent with their practice modelled after the example of Jesus, and is at least in part, an expression of their unity.²⁴¹ In Ephesians 6:18, Paul commands believers to “... pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.” (NIV) In 1 Thessalonians 5:17 he simply commands “pray continually.” (NIV) In James 1:5, the author makes a simple declaration that still speaks to church leaders today: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” Such an emphasis on prayer is still at least voiced as being critical in the life and ministry of the Church today.

It is the drawing or casting of lots that seems a more unusual activity in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, this was a fairly common practice, and was prescribed by God Himself.²⁴² Lots were cast in the selection of a goat to be the scapegoat offering on the Day of Atonement, as well as in the distribution of land among the tribes of Israel.²⁴³ It is referred to as a common practice in the Wisdom sections of Scripture describing the process of decision-making, and this practice

²⁴⁰ James 1:22.

²⁴¹ David J. Williams, *Acts: New International Biblical Commentary*. Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.: Peabody, MA, 1990, pp. 29-30.

²⁴² Ware, p. 58.

²⁴³ Leviticus 16:8; Numbers 26:55.

continued to be employed by the temple priests in the New Testament.²⁴⁴

In this situation, the casting of “the lot” was probably the shaking of two stones together in a container, with a name written on each, until one tumbled out. The name on that stone would then be perceived as God’s choice.²⁴⁵ But what significance, if any, is there in its use here? It may be helpful to first remember that this casting of the lot was done prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.²⁴⁶ Following this incident and the receiving of the gift of the Holy Spirit, there is no record of the early church using this method to determine God’s direction. While this does not prove conclusively that the practice is no longer valid, there appears ample reason to suggest that there are other means more valid and useful. Ultimately, it must be noted that there is no case in the New Testament where believers are commanded to seek the Lord’s guidance by casting lots.

The key to understanding this incident lies in recognizing that although the community nominated two individuals for the position, it was God who discerned their hearts and made the choice. The community had been involved in the process throughout: they listened to Peter’s story and proposal, nominated two individuals, prayed, cast lots, and affirmed God’s choice-- but it was still ultimately God’s choice.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ Proverbs 16:33; Luke 1:8-9.

²⁴⁵ Williams, p. 34.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 35.

²⁴⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision-Making In the Church*. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1984, p. 84.

Rather than uttering some form of preliminary prayer at their meeting and then arguing through this decision, the believers were asking God to make His will known, and they fully believed He would do so.²⁴⁸

Acts 6:1-6

As the church continued to grow in size, the logistical details involved in ministering to the physical and spiritual needs of the believers grew. In the opinion of the Grecian Jews, enough care was not being provided to their widows, and the complaint reached the ears and attention of the apostles. The initial challenge was clear: relieve the mounting tension between the Grecian and Hebraic Jews; at a deeper level, there was the need to address issues of spiritual authority and its transmission to others.²⁴⁹

In seeking to discern how to best deal with this issue, the apostles first gathered the assembly together, and shared what they believed to be their primary tasks in the ministry of the Church. As they did so, it is interesting to note that at this time the Twelve added prayer to preaching in specifying the essence of their apostolic activities.²⁵⁰ While they undoubtedly had realized its importance before, prior to this event there is no explicit reference to prayer as a primary ministry of those in church leadership.

In offering a solution to the need before them-- namely, the selection of seven

²⁴⁸ Thomas H. Green, S. J., *Weeds Among the Wheat- Discernment: Where Prayer and Action Meet*. Ave Maria Press: Notre Dame, IN, 1984, p. 67.

²⁴⁹ Johnson, 1983, pp. 64-65.

²⁵⁰ John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*.

individuals who would look after food distribution to those in need-- the leadership gave the authority of choice over to those who would be most affected by the decision. There was an intentional relinquishment of power for the purpose of empowering others. While the leadership did give guidelines as to what characteristics these seven individuals should have, the choice was made by the church, not by the apostles themselves. However, recognition of apostolic authority was not diminished in any way, because after the seven were chosen, the people recognized the role of the leadership by having them lay hands on those chosen.²⁵¹

A valuable insight during this decision-making process emerges in the involvement of those who would have to live with the results of the decision. Rather than simply impose a solution, the leadership gathered the corporate body together to share the problem, then make a proposal to the people. In Proverbs 15:22, the writer declares that, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." (NIV) The wisdom of such a truth became evident in this particular situation, for after the proposal was brought forth, made sense to and pleased the group, it was implemented with prayer and thanksgiving.²⁵² It is also worth noting that the believers still sought the affirmation and leadership authority of the leadership, submitting themselves to individuals God had chosen to lead. In Hebrews 13:17, the author gives the command that still needs to be affirmed today: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.

InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 121.

²⁵¹ Green, p. 127.

²⁵² Ware, p. 121.

They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.” (NIV)

Acts 15:1-35

Of special significance to this project is the record of events found in Acts 15. This chapter witnesses to the Church concerning the way it reaches decisions, not so much by prescription, but by way of a paradigmatic story.²⁵³ Having said this, the lessons and principles it presents are no less relevant and applicable today, and are supported by other portions of Scripture.

Up to this point in the growth and development of the Church, no official statements had come from Jerusalem concerning the requirements made of Gentile believers to be officially recognized as part of the Christian fellowship. The spread of the gospel began among the Jews, but Gentiles were also responding and being converted in remarkable numbers. Many Jewish Christians, still somewhat connected to their past, felt that Gentile believers essentially needed to become Jewish converts to Christianity; Paul and Barnabas, however, saw things differently. In an effort to come to some sort of conclusion and possible compromise, the issue was brought to the leadership of the church at the Jerusalem Council.

The seriousness of the situation in Acts 15 cannot be overstated. The future unity of the Church-- the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians-- was at stake. A

²⁵³ Johnson, 1983, p. 56.

split at this time would be catastrophic.²⁵⁴ How the leadership handled this sensitive issue would have repercussions well beyond Jerusalem.

In approaching this issue, the church leaders spent a good deal of time discussing the facts, implications, and possible solutions. After Paul and Barnabas shared their testimonies, and the believing Pharisees gave their opinion concerning the matter, the apostles and elders were left to debate the question in the presence of the others -- and the debate was considerable.²⁵⁵ There was no rush to quickly give an answer or ultimatum; they are not going to make any decision until they have spent an appropriate amount of time working it through together. It is only after this intense and prolonged discussion that Paul and Barnabas speak again, along with Peter and finally James.²⁵⁶ During these discussions, it can be assumed that differing opinions continued to be expressed. Peter's experience from Acts chapter 11 when he was at first challenged and then affirmed in his desire to fellowship with Gentiles, shows that opposition-- openly expressed-- was a part of the decision-making process, allowing a presentation of all the facts and a partial fulfilment of the command to test the spirits.²⁵⁷

The reports of the Spirit's activity in Antioch, as well as the apostolic speeches, provides insight as to the thought processes of those faced with this situation. It was

²⁵⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1980, p. 248.

²⁵⁵ Johnson, 1983, p. 81.

²⁵⁶ Ware, p. 245.

²⁵⁷ Johnson, 1984, p. 96.

important to know the facts about what was actually taking place in Antioch, and how God was working among the people there.²⁵⁸ Peter's speech in verses seven through nine then reminded the assembly of what God had done in the past, and in them already.²⁵⁹ The power of God is evidenced in Peter's narratives by recalling the signs and wonders that had occurred-- a validation of this as being the work of God.²⁶⁰ From these accounts, the past and present evidence of God's activity and blessing being presented, it becomes evident that in the decision-making process, there was a place for examining the fruit and experiential evidences relevant to the needed decision.²⁶¹

After these accounts are presented, James then addresses the gathering and evaluates the evidence in light of the testimony of Scripture. His ultimate decision-- made on behalf of and in consultation with the other leaders-- was based upon the correspondence between scriptural revelation and actual experience; between the witness of the prophets and the apostles.²⁶² This consultation with Scripture by the leadership reflects not only the conscious need to do so, but also the discipline of faithful, persistent study.²⁶³

When the decision was reached and presented, the leadership were considerate to

²⁵⁸ Williams, p. 262.

²⁵⁹ Stott, p. 245.

²⁶⁰ Johnson, 1983, p. 82.

²⁶¹ Stott, p. 246.

²⁶² Ware, p. 248.

²⁶³ Stott, p. 248.

a degree of all parties involved. The conditions of the letter were cultural concessions, given for the purpose of not causing division and harm unnecessarily.²⁶⁴ There was no sense of having “winners” or “losers” in a debate.

How was this accomplished? How was this potentially explosive issue resolved in such a way that unity was preserved and a beneficial decision made? That the whole assembly accepted the decision is key, as it included those who were bringing the charges against the Gentile believers. Because of how this situation was handled, and the commitment of everyone to honor God in the process, even the extremist Jews who had lost the debate agreed to follow a more liberal policy.²⁶⁵ The Acts 15 decision is the result of a process in which people were committed to understanding and obeying the will of God.²⁶⁶ Luke appears to go to great lengths to show how recognized leaders spoke first, how Scripture and experience coincided, and how the apostles, elders, and the whole Church then reached a unanimous decision.²⁶⁷ In the end, when sharing their conclusions in a letter to the Gentile believers in Antioch, the Jerusalem Council could say with confidence and integrity, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (Acts 15:28 NIV).

In reflecting upon these three events in the Book of Acts, in which the leadership of the Church was faced with important decisions to make, a few common elements can

²⁶⁴ Ware, p. 256.

²⁶⁵ Marshall, p. 254.

²⁶⁶ Johnson, 1984, p. 107.

be noted. The first common element is the fact that in each case, open public speech and discussion took place. There were no “closed-door” sessions that excluded anyone who was going to be affected by the decisions made. In fact, there was a good deal of discussion and debate presenting various viewpoints. The leadership was willing to listen, reflecting the truth expressed in Proverbs 13:10: “Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.” (NIV)

Secondly, prayer played a significant part in the process, either preceding, during, or following the discussion. This prayer was not only done by the leaders, but the entire assembly was encouraged to participate. In Deuteronomy 4:29, God makes a promise to the people that He would respond to them if they sought Him together with repentant hearts: “... if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.” (NIV) In Mark 11:24, Jesus said to the disciples, “whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” (NIV) In Romans 12:12, when Paul was leaving instructions for the believers in the city, he commanded them to be faithful in prayer.

Thirdly, in the discussions and debates, people felt free to share their experience and why they had the perspective they held. The issue was not solved by addressing theories and concepts alone; the human experience was also taken into consideration.

Finally, in each case, debate, discussion, and the sharing of personal experience, was all interpreted in the light of the truths of Scripture. The Word of God was

²⁶⁷ Stott, pp. 255-256.

consulted to interpret and shed light and meaning on the facts that were presented.²⁶⁸

This principle of abiding in the Word as a standard is reflected in Paul's command in Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." (NIV)

Can any conclusions be drawn concerning the nature of the decision-making processes of church leadership in the early Church? This researcher believes that based upon the common elements listed from the events recorded in the Book of Acts, the following can be interpreted as necessary ingredients for decision-making as the early church leaders understood and practised their ministry. First, decision-making is not always exclusively the role and responsibility of the church leadership, but often could and should include the entire assembly; secondly, the importance of prayer for discernment to take place cannot be overstated; thirdly, the participation in open and honest debate, allowing for disagreement and opposing viewpoints, must not only be permitted but encouraged; fourthly, the necessity of personal, communication of the decision by the leadership to those affected and involved.²⁶⁹

Corporate Discernment in the Contemporary Church

It is now the task of this researcher to further examine and reflect upon the implications of the research thus far on the life and ministry of the contemporary

²⁶⁸ Johnson, 1983, p. 67.

Church, especially as it relates to corporate spiritual formation and the decision-making processes of a leadership team in a faith community.

Understanding the Nature and Importance of Discernment in the Church

As the contemporary Church seeks to use models for group discernment on a leadership team, it must first come to terms with what discernment is. The actual word “discernment” comes from a Greek word meaning “to sift through.” Very early, it was seen as a sifting of “the wheat from the chaff, of sifting through our own interior experiences, ideas, thoughts, and feelings, all of which are brought about by the circumstances we are in.”²⁷⁰ Rose Mary Dougherty says that to discern “is to see through the illusory; to come to discover what is real.”²⁷¹ In a general sense, to discern is to engage in exercises and activities that create the capacity to distinguish the real from the phony, the true from the false.²⁷² In a spiritual sense, discernment distinguishes the good from the evil and the path toward God from the path away from God. In other words, the purpose of spiritual discernment is to know and do the will of God.²⁷³

²⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 87.

²⁷⁰ Roy M. Oswald and Robert E. Friedrich, Jr., *Discussing Your Congregations Future: A Strategic and Spiritual Approach*. Alban Institute, 1996, p. xii.

²⁷¹ Rose Mary Dougherty, S. S. N. D., *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment*. Paulist Press: New York, 1995, p. 24.

²⁷² Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God’s Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*. Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN, 1997, p. 18.

²⁷³ Ibid, p. 45.

Why is this important to the leadership team of a local congregation? People of faith -- believing that God is active in the world of human experience and desiring to participate in His activity -- must look for God's guidance and listen for His voice. At the same time, many other voices from the surrounding culture beckon, holding the promise of meaning, fulfillment, and satisfaction-- voices that speak from both the outside world and from within the sinful nature that still lies in every human heart.²⁷⁴ God created humanity with a free will, and people have always had the option of either rejecting God or accepting His invitation to join Him in His work. Concerning the nature of this invitation and God's way of expressing it, Oswald and Friedrich write:

Hence we will rarely experience God speaking to us in such a clear, loud voice that there is no mistaking that this is God's voice and that God wants us to do such and such. From time to time, we will feel a gentle nudge moving us in a certain direction, or we may feel God wooing us to consider coming home. Occasionally we will feel a presence that is almost palpable, yet when reflecting on it later, we might wonder whether it was merely our imaginations. Sometimes we might feel God within us, coaching us to yearn for God.²⁷⁵

What is needed in all cases is the gift of discernment so the Church-- especially church leadership faced with the task of decision-making-- is able to distinguish between messages from God and messages that stem from human willfulness and ego.²⁷⁶ In Psalm 81:11-12, God declared His verdict against those who refuse to do this: "... my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices." (NIV)

²⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 19.

²⁷⁵ Oswald and Friedrich, p. ix.

Foundational Assumptions Essential to the Group Discernment Process

Having established what spiritual discernment is and why it is important, it becomes necessary to state two important assumptions held by this researcher and many other believers to be true: God is good; and communication with God is possible.²⁷⁷ To engage in the process of seeking discernment, one must first believe that God is present and desires to speak. Individuals and groups must have the same sense of expectancy that young Samuel did when he cried in response to God, "Speak, for your servant is listening."²⁷⁸ Too often, Christians vacillate between a trust in the sure guidance of love that is God's will, and the feverish pursuit of God's will as though it were something outside personal experience that individuals and groups are left alone to discover.²⁷⁹

In truth, Christians are in a relationship with a God who is ever more ready to communicate to His followers than they are to listen; a God who is ever more ready to bestow grace than the intended recipients are to receive it. This God is also willing to offer direction and perspective if and when His people are ready to surrender their willfulness and be open to receiving such direction.²⁸⁰ It is true that the voice of God

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Danny E. Morris, *Yearning to Know God's Will: A Workbook for Discerning God's Guidance for Your Life*. Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1991, p. 75.

²⁷⁸ 1 Samuel 3:10.

²⁷⁹ Dougherty, p. 31.

²⁸⁰ Oswald and Friedrich, p. ix.

does not always come when and in the fashion that many people would desire, but the truth remains and must be affirmed that He does indeed speak. The Church's responsibility in part is to be patient, and to affirm the wisdom and freedom of God -- an especially challenging thing to do in times of difficulty or suffering, and in times of silence from God.²⁸¹

Gordon T. Smith states that the key to understanding how and why God speaks is in the principle of "friendship with God." By this he means that because of the potential for personal intimacy with God, the Church is not left to her own wisdom; rather, when believers seek God's will, "(they) are participating with Him, because (they) matter to God."²⁸² In asserting this idea of "friendship with God" in relation to spiritual discernment, Smith goes on to say that "discernment relates to the whole of our Christian experience, not just to isolated times of decision."²⁸³ That is to say, the believer's approach to God in prayer should be more the hunger for a deeper relationship with Him than solely the pragmatic purpose of getting an answer to a query or a solution to a problem. In any case, when decisions are to be made, there ought to be an openness and expectancy in decision-making; a true belief that God will be involved and active in the process.²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ Gordon T. Smith, *Listening to God in Times of Choice: The Art of Discerning God's Will*. InterVarsity Press: Downer's Grove, IL, 1997, p. 140.

²⁸² Ibid, p. 19.

²⁸³ Ibid, p. 21.

²⁸⁴ Stephen E. Parker, *Led By the Spirit: Toward a Practical Theology of Pentecostal*

How will God be involved in this process? How will He actually speak to those seeking His voice? The methods God may use are many and varied, as the study in the previous chapter revealed, and many of the methods described in the biblical texts have some degree of transference to the contemporary setting. It may be helpful at this point, however, to simply assert that when God speaks, the Church should not be so concerned to look for a specific method of communication, but rather to be open to any means God may choose. When Jesus promised that He would be with those who gather together in His name, He did not mean that He would just be there watching,²⁸⁵ rather, He would be calling, forming, challenging, speaking, and listening. His Spirit would be at work in those gathered to seek, honor and praise Him.²⁸⁶

It is also important not to ignore the need for those individuals gathered together for the purpose of seeking God's direction to be in a growing relationship with Him. Discernment is in part the function of a personal relationship: it is where prayer meets action. The more deeply an individual knows the Lord, the easier it will be to "read His face" and sense His desire and will. Thus it is dangerous to speak of communal discernment if the members of the community in question are not individually praying and discerning persons.²⁸⁷ Having said that, there are certainly situations that require

Discernment and Decision-Making. Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, England, 1996, p. 205.

²⁸⁵ Matthew 18:20.

²⁸⁶ Mary Benet McKinney, O. S. B., *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision-Making*. Tabor Publishing: Valencia, CA, 1987, p. 11.

²⁸⁷ Green, p. 178.

not only the involvement of several individuals working independently, but also those that benefit from working together in a group setting. Corrine Ware refers to the following benefits of group discernment:

(In practising discernment together) we are made to consider several other points of view. We push the boundaries of our spiritual knowledge and experience, and commands such as Paul's in Philippians 2:12-13 to 'work out our salvation' becomes a group process. There is also a greater sense of safety in numbers; trust, support, corrective discipline and accountability. Finally, we have an enriched resource base of information.²⁸⁸

When believers gather in His name and the Holy Spirit is at work in those individuals, each person has a "piece" of His wisdom. In the group decision-making process, this reminds each individual that no one has all the wisdom, everyone has a unique perspective to bring, and everyone has some measure of wisdom from God to share with the group.²⁸⁹ No one person can discern God's will for a group of people, but each individual can glimpse an understanding of what God desires. By sharing these understandings in the community of faith, members of the local church can enable the wisdom and the way of God to emerge in the group setting. Through prayerful reflection and empathetic sharing, the Spirit is permitted to move within and among the members of the group to develop a clearer picture about what is the will of God.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁸ Ware, pp. 17-19.

²⁸⁹ McKinney, p. 13.

²⁹⁰ Oswald and Friedrich, p. xi.

In summary, in order to realize the benefits of group discernment, it becomes necessary for the individual members of the group to believe and act upon the belief that each member is able to discern or hear from God.²⁹¹ It is also necessary to seek to nurture an environment of honesty with God, one another, and oneself, so that this mutual sharing and openness can more easily reveal God's activity.²⁹²

Practical Keys for Group Decision-Making in the Church Today

The question now arises as to how the group is to work together in the decision-making process. What activities or disciplines do they engage in? How should they prepare themselves? What will healthy decision-making look like?

Helpful Spiritual Disciplines for Decision-Making

Issues requiring group discernment are usually raised and dealt with at board, council, or congregational business meetings. For the group and individuals to be aligned with God's purposes, the group together needs to listen to God and to compare it's "spirit" to the Holy Spirit's character and voice.²⁹³ One of the most helpful ways to accomplish this is to transform the way a business meeting is conducted. For example, it may be helpful to view and lead a business meeting as a worship service where available facts can be presented and discussed, all in view to listening to the voice of

²⁹¹ Smith, p. 131.

²⁹² Ibid, p. 133.

²⁹³ Ackerman, p. 85.

God and offering the process to Him as an act of worship and surrender.²⁹⁴ That worship is presented as a corporate activity necessary to spiritual health and formation is reflected in the words of Hebrews 10:25: “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another...” (NIV) As God is said to inhabit the praises of His people, and corporate decision-making is an act of seeking God’s presence and voice, it seems logical to assume that one of the primary ways of inviting Him in to the process is to worship Him.

It is also helpful during and even prior to such meetings to encourage individuals to privately and corporately participate in some of the spiritual disciplines already examined in this research project. The first discipline that should be part of the process is prayer. Again, believers are commanded in both the Old and New Testaments to be disciplined in the activity of prayer, to “... pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests” (Ephesians 6:18, NIV). In Matthew 7:7-8, Jesus said, ““Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”(NIV)

While most if not all Christian leaders and believers would agree with this affirmation, an important clarification must be made concerning the role of prayer in decision-making: discernment is not simply having the pastor or leader offer a prayer and then freeing the group to begin the business of working out a solution using the best of their rational skills. Neither does discernment mean that the members of the

²⁹⁴ Foster, p. 182.

group simply go along with the prayer of a leader because they feel that is what they are supposed to do, and then get down to the “real work” of making a decision based on rational discourse. Discernment means just the opposite: the real work of the group is the praying prior to and during the meeting, with the rest of the work flowing out of that.

What follows prayer is not so much a reasoned approach to things as a genuine listening to God through one another.²⁹⁵ Prayers are not to be done for prayer’s sake, and prayer vitality is not measured simply by the number of prayer programs and activities promoted in the local church or the ministry team. Prayer is “about God and our link with God. Prayer is dialogue. It is speaking and listening, always believing that the voice of God will be louder than our own.”²⁹⁶ If the members of the group and the group together do not have a solid prayer life, they will not have the relationship necessary with the Lord for the discernment of spirits and for discernment-based decision-making.²⁹⁷ In understanding the role of prayer in corporate decision-making, Mel Lawrenz makes the following points: “Prayer as *position* reminds us that we are *under* God... prayer as *presence* reminds us that we are *with* God... prayer as *power*

²⁹⁵ Oswald and Friedrich, p. xii.

²⁹⁶ Mel Lawrenz, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation*. Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, p. 69.

²⁹⁷ Robert Faricy, S. J., *Seeking Jesus in Contemplation and Discernment*. Michael Glazier, Inc.: Wilmington, DW, 1983, p. 82.

reminds us that we are *in* God... prayer as *purpose* reminds us we are *for* God."²⁹⁸

Another helpful discipline in the group decision-making process is fasting. In the Old Testament, references to various fasts and their observance are so numerous, references to them seem to assume the reader has a knowledge of them and their purposes (see Jeremiah 36:6, 9). Jesus Himself implied that fasting would continue to be a part of the disciples activities in Matthew 6:16-18: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (NIV)

When fasting together, the group must remember that they fast not that God would hear them, but that they would be able to hear God.²⁹⁹ By engaging in this discipline together, a kind of clarity is present. Oswald and Friedrich explain it this way:

When we fast, every time we feel a hunger pang we are directed to ask, 'What am I really hungry for?' Our hunger also reminds us that we as a congregation are entering a dangerous opportunity and that we need to be more diligent in our prayers at this time. Those burdened with making decisions on behalf of the congregation are also reminded by their hunger that members of the congregation have entered a period of intense reflection for the sake of the future health of the congregation. This thought encourages them to be more diligent in their own prayers, so that they will make decisions congruent with the will of God for their congregation.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ Lawrenz, pp. 70-73.

²⁹⁹ Smith, p. 110.

³⁰⁰ Oswald and Friedrich, pp. xiii-xiv.

While engaging in such disciplines, how should a community of faith expect God to respond to their searching? Some espouse the practice of following “open doors,” or taking advantage of opportunities that seem to either open themselves up or close themselves off, limiting or guiding one’s steps in a fairly binding way. While God may indeed use such a method to accomplish His purposes, there are problems when it is used consistently to the exclusion of other methods. For example, what if more than one “door of opportunity” opens at the same time? If a “door of opportunity” appears to open or close, how does one know if this is the activity of God or Satan?³⁰¹

The same can be said of Gideon’s use of the fleece to discern the truth of God’s revelation to him.³⁰² While God may at times give some form of assurance or confirmation through such an act, it is important to remember some of the differences between Gideon’s circumstances and those of believers in the Church today. Some events and activities described in the Bible are more descriptive than prescriptive, and the activities of Gideon have been described by some as being similar to divination and forcing God’s hand, which is forbidden in the Word. Of even more significance, however, is the reality that Gideon did not have the access to the Holy Spirit that every New Testament believer has as a result of their faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.³⁰³

³⁰¹ Smith, p. 106.

³⁰² Judges 6:36-40.

In regard to both practises, the use of “open doors” or setting out fleeces, it is important to note that neither is given by God as a command in the Scriptures when seeking to know His will. In *Decision-Making and the Will of God*, author Gary Friesen criticizes the “blueprint” approach to discerning God’s will. He affirms that, “People are not expected by God to look at signs and open doors, or even listen to little voices in their heads. Rather, through Scriptures, the Christian’s mind is renewed, and we are able to make good choices.”³⁰⁴

The quote from Friesen also raises the prominent role the Word of God should play in guiding the decision-making process of a faith community, as it is the objective standard by which the subjective witness of the spirit is tested.³⁰⁵ In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul says that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (NIV) Even then, however, care must be taken to study passages carefully and with integrity, as some promises in the Word of God are to specific people for specific purposes, and not necessarily to every believer.³⁰⁶ It is important, therefore, to go to Scripture not primarily or solely for wise, ethical

³⁰³ Smith, p. 103.

³⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 16.

³⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 46.

instruction, but to encounter God in the living person of Jesus Christ and to have Him speak.³⁰⁷

The discipline of study should also be carried out in such a way as to not only involve the Scriptures, but to more broadly include the process of gathering all the necessary information required to make an informed decision. Proverbs 13:20 says “He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm,” (NIV) thus revealing the benefit of surrounding oneself with others who exhibit wisdom and learning from their example and experience. Proverbs 18:15 presents the wisdom of a mind that seeks information to make a right decision: “The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge; the ears of the wise seek it out.” (NIV) Similarly, Paul commands growth through study in Romans 12:2, by saying, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is- his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (NIV)

There are, naturally, some basic fact gathering exercises that must be carried out in decision-making in the local church. Time must be spent in rational consideration of the circumstances, opportunities, problems, obstacles, resources, and abilities related to the decision in question, as well as spending ample time in prayer, reflection, and other disciplines.³⁰⁸ In the “shared wisdom” approach, the careful and comprehensive gathering of data must be faithfully carried out before the leadership team can reflect

³⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 104.

³⁰⁷ Green, p. 49.

prayerfully upon it, and share insights based on that reflection.³⁰⁹

When gathering and processing the necessary information, it is helpful to follow some of the steps outlined by Lyle Schaller: come to an agreement on the question; analyze the facts; list alternative courses of action; review; examine the facts in more detail; review possible consequences of each alternative; eliminate some of the alternatives; analyze all possible consequences of the remaining alternatives.³¹⁰ Such activities do not exclude God, nor do they allow for laziness in the decision-making process; rather, they recognize the need for the group to be involved in the process with God by acknowledging how He may be speaking through natural and obvious means and circumstances.

The Heart and Attitude of Those Involved in the Process

During these activities, it is necessary to have a spirit of mutual openness with and dependence among the members of the group, as well as openness with and dependence upon God. Individuals must not only be willing but actively desire to hear what God may be saying through other members of the group. In discernment, experiential story is a means of working together for a common end, namely to discover what God has done and is doing.³¹¹ In the sharing of story to aid in

³⁰⁸ Smith, pp. 71-85.

³⁰⁹ McKinney, p. 43.

³¹⁰ Lyle E. Schaller, *The Decision-Makers: How to Improve the Quality of Decision-Making in the Churches*. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1974, p. 43.

³¹¹ Johnson, 1984, p. 107.

discernment, rather than using the opportunity as a means of manipulating others or self-righteously denouncing a differing perspective, the way that story is shared should reveal an attitude of service and humility.³¹²

This spirit of humility is one of the key ingredients or conditions for discernment, as it enables individuals to truly “hear” what is going on in the process.³¹³ It is also critical because it forces everyone to listen both to God and to others.³¹⁴ One of the greatest dangers in seeking to exercise discernment is that pride and selfish motives will lead participants away from the commitment to seek righteousness and the glory of God in the decision-making process.³¹⁵ In Philippians 2:3, Paul says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” (NIV) Thus, in order for the sharing of story to aid in discernment, the members of the group must pay careful attention with open minds and hearts. They need to observe and listen, noting what is happening around them and within them, attending to what others are saying and how they respond.³¹⁶

Discernment Takes Time and Hard Work

Discernment and working toward an understanding of God’s will and direction is a

³¹² Ibid, p. 130.

³¹³ Thomas Dubay, *Authenticity: A Biblical Theology of Discernment*. Dimension Books: Denville, NJ, 1977, pp. 90-92.

³¹⁴ Ibid, p. 96.

³¹⁵ Smith, p. 44.

³¹⁶ Johnson, 1984, p. 108.

process that often takes an extended period of time. When it is hurried, it is likely because those in leadership roles have already made up their minds about a solution and want a quick process to sanctify their position.³¹⁷ Rather than try to rush to an acceptable decision, church leadership teams and congregations would be well advised to encourage individuals and groups to fast, pray, and worship together until they have discerned the mind of the Lord in a particular matter.³¹⁸ As the psalmist writes in Psalm 37:7, “Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him.” (NIV)

At the heart of discernment is the issue of peace. When writing to the church in Philippi about bringing requests and petitions to the Lord in prayer, Paul says: “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7 NIV). In the seeking and experience of this kind of peace, the role of the Holy Spirit is emphasized in the decision-making process, and believers are cautioned against making rash decisions under pressure. Ignatius provided the insight that decisions should never be made in times of desolation -- anger, discouragement, etc. -- but only in times of inner peace.³¹⁹ Helpful in this regard is the commitment to focus not simply on doing the rational, prudent thing, but rather in doing the faithful thing.³²⁰

³¹⁷ Oswald and Friedrich, p. xvii.

³¹⁸ Foster, p. 178.

³¹⁹ Smith, pp. 50-56.

Majority Rule or Consensus?

How does a group or leadership team know when they have accomplished their task? What sort of support or agreement should be deemed significant enough to hold fast to a particular point of view as being the direction of God for a particular group of believers? While many local churches and other Christian groups have adopted the model of majority rule in making decisions, there are those who believe that in some instances -- and perhaps in all cases for a community of faith -- the only acceptable goal of the decision-making process is that of consensus.³²¹ Proponents of this view argue that only by reaching consensus can there be perfect unity in community, preserving the oneness of mind Christ commands us to pursue, and guarding the doctrines entrusted to the Church.³²²

While it is true that consensus may seem like an impossible goal to achieve, requiring much time and mutual vulnerability, it is a worthy goal as it can help avoid the polarization of people and hurt feelings.³²³ Paul's command in Ephesians 4:3 clearly states the need for a commitment to unity in the fellowship: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (NIV) The Quakers, or Society of Friends, practice business decisions through "Spirit rule." Issues are approached with

³²⁰ Oswald and Friedrich, p. xii.

³²¹ Morris, p. 116.

³²² Dubay, p. 32.

an assurance that the mind of the Holy Spirit can and will be known if ample time and commitment are made to the process.³²⁴

To a great extent, the key to discernment by consensus in decision-making is the spiritual quality and maturity of those in leadership. Thus, leaders ought to be chosen or nominated not only on the basis of pragmatic and organizational skills, but spiritual cooperation and their ability to lead others in this way.³²⁵ Ultimately, Spirit-given unity and consensus goes beyond mere agreement; it is the conviction that a group of individuals have together heard the voice of God speak into their circumstances.³²⁶

Concluding Comments

The decision-making process is one that requires effort and commitment on the part of the community of faith, and the firm conviction that God desires to reveal Himself through the process. The challenges and energies required are numerous. Among those already mentioned, leaders and other participants need to be aware of the truth that in opposition to their efforts to discern the voice and will of God, the Enemy has his own strategies to keep them from hearing and discerning God's voice. He will seek to thwart every attempt to be faithful to God's directives.³²⁷

There are also times when leadership teams, groups, and congregations are invited

³²³ Morris, p. 108.

³²⁴ Foster, p. 184.

³²⁵ Morris, p. 120.

³²⁶ Foster, p. 182.

into a simple faith as they make decisions, trusting God to transform the ambivalence of their hearts and to be with them through periods of uncertainty.³²⁸ Believers are called to seek the will of Jesus because He is “the Lord of our lives, and we want to bring our decision to Him, to make our decision under His Lordship.”³²⁹

Ultimately, discernment is a lifelong art and discipline. If a leadership team or fellowship seeks to practice discernment only at times of critical decision, they will stumble through the process at best.³³⁰ Because it is an art, discernment is something that cannot be learned or acquired simply by reading books or going to seminars on

³²⁷ Smith, p. 94.

³²⁸ Dougherty, p. 33.

³²⁹ Faricy, p. 79.

the subject. As Gordon Smith writes, discernment is learned “only by experience, by doing discernment itself. It is an experiential process.”³³¹

³³⁰ Smith, p. 86.

³³¹ Smith, p. 69.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Research of the Subject Material

Initial research for the theological reflection and related research chapters of this project began in the summer of 2000 at the campus libraries of both Bethel Theological Seminary and Bethel College in St. Paul, MN, during a two week stay while participating on Doctor of Ministry classes. Most evenings and weekends during this time were spent obtaining data relating to spiritual formation, corporate discernment, and church leadership.

After returning to Canada from classes in St. Paul, the remainder of the research for this project was conducted at the library of Atlantic Baptist University in Moncton, New Brunswick, from the summer of 2000 to late winter of 2001. Supplemental data was also obtained at this time using material and resources from the personal library of the researcher.

Finally, further research was conducted during the spring and summer of 2004 to supplement the data already obtained in the primary research for the project. This data was used to further enhance the data previously secured, and was researched in the library of Atlantic Baptist University, as well as the researcher's personal library.

Developing the Retreat Training Material

Following the primary research phase of the project, and based on the research completed up to that point, the researcher began the process of creating study material to be used at a deacon retreat in May 2001. The study material was based on the data secured in the research, as well as personal reflections of the researcher, and was designed between March and April 2001.

The retreat sessions focussed on three primary subject areas: the heart of a leader; spiritual disciplines; and seeking God's direction in decision-making (see APPENDIX A). The weekend was planned with the intent of having a fourth and final session during which the deacons and the researcher would design a leadership covenant based on the information gleaned from the previous three sessions of the retreat.

The Retreat Weekend

In May 2001, the researcher and three deacons left on a Friday afternoon and travelled to a summer cottage located about one hour's drive from Riverview, to return the following Saturday afternoon. The physical travelling together, relaxed and peaceful setting, and extended period of time set aside for the retreat, all helped to create a sense of detachment from the normal routines and obligations of all the participants, allowing them to focus on the goals of the retreat, as well as encouraging times of mutual sharing and bonding as a group.

After unpacking, settling in, and taking a walk around the lake together, the participants enjoyed a snack and worked through "Session One- Finding the Heart of a Leader." "Session Two- Spiritual Disciplines" was conducted that evening, while

“Session Three- Seeking God’s Guidance” was conducted after breakfast the next morning. Each session of interactive instruction led by the researcher was followed by a time of sharing, mutual encouragement, and prayer by all of the participants.

A fourth and final session was conducted after lunch that Saturday, where the participants were encouraged to share what they had learned from the previous three sessions. Following this sharing time, participants were then asked to reflect on how their ministry together might be enhanced by incorporating what they had learned together. As a result of the thoughts from this reflection time, a rough draft of a leadership covenant was written and affirmed by all present as a new model of ministry for the pastor and board of deacons (see APPENDIX B). Before leaving the retreat, commitment was made by all present to seek to be faithful to the covenant, and to periodically evaluate their ministry together.

Implementing the Leadership Covenant

In the week following the retreat, the researcher created copies of the leadership covenant for all of the participants in both business card and poster formats. These were then distributed to the participants at the next meeting of the board of deacons. At this meeting, time was spent sharing what impact the retreat had had upon the participants, and their hopes and aspirations for future ministry together.

Over the next several months, a reading program was developed and the researcher and deacons participated by sharing books and occasionally sharing reflections on them at deacon meetings (see APPENDIX C).

Participants were also regularly encouraged to fast at some time during the week prior to deacon meetings. Many of these meetings were held at a local restaurant for breakfast, encouraging a sense of fellowship and sharing to strengthen the experience of community on the deacon board, and praying for each other became a regular part of the meetings.

In addition to the time spent encouraging and ministering to each other during meetings, seeking to understand how God was active in individual, family, and corporate church life, it was also regularly affirmed that decisions concerning the ministry of the church would not be rushed; rather, time would be spent praying for God to reveal His will to the group.

During the implementation phase of the leadership covenant, the participants were encouraged annually to take part in a leadership development opportunity. These events took place at large churches in the Greater Moncton area in New Brunswick, and provided opportunity to grow spiritually and personally.

Follow-up Interview With Deacons

In March 2002, the researcher began the process of creating an interview to be used with the project participants to evaluate their perception of the project and its effects on their team ministry. The researcher met with Dr. Sam Reimer, a sociology professor at Atlantic Baptist University, to seek some guidance in the design of this interview.

In April 2004, a rough draft of the interview was sent to Dr. Rick Funk who served as the project mentor and supervisor for the researcher. Based upon the suggested

revisions received from Dr. Funk, a final interview was created in November 2004 (see APPENDIX D). In December 2004, the two remaining deacons in the project were interviewed together at a meeting which took place at WBC. The interview was recorded so that notes could be taken later and the data written in point form. The data from this interview, combined with the reflections of the researcher, served as the primary data in evaluating the results of the project.

Evaluation of Project Results Compared with Goals

Following Christmas of 2004, and into early January, the results of the deacon interview were compared with the stated goals of the project in the Proposal Report. This data was combined with the reflections of the researcher, and were then used to evaluate the effectiveness of the project in achieving the overall goals of the researcher.

Writing of Thesis Project Report

Chapters One and Two, and part of Chapter Three of the project report were written in April 2004. Rough drafts of Chapters One and Two were submitted in September 2004, while a rough draft of Chapter Three was completed and submitted in November 2004. The rough drafts of Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven were completed and submitted in January 2005.

Description of and Reasoning Behind Changes Made in the Project

During the implementation of this project, four primary changes from the original project proposal occurred.

The first notable change in the project was the length of time for its completion. In the original project proposal, the project was to be evaluated and the report written one year after the implementation of the leadership covenant began. Several factors led to the extension of this time period, including various ministry and family obligations. Overall, however, the single greatest factor in this change was the inability of the researcher to maintain focus on the project, and exercise the personal disciplines needed to meet the deadlines set in the project proposal. While more will be said in Chapter Six about the effects of this extended period of time on the overall results of the project, suffice it to say at this point that there were both positive and negative implications, none of which in the opinion of the researcher serve to take away from the validity of the project.

A second major change in the project concerns the actual number of participants. In the original Project Proposal, the project was to involve the researcher and three deacons. During the implementation of the leadership covenant, however, one of the deacons completed his ministry as a deacon sooner than anticipated so he could move on to serve in a new ministry of the church. This transition took place just before the original completion date of the project, with the result that there were only three individuals involved in the evaluation process: the researcher and two deacons. While a new deacon did join the board, and did embrace the leadership covenant and the commitments stated therein, he was not involved in the evaluation process as he was not a member of the board during the initial formation of the covenant, and had no real point of reference from which to do the evaluation.

The third change in the project relates to the implementation of the leadership covenant. Part of the covenant states that the pastor and members of the deacon board would participate in an annual retreat. In reality, this became much harder to coordinate than anticipated. A wide variety of factors and events simply made the scheduling of an overnight retreat at an isolated location when all project participants could be present, too difficult. This was compensated for in part by encouraging participation in leadership training events and exercises both at WBC and at other churches. All of the project participants were able to be involved in at least one such event per year, and reflections on these events were shared at the next meeting of the deacon board.

The fourth and final change in the program relates to both the initial retreat weekend at the beginning of the project, and the method of evaluation at the end of the project. A survey was to be used with the deacons at both the retreat weekend and the evaluation interview at the completion of the project. While the survey was carried out during the retreat weekend, it was carried out in an informal way which served more to make the participants feel at ease with the material to follow in the sessions than to actually obtain useful data. At the end of the project, the researcher chose a more relaxed style of interview with the deacons for the evaluation process, which served to better provide the type of data needed for a helpful evaluation.

CHAPTER FIVE

SHARING THE PROJECT RESULTS

On 23 December 2005, the researcher met with the two deacons who had participated in the full duration of the project. Stephen G. is a blue collar worker in the city of Moncton, and Stephen S. works in the food processing industry as well as operating his own cleaning company. Stephen G. has served as a deacon for a total of seven years, while Stephen S. has been a deacon for eight years. The purpose of this meeting was to interview the participants using the survey created to evaluate the effectiveness of the project.

Interview With Project Participants

The following are expressions of the responses recorded during the meeting with the deacons. Please refer to APPENDIX D for the actual wording of the questions.

Section One- Questions Related to Church Leadership

When asked the first question in Section One, Stephen S. shared his conviction that in addition to the regular duties described in the job description of a deacon for WBC, some of the primary responsibilities/activities of a spiritual leader are: to live a life of example to others; making the effort to know the people in the fellowship to better serve them; and the ability to recognize and acknowledge one's own limitations. Stephen G. affirmed these statements, emphasizing the need to be with and among the people of the

congregation developing healthy relationships with them, as well as the need to be an active prayer warrior in the fellowship.

In response to the second question, Stephen G. said that open-mindedness, approachability, being actively engaged in spiritual disciplines, and the desire to put God first in his or her life are some of the personal qualities important for a spiritual leader in a local church. He also stressed the need for humility. Stephen S. concurred with and elaborated on these qualities, adding the need to be disciplined in one's personal walk with God so that people are able to recognize the leader as one who is truly a friend of God.

In response to the third question, Stephen S. stated that members of a successful leadership team in a local church would be people who are open to helpful criticism and guidance, and who have developed a strong sense of unity and fellowship within the team. Stephen G. added to this by expressing the need for everyone on the team to appreciate the strengths and unique contributions of the other team members.

In response to the last question in this section, Stephen G. shared that his understanding of leadership in the local church changed as a result of participating in the ministry project by causing him to better appreciate the value of working as a team and developing team health. Stephen S. stated that while his basic understanding of leadership had not changed, the depth of his conviction concerning those beliefs had increased. This was especially true of his belief that God is more concerned with a person's willingness to serve and heart for Him than his or her gifts and abilities. Stephen S. also shared how much he had benefitted from and appreciated the prayer

support and encouragement he experiences in the leadership team.

Questions Related to Spiritual Disciplines

In response to question one, Stephen S. stated that the primary purpose of practicing spiritual disciplines is to better enable one to hear and recognize the voice of God. Stephen G. shared that they were useful in that they served as reminders people need to be constantly seeking to strengthen their relationship with God.

In response to the second question of this section, Stephen S. shared that he nurtures his relationship with God by spending time with Him each morning in Bible reading and prayer, and practicing conversational prayer with God throughout the day. Reading other devotional material, and purposefully spending time listening to music that encourages him were also mentioned among his spiritual disciplines. Stephen G. mentioned his efforts to have a daily time of reading and prayer as well, and his appreciation for the ministry that music has in his life, but also added his need to frequently seek times of solitude. Stephen G. has also been reading more actively in the areas of spiritual growth and church leadership, and has enjoyed a renewed commitment to study.

In response to the third question, Stephen S. stated that practicing some of these disciplines together on a leadership team would be beneficial in that it would allow the members to hear what God is doing and how He is guiding in the lives of the other members. In times of decision, hearing what God is saying through others who are committed to the same life of discipline helps to test what one thinks he or she may be hearing from God. Stephen G. agreed, adding that God often gives different pieces of a

vision or a direction to different individuals, and only by putting those pieces together can the team have an accurate picture of God's will. Stephen G. also added the benefit of accountability in the area of study, prayer, and other disciplines, that encourages him. When the team engage in a reading schedule together, he felt he was able to learn more in the discussions about the books than he would have learned on his own. Finally, both participants expressed the support, encouragement, and accountability factor of practicing these disciplines together on a team.

Reflecting on question four concerning the effect of the leadership covenant on the ministry of the team, Stephen S. shared that it has had a positive change in that the team had something concrete to refer to as a guideline and encouragement as they carried on the ministry of the deacon board. Stephen G. affirmed this observation.

Stephen G. also responded to question five by stating that it has helped remind him what a privilege and responsibility he has to be able to serve a church family as their deacon. Both participants shared that their understanding of their roles as husband and father grew as they recognized their need to be a leader by example not just for the church congregation, but for those who know them best.

In response to the final question, both participants stated that their understanding of spiritual disciplines had not changed significantly as a result of participating in this ministry project, but their appreciation of the need to engage in them grew, as did their growth in actually participating in them on a more regular basis. Stephen G. especially expressed his growth in the area of reading and study as a positive result of participating in the project. Spiritual disciplines were things they were both aware of,

but neither had much experience practicing them, nor had they previously regarded the practices they did engage in as being spiritual disciplines.

Questions Related to Seeking God's Guidance

In response to the first question, both participants strongly agreed that God does speak today and that it is important to listen to Him. Stephen S. shared that listening is important because people tend to believe they have all the answers, and to live life in such a way is to miss out on God's wisdom and they suffer the consequences. He described periods in his own life where he tried to live by his own rules and knowledge, and always found himself crying out for God to rescue him from some situation or mess that he had created. Stephen G. shared that living according to one's own wisdom is to live with only some of the truth and some of the facts; listening to God will provide all the guidance needed based on reality from a divine perspective. He also shared the belief that God is always trying to speak to people, therefore He has things of benefit and value to say if people will listen.

In response to the second question, Stephen S. stated that leaders should try to listen to God by practicing spiritual disciplines both corporately and individually. Stephen G. also mentioned the need to wait patiently over an extended period of time if need be, and to listen with an open mind and heart and be willing to hear whatever He might want to say. Stephen S. affirmed the value of trying to hear what God may be saying through other members of the team, and how he had grown in his perception of and appreciation for this awareness during the course of the project.

When asked the third question in this section, Stephen S. stated that the leadership team needs to follow some of the established guidelines set out in the leadership covenant concerning the decision-making process when faced with an important decision. Both participants expressed the belief that there needs to be unity on the leadership team and a shared commitment to doing whatever it takes and however long it takes to discover God's will in that decision, and then follow through on that direction. Stephen G. also mentioned the value in gathering helpful information, including seeking out wisdom from others in the congregation, as well as making the time to meet together regularly to pray and study together. Finally, both participants stated that God is active in all these activities, and desires to share His will even more than the team longs to hear it.

Responding to the last question in this section, both participants stated that their perception/understanding of decision-making in a local church had not really changed as a result of participating in the ministry project, but the principles and convictions they held before had been reinforced and strengthened.

Summary Questions

As a result of participating in the initial leadership retreat and seeking to observe the leadership covenant over three years, both participants felt that it had been a positive experience for them and the leadership team. Stephen G. expressed the encouragement of getting to know the other members of the team at a deeper level. He also shared that he was more comfortable in his ability to seek help and encouragement from a group of men with whom he felt a stronger sense of unity and

fellowship as a result of working through the retreat and following experiences together. Stephen S. concurred with this sentiment, expressing his appreciation for each member of the group and how much their support, encouragement, and friendship have meant in his own spiritual growth through the project.

In response to the second question, Stephen G. said that the most significant change he experienced as a result of participating in this project was his growth in the discipline of reading and study, and his appreciation for it. He expressed how difficult it was simply to stay focussed on reading his Bible, and how the reading program helped him not only to see the value of reading other Christian material, but to actually enjoy and look forward to doing so. He also expressed a new sense of humility and thankfulness for the call God has placed upon him to be a leader in a local church, and a growing sense of dependance upon Him to equip him to be the person God wants him to be.

In response to this question, Stephen S. expressed the sense of encouragement he felt in realizing that everyone else on the leadership team had struggles and needed to grow just as he did. This made him feel less an outsider, and more willing to draw strength from the support and encouragement of others. Both participants grew in their understanding of the unique strengths of people in the leadership team (and in the congregation), and their ability to be blessed by those ministry strengths of others.

In response to the third question of this section, Stephen S. stated that the more time the leadership team could spend together both in official meetings and socially, the stronger they would be as a unified group. Stephen G. shared a desire to have a

more regular prayer time as a group for both personal needs and ministry needs of the church fellowship. They also both expressed the firm belief that a more consistent focus on the principles stated in the leadership covenant would result in an even stronger team ministry.

This last sentiment and thought carried over into the last question of the survey, namely: In retrospect, what changes would you suggest to make the project more effective or meaningful? The strongest response from both participants was the need to faithfully participate in an annual retreat, and to more regularly review the leadership covenant together. Any perceived weaknesses in the project by the participants involved extended periods of time when the leadership covenant was not mentioned or reviewed, and the lack of the retreat weekend. Both participants believed that addressing these two issues would greatly strengthen the results of the project, and a renewed commitment to follow these recommendations was made by the participants and the researcher.

Implications for Paradigms of Corporate Spirituality on a Deacon's Board

This project attempted to develop a better understanding of how Scripture and theological tradition inform the ways God empowers individuals and groups for spiritually led decision making. Through the training sessions of the retreat weekend, and at some of the monthly meetings that followed during the course of the project, the researcher sought to address questions concerning how and why God spoke to people in the Bible and how Christians have traditionally understood this divine activity. As a result of sharing and studying these topics together, the project participants were

affirmed their conviction that the living God as One who reveals Himself freely by choice, provides the means of such revelation, and can be counted upon to do so for those who truly seek Him. Thus, they valued the opportunity to establish a leadership covenant that reflected these convictions, and sought to have the ministry practise of the leadership team reflect them.

The project also raised questions concerning the relationships between individual and corporate spirituality and how they influence decision making in the local church. It was revealed in the evaluation interview following the completion of the project, that the participants believed they had benefited from practising various disciplines together, and that in doing so they had available the means to better discern the will of God. Observing spiritual disciplines corporately seemed to have a positive effect on both the individual spiritual health and growth of those involved, as well as the overall ministry of the leadership team.

Throughout the interview, the participants repeatedly made reference to the value they placed on their experience of community within the leadership team and their need to help foster such community in the church fellowship. This supports the research of Chapter Three concerning the corporate nature of the Church, and the need to understand and appreciate this aspect of spirituality in order to grow in spiritual maturity. As the leadership team continues to serve the congregation of WBC, they will continue to seek ways to strengthen their own sense of unity and fellowship, and have committed to striving for the same growth in the fellowship as a whole.

The interview process also revealed the need to regularly emphasize the commitments, convictions, and ministry practices of the leadership team. Most of the weaknesses in the project could be attributed to a failure to follow through on such activities as the annual retreat, regular prayer times at monthly meetings, and making the commitments of the leadership covenant prominent in ministry activities. Looking into the future, the leadership team has committed to following through more faithfully on the covenants they have made, and to more regularly seeking to encourage each other in the area of spiritual formation.

The positive experience of the training sessions at the leadership retreat served to remind the researcher and project participants of their need to continue to be challenged and grow in their knowledge of spiritual truth and their integration of such knowledge into practice. The reading schedule will continue to have a significant role in the ministry of the leadership team, as it provides opportunity for all members to reflect, challenge, and be challenged both by each other and gifted writers of the past and present.

Implications for Ministry Theory

This study was based on the ministry theory that while the intentions of many who serve as leaders in the local church--deacons in particular--are noble and godly, the manner in which those responsibilities and roles are carried out tends to reflect more of a secular business model and mind-set than that of a people governed by the Spirit of Christ. This was proven to be true to a limited degree by the evaluation interviews with the deacons following the completion of the project. The participants expressed a

realization that while some concepts of spirituality and leadership were familiar to them, their depth of knowledge and the application of it was fairly limited. Even though prayer was regarded as important, the team had previously tended to follow fairly traditional, business-like models when approaching ministry activities like decision-making. The increased awareness brought about through the study, reflection, and sharing at the retreat weekend provided a means of expressing and dealing with some of the discomfort and lack of satisfaction their previous activities and methods had left with them. At a deeper level, there was a hunger to be more aware of God's presence, strength, and encouragement in their ministry, but time had never been taken to address this hunger and offer opportunity to grow in their understanding of leadership and spiritual formation. The conviction that leadership involves more than just dealing with problems and doing church business was brought out into the open, and was affirmed by encouraging spiritual growth and health through the observance of spiritual disciplines that require engaging in times of stillness, quiet, and waiting to hear from the Holy Spirit.

The researcher continues to believe that there needs to be a firm biblical basis for all ministry and leadership activities and that those in leadership positions must be encouraged to see the development of such a basis as a priority. Leaders need to understand their roles biblically and corporately and be willing to rethink their basic assumptions about how God wants to use them, especially in the decision-making process. This goal continues to be important not only for the sake of the congregations served by leaders but also for the leadership boards as corporate entities.

It continues to be the desire of the researcher that in the corporate process of study, examination, and the application of various spiritual disciplines, the board as a whole and its individual members will grow spiritually and become excited about what God is doing through and to them as a group, especially as the church heads into the future. This project has served to strengthen this desire, and affirm the validity of the directions being taken to address spiritual health on the leadership team.

Both of the participants expressed a recognition of the need to faithfully discern and obey God's will for them and for WBC, and were excited by the growing realization that God was actively seeking to reveal His will to them. To simply react from the point of human logic, to lay plans according to what makes sense to the rational human mind, and to base decisions on emotions is to doom the church to failure and ineffectiveness. In light of the numerous and formidable challenges of ministry in the present and future, the participants are clearly impressed with the need to hear what God has to say to the Church in order to face those challenges in a way that honors Him.

CHAPTER SIX

ASSESSING THE PROJECT

After completing the survey evaluation process with the project participants, several points became evident concerning the overall effectiveness of this project in achieving the goals stated in the initial project proposal.

Strengths

The most beneficial aspect of the project according to both the researcher and the project participants was the weekend retreat that took place at the beginning, and the resulting commitments made as a result of sharing the experience together as a group.

First, the material covered in the training sessions was both encouraging and challenging in that much of it was new to the deacons. Most certainly the approach of integrating spiritual disciplines into the role of leadership was new, and the discussions prompted by the material was lively and provoking. The sessions were designed to be interactive, and the participants enjoyed and benefited from the encouragement to share and question their former perceptions about leadership, spirituality, and disciplines. After sharing the training material with other pastors, the researcher has also been encouraged by the positive feedback received and the encouragement to continue sharing it with churches and leadership groups.

Secondly, the retreat was positive in that the leadership team left with something concrete and tangible that would immediately have an impact on their ministry: a leadership covenant. The covenant provided the participants with a means of incorporating what they had learned through the sessions into practical guidelines for their activities as leaders. The business cards and certificates, visual reminders of what they had experienced, learned, and committed to also served to strengthen their resolve and sense of purpose. The leadership covenant was also beneficial in that it came from God through the participants themselves; the group worked together prayerfully and thoughtfully, taking into consideration the personalities, situations, and understanding of all involved, to create a covenant that they truly owned.

Thirdly, the retreat provided a marvellous opportunity to strengthen the sense of fellowship and unity in the leadership team. By joining together for an extended period of time in a setting removed from the familiar activities and obligations of daily life, the project participants were able to relax and spend extended amounts of time talking about their own spiritual journeys, families, vocational challenges, as well as needs and opportunities in the life of the church. Through this experience, the participants grew in their knowledge of each other, their unique gifts, abilities and struggles, and in appreciation of God's design in bringing them together to serve as a team.

While the weekend retreat was the most positive part of the project, other activities that were initiated as a result of the retreat also proved helpful. A couple of days after returning from the retreat, a reading list was developed by the researcher, and the project participants were encouraged to read and study the books for their own

personal growth and further training in their ministry as leaders at WBC. At times, some of the books initiated healthy discussions during regular monthly meetings, and both of the deacons expressed their strong desire to continue with the reading program.

Following the retreat, the deacons also started the practice of meeting together for breakfast at a local diner before their monthly meeting. Although these breakfast gatherings were sporadic, they helped develop a stronger sense of fellowship within the group, and a commitment to support and encourage each other. Fellowship truly began to emerge in the thoughts of the deacons as a necessary priority in developing a healthy team ministry that would benefit the congregation of WBC and its ministry in the community.

A final positive strength of the project was the extended period of time allowed for the participants to experience the changes in their ministry focus and activities born out of the leadership covenant. By having a weekend retreat rather than simply a rushed meeting at the beginning of the project, and then committing to work together to implement the commitments of the covenant into their ministry for at least a year, the participants were able to experience the benefits of doing so over an extended period of time. Both the strengths and weaknesses of the project were given time to emerge and be addressed, and the leadership team grew to accept that the project was more than just an experiment on the part of the researcher; rather, it was an opportunity to allow God to permanently change the way they understood ministry and His involvement with them in it.

Weaknesses

The greatest weakness of the project had more to do with its implementation and evaluation than its initial activities. More specifically, the failure on the part of the researcher to faithfully and consistently follow-up on and encourage the commitments and activities that came as a result of the retreat weekend.

First, while all of the participants thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated the retreat weekend, and included a commitment in the leadership covenant to participate in a retreat annually, no retreat took place for the next three years. Several factors contributed to this, including the inability to find a time when individuals would commit to set aside the time, and procrastination on the part of the researcher in regard to taking initiative in planning. A compromise activity of sorts was practised as team members were encouraged to take part in leadership training opportunities that took place annually in the Greater Moncton Area. In a couple of instances, the researcher was able to participate with at least one of the deacons in such a training event, and the experience was positive. Yet, the lack of extended periods of time to simply share and pray together was truly felt by the leadership team, and was mentioned at a few regular monthly meetings.

Secondly, there were a few periods of time over the course of the project where the breakfast meetings were inconsistent. In the rush of everyday life, including some critical events that happened in the lives of the project participants, there were periods of several months where deacon meetings were simply held in the researcher's office with little time spent in prayer and sharing. While all of the team were aware of this

problem-- as they shared with the researcher following the project evaluation-- no one articulated it at the time, as they simply felt it would be taken care of for the next meeting.

Thirdly, a significant weakness in the project arose as a result of changes in the membership of the deacon board itself. Initially, there were three deacons participating with the researcher in the project. A few months after the weekend retreat, however, one of the deacons left the board to serve on a newly formed ministry team in the church. While the rest of the deacon board felt this was an important and necessary change in order to kick-start the new ministry team, it reduced the number of project participants to a total of three, including the researcher.

A new deacon was soon appointed and became involved in activities such as the reading program and leadership training as required by the leadership covenant; but because he was not involved in the initial training sessions and the formation of the leadership covenant at the retreat, he could not be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the project. In addition to this challenge, the new deacon was not able to receive in depth training concerning the reasons behind the various elements of the leadership covenant because of the lack of an annual retreat meant, and his commitment to participate in some parts of the covenant were questionable. The inability of the new deacon to fully 'get on board' with the rest of the group, in combination with the unique personality traits of this individual, seemed to divide the group to some extent and limit the openness and sense of unity within it. These difficulties were not the fault of the new deacon nor a reflection of a poor character on his part, but simply the reality of the

circumstances and personalities within the group as a whole.

A further weakness in the project was also mentioned briefly as a possible strength in the previous section of this chapter, namely the length of time used to implement the project. While the extended period of time did allow for the guidelines of the leadership covenant to become fully integrated into the ministry of the deacon board, it also posed some unique difficulties. For example, because there was such a large span of time between the retreat weekend and the initialization of the leadership covenant, and the evaluation process which began almost three years later, it was difficult for the participants to reflect on and evaluate some of the effects of the project on their ministry.

Overall, the greatest weakness in the program was the lack of consistent leadership and follow-up initiative on the part of the researcher. Ultimately, while the assumptions of the project proposal proved to be correct to varying degrees, focus on the goals of the project waned and the effort expended on emphasizing the principles of the leadership covenant decreased with the passing of the months and years following the initial retreat weekend. During those times when the leadership team was less intentional about following the leadership covenant, the ability to sense God's direction and presence was also diminished to a degree. Ultimately, group unity and cohesiveness, as well as a sense of intimacy with God, were more limited when the leadership covenant was ignored for an extended period of time.

Recommendations for Improvement

During the evaluation process, it became apparent that the deacons still placed a lot of value on the leadership covenant they had developed and adopted during the weekend retreat. However, the researcher believes that a deeper impact could be made by emphasizing the covenant more consistently. Even the simple exercise of reading it together at each monthly meeting would help serve to make it more prominent in the thoughts and activities of the team, especially during times of decision-making. Reminding deacons to pray and fast for at least one meal during the week prior to the regular monthly meeting and sharing reflections on those experiences with one another on the team would help strengthen the commitment to remember such disciplines.

It would also be helpful to focus on the leadership covenant during the annual retreat weekend, and review its various commitments. There may be times when the group feels that items should be added or slightly modified to reflect the spiritual needs and the personalities in the group at that time, and the foundational reasons behind the development of a leadership covenant could be reenforced.

Another recommendation would be to expand the education process to include other boards and ministries in the church. While the deacon board is a vital branch of ministry within the congregation, it is by no means the only one that would benefit from receiving direction and encouragement as they faithfully seek the voice of God in their ministry. While every group may not be able to organize a weekend retreat, the researcher believes that the other boards and committees would benefit by working

through the material or some modified version of it, and creating a ministry covenant for that group.

The researcher would also suggest involving the other members of the team in the creation of the reading and study program. Initially, the reading list was developed by the researcher and materials were simply distributed to the members of the team. There were times, however, when other members of the group would share reflections on other books they were reading or even movies they had seen, that challenged them spiritually. It would be helpful, therefore, to provide opportunities for team members to bring favourite books and study materials that were a challenge or blessing to their own spiritual growth and leadership development, and have the rest of the group work through that material.

Finally, the researcher now recognizes the need for more frequent evaluations of the ministry and spiritual formation of the leadership team during the project. The evaluation of the team's ability to benefit from the disciplines listed in the leadership covenant and to use them to better equip the group to faithfully serve the congregation of WBC, should be examined on more than just an annual basis.

CHAPTER SEVEN

REFLECTIONS ON THE DISCIPLINE OF CORPORATE DISCERNMENT

Areas of Personal Growth

The process of researching various books, scripture passages, and other materials for information to use in this project has produced a clearer understanding of the topics and issues for the researcher. It was extremely rewarding and challenging to reflect on the thoughts and convictions of other writers in the historical and contemporary Church concerning spiritual disciplines and decision-making, and their perspectives broadened, affirmed, and challenged his own. While this was most certainly true in the development of the leadership training sessions for the retreat with the deacons, it was also true of the material researched for chapters three and four of the project report.

With the benefit of increased academic knowledge, however, there also emerged the added challenge of transferring the information from the domain of intellectual assent to personal practice and experience. The process of gathering information for the sake of writing a project did not always translate easily into practical growth on a personal level for the researcher. In fact, when called upon by other churches or leadership groups over the past couple of years to lead workshops on the subjects of leadership and spiritual formation, the researcher often felt the need to more personally and faithfully incorporate the information he was sharing into his own life and practice.

These convictions were both humbling and grounding, as they forced the researcher to affirm his belief in the life-long pursuit of growth in practising spiritual disciplines together with God's people. While the achievement of a professional degree does indeed mark a significant accomplishment in an individual's life, that degree simply marks one of many stages in the ongoing journey toward spiritual growth and maturity.

This project also helped the researcher realize the difficulty of maintaining focus on a ministry direction over an extended period of time. While two one-year extensions were ultimately required to complete the project, the researcher did out of necessity grow somewhat in his ability to better schedule his time to accomplish specific tasks. Even more important was the realization of what types of sacrifices and commitments are necessary to maintain focus and enthusiasm for specific tasks.

There were several times over the course of implementing and reporting the project that the researcher was aware of the need to seek help in balancing family, ministry, and educational life. Only in the last year and a half did the researcher realize the degree to which he had been ignoring the first tenets of the leadership covenant, namely to seek to honor God by loving his family and being a role model and support to them. Since that time, the project participants have renewed their commitment to encourage each other in this area, and together are drawing strength to follow through on that commitment.

A further area of growth for the researcher relates to the ultimate purpose of practicing spiritual disciplines. It is easy for one to fall into the trap of practicing spiritual

disciplines in an attempt to either earn favor with God or somehow manipulate Him into providing a desired objective. While the potential for this error was known by the researcher before and during the project, there were still times when he had to refocus on the true purpose of the disciplines, namely to open himself up to be more receptive to God's voice and the leading of His Spirit.

The experience of participating in this project also helped the researcher grow in his appreciation and respect for the men chosen to serve as deacons at WBC. Through mutual encouragement, sharing, and the facing of difficult situations together, this particular leadership team was drawn closer together, and the researcher was able to grow through and thoroughly enjoy his interactions with each individual deacon. These men are all very unique from each other, yet the qualities of integrity and a true hunger for intimacy with God is apparent in each of them. In addition to the ministerial activities shared, there were also several occasions to spend time together either as a group or one on one socially, thus encouraging the relationships in the team to move beyond that of mere colleagues on a ministry board to close friendships.

Finally, the researcher grew in his willingness to share more openly with his own personal struggles and areas requiring further growth and development. Throughout the duration of the project, the deacons provided such an atmosphere of support, honesty, and encouragement, that the researcher felt increasingly more comfortable sharing prayer requests and struggles. Some of these requests included the challenges of completing academic studies and the demands of pastoral leadership; but they also included requests for prayer in the area of family life and personal

holiness. Some issues and struggles had never been shared with other individuals before, and while some may fear the thought of appearing weak or not having all the answers, the researcher found it liberating and comforting to share in confidence with a small group of men common struggles and challenges.

Areas of Disappointment

The greatest disappointment during the project was the failure to follow through on the annual retreat with the deacon board. This failure was expressed by the project participants during the evaluation process as their greatest disappointment as well. For the researcher, this failure was felt at several levels, both personally and ministerially.

On a ministerial level, the researcher believes that the effectiveness of the overall project was limited by the lack of concentrated, extended times of prayer and study together as a ministry team. While efforts were made to provide other opportunities for training and growth, the level of sharing and openness experienced at a retreat was missing. Meetings were held fairly regularly, but were sometimes rushed due to other commitments various individuals had, and extended discussions concerning ministry direction and focus were cut short. There were times when the majority of the discussions were focussed on dealing with pressing issues rather than seeking long term goals and vision for the church. While this was not always the case, it was a challenge to try to plan and minister pro-actively as opposed to reactively.

On a personal level, the researcher believes that his own spiritual and pastoral growth could have benefitted from participation in the annual retreats. While the regular monthly meetings did provide opportunity for growth and encouragement, the hunger

for extended time away with the leadership team was also felt. The researcher was encouraged and blessed through the initial retreat experience, and believes that more annual retreats would only have strengthened this growth in community and commitment to ministry.

A second disappointment for the researcher was the inability of one of the original three deacons to complete the project with the rest of the group. While the reason for his leaving the deacon board was positive and necessary, the researcher believes his input and involvement in the project and the evaluation of it would have been invaluable. His analytical personality, and perspective as a senior adult (whereas the other deacons are in their mid-forties) would have provided useful insight. In addition to these attributes, the original three deacons seemed to work well as a unit, and truly bonded at a spiritual level. As a note of encouragement, this individual will be joining the deacon board again at the next business meeting, and both the researcher and the rest of the board are truly looking forward to having him as a part of the group again.

Impact on Project Participants

While some of the specific areas of growth perceived by the project participants themselves have been examined in Chapter Five, the researcher was also encouraged to observe their growth through the duration of the project. As has been mentioned in a variety of ways and contexts already, there has most certainly been growth in the sense of community. The participants' appreciation for each other, and true commitment to encourage and support one another has been evident. This is truly a group united by more than a job description for a church board: they are friends and

fellow pilgrims. While this was true before their participation in the project, the strength of their relationship has only increased through their experience of it.

It was also encouraging for the researcher to observe an increased willingness to participate in spiritual disciplines that were perhaps foreign in practice to the members of the board. While participation may have been sporadic at times, the deacons clearly grew in their understanding of the various disciplines, and the valuable contribution they could have both in ministry and individual spiritual growth and health. The long term effects of this growth have yet to be discerned, but the researcher truly believes that the experience had beneficial for the participants.

Finally, the researcher has perceived a greater awareness of God's activity in the ministry team by the project participants. There has been an evident shift in moving from a simple business model for meetings, to spending more time in prayer and sharing to discern God's activity in both personal lives and the life of the church. The researcher also observed a growth in the experience of liberty and freedom for the members of the leadership team. As they became more aware of and sensitive to God's activity among and through them, they also realized to a greater extent His sovereignty in the church. The pressure to make things happen or fix all of the problems was reduced as they were better able to surrender these things to God and commit themselves to following His leading. WBC is God's church, and in surrendering it to Him more fully, the deacons were more free to trust Him to do His work.

Is the Subject of Corporate Discernment Relevant Today?

While the implementation of this project has had its share of challenges and even failures, the researcher is even more convinced of the need to pursue this area of study and ministry direction. The needs expressed in the original project proposal are still pressing, and the reality of the difficulties and dangers of ministry in a fallen world have become even more evident. The busy lifestyle of both clergy and volunteer leaders increases the pressure to adopt leadership styles and methods that emphasize productivity and visible results. The questions raised at meetings often relate to end results, rather than the appropriateness or even godliness of the activities used to achieve them. With time constraints and busyness also comes the potential lack of commitment to spend time in activities aimed at developing spiritual health in leaders and actively pursuing the voice of God during times of crisis and decision making.

It has also been evident to the researcher that the temptation remains for leaders and churches to model a ministry after another church or leader without seeking to understand and discover the unique calling God may have for them. While there is certainly much that can be learned by observing God's activities in other places and ministries, attempts to duplicate the results of specific individuals or churches fails to recognize the unique calling God places upon each setting. Only as churches and leaders commit themselves to discovering God's unique design and purposes for them will they experience the fulfillment and reward of walking in His blessing.

Ultimately, the need to discern God's voice and direction for a congregation, especially through a leadership team, is still pressing because the Church in both its

universal and local expressions is God's Church. Jesus Christ is still the head of the Church, and He is still the Lord of each local congregation. Therefore, it is still His desire and will that must be sought and fulfilled through the ministry of each fellowship and leadership team. To face the challenges of ministry in today's culture by engaging in frenetic activity birthed through the limited insight and creativity of human beings alone will only doom local churches to an existence marked by irrelevance, scandal, meaningless activity. While images of success may emerge, the fruit of their activity may be temporary and shallow; only God through His Spirit, anointing and working through surrendered hearts committed to serving His plans, can accomplish kingdom goals.

Questions For Future Study

Until recently, the only ministry program made available to churches in the CABC was the *Experiencing God* series by Dr. Henry Blackaby. In discussions with church leaders of other denominational backgrounds in the Greater Moncton area, the researcher was not made aware of any other ministry program that sought to introduce church leaders and congregations to the classic spiritual disciplines of their contemporary expressions. In similar fashion, leadership training opportunities and programs focussed on leadership styles, principles, and models, with little or no reference to spiritual formation as examined in this project.

Over the past four years, however, the researcher has noticed a growing interest within his own convention leadership in the area of spiritual renewal, disciplines, formation, etc. The Executive Minister of the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches

(CABC), as well as the Director of Evangelism, have been pursuing studies at Fuller Theological Seminary in this area, and a number of directives have come from these two individuals to the member churches and CABC leadership to pursue education and ministry in these areas. The researcher has had two opportunities thus far to participate in leading training exercises on spiritual disciplines and spiritual formation for other pastors as well as offering workshops at local church association levels and even a youth rally weekend. This increased awareness of the need to address spiritual health in both church leadership and church members has been encouraging.

As the need grows to provide helpful guides and programs for clergy and lay-people at a Convention level, the challenge emerges as to how to create such ministry tools that are both accessible and useful. As much of this material is relatively new in nature to those raised in the Baptist traditions of Atlantic Canada, it needs to be expressed in terminology that is culturally sensitive to the biases and predispositions of many who will be exposed to it. At the same time, it needs to challenge those biases and truly lead the participants forward in their journey of discovery and growth spiritually. For the researcher, this is an exciting challenge and opportunity, and one that will be embraced as future opportunities arise both at a local and convention level. It is his desire to address these opportunities with the Executive Minister of the CABC, and offer any help or assistance as may be needed to pursue the development of such resources in this area.

A second issue related to the need to develop useful tools at the local church level, is the challenge of maintaining focus and emphasis on spiritual formation for the long

term. While there has been a noticeable increase in the number of books and articles concerning spiritual health and formation in recent years, the potential danger is that it will simply be a Christian fad, until something new comes along to displace it. How can local churches, church associations, and conventions like the CABC, make issues related to spiritual formation more than just a new program, but instead incorporate practices and ministry programs/resources that encourage commitment to a long-term emphasis? Within a convention that upholds the principle of local church autonomy, how can the leadership of CABC present these resources in such a way as to truly challenge pastors and local churches to pursue this area of growth and make use of the provided resources?

While this project involved disciplines and topics that are not the exclusive domain of any particular Christian denomination, it was implemented in a Baptist church involving participants with strong Baptist roots. The researcher hopes to investigate if and how other Christian denominations in his area are addressing issues related to spiritual formation. How can these different denominational entities, which have at times have appeared to exist more as opponents than colleagues, learn from and encourage each other? Can ministry opportunities be created to offer encouragement and resources useful to several groups within the Greater Moncton Area? What are these other churches and denominations doing to raise the awareness of spiritual health among their pastors and leaders, and what have they learned in their attempts to do so?

Lastly, the researcher would like to investigate the relationship between various spiritual disciplines and practices, and the different personality types described in models such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Oswald and Kroeger explore this relationship at the level of spiritual leadership, and the researcher would like to develop resources to help leadership in his own and other churches better understand what kinds of activities and practices help them grow spiritually.³³² The most helpful resource the researcher has examined thus far in this area is written by Sandra Krebs Hirsh and Jane A. G. Kise, entitled *Soul Types*.³³³ The researcher hopes to examine this material more thoroughly and incorporate it into the next leadership retreat with the deacons. Following that exercise, the researcher also wants to seek a way to make this area of study more inviting to his general congregation, and provide the resources to do so.

³³² Roy M. Oswald and Otto Kroeger, *Personality Type and Religious Leadership*. The Alban Institute: Bethesda, MD, 1988, pp. 90- 122..

³³³ Sandra Krebs Hirsh and Jane A. G. Kise, *Soul Types: Finding the Spiritual Path*

That is Right for You. Hyperion: New York, NY, 1998, pp. 5- 37.

APPENDIX A

RETREAT WEEKEND SESSIONS

SESSION ONE: FINDING THE HEART AND SOUL OF LEADERSHIP

PART 1- THE HEART OF A LEADER

QUESTION- How do you feel about being called as a deacon?

I- To Be Called is a Privilege (*Read 1 Thessalonians 1:7-8*)

One of the greatest compliments people can pay Christians is to view them as examples for other Christians to follow. Paul gives us a good example of this when he writes to the Thessalonian church and commends them on their witness to those around them and to the other churches.

Of course, our role model- not only for deacons, but for all believers- is the example of Christ: ***"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."*** (1 Peter 2:21).

II- Am I Worthy? (*Read Acts 6:3; 1 Timothy 3:8-13*)

"But I just don't feel qualified!" This is often the response and feeling of many who are approached to consider being a deacon... and it is a very appropriate response for those who realize the responsibility of the call and the imperfections of humanity. In fact, no one can completely meet the requirements for any office in the church; it just isn't humanly possible. The qualifications most often used in selecting deacons are found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, and Acts 6:3, and while several things are mentioned, they

can all be divided into the following four general qualifications. The goal in trying to select and appoint people is not to find perfect Christians, but rather to find individuals who reflect a spiritual maturity and exhibit growth and a desire for growth in the following areas: A- Demonstrate growth toward mature faith; B- Demonstrate a Christian home-life; C- Demonstrate personal and public morality; and D- Demonstrate a life accepted by God and the Church. While no one can meet every qualification completely, deacons should give evidence of progress toward the ideal.

A- Growth Toward a Mature Faith

1- Growth in experiencing God's presence (*Acts 6:3- "... full of the Spirit"*)

Deacons need to be people who are experiencing God in their own lives, and who are learning how to allow the Holy Spirit to take control of their lives. This growth should be visible and noticeable by those around them and in the church. The best way this type of growth is nurtured is through prayer- one's spiritual maturity and desire is in direct proportion to the value they place on personal prayer and their desire to commune with God.

2- Growth in seeing life from God's perspective (*James 1:5; Rom. 12:2; Phil. 2:5*)

Deacons need to be individuals who are growing in the wisdom of the Lord. This means knowing their own limitations and abilities, as well as knowing and trusting in the abilities of God. This means having and developing the ability to discern the will of God and to discern between right and wrong, as part of the deacon's role is in making important decisions in the life of the church on behalf of the congregation. This growth is the direct result of time and energy spent in the study of God's Word. As the Word

saturates the individual, they become more Christ-like in their actions and thoughts.

This desire to be more like the Master, and the desire to know His Word, are the marks of spiritual maturity and sincerity.

3- Growth in integrating faith into life (*Matthew 6:33*)- A deacon needs to be a person who has learned that faith is not something theoretical- it is practical. A spiritual leader must be someone who demonstrates a simple faith in God to handle everyday situations as well as personal or family crises. They need to be learning how to trust themselves, their families, their entire lives, to the care of God.

4- Growth in demonstrating maturity (*Heb. 6:1; Eph. 4:13*)- Those who lead in the church should be striving to live lives in communion with God. While no one is perfect in this sense, deacons ought to be people who have demonstrated the lordship of Christ in their lives. Just as Moses' face shone because he had been in the presence of God, so too should the church be aware of a level of godliness in those who serve as deacons. A deacon should be one who desires to walk with God, and wants to help others do the same.

B- A Christian Home-life (*Read 1 Timothy 3:11-12*)

As leaders in the church, and as models for the rest of the body, deacons should have godly homes. Several points are mentioned here, but we need to take care that we don't misunderstand the meaning of the text. For example, the text says that a deacon must be a husband of one wife: Does this mean that single men cannot be deacons? If a deacon must be able to control their own children, does this mean that single people, or couples without children cannot be deacons? No. In regard to deacon's being the

"husband of but one wife," Paul's main point may simply be a rejection of the practice of polygamy in his culture, which was widespread. As for the belief by some religious groups that divorced people could not be deacons, it is hard to support with biblical reference. While divorce was not God's ideal, He did make allowances for it in some circumstances. We must also remember that when Christ forgives sin, it is forgiven and forgotten.

Different groups have translated **verse 11** in different ways. Some believe that it is describing the wife of a deacon (thus only men can be deacons) while others believe it is talking about female deacons. In either case (and the latter interpretation is easier to defend biblically), there is an emphasis on both men and women in the home of a deacon, being servants of Christ and the Church. The spouse of a deacon should be someone who will support their partner in their work, and even share some aspects of it.

Finally, the Bible teaches us that deacons should be good managers of their own home and children. In ***Ephesians 6:1-4*** Paul gives us some guidelines concerning the way we ought to raise our children. It should be noted that not every child in a Christian home will be a little angel! This passage is not telling us that Christians' or even Christian leaders' children have to be perfect- it is saying that the parents need to be good, Godly people, trying to raise their children in the ways of the Lord.

C- Growth in Personal and Public Morality (Read 1 Timothy 3:8)

1- Deacons need to be respected- Deacons should be people who are respected by their peers and community. This does not mean that everyone likes them! It means

that their life needs to be lived consistently with what they say they believe. **Titus 2:7-8** and **1 Peter 2:12** tell us that deacons should know when to be serious and when to be lighthearted. They should be able to instill confidence in the rest of the church (note the example of Cornelius in **Acts 10:2** of a godly man).

2- Deacons should have a controlled tongue- This means that deacons should not be gossipers or slanderers. They should be people who can keep things confidential and be trusted with private affairs. While they don't have to be gifted orators (remember the protest of Moses when the Lord commissioned him to speak the Word of God?), they should be able to share their thoughts clearly. **(See also 1 Corinthians 14:8-9; Exodus 4:10-12; James 3:9-11).**

3- Deacons should have Godly priorities- In **1 Timothy 3:8**, Paul warns the church that leaders should not be given to excesses. Although he mentions only wine here, we may be same in assuming that he means excesses of any kind. A deacon should know the value of things that money cannot buy, and not be consumed with a desire to own things and possessions. Rather, they will know that family, personal relationships, and most importantly their relationship with the Lord, are to be priorities in their lives.

D- A Model of Life Accepted by God and the Church (1 Timothy 3:10)

1- Accepted by God- A deacon should be someone who is visibly concerned about serving their Lord. They should be a person who- while they do not intentionally try to offend people- should nonetheless be focused primarily on what God is calling them to do. They should be concerned- as **Psalm 119:1, 23-24** says- with how they stand before God, and their lives should reflect the values that God reveals in His Word.

2- Accepted by the Church- As mentioned before, the church should recognize the qualities they desire in a deacon, and the life this person leads in their midst should be a respected and Godly example to others.

3- Sound doctrine- (Read 2 Timothy 2:15) This means that a deacon should have a good biblical understanding of their faith. They should have a grasp of the basic essentials of Christianity, and should be people devoted to growing in their knowledge. It is at this point that maturity of faith is considered; a new believer should not be given such an important and demanding leadership role in the Church.

4- Confidence for ministry- (Read 1 Timothy 3:13) This means that- while they are not to be overconfident in their own abilities- they are confident in the knowledge that because Christ has called them to serve as deacons, he will equip them to do the task. The confidence is in Christ- not in themselves.

**** In our next session tomorrow, we will look at those things (habits, exercises, lifestyle choices) that open us up to the Spirit of God to grow these fruit in our hearts and lives.***

PART 2- MODELS OF LEADERSHIP IN MINISTRY

The primary role of the deacon is to be a servant of God, faithful in attending to the needs of those in the Church and in the community. Historically, many of the responsibilities of deacons were very practical: (a)- visitation of the sick; (b)- administering benevolent funds; (c)- provide pastoral care; (d)- preventive church

discipline; (e)- assisting at the Lord's Table and in worship; (f)- helping to train new converts. Additional duties were added in more recent decades (most of them after the 1800's) including: (a)- business roles and administration; (b)- screening programs and ideas for the congregation

While these were to varying degrees emphasized at different times in the history of the Church, the primary role of the deacon was still one of **service**, providing spiritual counsel and care to the congregation. In this way, the deacons were and are still to be co-workers with the pastor. When the business and administrative demands limit the deacon's ability to minister and provide care for the Church, then those other roles need to be delegated elsewhere. The deacon needs to be freed to serve as a deacon. Historically, deacons have assisted the pastor in his/her efforts to minister to the Church in three specific ways: (a)- providing care to families; (b)- proclaiming the Word; (c)- providing leadership in the Church.

A- Providing Care for Families

One of the responsibilities of the deacon is to provide care and counsel to the families in the church. Many churches do this by dividing the number of families/people in the church, among the deacons, and assigning each deacon to a group of people. While this role may sound overwhelming to some, it need not be. The deacon is not expected to have a degree in counselling or theology; the concept is that each family/person has someone other than just the pastor there to help them.

1- Care as Jesus cared- (*Read John 13:34-35*) The most effective way to learn to love your people is to start praying for them and getting to know them as individuals.

Taking their cares before the throne of grace is a sure way of learning to care for and love them.

2- Minister in times of crisis- An important part of deacon ministry is being available to help the pastor in crisis counselling. This prospect, again, seems to make many deacons feel hesitant, but it need not do so. Many worry about "What will I say?" when the better question is really "How can I listen?" At most times, those suffering or grieving just want someone to listen to fond memories, unfocused anger, and to cry with them; they usually don't want someone who has all of the answers.

B- Proclaiming and Sharing the Gospel

Another important aspect of deacon ministry is that of sharing the gospel and teaching the Word. No, this doesn't mean that all deacons have to preach from the pulpit and teach a Sunday School class! But it does mean that in some capacity, they need to be willing to take advantage of opportunities to share the Word- either in speech or action- and to teach by their example, the truths of the Word of God.

1- Proclaim as Jesus did- (*read 1 Corinthians 9:22*) When Jesus taught and ministered, he did it equally with all people. He treated everyone with equal love and respect. He was willing to cross the traditional barriers of religion and leave the "comfort zones" in order to reach those who were usually ignored. That is how deacons are to live their lives as well.

2- Sharing with unbelievers- (*Matthew 10:32-33*) Deacons are called- just as all believers are called- to share their faith with those around them. By living lives that reflect the truths of God's Word, and by taking advantage of opportunities to share the

gospel, the deacon is fulfilling their part of the Great Commission. Being sensitive to the Holy Spirit is an essential, and living a consistent life of love and humility, tempered with boldness, will make the deacon an effective witness.

3- Teaching the Way to believers- (1 Thess. 4:18; 5:11)- Part of the deacon's involvement in proclamation is the instruction of God's people in the Word, both by the way they lead their lives and by the words they speak. Deacons may at times be called upon by members of the Church for counsel and advice, and this counsel needs to be based firmly on the Word of God. There are times when the problem is beyond the deacon's ability to deal with, and it needs to be referred to the pastor or another leader- that's okay. But at many times, the deacon has the joyful privilege of encouraging a fellow believer in their faith. This is the positive aspect of teaching. The negative aspect of teaching involves discipline. When a member of the Church is living in visible sin and is causing the ministry and witness of Christ to suffer in the Church or in the community, the pastor with the support and help of the deacons has the scriptural mandate to address the problem with the individual (**see Matthew 18:15-18**). While this is not always a pleasant experience, it is a necessary task for the sake of the rest of the body and for the integrity of Christ's Church. The purpose of church discipline is always to provide the individual with opportunity to repent and be restored to right fellowship.

C- The Deacon as a Leader in the Church

Every deacon is aware of the fact that their lives are under the scrutiny of people both inside and outside of the Church. As long as they remember that they are first and

foremost responsible to God, this fact should not trouble them too much. It should, however, remind the deacon that they are a role-model in the Church. Along with the pastor, the deacons are responsible to help provide vision and leadership in the work and direction of the Church. They should feel free to take initiative and try to motivate others with both their words and deeds.

1- Example of Jesus

a- Jesus led by example (read *John 13:12-16*). Effective leaders have realized that they can never motivate people to do something that they are not willing to do themselves.

b- Jesus led with authority. He did not lord it over his followers, and commanded them to do the same (*Matthew 20:25-26*); but he also did not back down when the will of God was being opposed. He spoke and acted with the authority of God, and leaders in the Church need to do this also, as they submit to the will of Christ.

c- Jesus shared leadership (read *Matthew 10:5-8*).

d- Jesus led with humility as a servant (read *Matthew 10:25-28*) *Philippians 2:5-11* describes the ministry of Christ, and should describe the ministry of the deacon as well.

e- Jesus led prayerfully (read *Matthew 14:22-23; Luke 6:12; Luke 9:27-28*).

2- Example of Early Church

a- Leaders led by example (read *1 Cor. 11:1; Philippians 3:17; 2 Thess. 3:7; Titus 2:6-7*)

b- Leaders led with authority. As we read of Jesus earlier, He did not lord his

authority over his followers, and commanded them to do the same (***Matthew 20:25-26***). (***Read 2 Cor. 10:7-11; Titus 2:15; Hebrews 13:17***). Leaders need to speak and act with the authority of God as they submit to the will of Christ.

c- Leaders shared leadership. Deacons need to encourage others in the ministries they are involved in. If a deacon notices a gift in someone that is not being exercised, they should encourage that individual to use their gift. Deacons may also enlist the help of others (selectively) to carry out some responsibilities, and help teach them how to serve in the Church.

d- Leaders led with humility as servants of Christ. (***Read Acts 6:1-7; Philippians 2:3-4; Colossians 3:12; James 3:13***)

e- Leaders led prayerfully (***read Acts 1:24; 4:24-31; 13:1-3; 1 Timothy 2:8***)

3- Connecting With Contemporary Models

There are several models of church leadership being espoused today in the West. All of them have some level of validity, but all can be unhealthy if taken to extremes or consistently used without the balance of the other aspects of leadership. For example, what are the pros and cons of the following models:

a- teacher (example and informational)

b- counsellor

c- C.E.O.

d- shepherd

e- servant

SESSION TWO: SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Question- When you hear the term “spiritual disciplines” what thoughts come to your mind?

I- Introduction to the Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual disciplines and spirituality in general have become an increasingly popular topic of interest in our culture, while religion had appeared to be drifting to the wayside. People are genuinely hungry for a spiritual “experience” and many of the spiritual disciplines provide such an experience for them. Spiritual disciplines are practised in most of the major religions and cults groups in the world, so they are not limited to the Christian faith; however, this does not mean that there is no place for them in Christianity, either.

The classical Disciplines of the spiritual life are a call to move beyond surface living into the depths. They invite us to explore the inner caverns of the spiritual realm. They urge us to be the answer to a hollow world.

*The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for **deep** people.*

A- Disciplines are not:

- 1- just for “super-spiritual” giants
- 2- dull and disheartening, or hard (in that they require a lot of study beforehand)
- 3- primarily external. The inner attitude of the heart is far more crucial than the mechanics
- 4- legalistic

B- Disciplines are...

The Spiritual Disciplines are an open door, providing access for God by His Holy Spirit to enter in and shape us. They are God's way of getting us into the ground like seeds; they put us where He can work within and transform us. By themselves, the spiritual disciplines can do nothing- they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God's means of grace.

Our world is hungry for genuinely changed people. Leo Tolstoy said, *"Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing himself."* Let us be among those who believe that the inner transformation of our lives is a goal worthy of our best effort.

II- The Traditional Spiritual Disciplines

A- Inward Disciplines

1- Fasting (Matt. 6:16-18)

- *Defined:* Abstaining from food and/or liquid for a specific period of time for a spiritual purpose

- *Purpose:* Fasting shows us how strong the call of our flesh really is. Fasting reminds us that we need God even more than food (Matt. 4:4). When we fast, we ask God to feed our souls with Him.

- *Freedom from:* Preoccupation with physical desires.

Question- Why do we not talk much about fasting?

2- Meditation (or Contemplative prayer) (Joshua 1:8)

- *Defined:* Withdrawing to a place of quiet and solitude to reflect upon a portion of scripture, an event of the day, or one's surroundings with the intent to focus and listen to hear God's voice.

- *Purpose:* To allow God to create that inner space within us where He can commune and fellowship with us; where we can be aware of His presence. God often gives guidance, confirmation, etc. as we meditate upon him.

- *Freedom from:* emptiness, confusion, self-reliance

Question- What are some of the negative connotations associated with meditation?

3- Prayer

- *Defined:* It is communication and communion with God.

- *Purpose:* To pray is to change.

- *Freedom from:* isolation, self-direction (the list is endless!)

Question- How many different ways can we pray?

4- Study (Matt. 4:4; 2 Timothy 2:15)

- *Defined:* The careful and prayerful reading of scripture, devotional material, and other writings for the purpose of feeding one's own soul and growth as a disciple. It also includes studying and examining the creation around us, our situations, etc. It involved four steps: repetition, concentration, comprehension, and reflection.

- *Purpose:* To shape our minds, which shape our thoughts and habits.

- *Freedom from:* ignorance, bad habits, influence of sinful culture

Question- Why do many people not pursue study & reflection?

5- Journal-keeping (2 Corinthians 10:11)

- *Defined:* The practice of pausing daily or a few times a week to jot down God's movements and our thoughts as a way of quieting and un-cluttering our overactive routines.

- *Purpose:* Allows us to more objectively see our lives as they are; show us the hand of God moving.

- *Freedom from:* ignorance, lack of focus

Question- What other benefits can you think of for this discipline?

B- Outward Disciplines

1- Simplicity (Matt. 6:19-21)

- *Defined:* Simplicity is freedom. The conscious effort to remove the clutter and bondage brought about by having too many "things" in our lives (possessions, commitments, etc). The commitment to buying and using based on genuine need- not want or desire. The commitment to eliminating "busyness" and to not be controlled by anything other than God.

- *Purpose:* Open our lives to the true blessings of God and to be able to respond to the call of God.

- *Freedom from:* Bondage or addiction to material things, limitations of debt

Question- How else are we "free" when we practice simplicity?

2- Solitude & Silence (Psalm 46:10a; Mark 1:35)

- *Defined:* Regularly making time to be still and quiet before God in prayer; simply being with Him in a quiet place and listening to the prompting of His Spirit, as opposed

to asking or telling Him anything. Regularly setting aside time to be alone, in a place free from all distractions, to be still before God. It also includes speaking less and listening more (to God and to others).

- *Purpose:* It allows us to feel comfortable with being alone in the presence of God. It allows us to draw our life from God, rather than busyness and activity.

- *Freedom from:* Loneliness, busyness, lack of self-worth

Question- Why is this a difficult discipline to pursue?

3- Submission (Mark 8:34 ; Philippians 2:3-8)

- *Defined:* The freedom to give way to others. It is **not** self-hatred or self-contempt.

- *Purpose:* To acknowledge our pride & selfishness, and to serve others and Christ without reserve.

- *Freedom from:* The need to always get our way, and now we are free to value other people

Question- How has this discipline been misused?

4- Service (John 13:14-15)

- *Defined:* Caring for the needs of those around us without seeking reward, honor, or recognition. Often these are the menial or “lowly” tasks that others do not want to do.

- *Purpose:* To follow the example and command of Christ; to help those in need and to contribute to our society.

- *Freedom from:* pride, self-centered living, always seeking the approval of others

Question- How can we claim to be involved in service, yet not be practicing the discipline?

5- Hospitality (1 Peter 4:9)

- *Defined:* Providing a meal, shelter, or companionship to those we might not “normally” be around. Providing a place of rest for those who are weary or who have no where else to turn.

- *Purpose:* To provide a practical and much-needed service to those in need, be it physical, emotional, or spiritual.

- *Freedom from:* selfishness, greed, idolatry

C- Corporate Disciplines

1- Confession (James 5:16; John 20:23)

- *Defined:* Sharing with a trusted mentor/guide/friend our innermost secrets and struggles, allowing that person to pray with us for strength to resist temptation in these areas.

- *Purpose:* In mutual acts of confession, we release the power that heals.

- *Freedom from:* an unforgiving spirit, pride and self-deceit

Question- How (why) has our Baptist (Protestant) tradition neglected this discipline?

2- Worship (John 4:23; Hebrews 13:15)

- *Defined:* Our response to the gifts of love from God; the offering of praise from a heart that has been touched by God.

- *Purpose:* To acknowledge God as God, and our place in relationship to Him; to affirm the need for a response of obedience to God.

- *Freedom from:* Idolatry

Question- How can worship be extended beyond the Sunday church service?

3- Spiritual guidance (Pr. 12:15; 13:20)

- *Defined:* Meeting regularly with a trusted mentor/guide (or small group) who seek to help us discern how God may be speaking to or directing us on our spiritual journey.

- *Purpose:* To give a clearer picture as to how God may be leading and directing

- *Freedom from:* subjectivity, ignorance, self-reliance

Question- What are the primary hindrances to this discipline?

III- The Corporate Nature of All Disciplines

*“Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ
for the sake of others.”*

- Robert Mulholland Jr.

That there is a corporate element to all of the spiritual disciplines is undeniable for one very good reason- biblical Christianity is corporate spirituality. We are part of a Body (Rom. 12:4-5). Some of the disciplines actually require the participation of others in order to exercise them; others are corporate in that the long-term benefit of practising them benefits those around us. In much the same way that spiritual gifts are given to us by God for the sake of others in the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-13), spiritual disciplines enable us to grow to be more effective and useful in the kingdom of God. There is no aspect of running away from the world, or ignoring it so we can suppose our faith to be a “private affair.” We must always come back to the world, hopefully better equipped to minister to it.

A- The Positive Aspects of Corporateness

The following truths are foundational to understanding the corporate nature of the disciplines.

- 1- Provide accountability and safeguards
- 2- Offer a setting in which to practice the disciplines
- 3- Offer support when we do not or cannot participate
- 4- Offer nurture as God uses the disciplines to cause us to grow

B- The Challenges of Corporate Reality

The corporate nature of the disciplines also points out the costs of exercising them:

- 1- investment of time
- 2- openness and accountability
- 3- openness to other ideas/opinions
- 4- relinquishing control and surrendering to mystery

SESSION THREE: SEEKING GOD'S GUIDANCE

I- Does God Speak?

This may sound an odd question, but it is critically important for us to honestly ask ourselves together:

Question- Do we really believe that God will speak to us today?

Question- Why is the answer to this important? It affects our understanding of God, what it means to have a relationship with Him, God's involvement in His creation, the way we approach life and ministry, etc.

Revelation 3:20- Jesus is knocking

Matthew 7:7-8- ask, knock, seek...

James 1:5-7- when asking for wisdom, we must believe God will give it

II- God's Reasons for Speaking

A- General Truths

1- Love- He loves us as much as He loved those in the Old & New Testaments (*John 17:20-23; Hebrews 8:10-11*)

2- Guidance- We need His definite and deliberate direction for our lives. (*Ephesians 5:15-17*)

3- Assurance- We need His comfort and assurance today as they did (*2 Corinthians 1:3-4*)

4- Relationship- The primary purpose in God revealing Himself is not to increase knowledge of facts but to establish or strengthen relationship with Him. Revelation is

personal. A personal God presents Himself to persons. What God reveals is primarily Himself.

B- Specific Goals: Revelation & Truth

- 1- That we would comprehend the truth (*1 Cor 2:12*)
 - a- About Him
 - b- About ourselves
 - c- About other people
- 2- That we would be conformed to the truth (*2 Timothy 3:14-15*)
- 3- That we may communicate His truth (*Acts 1:8; 2 Timothy 2:2*)

III- Why We Need to Listen

Question- Why is it important to hear God's voice?

- 1- **Awareness of sin** (*Psalm 139:23-24; letters to the 7 churches in Revelation*)
- 2- **It is God's work we are to do- not ours** (*John 6:38*)
- 3- **If we follow our ways, we:**
 - a- die (*Proverbs 14:12*)
 - b- are not guaranteed God's blessing or protection (*Psalm 81:8-14*)
 - c- waste our time and His resources (*Psalm 127:1*)
 - d- respond according to the flesh (*Garden of Eden*)
 - e- express pride and independence from God (*same as above*)
- 4- **To avoid discipline** (*Amos 8:11f*)
- 5- **The presence of deceptive spirits** (*1 John 4:1*)

6- He has plans to reveal- (*Jeremiah 29:11; Ephesians 2:10*)

These reasons apply whether we are talking about individuals, church leaders, or congregations.

IV- How Does God Speak?

A- Old & New Testaments

1- Historical events (retelling of Abraham's story to the Jews)

2- Divine speech (example of the prophets "The word of the Lord came to me saying...")

3- dreams (book of *Daniel*)

4- Scripture (*2 Timothy 3:16-17*)

5- circumstances

6- angels

7- Holy Spirit (*Acts 16:6-7*)

B- Today

1- Scripture (*Joshua 1:7-8; Hebrews 1:2*)

2- Holy Spirit (*John 14:25-26*)

3- Other people (*Acts 21:10-11*)

4- Circumstances

a- restless spirit (*Esther 6:1*)

b- a word from others (*2 Samuel 12:1f*)

c- blessings (*Romans 2:4*)

- d- unanswered prayer (*1 Peter 3:7*)
- e- unusual circumstances (*Exodus 3:1-4*)
- f- Failure (*Joshua 7:5f*)
- g- tragedy (*Numbers 21:4-7*)
- h- sickness (*2 Chronicles 32:22-25*)

V- How Can We Listen?

A- What Affects Our Ability to Listen

1- Our relationship with Him (John 10:27)

2- Our perception of Him

- a- loving or demanding Father
- b- intimate or distant friend
- c- patient or tolerant teacher
- d- gentle or angry guide
- e- understanding or insensitive counsellor
- f- generous or reluctant provider
- g- faithful or inconsistent sustainer

3- Our attitude toward Him

- a- submissive
- b- trusting
- c- thankful

B- Practical Helps

- 1- **expectantly** (*Jeremiah 33:3; Elijah at Shechem*)
- 2- **quietly** (*Psalms 40:6; 62:5*)
- 3- **patiently** (*Psalms 37:7*)
- 4- **actively** (*Colossians 3:16*)
- 5- **confidently** (*Matthew 7:11*)
- 6- **dependently** (*1 Corinthians 2:7-11*)
- 7- **openly** (*James 1:22*)
- 8- **attentively & carefully** (*Exodus 15:26*)
- 9- **submissively** (*James 4:10*)
- 10- **gratefully** (*Philippians 4:6-7*)

C- When Faced With Decisions

- 1- **review the past** (*2 Samuel 7:18*)
- 2- **reflect upon God & His promises** (*2 Samuel 7:19-21; 28*)
- 3- **ask God** (*James 4:2b*)

D- Examples From Acts

- 1- **Election of Matthias** (*Acts 1:15-26*)
- 2- **Decision to continue preaching** (*Acts 4:23-31*)
- 3- **Choosing of the 7** (*Acts 6:1-6*)
- 4- **Accepting Paul as a disciple** (*Acts 9:26-30*)
- 5- **Sending Paul & Barnabas** (*Acts 13:1-3*)

6- Foundations for church unity

- a- The Conversion: The first decision (*Acts 10:1-48*)
- b- The decision defended in Jerusalem (*Acts 11:1-18*)
- c- The Jerusalem Council (*Acts 14:26- 15:35*)

** To close this session, ask deacons to review section on spiritual disciplines, and brainstorm how some of them may be useful for us individually and as a leadership team. Record these suggestions, and commit to implementing them.*

APPENDIX B

THE LEADERSHIP COVENANT

LEADERSHIP COVENANT

As a Deacon and member of Whitepine Baptist Church, I join with my fellow deacons and Pastor in committing to observe the following ministry guidelines as we serve the Lord together:

- 1- To honor God by loving my family and being a godly role model and support to them;
- 2- To honor God in my church, work, and community relationships;
- 3- To spend time alone with God on a regular basis to pray and be formed by Him;
- 4- To openly and honestly spend time in our meetings encouraging, sharing with, & praying for each other;
- 5- To acknowledge the need for and seek prayer support from my church family;
- 6- To participate in a reading program;
- 7- To fast & pray one day a month, in the week prior to and in preparation for our Deacon meeting;
- 8- To participate in an Annual Retreat;
- 9- To allow at least one week to pray, discuss, and seek the will of the Lord as a group prior to all major leadership decisions.

Date: _____ Signature: _____

APPENDIX C

DEACON READING LIST

Deacon Reading List

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APPENDIX D

THE DEACON INTERVIEW

DEACON INTERVIEW

* (Concerning the last question in each section, the phrase '*as a result of participating in this ministry project*' will be clearly defined as having participated in the retreat weekend, the formation of a leadership covenant, and the practice of seeking to follow the guidelines of that covenant up to the time of the interview, three years later).

SECTION 1- CHURCH LEADERSHIP

- 1- What do you believe are the primary responsibilities/activities of a spiritual leader?
- 2- What personal qualities do you believe are important for a spiritual leader in a local church?
- 3- What qualities do you believe are needed for a successful leadership team in a local church?
- 4- Has your perception/understanding of leadership in the local church changed as a result of participating in this ministry project? If so, how?

SECTION 2- SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

- 1- What do you believe to be the primary purpose(s) of spiritual disciplines?
- 2- How do you nurture your relationship with God?
- 3- Would there be any value in practicing any of these disciplines with a leadership team? If yes, why, and how might they be incorporated into the leadership team's ministry?
- 4- After a weekend retreat a few years ago, you participated in the formation of a leadership covenant. Has that covenant affected the groups' ministry since that time?
- 5- Has it affected your ministry as a deacon? As a husband/father? Explain.

6- Has your perception/understanding of spiritual disciplines changed as a result of participating in this ministry project? If so, how?

SECTION 3- SEEKING GOD'S GUIDANCE

1- If you believe God does speak today, do you believe it is important to listen? Why?

2- If you believe God does speak today, how should leaders try to listen?

3- What steps do you believe are important for a leadership team to follow as they are faced with making a decision? Is God active in any of these steps? How?

4- Has your perception/understanding of decision-making in a local church changed as a result of participating in this ministry project? If so, how?

SECTION 4- OVERALL SUMMARY

As a result of the leadership retreat and seeking to observe the leadership covenant over the past three years:

1- Has the experience been

- positive/helpful

- negative/confusing

2- What has been the most significant change/ learning you experienced as a result of participating in this project?

3- How can the ministry of the leadership team be strengthened even more based on what you have learned from your participation in this ministry project?

4- In retrospect, what changes would you suggest to make the project more effective or meaningful?

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