

"Drills down deep into rock-bed practicalities for any community." —Richard J. Foster

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T O G E T H E R

A DISCERNMENT PRACTICE
FOR LEADERSHIP GROUPS



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INTRODUCTION

THE HEART OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

*Decision making has its limits. We make decisions.
Discernment is given. The Spirit of God, which operates
at the deepest levels of the human psyche and within
the mysteries of the faith community,
brings to the surface gifts of wisdom and guidance
which we can only discover and name.*

DANNY MORRIS AND CHUCK OLSEN



It was a conversation similar to many I have had with Christian leaders. An associate pastor from a large church was telling me that his church was going through a major transition as its leaders tried to respond to its growth. They had outgrown their facility (a good problem to have!), so the obvious question was, Will we add on to our facility or will we start another church?

As we talked, it became clear that this question was only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface larger questions lurked: What should be our emphasis now? Does our mission still capture what

we feel called to? Is our leadership structure effective for what is emerging now? Can we keep going at this pace, or will we burn ourselves out by adding a building campaign and more people and activities to our plates?

Sensing the weight this pastor was carrying, I probed a little deeper and asked, “How are you going about answering these questions together? Do you have a clearly articulated process for discerning God’s will in these matters?” A look of disorientation crossed his face as he realized that the answer to the question was no. After recovering a bit, he added, “But we always have a time of prayer at the beginning of our meetings!”

It was awkward, to say the least.

This pastor, like so many Christian leaders, had a vague sense that our approach to decision making should be different from secular models—particularly when we are leading a church or an organization with a spiritual purpose.¹ The problem is that we’re not quite sure what that difference is. In the absence of a clear consensus, that difference often gets reduced to an obligatory devotional (often viewed as irrelevant to the business portion of the meeting) *or* the perfunctory prayers that bookend the meeting. Sometimes even these well-meaning attempts at a spiritual focus get lost in the shuffle!

LEADERSHIP DISCERNMENT

Discernment, in a most general sense, is the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God—both in the ordinary moments and in the larger decisions of our lives. The apostle Paul says that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds *so that* we can discern what the will of God is, that which is good, acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2). This includes not only the mind of each individual but also the corporate mind.

Discernment literally means *to separate, to discriminate, to determine, to decide or to distinguish* between two things. Spiritual

discernment is the ability to distinguish or discriminate between good (that which is of God and draws us closer to God) and evil (that which is not of God and draws us away from God). There are many qualities that contribute to good leadership, but it is our commitment to *discerning and doing the will of God* through the help of the Holy Spirit that distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership.

Corporate or leadership discernment, then, is the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and activity of God *as a leadership group* relative to the issues we are facing, and to make decisions in response to that Presence. Spiritual leaders are distinguished by their commitment to discern important matters together so they can affirm a shared sense of God's desire for them and move forward on that basis.

It is hard to imagine that spiritual leadership could be about anything *but* seeking to know and do the will of God, and yet many leadership groups do not have this as their clear mandate and reason for existence. This 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?

Discernment together as leaders, on the other hand, opens us to an entirely different reality—the wisdom of God that is beyond human wisdom and is available to us as we learn how to open ourselves to it (1 Cor 2:6-16). This approach to leadership presents unique challenges because it requires us to move beyond reliance on human thinking and strategizing to a place of deep listening and response to the Spirit of God within and among us. This is not to dismiss what human wisdom and strategic thinking have to offer us. Our ability to think things through and apply reason to our decision making is a gift from God; however, the Scriptures are clear that human wisdom and the wisdom of God are not the

same thing. Part of becoming more discerning is the ability to distinguish between the two (1 Cor 1:18-31).

One of the challenges to leadership discernment is that it can seem somewhat subjective and even mystical, which doesn't always go over too well with hard-nosed business people and pragmatists—those who often make up boards and other leadership groups. It is one thing to rely on what feels like a more subjective approach when it pertains to our personal life, but it feels much riskier when our decisions involve large budgets, other people's financial investments, the lives of multiple staff, reports to high-powered boards and serving a “customer base” (congregation or organization) with varying levels of expectation. And yet many leaders today are longing for a way of leading that is more deeply responsive to the will of God than to the latest ideas from a *New York Times* bestseller. We wonder, *Is there a trustworthy process that enables Christian leaders to actively seek God relative to decisions we are making?*

The answer is a resounding yes! and it is why I have written this book—to provide practical guidance for leaders and leadership teams who want to enter more deeply into the process of corporate discernment as a way of life in leadership.

Personal Reflection

*How do you respond to the idea that discernment is what distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership?
How would you describe the way your leadership group makes decisions currently?*

A ONE-STOP SHOP FOR LEADERSHIP GROUPS

While there are many books on personal discernment and a few resources on corporate discernment, this book is designed to be a

one-stop-shop guide for leadership groups who wish to become a community for discernment. The process involves (1) preparing individual leaders for discernment, (2) becoming a community for discernment at the leadership level and (3) engaging an actual process for discerning God's will together as leaders. This integration of spiritual transformation, community and discernment is based in part on Romans 12:2, in which Paul establishes a strong cause-and-effect relationship between spiritual transformation and the ability to discern and do the will of God in the context of the new community of believers gathered in Rome: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, *so that* you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (emphasis added).

For the purposes of this book I have not made a strong distinction between churches and Christian ministry organizations because I believe that whenever and wherever Christians gather in Christ's name to carry out his purposes in the world, we are the body of Christ. As an expression of Christ's presence on earth there should be something about what we do and how we do it that is distinctly spiritual. Thus, when I use the word *church* or *community*, I am referring to any group of Christians who gather in the name of Christ and are seeking to be responsive to Christ's purposes in the world. Whenever Christians gather we are, at the deepest level of reality, the community of Jesus (Mk 3:34-35), and we have the opportunity to make decisions in a way that reflects this reality. This book is intended, then, for leadership groups in churches and Christian organizations who are ready to be more intentional about becoming a spiritual community that exists to discern and do the will of God.

PREPARATION AND PROCESS

One of the things I have learned in my own practice of corporate discernment, and also in working with others, is that *the preparation*

is *actually more important than the process*. If leaders and communities of leaders are prepared at the levels put forth in this book, discernment will happen even without a process. Conversely, if leaders are not prepared on the levels described here, there is a good chance discernment won't happen even when they engage the process; there are too many human dynamics that will get in the way. *That's why two-thirds of the book is about preparation and one-third is about the actual practice of leadership discernment*. It is also why the book is designed to function on two levels at once—to create space for each person's *personal* journey of transformation and growth in discernment, while at the same time providing guidance for the *group process* of leadership discernment. Thus, you will find questions for personal reflection throughout each chapter, indicated by a gray box; then, when you convene as a group, there is an exercise for processing and practicing together at the end of each chapter.

Becoming a community for discernment at the leadership level will not happen by accident because there are so many internal and external forces at work pulling us in other directions. What exactly is involved in shaping a group of leaders into a group who can together discern God's will?

First, a leadership group needs to have a *shared understanding* of what discernment is, a *shared conviction* that discernment is the heart of spiritual leadership, and a *shared affirmation* that discerning and doing the will of God is how they intend to lead. This in itself is no small thing.

Often, when individuals are invited to serve as elders, deacons or board members in churches and organizations, the definition of spiritual leadership is assumed or (at best) it is very general, and the expectations for what that means are unclear and ill-defined. That is why it is important to take time to establish a biblical understanding and vision for discernment as the heart of spiritual leadership. This includes understanding what the inner obstacles to such an approach might be, which is the focus of chapter one. If you

take time with this chapter, you can establish commitment to discernment as a group norm that will serve you well in the long run—far beyond your current leadership group. Even if your leadership group has rotating terms, the group identity, norms and expectations will have been clearly established so that those who rotate on know what they are joining and are shaped by that reality.

The rest of the book is structured in two parts: becoming a community for discernment, and exploring an actual practice for leadership discernment. Chapters one through three focus on *the spiritual preparation of each individual leader*. Chapters four through eight address *the preparation of the leadership group as a community for discernment*. And chapters nine to twelve *describe the process of leadership discernment*, giving you a chance to begin exploring it together.

To flesh out what the process of becoming a community for discernment looks like in the life of a group, I have included (starting in chapter two) the story of a group of leaders from Grace Church as a thread running throughout the book. The group itself is fictitious, and yet it is all true; everything that happens in the group is based on experiences I have had facilitating leaders from various churches and organizations in preparing for and practicing leadership discernment. This group discovers what we all have a chance to discover: that corporate discernment, like all spiritual disciplines, is a concrete practice that opens us to the surprising activity of God in our lives. And *that*, friends, is when leadership gets exciting!

A WORD OF PASTORAL CONCERN

I know that leaders today are tired. Tired from within because their ministry leadership is often carried out in the context of schedules that are too full and barely sustainable. Tired from without because of the continual burden of responsibility and expectation others place on them, and which they accept. Tired from

beyond because current models for ministry get them ramped up to do and be more than they can realistically do and be, and yet they are still trying.

This book is not meant to add to the exhaustion. Instead, it is meant to provide hope that there is a way of doing life in leadership that is not so complicated and heavy—a way of making decisions that does not have to rely on our own brilliance and ability to think hard, a way of being involved in God's work that ends up being more about God's work than our own. Discerning and doing the will of God together is that way.

So I invite you to relax. Read the book with your spiritual heart first, and start discerning now. Don't let your first question be, *Will this work in my setting?* as though the particularities of your setting—your organizational structure, your church polity, your problems, your people—are the norm against which all reality is to be measured. Instead, ask, *Is it good? Is there a sense of rightness to it? Does it draw me (and us) toward the good—toward God?* If your group can agree on that much, the rest will come.

Yes, there will be some new steps to learn, some new things to practice. Feel free to do *something* before you do *everything*; pick the one thing you think you can do, and do it with all your heart. God faithfully comes into any bit of space we create for him, and pretty soon the one thing you do before you do everything leads to another thing and another, until you find that leadership is not the burden it once was. It is a dance in which God leads and you follow. It is a wave that God sends, and you ride it. It is the breath of God, and you are the feather that floats upon it. It is a wind of the Spirit that blows, and you lift your sail to catch it. It is a powerful current that is already flowing, and *you* are in that flow.



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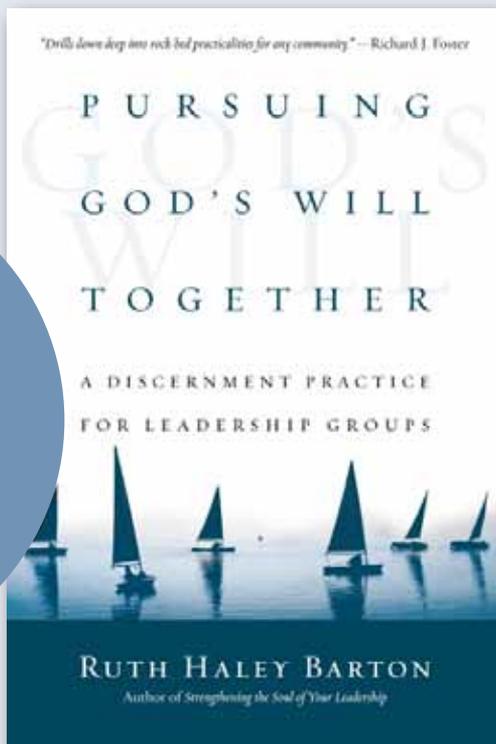
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