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JESUS AND THE SPIRIT



A Christian is a person who has deliberately and eagerly decided to live by the Word of God. Holy Scripture makes the extraordinary assumption that God the Creator has chosen to speak to us. In the Old Testament era this speaking was through the prophets. At that time, if one was to listen to God, one had to attend to the prophets; they were the mouthpieces of God. With the advent of the New Covenant, however, there came an astonishing transition, described cogently in the opening words of the letter to the Hebrews: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb 1:1-2).

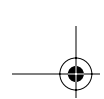
The life of God is found in knowing the voice of the Son—the voice of Jesus. God has spoken to us through Jesus.

THE WORDS OF JESUS

Jesus is the incarnate second person of the Trinity, but the Scriptures remind us that he is also a Teacher who speaks on behalf of God, and his words are the words of life. As Jesus said to his disciples, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn 6:63). And so Jesus himself announced that if we attend to the voice of the Son of God, we will live (Jn 5:25). For what Jesus speaks, he speaks on behalf of the Father (Jn 12:50).

The words of Jesus are the bread by which we live (Jn 6), the living water for which we thirst (Jn 7:37-38) and the light of the world (Jn 8:12). He is water, bread and light to those who listen to his voice. Jesus is the good shepherd, and so of course his sheep hear his voice (Jn 10:4).





This voice is powerful. Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out of the tomb and back from the dead (Jn 11:43). This same voice tenderly called Mary Magdalene by name in the garden following the resurrection (Jn 20:16). And on some level this is what we all long for—to hear Jesus call *our* names. We yearn to hear the redemptive voice that, in the words of the hymn writer, “calms our fears and bids our sorrow cease.” But more, we long to hear the voice of Jesus in the midst of the competing demands and expectations that we all face in the world and in the church. This is the voice that will give clarity, meaning and direction to our lives, enabling us to know who we are and who we are called to be. We somehow know that the voice of Jesus will enable us to live with courage and grace in a broken world.

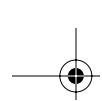
In our early adult years we yearn to know Jesus’ voice because we are making critical life choices. In midlife the issues are no less demanding as we seek to know that we are not alone, that Jesus is there for us. In our senior years the longing to know the voice of Jesus is, if anything, even more pronounced, for then we need to hear the voice of comfort, the voice of courage, the voice assuring us that indeed we know God and God knows us. Thus one of the deepest desires we have as Christians is to know the voice of Jesus.

As often as not, this longing arises when we face an important decision and yearn for God to speak to us and give us wisdom, direction and assurance in the midst of perplexing circumstances. The choices we make affect our lives and the lives of those we love; we long for the guidance of God. Further, in times of suffering and disappointment, we ardently seek to hear Jesus that we may know grace, comfort and hope in the midst of our pain.

This longing seems accentuated for those who live in busy and noisy cities. The city confronts us with a bewildering and confusing array of choices. We will live with sanity only if we are able to nurture the capacity to discern—to know the voice of Jesus in the midst of the choices we must make and in the midst of the myriad of competing voices we hear.

To discern is to make a distinction between the voice of Jesus and those competing voices that invariably speak in our hearts and minds. Sometimes





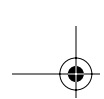
these voices are nothing more than our own inner emotional turmoil; sometimes the voices we hear are the spoken and unspoken expectations of others; and there is no doubt that sometimes we come face to face with the subtleties of the evil one.

In the last book of the Bible, the Revelation of St. John, the apostle wrote of a series of visions that included seven messages for the seven churches of Asia (Rev 2—3). The Christian community over the centuries has always been taken by one in particular, the remarkable words spoken to the church in Laodicea. It is a sobering assessment of this church. The Lord said they were neither cold nor hot, and they were seemingly content in their lukewarmness. The angel of the Lord called them to repentance with words that echo deeply in our hearts.

I can vividly remember one of my experiences of these words. I was attending a concert put on by the Vancouver Chamber Choir and the Pacific Baroque Orchestra on December 3, 1999. The concert included the oratorio by Johann Sebastian Bach called *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* (“Now Come, Savior of the Nations”), which contains a wonderful recitative that is sung by the baritone. Derrick Christian was the baritone that evening, and I sat there and heard him sing the words to the Laodicean church, as found in Revelation 3:20: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” As he sang, I realized that I longed for nothing so deeply as that I would hear and know the voice of Jesus. These words called to the deepest part of my being.

I am not alone in this; the church over the centuries has found great comfort in Christ’s promise. But there is an irony in this because these are words of warning and judgment on the church in Laodicea. Christians of all generations and cultures see their own failure reflected here. We are often deeply conscious of how we have failed (and are still failing) to live in a manner consistent with our confession and with the call of Jesus. Thus the words of judgment to the Laodicean church are for us words of mercy and reassurance; the Lord is inviting this pathetic congregation (and us!) to





hear his voice with the promise that if we listen, he will enter and we will be with him and he will be with us.

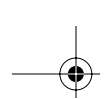
But what is this voice? If Jesus is the good shepherd and his sheep hear his voice, how do we hear it? How is it recognized and known?

THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

For one thing, the voice of Jesus is found in the words of the apostles, as inscripturated in the New Testament. Indeed the whole of holy Scripture is the word of Christ (Col 3:16). Furthermore, many Christians would affirm the role of the church and of those within the church who are called to speak for Christ in the life and witness of the Christian community. But Christians of all traditions are appreciating more and more that the voice of Jesus is also present to the Christian community through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. As I hope to show, this inner witness is always grounded in the written witness of the Spirit—holy Scripture—and it is recognized by those who live in mutual submission within the community of faith. With these two anchors in place, Christians can know and live by the remarkable reality that God speaks to us through his Son, Jesus Christ, and that Jesus is present to us by his Spirit. We hear the voice of Jesus as we attend to the inner witness of the Spirit.

Earlier I referred to the words quoted in Revelation 3:20: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in.” As mentioned, these words were spoken to the Laodicean church, one of seven “messages” that were given to seven different churches. It is noteworthy that each of these seven messages concludes with a standard phrase with little variation: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev 3:22). The link with the voice of Jesus is very apparent—we attend to the voice of Jesus by listening to what the Spirit is saying. We find this same link in the letter to the Romans, where we are reminded that we are children of God when we are led by the Spirit (Rom 8:14) and that the kingdom of God is “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17).





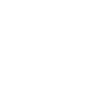
The connection between hearing the voice of Jesus and listening to the Spirit should come as no surprise to those familiar with the Gospel of John. An underlying thread of this Gospel is that the disciples learned to live by the voice of Jesus. Then in chapter 14 Jesus announced that he would be returning to the Father and that this meant he would be physically absent from them and from the world. They would no longer be able to see and touch him or hear his audible voice—the voice that had come to mean so much to them. Yet he also urged them not to be anxious about this. He would not leave them orphaned (Jn 14:18); rather, he would send them “another.” This other was an Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, who would testify on behalf of Jesus (Jn 15:26).

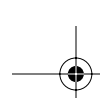
John 14 opens with wonderful words of reassurance from Jesus: “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” The chapter concludes with these same words (Jn 14:27), spoken immediately after Jesus had assured the disciples that the Holy Spirit would come. The entire ministry of Jesus was one that was empowered by and guided by the Spirit (Lk 4:18). And at the conclusion of his ministry, as a final gesture of love and empowerment for his disciples, he would breathe his Spirit on them (Jn 20:22). That being the case, we read that “by this we know that [Christ] abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us” (1 Jn 3:24).¹

This is the heart of the matter. John 15 is a call to live in union with Christ, as branches that are grafted into the vine and that bear fruit because we abide in Jesus. This union is known through the ministry of the Spirit. We abide in Christ when we are a people who receive his Spirit and live by his Spirit. As is highlighted earlier in the Gospel of John, Jesus is the one who speaks the words of God, “for he gives the Spirit without measure” (Jn 3:34).

It comes as no surprise, then, that the early church was a community that lived in intentional response to the Spirit, as is evident throughout the book of Acts. In Acts 13, for example, we read that “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart

¹Hans Urs von Balthasar put this well when he wrote, “The Son is the prototype of those ‘who are led by the Spirit of God’ (Rom 8:14)” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986], p. 188).





for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them' ” (Acts 13:2). And the church in Antioch obeyed because they knew that in so doing they were following Jesus, the Lord of the church.

The Spirit has come in place of the bodily presence of Jesus, and so the church follows Christ only insofar as it intentionally responds to the Spirit. Therefore, when we long to hear the voice of Jesus, what we seek is not an audible voice that we hear with our senses. Rather, we listen to Jesus and live by his “voice” when we attend to the Spirit—when we are, in the words of Romans 8:14, led by the Spirit. Jesus is known, and thus the voice of Jesus is known, through the ministry of the Spirit.

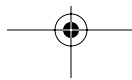
This theological principle brings to mind two subtle errors that we must avoid. First, we cannot conclude from this development (Jesus’ return to the Father) that the presence of the Spirit is a minimally acceptable alternative to Christ. Not so! Rather, through the gift of the Spirit, we have the capacity to experience the entire Trinity and to live in dynamic union with Father, Son *and* Spirit. Second, we cannot suggest that the gift of the Spirit supplements what we do not have in Christ—that, having received Christ, we now need in addition to have an encounter with the Spirit. Indeed it is by the Spirit that we know the crucified and risen Christ in personal experience.

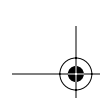


ATTENDING TO THE SPIRIT

As we have seen, it is by the Spirit that we are enabled to know the voice of Jesus. This leads to the following conclusion: The genius of the Christian life is the resolve, willingness and capacity to respond personally and intentionally to the prompting of the Spirit. To be a Christian is to walk in the Spirit, to be led by the Spirit, to respond to the Spirit, who transforms us into the image of Christ. What made the day of Pentecost so significant was that this event established our claim that every believer can know the immediate presence of the Spirit in our lives.

It is helpful to speak of this presence as *the inner witness of the Spirit*. By this we mean a direct impression on our inner consciousness, usually but not necessarily occasioned by some event or circumstance in our lives. God





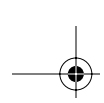
can, of course, bring a deep inner peace or awareness of his presence through no apparent catalyst. But whatever the means, the Spirit of God can and will make a direct, unmediated impression on the heart and mind of the Christian believer. It is possible to experience this witness and know with confidence that this is the inner work of the Holy Spirit—to know it is the voice of Jesus.

This witness is available to each individual Christian. But we can also affirm that God speaks to us as a community. As individuals, we develop the capacity to hear the voice of Jesus. But then as communities of faith, we can also seek and urgently need to develop our capacity to listen together to the witness of the Spirit. We need to know, corporately, as part of our patterns of governance and decision making, how to attend to the Spirit and know what the Spirit is saying to the community as a whole.

For us as individuals, the danger is that we might never develop an inner life. It is easy to live by duty, the expectations of others, the routines of our work and the inertia of culture and religious traditions. Surely what we long for, though, is an authentic interior life in which we know to the core of our beings that the Spirit of God is present to us and speaking life to us—a life that is personally and dynamically our own. With a well-developed interior life, we live our lives in response to the Spirit. We choose to live that which we are called to live—our life, not someone else's life.

The same could be said for churches and religious organizations. We do not genuinely fulfill what God is calling us to be and do as a community unless we develop the capacity to hear together the voice of Jesus in our midst—his voice of assurance and comfort, but also his voice of call and guidance. It is easy for churches or religious organizations to look elsewhere for models or trends to follow. Some church leaders are easily attracted to attending a conference or reading the most recent how-to book to learn how to help their church or organization develop in the same way as some remarkable church on the other side of the continent or the ocean. Others, in contrast, are nostalgic about a tradition, about the way things have always been done in this particular community, and speak of it as “our way.”





Yes, we need to learn from others. And surely we are right to stress the value of the heritage we have within our church communities and organizations. But both our search for new models and the love for our own way of doing things can undermine our capacity to hear the new word that Jesus has for us as a community. We urgently need to develop a corporate capacity to respond to the voice of Jesus and have the courage both to hear this voice and to respond eagerly to the particular way God is calling us at this time and in this place.

This is life: an intentional response to the voice of Jesus, a voice that comes through the presence of the Spirit. Discernment is the discipline of attending to this presence and responding to this leading.

DYNAMIC TENSIONS IN CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT

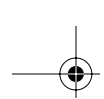
To attend to the Spirit is to discern the witness of the Spirit to our hearts and minds. This discernment is possible only if we are alert to several dynamic tensions that shape and guide the task of attending to the Spirit. The tension between heart and mind will be the focus of chapter three, but at least four other such tensions will guide our thinking and our response to the Spirit.²

1. *Divine initiative and human response.* Christian theology affirms the priority of God, and when it comes to discernment, this means that God is always the initiator. Before we can seek God, God has already sought us. Christian spirituality is *always* a spirituality of response. It is God who reaches out to us, speaks to us and enables us to hear his word. The genius of discernment is learning how to respond to this initiative. As God is always prior, discernment is the task of engaging this priority, seeking to know how God is speaking to us in this place and in this time.

However, while we can and must affirm the priority of God, we should

²In using the language of “tension,” we acknowledge what is often the case in Christian theology—that frequently truth is found in sustaining two polarities and that error arises when we affirm, intentionally or inadvertently, one side of the equation over the other. So when it comes to the theology and practice of Christian discernment, it is helpful to think in terms of the dynamic tensions we must preserve if we are to discern well.





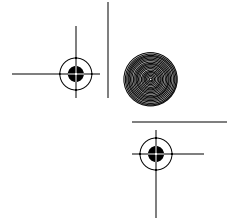
never do so in such a way as to discount the significance of what we ourselves do. The fact that God has priority and that all spirituality presumes God's initiative does not for a moment imply that we cannot accept responsibility for how we respond. Rather, the initiative of God calls forth our response. Christian discernment rests in this tension between the priority of God on the one hand and the call for genuine human action and responsibility on the other.

The response to the initiative of God requires both receptivity and skill. Receptivity is the fundamental disposition of openness to the priority of God, a desire to know the Word of God and an eagerness to respond in truth with our whole beings to this Word. The prayer that best captures this posture of receptivity is wonderfully expressed in the words of young Samuel when he said, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3:10). However, discernment is also a learned art. Good will and good intentions are not enough. Many have been eager and willing to hear God but live deluded lives, doing harm when they presume to be doing good, living by their own ambitions when they say and believe they are doing the will of God. In other words, we need to learn discernment because it is quite possible, even if we are eager and sincere, to be led by our own misguided desires, motives and inclinations.

We must learn to distinguish, for not all "spiritual" experience finds its source in God. Scripture urges us, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 Jn 4:1). We see the same dual concern in 1 Thessalonians 5 when Paul urged his readers to a radical openness ("do not quench the Spirit," 1 Thess 5:19) but also urged them to be discerning ("test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil," 1 Thess 5:21-22).

Yet how do we know that what we are experiencing is truly from God? How do we know that God is present to us and that our experience is the fruit of God's grace? How do we know it is God and not just self-delusion? We need to somehow determine that we are not merely hearing what we want to hear but instead are encountering the triune God who is revealed in holy Scripture.





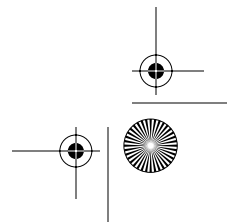
Further, the demands and expectations of others, while not necessarily evil, can easily sway us if we are generous people. Self-knowledge demands that we recognize our capacity for self-deception. A feeling of joy and contentment may be nothing more than our own enjoyment of recognition or a subtle desire to escape responsibility. In other words, a sincere heart must be complemented with a discerning mind. The capacity to discern, then, is a critical sign of spiritual maturity. The author of the letter to the Hebrews chided the readers for failing to be more mature in their faith and identified discernment as the sign of this maturity (Heb 5:12-14). It is as discerning people that we are able to grow in righteousness (Phil 1:9-11).

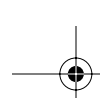
In this study on discernment, therefore, I will address the matter of our inner disposition. We can learn not only how to respond but also how to foster a genuine openness to the Spirit of Christ. I recognize, though, that no amount of study or critical analysis is a substitute for the disposition of humility—a poverty of spirit that is reflected in a childlike simplicity of heart (Mt 11:25-26; Lk 10:21). Humility is the first requirement for effective discernment. Yet Jesus taught his disciples how to lift up their hearts toward God, how to become receptive and vulnerable to the gracious initiative of God. Surely we have the capacity to learn with them.

While we foster this posture of receptivity, we must stress that discernment is also about our skillful response. We can learn much about this aspect of discernment from the wealth of our spiritual heritage, specifically how to test the movements of the heart, how to be alert to evil that masquerades as an angel of light and how we can be men and women who have both eager hearts and alert minds. Our resolution is to listen with heart and mind, and we listen well when we attend to both the priority of God's speaking and the necessity of an eager but discerning response.

2. *The context of our lives and the particularity of the voice of Jesus.* In discernment we need to attend to the tension that we experience between the specific context of our own lives and the capacity of the Spirit to speak uniquely into that context.

All religious experience is contextual and socially conditioned. All expe-





rience, including the experience of God, is located in the particularities of our lives and the factors that have shaped them. Many assume that if God is at work, this somehow overrides the specifics of our lives and makes them irrelevant. But God always speaks into the particular. If we hear the voice of Jesus, it is in part because we have learned to be attentive to the details of our lives. This includes the formative elements of our experience—the environment in which we grew up and the religious tradition that has shaped and informed our experience of God (particularly our language for God)—as well as the current aspects of our life circumstances.

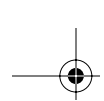
We have a greater capacity to listen to Jesus if we are frank with ourselves about who we are, where we have come from, what we have experienced and what we hope for. Only then can we develop the ability to attend to the inner witness of the Spirit. We turn from sentimentality and pretense; we affirm things as they actually are, not as we wish they were. We strive to see and accept the actual circumstances of our lives rather than live and act as though they were otherwise. This includes honesty about our history, what we have been and what we have done. But further, it includes accepting what has been wrong about our lives, whether we are to blame or not, whether or not we have been all that we had hoped to be. It also means that we turn from the propensity to indulge in a wistful memory of some better time in the past.³

Some affirm all of this and go too far. They insist that all religious experience can be explained by social and cultural analysis. This perspective essentially denies the possibility of God's gracious intervention in human affairs.

Religious experience cannot be reduced to social and cultural analysis, or to a critical understanding of our environment, however important this is. The voice of Jesus can never be explained solely by our circumstances. While God speaks into the particularities of our lives, understanding and accepting

³This was aptly put by William Barry when he wrote, "The wisdom necessary for discernment requires an acceptance of the present environment as the one and only theatre for my action" (William A. Barry, "A Theology of Discernment," *The Way Supplement: The Place of Discernment*, spring 1989, p. 138).





these particularities never constitutes the whole of discernment. God may well surprise us! And God is clearly capable of saying one thing to one person and another thing to another, both of whom may have remarkably similar circumstances. While we must affirm that God speaks to us within our context, the voice of Jesus is never determined by or reduced to those circumstances. I am impressed, for example, by the contrast we see between two men whose encounters with Jesus are described in Luke 18—19.

In Luke 18 we read that a rich young ruler came to Jesus with a question: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Lk 18:18).⁴ Jesus responded with some standard rabbinic questions and observations. But this man persisted in his search for an answer, so Jesus gave it to him: “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, . . . then come, follow me” (Lk 18:22). The man was very rich, and these words from Jesus saddened him. We read in the parallel account in Matthew’s Gospel that he went away.

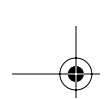
However, we should not discount him. He was probably a sincere seeker. I often imagine that though he was dispirited by Jesus’ response, he nevertheless continued to follow, but at a distance, trying to reconcile his longing for Jesus with his wealth. And if he did continue down the road with Jesus, he would have been surprised at what happened. For we read in the next chapter, Luke 19, that Jesus had another encounter with a wealthy man, but this time with a very different outcome.

Luke portrayed the rich young ruler of Luke 18 as a good man. He had acquired his wealth by honorable means. The disciples were bewildered that his wealth could be an obstacle to the kingdom of God. But the wealthy man of Luke 19, Zacchaeus, is portrayed as just the opposite—he was the chief tax collector of that region. He had aligned himself with the oppressor, and his wealth had likely come by less than honorable means.

The rich man of Luke 18 sought Jesus out and asked his question. In contrast, the rich man of Luke 19 climbed a tree so that from a distance he

⁴Luke describes him merely as a “ruler.” It is from Matthew 19:22 that we know he was young.





could see Jesus over the heads of the people in the crowd who lined the path into Jericho. And Zacchaeus must have been amazed, if not shocked, that Jesus approached him and announced that he would join Zacchaeus in his home! Jesus declared by this deed what he also announced in word, that salvation had come to the home of this tax collector. With an eager response, Zacchaeus proclaimed that he would give half of his money to the poor and pay back those whom he had defrauded.

Now imagine if the rich young ruler of Luke 18 overheard this interchange between Jesus and Zacchaeus. It seems to me that he might have approached Jesus a second time with a legitimate question: “You call me to sell everything and give it to the poor, but to this man—this tax collector—you say nothing about his money and he announces that he will give one-half of his wealth to the poor! Why this discrepancy?”

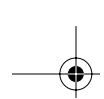
The answer could easily have been something along the following lines: “My word to you is different than my call to Zacchaeus.” In other words, though they were both wealthy men, there was not some standard way by which they were both to live.

A common temptation in discernment is that of assuming that God’s word in one set of circumstances is the same for someone else in a similar situation. We are continually tempted to compare ourselves to others or assume that we know God’s word for others. But God may well lead one person, whose circumstances resemble ours, in ways very different from his call to us.

John 21 describes an experience of St. Peter that is instructive in this regard. After the powerful encounter with Jesus when he was called to “feed my sheep,” Peter looked over at the one who is called the beloved disciple (presumably John himself) and asked Jesus, “What about him?” (Jn 21:21).

Jesus’ response was intentionally vague as he spoke of his call to the other disciple. Then he said, “What is that to you?” (Jn 21:22). Peter’s responsibility was to hear the call of Jesus on *his* life. This implies that we should avoid being curious about what God is saying to others, comparing ourselves with others or, even worse, presuming to know what God is saying to others.





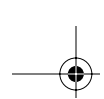
Discernment, then, calls us to consider our circumstances, certainly, but this is only the first act of discernment. The contrast between the rich young ruler and Zacchaeus is a constant reminder of the fundamental principle of discernment: we cannot discern for one another. No matter how well I understand your circumstances, I am never able to tell you what God is saying to you. No one can presume to discern for another. Even if I am your pastor and know you well, I can never say that I know what God is saying to you. I may suggest possibilities; and I may even go so far as to suggest what I suspect the Lord is saying. But in the end, only *you* can discern what God is saying to you.⁵

This is why discernment is such a vital skill in the Christian life. We can discern only for ourselves. Further, we mature in the Christian faith only when we learn to discern for ourselves and thus develop the capacity, and hopefully the courage, to listen and to act in a manner congruent with the voice of Jesus.

It is important to make an additional point here. Discernment is indeed a matter of recognizing what God is saying to us now, at this time and place. But sometimes this means that we hear that voice through the spiritual discipline of retrospection. Sometimes, perhaps often, we do not hear the voice of Jesus in the moment, but later we look back and consider the signs of the Spirit's presence in our lives. At these times we might chide ourselves and wonder why we missed the voice of Jesus earlier, when in retrospect we can clearly see that he was speaking to us. Indeed sometimes it may seem that we should have been able to recognize his voice and failed to do so because we were not receptive or attentive. On the other hand, it is often the case that we cannot discern *except* in retrospect. God wants us to hear something now that we can appreciate only as we consider how God has been present to us and has led us in the past. Our past begins to make sense through retrospec-

⁵I need to stress, of course, that the general will of God—God's word for all people of all time—is clearly laid out in the Scriptures. What I am speaking to here is the particular call, that is, how one person is called to live out the specifics of God's will in the world. We certainly are to call one another to obedience, but it is another matter when a person is wrestling with a choice that is morally neutral.





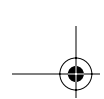
tion, and how we are being called to act in the present makes sense as we see the gracious hand of God present in our past circumstances.

Yet all of this is intended to enable us to hear God speak to us today, in the present context of our lives. The tension is that we cannot hear God except in the actual context of our lives but that the context is never the whole of what God is saying to us. God speaks into the particularities of our lives, and God is always able to surprise us in those particularities.

3. *The voice of Jesus in prayer and in the world.* There is a third critical tension in discernment that we need to take into account: the dynamic interplay between what happens in prayer and what happens in the rest of our lives. One side of this tension calls us to affirm that God is present everywhere. When it comes to discernment, one of the most common errors is to assume that God speaks only in particular kinds of contexts or only in specific modes. This error minimizes God's voice, usually with an assumption that God only speaks in religious settings. The complementary error is the assumption that if we are in a religious setting, then surely what we hear is God speaking and never the expression of evil. Neither is true; God is present in the world and evil is present within the church.

The danger is that we might miss the voice of Jesus because we are unwilling to hear him through the mode by which he is speaking. We reject what we are hearing and presume that this could not possibly be the voice of Jesus because of the source or the venue. However, a discerning person learns to be alert and attentive to the voice of Jesus in every context of life and, potentially, through unexpected channels of communication. Augustine's conversion came in response to the words of a child playing outside his window. His experience is a reminder that God may well surprise us and speak to us through those whom we might initially discount because of their youth or other factors. But discerning people know that God often chooses to confound the wisdom of the "wise" by challenging the teacher through her students, the father through the words of his teenage daughter, the grandparent through the questions raised by a grandson. A wise person knows that those with less education, or even those of another faith tradi-





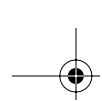
tion, are often a source of crucial insight. Is it possible for God to speak to me through a Buddhist or through my agnostic neighbor? As I ride the bus to work, can God speak to me through the person sitting next to me? Or do I always assume that if they are not Christians, or if they do not have as much theological education or experience as I have, they cannot be a means by which I hear the voice of Jesus?

Effective discernment requires that we be open to surprises, to the strange and wonderful ways in which God may want to encounter our hearts and minds, inform our conscience and call us to be his followers. However, while we must affirm that God can speak to us anywhere and through whatever means, to become discerning people it is necessary that we learn to listen in prayer. While we must avoid the error of thinking that God is only present to us in religious settings such as worship and prayer, we also need to appreciate that if we are able to recognize God's presence in the whole of life, it is because we are people of prayer.

To put it differently, while God speaks to us in the whole of our lives and potentially within just about any circumstance and through any person who comes our way, we will not recognize the voice of Jesus unless we establish the pattern of listening to the Spirit in our prayers. We learn to listen in prayer. Then, in time, the whole of our lives will be marked by our capacity to listen. Thus mature pray-ers are those who are not just attentive to Jesus in prayer; they have over time become women and men who are able to discern the inner witness of the Spirit in the midst of life and work. Whether on the bus or in a committee meeting, whether in a worship service or a sporting event, they are individuals of discernment alert to the ways in which God is present and speaking. But they learn to be discerning people by first developing the capacity to attend to the inner witness of the Spirit in the context of their prayers. Discerning people are pray-ers.

But as we are reminded in Romans 8:26, we do not know how to pray. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Our inability to pray is a recognition that we are deeply dependent on the





Spirit to guide us in our praying. Indeed it is precisely at this point that we seek to follow and respond to the Spirit. Without a conscious dependence on the Spirit in our prayers, we are always in danger of talking to ourselves rather than to God. The Spirit guides our prayers such that our praying is in obedience to this inner witness. Obedience here is not so much compliance as it is an eager and hearty response—an unqualified yes to the initiative of the Spirit. Too often our inclination in prayer is to propose an agenda for God, but true prayer is first and foremost an act of response to God’s initiative. In prayer we certainly learn to speak, but our speaking arises out of our listening.⁶

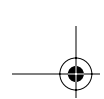
Prayer is an intentional response to the Spirit. We acknowledge that we do not know how to pray but also appreciate that the Spirit will guide us in our praying. Surely this is at least in part what the apostle Paul meant when he called his readers to “pray in the Spirit at all times” (Eph 6:18; compare Jude 20) and at another time spoke of Christians as those who are “led by the Spirit” (Gal 5:18). In prayer, as in all of life, we seek to respond to the initiative of the Spirit.

For some, then, this book will be a guide to prayer—to what it means to both listen and discern in their praying. The hope is that, in learning to listen well in prayer, we might learn to listen well wherever we are. If we are genuinely attentive to Christ in prayer, we will more likely be attentive to the witness of Christ’s Spirit in every dimension of our lives.

4. *The individual and the community.* Here is another dynamic tension in discernment. The community is both a threat and an indispensable aid to discernment. As individuals, we can and must the develop the capacity to listen to the voice of Jesus for ourselves, quite apart from the potentially weighty influence of the community. But we are never alone in our listening; we are always hearing Jesus from within community with its network of relationships.

⁶“Prayer is a conversation with God in which God’s word has the initiative and we, for the moment, can be nothing more than listeners” (Balthasar, *Prayer*, p. 15). Some might suggest that this sounds like a form of quietism that undermines the legitimate place of human agency. However, though the spiritual life is one of response, it is an *active* response—an eager, willful engagement with the initiative of the Spirit.



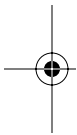


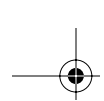
On the one hand, this means that as communities we must take the individual seriously. As I hope to show in the chapters on communal discernment (chapters eleven and twelve), the community will not be able to listen to the voice of Jesus until we appreciate that God speaks through individuals within the community. Conversely, as individuals, we face the challenge of learning what it means to listen to God for ourselves, in light of our personal experience and call. For us to mature, our faith and our experience of Christ cannot be derivative of others' faith. It must be our own, forged through our own experience. A personal faith is developed as we trust God, experience his grace and recognize that the God of creation calls us by name. We learn to hope in God—as individuals—and learn to live in radical dependence on the gracious work of God in our lives and in our world.

We cannot look to our surrounding culture or society to provide us with support. On the contrary, in a post-Christian era the intellectual, moral, artistic, judicial and educational streams of our societies will either take no account of our religious convictions or actually be adversarial to them. Fundamentalism seeks to stay the cultural tide (that is, it puts its energy into fighting the decline toward secularism) or else denies that any significant cultural change has occurred. Perhaps the better alternative would be to recover the dynamic of authentic spiritual experience.

What if we accept that we now live in a religious, moral and spiritual desert—a social and cultural landscape that is not hospitable? Then the only alternative is to draw strength from our own experience of divine grace. An inhospitable culture is part of the context for the experience of God. This is not something that is new per se. It was the contextual reality for the psalmists (see Psalm 12, for example) and for the Christians of the first and second centuries.

This does not mean that we abandon culture and society or remain passive. It means, rather, that our posture can be one in which we do not expect the culture and society to sustain us. Our point of reference is *our* experience of divine grace. The great mystics did not go the way of pure ne-





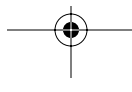
gation. They sought God in the world, believing that God is found in all things (to use a wonderful line from Ignatius Loyola). They demonstrated that the true contemplative is a contemplative in action—engaged in generous service in response to the pain of the world.

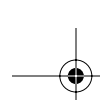
Some contend that this emphasis on personal experience is too subjective. However, our experience is always of an external, tangible reality that is encountered by the believer. Furthermore, while our experience is personal and unique, it is always mediated by and sustained by the community of faith. The community does not lose its role when there is an emphasis on a highly personal, experiential religious faith. Rather, as Louis Dupré contended, the community is that entity which enables the individual to experience the ancient reality on which faith is based. Dupré noted, “By providing the believer with sacraments, Scriptures, and a whole system of representations, the religious community enables the individual to integrate his or her private spiritual life within a living communion.”⁷

But herein lies a tension that is central to our pursuit of discernment. Though the community is an essential bastion of support in the face of a post-Christian or non-Christian social environment, we also need to acknowledge the threat to discernment that exists within the Christian community itself. Many religious leaders and Christian communities unintentionally, and sometimes intentionally, foster the idea that we hear the voice of Jesus only through the community and particularly through the leadership of that community. They are uncomfortable with the idea that the individual Christian, with a mind informed by the Scriptures, can truly know the voice of Jesus in his or her own heart and mind. They believe that it is their responsibility to tell their fellow Christians what they should hear and how they should act.

The tragedy is that the community then does not really foster spiritual maturity. It does not enable individual Christians to hear the voice of Jesus and encounter for themselves the living bread and living water. And

⁷Louis Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection: Excursions in the Phenomenology and Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 142.





so their faith becomes a derivative experience rather than a personal response to God.

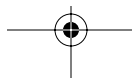
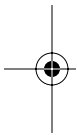
In a situation like that the group identity or mentality easily disregards the boundaries of our individual lives.⁸ The individual has no capacity to breathe, to make sense of what is happening in his or her own heart. And consistently what we find is that the community appeals to critical values of community itself, of duty and responsibility, of faithfulness (to the community) as a way to discourage individual consciousness. The community invades the inner life of the individual rather than supporting it.

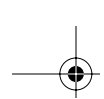
The grace we seek, in other words, is one in which we personally experience the inner witness of the Spirit; it is our own experience—not a secondhand experience or one derivative of another's experience. However, it should be immediately apparent that we cannot learn how to discern while in isolation from the community of faith. Though we must learn discernment *for* ourselves, we do not learn *by* ourselves. Thus the tension: the community is a threat to our capacity for discernment, but to discern well requires a high level of mutual dependence within Christian community and genuine accountability to that community.

DISCERNMENT AND THE SCRIPTURES

Throughout the history of the church there have been Christians who have opposed speaking of an unmediated inner witness to the hearts of ordinary women and men. Perhaps they have feared extremism. They may have rightly been alert to the human capacity for self-deception. It has also been usual for those who have had this concern to insist that they upheld Scripture or church tradition and feared that an emphasis on a personal response to the Spirit would undermine these anchors of our faith. But fear of extremism can

⁸This is what Flora Wuellner called a "group mentality" and a "tribal spirit" (Flora Wuellner, "Were Not Our Hearts Burning Within Us?" *Weavings*, November-December 1995, p. 31). She went on to speak of how this is often in the ethos or ambience of a community, or how things are "done" or "not done" in a church, school or other organization. I will address this further when I speak of the convicting ministry of the Spirit and our capacity for false guilt that arises from the expectations of others (chapter five).





cause us to “quench the Spirit” (1 Thess 5:19). A wiser response is to affirm the inner witness while also emphasizing the need for discernment.

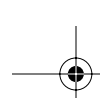
This discernment is possible only when we sustain the dynamic tensions outlined in this chapter. In turn, the tensions that undergird the discipline of discernment are kept in equilibrium by an unreserved commitment to the priority of holy Scripture. Few things are so central to the Christian perspective on discernment as the relationship between the inner witness of the Spirit and the objective, inscripturated witness of the Holy Spirit, namely, the Bible. As I hope to demonstrate through an exploration of each dimension of this inner witness, we cannot know the voice of Jesus unless we are men and women of Scripture, with our minds and hearts informed by truth. Why? Because the inner witness will never contradict the written witness of the Spirit. Further, we cannot develop our intuitive capacity to recognize the inner witness unless we are women and men who are immersed in Scripture so that the contours of our hearts and minds are ordered and enabled by the Word.

The inner witness of the Spirit is the personalization or application of the written witness to our lives. It is the ancient Word that now takes form in our lives, in this time and place, in this set of circumstances. The inner witness of the Spirit is the necessary complement to the Scriptures, without which the Bible is but an ancient book. But then it also follows that we cannot know the inner witness unless we know the written witness. Klaus Bockmühl used a wonderful image when he wrote about the relationship between the inner witness and Scripture, stressing that “Holy Scripture is the starting point and measuring rod for individual insight.” He went on to suggest that Scripture is like the base line in music that keeps the score grounded and secure.⁹

We attend to both the written and the inner witness with a pure and simple objective—that we would become increasingly conformed to the image of Jesus the Son (Rom 8:29). It is clear from the New Testament that the

⁹Klaus Bockmühl, *Listening to the God Who Speaks: Reflections on God's Guidance from Scripture and the Lives of God's People* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Helmers & Howard, 1990), p. 149.





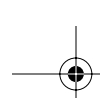
ministry of the Spirit is Christocentric: the Spirit glorifies Christ and enables us to be transformed into his image. Yet when we speak of the work of the Spirit enabling us to be like Christ, it is not just any “Jesus.” The Spirit of God will enable us to know the Christ who was sent by the Father, who took on our humanity through the incarnation, suffered on the cross and reigns now as risen Lord. Any other “Jesus” is not the Jesus of the New Testament, of Christian faith or—more to the point—of the Holy Spirit.

At this point, some comments about illuminism might be appropriate. Anyone who takes discernment and the inner witness of the Spirit seriously may be accused of being an enthusiast or a religious fanatic. Indeed, throughout the history of the church, there has always been an affirmation of the inner witness even while at the same time a segment of the church has been apprehensive about any such witness. Such a reaction occurs because there has been a persistent aberration of classic Christian teaching on this subject. Known as *illuminism*, this aberration is misguided and harmful in many ways to the church and to Christians.

Illuminism is a teaching (and practice) that takes seriously the idea of an inner light based on the assumption that the Spirit is present within each person and that God teaches us through this inner illumination. However, while affirming the inner subjective awareness, illuminists fail to give equal importance to the outer witness—holy Scripture. Often these are individuals who insist on the importance of Scripture, but they use Scripture only insofar as it endorses their own subjective awareness or conviction. Further, illuminists tend to deny the critical place of the intellect and the importance of the Christian mind. True discernment, in contrast, affirms our capacity to respond to God with both heart and mind. What is particularly perilous is that illuminists view themselves as having a privileged inner light that cannot, and need not, be challenged by the community. They consider their inner light to be self-authenticating; they think the counsel and wisdom of others is superfluous and unnecessary.

Sometimes we see this in religious teachers or leaders. They bristle when it is suggested that their vision or dream or deep conviction is not en-





dorsed by others. But true humility and (as we shall see) true discernment are a knowledge of God and of the inner witness that comes in dynamic interchange with the community of faith. Truly discerning persons are conscious of their own capacity for self-deception and thus of their vital need for the encouragement, support and wisdom of others.

We need to be able to ask each other two questions. First, what do you think Jesus is saying to you at this time and in the midst of this set of circumstances? And second, how do you know this is the voice of Jesus? In the chapters that follow, I hope to provide a grammar for our conversations—something to which we can appeal in our own personal journey of faith, but also something to which we can appeal *together*. We want to be able to talk meaningfully about the experience of the Spirit, do so in a way that enables us to be discerning and, hopefully, learn to answer both questions well.

