

**A CRITICAL REVIEW OF
SCRIPTURE AND DISCERNMENT:
DECISION MAKING IN THE CHURCH**

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Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson is a respected religious writer, speaker, and critic. Born in Park Falls, Wisconsin, Dr. Johnson received his primary education from both the public and parochial school systems.¹ Dr. Johnson spent five years as a Benedictine monk before receiving his B.A. in Philosophy in 1967 from Notre Dame Seminary. Dr. Johnson then went to earn his M.A. in Religious Studies from Indiana University and a Master of Divinity from St. Meinrad School of Theology in 1970. Finally, Dr. Johnson received his Doctorate in New Testament from Yale in 1976. During and after completion of his education, Dr. Johnson taught at several schools, including St. Meinrad, St. Joseph Seminary College, Yale Divinity School, and Indiana University. Dr. Johnson is currently the R.W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Emory University and a Senior Fellow of the Emory Center for the Study of Law and Religion.²

Dr. Johnson has been writing since 1973 with the publication of his first book, *Teaching Religion to Undergraduates*. Since then, Dr. Johnson has published a total of twenty-two books on various religious topics, including several Biblical commentaries and rebuttals to the claims of the liberal Jesus Seminar. Dr. Johnson is a frequent lecturer

1 Wikipedia Contributors, "Luke Timothy Johnson," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Luke_Timothy_Johnson (accessed Nov. 6, 2007).

2 Emory University, "About Candler | Faculty: Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson," <http://candler.emory.edu/ABOUT/faculty/johnson.cfm> (accessed November 6, 2007).

at several universities and seminaries around the country, often representing a conservative rebuttal against the Jesus Seminar (Wikipedia Contributors).

With these auspicious credentials, Dr. Luke Johnson is quite qualified to pen insights on the topics found in his 1996 book, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*. In this short but dense book, Dr. Johnson lays out how Scripture should be used in the formation of decisions of faith, but that is not enough – Christians must also employ discernment in the formation of decisions because Scripture is intended to be left open to interpretation (and this interpretation is what keeps Scripture alive and relevant in the life of the Christian and the church).

In the first chapter, Dr. Johnson seeks to lay out a set of definitions, or “theoretical remarks” that form the basis for the arguments found in the balance of the book.³ Dr. Johnson begins his discourse by defining decisions making and groups, and then expands this definition to the church and the decisions made by the members of the church. Johnson begins by making a distinction between task and identity decisions: “task decisions concern the functions to be performed by the group,” while identity decisions involve questions of membership, discipline, and correction (Johnson, 14-15). The types of decisions a group makes, both task and identity, redefine the group and the group's function. Johnson also mentions how practices and identifications that are implicit within the group become explicit when faced with a challenge (whether from

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 13.

within or external to the group). This challenge requires a process of interpretation of both tradition and the voice of change in order to reach an appropriate decision (Johnson, 17).

After discussion of the challenges facing decision making within a group, Johnson expands his focus to the church as a group. The first challenge faced, is simply that of defining “the church,” because this definition can range “from the smallest gathering of two or three ... all the way to some cosmic understanding of church as ‘catholic’ or universal (Johnson, 21). Johnson, however, argues that one must first and primarily look at the church on the local level because that is the only place where a face to face church community can be found.

Within this communal church group, decisions must be made according to the groups' defining principals. Because the church is fundamentally a group built around faith, decisions of the group must be based upon faith. As for the “theology” of the church, Johnson claims that this is simply an expression of the faith that the group holds. (Johnson, 26). However, this expression of faith must be held by both the theologian and all other members of the group, or it is invalid (Johnson, 27).

After laying down the baseline definitions, Johnson moves into a discussion of the authority of the New Testament in the church. Johnson looks into what he refers to as a “midrashic model” of interpretation, wherein one seeks to “hear the various voices in all their conflicts and disagreements,” through which the text opens to new

interpretation and meanings. Johnson argues that Christians should seek to read the New Testament as a living conversation instead of seeking an “essential core” (Johnson, 39). Finally, the book turns to an investigation of sources of authority within the New Testament. These include the New Testament's ability to create an identity within a Christian community, its' empowerment of the reader, and a source of opinions that are open to the interpretation of the church.

In the third chapter, Dr. Johnson discusses the issue of literary diversity within the New Testament and what this means for theology based upon it. For most readers, the literary diversity of the New Testament is not a problem (and is often ignored). However, when attempting to construct a theology based upon the New Testament and firmly define the faith of the church, one must take a literal reading of the texts. Johnson argues that the problems of literary diversity in the New Testament should be seen more as a possibility to look at scripture in a more open and free light, leaving behind certain “idolatrous closures in order to embrace the freedom God offers us” (Johnson, 54). Theology should be continually changing, growing, and evolving with the lives of the Christians in the church. The diversity of the New Testament leaves it open to the creation of theology within the community of faith and this takes an important place in the discernment of God's Word (Johnson, 58).

Chapter four, Difficulties, begins Johnson's analysis of portions of the New Testament that address decision making amongst the church group. Johnson looks

mainly toward Paul's New Testament writings because Paul mainly speaks to the "life of the local assembly" and because Paul "seeks to delineate the theological implications of the church's common activity" (Johnson, 62). Through a survey of several sources, Johnson extrapolates that there is a clear need for continual discernment demonstrated through scripture because of the difficulty of defining the "impulses of the Spirit" (Johnson, 64). Johnson also mentions the historical trend of overlooking how a passage is delivered in light of what is said. This has been somewhat reversed in recent history, but the theological implications of this interpretive method have been overlooked. Johnson says that even though the factuality or historical authenticity of a passage may be questionable, the narrative can still hold important theological truths (Johnson, 73). Johnson argues that the literary structure of various passages in Luke are critical to the purpose. Christians should allow "the biblical narratives to speak to the narratives of our own experience and self-understanding ... to pose the critical and interpretive questions to our own practices and presuppositions" (Johnson, 79).

In the fifth chapter, *Decisions*, Johnson seeks to place the decision making process found within Acts into the framework of modern church decision making. Johnson looks at examples from Acts and how they illustrate the interplay between human decision and divine direction (Johnson, 82). Johnson then moves to four instances of decision making in the New Testament and expounds on the meaning of these passages. Finally, Johnson investigates the church decision making process

through the narratives related to the baptism of Cornelius and the upheaval that this caused within the early church and pulls in applications to today's church decisions.

In chapter six, *Discernment*, Johnson investigates some of the problems of discernment, such as improper use and claims of entrusting the church to something vague (Johnson, 110). Johnson argues that while there are dangers in improper use of discernment, it is much more dangerous to base the decisions of the church on something else. Johnson claims that edification should be the goal of all discernment, and that this edification should result in an increase of holiness in the church. Finally, Johnson looks at various implications of discernment for the church. These include the way in which “narratives of the faith are presented to the assembly” and the assumption that everyone is equal in all matters of faith (Johnson, 130).

Chapters seven and eight comprise Johnson's reflections on proper practice or application of discernment to the decisions of the church. Johnson begins by mentioning that discernment should first be used in “each believer's own search for God's will in the response of faith” (Johnson, 135). This must be carried on individually and by everyone within the church. To properly respond to promptings of the spirit, the Christian must be careful to look to the narratives of the Bible and thoughtfully apply these to the situation.

After recapping the basic premises of discernment, Johnson moves into a discussion of specific cases facing the church today. Johnson speaks first to the role of

women in the church. Through the symbolism of Scripture, the narratives of both men and women in the church and other testimony, the church should be able to discern an appropriate answer to this question. Secondly, Johnson looks at the question of homosexuality in the church. After looking to several passages of scripture and various narratives, Johnson once again leaves the reader with questions of how the church should proceed in it's decision on the case of homosexuality. Finally, Johnson looks at communal sharing of possessions by members of the church, where he again outlines various narratives to be used in proper discernment of the correct stewardship of what God has provided.

Johnson concludes the book with a brief chapter on ways to rethink church function and decision making in light of the arguments presented in the book. This can be accomplished through preaching and the group formation of theology. Preaching serves as a method of finding discernment, as the preacher tries to listen to the voices in the text and discern an answer to the question(s) posed. Christians must also learn to think theologically in groups. Because all decision making should be a function of every member of the group, it is imperative that the group determine it's belief or theology. As the group defines its theology, the process of discernment should become clear.

Dr. Johnson's book provides a refreshing look at not only why the church makes decisions but how we as Christians should interact with the decision making process both in the church and in their personal lives. The arguments presented are well formed

and presented in an impeccably logical structure that is easy to follow by even the most untrained reader. From the groundwork presented in the opening chapters of the book, most of the arguments are presented at such a fundamental level that it is nearly impossible to disagree with Dr. Johnson.

While I tend to agree with the majority of the thoughts presented within the book, there are a few points on which I am not completely convinced, but perhaps this is a matter of personal discernment. From the opening definitions, I agree with the definitions of group and group decision-making. The church is indeed a community of believers and as such, should follow the general form of group decision making.

Johnson does not give place to a hierarchy in church decision making, instead claiming that all decisions are to be made by the entire group as a whole. It is interesting to note that as Johnson defines the group-ness of the church, it would appear more as an exclusive institution than an open community, which seems to be quite separated from what I think of when speaking of the "church." With the church's open doors, what is to happen if a divergent group enters the church and gradually corrupts the decision making process? Of course this problem is solved by every member of the group having a real, living, personal relationship with Christ and continually seeking to define the church and appropriate its' decisions. However, this idealistic view of the typical member is just that – idealistic. In my experience of "church," most members are passive and detached. Of course this points to a much more serious problem within the

church.

Overall, Johnson's arguments are fantastic and provide a much needed change of perspective on the way that decisions should be formed within the church. If every Christian looked to the Bible to hear the discussion between the various narratives in Scripture, and then looked to apply them not only to decisions in their personal lives, but those of the church, I think you would find a much more vibrant and thriving church. Christians must learn to allow the Scripture to live and speak to them, then seek out application for the problems facing them.

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