Models of Spiritual Discernment

BY HELEN H. CEPERO

How do we know which thoughts, feelings, decisions, and actions in our lives lead to God? What signs mark the journey? Such thorny questions are addressed in the four books reviewed here.

Spiritual discernment, at its heart, is the art of distinguishing what leads to God from what does not. But how do we know which thoughts, feelings, decisions, and actions in our lives lead to God and which lead away from God? How do we know when we are following the pathway toward God? What signs mark the journey? Can we develop the art of spiritual discernment, or is such wisdom a gift of God to be received rather than mastered? These and other thorny questions about spiritual discernment are addressed in the four recent books reviewed here.

In *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 428pp, $31.99), theologian David F. Ford explores scriptural teachings on wisdom with a focus on "listening" to those who suffer. He offers a careful re-reading of biblical texts concerned with living in the Spirit and loving God. Then he takes these insights and looks at them in the light of three contemporary settings: wisdom gained through interfaith dialogue among Christians, Jews, and Muslims; interdisciplinary wisdom sought within the modern university; and interpersonal wisdom found through living with people who have learning disabilities in the L'Arche communities founded by Jean Vanier.

Ford proposes that the cry for wisdom is posed in various "moods." Often Christian wisdom and discernment are expressed in the "indicative" mood ("This is good news…") or "imperative" mood ("Do this…"), but in Scripture they are also modeled through desiring, questioning, and exploring possibilities, which he calls the "optative," "interrogative," and "subjunctive" moods respectively.

For example, Ford helps us "re-read" the cry of Job seeking to love God for God's sake by juxtaposing the scriptural story with the horrific cries of the victims of the *Shoah*, or Holocaust, which are captured in Michael O'Siadhail's heart-rending poetry:

> Pyjama ghosts tramp the shadow of a chimney.
> Shorn and nameless. Desolation's mad machine
> With endless counts and selections. *Try to* see! (p. 95)

Living in the Spirit, according to Ford, requires us not only to carefully re-examine Scripture, but also to share life together in worship and prayer, with a vulnerability that reflects the cross of Jesus Christ. Loving the God of wisdom in this way leads us into an almost mystical union with God, which is characterized less by certainty than by a joyful desire for God and life in the world. Ford longs for a new way of doing theology, which leads to Christian wisdom that embraces the person holistically, body and soul, and is altogether informed by scriptural knowledge and ecclesial practice.

With this wide understanding of Christian wisdom, Ford outlines how a friendship among Jews, Christians, and Muslims would allow us to see multiple meanings in the biblical text. In the university context he examines the possibility of dialogue among academic disciplines that can bring unified wisdom and mutual holistic understanding.

Finally, he commends the friendships in L'Arche communities, where wisdom is characterized by mutual love. Members listen to the cries of each individual—both persons with disabilities and the able-bodied—across faith traditions and people groups. They find joy, celebration, and blessing in life together as they learn to love God for God's sake and love one another for each other's sake. They "re-read" shared scriptures in the context of their spiritual friendship, and this reading makes possible an ecumenical life filled with joy.

The next three books, in their own way, spell out some of these key discernment practices found in *Christian Wisdom*.

In *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004, 276 pp., $20.00), editors Gary W. Moon and David G. Benner bring together representatives of seven Christian traditions—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Reformed, Wesleyan-Holiness, Social Justice, and Pentecostal/Charismatic—to

address the topics of spiritual direction, authentic transformation, indicators of mature spirituality, and the relationships among spiritual direction, psychotherapy, and pastoral counseling. Each writer provides a guide to further readings from his or her tradition. In a second part of the anthology, other writers examine the relationships among the practices of spiritual direction, psychotherapy, and pastoral counseling. The final essay in the book, "Three Voices, One Song," is an extended three-way discussion of a case study by a representative of each of these three soul care-giving disciplines.

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Moon and Benner commissioned these chapters in response to what they describe as a cry from Christians in all traditions to experience intimacy and friendship with God. The editors' first goal is to help readers "understand and experience more of the journey of authentic transformation," which is "becoming aware that God is everywhere and learning to practice his presence and yield to his transforming grace" (p. 14). Another goal is to begin an interdisciplinary dialogue that will bring clarity and understanding to the process of spiritual formation in each faith tradition.

As they respond to questions posed by the editors, each of the writers in the first section highlights their tradition's distinctive perspectives on spiritual formation and direction. Yet similarities appear that seem to offer common ground. Each one sees the Holy Spirit as the primary spiritual director, teacher, and guide, but each one also longs for human guidance in the journey to better discern the presence and voice of God. Regarding the nature of spiritual maturity, there is a surprising agreement across traditions that the model is Jesus Christ and his way of love—to be spiritually mature is to "put on Christ," to conform oneself to Jesus and bear similar spiritual fruits in one's life.

Clear differences in approach, practice, and ultimate goals emerge in the final discussion of the case study by a spiritual director, pastoral counselor, and psychotherapist. But as each person speaks out of her expertise and responds to the other two, there is a remarkable sense of friendship and collegiality. For instance, psychotherapist Theresa Clement Tisdale tells a colleague she is "struck by what was referred to earlier as harmonies and melodies created by our dialogue. While our voices are distinct, they create a song I found very deep and rich" (p. 236).

Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls encourages us to respond to the cry of the wider Christian faith community for true transformation by

examining our particular traditions—not to erase the important differences among them, but to find commonalities and overarching direction. It promotes dialogue among the three soul care-giving disciplines based on their similar goals of achieving the spiritual well-being that grows from an authentic relationship with God. This book helps us see how soul care is understood and practiced in the larger Christian world and among related disciplines of spiritual direction, pastoral counseling, and psychotherapy.

Jeanette A. Bakke's *Holy Invitations: Exploring Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000, 288 pp., $19.99) illustrates the practice of spiritual direction through a series of dialogues. In the first part she describes the shape and content of spiritual direction and discusses how to select a spiritual director and prepare for direction. Part two is an overview of subjects that are frequently discussed in spiritual direction, while part three speaks to both the benefits and difficulties that arise in the spiritual direction process.

In spiritual direction, Bakke says, the primary focus should be on God. The director and directee listen together not to themselves but for God, in order to discern the ways God is moving in their experience. Rather than talking about themselves, they talk about God. As they become more aware of God in their lives, they can better mirror God's desires for them. This is why Bakke insists that the primary spiritual director is the Holy Spirit.

Bakke distinguishes between constantly turning toward God in the context of faith and listening for God in the context of our life. In the latter case, we may encounter God in ways that surprise and overwhelm us, or discover a deep longing for more of God. Discernment, or wise decision-making, always involves our surrender to God's love. Wise decisions, she concludes, will be congruent with Christ-like attitudes and behaviors, aligned with scriptural teachings and values, grow out of our personal history and relationship with God, and exhibit fruit of the Spirit through transformed relationships with others. As we are open to God's invitation to join his way, we will enjoy peaceful inner stability and authenticity (p. 229).

Marva Dawn's *Joy in Divine Wisdom: Practices of Discernment from Other Cultures and Christian Traditions* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006, 320 pp., $21.95), with its more anecdotal style, employs stories to introduce Christian wisdom practices across cultures. She begins with God's grace, but emphasizes how personal virtues are a means of accepting grace and discerning wisdom.

Dawn suggests that wisdom and discernment develop through an upward spiral of character formation that adds and builds at every turn.

The more we seek these virtues, the easier and more likely it is that we will make choices that reflect Christian values. The more we are able to make godly choices, the more we become people who will discern godly attitudes and habits. The spirals become interwoven when we are part of communities that reflect God's character.

The search for those virtue-forming communities takes the author back into Scripture and to Christian communities of discernment around the world. Dawn is especially critical of North American Christianity for being so culturally infected with individual materialism that uniquely Christian wisdom is rarely inculcated in its church communities.

Integral to this upward spiral of character is the willingness to suffer, a willingness which Dawn understands to be rooted in the character of God. This chosen vulnerability will not be undertaken unless we are willing also to "love God for God's own sake and not for what we can get out of him" (p. 211). The spiral of character and discernment ends in joy and celebration.

Although Dawn tends to speak primarily out of the indicative and imperative mood more familiar to evangelical Christianity, I see several similarities of practice with previous models of discernment: the importance of re-reading Scripture among culturally diverse Christian communities, loving God for God's sake, listening to the cries of suffering and being willing to suffer with others, building character that embodies Christ-like attitudes and choices, and participating in discerning communities that are joyful and can bless others.

None of the four books reviewed here gives a simple model of discernment, but together they give us a clear sense of the identifying characteristics of Christian understanding. Each seeks a model of discernment and Christian wisdom that is ultimately transformative because it is rooted in an awareness of God's certain presence with us.

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