

# The Spirit and the Church: The Ecclesial Ontology of the Holy Spirit and Its Implications for the Theology and Practice of Communal Discernment

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AMBROSE SEMINARY

**THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH:  
THE ECCLESIAL ONTOLOGY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS  
FOR THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT**

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF AMBROSE SEMINARY  
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BY  
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FACULTY OF THEOLOGY

AMBROSE SEMINARY

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*For Ines –  
a faithful spouse, friend, and co-discerner*

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## PREFACE

This thesis marks the end of a chapter in my life that started in February 2012. Back then, I was a young pastor of a small Baptist Church in Požega, Croatia. Having just earned a bachelor's degree in theology (2009), I was convinced that I was prepared enough to lead the church which had been shattered by a major crisis and was on life support. I was soon proved wrong by the many challenges I had to deal with, as well as by, seemingly, *God himself*. It was at a breathtaking retreat centre, nestled in the tranquility of a forest near the Polish border, where my interest in the practice of spiritual discernment was sparked. In February 2011, I attended a leadership conference in Malenovice, Czech Republic, where in one of the worship sessions, rather unexpectedly, I experienced a deep sense in my inner being – which I interpreted as the voice of Jesus – a challenge to learn to listen to God's voice and live accordingly.

In the time that followed, I embarked on a personal study of spiritual discernment. As I was reading and reflecting on it, I became convinced that the church, not just its members, can grow and flourish only as it communally attends to the voice and guidance of the Holy Spirit. As my aptitude for academic study and passion for teaching was becoming more accentuated, I sensed that God may be calling me to pursue an academic ministry, which meant going back to school. It seemed to me that an academic engagement in the subject of spiritual discernment, personal and communal, might be an area of theology with which I was entrusted to tend and minister to the church. As I was pondering these thoughts and considering what graduate school could facilitate my vocational sensibilities, I happened to have been reading *The Voice of Jesus* by Gordon T. Smith, the first book I had read on the subject that convinced me that spiritual discernment can be approached academically. Not long after, I searched online for “Gordon T.

Smith” to find out where he taught, assuming that that school could be a good place for me to pursue my sense of calling. In the summer of 2016, having discerned that this school would be a good place, my wife and I moved to Calgary, Alberta, where I started my Master of Arts in Biblical and Theological Studies program, which culminated in the completion of this thesis on the subject of communal discernment.

The journey from the forest in Czech Republic to the graduation ceremony at Ambrose University would be inconceivable, even less achievable, without the presence and support of people God has brought into my life at every point of the journey. It is God himself, however, who called me and gave me courage to go back to school in a country far from home. It is by his sheer grace that numerous and seemingly insurmountable obstacles on the way to Ambrose were removed. Therefore, before anyone else, I give thanks to God for his provision and guidance.

Three individuals have helped remove a large financial obstacle pertaining to my study permit, enabling me to apply, receive the permit, and move to Canada to pursue my degree. For that I thank my dear friend Matt Levett, and my father- and mother-in-law Slavko and Edita Turinski. Thank you for your generous support. May God bless you richly.

I want to specially thank Frank and Manuela Teruel, who provided us with a home in Okotoks, Alberta, upon our arrival, as well as to their daughter Ruth Pyrke who made this arrangement. Their hospitality and generosity made our transition to Canada so much smoother. May God bless you and your families richly.

I am immensely grateful to the faculty at Ambrose Seminary. Many of them that I had the privilege to have as teachers, as well as those I had a chance to get to know at our retreats and community lunches, have made a huge impact on my life. I have never had a chance to live in a community of such a godly, wise and academically competent group of people. I am very

grateful for this precious time, which I will greatly miss. I want to give special thanks to several faculty members. First of all, I want to thank our president, Gordon T. Smith, who, despite his busy schedule, agreed to supervise the research and writing of this thesis. Beyond the benefits of his expertise in the field and astute counsel in the process of my research and writing, he was always open to answer any questions I had about the Christian life, academics, and theology in general. No person has taught me more about spiritual discernment than him. For all of that, I am very grateful to him. I also want to thank our dean, Jo-Ann Badley, whose love for God and her students made her a model of the kind of teacher I am hoping to become. Her words in times of academic stress and tension always brought inner tranquility, helping me to find an extra source of strength and focus to finish well. I also want to thank my academic advisor, Beth Stovell. She advised me well how to map the pursuit of my master's program. I am also grateful for many hours she generously gave me in conversation about the world and life of academics and encouraged me in my own sense of academic vocation like no one else. Her contagious love for God, her family, her church, and academic excellence, exemplified for me that all of these aspects of life can coexist and flourish. Finally, I want to thank Bernie Van De Walle. I am thankful for his encouragement and support, especially during my first year at Ambrose. I am especially thankful for his leadership coaching while I served as the Consular Director of the Seminary Student Leadership Team. Thank you all. You have enriched me for life. May the Lord bless you and your families richly.

I want to thank the donors of Ambrose University for generously giving to the school as well as to me personally through several scholarships I have received. Without their generous giving the pursuit of my calling and the completion of my degree would have been significantly harder to achieve. Thank you all sincerely and may the Lord bless you richly.

I am very grateful for many fellow seminarians I had the privilege to meet and study with. Their own stories of hearing from and being led by God in pursuit of their vocations have taught me much about discernment and have greatly inspired my faith. Daily conversations during lunch breaks in the Seminary Commons have not solved many world problems or theological controversies, but have shaped my theology and spirituality and have forged many friendships. Thank you all, and may the Lord bless you richly, wherever he leads you.

Being away from home was not easy; at times it was unbearable. The Foothills Community Church of Okotoks has provided a sense of home in Canada. I am especially thankful to several families and individuals who have welcomed and embraced us as their own and supported us in every imaginable way: Steve and Jessica Schaufele, Norm and Karen Molvik, Sharon Friesen, Mike and Linda Sojer, and Tyler and Shaylene Friesen. Because of their presence in the life of my family, Okotoks will always remain in our hearts as another home, wherever life takes us. Thank you all and may the Lord bless you and your families richly.

I am grateful for my family in Croatia. I am especially thankful to my parents, Tomo and Željka Hamp, who supported me with unceasing prayer and patiently endured the separation from me and my family. I am also thankful for my sisters, Ana Dvoraček, and her family, and Stephanie-Ruth Hamp, who have always reminded me of the joys of family whenever I spoke to them. Thank you and may the Lord bless you richly.

Finally, my utmost gratitude goes to my wife Ines, who has faithfully embarked on this journey with me, believed in me, and supported me along the way in every imaginable way. I can hardly imagine doing all of this without her love and support. Mila, neka te Bog obilno blagoslovi. As this chapter of my life comes to an end and I start a new one, my faith is deepened, my life immensely enriched, and my heart is overflowing with joy and gratitude.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis inquires into the subject of communal discernment. It defines communal discernment as the Spirit-enabled capacity of the church to recognize God's will in its ongoing life as well as in times of decision making. While the majority of studies on the subject focus on the method of communal discernment, and emerge from the field of Christian spirituality, this thesis addresses the subject from a theological perspective. Concretely, it offers a theological framework that informs the practice of communal discernment. The framework is developed on the premise that a theology of communal discernment, being traditionally recognized as an inherent capacity of the church and the work of the Holy Spirit, must be located at the theological intersection of pneumatology and ecclesiology, that is, pneumatological ecclesiology. The study focuses specifically on delineating theological aspects of the ecclesial ontology of the Holy Spirit and reflects on how it informs the theology and practice of communal discernment. The study shows that a theological description of the ecclesial ontology of the Holy Spirit enables us to see how the Spirit's ontic being interpenetrates with and conditions both the very ontology of the church and its capacity for communal discernment. The argument is construed by an exegetical-theological reading of key New Testament texts in Acts and Paul, and a critical ecumenical conversation with representatives of two major Christian traditions – John D. Zizioulas and Karl Rahner.

## INTRODUCTION

### a. Introduction to the Subject

*Placuit Spiritui sancto et nobis.* For centuries, the Christian church proclaimed these words in conclusions of its deliberations and determinations in the ecumenical councils. The statement, ever since it was first uttered by James the brother of Jesus in Acts 15:28a – “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” – during what is considered the first council of the church, speaks of the church’s confidence in the immediate presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Ladislav Orsy expresses this confidence well: “The community of bishops, assembled in councils, universal or particular, had to discern the meaning of God’s word. They were aware that their canons, decrees and ‘determinations’ were more than a fruit of human calculation and conjectures: they were insights into a mystery.”<sup>1</sup> Since the very beginning, the church has understood itself as a community of spiritual discernment. The aim of this thesis is to inquire into this subject, that is, to reflect theologically on the practice of communal discernment.

What exactly do we mean by communal discernment? In the English language, the word discernment carries three connotations. It implies *insight* – the ability to see something clearly; *discretion* – the capacity to distinguish between good and evil; and *judgment* – the aptness to make a good assessment.<sup>2</sup> The idea was first introduced into the biblical and theological vocabulary by Paul. His references to διακρίσεις πνευμάτων and their cognates (1 Cor. 12:10) and δοκιμάζω (1 Thess. 5:21), although elusive for conceptual specificity and variously translated, point to the idea of discernment as used in English. Paul makes two things clear in

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<sup>1</sup> Ladislav M. Orsy, *Probing the Spirit: A Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1976), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer, and the Witness of the Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 10.

these references: first, that discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and second, that its context and practice belong to the gathered community of believers. Hence, in Paul's usage, discernment is by nature a communal practice empowered by the Holy Spirit. The rest of Scripture also indicates that the people of God have practiced and were instructed about discernment since the early times. In the Old Testament, the instructions for and the practice of communal discernment are explicitly related to distinguishing between true and false prophets who spoke on behalf of God (cf. Deut. 18:15-22). It is in the book of Acts, however, that we find the most detailed description of the church's practice of communal discernment. Acts 13 and 15 stand out in particular. In Acts 13:1-3, the Antiochian church, instructed by the Holy Spirit, sends Paul and Barnabas to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. This Lukan glance at the life of the church in Antioch reveals a communal capacity to hear, i.e., to recognize promptings and leadership of the Holy Spirit. The narrative on the larger scale culminates in Acts 15, known as the Jerusalem Council, where the church, faced with a critical dilemma, articulates its decision with the recognition that it was guided by the Holy Spirit (15:28). These biblical references and allusions inform the definition of communal discernment that I will be assuming in this thesis: *It is the Spirit-enabled capacity of the church to recognize God's will in its ongoing life as well as in times of decision making.*

The language of the "will of God," however, needs some clarification. Depending on one's social context and theological background, the phrase "God's will," as insightfully pointed out by Alan Kolp, may conjure images of a controller or manipulator, and thus may be repugnant to some readers.<sup>3</sup> John Futrell also reminds us that the language "will of God" has through the history of theology often been conceived statically, especially in the predestination controversies,

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Kolp, "The Clearness Process: A Way Opens," *The Way* 47, no. 1-2 (2008): 178.

“and applied in careless ways to specific events...”<sup>4</sup> My usage of the term implies neither of the two connotations. Futrell’s substitute term “the word of God here and now” best captures what I intend to communicate with this term. I will here use the phrase “will of God” for the sake of continuity, since this language has been traditionally used in association with discernment.

The study of the subject of communal discernment is relevant for at least three reasons. First, constant and rapid change along with the relentless forces of globalization and secularization are bringing about unprecedented ideological, political, economical, and social complexities and challenges to the world we live in. This new reality inexorably shapes the very identity and outlook of the church. In such a time as this, appeals to and entrenchment in ways of the past create more challenges than they solve and, more often than not, engender divisions in the church rather than unity in clarity of direction. This reality thus makes urgent the task for the church to place theological reflection on and the practice of communal discernment at the forefront of its life.

Second, thinkers across the denominational spectrum recognize the need of engaging in communal discernment. Ruth Haley Barton, writing specifically to leaders but no less applicably to entire churches, stresses that it is staggering that many leadership groups do not have communal discernment as their clear mandate and reason for existence. This neglect, she insightfully stresses, raises a serious question: “If we are not pursuing the will of God together in fairly intentional ways, what are we *doing*? Our own will? What seems best according to our own thinking and planning? That which is merely strategic or expedient or good for the ego?”<sup>5</sup> While such a concern clearly expresses free church sensibilities, Luke T. Johnson, writing from the Roman Catholic perspective, acutely stresses that while the church’s task is not to constantly

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<sup>4</sup> John Carroll Futrell, “Ignatian Discernment,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 2, no. 2 (1970): 86 n. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth H. Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2012), 11.

reinvent itself, discernment is necessary for its life because it must choose daily “between growing in response to God’s call or conforming to the precedents [it] has mastered and routinized.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, on the academic side of things, while there is a long and rich tradition on the subject of personal discernment, the same cannot be said for communal discernment. Although the subject of communal discernment has recently enjoyed a renewed interest among thinkers across the confessional spectrum, it is still a relatively uncharted academic territory. Speaking on behalf of the scholarship on the subject, Gordon T. Smith captures it well: “In many respects, within the Christian community we are still finding our way on this matter.”<sup>7</sup>

## **b. Literature Review**

Historically, two Christian societies have placed discernment at the forefront of their corporate identity: the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and the Society of Friends (Quakers). The Jesuits are a Roman Catholic monastic order gathered around the life and writings of Ignatius of Loyola, who is the most influential source on discernment in the Christian monastic tradition. His work *The Spiritual Exercises*, which entails “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits,” while reflecting the long Christian tradition on the practice, is the first formalized and systematized approach to discovering the will of God in the Christian tradition.<sup>8</sup> While the practice of individual Ignatian

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<sup>6</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision-Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 111.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *The Voice of Jesus*, 224.

<sup>8</sup> See Louis J. Puhl, ed., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951). For a helpful explanation of the Ignatian understanding and practice of discernment see Futrell, “Ignatian Discernment.” For fine overviews of the understanding and practice of discernment in the Christian tradition see Jacques Guillet et al, *Discernment of Spirits*, trans. Innocentia Richards (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1970); Elisabeth Hense, *Early Christian Discernment of Spirits* (Zürich: Lit, 2016); Mark Allen McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York: Crossroad, 2004) and Antony D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers: Diákrisis in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007).

discernment has been central to the Jesuit spirituality since their beginnings, it is only in the early 1970s, with the impetus of the renewal spirit of Vatican II, that the Jesuits started reflecting on the practice of communal discernment. Their contribution on the subject is modeled on the early Jesuit document *Deliberatio primorum Patrum* (“The Deliberation of the First Fathers”), which describes the method of communal discernment that was developed and utilized by Ignatius of Loyola and his companions in 1539, when they discerned the call to establish the Society of Jesus as a religious order.<sup>9</sup> The work by John C. Futrell, *Communal Discernment: Reflections on the Experience*, is one of the first and the most referenced contributions to the subject by the Jesuits.<sup>10</sup> In this study, Futrell offers reflections on the dynamics of authentic communal discernment, the role of individual experiences and their synergy in the communal process, as well as the prerequisites for the process. After a brief explanation of the *Deliberation of the First Fathers*, Futrell proposes a seven-step method of communal discernment, modeled as an interplay of individual prayer and sharing of experiences of personal discernment on the matters of discussion.

Ladislav Orsy is one of the rare Jesuit thinkers who has recognized the need among the Jesuits to start reflecting theologically on communal discernment, instead of focusing on the method only. In his *Probing the Spirit: A Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment*,

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<sup>9</sup> An English translation of *Deliberatio primorum Patrum* can be found in John Carroll Futrell, *Making an Apostolic Community of Love: The Role of the Superior According to St. Ignatius of Loyola* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), 188-94. For a helpful explanation and commentary on the text see Jules J. Toner, “The Deliberation That Started the Jesuits: A Commentario on the *Deliberatio Primorum Patrum*,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 6, no. 4 (1974).

<sup>10</sup> John Carroll Futrell, “Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 4, no. 5 (1972). For two other proposals similar to Futrell’s, see Jules J. Toner, “A Method for Communal Discernment of God’s Will,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 3, no. 4 (1971) and Roswitha Cooper, *Finding God’s Will in Community: The Process of Communal Discernment* (Rome: World Christian Life Community, 1993). For informative reflective essays on communal discernment from the Ignatian tradition see *The Way Supplement* 85 (Spring 1996) issue “Discerning Together.”

Orsy aims to accomplish just that.<sup>11</sup> The study unfolds around five specific queries: (1) What are the theological foundations of communal discernment? (2) What are the legitimate expectations that the discernment process can fulfill? (3) What is it that the community cannot obtain through discernment? (4) What is the relationship between authority and community discernment? (5) What practical guidelines follow from these theological considerations? The study leads to thirty-five theses or propositions.

While reflections on communal discernment abound among the Jesuits, the same cannot be said for the Quakers. Similar to the Jesuits, the Quakers started as a society gathered around the experience and teachings of their first leader, George Fox.<sup>12</sup> Central to the Quaker spirituality has been the belief that every believer can experience revelatory leadings by means of Inner Light. The Quakers express these leadings in their meetings for worship and in their meetings for business, where they practice communal discernment. Beyond the spiritual writings of their prominent leaders, the Quakers have not systematically reflected on their understanding and practice of communal discernment. The study by Michael L. Birkel, *Silence and Witness: The Quaker Tradition*, is one of the most helpful resources to inquire into the Quaker approach to the practice.<sup>13</sup> Birkel explains that the Quakers, in their communal discernment of individual leadings during their meetings for worship, employ four tests to establish the authenticity of divine leadings: (1) moral purity, i.e., integrity of the speaker; (2) the speaker's patience in being submitted to testing; (3) the Spirit's self consistency, one of which is congruency with Scriptural

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<sup>11</sup> Orsy, *Probing the Spirit*.

<sup>12</sup> See John L. Nickalls, ed., *The Journal of George Fox* (London: Religious Society of Friends, 1975) and Jones M. Rufus, ed., *George Fox: An Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Ferris and Leach, 1903).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Lawrence Birkel, *Silence and Witness: The Quaker Tradition*, Tradition of Christian Spirituality (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004). For other brief overviews and reflections on the Quaker practice of communal discernment see Jo Farrow, "Discernment in the Quaker Tradition," *The Way Supplement* 64 (Spring 1989): 51-62; David Lonsdale, *Dance to the Music of the Spirit: The Art of Discernment* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), 143-45 and Nancey C. Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 152-54. Murphy's study includes a brief description of the early Anabaptist approach to communal discernment, pp. 145-50.

revelations; and (4) the fruit of unity of the congregation. Birkel adds that when the Quakers gather to discern in conducting their business, i.e., decision making, the process is imbued in silent worship and chaired by a clerk who leads the congregation toward unity in decision. The Quakers have also been known for their use of the “clearness committee” tool in discernment, which is, however, more a communal assistance to individuals to discern well than a practice of communal discernment *per se*.

More recently, several other Christian traditions have recognized the need and have engaged in the study of communal discernment. In the very recent article “The Challenge of Discerning Between the Genuine and Counterfeit Signs of the Spirit(s),” Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen points to an urgent task for Pentecostals, known for their emphasis on charismatic experience, to develop a theology of discernment.<sup>14</sup> While he recognizes and applauds several studies among Pentecostals on the topic, he notices a dearth of theological reflections on the subject of discernment. In this paper, Kärkkäinen first assesses the current state of the Pentecostal understanding of discernment and criteria developed, then analyzes insights gained from the ecumenical dialogues Pentecostals have been engaged in, and finally makes a preliminary step toward criteriology of discernment, with a primary focus on the presence of the Spirit in other religions, highlighting the primacy of the Christological criterion in discernment as well as openness to the criteria developed in other religions and Christian traditions. Kärkkäinen argues that the Trinitarian theological framework should lead the way in Pentecostal criteriology of discernment.

The most comprehensive study on communal discernment among the Pentecostals to date has been done by Stephen Eugene Parker, *Led by the Spirit: Toward a Practical Theology of*

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<sup>14</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “The Challenge of Discerning between the Genuine and Counterfeit ‘Signs of the Spirit’: Toward a Pentecostal Theology of the Discernment of the Spirit(s),” *JEPTA* 39, no. 2 (2019).

*Pentecostal Discernment and Decision Making*.<sup>15</sup> In this study, Parker constructs a practical theology of discernment that is true to the experiential nature of Pentecostalism yet subject to critical theological criteria. His primary focus is a critical reflection on the practices of communities of faith. Parker constructs his work based on an ethnographic study, psychological study, and a critical interaction with Paul Tillich's work on revelatory experiences. While he engages in a theological analysis, the work is not a systematic theology of the Spirit's leading.

A constructive theologizing on communal discernment has recently been coming from the missional church movement. In one of the earliest articles from the movement on the subject, "Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit," Inagrace T. Dietterich reflects on the vision of communal discernment for the missional church, arguing that discerning communities should be neither hierarchical nor egalitarian, but pneumocratic communities – who attend to the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst.<sup>16</sup>

David C. Hahn is a thinker within the movement who has offered a theology of congregational discernment.<sup>17</sup> After a helpful overview of typology of discernment in the Christian tradition, Hahn, drawing from theological and philosophical sources, develops a theology of communal discernment construed as divine action in conversation and framed in

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen Eugene Parker, *Led by the Spirit: Toward a Practical Theology of Pentecostal Discernment and Decision Making* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1996). A reflective study on communal discernment often referenced among the Pentecostals is Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., "Discerning the Spirit in the Life of the Church," in *Church in the Movement of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). For brief overviews and reflections on the subject coming from the Charismatic movement, see William C. Spohn, "Charismatic Communal Discernment and Ignatian Communities," *The Way Supplement* 20 (Fall 1973): 38-54 and Murphy, *Scientific Reasoning*, 154-57.

<sup>16</sup> Inagrace T. Dietterich, "Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). For suggestions within the movement what such a communal method might look like, see Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era* (Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2007) and Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007). For an insightful comparative study of the missional and Quaker understandings of communal discernment, see Curtis R. Love, and Nelus Niemandt, "Led by the Spirit: Missional Communities and the Quakers on Communal Vocation Discernment," *HvTSt* 70, no. 1 (2014).

<sup>17</sup> David C. Hahn, "Congregational Discerning as Divine Action in Conversation," in *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

terms of participating in the life of the triune God in the world. With this approach, he offers an understanding of communal discernment that goes beyond the traditional instrumental approach to decision making.

Finally, three other studies deserve our attention. The spiritual and systematic theologian Gordon T. Smith, in the last two chapters of *The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer, and the Witness of the Spirit*, reflects on the nature and character of communal discernment, drawing from the discernment tradition of Ignatius Loyola, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards.<sup>18</sup> Smith first offers some orienting insights with respect to communal discernment, including the New Testament examples of the practice, and follows with a critical analysis of hierarchical, egalitarian and consensual decision making; a biblically undergirded affirmation about the nature of the process of communal discernment; and some preliminary conditions for the process. Smith concludes his contribution with a proposal of a method of group deliberation that seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

An influential study coming from thinkers from the Presbyterian tradition is *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*.<sup>19</sup> In this study, Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, after providing a helpful overview of references and approaches to communal discernment, propose an elaborate ten-step method of communal discovering of the will of God. In the appendix, the authors include a very helpful comparative analysis of the understanding of authority and guidance in different Christian traditions.

Finally, a valuable contribution to the subject from the area of biblical scholarship is the study by Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, *The Voice of Jesus*.

<sup>19</sup> Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *Discernment*.

Johnson argues that communal discernment is a fine interplay of Scripture and discernment. The Scripture, while the final authority in the life of the church, does not illumine every situation the church may face. Therefore, the church needs to be engaged in discernment alongside Scripture. Johnson also argues that the process of communal reflection on religious experiences of the group and its individuals under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is constitutive of communal discernment. He undergirds his argument with fine exegetical study of practices of communal discernment in the book of Acts – especially Acts 15 – where he finds an intricate interplay of religious experience and Scripture.

The foregoing literature review reveals several things about the current state of scholarship on the subject of communal discernment. While the most substantial and fruitful contributions to the subject have come from the Jesuit tradition, their approach, apart from Orsy's cursory theological reflections, have mainly focused on methods of the practice, theoretically undergirded in monastic spirituality of discernment and the personal experience of their founder. Very much the same observation can be made about the Quakers' contribution, although the theoretical underpinnings, apart from the experience of their prominent leaders, are harder to establish. Other studies reveal the bent towards method and the phenomenology of the subject. Beyond cursory theological reflections, the works of Hahn and Johnson offer important contributions to the theology and practice of communal discernment that emerge from theological-philosophical and biblical study. In the final assessment, while we witness a recent proliferation of the studies on the subject emerging from various Christian traditions, what is nevertheless evident is a deficit of substantial biblical-theological studies that inform the practice of communal discernment.

### c. Thesis, Methodology, and Organization

In this study, my aim is to address the theological lacuna in the current state of scholarship on the subject and attempt to offer a theological framework that would inform the practice of communal discernment. Given that Scripture and tradition assume that the practice of communal discernment belongs to the nature of the church and link its capacity to do so to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, any attempt at a theology of communal discernment must be situated in the theological domains of pneumatology and ecclesiology, and more concretely, their integration. It is in the theological interaction of these two doctrines and their synthesis, which we may thus, as a single area of inquiry, refer to as pneumatological ecclesiology, that I locate my attempt at a theology of communal discernment and reflect on implications for its practice. My focus, more precisely, is to reflect on the ecclesial ontology of the Holy Spirit – i.e., the manner of the Spirit’s being as reflected in the life of the church – and its effects on the church’s capacity for and practice of communal discernment. The study will show that a theological description of the ecclesial ontology of the Holy Spirit enables us to see how the Spirit’s ontic being interpenetrates with and conditions both the very ontology of the church and its capacity for communal discernment.

In terms of my methodological approach, I am guided by two commitments. First, writing from the evangelical perspective, I am committed to the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*. This means that I give primary attention to the witness of Scripture and then secondarily – but not less important – to the Christian tradition. Second, I cannot agree more with Miroslav Volf, who asserts that today any discussion on the nature of the church is meaningful only as an ecumenical project.<sup>21</sup> The very same can be said of pneumatology. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen puts it

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<sup>21</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 19.

well: “No Church can claim a monopoly on the Spirit, and no tradition is a specifically ‘spirited’ one. Only by carefully listening to and learning from the various, often conflicting, testimonies concerning the Spirit, can we come to any kind of comprehensive understanding.”<sup>22</sup> My approach is thus also intentionally ecumenical. Following these two commitments, I construct my argument by an exegetical-theological reading of key New Testament texts and a critical interaction with John D. Zizioulas and Karl Rahner, representatives of two doctrinally robust Christian traditions – Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic.

The argument unfolds in the following way. The thesis is divided into two parts. In Part I (The Spirit and the Church in the New Testament), I engage in an exegetical-theological reading of key texts in Acts (Chapter One) and the Pauline Epistles – Ephesians and First Corinthians (Chapter Two) – where I delineate the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit and pay heed to explicit references to communal discernment, as well as pay attention to how the former affects the latter. In the conclusions of the chapters, I suggest preliminary implications of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit for the practice of communal discernment. In Part II (The Spirit and the Church in Ecclesiastical Perspectives), I critically interact with John D. Zizioulas (Chapter Three) and Karl Rahner (Chapter Four), delineating their respective contributions to pneumatological ecclesiology with specific attention to describing the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit. In the conclusions of the two chapters, I suggest preliminary implications for the practice of communal discernment. In Chapter Four, I include a brief excursus on a modern example of communal discernment (Vatican II), and reflect on its significance and implications for the practice. In my final conclusion, I synthesize conclusions from the individual chapters and offer suggestions for further research.

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<sup>22</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 9.

#### **d. Outcomes and Limitations**

Finally, I want to anticipate outcomes of this study as well as articulate my awareness of its limitations. Concerning the outcomes, although I reflect on the practice of communal discernment, I do not offer a comprehensive method. Many thinkers, not least among the Jesuits, have richly and fruitfully contributed to that aspect of communal discernment. Stemming from my theological approach, my contribution will offer preliminary insights on the nature of communal discernment, reflections on its practice, and also a sketch of a criteriology of discernment.

I am particularly aware of two limitations of this study, both of which have to do with the space I had available for this thesis. First, although my theological contribution to the subject of communal discernment is located in and hinges on pneumatological ecclesiology, I do not offer a comprehensive – my own, so to speak – articulation of pneumatological ecclesiology that integrates the church's capacity for communal discernment, nor the defining elements of what it means to be the church. Such an agenda would simply surpass the limits and time I had available for this thesis. Instead, I draw implications for the practice of communal discernment based on the theological resources of pneumatological ecclesiology as I understand them from an exegetical reading of Scripture as well as from the critical reading of John D. Zizioulas and Karl Rahner. One of the shortcomings of this approach is that my reflections hinge on, at times, mutually incompatible articulations of pneumatological ecclesiology. I am aware that such an approach to a certain degree affects the tenability of my conclusions. This thesis should thus be read as a preliminary sketch of the implications of pneumatological ecclesiology, as understood biblically and traditionally, for the theology and practice of communal discernment. I hope my

initial attempt will paint in broad brush strokes what such a comprehensive theology of discernment fully and coherently integrated into pneumatological ecclesiology might look like.

Second, although my approach intends to be ecumenical and eclectic, my discussion is limited to representatives of two traditions – the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic. I am aware that the two representatives do not exhaust the contributions of their own tradition nor, even less so, the constructive and fruitful theologizing coming from the Global South, or feminist and other marginal voices, all of whom have creatively challenged classical doctrinal formulations and greatly enriched the ecumenical dialogue. However, a fully inclusive ecumenical conversation would either oversimplify those contributions or significantly go beyond the space confines of this thesis.

And before we dig in, let me say a final word on the nature of this study. Discernment is by nature an attempt at gaining insight into the mind and ways of the Creator by those who are created. As such, it is inevitably imbued in mystery. Discernment is therefore to a degree an elusive process and its outcomes can at best be provisional. No method or approach can overcome these limitations. Although this reality may engender cynicism among some people, a study and practice of discernment is nonetheless meaningful. It can be compared to a study of ancient texts. Although many of the ancient manuscripts suffered physical damage to the point of unreadability, we do not abandon them because the entire content of the text eludes us. Indeed, we hope that the more words we identify with various tools we employ, we will come a step closer to what the author meant to communicate. And this is my hope with respect to the study of discernment: as we identify aspects of the Spirit's being and ministry in the life of the church, I hope we will take a step forward in our capacity to recognize the immediate will of God for his people.

**PART I:**  
**THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

**CHAPTER ONE:**  
**THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH IN ACTS**

It is hard to overemphasize the importance of the book of Acts for our understanding of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the church. Acts is pneumatologically rich, so much so that we can appropriately call it “Book of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars today regard Luke as a historian and theologian. In juxtaposing Luke’s and Paul’s contributions on the Spirit, François Bovon puts it well: “While Paul thought of the role of the Holy Spirit, Luke affirms and describes it.”<sup>2</sup> Acts also narrates several instances of the early church’s practices of communal discernment, in which the church demonstrates its capacity to recognize the Spirit’s activity and guidance in its midst. The narrative of the Jerusalem Council stands out in particular, showing that the Holy Spirit played the central role in the church’s decision that has radically shaped its self-understanding, theologically and practically. Luke Timothy Johnson sums up the significance of Acts for our study well: “Luke brings together the themes of the Church and the Holy Spirit in the attention he pays to the process of human decision making ... By means of carefully constructed narrative, Luke communicates a vision of the Church as a community of moral discourse and of discernment of Spirit.”<sup>3</sup> In Acts, Luke knits pneumatology, ecclesiology, and the practice of communal discernment into a unique tapestry. To theologically reflect on the

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>2</sup> François Bovon, *Luke the Theologian: Fifty-Five Years of Research (1950-2005)*, 2nd rev. ed. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 271.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, 15-16.

ecclesial ontology of the Spirit and its implications for the practice of communal discernment, we will look more closely at Luke's description of the church awaiting the Spirit (Acts 1), the church being filled with the Spirit (Acts 2), and the church's communal discernment with the Spirit (Acts 15).

## 1.1. The Church Awaiting the Spirit

### 1.1.1. The Promise of the Spirit: The *sine qua non* of the Church

In Acts 1, Luke describes the church in transition from Jesus' resurrection and ascension to its life in the power of the Spirit.<sup>4</sup> In the first lines of Acts 1, Luke recapitulates Jesus' teaching to the apostles from his previous book (Luke 24:39-53). The particular emphasis in this recapitulation is the role of the Holy Spirit in the identity and life of the church after Jesus' ascension. Namely, Jesus promises the coming of the Spirit to the gathered disciples twice in just a few verses. The church will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (1:5) who will empower it for witness (1:8).

Three things stand out in this promise of the Spirit. First, the promise serves as "overture to the book of Acts," that is, as the theological explanation of the church's identity and activity in Acts.<sup>5</sup> That implies, second, that Luke's double emphasis on the promise of the Spirit indicates the necessity of the power of the Spirit for the church's post-ascension existence.<sup>6</sup> And third is that "God is the prime agent in what happens," evident in the fact that Jesus promises the power

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<sup>4</sup> Although Luke describes the group gathered around Jesus as "the hundred and twenty believers" and not as church, "in many places, Luke refers to these people as ἐκκλησία, 'church' (e.g., 5:11; 9:31; 15:22; 20:17)." See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 39. Some scholars have tried to attach theological significance to the fact that Luke does not use the term ἐκκλησία before chapter 5, but there is no persuasive evidence to make much of this observation.

<sup>5</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 676.

of the Spirit the Father will send in the time he has chosen.<sup>7</sup> Luke thus prefaces his description of the early church with an explicit theological statement: the Holy Spirit is the *sine qua non* of what it means to be the church. That is, in Beverly R. Gaventa's words, "[t]he church draws its existence from God's intervention, rather than from its own initiative."<sup>8</sup> The promise of the Spirit and its ecclesial significance thus explain Luke's inclusion of Jesus' only post-resurrection command to the church, nestled in this introduction in 1:4: *to wait* for the coming of the Spirit.

It is worth digressing at this point for a moment to look through the Johannine lens of Jesus' promise of the Spirit. The same Spirit promised by Jesus in Luke-Acts is the Spirit that will teach and remind the church of Jesus' teaching (John 14:26). Jesus' wording about the role of the Spirit, Craig S. Keener argues, "is neither innovative nor simply repetitive ... but explanatory and applicational."<sup>9</sup> This role appears in 1 John 2:27 as "anointing," which enables discernment between truth and error.<sup>10</sup> Another nuance of John's presentation of Jesus' promise of the Spirit is that the Spirit will guide the believers "into all the truth" (16:13). Keener argues that this promise entails the Spirit's enabling believers to hear the voice of Jesus in the same way they were enabled to hear what Jesus was saying when he was with them.<sup>11</sup> Thus the promise, Keener concludes, "must include the continuing sense of his [Jesus'] presence and intimate communication through the Spirit in the community."<sup>12</sup>

Luke and John thus give us a holistic picture of the promise and importance of the Spirit: the coming of the Spirit of power and truth is about to be inscribed into the DNA code of the

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<sup>7</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 66.

<sup>8</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 978.

<sup>10</sup> Keener, *John*, 979.

<sup>11</sup> Keener, *John*, 1039.

<sup>12</sup> Keener, *John*, 1039.

church, which will shape its nature and character. For Luke, the Spirit is the *sine qua non* of the church.

### 1.1.2. Prayer in Unity: Where the Spirit and the Church Meet

In 1:12-14, Luke depicts the manner by which the church understood Jesus' commandment to wait for the Spirit. Having returned to Jerusalem, "all these [the community of disciples] were constantly devoting themselves to prayer..." (1:14).<sup>13</sup> The fact that Luke describes the church's interpretation of Jesus' instruction to wait for the promise of the Spirit as an active engagement in prayer rather than passive absence of action, is of important theological significance. Luke's emphasis on the church's prayer and togetherness serves as "a key element that frames the section about preparing for the Spirit's coming."<sup>14</sup> Throughout Acts, Luke intentionally links prayer to explicit activities of the Spirit. Groups of believers and individuals were filled with the Spirit after they had prayed in 4:31, 8:15, 9:11, 9:17, 10:30, 10:44.<sup>15</sup> G. W. H. Lampe, writing before gender inclusive language, acutely points out: "In all these instances there is a very close connection, either stated or implied, between prayer on the part of man and the communication from the side of God, in various forms and for different purposes, of the power, inspiration, or guidance of the Holy Spirit."<sup>16</sup> That Luke's linking of prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit is intentional and not only perceived in the text, is evident for two other reasons. First, Luke is the only evangelist who mentions that the Spirit descended upon Jesus when "he was praying" (Luke

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<sup>13</sup> If not otherwise noted, all biblical references are from New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>14</sup> Craig S. Keener, "Power of Pentecost: Luke's Missiology in Acts 1-2," *AJPS* 12, no. 1 (2009): 57. Although Luke does not disclose the character or content of the church's prayers, Keener has persuasively argued that the disciples do not pray just in a generic sense, but specifically for the reception of the Holy Spirit that was promised to them. See the argument in Keener, *Acts*, 750.

<sup>15</sup> Keener, "Power of Pentecost," 57.

<sup>16</sup> G. W. H. Lampe, "The Holy Spirit in the Writings of St. Luke," in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot*, ed. D. E. Nineham (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), 169.

3:21-22).<sup>17</sup> Second, while Matthew in his gospel stresses that God gives good gifts to those who ask (Matt. 7:11), Luke “focuses on God granting the greatest gift: the Holy Spirit” (Luke 11:13).<sup>18</sup>

But this emphasis on the connection of prayer and the activity of the Spirit in the church needs further nuancing. Keener acutely stresses that although Luke’s link of prayer and the work of the Spirit – particularly in the church’s anticipation of the coming of the Spirit – is unlikely to be incidental, “God is sovereign and does not *only* pour out his Spirit in connection with prayer.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, to claim that the Spirit’s presence and activity in the church *depends* on the church’s prayer would, at best, fly in the face of the biblical evidence, and, at worst, be theologically troubling on many grounds. Graham Twelftree can perhaps help us best to, on the one hand, take Luke’s emphasis on the connection of prayer and the work of the Spirit seriously, and, on the other hand, remain theologically consistent with his point in 1:4 – that the Spirit will come because of the promise of the Father. Twelftree has persuasively shown that in Acts “the Spirit comes not in direct response to prayer but according to God’s determination and timing to *devoted* or *prayerful* people.”<sup>20</sup> Luke, in Twelftree’s opinion, has intentionally omitted connecting the church’s prayer and the outpouring at Pentecost to weaken the theological

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<sup>17</sup> Keener, “Power of Pentecost,” 57.

<sup>18</sup> Craig S. Keener, “The Spirit and the Mission of the Church in Acts 1-2,” *JETS* 62, no. 1 (2019): 38. As an interesting side note, Craig Keener has written a commentary of over 4500 pages on Acts which took him a whole decade to write. In the article just quoted he shares the most valuable insight he gained from his research: “Toward the end of writing my four-volume Acts commentary, I considered what might be the most personally valuable insight I had acquired from that decade of work. The insight that I concluded was most valuable was not an insight unique to me, nor was it one that required extensive engagement with extrabiblical primary sources or secondary literature. Nevertheless, it was the insight that I found most valuable personally. On several occasions, corporate experiences with the Spirit in Acts follow times of prayer, and this is consistent with Jesus’s promise in Luke’s Gospel. I believe that this connection in Luke-Acts invites those of us who yearn for more of the work of God’s Spirit among us today to begin, more concertedly and consistently, to ask God for it” (p. 38).

<sup>19</sup> Keener, “The Spirit,” 37.

<sup>20</sup> Graham H. Twelftree, “Prayer and the Coming of the Spirit in Acts,” *The Expository Times* 117, no. 7 (2006): 272 (emphasis added). For a wider and helpful bibliography on the study of the relationship between prayer and the coming of the Spirit, see Keener, “Power of Pentecost,” 56 n. 34.

connection between prayer and the Spirit (2:1).<sup>21</sup> We can thus conclude that Luke links prayer and the work of the Spirit to emphasize not so much the efficacy of prayer, but the necessity of the church's prayerful disposition, which ontologically links the Spirit and the Church.

Acts 1, however, further characterizes the church's disposition of devoted prayer. Gaventa astutely points out that 1:14 literally reads: "these all were persisting together."<sup>22</sup> The emphasis here is on the unity of the church<sup>23</sup> as well as singleness of mind in their persistence in prayer.<sup>24</sup>

In the prolegomenon to Acts, Luke describes the church in transition, making two important theological points along the way. First, the Spirit is the *sine qua non* of the being of the church. In C. K. Barrett's words, "he [Luke] knows that the church, when it truly appears, will not be a merely human society but the vehicle of a divine agent."<sup>25</sup> Concretely, the Spirit will be the power and compass of the church for bold witness and revealer of the truth about itself, God, and the world. And second, persistent and unified disposition of communal prayer is a pivotal meeting place of the being of the church and the ecclesial being of the Holy Spirit.

### 1.1.3. The Proto-ecclesial Communal Discernment

In the remainder of the first chapter, Luke narrates in great detail another activity of the church during its waiting for the promise of the Spirit. Those gathered, under the leadership of Peter, engage in the first recorded practice of communal discernment by the fledging movement of Christ-followers (1:15-26). Given that it is an activity of discernment before the promise of the Spirit – and the fact the rest of Acts univocally portrays an active role of the Spirit in the

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<sup>21</sup> Although Twelftree argues from silence in this instance and in my opinion overstates his point, his helpful nuancing of the role of prayer in the coming of the Spirit in the church of Acts is still helpful based on his overall argument.

<sup>22</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 68.

<sup>23</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 68.

<sup>24</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 751.

<sup>25</sup> C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1 I-XIV, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 107-08.

church's identity, mission, and existence, not least in its discernment in Acts 15, along with the fact that Jesus explicitly commanded them to wait – Peter's initiative to facilitate a communal discernment process of the church raises a question: does the narrative tell us anything significant about the church's capacity for communal discernment? I will reflect on this question by forming an anatomy of the whole process and will analyze and evaluate it along the way.

Johnson identifies two decisions the church makes here: *that* Judas needs to be replaced and *who* the replacement is.<sup>26</sup> But I would add that the church makes another decision between these two: that Judas needs to be replaced *now*, before the coming of the Spirit.

Peter begins by explaining that Judas' betrayal happened according to Scripture (1:15-16). He then again appeals to Scripture where he finds a proof text in Psalm 109:8 to argue for the necessity of Judas' replacement. But Peter's reasoning raises the first question: Why was it necessary to replace Judas in the first place? Johnson argues that Judas' sin had greater consequence than that for his own life; it was "a threat to the fulfilment of Jesus' promise [restoration of Israel] and the whole plan of God."<sup>27</sup> The twelve represented "the righteous remnant of the eschatological people of God,"<sup>28</sup> the number Jesus selected himself.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, to prepare for this plan, as the church understood it, complete representation of Israel was necessary. Hence the church led by Peter decides to select the missing representative of the band of twelve.

It is worth pointing out two observations at this point. First, although it is understandable that the Twelve functions symbolically to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, Gaventa insightfully points out that "it remains unclear exactly how the apostles stand in relationship to

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<sup>26</sup> Johnson, *Discernment*, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, 38. For Luke's understanding of the significance of the Twelve in regard to the restored people of Israel, see Luke 9:17; 22:30.

<sup>28</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 775.

<sup>29</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 752.

those tribes.”<sup>30</sup> Second, important as the symbolic representation of Israel and its restoration may be, the Spirit – presumably the leading force of that restoration – was neither promised (Acts 1:4; 8) nor given (Acts 2:4; 38) only to the twelve, the number we do not hear of nor find significance of in the rest of Acts.

So, on what basis did the church discern that Judas needed to be replaced? They based it on Peter’s interpretation of Psalm 109:8, which he employed, acutely noticed by the majority of exegetes, to point “to the ‘divine necessity’ of certain things transpiring.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the church discerned that replacing Judas would be “in compliance with the direction of the Psalm text,”<sup>32</sup> and therefore in accordance to God’s own plan.

Moving on to the second decision: the timing of the decision. Johnson sees the timing of the replacement as theologically significant. He argues “that by reaching this decision now [before the coming of the Spirit], the community articulates its identity as Israel,” which is symbolized by the band of Twelve “upon which the Spirit is to fall.”<sup>33</sup> However, while the text makes clear *why* the church – or Luke for that matter – taught replacement of Judas was necessary, it still remains unclear why the replacement had to take place *before* the coming of the Spirit, especially given the fact that the Spirit was neither promised nor given *only* to the Twelve (*contra* Johnson).

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<sup>30</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 29.

<sup>32</sup> Soards, *Speeches*, 29. Barrett asserts that the proof texts for Peter’s initiative “were almost certainly thought of after the event; the assumption that led to them and to the action they were used to justify was that the number twelve was significant and must be maintained.” Barrett, *Acts*, 93. Although this comment may lead us to be skeptical, first, of the church’s whole initiative and consequently the decision, and second, of the legitimacy of Luke’s use of the tradition of the event and thus his theological agenda, the account as we have it is what we have to work with for our theological reflection on this first act of the church’s communal discernment process. Be that as it may, I agree with James Dunn, who concludes that “[t]he positive corollary is that by reconstituting the twelve, Luke reaffirms yet once more the continuity between the church about to emerge and the Israel of old.” James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Narrative Commentaries (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 17-18.

<sup>33</sup> Johnson, *Discernment*, 83.

James Dunn offers a different perspective on the possible factor that drives the church's agenda. He acutely points to the very last question the church asks Jesus in 1:6: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus' answer is telling: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority" (1:7).<sup>34</sup> In effect, Jesus rebukes their curiosity about "times and periods," and redirects their attention to what matters: the empowerment of the Spirit (1:8). Therefore, given that the text does not indicate what drives their decision about the timing of Judas' replacement, nor how they exercise discernment on that matter, "the fact that the only clear action taken in the ten day interval is to complete the band of twelve apostles," surely suggests, in Dunn's interesting conclusion, "an attitude wholly in accord with that of the question in 1:6."<sup>35</sup> Can it thus be that what drives their agenda about the timing of Judas' replacement is their preoccupation with chronology – explicitly rebuked by Jesus – and that they are "still no further on than they were in 1:6, still needing the redirection which Jesus himself indicated in 1:7-8?"<sup>36</sup> The evidence, or lack thereof, for the church's exercise of discernment in respect to this decision is thus susceptible to serious questioning.

That leads us to the last decision: who will replace Judas. Peter delineates the criteria for the candidates in 1:8, suggesting it be a person who accompanied the remaining eleven in witnessing to Jesus' life, from his baptism to his resurrection. Although at first the criteria appear to be somewhat haphazard, they most likely reflect Jesus' commissioning of the disciples for witness – the resurrection, we can assume, being the cornerstone of that witness. Keener is thus right in asserting that "choosing those who had spent the most time with Jesus was important so

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<sup>34</sup> It is worth pointing out that the disciples' question is not completely misguided. Exegetes point out that the question likely comes as a response to Jesus' teaching on the kingdom in 1:3. Also, Jesus in fact does not reject their question, but corrects it. Nevertheless, the direct correlation between Jesus' teaching on the kingdom and the disciples' question is not very clear.

<sup>35</sup> Dunn, *Acts*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Dunn, *Acts*, 17.

that they could guarantee and interpret the message about him.”<sup>37</sup> So they proposed Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias (1:23).<sup>38</sup> The church then exercises discernment in two steps: prayer and casting lots. The prayer (1:24-25) “indicates that they are depending on God to provide the right replacement for Judas.”<sup>39</sup> Marion Soards points out that the word ἐκλέγω (“to choose”), “refers to divine calling or choice ... and it is noteworthy that in 15:7-8 [the church’s last recorded communal discernment in Acts] ‘to choose’ and ‘knower of hearts’ occur in close proximity, as they do here.”<sup>40</sup> The church then completes its discernment by casting lots, which guides them in their decision that God has chosen Matthias to replace Judas.<sup>41</sup> Keener persuasively concludes that “the Lord’s ‘choosing’ Matthias (1:24) provides continuity with his ‘choosing’ other apostles in 1:2.”<sup>42</sup> The discussion so far leads us to conclude that the church’s discernment process, which involved appeal to and interpretation of Scripture, prayer, and lots, revealed the will and guidance of God.

What are then the significance and implications of this account for the theology and practice of communal discernment? Before we answer that, two observations still deserve our attention. It is noteworthy that casting of lots never again appears in the rest of Acts or the New Testament.<sup>43</sup> It is also striking that, according to Dunn’s observation, “when Luke uses very similar terms in 15:7-8 [God who knows the heart and chooses] that which attests his choice and

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<sup>37</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 769.

<sup>38</sup> Given the candidacy criteria set by Peter, it is “worth noting that James, the brother of Jesus, is not put forward [as a candidate]. Of the three most prominent and influential people in the subsequent narrative (Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and Paul), only one met the qualifications to become one of ‘the apostles’!” Dunn, *Acts*, 21.

<sup>39</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 772.

<sup>40</sup> Soards, *Speeches*, 31.

<sup>41</sup> According to Lev. 16:7-10; Num. 26:55; 1 Sam. 10:20-21, casting lots was a traditional means of discerning God’s will. The practice was also widespread among Greeks and Romans. On using lots in antiquity see Keener, *Acts*, 776-78. Scholars debate on the exact manner in which the church employed this practice at this given time. Most likely, “names were placed in a vessel and one was allowed to fall out.” See Barrett, *Acts*, 105.

<sup>42</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 772.

<sup>43</sup> Keener is right, however, in pointing out that we should not question the validity of casting of lots, given that God directly chose Zechariah by means of lot (Luke 1:9-17; 67). See Keener, *Acts*, 773.

will is the giving of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>44</sup> The narrative thus intends to contrast the church’s understanding and practice of communal discernment before and after Pentecost and, more importantly, “show the difference made by the gift of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>45</sup> We therefore move to explore that difference, first in the account of Pentecost (Acts 2) and then in the account of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

## 1.2. The Church Filled with the Spirit

In chapter 2 of Acts, we find the famous description of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit onto the church. In this part, we theologically reflect on Luke’s description of the coming of the Spirit and probe deeper into the theological significance of Pentecost for the being of the church, especially in relation to its capacity for communal discernment.

### 1.2.1. The Coming of the Spirit

Luke sets the fulfilment of the promise of the Spirit at the feast of Pentecost (2:1), also called the Feast of Weeks (cf. Exod. 23:16; 34:22). The Jewish community celebrated the feast at the end of the barley harvest, fifty days after Passover. The focus of the feast was thanksgiving for God’s provision and thus was also referred to as the day of first fruits. Scholars have debated the theological significance of the outpouring of the Spirit on this particular day. Among the cacophony of allusions and theological arguments, John Calvin is probably the closest to the

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<sup>44</sup> Dunn, *Acts*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 94; Dunn, *Acts*, 21; and Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary, Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 56 support this conclusion.

truth of the matter in saying that the reference to Pentecost most likely explains why there were so many people in Jerusalem when the Spirit came.<sup>46</sup>

But perhaps of greater significance is Luke's description that the church was "together in one place" (2:1). We assume from the context that Luke refers to the same group present at the election of Matthias. Although their activity is not explicitly mentioned, the reference to the church's togetherness assumes their disposition of communal prayer. The repeated emphasis on the church's togetherness "offers an inclusio framing the section regarding their preparation for the outpouring of the Spirit (2:1)."<sup>47</sup> Luke thus used all his literary skills to carefully articulate and emphasize the importance of communal disposition of persistent prayer in unity as a means of active waiting for the promise of the Spirit.

Within the first two chapters Luke mixes several metaphors to encapsulate the full breadth of theological significance of Pentecost. After describing the promise of the Spirit in terms of baptism to emphasize the Spirit's empowerment (1:5) in 2:2-5, he describes the coming of the Spirit in terms of wind, fire, and filling. In the Old Testament, the language of wind and fire was regularly associated with theophanies (e.g., Exod. 3:2; 1 Kings 19:11-12; Isa. 66:15). The allusion indicates that God is again present to his people; that the same God who was present with the people of Israel is now present with the community gathered in prayerful unity.<sup>48</sup> The

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<sup>46</sup> See Gaventa, *Acts*, 74. Since the early times of Christian literature, interpreters have tried to make a connection between Pentecost and the Jewish celebration of the reception of the Law on that day. Keith Warrington suggests that the overlap of the Jewish celebration of the reception of the Law and the coming of the Spirit may be a coincidence; however, he finds it interesting that the Spirit from Pentecost on "becomes the guiding influence for believers." See Keith Warrington, *Discovering the Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 55. Nevertheless, most exegetes note that the Jewish connection of the reception of the Law and the day of Pentecost appears in their literature much later than the book of Acts. See Gaventa, *Acts*, 74. As convenient as this connection may be for our overall argument, there is no clear evidence to associate these two events. Keener has a point in saying that "Luke provides few clear indications linking the day of Pentecost with Sinai, fewer than one would expect if Luke recognized and hence wished to make use of such a connection." Keener, *Acts*, 787.

<sup>47</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 751.

<sup>48</sup> Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 66. Greg Beale sees a deeper significance of Luke's description of the church's

connection between the divine presence and a community gathered in prayer and unity echoes Jesus' promise that he would be among those who gather in his name and agree on what they ask (Matt. 18:19-20). The description of the coming of the Spirit thus indicates that the presence of God is a key aspect of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit inaugurated at Pentecost.

The language of filling with the Spirit is also evocative. The Old Testament speaks of filling with the Spirit to describe special inspiration of individuals for leadership, prophecy, or a particular skill. In fact, in his gospel, Luke uses the metaphor of filling specifically to describe an experience of enabling the prophets and prophetic inspiration (cf. Luke 1:15; 41; 67).<sup>49</sup> In what follows in Acts 2, Luke develops the metaphor even further and links it to the very being of the church.

### 1.2.2. Ecclesial Ramifications of Pentecost

#### 1.2.2.1. *The Church as the Prophetic Community*

As those filled with the Spirit start speaking in different languages (2:4), the bewildered crowd beg for a meaningful explanation. Peter stands up, and after ruling out the problem of drunkenness, explains the phenomenon by quoting from Joel 2:28-32a (2:14-21). It is worth noting that Peter does not quote Joel verbatim, but adds new material to bring out the implications of Joel's prophecy for the coming of the Spirit.<sup>50</sup> Peter's appropriation of Joel reveals three implications of the coming of the Spirit for the ontology of the church: the pouring

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filling with the Spirit and persuasively argues that Luke intends to evoke the theme of the coming of God's temple onto his church. This connection further solidifies our argument that the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit inaugurated God's active presence in his church. See G. K. Beale, "The Descent of the Eschatological Temple in the Form of the Spirit at Pentecost Part 1 the Clearest Evidence," *Tyndale Bulletin* 56, no. 1 (2005): 73-102; G. K. Beale, "The Descent of the Eschatological Temple in the Form of the Spirit at Pentecost Part 2 Corroborating Evidence," *Tyndale Bulletin* 56, no. 2 (2005): 63-90; G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

<sup>49</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 805-06.

<sup>50</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 875.

of the Spirit is eschatological; it is the pouring of the Spirit of prophecy; and the outpouring is for the entire church.<sup>51</sup>

How exactly do these three implications inform the ontology of the church? Peter's first addition is the phrase "in the last days" (2:17). In the New Testament, this phrase is always used to mean the new era in history spanning from the time of Jesus' resurrection onwards.<sup>52</sup> The coming of the Spirit is thus eschatological in nature, meaning two things: that the eschaton has arrived at Pentecost, and that the Spirit will permanently remain in the church.

Peter's second addition is the phrase "and they shall prophesy" (2:18). The eschatological outpouring of the Spirit is specifically that of the Spirit of prophecy. The implication is that the quotation does not only link the coming of the Spirit with the Old Testament prophecy – and thus authenticate the coming – but highlights that prophecy is in fact "to be expected from the new community."<sup>53</sup> In other words, God's permanent presence in the church through his Spirit will be characterized by "prophetic empowerment."<sup>54</sup> Peter's interpretative twist thus suggests that at Pentecost the Spirit has established the church as "a community of charismatic prophets."<sup>55</sup> What does that new identity exactly mean for the church? The rudimentary implication of this new nature is that the church is now "empowered to proclaim the Word of the Lord,"<sup>56</sup> which plays out immediately in Peter's sermon in 2:22-36. Max Turner has further enlightened the significance of this new identity. While the majority of scholars restrict the prophetic nature of the church in Acts to empowerment for witness and mission, Turner shows that "the 'Spirit of prophecy' anticipated in Judaism prototypically afforded revelation, wisdom and invasive

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<sup>51</sup> Stronstad, *Prophethood*, 69.

<sup>52</sup> Keener, "The Spirit," 39.

<sup>53</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 77.

<sup>54</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 780.

<sup>55</sup> Stronstad, *Prophethood*, 65.

<sup>56</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 782.

prophetic and doxological speech.”<sup>57</sup> Although witness is an unequivocal element of this new nature, Turner argues that the Spirit also “provides the charismatic dimension of the Christian life which brings the believer (individually and corporately) God’s directing, transforming, and strengthening presence.”<sup>58</sup> Gonzalo Haya-Prats has also insightfully pointed out that even in Acts the common object of the interventions of the Holy Spirit is the formation but also the direction of God’s people.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, the full implication of the church’s Spirit-given prophetic identity is its capacity and mandate to watch for, hear, and proclaim the word of God, and to discern his direction as it navigates its life in this world. This capacity, in Haya-Prats’ words, “lies behind all of the Spirit’s interventions in the historic dynamism of community and deals ... with prophecy in the fullest sense.”<sup>60</sup>

The last implication of Peter’s appeal to Joel suggests that the outpouring of the prophetic Spirit applies to the entire church, not just the selected leaders, as was the case in the Old Testament. The Spirit’s coming to the entire church gathered in Jerusalem is thus the fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy that the Spirit will come to “all flesh” (2:17). As the spirit of prophecy is given to all gathered, the whole church is now collectively responsible to live out its prophetic nature.

#### *1.2.2.2. The Church as the Fellowship Formed by the Spirit*

In the text that follows, Luke describes another immediate ramification of the coming of the Spirit onto the church. In addition to the church’s Spirit-endowed prophetic nature, its social

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<sup>57</sup> Max Turner, *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel’s Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 431.

<sup>58</sup> Turner, *Power*, 416.

<sup>59</sup> Gonzalo Haya-Prats, *Empowered Believers: The Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts*, ed. Paul Elbert (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 230.

<sup>60</sup> Haya-Prats, *Empowered Believers*, 233.

structure has been “spiritualized” as well. Because of its shared experience of the Spirit, Luke now intentionally describes the church as a community and “not merely as an aggregation of autonomous individuals.”<sup>61</sup>

A number of exegetes see a chiasmic structure in Luke’s description of this newly formed community. The structure suggests sharing of possessions as the central characteristic of the Spirit-formed community.<sup>62</sup> Although chiasmic structures tend to be constructed more by interpreters of Scripture than its writers, it is interesting that in Luke’s next account of the outpouring of the Spirit in 4:32-35, the emphasis on sharing possessions recurs with even more elaboration.<sup>63</sup> Evidently, Luke wants to emphasize that the Spirit’s presence in the church inevitably affects the church’s attitude to possessions, a characteristic important enough to emphasize more than once. The theological significance of this insight has been uncovered by a number of scholars who have noticed a resemblance between Luke’s description of the post-Pentecost community and the Greco-Roman conceptions of ideal friendships. Alan C. Mitchell most helpfully explains the significance of this connection, arguing that in Luke’s case, the emphasis is on social equality, “to stress unity and harmony.”<sup>64</sup> Luke’s emphasis on equality, signified by sharing of possessions, thus further qualifies his ongoing emphasis of the church’s togetherness and unity.

The centrality of the church’s togetherness and unity expressed in sharing of possessions is framed by worship, prayer, joy, fellowship, breaking of bread, and eating together with generous hearts. The English rendering of ἀφελότητι καρδίας (“generous hearts”), however, obscures

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<sup>61</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 81. Interestingly, in 1:13 Luke describes the church as a gathering of prominent individuals and the rest that formed the crowd awaiting the Spirit.

<sup>62</sup> See the structure in Keener, *Acts*, 992.

<sup>63</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1012.

<sup>64</sup> Alan C. Mitchell, “The Social Function of Friendship in Acts 2:44-47 and 4:32-37,” *JBL* 111, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 266. It is interesting that Ananias and Sapphira’s sin is rebuked as a lie against the Holy Spirit.

Luke's description here. The phrase most likely implies "singleness of heart to the Lord" or "being of one mind."<sup>65</sup> The emphasis here, again, is on unity, which Luke reinforces in 4:24, 5:25, and 15:25.<sup>66</sup> Unity is thus the virtue that qualifies all other characteristics of the Spirit-formed community.

In summary, Luke describes the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost as the fulfilment of Jesus' promise of the church's baptism with the Holy Spirit. Filled with the Spirit, the church has been pneumatically constituted as the prophetic community, existing by God's empowering and guiding presence to attend to and boldly proclaim the word of God. The social structure of its ontological constitution is characterized by equality, worship, prayer, joy, fellowship, breaking of bread, and eating together – all in the atmosphere of unity and singleness of mind.

### 1.2.3. Pentecost as Constitutive of the Ecclesial Ontology of the Spirit

Before we move on to Acts 15, we need to address two other implications of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Barrett has made two interesting observations that raise two related questions. Namely, although the Pentecost experience is significant for Luke's theological agenda in Acts, the narrative of Acts shows that the church and its members were repeatedly filled with the Holy Spirit after Pentecost. Does this suggest that the Spirit's presence in the church is occasional and not constant?<sup>67</sup> That inevitably leads us to ask the next question: Was Pentecost an ecclesiological constitutive event or an event conditioned by the missionary purposes of the early church? In Barrett's view, the second question can be further validated by the fact that Paul, who spares no ink on pneumatology, never mentions any such constitutive event of the

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<sup>65</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1029.

<sup>66</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1029.

<sup>67</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 108.

reception of the Holy Spirit.<sup>68</sup> It might be objected at this point that we are splitting hairs here, but the questions are valid for at least the following reason: if Pentecost is not the constitutive event of the church's ontology, then we have no theological grounds for constructing an ecclesial ontology of the Spirit based on Pentecost for the church after Acts, or today, for that matter. Although these questions ask more of Luke than he intended to communicate, the narrative offers us enough clues to theologically reflect on these issues.

As to the first question, Barrett himself offers a preliminary clarification. The repetitions of the coming of the Spirit do not necessarily suggest that the Spirit deserted the church after Pentecost; the subsequent fillings simply indicate that “whenever need arose Peter and other Christians received the promised help of the Holy Spirit, which was manifest on such occasions as it could not be at other times.”<sup>69</sup> Also, Barrett adds, “Luke has recorded and bears in mind the promise of Jesus ... that the Spirit's aid will be given to those who must make defences in law courts.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, Luke describes and conceptualizes the work of the Spirit in the church phenomenologically, that is, from the perspective of his intermittent manifestations. Such a perspective would suggest, Barret concludes, that Luke understands the presence of the Spirit in the church as occasional, rather than constant.<sup>71</sup> However, a phenomenological description does not (necessarily) fully encapsulate the *theological* reality. To argue that the Spirit is not constantly present in the church based on Luke's perspective would be arguing from silence. The narrative of Acts thus does not allow us to provide a conclusive answer to this question.

But does the ambiguity surrounding the foregoing question suggest that Pentecost was therefore not constitutive of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit? I submit that this question does

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<sup>68</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 108.

<sup>69</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 108.

<sup>70</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 115.

<sup>71</sup> Barrett, *Acts*, 115.

not hinge on the foregoing conclusion, and that, in fact, Pentecost is the paradigm for understanding how the church is constituted by the presence of the Spirit and ecclesial work of the Spirit. I offer five reasons to support my thesis. First, Keener insightfully suggests that the repetitions of the coming of the Spirit do not put in doubt a constitutive significance of Pentecost; they actually suggest the opposite: the repetitions validate Pentecost by indicating that the presence of the Spirit in the church, inaugurated at Pentecost, is paradigmatic and thus normative for what it means to be the post-ascension church.<sup>72</sup> Second, although Paul does not explicitly refer to Pentecost the way Luke does, he does refer to a moment in the life of the church when God has “poured out his Spirit” (Rom. 5:5; Titus 3:5-6), “and presupposes that at some point God began to lavish his Spirit on the church in a way dramatically greater in magnitude than God’s people had experienced before.”<sup>73</sup> Third, Luke clearly intends to associate Pentecost with Jesus’ reception of the Holy Spirit. “Just as Jesus began his public ministry only after being anointed by the Spirit (Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38), so also his followers must be empowered for their designated ministry.”<sup>74</sup> Dunn also observes that by attributing such a prominent role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church in the rest of Acts, Luke clearly wants us see that “the mission of the church could not hope to be effective without this empowering from God (the Spirit of God) which transcends human ability and transforms human inability.”<sup>75</sup> Fourth, if Pentecost is the fulfilment of Jesus’ promise of baptism with the Spirit – which the narrative structure clearly indicates – then we can assume that the Spirit’s presence is constitutive and constant. Finally, although the language of filling could be understood as

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<sup>72</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 793-94.

<sup>73</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 787-88. See there for exhaustive New Testament support for this conclusion.

<sup>74</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 782.

<sup>75</sup> Dunn, *Acts*, 12.

momentary, the verb πλήθω (“to fill”), as Howard Marshall indicates, “refers at the same time to reception of permanent endowment.”<sup>76</sup>

The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost was thus a constitutive event of the church’s ontology. At Pentecost, God has come to dwell among his people through his Spirit, establishing the church as the prophetic community animated by worship and characterized by unity, expressed in equality, togetherness, and singleness of mind.

We now turn to the last key text in Acts in our exploration of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit, where we find explicit implications of Pentecost for the church’s capacity for communal discernment.

### **1.3. The Church Discerning (with) the Spirit**

After Pentecost, Luke describes the church living out its prophetic empowerment for witness that leads to its rapid proliferation. The church’s witness and expansion are no longer restricted only to the Jewish community but have reached Gentiles as well, most extensively through Paul and Barnabas’ missionary voyage (chapter 13). The church has now become a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile believers. This new reality is beginning to raise some questions among Jewish believers. Luke records how a group of believers from the Jerusalem church comes to Antioch and begins to teach that the Gentile converts need to be circumcised according to the Law in order to be saved (15:1).<sup>77</sup> Paul and Barnabas adamantly reject such a teaching, which leads to “no small dissension and debate” (15:2). The Antiochian church becomes aware that the issue is

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<sup>76</sup> I. Howard Marshall, “Significance of Pentecost,” *SJT* 30, no. 4 (1977): 24. Marshall provides three pieces of evidence to support this thesis: 1) Acts 9:17 indicates the Spirit’s permanent filling of Paul; 2) “Peter regards the gift of the Spirit to Cornelius, on the basis of which he becomes a member of the church, as being the same essence as the gift at Pentecost;” 3) if the converts at Pentecost received a permanent gift, it follows that the apostles had received the Spirit in the same way.

<sup>77</sup> Although the text refers to the group as “certain individuals ... from Judea,” we can deduce from 15:24 that they belonged to the Jerusalem church.

way over their head, and that the church's unity, singleness of mind, and its self-understanding are seriously jeopardized. It becomes evident that the wider church needs to make a decision about the situation. The Antiochian church thus sends a delegation to the mother church in Jerusalem to participate in a communal discernment process (15:2), known as the Jerusalem Council. How did the process of communal discernment on such a serious issue unfold? In what follows, I build the anatomy of the communal discernment at the Jerusalem Council and offer some theological reflections along the way.

### 1.3.1. The Anatomy of the Communal Discernment

#### 1.3.1.1. *Open Debate*

Having been welcomed by “the whole church and the apostles and elders,” the Antiochian delegation reports “all that God has done through them.” The theological issues that stirred the unrest in Antioch are also now brought forward to the entire church. Some believers stand up and confirm the stance of their fellow Jews, adamant that Gentiles need “to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses” (15:5).<sup>78</sup> Johnson brilliantly captures the atmosphere in the room and the intersection the church finds itself at this point:

The only thing which could counter such a powerful precedent is the conviction that the God revealed in the past was active in these events now, and that God's way of maintaining continuity in revelation may not be the same as ours. This, then, becomes the issue for the church's discernment. Will it fall back on its deeply rooted (and revealed)

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<sup>78</sup> The believers who stand up here are explicitly identified as belonging to the sect of Pharisees. It is very unlikely that Luke refers to them pejoratively, but most likely intends to point out why to this group of Jewish believers keeping the law is very important. Johnson points out that the theological reasoning of the Jewish party should not be easily dismissed. “It was theologically respectable. If part of God's revelation consisted in the practice of circumcision as the symbol of entrance into the people (and it did); and if all the previous revelation by God had taught the necessity of keeping the Law as a full part of being the people and receiving the blessings (as it surely did); then their statement is neither superficial nor silly. In fact, the weight of evidence would be on their side.” Johnson, *Discernment*, 101. Today, we would say that their theology and reasoning were very biblical. For a more extensive treatment of the importance of circumcision for Jewish religious identity, see the excursus on circumcision in Keener, *Acts*, 2215ff.

perceptions of how God “ought” to act, or will it recognize that God moves ahead of its perceptions?<sup>79</sup>

The narrative then indicates that “the apostles and elders met together to consider the matter,” extensively debating among themselves (15:6-7). Luke clearly refers here to the church’s leadership and seems to suggest that they assume the responsibility for the discernment process and the decision making.<sup>80</sup> However, the text makes clear that the whole church welcomes the delegation, participates in the initial debate, listens attentively (2:12), and plays a role in the final decision (2:22). It thus appears that, in fact, “a plenary session is in view.”<sup>81</sup> At this point, we see that Luke is not embarrassed of the church’s internal disagreements and debates, and clearly assumes that openly expressed opposition is a crucial part of a communal discernment process. Johnson summarizes the first stage of the church’s discernment well:

[Opposition] enables discernment to take place, by exposing the options to full view. It is part of the testing of the Spirit. When the church argues over its actions, it discovers the roots implicit understanding which gave rise to the action, and it can begin to articulate its faith in a more explicit way.<sup>82</sup>

### 1.3.1.2. Testimonies of God’s Activity

After the internal debate among the leaders, Peter, Barnabas, and Paul in turn address the whole assembly. Peter stands up and shares about what clearly refers to his witnessing of the conversion of Cornelius (15:7-9; cf. 10:1-11:18).<sup>83</sup> The operative word here is *witness*. Notice

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<sup>79</sup> Johnson, *Discernment*, 101.

<sup>80</sup> In Gal. 2:1-10, Paul references a meeting with the Jerusalem leadership about the question of the Gentiles’ observance of the Law. Exegetes are divided as to whether Paul refers to the Jerusalem Council here or to another meeting not recorded by Luke, or whether he conflates several meetings recorded by Luke (e.g., 11:30; 12:25). Since no consensus exists on the matter and since Paul makes the reference for his own theological purposes, I have refrained from using Gal. 2:1-10 in my treatment of the Jerusalem Council. For an extensive analysis of the current debate, see Keener, *Acts*, 2195ff.

<sup>81</sup> Pervo, *Acts*, 372.

<sup>82</sup> Johnson, *Discernment*, 96-97.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson makes an interesting observation by pointing out that “the Western text gives additional prophetic character to his speech by stating: ‘he stood up in the [Holy] Spirit’.” See Johnson, *Acts*, 261.

that Peter neither speaks as a “prince of the apostles” nor assumes *ex cathedra* authority to settle the problem; “his function is to narrate his experience and draw implications from it.”<sup>84</sup> His focus is therefore entirely on God’s activity and his initiative.<sup>85</sup>

Peter’s testimony of Cornelius’ conversion is fundamental for the whole process, so we need to backtrack a few chapters and briefly review the story in view. In 10:3-6, Cornelius has a vision in which he is instructed to send some men to Peter, who has received a vision in the meantime as well, instructing him to eat profane and unclean food (10:10-16).<sup>86</sup> Peter is initially resistant, but the voice exhorts him that he should not call profane what God has made clean. While he is pondering the vision, the men sent by Cornelius arrive, and Peter, nudged by the Holy Spirit, greets them, learns about Cornelius’ vision, and sets off with them to meet Cornelius (10:19-24). Having arrived, Peter meets Cornelius and the assembly gathered in his house, and shares the reason for his coming, to which Cornelius replies with details of his own vision, instructing Peter to preach (10:28-33).<sup>87</sup> “While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word” (10:44). The Jewish believers accompanying Peter have a *déjà vu* of Pentecost, as the Gentiles start speaking in tongues and extolling God (10:45-46).

Peter now interprets his experience to the assembly, saying that, by giving the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles, “God has made no distinction between them and us [Jewish believers]” (15:9). It is God who chooses (15:7) and it is God “who knows the human heart” (15:8). The Gentiles’ reception of the Holy Spirit is God’s initiative and work, and therefore, requiring circumcision of the Gentile believers would thus question and resist God’s activity (15:10).

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<sup>84</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, 261.

<sup>85</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 215.

<sup>86</sup> To reemphasize our earlier point about the significance of prayerful disposition, it is important to point out that both Cornelius and Peter receive their visions while they are praying (10:2, 9, 30). In fact, the text suggests that both the vision and God’s work in Cornelius’ household transpired as a direct response to his prayers, because they “have ascended as a memorial to God” (10:4).

<sup>87</sup> At this point, Peter has already understood that his vision of food and God’s “cleaning” had to do with his association with Gentiles, as he later interprets to the Jerusalem church (11:12).

Luke then summarizes two other testimonies presented, of Barnabas and Paul, who also, like Peter, share their experience, and witness of “all the signs and wonders that God had done through them and among them” (15:12; cf. 13:1-14:26). The emphasis of the testimonies is telling; “the actor of the signs and wonders is God again, not them.”<sup>88</sup> Johnson reminds us that in Acts, signs and wonders “always function as the signal of God’s prophetic spirit at work.”<sup>89</sup> They thus serve to signal “that the Holy Spirit was the one who accomplished the conversion of Gentiles.”<sup>90</sup>

The three testimonies are significant for three reasons. First, as Johnson astutely points out, Peter, Barnabas, and Paul do not speak up as “arbiters, but as witnesses, speaking in their own voice of God’s work through them.”<sup>91</sup> Second, what is brought to the church are narratives of religious experience – not theological reasoning supported by proof texts from Scripture – which form “a single story for the church’s discernment.”<sup>92</sup> Finally, the testimonies of God’s activity indicate that the church takes for granted that God’s work in the church and in the world can be recognized and authentically proclaimed.

#### *1.3.1.3. James’ Proposal of the Decision*

Now James stands up and offers a theological synopsis of Peter’s testimony, that is, that God has accepted the Gentile believers as his people (15:13-14). He then turns to Scripture and quotes from Amos 9:11-12. A number of exegetes have noticed a significant subtlety in the wording of James’ introduction to the quote. Notice that James does not say “the words of the prophets agree

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<sup>88</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 217.

<sup>89</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, 263.

<sup>90</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, 263.

<sup>91</sup> Johnson, *Discernment*, 103.

<sup>92</sup> Johnson, *Discernment*, 103.

with this,” but “this [God’s acceptance of Gentiles] agrees with the words of prophets” (15:15).<sup>93</sup> James’ wording speaks volumes about the role of Scripture in his proposal, and in the church’s discernment process, for that matter. The wording suggests two things. First, that James does not argue from Scripture, but looks for “scriptural language with which to express the church’s experience of God’s action.”<sup>94</sup> That implies, second, that James gives priority to the church’s testimonies of God’s activity over its current understanding of Scriptures in that the church’s understanding does not become “the measure of how God can work,” but that God’s activity dictates how we should read Scriptures.<sup>95</sup> The second half of the quote from Amos in fact affirms that God has always intended to include Gentiles into his people and that the Gentile conversions, witnessed to by the three missionaries, “is consistent with God’s plan.”<sup>96</sup>

James then proposes a decision (15:19). By speaking in the first-person singular, he does not assume the role of final arbiter (15:19). Instead, he formulates and proposes the decision to the whole church based on the collective testimony of the activity of the Spirit and its consistency with Scripture.<sup>97</sup> James proposes that the Gentile converts need not be circumcised to be saved – and by implication part of the church; however, they should be encouraged to abstain from “things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (15:19-20).

Some interpreters suggest that the three stipulations serve as a good compromise or enable the church to reach a consensus. But this language suggests that the stipulations serve as an appeasement of the Pharisaic sect or a way to keep everyone happy, so to speak. But something

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<sup>93</sup> See Gaventa, *Acts*, 218; Johnson, *Acts*, 264.

<sup>94</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 218.

<sup>95</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, 271.

<sup>96</sup> Gaventa, *Acts*, 220.

<sup>97</sup> Graham H. Twelftree, *People of the Spirit: Exploring Luke's View of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 161.

more is going on here, equally led by the Holy Spirit as the witnesses of the missionaries. John Nolland points out that, although Gentiles need not be circumcised, “when it comes to practicalities it is not quite simple. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians have to be Christians together.”<sup>98</sup> Many habitual practices of the Gentile believers do not make this possible. Just as the Gentile believers do not need to become Jewish to become members of the church, Jewish believers do not have to forego their Jewish values and practices. In this proposal, the church clearly reflects its commitment to its Spirit-given and animated unity, fellowship, and togetherness. The three stipulations thus, at the minimum level, enable this fellowship and unity.

#### *1.3.1.4. The Epistolary Pronouncement and Reception of the Decision*

At this point in the discernment process, Luke clarifies the role of the leaders: they do not make the decision on behalf of the church or assume that their deliberations automatically reveal the will of God. In fact, they lead the church by facilitating the communal discernment process of the entire church and lead it towards a decision.

In what follows, the church consents to send a letter to the Gentile churches to announce the decision of the church. The letter indicates not just *that* the decision has been made about the issue, and *what* the decision is, but *how* the decision has been made. In the extraordinary words of 15:28a we read: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” James’ pronouncement is not so unusual for its formulation as it is for its content.<sup>99</sup> The prominence is again given to God (the Holy Spirit), although the church has done the hard work of meeting and discerning.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> John Nolland, “Acts 15: Discerning the Will of God in Changing Circumstances,” *Crux* 27, no. 1 (1991): 33.

<sup>99</sup> Keener shows that “inscriptions from the Greek East abundantly illustrate such language for decrees produced by the agreement of citizen assemblies.” See Keener, *Acts*, 2291.

<sup>100</sup> I am cognisant that we should not over-theologize word orders, but I wonder if the wording “the Holy Spirit and us” as opposed to “us and the Holy Spirit” is not incidental and is intended to insinuate the primacy of the

The key question is: How did the church discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit in this process of communal discernment? Several exegetes note that Luke does not mention any heavenly visions, inspired speeches, or prophetic utterances, all of which he would not shy away from mentioning should he have wanted to.<sup>101</sup> Keener has suggested four solutions to this conundrum: First, the presence of prophets might suggest that they affirmed the decision or evaluated a prophecy pertaining to the decision (15:32); second, that the church's consensus speaks of the Spirit-led agreement (15:22); third, that the use of Scripture assumes its inspiration by the Holy Spirit; fourth, by Peter's witness of God's acceptance of the Gentiles, and Barnabas and Paul's witness to the signs and wonders.<sup>102</sup> Our anatomy of the process shows that the latter two – the missionaries' testimonies of the Spirit's work among the Gentiles and its agreement with Scripture – form the basis of James' proposal, i.e., of the church's discernment of the Spirit's guidance.<sup>103</sup> Haya-Prats has also astutely pointed out that the Spirit's role in the acceptance of the Gentiles, and thus consequently in the church's ability to discern his guidance, resonates with ample instances in Acts when the Spirit directs Paul's journeys (16:6-7; 19:21; 20:22-23; 21:4; 11). This series of texts, Haya-Prats concludes, "follows the same line of

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Spirit's work in the process, i.e., that the Spirit is not only an invisible consulting "elder emeritus" in the back of the room, but perhaps the main plenary speaker through the speeches of his witnesses.

<sup>101</sup> See Dunn, *Acts*, 208; Barrett, *Acts*, 744.

<sup>102</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2292.

<sup>103</sup> G. W. H. Lampe is the first scholar who suggested the interpretation of the 15:28 as referring to the Spirit's work among the Gentiles brought to light by the testimonies. G. W. H. Lampe, *St. Luke and the Church of Jerusalem: The Ethel M. Wood Lecture Delivered before the University of London on 4 March 1969, The Ethel M. Wood Lecture 1969* (London: Athlone Press, 1969), 25 as quoted in John A. McIntosh, "'For It Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit' Acts 15:28: How Did the Members of the Jerusalem Council Know This?" *RTR* 61, no. 3 (2002): 132. McIntosh has further elaborated on Lampe's assertion and persuasively argued that the three testimonies – of Peter, Barnabas and Paul, and Scripture – indeed form the Spirit's revelation. Nicholas Austin suggests the same reading, arguing that the church discerned the Spirit by listening to testimonies of the work of the Spirit. See Nicholas Austin, "Discernment as a Work of the Church," *The Way* 58, no. 4 (2019): 10. While recognizing the importance of rational deliberations, the wisdom of Scripture, and the affective dimension of the participants, P. G. R. de Villiers also argues that the church's attention to the missionary activity in the Spirit exhibited in the testimonies of the three witnesses ultimately facilitated the pneumatic dimension of the process of the communal discernment, which he refers to as the practice of "contemplative gaze." Pieter G. R. De Villiers, "Communal Discernment in the Early Church," *AcT* 17 (2013): 148-52.

prophetic direction of the people of God in situations that appear important in Paul's story."<sup>104</sup>

We can thus conclude that the religious experience of the church and its consistency with Scripture was a manner by which the church recognized God's will on this matter. Twelftree has summarized well the church's communal discernment with the Spirit in Jerusalem:

God had taken the initiative in giving the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles and doing signs and wonders among them. On the other hand, the human aspect in the decision making is seen in the debate, the reports, the leader detecting a congruence between Scripture and the reports, and finally, in the agreement of those present to communicate the decision.<sup>105</sup>

The reception of the letter by the Antiochian church results in an outcome that is theologically poignant. Upon hearing the decision, the congregation "rejoiced at the exhortation" (15:31). Keener observes that "the 'rejoicing' here fits the response of other Diaspora churches to the Gentile mission in 15:3; joy was a sign of the Spirit's activity in the church."<sup>106</sup> As a result, the Antiochian church sends the delegation back to Jerusalem "in peace" (15:33). Johnson makes an important point about this response: "Luke wants the reader to see the Church ... internally unified, with its first and most serious decision reconciled."<sup>107</sup>

The entire narrative of the church's communal discernment in Jerusalem unequivocally echoes with the church's ontological constitution formed at Pentecost. Founded and empowered as the prophetic community, the church communally discerns the will of God by gathering and witnessing to and publicly sharing about the Spirit's activity, enabling it to read and appropriate Scripture in the new light. The process is clearly guided by its Spirit-given and animated commitment to fellowship, joy, and unity. The church is capable of discerning and confirming

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<sup>104</sup> Haya-Prats, *Empowered Believers*, 211.

<sup>105</sup> Twelftree, *People of the Spirit*, 162.

<sup>106</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 2294.

<sup>107</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, 280.

the Spirit's guidance as it witnesses to the Spirit's preservation of its unity and fellowship, as well as the peace and joy among its members.<sup>108</sup>

#### 1.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have sought to theologically reflect on Luke's description of the nature and character of the early church in Acts, where he knits ecclesiology, pneumatology, and the practice of communal discernment into a unique tapestry. Our exploration of Acts has unequivocally shown us the *sine qua non* role of the Holy Spirit in the very being of the church. The ecclesial ontology of the Spirit is most specifically evident in the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, which constitutively established the church as the prophetic community, animated by unity, fellowship, worship, joy, and prayer. As the post-Pentecost prophetic community, the church is under the immediate guidance of God. It is in the dispositions of persistent prayerfulness and unity where the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit and the very ontology of the church meet. Therefore, the church can be true to its nature only by prayerfully awaiting and attending to the Spirit's empowerment and guidance.

The ecclesial ontology of the Spirit as described in Acts also informs the church's capacity for and practice of communal discernment. The church's Spirit-given ontology clearly drives its practice of communal discernment at the Jerusalem council. Faced with a pivotal decision, the church communally discerns God's will in attesting to the Spirit's activity by the sharing of religious experiences, the congruency of that activity with Scripture, and the preservation of the church's default character of fellowship, unity, peace, and joy. The Jerusalem council also

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<sup>108</sup> Writing on the importance of the affective element in the process of communal discernment, de Villiers insightfully points out that while joy and peace indicate congruency with the will of God, "negative emotions" are indicative of decisions that do not reflect the will of God, evidenced in the Antiochian church being disturbed and troubled by the teaching of the Pharisaic sect (Acts 15:22-29). De Villiers, "Communal Discernment," 145-47.

reveals some preliminary ideas about the structure of the practice of communal discernment. First, it shows that communal discernment belongs to ecclesial gathering and assumes the participation of the entire church; second, that communal discernment entails rational deliberations and hearing of all views; and third, that leadership plays a significant role by facilitating and leading the church toward a decision and not by making a decision on behalf of the church.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH IN THE PAULINE EPISTLES

In this chapter, we transition to the Pauline corpus, which occupies the major portion of the New Testament. Although Paul does not write as a systematic theologian, his letters are replete with a robust articulation of the person and activity of the Holy Spirit, who plays a prominent role. In Gordon Fee's words, "there is no aspect of his [Paul's] theology – at least what is fundamental to his theology – in which the Spirit does not play a leading role."<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I focus on Paul's description of the ontology of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, and particularly to those aspects that enlighten our understanding of the very being of the church and, consequently, the church's practice of communal discernment. In light of my focus, I will restrict my study to the epistles of Ephesians and First Corinthians, which most comprehensively encapsulate and represent Paul's understanding of the ecclesial ontology of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

#### 2.1. The Spirit and the Church in Ephesians

Paul's teaching on the nature of the church permeates the book of Ephesians so much so that many scholars concur that ecclesiology occupies the prime emphasis in the letter.<sup>3</sup> What is even more evident is that the Spirit actively participates in every aspect of Paul's depiction of the

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 896. Although written in 1994, Fee's study is still the most comprehensive analysis of pneumatology in Paul to date. I rely heavily on this work in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> I am aware that many literary features of Ephesians have led a number of scholars to question Pauline authorship of the epistle. This study is not a place to engage in this debate. I have subsumed Ephesians in the Pauline corpus for my purposes because, even if he is not the actual author of the book, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the theology of Ephesians echoes Paul's theology in the rest of his corpus, especially in regard to his pneumatology. Fee, *Presence*, 660. For arguments against Pauline authorship see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), lix-lxxiii; for arguments for Pauline authorship see Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 46-50. For convenience of expression, I will refer to Paul as the author of Ephesians.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold, *Ephesians*, 502.

church. In what follows, we explore the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit in Ephesians in all its aspects. To do so in a way that reflects Paul's intention, we must pay heed to Fee's insightful caveat to read Paul's description of the work of the Spirit not as "referring primarily to the individual believer," but having to do "with the people of God as a corporate whole."<sup>4</sup>

### 2.1.1. The Spirit as Wisdom and Revelation

Paul's opening prayer in 1:17-18 reveals a unique ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church. Paul prays that God may grant the Ephesians "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation."<sup>5</sup> He does not pray that they be filled with the Spirit – which happens to be the Spirit of wisdom and revelation – in terms of initiation; Paul is aware that they already have the Spirit (cf. 1:13). Instead, he prays that the same Spirit they were already given *afford them* wisdom and revelation.

The following verses clarify this prayer in two ways. First, that the goal of this ministry of the Spirit is that they would have "the eyes of [their] hearts enlightened." Ancients referred to καρδιά ("heart") as the place in humans where the religious life is rooted, being the seat of human will that controls human moral conduct.<sup>6</sup> Paul thus in effect prays that the Spirit may afford wisdom and revelation not of a kind that primarily informs the Ephesians' cerebral knowledge but that which inevitably transforms how they behave and respond to this world.<sup>7</sup> Second, this enlightening of hearts is specifically aimed at having a deeper knowledge of God and a better understanding of their reality in light of what God has done (1:18-19).<sup>8</sup> In other

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<sup>4</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 663.

<sup>5</sup> It is striking that although the majority of exegetes concur that πνεῦμα here refers to the Holy Spirit, most English translations render this phrase as "a spirit of wisdom and revelation." Even if we put all the exegetical arguments aside, Fee's point exposes the absurdity of this rendering: "What, one wonders, can 'a spirit of revelation' possibly mean in *any* sense in English?" Fee, *Presence*, 676.

<sup>6</sup> See Arnold, *Ephesians*, 212 and Pheme Perkins, *Ephesians*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 90.

<sup>7</sup> That Paul organically links an enlightened heart to virtuous moral conduct is evident also in 4:17-19, where he describes the vicious life of the Gentiles as stemming out of their "darkened understanding."

<sup>8</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 676.

words, the wisdom and revelation that the Spirit provides is of “a deepening existential grasp of core truths which the Ephesians are already expected to ‘know’.”<sup>9</sup> Paul’s prayer for this aspect of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit thus also clarifies further the character of Jesus’ promise of the Spirit who will “teach you all things” (John 14:26) and “guide you into all truth” (16:13);<sup>10</sup> that is, that this Spirit-fostered understanding of truth is organically linked with our existential sense of being and living in this world.

Paul’s prayer illumines an important implication of this aspect of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit. Namely, the prayer for the communal gift of the revelatory ministry of the Holy Spirit belongs to the larger context of the theme of Christ’s victory over the powers that pervades the book of Ephesians. One characteristic of the evil forces still at play is that they are bent on deceiving the minds of believers through those who are darkened in their minds (5:6).<sup>11</sup> Paul thus exhorts the Ephesians not to associate with them (5:7) but to instead live in the light, “for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true” (5:9); and, to not take part “in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead [to] expose them” (5:11). Paul sums up his exhortations with, “So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (5:17). Because of the insidious presence of the evil forces, Paul in effect exhorts the Ephesians to exercise discernment, in a sense of judging between the evil and the good. And since the metaphor of light and darkness dominates the exhortations, it is evident that Paul rests assured that the Spirit of wisdom and revelation he has prayed for – that brings heart-enlightenment – will also enable the Ephesians to communally discern “the will of God” and “all that is good and right and true.”

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<sup>9</sup> Max Turner, “Spiritual Gifts and Spiritual Formation in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians,” *JPT* 22, no. 2 (2013): 202.

<sup>10</sup> Arnold, *Ephesians*, 104.

<sup>11</sup> Arnold, *Ephesians*, 492.

Paul's prayer thus reveals that the Holy Spirit, in leading the entire church into an existential understanding of God and their reality, also fosters its capacity for communal discernment.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.1.2. The Spirit as Unity and the Presence of God

In chapter 2, Paul takes us deeper into the mystery of the church and shows us another profound aspect of the ministry of the Spirit in the church. To enlighten their corporate nature as the church, Paul reminds Ephesians of their former place, i.e., that they were dead in their sins and living under the power of the evil one following the passions of the flesh (2:1-3). More specifically, as Gentiles – “strangers to the covenant of promise” – they were separated from God and without hope (2:11-12). But by God's gracious work through Christ, they have been made alive (2:4-5); that is, Christ has become “our peace,” creating “one new humanity” of Jews and Gentiles and enabling their life together, and both as a whole to God, in “one body” (2:13-17).

This one body brought about by Christ has enabled a whole new reality: “access *in one Spirit* to the Father” (2:18). What does it exactly mean that the church has access to the Father in one Spirit? By this phrase, Paul in fact describes two profound aspects of the Spirit's ecclesial ontology. In the fact that he does not simply say “by the Spirit” – which would do for the point of access to the Father – Paul asserts that the church's oneness, while being made possible by Christ, is realized by the believers' shared initial and continuing experience of the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> What Paul is saying here in a complete sense is that the church is “united in the one Spirit” or “the fellowship of one Spirit” and in the sphere of that spiritual fellowship has access to the

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<sup>12</sup> In 1 Cor. 2:13-14, Paul makes the same connection between the Spirit and wisdom, but there explicitly links the Spirit with discernment, which is there best understood as “being able to make appropriate ‘judgments’ about what is God doing in the world.” Fee, *Presence*, 107.

<sup>13</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 684.

Father.<sup>14</sup> In this phrase Paul thus reveals first, that the Spirit lies behind the church's unity and, second, that in such unity the church has access to God.

In 2:19-21, Paul describes the implications of this new reality in the church. By mixing several metaphors, he asserts that, having been united and having gained access to the Father in one Spirit, they are now “the members of the household of God,” growing “into a holy temple of the Lord,” and, in the Spirit, are being built together “into a dwelling place of God.” In translation, their unity in the Spirit transforms their relationships with one another – including the whole church – and with God, so much so that they are now marked by “the sense of belonging and closeness that is experienced within the bonds of family.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, this new reality brought about by the Spirit is teleological; that is, gathered together in the Spirit, they are now built, in the same Spirit, into a holy temple where God chooses to abide.<sup>16</sup>

### 2.1.3. The Spirit as the Power of Love

Because of this mystery revealed first to Paul and now to the Ephesians, Paul prays for them yet again in 3:14-20, offering two petitions to the Father.<sup>17</sup> First, that “you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being grounded in love” (3:16-17). Paul prays that the Ephesians may be empowered by the Holy Spirit in their inner being. He uses τὸν ἑσω ἄνθρωπον (“inner being”)

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<sup>14</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 684. Paul makes the same theological point in 1 Cor. 12:8, 13, where he explains that believers form one body by being immersed in one Spirit. When Paul refers to “fellowship of the Spirit” in Phil. 2:1-4, he has the same thing in mind. Dunn helpfully clarifies that this idea would be translated better as “participation in the Spirit,” which forms the basis for the church's unity. See James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 561-62.

<sup>15</sup> Arnold, *Ephesians*, 169.

<sup>16</sup> In 1 Cor. 3:16-17 and 2 Cor. 6:16 Paul uses the same metaphor of the church as the temple of God. There he uses it to support his ethical exhortation to Corinthians: because God who dwells among them is holy, his temple is also holy. They thus ought to behave in a way that reflects their status as a holy temple of God. Fee, *Presence*, 116.

<sup>17</sup> Exegetes debate as to how many petitions Paul offers to here and in what ways the clauses of the petitions relate to each other. I present them as two not to make an exegetical point, but to more conveniently and succinctly articulate my theological points.

interchangeably with καρδία (“heart”), referring to the same place in the human being as he does in his prayer for the Spirit of wisdom and revelation. In the next clause, he explains what specifically he prays for. Exegetes agree that Paul does not suggest that the strengthening of the Spirit *enables* the dwelling of Christ in their hearts, but that Christ dwells in their hearts by the power of the Spirit.<sup>18</sup> In other words, “the indwelling of Christ is that which strengthens believers.”<sup>19</sup> Paul prays for the empowerment for two reasons: first, by echoing the language of dwelling from earlier, he desires for them to “experience more of the nearness of God,”<sup>20</sup> which will, second, bring them to a heartfelt awareness of God’s love for them. Blending the agricultural and construction metaphors, Paul prays that they personally, and consequently corporately, be “rooted” and “grounded” in that love as the newly formed fellowship of the one Spirit. In other words, Paul prays that the foundation of their communal life would be God’s love for them which overflows onto their love for one another.<sup>21</sup>

His desire for a deeper spiritual experience of the presence of God in their hearts is made even more explicit in the second petition: “that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God” (3:18-19a). Here Paul makes clear why he prays for the strengthening by the Spirit: it is that they may comprehend and know the love of Christ. The fact that this Spirit empowered knowledge of

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<sup>18</sup> See Perkins, *Ephesians*, 90; Fee, *Presence*, 696.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 276.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold, *Ephesians*, 211.

<sup>21</sup> Arnold insists on an exegetical basis that Paul here exclusively refers to being grounded *in God’s love for them*. See Arnold, *Ephesians*, 213. However, it is unimaginable that Paul does not have in mind that the same love ought to express itself in the church. Be that as it may, he will make this point explicit in the following exhortations in chapters 4-6.

Christ's love "surpasses knowledge" indicates that Paul does not pray primarily for their cerebral knowledge of Christ's love, but visceral or "experiential."<sup>22</sup>

In this prayer, Paul makes a profound theological statement. The same Spirit who unites the church into one body also strengthens individual believers to experience the love of Christ in their inner being. The goal of this individual strengthening, Fee insightfully points out, "is not so that the individual believer will 'be blessed', as it were, but that they might live out the life of Christ *together*, that is, so that the 'one body of Christ' composed of Jew and Gentile believers might really work."<sup>23</sup> When their corporate being is grounded in love, they are being filled to all the fullness of God, as they incrementally are being recreated into God's image.<sup>24</sup>

#### 2.1.4. The Church as the Mature Body Built in Love

Paul's awareness of this twofold ministry of the Spirit in the church – forming their unity and empowering their experience and expression of love – informs his parenetical section of chapters 4-6. Paul sets the theme of the section in 4:1-3, in which he urges the church "to maintain the unity of the Spirit." Paul's language is telling: the church does not have to labour to make its unity possible; instead it should *maintain* the unity already made available in the Spirit. Paul here explains both *how* the church should maintain that unity and *what* that unity looks like. The church maintains its unity by virtues of "all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love." These virtues loudly echo Paul's description of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. The exhortation thus reveals yet another activity of the Spirit: that of an empowerment or gifting of the church to maintain the unity he has realized.<sup>25</sup> Although some

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<sup>22</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 696.

<sup>23</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 696.

<sup>24</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 697.

<sup>25</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 700.

scholars argue that συνδέσμῳ τῆς εἰρήνης (“the bond of peace”) belongs to the aforementioned virtues and informs the *means* by which the church maintains the unity of the Spirit, Fee argues well that “the bond of peace” in fact describes *what* that unity looks like.<sup>26</sup> As we have shown, the unity realized in one Spirit was made possible by Christ who made one body of Jews and Gentiles by “making peace,” which has become the bond of unity of the body (2:15).<sup>27</sup> The bond of peace is thus not a means by which the unity of the church is maintained, but that which itself needs to be maintained. Further, if this peace refers to Christ’s destruction of the hostility between peoples to form one humanity, then the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace refers not to “inner tranquility” but to the Spirit-empowered eradication of all traces of any kind of divisive hostility in the church.<sup>28</sup> The teleological orientation of the unity formed and sustained by the Spirit is that in such an atmosphere each and every single member of the body, gifted by the Spirit,<sup>29</sup> may contribute toward “building up the body of Christ” in love so that it might mature in its unity (4:12, 16).<sup>30</sup>

In order to maintain the unity of the Spirit and build the body in love to its maturity, believers must watch closely how they live. In his typical fashion, Paul exhorts them to stay away from all the vices that accompany the Gentiles, and to embrace virtues that characterize their new corporate identity in Christ (4:25-32). About halfway through the list, Paul slips in a curious exhortation: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” The admonishment clearly echoes

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<sup>26</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 700.

<sup>27</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 701. Turner clarifies the relationship between peace and unity well, saying that “‘Peace’ here, as in 2:15-17, is a partial synonym for the kind of ‘unity’ and ‘reconciliation’ that dominate the letter.” Turner, “Spiritual Gifts,” 199.

<sup>28</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 701.

<sup>29</sup> Although Paul here does not refer to the gifts as χαρίσματα as he does in 1 Cor. 12:28, the close association of this text with the text in 1 Corinthians leads us to assume that Paul refers to these giftings as being animated by the Holy Spirit. Fee, *Presence*, 706.

<sup>30</sup> Here Paul reinforces the same point as in 2:21, where he uses the metaphor of body instead of temple.

the language of Isaiah 63:10, where Isaiah equates the Spirit of God with the divine presence.<sup>31</sup> What Paul intends to achieve with this strong language is to show that when the church engages in those vices – which achieve exactly the opposite of fostering unity of peace and love – they reject the very empowering presence of God that lies behind their unity and power to love.<sup>32</sup> Paul therefore concludes his set of exhortations in 5:18 with “be filled with the Holy Spirit.” In other words, when the church actively walks in the Spirit, the benefits of the Spirit’s empowering ministry will be palpably present and most evidently manifested in the church’s mutual relationships and corporate worship.<sup>33</sup>

Ephesians reveals three profound aspects of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit. First, the Spirit’s presence in the church affords wisdom and revelation that leads the church into a deeper knowledge of God and itself, which is organically linked with the church’s existential sense of being and living in this world and its capacity for communal discernment. Second, the Spirit is the unity-forming presence of God in the church which is most essentially characterized by peace; the same Spirit that realized the unity of the one body brought about by Christ also empowers the church to maintain that unity. And third, the Spirit empowers each believer with an experiential awareness of Christ’s love for them, so that the church, being grounded and rooted in love, may mature in its unity.

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<sup>31</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 713.

<sup>32</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 713.

<sup>33</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 722. The majority of exegetes concur that the five participles in 5:19-21 do not articulate the *means* by which the believers can be filled with the Spirit, but the *results* of their life being filled with the Spirit. That view, however, leaves us with no explanation as to how we should understand the exhortation. Fee’s reading of the exhortation as being synonymous with Paul’s “walking in the Spirit” can give us a clue that filling with the Spirit entails at least nourishing and cultivating the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25), which there Paul introduces with the exhortation, “Live by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16).

## 2.2. The Spirit and the Church in First Corinthians

In the following section, we transition to Paul's understanding of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit as reflected in his first epistle to the Corinthians. As in Ephesians, pneumatology permeates this entire epistle. Paul writes to the church which has misunderstood the nature of Christian spirituality so much so that their life together reflects anything but the gospel. To correct their misconceptions and congregational practices, he touches on almost every aspect of the ministry of the Spirit we find in his entire corpus.<sup>34</sup>

In this section, we focus on the single largest treatment on the Holy Spirit in the Pauline corpus (chapters 12-14), which deals with a unique aspect of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit: manifestations of the Spirit in the church, commonly known as spiritual gifts.<sup>35</sup> This section is significant also because here Paul explicitly refers to the practice of discernment of spirits and associates the Spirit with the church's capacity for communal discernment. I will focus first on the significance of Paul's understanding of spiritual gifts in general, developed in chapters 12 and 13, which provide the theological underpinnings of his practical correctives in chapter 14, and then focus more closely on the role of the Spirit in communal discernment.

### 2.2.1. The Spirit as the Manifest Grace of God

In 12:1, Paul introduces the section with: "now concerning spiritual gifts." Although the word *πνευματικός*, which Paul uses here, is commonly translated as "spiritual gifts," the translation

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<sup>34</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 82.

<sup>35</sup> Two other significant aspects of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit emerge in Paul's letter to Corinthians: the Spirit that leads to proper perception of the work of God (2:14-15), and the Spirit as forming the church into the temple of the God and the dwelling place of the Spirit (3:16-17). Since these texts do not offer anything substantially different from what we have already reflected upon in Ephesians, I dedicated this portion of the chapter solely to Paul's treatment of spiritual gifts.

that probably best reflects Paul intention here is “things that come from the Spirit.”<sup>36</sup> This introductory sentence thus suggests that Paul is about to offer a concentrated treatment of a particular aspect of the Spirit’s activity in the church that the Corinthians need clarity about.

### *2.2.1.1. The Spirit Exalts Christ*

Paul begins with a bigger picture, addressing what appears to be the matter of discernment in general (12:2-3). To address the Corinthians’ overenthusiasm with “the spiritual things,” Paul offers the fundamental indicator which distinguishes the authentic presence and activity of the Spirit in the church from popular spirituality. Paul is aware that Corinth is anything but spiritually boring, and that many Gentile members – if not all – were previously taking pleasure in its spiritual amenities. For that reason, he reminds them of their former status as pagans, when they were being “enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak” (12:2). Formerly, they were deceived by various spirits; but now, they are a community established by the work of Christ and animated by the presence of the Spirit. Paul thus reveals an important criterion that authenticates the presence and work of the Spirit in the church: things that come from the Spirit – and more specifically, Spirit-inspired speech – are inevitably characterized by the Christological confession “Jesus is Lord” (12:3).<sup>37</sup> Fee astutely points out the obvious, that is, that even a person without the Spirit can technically make such a statement. He thus clarifies well that for Paul it goes without saying that the confession denotes “absolute allegiance to Jesus as one’s

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<sup>36</sup> Fee helpfully explains that whenever Paul uses πνευματικός, he intends to emphasize the work of the Spirit, and when he uses the word χαρίσματα, he focuses on the Spirit’s specific manifestations (gifts) in the individual members. Fee, *Presence*, 153. Anthony C. Thiselton’s rendering of πνευματικός as “things that come from the Spirit” probably clarify best what Paul is about in 1 Cor. 12-14. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 910.

<sup>37</sup> Paul is here focusing on the authenticity of the Spirit-inspired speech because of the Corinthians’ undue obsession with speaking in tongues.

deity.”<sup>38</sup> Paul is thus making it clear at the outset of this concentrated section on the Spirit that the absolute and unwavering allegiance to Jesus is part and parcel of the Spirit-activated spirituality. Richard B. Hays puts it well: “Only where the lordship of Jesus is authentically confessed can we know that the Holy Spirit is at work.”<sup>39</sup> The essence of this confession thus must be reflected in the believers’ speaking and acting “in ways that glorify the lordship of Jesus.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, for Paul, the ultimate criterion for the authenticity of the Spirit’s presence in the church are not the phenomena that appear spiritual, but “the exaltation of Jesus as Lord.”<sup>41</sup>

#### 2.2.1.2. *The Spirit Forms an Interdependent Charismatic Community*

Having identified and established the foundational criterion that authenticates the Spirit’s presence in the church, Paul now addresses the specifics of what he intends to talk about (12:4-11). He affirms that the Spirit manifests himself in the church in the varieties of gifts, services and activities. And although some manifestations may appear less spiritual than others, the one and the same Spirit animates them all (12:4-7). Noticeably, Paul uses the term χάρισμα (“gift”) here, which is a cognate of χάρις (“grace”), to describe a unique character of this aspect of the Spirit’s being in the church. Dunn explains well the significance of this terminology: “By definition, a charism is the result of God’s gracious act; it is divine grace come to effect and

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<sup>38</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 157.

<sup>39</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 208.

<sup>40</sup> Hays, *Corinthians*, 209.

<sup>41</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 158. Fee, however, asserts that Paul here does not attempt “to establish a means of ‘testing the spirits,’ but rather to remind them that ‘inspired utterance’ as such is not sure evidence of being ‘led by the Spirit,’ especially if it were to have a negative impact on others.” Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 644. Fee is probably right on what Paul intended to communicate here. However, since the authorial intent – even if it can be established with any degree of certainty – does not limit the spectrum of the meaning of a text, I submit that Paul’s statement as such inevitably suggests that the existential Christological orientation in effect serves as a criterion – perhaps the foundational criterion – of testing the authenticity of spiritual phenomena in the church. For example, spiritual utterances and lifestyles that in any way undermine the lordship of Christ must be suspected as inauthentic based on Paul’s assertions here. See also James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 235.

expression in word and deed.”<sup>42</sup> Paul thus suggests that the dynamic of the corporate life of the church hinges not on human natural abilities, but on the grace of God – manifested by the Spirit, through every believer, and for the common good (12:7).

To illustrate his point, Paul enlists a number of manifestations of the Spirit in the church (12:8-11). Since the list is clearly illustrative, we should not take it as an exhaustive catalogue of spiritual gifts. Also, as Hays asserts, “it is futile to speculate at length about the precise meaning of each gift, because Paul does not give us enough information to construct a clear picture.”<sup>43</sup> However, Paul makes two important theological points about the Spirit’s activity in the church in this respect. First, he prefaces the list with the affirmation that a gift is given “to each [member of the church]” and ends with the affirmation that the gifts are allotted “just as the Spirit chooses.” Paul’s illustration thus reveals three important theological nuances about this unique aspect of the Spirit’s being in the church. First, the Spirit promotes diversity in the church rather than uniformity. Second, the varieties of gifts, as well pointed out by Fee, “ultimately express the Spirit’s sovereign action in the life of the believer and the community as a whole.”<sup>44</sup> And third, well observed by Dunn, the list “seems also intended to bring out the charisms’ character of mutual interdependence.”<sup>45</sup> This character is particularly evident in Paul’s pairing of the gifts of tongues with interpretation of tongues, and prophecy with discernment of spirits.<sup>46</sup> The clear implication for the life of the church is that the gathered believers in the church need each other to experience in fullness the manifest presence of God in their midst. Hays paints a very vivid

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<sup>42</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 554.

<sup>43</sup> Hays, *Corinthians*, 211. Arguably, if Paul intended to provide a comprehensive list of the spiritual gifts that the believers could recognize in themselves and practice, he would certainly carefully delineate each gift.

<sup>44</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 174. “This is the Pauline version of ‘the wind/Spirit blows where it/he wills’ (John 3:8).”

<sup>45</sup> Dunn, *Paul*, 556.

<sup>46</sup> Dunn, *Paul*, 556.

picture of how this aspect of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit shapes the very ontology of the church:

The overall picture of the church that is implied in these verses is, to put it mildly, remarkable: ‘each one’ (v. 7) is empowered by the Spirit with one of these extraordinary gifts. The church as a whole is envisioned as a charismatic community in which the power of the Holy Spirit is palpably present, operating through the complementary gifts of its various members.<sup>47</sup>

### *2.2.1.3. The Spirit Promotes Unity in Diversity*

To illustrate the complementary and interdependent nature of the manifestations of the Spirit, Paul employs his favourite analogy of body (12:12-30). One of the reasons he likes this analogy so much – which he also uses metaphorically here and elsewhere – is because body perfectly exemplifies the possibility of simultaneous existence of oneness and difference. Body thus illustrates best Paul’s intention to explain the organic relationship of the church’s unity and diversity. He shows that just as the body is one and has many members, so also is the church one in its diversity (12:13). The Spirit, however, is the crucial element behind this reality of the church. Paul explains: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” The church is one because *all* its members were immersed into the experiential relationship with the one Spirit and can now “drink of one Spirit” in abundance.<sup>48</sup> In other words, the church is one by virtue of sharing the common source of its charismatic life.

However, the church’s diversity is equally as important as its unity. Paul thus develops his analogy further: “indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many” (12:14). In other words, just as the body, although one, is characterized by a diversity of functions, so are

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<sup>47</sup> Hays, *Corinthians*, 212.

<sup>48</sup> Hays, *Corinthians*, 214.

they one yet characterized by the diversity of contributions in the church, where no single member should be disparaged. Paul thus labours to emphasize that the diversity of manifestations of the Spirit in the individual members does not license invidious distinctions, but in fact qualifies the nature of the church's oneness. By directly associating the Spirit with the church's being as unity in diversity, Paul in effect affirms that the church's diversity is not a natural social reality it needs to keep in mind as it pursues life together – as true as that is of any social entity – but that it is God himself who has arranged the church in this way, i.e., “as an interdependent organism.”<sup>49</sup> Paul thus urges in the following verses that individual differences should not lead to divisions, but to interdependence and mutual caring (12:14-26).<sup>50</sup> Fee summarizes well Paul's ultimate point here: “The Spirit does not divide; the Spirit promotes the welfare and edification of others, because the *one* Spirit is common to *all* and has made them into one body.”<sup>51</sup>

#### 2.2.1.4. *The Spirit Manifests Himself in Love*

Paul concludes the theological underpinnings of his upcoming practical corrections (chapter 14) with what seems an abrupt encomium to love (chapter 13). However, Paul is not showing off his poetic side or getting carried away into sentimentality; indeed, he makes a resolute theological point that further enlightens the nature of the Spirit's manifestations in the church. In the first line, Paul provides yet another “evaluative framework,”<sup>52</sup> audaciously expressed in categorical language, that authenticates the true manifestations of the Spirit in the church: whoever exercises spiritual gifts without love “is nothing” (13:1-3). Because love is the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22) – the *sine qua non* of the Spirit's presence in the church – and because the Spirit is

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<sup>49</sup> Hays, *Corinthians*, 216.

<sup>50</sup> Hays, *Corinthians*, 216.

<sup>51</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 186.

<sup>52</sup> Hays, *Corinthians*, 222.

intentionally bent toward fostering love in the church (cf. Eph. 3:16-17), it follows, in Dunn's words, that "the Spirit which manifests itself as charisma in the concrete situation of community manifests itself as love in the character of the charismatic."<sup>53</sup> In the following verse, however, Paul makes sure to characterize the love that accompanies spiritual gifts: love that is truly of the Spirit despises self-centredness and actively seeks the benefit of others (13:4-7).<sup>54</sup> Paul thus in an exquisite literary manner, almost so as to smooth out the rough edges of the combative tone he has had to employ so far, stresses that Christian *love*, and not the spiritual manifestations, is the sure sign of the Spirit.<sup>55</sup>

Our broader exploration of Paul's understanding of spiritual gifts in the church thus reveals that, first, the Spirit's being in the church inevitably results in a congregational life that glorifies the lordship of Christ; second, that the Spirit manifests himself in the church so as to form one, diverse, and interdependent body; and third, that the Spirit's manifest presence in the church is always revealed in self-effacing love.

### 2.2.2. The Spirit and Communal Discernment

We now zoom in to Paul's specific reference to the spiritual gift of διακρίσεις πνευμάτων (12:10) and explore how it informs our understanding of the practice of communal discernment.<sup>56</sup> What is immediately evident is that for Paul the gift, usually translated as "discernment of spirits," does not exist independently in the church but accompanies the gift of prophecy. Just as tongues are paired with interpretation of tongues, prophecy is paired with discernment of spirits (12:10). This is made even more explicit in 14:29, where Paul instructs

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<sup>53</sup> Dunn, *Spirit*, 294.

<sup>54</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 201.

<sup>55</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 203.

<sup>56</sup> For a fine study of the patristic exegesis of the charisma of discernment of spirits, see Joseph T. Lienhard, "On 'Discernment of Spirits' in the Early Church," *TS* 41, no. 3 (1980).

Corinthians to “weigh” (a verbal cognate of διακρίσεις) every prophetic utterance during their gatherings. We can thus confidently assume that Paul here identifies discernment of spirits with weighing of prophecies. To get a clearer vision of Paul’s description of the Spirit’s role in the church’s capacity for communal discernment, we must explore the individual significance and interplay of these two gifts.

#### 2.2.2.1. *Prophecy as Insight into God’s Ways*

Paul’s frequent references to prophecy in his letters indicate that this charism was a regular and widespread phenomenon in the early church.<sup>57</sup> He does not, however, offer a systematic treatment of prophecy; therefore, its exact nature and characteristics are hard to pin down.<sup>58</sup> The clues in chapters 12-14 reveal several important features of prophecy. First, scholars agree that the Old Testament prophetic tradition informs Paul’s understanding of prophecy.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, Paul evidently assumes that prophecy does not carry the same authority as an inspired text of Scripture, which probably explains why its significance is determined by the practice of weighing.<sup>60</sup> Second, Paul understands prophecy as spontaneous utterances – spontaneous in a sense that they are not expositions of a previously prepared material (14:29-32).<sup>61</sup> Third, although 12:10 indicates that the gift of prophecy is given to some members of the church, Paul

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. 1 Thess. 5:20; 1 Cor. 11:4-5; Rom. 12:6; Eph. 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; 1 Tim. 1:18; 4:14.

<sup>58</sup> One of the most comprehensive treatments of the nature and practice of early Christian prophecy is offered by David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

<sup>59</sup> While Paul was clearly informed by the Old Testament prophetic tradition, he understood its nature in a new light. Fee’s view on this is helpful: “Since Paul saw prophecy as evidence for the fulfilment of God’s eschatological promises, he undoubtedly also saw the New Testament prophets as in the succession of the legitimate prophets of the Old Testament. This explains in part why all such prophecy must be discerned, just as with those in the Old Testament. But the *nature* of the new prophecy was also understood to be of a different kind, precisely because of the church’s present eschatological existence.” Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 172.

<sup>60</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 170.

<sup>61</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 170. Fee thus asserts that, based on the evidence of 1 Cor. 14:29-32, prophecy is not a delivery of a previously prepared sermon, as some want to define it.

also assumes that the gift is somehow available to all (14:31; cf. 14:1, 5). In fact, in Hays' explanation, "When Paul writes 'you can all prophesy', he is not giving permission but actually acknowledging a *power* to all by the one Spirit."<sup>62</sup> Fourth, prophesying in Paul's references belongs strictly to the context of the church gathering and are for the benefit of the whole church.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, prophecy is never intended for "private séances or consultations."<sup>64</sup> Fifth, Paul seems to suggest that the content of prophecy is in some sense revelatory. This is evident in 14:26-32, where he closely associates prophecy and revelation. Fee thus insightfully concludes that "the word 'reveal' [14:31] in this context suggests that for Paul this was the essential character of what was spoken in prophecy."<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, in juxtaposing prophecy and tongues, Paul seems to refer to prophecy as representative of all inspired utterances. The gifts of wisdom and knowledge thus describe what is essentially entailed in prophecy, which can then be understood as "God's present revelation of his ways."<sup>66</sup> Finally, Paul characterizes prophecy as being ἐκ μέρους ("in part") and the content of its revelation as incomplete, akin to a dim vision (13:9, 12), the implication being that the church's perception – and consequently its understanding – of those revelations is always blurry.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Hays, *Corinthians*, 243. Peter's appropriation of Joel 2:28-30 at Pentecost reveals that the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit is specifically that of the Spirit of prophecy now available to all. See 1.2.2.1. above.

<sup>63</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 171.

<sup>64</sup> Eugene Boring, "Prophecy (Early Christian)," in *ABD*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 495-502.

<sup>65</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 253.

<sup>66</sup> Fee, *Presence*, 203. Turner also helps solidify this connection by pointing out that "wisdom and revelation" was in the Old Testament associated with the Spirit of prophecy granted to selected individuals. Turner, "Spiritual Gifts," 202. Aune's study, based on wide-ranging data, also concludes that the early Christian prophets were understood as mediating divine revelation. Aune, *Prophecy*, 198.

<sup>67</sup> Some contemporary evangelical scholars, promulgating the view today known as cessationism, suggest based on these verses that the revelatory nature of prophecy and other "miraculous" gifts ceased with the apostles, and more specifically, with the closing of the canon of Scripture. They argue that Paul's reference to "when the perfect (complete) comes" points to the closing of the New Testament canon. However, the exegetical argumentation behind this view, in Hays' blunt expression, "is simply nonsense." See Hays, *Corinthians*, 229. The implication of the cessationist view, however, is not only that prophecy is taken out of ecclesiology, but so is the practice of communal discernment, since Paul links the two together.

If we synthesize Paul's clues, we can define the charism of prophecy as spontaneous Spirit-inspired messages that can potentially come from any member of the church in the context of the church's gathering, which in some degree provides insight into God's ways. This definition, if justified, has an important implication for our understanding of the church's capacity for communal discernment. Paul in effect reveals that the Spirit's manifestation through prophecy in the gathering of the church serves as a communal medium of gaining insight into the mind and ways of God, which, in one sense, is what is entailed in the practice of communal discernment. But since prophecy in Paul's view does not stand on its own, we need to explore its accompanying gift of discernment of spirits to gain full insight into Paul's depiction of the Spirit's enabling of the church's capacity for communal discernment.

#### 2.2.2.2. *Discernment of Spirits as Assessment of Prophetic Insights*

We have already pointed out that weighing of prophecies is what Paul understands by the gift of discernment of spirits.<sup>68</sup> As is the case with prophecy, although Paul initially characterizes discernment of spirits as a gift given to some (12:10), he assumes that all believers should be involved in its practice (14:29).<sup>69</sup> Dunn provides a very helpful definition of the dual nature of this charism:

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<sup>68</sup> It is not entirely clear what the charism "discernment of spirits" in fact refers to. One option is to take it in the sense of 1 John 4:1, where testing refers to the ability to differentiate between the evil spirit or good spirit at work. The other option is to see it as reflecting Paul's language of weighing (evaluating) prophetic utterances in 1 Cor. 14:29. Exegetes agree that it likely carries the sense of both. In Dunn's observation, "there may be little ground for dispute between these two sets of alternatives." Dunn, *Spirit*, 233.

<sup>69</sup> That prophecies do not carry their own authority and need to be tested by all members is also affirmed in 1 Thess. 5:20-21 and 1 John 4:1. Paul's instruction here raises another question: Given that all members of the church are invited to participate in discernment, does it mean that at the moments when prophecies are uttered all believers receive the gift of discernment of spirits, or that all members are enabled to test the authenticity and significance of prophecies by virtue of having the same Spirit who inspired (or not) the utterances – that discernment functions on the principle, in Bittlinger's phrase, "the Spirit recognizes the Spirit"? See Arnold Bittlinger, *Gifts and Graces: A Commentary on I Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 121 as quoted in Fee, *Presence*, 252. If the former is the case, I wonder if we should understand the two gifts – or in fact all spiritual gifts – not as commodities, so to speak, graciously given by the Holy Spirit to some – who then permanently possess them and after the church

In this context, *diakrisis pneumatōn* is best understood as *an evaluation, an investigating, a testing, a weighing of the prophetic utterance* by the rest (of the assembly or of the prophets) to determine both its source as to inspiration and its significance for the assembly (source and significance being the same side of the one coin, so that the evaluation includes both interpretation of spirits = spiritual utterances, and distinguishing of spirits = sources of inspiration). That it is described as a charisma presumably means that the evaluation was not simply a matter of logical and rational analysis but ultimately a sense shared by (most of) those involved that this word was (or was not) a word of the Spirit and that the significance discerned in it was in accord with the mind of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:16; 7:40).<sup>70</sup>

Paul makes clear that the Spirit lies behind the church's capacity to discern the source and the significance of prophetic utterances. What eludes us, however, is the mechanics of this practice. Paul is silent on any explicit criteria for weighing prophecies or characteristic ways the Spirit manifests himself through this charism. However, given that discernment of spirits is charismatic in nature, criteria for its practice must reflect pneumatic characteristics. We can thus extrapolate on the criteria of discernment of spirits on pneumatological data in Paul.

Dunn has offered the most comprehensive treatment of the potential criteria for discernment of spirits. He offers three criteria, extrapolating from Paul's clues throughout his corpus.<sup>71</sup> First is the criterion of kerygmatic tradition. Prophetic utterance can be taken as inspired by the Spirit if it confirms or is in accord with the gospel.<sup>72</sup> However, as straightforward as it is, the criterion is not without its problems. In the Old Testament we find many cases where false prophets speak in line with the traditional teaching. The case of the Jerusalem Council vividly exemplifies this problem.<sup>73</sup> Although the arguments of the believers from the Pharisaic sect were in accordance with the biblical teaching, they were rejected after the initial hearing.

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gathering can go home with them, as it were – but as the Spirit's sovereign manifestations during every gathering, where anyone can afresh become a medium of the Spirit's manifestation. Paul's description of the gifts of prophecy and discernment of spirits in 14:29-32 suggests that at least these two gifts operate in this way. This could explain why Paul considers the gifts of prophecy and discernment both as given to some and yet available to all.

<sup>70</sup> Dunn, *Spirit*, 234.

<sup>71</sup> Dunn, *Spirit*, 293-97.

<sup>72</sup> Fee points out that Paul in 2 Thess. 2:1-15 in a way employs this criterion, indirectly exhorting the Thessalonians to reject prophecies that do not conform to his previous teaching.

<sup>73</sup> See 1.3. above.

This criterion can be helpful, however, if we nuance and qualify it. Jacques Guillet's explanation of the criterion is very helpful: A charismatic revelation will *harmonize* with or *deepen* a revelation already confided to the church.<sup>74</sup> This means that the criterion of congruency with the kerygmatic tradition, to aid discernment, ought to be utilized not on the level of formal equivalences, i.e., "proof-texting," but in hearing whether a revelation is "in tune" with what is already revealed.<sup>75</sup> Second is the criterion of love. For Paul, love, Dunn suggests, being the fruit of the Spirit, is the decisive indicator of the authenticity of manifestations of a charism (chapter 13). Specifically, it is love that is characterized by patience and kindness, and devoid of envy and conceit. Therefore, only when love accompanies charism – prophecy in this case – can it be considered as authentically coming from the Spirit. Third is the criterion of building up. Since the Spirit's explicit intention in various manifestations is to build the church in unity of peace and love, whatever does not build up but destroys that unity formed and sustained by the Spirit is not inspired by that same Spirit.<sup>76</sup> Guillet illumines this connection well: "From the instant this body [the church] was born of the Spirit and drank of the Spirit ... the Spirit cannot act except to make it grow in unity."<sup>77</sup> Therefore, while Paul does not speak explicitly about the criteria that accompany the gift of discernment of spirits, we can nonetheless conclude the following:

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<sup>74</sup> Guillet, *Discernment*, 46.

<sup>75</sup> We see an employment of the criteria of Scripture on the level of harmonization instead of proof-texting in Acts 15. See 1.3.1.3. above. Hans Urs von Balthasar, in reflecting on Christian pluralism, insightfully speaks of truth as symphonic. This idea brings to mind a symphony. A symphonic orchestra need not play the very same score line in order to perform the song "truthfully." Harmonious performance in fact "deepens" the song and exhibits it more robustly.

<sup>76</sup> Fee treats the whole formula "upbuilding and *encouragement and consolation*" from 14:3 as a criterion. However, encouragement and consolation can be helpful criteria only if they describe the *intention* of the person uttering a prophetic word – as this would be an expression of love and thus fall under the criterion of love – and not as helpful if they describe the *response* of the hearers. For the hearers' response is conditioned by the disposition of their own hearts, and thus can hardly serve as a criterion for prophetic discernment. For instance, if the hearers are disposed to things that oppose the ways of God, they will likely find prophecies that support them in their ways as encouraging and comforting, and those that do not, as repellent, discouraging, and discomfiting. The ample cases of rejections of true prophets of God in the Old Testament illustrate this point. Precisely because of Israel's desire for peace and security, words of false prophets were more encouraging and comforting, and thus preferred, than calls to repentance and foretelling of doom and destruction by true prophets.

<sup>77</sup> Guillet, *Discernment*, 45.

prophetic discernment, at minimum, entails attending to harmonization with the kerygmatic tradition (Scripture), and the spiritual fruits of love and building up of the church in the unity of peace. Therefore, prophecies that are accompanied with these signs can be trusted because they resonate with the manner of the Spirit's being in the life of the church.

Paul's teaching on the gifts of prophecy and discernment of spirits reveals the nature of communal discernment as a charismatic practice. That is, that the Spirit manifests himself in the church to endow the capacity for communal discernment – both in the sense of affording insight into God's ways and in the sense of enabling an evaluation of the authenticity and relevance of those insights.

### **2.3. Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have sought to explore Paul's understanding of the Spirit's presence and ministry in the life of the church. Our focused attention on Ephesians and First Corinthians has led us to several conclusions with respect to key aspects of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit and its implications for both the ontology of the church and the church's capacity for and practice of communal discernment.

Paul delineates four aspects of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit. First, the Spirit is the unity-forming presence of God in the church, which is, in its most basic form, characterized by the bond of peace. Concretely, the Spirit, having established the church's oneness, manifests himself in diverse ways with the purpose of building up the church into a mature, interdependent, and unified body. Second, the Spirit's unity-forming presence is organically linked with his ministry of empowering mutual love in the church, most profoundly by bringing about an experiential awareness of Christ's love. Third, the Spirit endows the church with a deeper

knowledge of God and manifests himself in prophecy and discernment of spirits, conferring on the church the capacity to gain a present but tentative insight into God's ways. And finally, the Spirit's ministry is organically linked with the redemptive work of Christ: first, by bringing about an experiential realization of the reconciling work of Christ and, second, by fostering a congregational life that glorifies his lordship. These aspects of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit, for Paul, inform the very ontology of the church; it is for this reason they need to be safeguarded and nurtured, as Paul makes clear. Paul knows of no other church than one which is an interdependently unified charismatic body, is permeated with love, has access to the presence and mysteries of God, and lives under the lordship of Christ.

These aspects of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit as revealed by Paul also inform and condition the church's capacity for and practice of communal discernment. First, the church's practice of communal discernment will inevitably lead the community into a more robust understanding of God and deepen its allegiance to the lordship of Christ. Second, communal discernment will inevitably bring about an existential communal awareness of love and unity as foundational aspects of the church's being. The authenticity of the Spirit-led communal discernment will thus be evident in outcomes that restore and/or maintain love and unity of peace in the church. On the other hand, communal decisions that result in destroying love and unity of the church ignore the presence and guidance of the Spirit, and actually grieve the Holy Spirit of God. Third, communal discernment may entail specifically charismatic elements of prophetic insights into God's ways and charismatic evaluation, both of which are communally shared characteristics. However, those insights are always partial and incomplete. Therefore, in Hays' wise counsel, the discerning community should always "have a sense of humility and a sense of

humor about even [its] gravest convictions and activities.”<sup>78</sup> Finally, by praying for the Spirit’s ministry of revelation and love in Ephesians, Paul reveals the critical importance of the discipline of prayer, which ontologically links the church and the Spirit. The disposition of prayer is thus the proper atmosphere of any Spirit-imbued discernment process.

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<sup>78</sup> Hays, *Corinthians*, 223.

**PART II:**  
**THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH IN ECCLESIASTICAL PERSPECTIVES**

CHAPTER THREE:  
THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX TRADITION:

JOHN D. ZIZIOULAS

Eastern Orthodox theology is known, among other things, for its robust pneumatology. Hence our study of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit, apart from seeking to be ecumenical in nature, cannot avoid an interaction with the Orthodox understanding of the relationship of pneumatology and ecclesiology. In this chapter, I interact with John D. Zizioulas, a prominent Orthodox theologian. Zizioulas' theological contribution is hard to overstate. Across the confessional spectrum he is considered, in Yves Congar's words, "as one of the most original and profound theologians of our age."<sup>1</sup> Zizioulas has not only outstandingly expounded the most important tenants of Orthodox theology but has also creatively nuanced it and brought it into dialogue with the Christian West. His contribution is thus rich both theologically and ecumenically.

Zizioulas' view of the relationship of pneumatology and ecclesiology is hard to present as an independent theological area of inquiry, because it is organically bound to his other theological emphases that form an interdependent whole. In his own words, "The mystery of the Church, even in its institutional dimension, is deeply bound to the being of man, to the being of the world and to the very being of God."<sup>2</sup> We can thus understand pneumatology, ecclesiology,

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<sup>1</sup> Yves Congar, "Bulletin d'ecclésiologie," *RSPT* 66 (1982): 88 as quoted in Volf, *Likeness*, 73.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 15.

theology proper, and anthropology only as a unity.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in order to highlight Zizioulas' view of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit and draw implications for communal discernment, we need to sketch his entire theological system that informs his pneumatological ecclesiology.

### 3.1. The Ontology of Communion

The notion of *koinōnia* (“communion”) is Zizioulas' “most distinctive idea that permeates all of his theology and the view of the church.”<sup>4</sup> For him, *koinōnia* is an ontological category rooted in and springing from the very nature of God, which is realized in the church through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. How do theology proper, ecclesiology, anthropology, and pneumatology interact according to Zizioulas?

#### 3.1.1. The Trinity as a Communion of Persons

Zizioulas begins with theology proper, i.e., the trinitarian being of God. We will not go into all the intricacies of his trinitarian underpinnings of communion ontology but sketch it enough to provide a necessary background for our theological focus.<sup>5</sup> God is a relational being; “without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God.”<sup>6</sup> God is also not a kind of being “who first *is* and then *relates*” but he exists communally.<sup>7</sup> It is in this ontological manner that God creates and relates to his creation. The Holy Trinity is thus “a *primordial* ontological concept.”<sup>8</sup> Nothing that exists can be conceived as existing in isolation

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<sup>3</sup> Volf, *Likeness*, 81.

<sup>4</sup> Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 106.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed critical engagement with Zizioulas' trinitarian underpinnings of his ecclesiology, see the fine study of Volf, *Likeness*.

<sup>6</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> John D. Zizioulas, “The Church as Communion,” *SVTQ* 38, no. 1 (1994): 6.

<sup>8</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 17.

from something else, i.e., in itself, an individual, “since even God exists thanks to an event of communion.”<sup>9</sup>

Communion necessitates multiplicity, distinguishable entities that relate to each other. In God’s ontological constitution, it is the three persons of the Trinity who interrelate with each other and constitute the being of God. Zizioulas’ view of personhood, which is rooted in God, is crucial for his theology. The persons of the Trinity can be conceived of as unique and distinguishable persons only in terms of their relationship to the other persons. They cannot be understood in and of themselves, simply because they do not exist otherwise. It is because of their relational nature that they are properly called persons, and not individuals.<sup>10</sup> Personhood is thus another ontological category for Zizioulas. To distinguish between the aspect of God’s oneness and multiplicity of three unique persons, Zizioulas relates the idea of persons with *hypostasis*; God is thus one by virtue of three *hypostases* – the Father, who begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit; and the latter two, who exist in relation to the Father in the reverse fashion, so to speak. In short, God’s being “is identical with an act of communion.”<sup>11</sup>

In Zizioulas’ view, the personal ontology of God makes possible and informs the true ontology of humans, which is organically linked with the ontology of the church. Because personhood belongs to the aseity of God, “human beings can become persons only by participating in God’s personhood.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, God relates to the world in order to embrace it

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<sup>9</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> The ontological differentiation of person and individual is so crucial in Zizioulas’ theology that it shapes his Christology, anthropology, and ecclesiology. The notion of person is marked by being in communion, sourced in the very eternal life of God; the notion of individual is marked by ontological isolation, as a self-enclosed substance, sourced in sin and leading into death.

<sup>11</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Volf, *Likeness*, 78.

in “the divine-human *koinōnia*.”<sup>13</sup> Before we explore Zizioulas’ understanding of such a communion, we need to sketch his conceptualization of human personhood.

### 3.1.2. Humans and Personhood

Zizioulas describes human ontology in two ways. First is the biological existence; it is constituted by humans’ natural conception and birth.<sup>14</sup> In this way of being, humans live as individuals, separated from communion with God and other human beings, and are ultimately bound to death, which is the essential consequence of the fall. Because humans are created in the image of God, they have an innate proclivity toward personhood, yet due to sin it always remains elusive. Their biological existence thus operates on the dormant ontological constitution of personhood which binds them to separation and death. For Zizioulas, the goal of salvation is that “the personal life which is realised in God should also be realised on the level of human existence. Consequently, salvation is ... the realisation of personhood in man.”<sup>15</sup> However, human personhood cannot be realized with only natural abilities, i.e., abilities inherent in the biological mode of existence.<sup>16</sup> For personhood to become reality for humans, “the *constitutional make-up of the hypostasis* should be changed – not that a moral change of improvement should be found but a kind of a new birth for man.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, true human personhood needs a transcendental source. It can be achieved, in Volf’s reading, “only in communion with the personal God, who alone merits being called a person in the original sense.”<sup>18</sup> In short, “the sin of individualism ... is overcome in the *koinōnia* of the Spirit.”<sup>19</sup> It is in the context of the Spirit-

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<sup>13</sup> Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 106.

<sup>14</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 50.

<sup>15</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Volf, *Likeness*, 83.

<sup>17</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Volf, *Likeness*, 83.

<sup>19</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 236.

formed communion where Zizioulas sets human personal (re)constitution, which is the second way of human existence.

### 3.2. The Church as the *Koinōnia* of the Spirit

The salvific reshaping of human personhood can only be realized in the church. Zizioulas thus calls this way of being “the *hypostasis of ecclesial existence*.”<sup>20</sup> The church is not primarily an institution, it is “a set of relationships, which [provides] one with a new identity, different from the identity given by natural birth or society.”<sup>21</sup> As we have already indicated, this ontological reconstitution requires a new birth. Baptism, Zizioulas argues, is the initiatory act of ontological constitution of ecclesial hypostasis. But what exactly does baptism bring about? We have also indicated that for Zizioulas true human personhood can only be realized and maintained in communion with God; baptism thus brings about a personal way of being that raises nature “to a hypostatic existence identical with that which emerges from the Father-Son relationship ... Man’s identity is not rooted in the relations provided by nature, but in uncreated Father-Son relationship.”<sup>22</sup> Zizioulas in effect stresses that mere human gathering and communing is not enough for true human personhood to be realized. (We could say that such communion would be nothing but a random sum of *individuals*.) True human personhood needs to be rooted in the very life of God, who is the source of personhood *par excellence*. Human personal relationships thus need to be marked by both horizontal and vertical relationships, in which humans relate to God as the Father and other church members as brothers and sisters.<sup>23</sup> In order for the church to be

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<sup>20</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> John D. Zizioulas, “The Early Christian Community,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. B. McGinn and J. Meyendorff (New York: Crossroads, 1985), 28.

<sup>22</sup> John D. Zizioulas, “On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood,” in *Persons, Divine and Human: King’s College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, ed. C. Schwöbel and C. E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 43-44.

<sup>23</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 57.

such a place, it inevitably needs to be linked with the very being of God. How exactly, theologically and existentially, do the being of God and the being of humans meet in the church?

### 3.2.1. Trinitarian Underpinnings of the Church

In Zizioulas' view, the church is rooted in and built by the triune God in history; it is based in "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14)."<sup>24</sup> To expand, the Father wills "that the communion of God should extend into creation through the Church" where the world can receive true life.<sup>25</sup> The Son becomes incarnated, that is, "the person in whom [the] union of created and uncreated is realised."<sup>26</sup> Jesus Christ epitomizes the human life as person, by virtue of the hypostatic union of his divine and human natures.<sup>27</sup> Christ's life is thus the existential "basis and 'hypostasis' of the person for every man."<sup>28</sup> It is for this reason, Zizioulas poignantly concludes, that Jesus Christ deserves the title of Saviour, and not "because he brings the world a beautiful revelation, a sublime teaching about the person."<sup>29</sup> Human life-giving ontological reconstitution is not found in something that Christ *gives*, but in the very *life* of Christ. But Christ can become the true source of life and personhood for humans only through the economy of the Spirit, who incorporates the entire creation into the life of Christ.<sup>30</sup> How precisely is Christ's personhood linked to humanity in the church by the Spirit? The proper relationship of pneumatology and Christology is decisive for Zizioulas' ecclesiology.

Zizioulas relates the existence of Christ exclusively to the economy of the Spirit. The Spirit conceives Jesus as a historical person (Matt. 1:18-20; Luke 1:35) and anoints him as Christ

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<sup>24</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Douglas H. Knight (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 139.

<sup>25</sup> Zizioulas, *Lectures*, 132.

<sup>26</sup> Zizioulas, *Lectures*, 132.

<sup>27</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 55.

<sup>28</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 54.

<sup>29</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 54.

<sup>30</sup> Zizioulas, *Lectures*, 132.

(“anointed one”; Luke 4:13), in whose fullness he lives.<sup>31</sup> The historical identity and life of Christ is thus unimaginable without the Spirit. The Spirit also raises Jesus from death. Christ’s resurrection was thus not a miracle of his divine nature, “but a result of the intervention of the Spirit.”<sup>32</sup> The Spirit, who is beyond history, liberates the Son from bondage to history.<sup>33</sup> “The Spirit thus makes of Christ an eschatological being, the ‘last Adam’.”<sup>34</sup> Bringing eschatology into history is the first fundamental particularity of the economy of the Spirit.<sup>35</sup>

Christ, to exist truly as a person, needs a communally constituted ontology. The Spirit, Zizioulas thus argues, makes Christ both “one” and “many.”<sup>36</sup> Christ cannot be “conceived in terms of our empirical individualized existence; he is not an individual but a person in the true sense of the word; his existence implies a body *by definition*.”<sup>37</sup> The Spirit thus makes Christ “many” by forming his “corporate personality.”<sup>38</sup> It is not insignificant, Zizioulas adds, that the “Spirit has always, since the time of Paul, been associated with the notion of communion. Pneumatology contributes to Christology this dimension of communion.”<sup>39</sup> The formation of communion is thus the second fundamental particularity of the economy of the Spirit. Zizioulas thus concludes: “It is because of this function of Pneumatology that it is possible to speak of Christ as having a ‘body’, i.e., to speak of ecclesiology, of the Church as the Body of Christ.”<sup>40</sup> Here we must repeat that Christ’s personhood, just as with the Trinity, is not expressed as existing substantially as one and then subsequently in his relationship to the church; Christ exists

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<sup>31</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 111.

<sup>32</sup> John D. Zizioulas, “The Mystery of the Church in Orthodox Tradition,” *OiC* 24, no. 4 (1988): 296.

<sup>33</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 130.

<sup>34</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 130.

<sup>35</sup> For Zizioulas, eschatology is not primarily a chronological category, i.e., that which will transpire at *parousia*, but an existential category, i.e., “that which is ultimately real” – the eternal, meta-historical existence and reality of God, which will become the reality of the entire creation at the end of the age. Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History: Comparative Ecclesiology*, vol. 2 (New York: Continuum, 2004), 442.

<sup>36</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 182.

<sup>37</sup> John D. Zizioulas, “The Pneumatological Dimension of the Church,” *Comm* 1, no. 2 (1974): 146.

<sup>38</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 130.

<sup>39</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 130.

<sup>40</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 130-31.

by the Spirit as both one and many. His corporate personality, the church, is the *sine qua non* of his ontological constitution. Christ is inconceivable without the church. In such a way of being, Christ is the epitome of human personhood by virtue of “his relationship as Son to the Father and as head to his body.”<sup>41</sup>

The mystery of the church is thus born out of this interplay of Christ and the Spirit, who is simultaneously “one” and “many.”<sup>42</sup> Just as Christ is inconceivable without the church, the church is also inconceivable without Christ. Ecclesiology and Christology are two sides of the same coin, both pneumatologically constituted in the one and the same event of the Holy Spirit. Zizioulas turns to 1 Cor. 12-14 to delineate the pneumatologically constituted corporate personality of Christ, i.e., the church. The gifts of the Spirit are not additions to the church, a spiritual tailwind to an already existing church, so to speak, but the very means through which the corporate reality of Christ, i.e., his body, the church, is realized, exists, and is manifested.<sup>43</sup> The Spirit forms the body of Christ as a charismatically diverse and interdependent organism. The church is thus “the community of [Christ] constituted in and through the gifts of the Spirit.”<sup>44</sup>

This twofold economy of the Spirit in relation to Christ – eschatology and communion – are two fundamental underpinnings that shape Orthodox ecclesiology. The ramifications for human personhood are worth quoting in Zizioulas’ own words in full:

From the fact that a human being is a member of the Church, he becomes an ‘image of God’, he exists as God Himself exists, he takes on God’s ‘way of being’. This way of being is not a moral attainment, something that man *accomplishes*. It is a way of relationship with the world, with other people and with God, an event of *communion*, and

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<sup>41</sup> Volf, *Likeness*, 84.

<sup>42</sup> Zizioulas, “Pneumatological Dimension,” 146.

<sup>43</sup> Zizioulas, “Pneumatological Dimension,” 150.

<sup>44</sup> Zizioulas, “Christian Community,” 27.

that is why it cannot be realized as the achievement of an *individual*, but only as an *ecclesial* fact.<sup>45</sup>

And we have to emphasize again that humans, like God or Christ, do not exist first as “saved individuals” and then relate to others, but they live truly as persons in the event of communion with God and others in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Because he is the Spirit of communion, “[n]one can possess the Spirit as an individual, but only as a member of the community. When the Spirit blows the result is never to create good individual Christians but members of a community.”<sup>46</sup>

In Christ, as the *koinōnia* of the Spirit, the church exists as both one and many, reflecting thus the very life of God to whom it is existentially linked. The mystery of the church, Zizioulas concludes, “has its birth in the entire economy of the Trinity and in pneumatologically constituted Christology. The Spirit as ‘power’ or ‘giver of life’ opens our existence to become relational, so that he may at the same time be ‘communion’ (κοινωνία, cf. 2 Cor. 13:13).”<sup>47</sup>

So far, we have explored the communion-forming aspect of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit in theological terms. But how does this ontological transformation in Christ by the Spirit become experiential for believers in the church?

### 3.2.2. The Church as the Eucharistic Communion

All that we have explored thus far about the mystery of the church in Zizioulas’ theology, manifests itself in the Eucharist. Eucharist is for Zizioulas the heartbeat of the church’s ontology. We must clarify at the outset that for Zizioulas – and the entire Orthodox tradition – the Eucharist is not a “thing” or one of the sacraments; it is “an assembly (*synaxis*), a community, a

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<sup>45</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Zizioulas, “Christian Community,” 27.

<sup>47</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 112.

network of relations...’<sup>48</sup> In the primitive sense, Zizioulas explains, the Eucharist was understood “as the event that brought together the dispersed people of God ‘in the same place’” in any given geographical locale.<sup>49</sup> But, most importantly, it is a deeply spiritual event; it is not merely a celebratory gathering. In the event of the Eucharist, believers become experientially constituted as the church, the body of Christ. And because Christ is pneumatologically constituted, the Eucharistic gathering can become so experientially only by the Spirit. It is thus conditioned by *epiclesis*, i.e., the prayer of invocation of the Spirit. Only in this epiclestically conditioned gathering do believers become the communion of the Spirit in which all the soteriological benefits become an experiential reality. Zizioulas summarizes the existential gravity of the Eucharistic gathering as follows:

It is not by accident that the Church has given to the Eucharist the name of “Communion.” For in the Eucharist we can find all the dimensions of communion: God communicates Himself to us, we enter into communion with Him, the participants of the Sacrament enter into communion with one another, and creation as a whole enters through man into communion with God. All this is taking place in Christ and the Spirit, who brings the last days into history and offers to the world a foretaste of the Kingdom.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 60.

<sup>49</sup> Zizioulas, “Christian Community,” 29. The current reality of the church being locally divided according to confessional commitments is an ecclesiological oxymoron for Zizioulas. He admits that this is a grave problem that awaits ecumenical resolution, which can only be properly addressed by the reconsideration of the nature and theology of the local church. Zizioulas in fact does not give a confessional local church ecclesial status because it is rooted in confessionalism and not in the Eucharist, i.e., coming together of dispersed people(s) in one place. See Zizioulas, *Being*, 260. Three comments, however, can be made by way of response. First, is not Zizioulas’ view of the church just another form of confessionalism existing among the others in any locale? Second, theologically speaking, confessional ecclesiology is not necessarily inconsistent with Eucharistic ecclesiology, as long as the doctrinal particularities do not cause and cultivate division and segregation, which then, I would agree with Zizioulas, is an ecclesiological and ecumenical problem. A case in point is the town of Okotoks in Canada where I currently worship in one of the local churches. We, although confessionally distinct from other local churches in town, see ourselves as a unique part of “the church of Okotoks” – and enjoy reciprocity in that respect – which we exhibit by praying each Sunday for other local churches and their leaders in particular. In the words of my own pastor, the leaders of the local churches “see each other as ‘Elders’ of the church of Okotoks and submit to each other for the sake of the revealing of the gospel to all our people and the community.” And third, even if the contemporary Orthodox expression of the local church could not be justifiably charged with confessionalism, it cannot avoid, at least in North America, the problem of ethnicism, which is no less incompatible with Eucharistic ecclesiology than is confessionalism.

<sup>50</sup> Zizioulas, “Communion,” 355.

What epiclestically conditioned Eucharistic gathering suggests, in effect, is that “the Church is an event, taking place again and again, not a society structurally instituted in a permanent way.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the church, as the Body of Christ “*is by becoming* again and again what it is as if it were not at all that which it is.”<sup>52</sup> The church is thus, in Calinic Berger’s words, a “rhythmic Christian experience, a momentary grace acquired only to be lost again.”<sup>53</sup>

The Eucharist, properly understood as an epicletic constitution of the church, has two important implications for the ministerial nature of the church. First, we have already pointed out that the church is the very Body of Christ, not in abstraction, but specifically as charismatically constituted by the Holy Spirit. And since the reality of the church is experienced only in the Eucharist, it follows that “no charisma can exist outside of the gathered community.”<sup>54</sup> For Zizioulas, thus, “[t]here is no *charisma* that can be *possessed individually* and yet there is no *charisma* which can be conceived or operated *but by individuals*.”<sup>55</sup> It also follows that “every gift is every time a new *event*. The body of Christ is thus built up through convergence of new events and not through a preservation or transmission of historical realities.”<sup>56</sup> Zizioulas makes this point mainly in arguing for the proper relationship of the church as institution (that which was formally given), including the ordination and ministry of bishops, and the work of the Spirit. But his argument applies for all charismatic manifestations in two ways. First, that any spiritual gift is manifested in individuals in the event of communion as if they have never been manifested before. Second, charismatic manifestations need to be “clothed with prayer, i.e., with the petition

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<sup>51</sup> Zizioulas, “Mystery,” 301.

<sup>52</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 296.

<sup>53</sup> Calinic Berger, “Does the Eucharist Make the Church?: An Ecclesiological Comparison of Stăniloae and Zizioulas,” *SVTQ* 51, no. 1 (2007): 50.

<sup>54</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 163.

<sup>55</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 164.

<sup>56</sup> Zizioulas, *Communion*, 295.

that the given may be given as if it had not been given before.”<sup>57</sup> Therefore, spiritual gifts are inconceivable as possessions of individuals.<sup>58</sup> In the final analysis, thus, the charismata are never “sacraments” in themselves, but given their epicletic character, they always belong to the Eucharistic service, the *koinōnia* of the Spirit, as Paul makes evident in 1 Cor. 10-14.<sup>59</sup>

Second, the Eucharist is a sacrament, though not as one among the others, but in a sense that it becomes a *locus* where everything *becomes* sacramental. In such a view, there is no distinction between Word and sacrament. Therefore, in the Eucharist, the historical word becomes eschatological. The voice of the historical Christ “comes to us, no longer simply as ‘doctrine’ through history, but as life and *being* through the *eschata*.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, in Scripture we do not hear the voice of the historical Christ, but the voice of the eschatological, or ontic, Christ in his immediate epicletically manifested presence. Dogmas, Zizioulas thus concludes, are not untouchable “relics from the past,” but are faith statements springing from the worshipping community.<sup>61</sup> Dogmas – and Scripture for that matter – are always received by worshipping communities “in new forms of experience and with constant openness to the future.”<sup>62</sup>

Now that we have sketched Zizioulas’ understanding of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit in its organic connection to theology proper, anthropology, and Christology, we are in a place to offer some critical reflections. First, the most problematic aspect of Zizioulas’ view of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit is his explicit ontological and existential identification of Christ and the church. The problem is evident in two ways. First, Zizioulas, wittingly or unwittingly,

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<sup>57</sup> Zizioulas, “Pneumatological Dimension,” 152.

<sup>58</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 23.

<sup>59</sup> Zizioulas, *Eucharistic Communion*, 22. Cf. Zizioulas, “Pneumatological Dimension,” 150.

<sup>60</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 22.

<sup>61</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 191.

<sup>62</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 192.

excludes in his ecclesiology the biblical image of the church as bride of Christ. The reason this is problematic, as Congar observes, is that the image of bride necessitates conceiving of the church as having an independent identity from that of Christ.<sup>63</sup> Arguably, the two images of body and bride can ultimately be seen as synchronic, but only at *parousia*, if we take the imagery of bride as teleological – leading into marriage in which the two become one flesh (cf. Eph. 5:25-27). But in that case Zizioulas is rightly charged with presenting “overrealized eschatology.”<sup>64</sup>

Second, if the church as the eschatological body of Christ is conditioned and repeatedly actualized epiclestically, it then follows that Christ, who is ontologically conditioned by the church, is actualized in the same manner. This is problematic, not so much because this view makes Christ pneumatologically conditioned – Zizioulas establishes this well – but that we have no way of conceiving the ontology of Christ without the Eucharist, unless we conceive of him as an individual.<sup>65</sup> But does this imply that he does not *exist* between the Eucharists? Since his personhood is constituted on the one side by his divine nature as the Son in relationship to the Father – and this is precisely the way he can be the source of true personhood for humans – he thus cannot but exist. But then he is either not ontologically conditioned by the church – the view Zizioulas clearly argues against – or he exists rhythmically in the same way as the church does – which is unlikely the position Zizioulas would take. I thus concur with Volf that the biblical image of the body of Christ should be best understood metaphorically, depicting the communion in the Spirit “between Christ and Christians (see 1 Cor. 6:17) or between Christ and the church

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<sup>63</sup> Yves Congar, “La personne ‘Eglise’,” *RThom* 71 (1971): 625 as quoted in Paul McPartlan, “Who Is the Church?: Zizioulas and von Balthasar on the Church’s Identity,” *Ecclesiology* 4, no. 3 (2008): 278.

<sup>64</sup> See Volf, *Likeness*, 101.

<sup>65</sup> This is definitely not the way Zizioulas would explain this conundrum, for “*Christ without His body is not Christ but an individual of the worst type.*” Zizioulas, *Being*, 182.

(see Eph. 5:22-33), and thereby also between Christians themselves (see Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:14-26).”<sup>66</sup>

Second, Zizioulas leaves us with several other conundrums that remain unanswered. First, he leaves unexplained the ontological constitution of individual believers – or the entire church for that matter – outside of the Eucharistic communion. Are they individuals – in Zizioulas’ sense of the word – in the same way as they were before baptism? Second, and related to the first, can we conceive of the work of the Spirit outside of the Eucharist, both in the church and in the life of individual believers?<sup>67</sup> Although Zizioulas asserts that the Spirit blows as he wills, he seems to imply that the Spirit is rather restricted in operation and movement to a particular institutional (liturgical) form.

### 3.3. The Spirit, the Church, and Truth

Before we draw some conclusions, we must address Zizioulas’ understanding of truth. Scripture, Zizioulas points out, identifies Christ with the truth (John 14:6). We can only properly understand this identification in terms of pneumatologically constituted Christology, i.e., ecclesiology. In that sense, truth is not that which Christ reveals to us, which is then transmitted

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<sup>66</sup> Volf, *Likeness*, 143. See there for a more comprehensive argumentation of this conclusion. It is not incidental, Volf astutely observes, that the church is described as “the *bride* of Christ rather than the ‘wife’ of Christ.” Volf, *Likeness*, 143 n. 64.

<sup>67</sup> See also Berger, “Eucharist,” 51. Zizioulas partially responds to this problem, saying that although monasticism has been an important part of Orthodox tradition, it has never played a decisive role in ecclesiology. He does seem to affirm that the Spirit can work in the lives of individual believers, but that this is not the direction the Spirit leads us in. Although the Spirit enables a degree of contemplation in individuals, he ultimately leads us “towards the gathered Church, and not towards an isolating individual experience.” See Zizioulas, *Lectures*, 12. Be that as it may, his understanding of the ecclesial and personal activity of the Spirit are, at best, unclear. N. V. Harrison attempts to explain the conundrum by asserting that “Orthodox Christians are always living and acting on the basis of the last Communion they have received and preparing for their next Communion. The Eucharist is the source and goal of their lives, and despite many sins and failures their task is to make everything they do in the world an expression of their identity as constituted in the Eucharist.” Nonna Verna Harrison, “Zizioulas on Communion and Otherness,” *SVTQ* 42, no. 3-4 (1998): 294. Harrison is in effect saying that individual believers live between the Eucharists in the afterglow of the previous Eucharist, so to speak. He leaves unexplained, however, both their ontological condition as well as the role of the Spirit in their para-eucharistic ministry and spirituality.

to us through Scripture and tradition with the assistance of the Holy Spirit; rather, it is the Spirit-realized Christ-truth event of communion; “truth and communion [are] identical.”<sup>68</sup> It is in this sense that we must conceive of the Spirit’s ministry of leading us into truth (John 16:13) and his being “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).<sup>69</sup> The truth as a “communal occurrence” can only be experienced in the Eucharist. Truth is thus conditioned epiclestically.<sup>70</sup> In that sense truth is not something given to the church, but something that stems from its existence, as life of communion.<sup>71</sup>

Two implications flow out of this conception of truth. First, truth cannot be conceptualized. It is not a proposition or a kerygmatic statement and thus cannot be “enslaved in formulations.”<sup>72</sup> It therefore “cannot be objectified and transmitted in isolation from the community.”<sup>73</sup> Second, because the Spirit places truth in the context of communion, “no individual mind can grasp the truth of the Gospel which the Spirit reveals.”<sup>74</sup> Consistent with his overall theological system, Zizioulas goes so far as to say that “the Spirit does not inspire individuals, even if they are holy and righteous...”<sup>75</sup> Instead, he forms a community in which he makes each member of the congregation fruitful, so that they “being helped by others [make] public the Spirit’s enlightenment. This is why the experience of the gathered Church is ... greater than the

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<sup>68</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 110-12 (quote on 112).

<sup>69</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 112-13. See also Zizioulas, “Pneumatological Dimension,” 153.

<sup>70</sup> Volf, *Likeness*, 93. Cf. Zizioulas, *Being*, 114 and “Pneumatological Dimension,” 154.

<sup>71</sup> Zizioulas, “Pneumatological Dimension,” 153.

<sup>72</sup> Zizioulas, “Pneumatological Dimension,” 153-54.

<sup>73</sup> Zizioulas, “Pneumatological Dimension,” 154.

<sup>74</sup> John D. Zizioulas, “The Holy Spirit and the Unity of the Church: An Orthodox Approach,” in *The Holy Spirit, the Church, and Christian Unity*, ed. Doris Donnelly et al (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 41.

<sup>75</sup> Zizioulas, “Holy Spirit,” 41.

experience of contemplation.”<sup>76</sup> Therefore, Zizioulas concludes, “[c]onsultation, discussion, and dialogue with all openness to the views of the others is an essential demand of Pneumatology.”<sup>77</sup>

Zizioulas reveals an inconsistency, however, in his explanation of the notion of truth. While he stresses that truth is not propositional, i.e., rational knowledge, he also asserts elsewhere that “truth is not *just* something ‘expressed’ or ‘heard’, a propositional or a logical truth...”<sup>78</sup> It therefore *is* propositional in some sense.<sup>79</sup> It appears that Zizioulas operates with two notions of truth: the ontological truth and cognitive truth, the latter being subordinate to and contextualized in the former. Although Zizioulas does not expound this himself, the latter notion of truth must exist alongside the former, because there is otherwise no way to explain the existence of Orthodox dogmas, or Zizioulas’ own theology, for that matter.

### 3.4. Conclusion

Despite the fact that Zizioulas constructs his ecclesiology on a one-sided witness of Scripture with respect to the imagery of the church, and that he leaves us with several theological conundrums, his theological contribution of pneumatologically conditioned communion ontology is unsurpassed. His delineation of the twofold economy of the Spirit in relation to the church – eschatology and communion – shows not just that the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit informs the ontology of the church, but that in fact the latter is inconceivable without the former. That is, the communion ontology of the Spirit interpenetrates with the church in the person of Christ so as to condition the very ontology of the church, constituting it as a charismatically interdependent fellowship of the Holy Spirit, existentially realized in the epicletic gathering.

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<sup>76</sup> Zizioulas, *Lectures*, 12. In this view, Zizioulas exhibits again his ambivalence and inconsistency about the condition of individuals and the role of the Spirit outside of the Eucharistic gathering.

<sup>77</sup> Zizioulas, “Holy Spirit,” 41.

<sup>78</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 115 (emphasis added).

<sup>79</sup> Volf makes the same observation in *Likeness*, 94.

Zizioulas' understanding of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit also informs and conditions the church's capacity for communal discernment. I express the conclusions in four propositions. First, believers are constituted, live, and act truly as Christians only as persons in communion with God and others in the context of the epiclestically conditioned gathering in which they are manifested as the church. Communal discernment as an act of the church thus by definition belongs to this context. As such, it is contingent on the invocation of the Holy Spirit (prayer). Second, and related to the first, if the Spirit constitutes the church specifically as a charismatic community, then the charismatic manifestation of communal discernment is either inconceivable or ineffective outside of the epicletic gathering. Said positively, the Spirit-empowered communal discernment is the capacity of the church actualized in the epicletic gathering always as a new event, requiring repeated dependence on grace. Third, if truth is primarily an experience of communion, and only derivatively an understanding that flows out of that communion, then communal discernment is by nature a relationally experienced insight into God's will. As such, the Spirit-empowered communal seeking and seeing is an act of interdependent hearing in the event of communion rather than a sum of subjectively and individually – i.e., independently – derived insights. And fourth, and related to the third, the role of Scripture in communal discernment can only be properly applied in the process of hearing God when communal discernment is set in the context of the epicletic gathering. As such, Scripture has the Spirit-given capacity to speak to the gathered believers in a manner never experienced before. The charismatic aspect of discernment is not in tension with Scripture, for both belong to and depend on the one and the same event of fellowship of the Spirit for its effectiveness.

CHAPTER FOUR:  
THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC TRADITION:  
KARL RAHNER

It would not be an overstatement to say that the Roman Catholic tradition still awaits a doctrinal synthesis of pneumatology and ecclesiology.<sup>1</sup> Since the time of the Protestant Reformation, Catholic ecclesiology has continued to be anchored in the notion of the church as institution, doctrinally developed on the basis of Christology. Consequently, the role of the Spirit has been marginal.<sup>2</sup> In the last two centuries, several prominent Catholic scholars have recognized the necessity of a constitutive integration of pneumatology into ecclesiology. Nevertheless, Catholic ecclesiology has still gravitated to its institutional doctrinal framework.<sup>3</sup> We could thus say that the Roman Catholic ecclesiology of the last two centuries has swung back and forth between the two ecclesiology-defining poles: institution and the Spirit.

Just prior to and during the Vatican II, three theologians laboured to coherently integrate pneumatology into ecclesiology: Yves Congar, Heribert Mühlen, and Karl Rahner. Although the former two, in the opinion of many scholars, surpass the latter in their pneumatological contribution, Rahner's work stands out because he has come closest to a comprehensive Catholic pneumatological ecclesiology, by carefully steering the middle course in the Catholic institution

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, one of the most influential Catholic theologians, admits that the integrative theological work of pneumatology and ecclesiology has not yet been comprehensively written. See his assessment in Karl Rahner, "Observations on the Factor of the Charismatic in the Church," in *TI* 12, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 82 n. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Toward a Pneumatological Theology: Pentecostal and Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology, Soteriology, and Theology of Mission*, ed. Amos Yong (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002), 90.

<sup>3</sup> A rethinking of the integral place of the Spirit in the church was most influentially brought about by Adam Möhler, who himself later in his life swung back to the institutional framework. See Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatological Theology*, 90.

and the Spirit debate.<sup>4</sup> For this reason – among many others – Rahner is considered as “*the* religious thinker who [has] contributed more than any other to the renewal of Catholic theology in the twentieth century.”<sup>5</sup> Rahner is also a Jesuit and a fine reader of Ignatius Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises. Hence for him the church’s capacity for discernment of spirits is one of the key aspects of the life of the church. It is thus hard to find a better representative in the Catholic dogmatic tradition who speaks of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit and its implications for communal discernment than Karl Rahner.

Before I critically engage with Rahner, it is worth providing a brief theological orientation to his pneumatological contribution. Rahner writes in the context of the Catholic institution and the Spirit debate, responding specifically to the Catholic default theological bent toward the former. He recognizes an endemic danger in the institutionally constructed ecclesiology: that, apart from the marginalization of pneumatology, the place of the individual might be lost.<sup>6</sup> He writes with this sensitivity so much so that he has been, rightly in my opinion, criticized for undue anthropocentrism.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, his discussion of pneumatology is primarily anthropocentric and thus the relationship of anthropology, ecclesiology, and pneumatology remains underdeveloped.<sup>8</sup> Further, although the institution and the Spirit debate requires a

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<sup>4</sup> Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatological Theology*, 91.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey B. Kelly, ed., *Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*, The Making of Modern Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>6</sup> O’Donovan captures well Rahner’s sensitivity in this respect: “Rahner cautions against the danger facing the Church that the individual could take refuge in the collective and think that to be a good and mature Christian it is sufficient to march willingly and passively with all the rest of the Church’s people.” Leo J. O’Donovan, “A Changing Ecclesiology in a Changing Church: A Symposium on Development in the Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner,” *TS* 38, no. 4 (1977): 740.

<sup>7</sup> Among his Catholic peers, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Baptist Metz have offered the most substantial criticism of Rahner on this matter. See Declan and Mary E. Hines Marmion, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> Kärkkäinen makes a similar observation, saying that Rahner’s pneumatology “is so anthropologically focused that its communal (i.e., ecclesiological) aspects did not receive due attention.” Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatological Theology*, 94. Rahner, however, seems to insinuate that he has an opinion about the communal experience of the Spirit, but he never comprehensively develops it. See Karl Rahner, *The Spirit in the Church*, trans.

worked out Christology and pneumatology, as well as their synthesis, Rahner bypasses this discussion and focuses on its inevitable practical outcome, the relationship of the charisms of the Spirit and the institutional structures in the concrete life of the church.<sup>9</sup> It is in this Catholic dogmatic discussion that we find, most explicitly, Rahner's delineation of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit.

#### 4.1. The Spirit as the Dynamic Element in the Church

For Rahner, two equally true propositions must be held and should be maintained about the origins of the church: (1) that it was founded at Pentecost, and (2) that it was established by Jesus who gave authority to Peter and the apostles.<sup>10</sup> This duality of the church as institution – as hierarchically organized society with its official ministries – and the Spirit – as its charismatic element – defines the very nature of the church.<sup>11</sup>

##### 4.1.1. The Spirit and Institution

On the one side, the church is by nature a permanent hierarchically structured and ordered society. Rahner explains, however, that the church as such cannot be reduced merely to a system that, once established by Christ, operates simply on the basis of its established structures, offices,

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John Griffiths (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 10. For the sake of comparison, while Zizioulas' coherent articulation of anthropology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology is unsurpassed, it has come at the expense of the possibility of envisaging theological anthropology outside of the doctrinal triad. In Rahner, we encounter the opposite problem: his pneumatological anthropology comes at the expense of the communal nature of the church and its relationship to pneumatology. The following quote epitomizes the difference between the two: "Christianity is the religion of man's personal relationship with God, and it can never be reduced to merely human relationships." Karl Rahner, "The Relationship Between Personal and Communal Spirituality in the Orders," in *77* 14, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 235.

<sup>9</sup> Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatological Theology*, 91. One of the side effects of this approach is that some of his conclusions are not as theologically undergirded as one would expect.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, trans. W. J. O'Hara, QD 12 (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 42.

<sup>11</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 42.

ministries, and fixated laws and orders administered purely by men.<sup>12</sup> The promise of Jesus to remain in his Spirit in the church until the end of the world in fact applies to the institutional church. As such, the church is “the historical concretization of the charismatic as brought about by the Spirit of Christ.”<sup>13</sup> The church as institution is thus essentially charismatic. Rahner qualifies this proposition by saying that the Spirit is not identified with that which is established and ordered; rather, the institution reflects an aspect of the church only if “there is always added to it in fact and in idea a power which itself is indefectible, the *assistance* of the Spirit of God himself.”<sup>14</sup> This assistance of the Spirit applies not only to the actual man who holds office but to the office itself.<sup>15</sup> This means that, by default, the Spirit will endow the office holders with necessary charismata to rightly perform their duties.<sup>16</sup> For Rahner, the assistance of the Spirit to the institutional church is the inevitable implication of Jesus’ promise and giving of the eschatological Spirit as its definitive possession.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the divinely established institution of the church, with its formal elements, is continually legitimized by the Spirit’s unceasing bestowal of charismata upon the church’s office holders, enabling them to transcend their natural human limitations and weaknesses in performing their ecclesial duties.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4.1.2. The Spirit as an Element of Transcendence

On the other hand, the church by nature has a charismatic element. The activity of the Spirit is the element that ensures the spiritual vitality of the institution; but it does not stand in relation to

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<sup>12</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 44. Rahner compares such a purely institutional structure with a Jewish synagogue, “which, founded by God in the covenant, broke the covenant” and is thus by nature devoid of the Spirit. See Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 43; 48.

<sup>13</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 86.

<sup>14</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 45 (emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 86.

<sup>17</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 86.

<sup>18</sup> Kelly, *Karl Rahner*, 218-19.

the institutional side of the church as its equal and opposite pole or exist as one category in the church among the others.<sup>19</sup> Rather, the charismatic element in the church “is the first and the most ultimate among the formal characteristics inherent in the very nature of the church as such.”<sup>20</sup> Essentially, it is the element of transcendence, “a special characteristic of the system as a whole.”<sup>21</sup> The charismatic element is that pole of the church’s dual structure which is ultimately and creatively free and, as such, is incalculable and unaccountable to and uncontrollable by anything historical.<sup>22</sup> This implies that, alongside the static continuity of the church’s institutional life expressed in administration of sacraments and teaching, the church is also dynamic.<sup>23</sup> This dynamism can “never find adequate expression simply in the forms of what we call the Church’s official life.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, in addition to the institutional expression in the form of assistance, the Spirit manifests himself “in ever fresh and unexpected form, and hence needs to be discovered ever anew.”<sup>25</sup> The role of the Spirit in the church, as its dynamic element, is to transcend the church’s historical limitations both by the charisma of office and his free movement, “to keep the church with all its failings in the grace, truth, and holiness of God.”<sup>26</sup>

Before moving on any further, we should critically reflect on two of Rahner’s arguments. First, Rahner seems to argue that the permanent hierarchical structure of the church and its

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<sup>19</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 97.

<sup>20</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 97.

<sup>21</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 86. Here we see an agreement between Rahner and Zizioulas on the quintessential aspect of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit that establishes the ecclesiality of the church. While Zizioulas conceptualizes the Spirit as bringing eschatology into history, Rahner understands the Spirit as an element of transcendence. Although the two ideas are not identical in meaning, they substantially overlap. However, while in agreement on the aspect, they disagree on the Spirit’s ontological manifestation. Whereas for Rahner the transcendental/eschatological Spirit ushered at Pentecost is the permanent possession of the church in her historical continuity, for Zizioulas the Spirit is never assumed as the church’s possession but constitutes the church by virtue of enlivening it ever anew in the repeated event of Pentecost.

<sup>22</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 94.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Lay Apostolate,” *Cross Currents* 7, no. 3 (Sum 1957): 229.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Rahner, “Do Not Stifle the Spirit!,” in *TI* 7, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 75.

<sup>25</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 84;

<sup>26</sup> Kelly, *Karl Rahner*, 219.

reception and possession of the Spirit are organically and inextricably related realities; specifically, that the primacy of Peter and apostleship, as the foundation of the hierarchical structure of the church, and Pentecost, as the foundation of the church's charismatic element, seamlessly blend into a coherent system, in which the latter permanently legitimizes the former. This view is problematic for two reasons. First, Rahner, surprisingly, offers no theological underpinnings for this view. Second, even if we assume that he has Pentecost in mind to undergird his view, the narrative of Pentecost, as we have shown in the first chapter, in no way indicates a unique endowment of the Spirit to the apostles. Pentecost thus makes no provision for the view that the Spirit thenceforth permanently legitimizes the church's hierarchical structure.<sup>27</sup> The fact that the structure of apostleship does not have an ecclesiological defining role in the New Testament is not incidental, in my opinion. It thus appears that Rahner himself gives primacy to institutional ecclesiology in such a way that pneumatology appears only as an add-on to legitimize the already existing church as institution and to keep it from stagnation.<sup>28</sup>

This assumption informs another unconvincing argument we find in Rahner: that the gifts of the Spirit can be conceived as office, i.e., permanent forms of ministry. To support this view, Rahner appeals to church tradition and to Scripture. As to the former, Rahner says that “the theology of the Church has worked out with ever-increasing clarity when, to what degree and with what varying certainty this charismatic assistance of the Holy Spirit is promised to the Church's ministry.”<sup>29</sup> He does not, however, reveal any details. As to the latter, Rahner appeals to 1 Cor. 12-14. Although this text is the *locus classicus* for the theology of charismata, it does not suggest that there are gifts “both as office and as pneumatic enablement to fulfill the

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<sup>27</sup> See the discussion in 1.1.3. and 1.2. above

<sup>28</sup> See a similar critique in Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatological Theology*, 92.

<sup>29</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 46.

office.”<sup>30</sup> We could argue that Paul, at the minimum, assumes the latter. But this argument would hinge on the New Testament view that charismata give rise to ecclesial roles and not *vice versa*, as Rahner suggests.

Second, Rahner conceives pneumatology in terms of freedom that manifests itself in ever-new forms that need to be freshly rediscovered. Yet one wonders whether this creative freedom applies to new forms of church structures. According to William Dych’s reading, Rahner seems to affirm a degree of changeability in ecclesiology, saying that “[a]t times the Church must discover new forms in which it can maintain its unchanging identity and accomplish its mission in new historical situations.”<sup>31</sup> For Rahner, that necessarily entails a grassroots formation of base communities, “created by the free decision of their members.”<sup>32</sup> However – and here I agree with Richard Lennan – Rahner’s theology of the relationship of the unchangeable and changeable in the church lacks in precision, to say the least.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4.2. Ecclesial Ramifications of the Charismatic Dynamism

Rahner’s understanding of the Spirit as the dynamic element in the church leads him to propose several inevitable implications that must characterize the concrete life of the church. We will focus on the two most important ones which directly or indirectly inform the church’s capacity for and practice of communal discernment.

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<sup>30</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 46.

<sup>31</sup> William V. Dych, *Karl Rahner* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 93-94.

<sup>32</sup> Dych, *Rahner*, 93.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 265.

#### 4.2.1. The Church as an Open System

The first implication of the spiritual dynamism is that the church must be characterized as an open system. By this characteristic Rahner means that the state of the church in any given moment is not defined by anything immanent in the system itself but that its definite state is defined by the “dominion of God, so that to do justice to the state in which the system exists at any given stage we must say that its operations are charismatic rather than institutional in character.”<sup>34</sup> What this means is that the Spirit himself leads and crafts its state of being, which he himself arranged and which can never be “planned for beforehand by any man or institution.”<sup>35</sup> Rahner argues for a dialectic with respect to spiritual dynamism in the church. On the one hand, the Spirit is always new and surprising; on the other hand, the Spirit “also stands in inner though hidden continuity with what came earlier in the church and fits in with her spirit and with her institutional framework.”<sup>36</sup> The church, lest it extinguish this Spirit and suppress its charismatic nature, must thus embrace this dialectic.

The most important implication of the church as an open system is that the incalculable work of the Spirit in the church is not limited to the hierarchy; “there are charismata, that is, the impulsions and guidance of God’s Spirit for the church, in addition to and outside her official ministry.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the Spirit can lead the church and craft its future by bringing about revelations directly through lay men and women endowed with unique gifts and graces.<sup>38</sup> In fact, the Spirit works in all members in such a way that he may reveal to them unique missions to show the church of their time.<sup>39</sup> The laity thus, in Lennan’s words, “could actually help the

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<sup>34</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 89.

<sup>35</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 97.

<sup>36</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 83.

<sup>37</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 49.

<sup>38</sup> Rahner, “Do Not Stifle,” 75. See also Karl Rahner, *Nature and Grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church*, trans. Dinah Wharton (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 34.

<sup>39</sup> Rahner, *Nature and Grace*, 34.

Church grow in truth, since they too [are] guided by the Spirit, who [is] both the source and content of that truth.”<sup>40</sup> This requires of the church, first, that its hierarchy not merely tolerate the unpredictable impulses of the Spirit begrudgingly, but actually examine them, listen to their message, and cultivate them, whenever and wherever they appear;<sup>41</sup> and second, that the *entire* church needs to be open to the promptings of the Spirit.<sup>42</sup> For Rahner, it thus goes without saying that spiritual discernment is required both of the hierarchy and of the laity.

#### 4.2.2. The Church as a Place of Charismatic Tension

The second implication of the spiritual dynamism in the church is that it inevitably leads to “a legitimate opposition of forces” that should “be accepted by all as something that should exist.”<sup>43</sup> Rahner in effect suggests that internal ecclesial disagreements and tensions, caused by the multiplicity of stirrings and impulses of the Spirit, are in fact charismatic in nature and not necessarily a consequence of human imperfections. He anchors the argument in 1 Cor. 12-14, saying that the Spirit, by means of various graces in the church, brings about plurality and not uniformity in the church. It thus follows that no one forms the whole of the work of the Spirit in the church.<sup>44</sup> Yet the same passage presupposes, Rahner argues, the existence and maintenance of unity of the church. Unity, however, should not be achieved by uniformity, but with harmony of the charismatic impulses. Clerical authoritarianism and ecclesial schisms are thus equally flawed approaches to unity.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, 102.

<sup>41</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 87.

<sup>42</sup> Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 115.

<sup>43</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 73.

<sup>44</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 74.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Lennan, “Ecclesiology and Ecumenism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan and Mary E. Hines Marmion (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 137.

But how is this harmony achieved? Rahner argues that the harmony of the potentially divisive impulses of the Spirit “can only be guaranteed by the one Lord of both, and by him alone, that is to say, charismatically.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, both the diversity of impulses and their harmonious existence belong to the work of the Spirit in the church. The church thus must look to the Spirit as the sole anchor of its unity. Rahner does not, however, provide absolute clarity on what this pneumatic unity in harmony practically entails and requires. He seems to lodge his trust in the nature of the Spirit, saying that “[i]t is ... part of the Catholic faith that the Spirit of God in the Church is able to prevent an absolute schism between those who simply possess the Spirit and those who hold office...”<sup>47</sup>

We can infer several charismatically stabilizing factors from Rahner’s theological corpus. First and foremost, maintaining charismatic unity requires fostering mutual love. For Rahner, love expresses itself in allowing another to be different, “even when it does not understand him.”<sup>48</sup> Love also assumes patience and tolerance during the process of discernment of the Spirit’s stirrings.<sup>49</sup> Second, Rahner suggests that the gifts of the Spirit ought to operate in an orderly way. In fact, the authenticity of the various stirrings of the Spirit will be evident in their conformity to the order prescribed by authority.<sup>50</sup> Although Rahner does not clarify this proposition either, he reveals an important ecclesial factor that informs our quest for his understanding of charismatic harmony: particular contours of authority. By authority, Rahner refers to the charismatically constituted hierarchy of the church. He argues that by virtue of its dual structure, the church possesses both monarchial and democratic elements.<sup>51</sup> He explains the

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<sup>46</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 52.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 57.

<sup>48</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 74.

<sup>49</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 75.

<sup>50</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 54.

<sup>51</sup> Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 88.

coexistence of both by saying that while the pope and the episcopate do not hold the *ultimate* authority in the church, they constitute the *supreme* authority in the church.<sup>52</sup> Yet this authority vested in them is not above the whole system; it is part of the church as an open system. The democratic elements in the church, on the other hand, “can never stand in fundamental contradiction to the ecclesiastical authority which gives it social form and structure.”<sup>53</sup> However, the ecclesiastical order in and of itself does not guarantee harmony, because the “bureaucratic routine” is always in danger of becoming an end in itself.<sup>54</sup> Thus, to avoid potential stifling of the Spirit, the church needs to rethink its view of ecclesial obedience. Because the church is an open and democratic system, obedience in the church must entail “mutual influence and interdependence between those vested with authority and those who are ‘subordinate’ to them.”<sup>55</sup> Because all in the church live in this dialectic of obedience between the Spirit-assisted authority of the hierarchy and the free charisma in the laity, the notion of obedience cannot be based on static and formalized principles.<sup>56</sup> Rather, the concrete dynamics of obedience must be constantly rediscovered afresh in any given concrete situation. John Sachs captures the essence of Rahner’s vision of authority and this dialectic of obedience in understanding ecclesial order, saying that “authority in the Church is the *power of responsibility to the Spirit* and ‘we should be ready to discern the Spirit who is the source of authority wherever, whenever, however, and in whomever the Spirit shows itself’.”<sup>57</sup> Sachs’ helpful interpretation still leaves unclear the intricacies of the actual process of discerning the dynamics of authority in any concrete situation. Rahner, however, provides a rule of thumb, not as a criterion of discernment, but for situations of *status*

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<sup>52</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 69.

<sup>53</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 73.

<sup>54</sup> Rahner, *Dynamic Element*, 52.

<sup>55</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 95.

<sup>56</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 96.

<sup>57</sup> John Randall Sachs, “Do Not Stifle the Spirit!: Karl Rahner, the Legacy of Vatican II, and Its Urgency for Theology Today,” *CTSP* 51 (1996): 31 (emphasis added).

quo: “it is the official institutions that have the last word ... so that our obedience is due to them.”<sup>58</sup> Yet this rule of the last word should not be taken in the sense of final settlement of charismatic tensions. In other words, the rule of the last word does not assume the unchangeability of a decision or permanent abrogation of the dialectic of obedience. Instead, the dialectic and its outcomes will have to be discerned afresh in every new generation.<sup>59</sup> Rahner’s own words capture best the interplay of love and the dialectic of obedience as two key characteristics of the charismatic harmony:

Each one must have an anxious conscience about his own poverty and deficiency in charismatic gifts. Each one must be ready to pay heed to the gift of another, even when he himself does not possess it. Obedience must not drive out the courage of self-responsibility, nor, conversely, must the courage of one’s own convictions drive out obedience.<sup>60</sup>

And thirdly, embracing charismatic tension while fostering charismatic harmony requires genuine openness to the will of God, both by those who hold an office and those who do not.<sup>61</sup> This can only be achieved through a posture of genuine prayer by all.<sup>62</sup> The key to unity is thus in spirituality rather than in precepts.<sup>63</sup> It is in the atmosphere of genuine discussion where all three elements of charismatic harmony find their place and where the truth of the Spirit comes to light.<sup>64</sup> Sachs, speaking of the timeless legacy of Rahner, captures this well:

It is in the often tedious and sometimes painful process of listening and arguing that the truth comes to light. To short-circuit this process simply by an appeal to authority is subversive of authority and quite possibly subversive of truth. Authentic discernment of Spirit requires an atmosphere of freedom for inquiry and experimentations, an attitude of

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<sup>58</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 96. Rahner also assumes that discernment of spirits is bound up with ecclesiastical authority. See Karl Rahner, *Visions and Prophecies*, trans. Charles Henkey and Richard Strachan, QD 10 (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), 27; Rahner, “Apostolate,” 229. However, he neither undergirds this official capacity for discernment nor offers any guidelines on how this discernment is actually practiced in concrete situations.

<sup>59</sup> Rahner, “Observations,” 96-97.

<sup>60</sup> Rahner, “Do Not Stifle,” 86.

<sup>61</sup> Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, 106.

<sup>62</sup> Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, 106.

<sup>63</sup> Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, 106.

<sup>64</sup> Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, 104.

patience and a willingness to engage in ongoing dialogue, even in the wake of a decision by the magisterium.<sup>65</sup>

For Rahner, the charismatic tension in the church is thus not an aspect of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit which reflects the church's imperfections and something that simply needs to be resolved. Rather, it should be embraced as the Spirit's *modus operandi*. Any prescribed means of de-escalation of tensions inexorably, Rahner would argue, leads to suppression of the charismatic element in the church and consequently the dynamic nature of the church. Although it appears that Rahner himself swings between the institution and the Spirit, especially when he appeals to authority, and remains unclear about the criteria of their relationship, I agree with Lennan that Rahner does it intentionally, i.e., that his understanding of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit demands this.<sup>66</sup> A downside of this position, however, is that Rahner seems to suggest, as pointed out by Leo Dullart, that "once the Spirit is summoned, human conflicts dissolve in a magical way."<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, Rahner's conception of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit in terms of incalculable dynamism, which presupposes diversification of charismata and thus implies democratization of authority as well as unceasing practice of communal discernment, is unquestionably his greatest pneumatological contribution.

### 4.3. Conclusion

Rahner's understanding of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit, encapsulated in his notion of the Spirit as an element of incalculable dynamism in the church, informs and conditions the very ontology of the church as well as its capacity for and practice of communal discernment. Permeated with the pneumatic dynamism, the being of the church is inevitably characterized by

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<sup>65</sup> Sachs, "Do Not Stifle," 32-33.

<sup>66</sup> Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, 108.

<sup>67</sup> Leo Dullart, *Kirche Und Ekklesiologie* (Münich: Kaiser, 1975), 177 as quoted in Lennan, *Ecclesiology*, 108.

transcendental incalculability, harmonious charismatic tension, and democratic governance. This pneumatic ontological structure consequently conditions the church's capacity for and practice of communal discernment in several ways. The first observation has to do with the relevance of Rahner's contribution to the ecumenical discussion on communal discernment. Although the Catholic "Spirit and institution" discussion, to which Rahner contributes, may *prima facie* appear irrelevant to the non-hierarchical churches, the contemporary trends reveal that many of those churches *de facto* operate institutionally, either by way of entrenched conservatism – staying on the course of "good old ways," safeguarded by their leadership – or by way of secular corporate models of executive leadership that assumes the role of vision casting and strategic organizational and missional planning. That the Spirit crafts the future of the church through all and thus needs to be discerned by all is a timeless and timely reminder to the whole church. Second, Rahner's explication of the dialectic of the charismatic and the institutional, i.e., the leadership – however we understand the nature of its structure – and the laity, provides the most convincing theological underpinning of what transpired in Acts 15. That is, in the process of communal discernment leaders are vested with authority not in a sense of exclusive decision making but in terms of responsibility to facilitate the dynamism of the Spirit in the church, however and wherever it appears. Third, the charismatic constitution of the church that assumes a necessary ecclesial tension implies that no person or distinguishable group in the church fully represents the will of God. It is thus in the dynamic of the tension created by diverse impulsions of the Spirit that the truth is revealed to all. Two practical implications follow: First, although unanimity may be an outcome of communal discernment, it should not be sought in uniformity. The aim of the process is not uniformity but harmony of the Spirit's impulsions. Second, faithfulness to one's own charisms as well as listening to others in the context of genuine

discussion is an inevitable demand of Spirit-imbued communal discernment. And finally, the movement of the Spirit in communal discernment is neither fully original nor fully traditional. The ecclesial ontology of the Spirit is characterized by the dialectic of consistency with what came earlier in the church, and an unpredictable and incalculable originality.

#### **4.4. Excursus: The Second Vatican Council and Communal Discernment**

Having examined the theological underpinnings that shape the Roman Catholic articulation of pneumatological ecclesiology and its implications for the practice of communal discernment, in this brief excursus we turn to a case study of a contemporary practice of communal discernment in the Roman Catholic tradition: the Second Vatican Council. What can we learn from Vatican II about the practice of communal discernment?

Vatican II was a general council of the Roman Catholic Church convoked by Pope John XXIII on 25 January 1959. It was held from 11 October 1962 to 8 December 1965.<sup>68</sup> It was unique compared to the previous councils in that it was not convoked as a response to a crisis. The pope intended it to be a “flash of sublime illumination” – a phrase he often used – to the complex post-war world the church found itself in. The pope also referred to it as a new Pentecost. In Giuseppe Alberigo’s interpretation, “[t]he reference to Pentecost ... brought to the forefront the action of the Holy Spirit rather than that of the pope, the Church, or even the Council assembly itself.”<sup>69</sup> The council was thus conceived by the pope as a venture into an act of seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>68</sup> The official sessions were held in four periods: (1) Oct 11-Dec 8, 1962; (2) Sept 29-Dec 4, 1963; (3) Sept 14-Nov 21, 1964; (4) Sept 14-Dec 8, 1965.

<sup>69</sup> Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, trans. Matthew Sherry (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 119.

To the surprise of many in the Catholic Church, the pope, who at the time had already been firmly settled in the Catholic consciousness as the infallible authority of the church, wanted the process to include the voices of the entire church. The council thus mustered a staggering three thousand delegates from all around the world, including more than twenty-five hundred Catholic bishops, theologians, and lay members, as well as representatives of non-Catholic observers. Vatican II was thus also conceived as an act of communal discernment of the whole church, not just of the Catholic authorities.

The inclusive nature of the council was also evident in the agenda and the structure of the proceedings. The agenda was not set by the pope; rather, it was drafted in the preparatory stage of the council by a committee that gathered opinions from bishops from all around the world about the issues that in their opinion needed attention by the church. In the second stage, the committee sifted through the materials and integrated them into texts to be presented at the opening of the council. The pope circulated the order of the council, which consisted in two levels of activity: first, there were plenary sessions (general congregations), where documents were presented, discussed by all, emended, and voted on; second, there were working groups consisting of eleven commissions that explained and expanded on the documents which embodied the discussion of the council and their decisions. Each session began with a mass and the enthronement of the book of the gospels. These liturgical acts, in John O'Malley's words, "were not superficial ornaments. They pointed to the conviction that the council was above all a sacred gathering."<sup>70</sup>

It is important to emphasize the intended and prevailing spirit of the council's process of discernment. The council radiated with a conciliar rather than hierarchically authoritarian spirit. O'Malley says that the process breathed with a style "less autocratic and more collaborative, a

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<sup>70</sup> John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 32.

style willing to seek out and listen to different viewpoints and to take them into account, a style eager to find common ground with ‘the other’, a style open and above board, a style less unilateral in its decision making....”<sup>71</sup> In Rahner’s witness, the pope worked with the assembly “as with the community of his brother bishops, not as a random gathering of ‘yes-men’.”<sup>72</sup> Although it took some time for the bishops to come out of their pre-conciliar mentality of passivity and assume a participatory role in the decision making, the council eventually vibrated with lively discussions, deep disagreements – to the point that harsh words were exchanged – and an overt formation of the majority and minority groups. That the atmosphere of true discussion was sought and maintained and not compromised for the sake of expedience of the process is evident in the fact that no conclusive decisions were made in the first period of the council.

Yet the council’s outcomes are admirable. It promulgated sixteen official documents. Despite the overt tensions and disagreements that characterized the process, the decisions were reached by almost complete unanimity. Rahner helpfully characterizes this outcome, saying that the astonishing thing about the council was not *that* unanimity was reached, but that it was reached in *freedom*.<sup>73</sup> His reflection on this aspect of the outcome and what it requires is worth quoting in full:

It is not just to be assumed that this sort of unanimity can be expected in the present day. One can easily get the impression nowadays that freedom has caused, at least in the field of theology, discord, and that only by the show of authority can one make any appreciable advances in thought or activity. But the Council demonstrated that with the grace of God this is not necessarily so. Naturally, such unity in freedom is achieved only with great effort, and here and there a step on the way may seem to be merely a bad compromise. But this is actually the way unity in freedom is realized.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> O’Malley, *Vatican II*, 308.

<sup>72</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Church After the Council*, trans. Davis C. Herron and Rodelinde Albrecht (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1966), 13.

<sup>73</sup> Rahner, *Shape of the Church*, 14.

<sup>74</sup> Rahner, *After the Council*, 14.

Rahner's insight thus reveals that true unity in diversity in communal discernment requires the atmosphere of freedom.

The witnesses to the council reveal two other outcomes that call for our attention. First, Alberigo writes that at the conclusion of the council there was a "peaceful atmosphere among the bishops" as well as "tranquility among the faithful..."<sup>75</sup> The unity of the church in its decisions was thus also characterized by peace in the main actors as well as in those who received the decisions. And second, participation in the process has had a lasting spiritual impact on many bishops.<sup>76</sup> Alberigo writes that the experience "influenced their personalities and even brought about a few fairly surprising 'conversions'."<sup>77</sup> Some bishops later wrote that the council was a spiritual event so much so that it demanded a radical modification of their approach to their ministry as bishops.<sup>78</sup> The outcome of the process of discernment was thus not just a decision, but a communal and personal experience of transformation. Alberigo describes well the overall spirit and the outcome of the process:

The pastoral nature of Vatican II and its efforts toward renewal lent a powerful significance to the participation of bishops, theologians, and observers. This induces one to find in the event a profound and commonly shared experience. It is a sharing that transcended the frequently narrow and formal limitations of the relationships among the ecclesiastics. Hundreds of persons who were totally unfamiliar to one another, who sometimes mistrusted one another, and who were of different ages, experience, language, and culture found themselves giving life to a common endeavour with implications far beyond the elaboration and approval of specific decisions. From this point of view the Council was a masterpiece of the Catholic bishops and of the subtle workings of the Holy Spirit.<sup>79</sup>

Although in the opinion of the majority of scholars, far from being a perfect event, Vatican II teaches us six important things about the practice of communal discernment. First, communal

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<sup>75</sup> Alberigo, *Vatican II*, 116.

<sup>76</sup> Alberigo, *Vatican II*, 118.

<sup>77</sup> Alberigo, *Vatican II*, 118.

<sup>78</sup> Alberigo, *Vatican II*, 118.

<sup>79</sup> Alberigo, *Vatican II*, 128.

discernment is facilitated best with a clear structure and agenda. Second, a truly inclusive process of discernment is hard work and takes time. Third, deep disagreements and tensions belong to the nature of communal discernment; in fact, they are a necessary path to true unity in decision. Fourth, unanimity is a true sign of unity in decision only when it is reached in freedom and peace. Fifth, corporate prayer and worship is an appropriate atmosphere for seeking the guidance of the Spirit. And sixth, being a spiritual event, we may expect that communal discernment will result not only in a decision, but in a communal experience of God which is corporately and personally transformative.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, we have theologically reflected on the subject of communal discernment. Our discussion was located in the theological field of pneumatological ecclesiology. Concretely, we have described theological aspects of the ecclesial ontology of the Holy Spirit with a particular attention as to how it informs the church's capacity for and practice of communal discernment. Throughout the study, we have seen that a theological description of the ecclesial ontology of the Spirit shows us how the Spirit's ontic being interpenetrates with and conditions both the very ontology of the church and its capacity for communal discernment. In what follows, I offer a synthesis of the conclusions we proposed throughout the study. The synthesis is organized around the questions of the nature and the criteria of communal discernment. I will conclude the thesis with suggestions for further research on the subject.

### **a. The Nature of Communal Discernment**

The study has shown that the ecclesial ontology of the Holy Spirit shapes the very ontology of the church. At Pentecost, the church was constituted by the Holy Spirit as the prophetic and charismatically interdependent community of equal persons in communion with God and one another, living at the intersection of history and eschatology. This ontology of the church manifests itself in the epicletic gathering, which is characterized by incalculable dynamism, the unity of peace, worship, joy, love, prayer, and allegiance to the lordship of Christ. Its teleological orientation is a mature, interdependent, and unified body of Christ.

This ontological constitution inevitably conditions the nature of the church's practice of communal discernment. First, communal discernment belongs to the context of the epicletic

gathering. It is in this context that the church existentially realizes its true ontology and truly acts as the church. Second, because of its interdependent charismatic constitution and existence, two specific implications about the nature of communal discernment follow: first, it is by nature a communally interdependent and relational activity characterized by open discussion and mutual hearing, as well as an inevitable tension, whereby the sense of God's will is not situated in any single part of the body, but in the dynamic of the tension; second, personal and corporate religious experiences and their narratives inevitably belong to the activity of communal discernment. Third, because of the church's being as communion both with God and among its members, communal discernment is by nature a process whereby the church gains a deeper awareness of God and his love for its members as well as their love for one another. In other words, communal discernment is not a mere transfer of information which we interpret as "God's will"; it is a communal encounter with the divine. Consequently, fourth, communal discernment is a personally and communally transformative activity. Fifth, communal discernment affords a deeper understanding of God's will mediated in Scripture. And finally, because the church's ontology is characterized by both historical and eschatological elements, communal discernment is always provisional. That is, it is akin to a vision seen dimly. For that reason, communal discernment is ultimately by nature an activity characterized by humility.

The foregoing description of the nature of communal discernment and the two examples we have explored – the Jerusalem Council and the Second Vatican Council – inform the following seven reflections and suggestions with regard to the practice of communal discernment. First, communal discernment is first and foremost an ecclesial gathering, and should include, as much as possible, participation of the entire church. Second, leaders of the church can play an important role in the process of discernment by acting as facilitators who lead

the church toward its corporate sense of God's will. Third, communal discernment is best approached with a clear structure and agenda that provide ample time and space for the participation of the entire church. Fourth, communal discernment should be imbued in prayer and worship. Fifth, an open discussion that does not aim to stifle tensions and disagreements should be the dominant mode of the process. Sixth, the process should allow a space for testimonies of religious experiences as well as charismatic elements. And seventh, decisions are proposed and made tentatively and held loosely.

### **b. Toward a Criteriology of Communal Discernment**

Our study informs the following sketch of criteria for communal discernment. The authenticity of the outcomes of the church's practice of communal discernment can be assessed in five ways. First, the church's interpretation of God's will will be in accordance with Scripture. The accordance is not necessarily evident in formal equivalences ("proof-texting"), but in harmony with Scriptural revelation. Second, the authenticity of communal discernment can be confirmed by outcomes that restore and/or maintain the unity of peace and love in the church. Third, the outcomes of communal discernment will in some way reflect the church's allegiance to and glorification of the lordship of Christ. Fourth, unanimity in decision reflects its authenticity when it is reached in freedom and peace, and not by compelled uniformity of various contributions. And finally, given that the true ontology of the church is characterized by all the theological aspects that inform these criteria, no criterion can stand on its own. Concretely, each criterion qualifies and accompanies the others. Therefore, in sum, the church's interpretation of God's will will be characterized by outcomes that foster the church's ontological constitution in its entirety.

### **c. Suggestions for Further Research**

The particular theological approach I have employed in this study on the practice of communal discernment has opened up new vistas, raised some questions, and enabled me to see how the practice of communal discernment can be further explored. First, the study of communal discernment from the perspective of pneumatological ecclesiology could be further nuanced and expanded in three ways. First, my analysis of the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic understanding of pneumatological ecclesiology relied on the theological contributions of their respective representatives. A synthesis of the internal theological conversation within those traditions would more comprehensively reflect the doctrinal contributions of those traditions than any one of their representatives can. Second, an ecumenical analysis of pneumatological ecclesiology would be greatly enriched by the inclusion of the contributions of other Christian traditions, as well as the voices of the Global South, feminist and other marginal voices, all which have creatively and substantially challenged classical doctrinal formulations. And third, the study could be further expanded by offering what I have been sketching throughout this thesis but never fully constructed, that is, a comprehensive (systematic) pneumatological ecclesiology that is attentive to the church's capacity for communal discernment. Such a project would be a natural next step of my preliminary contribution. I hope this thesis has painted in broad brush strokes what such an ecclesiology would look like.

Second, a theological study of communal discernment could also be explored within the field of theology of religions. Scholars in several Christian traditions have come to terms with the fact that the presence and work of the Holy Spirit cannot be limited to Christianity and have engaged in a fruitful theological discussion on the pneumatology of religions. Even a brief glance into those discussions reveal that the theological issues of such a pneumatology is

inextricably bound to the question of discernment of spirits. Questions and theological articulations that come from the field of pneumatology of religions would further inform and enrich our understanding of the Spirit's role in communal discernment.

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