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An Interview with Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson

ROBERT WETZEL

Luke Timothy Johnson is the Robert W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Candler School of Theology, Emory University. He is the author of numerous books and articles, including *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. In this interview with the editor, Robert Wetzel, Dr. Johnson discusses his book, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*.



Decision Making in the Church was published in 1983. You describe it as “a book that seemed to force itself on me.” What concerns were uppermost on your mind that led you to write on this topic?

The book has its origins in two kinds of personal experiences. One was the experience as a young Benedictine monk in which I was involved in the theological battles of the second Vatican Council over the reform of the liturgy and of the monastic life. In those struggles, I found that the mode in which decisions were being made and my participation in them did not reflect what I would call a faithful discernment so much as a party divisiveness and the willingness to be right and not be righteous. That is, not to be in right relationship. So, we won. I was one of the theological liberals and we won, but it was a Pyrrhic victory because I think we won at the cost of upsetting something fundamental. And that is that we basically did not care how God had been at work in the lives of the older monks or the conservative monks. We didn’t want

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to listen. On the basis of historical criticism, we knew what was right, and so why should we listen to anybody’s personal experience? It took years for me to recognize how grievous a sin this was. So, one factor in my writing this book is an act of personal repentance. The second factor was my experience at Yale Divinity School as a young teacher, and my puzzlement at why my perception of how the New Testament should be taught was so different from that of my senior colleagues. I eventually realized that this was because I spent about twenty hours a week listening to students—listening to their stories. I thereby became deeply convicted of the power of story and

the power of personal testimony to reveal what God was doing. I thought God was doing something at that time in these students’ lives that we needed to take into account in our pedagogy. I developed a course called “Christian Existence of Life in the Spirit” which was deliberately geared toward allowing those students’

stories to become a part of the “stuff” of theological reflection. It was immediately after that course, which I found deeply convicting, in that I read the forty-page typed reflective journals of sixty students. It was immediately after that experience that I wrote *Decision Making in the Church*. I was convinced that the missing component in the way in which churches discern and decide is the discernment of what God is up to in human lives.

Scripture and Discernment, *Decision Making in the Church*, published in 1996, is an expansion of your original book. Why, after fourteen years, did you find yourself wanting to revisit the issues of *Decision Making in the Church*?

The first edition probably set an indoor record for going out of print. It was out of print so fast it left skid marks. It was reviewed slightly but sold practically no copies. So I thought of it as a kind of utopian essay that didn't have any hearers. Over the years, however, I heard from pastors that were in fact doing what I had called for in the book. There was a group of pastors in New Haven, Connecticut who informed me that on the basis of this book they were organizing themselves into groups in order to think and read together theologically as a basis for discernment. So, in 1996 I thought that it might in fact be possible to re-issue this book and address what seemed to be, if not an interest among general readers, an interest among pastors. And together with this, I had remained even more deeply

convinced that what I happened to learn from my own experience and from my reading of the Acts of the Apostles was important for others to hear. I should say also that the other place where this original version had struck a cord was among certain theologians. Gregory Jones, Stephen Fowler, Jeffrey Siker, and Richard Hayes saw in my reading of Acts 10 to 15 a provocative challenge that had genuine theological significance.

You described Scripture and Discernment as an exercise in practical theology. You say that practical theology is equally important and as serious as theoretical theology, but that doing practical theology requires quicker feet. In what sense must the practical theologian be more fleet-footed than the theoretical theologian?

I guess in just about every sense of the word. I've always thought that the built-in classicism of theological faculties that regards the classical disciplines as requiring a lot of brains and the so-called practical discipline as requiring a big heart as being completely wrong. Theory, after all, stands still. One can learn a theory and apply it. Or one can learn a theory and then develop its corollaries. Thinking on the faith of real life can bring real terror to the mind. Trying to elicit the theological significance of practice, of everyday life, trying to discern how God's voice might be the resonance of human voices simply requires a kind of theological agility or suppleness in order to be done well. That is a greater task than, for example, analyzing the writings of Karl Barth.

Which is why, I suppose, that all of us teaching in seminaries should have some experience in practical pastoral ministry.

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I think so. And that practical ministry might actually happen in the seminary itself. If the seminary conceives of itself and behaves as a community of faith, then clearly there are multiple opportunities for engaging the obscure and complex realities of the life of faith.

Even though you regard your book as an exercise in practical theology, you do not see it as a manual of instructions. Rather, you want to think with us about ways in which making decisions in the Christian church can be a theological process rather than following a manual of instructions. What would it be like for the leadership of the congregation to be involved in a theological process?

That's an excellent question. I think my only cavil with the question is when it says "the leadership in a congregation" because I conceive of this process as one in which the whole congregation takes part. It is not

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simply something that leaders or teachers or pastors engage in. And, in fact, it is extraordinarily important that the participation of all somehow be realized. But to get to the point of your question, I think that following a set of instructions is not the answer. There are a lot of how-to manuals on the shelves of religious bookstores: how to swell the ranks, how to raise money, how to do this and that. Books like this all begin with the premise that these problems have solutions. If we put tab A into slot A and tab B into slot B and fold on the dotted line, a certain result will follow. What I am envisioning begins with just the opposite premise. I am convinced that communities of faith are engaged in mystery rather than problem solving, that

to respond to the living God as a community of faith always involves obscurity. It always calls us into question, and does not enable us to distance ourselves from the process. So, what is required of us are different sets of capabilities or capacities than those of problem solving. If, in fact, our job is to heed the work of the Holy Spirit that goes before us, if our premise is that God is at work and that we are not making a casserole from a recipe but rather trying to respond in faith to the person of God who goes before us, then we need to develop skills of hearing, of listening, of speaking that are appropriate to the matter in which we are involved. And so this is entirely an inter-subjective enterprise.

The one whom we engage is a subject. Our learning is a learning that we do together. We need somehow to develop capacities for speaking and hearing that are appropriate to inter-subjective learning. So the model of a recipe book or the model of a manual of instructions would, in my opinion, be disastrous for this process.

You mentioned two biases in the introduction. The first one is that there ought to be some connection between what a group claims to be and the way it does things. Do I detect some irony here? Most churches would want to say "of course." You seem to be suggesting that it isn't necessarily so.

Yes, indeed. I do intend some irony, and I think that there are two things that should be said to this. Number one, I want to applaud corporations for acting like corporations. I mean, if there should be some consistency between the mission or the identity of a group in the way it makes decisions, then it's just utterly silly for a group that's constituted on the basis of making a profit, let's say a corporation, to invoke the divine will. I mean, that's just a confusion of categories—that's muddled thinking. But if we look at the church as a group of people who claim to be constituted on the basis of faith in the living God and seek to respond to God, then its actual decision-making should not be a reflection of the corporate model. Churches

may find themselves seeing the bottom line, efficiency, sheer precedent, and the desire to survive. A church may simply find itself seeking to keep the members at peace. Many of these factors go into *ecclesial* decision-making. As a Roman Catholic, I have seen this process in the work of the Vatican. The process of decision-making is one which is unusually transparent and public, or unusually transparent because it is so public. And we see, as Gary Wills has just brilliantly pointed out in his recent book, *Papal Sins*, how sometimes the Vatican can put itself in an absolutely ludicrous position because it wants to maintain the precedence of previous bad decisions in order not to erode its authority, little realizing, of course, that that very mulishness is what erodes its authority more than anything else.

And I suppose complementary to that is the way the corporate model for doing things ends up in a board of elders in an independent congregation.

Absolutely, absolutely.

The second bias is that when the church makes a decision, the Bible ought to somehow be involved. Very few churches would want to disagree with this. Are you suggesting that in practice many churches do not involve the Bible in decision-making?

Well yes, I think that's the case, and I expect that this is not necessarily the fault of the churches. I mean, as a biblical scholar, I take very seriously the charge of Jesus in the Gospels that the Pharisees, whom I think we represent in this case, have neither entered themselves nor allowed others to enter. In the era of modernity, biblical scholarship has far too seldom read scripture as a form of ecclesial hermeneutics and have disabled the church from reading scripture in a way that would be helpful to its decision process. So I think what is called for is not simply something that pastors need to do, but also that we need to do as teachers. But I think that if the Bible is being engaged or used in the decision process, it is probably not being used very well.

In proof-texting?

In proof-texting or being used selectively. And in part, of course, what I'm trying to get at is a process by which it is not so much whether we take a specific text at the moment of making decisions and make it work in the way that legal briefs do by citing cases, but rather that the process by which the church lives is one infused with what might be called a scriptural imagination. Hence the kinds of ways of assessing values, the ways of seeking about success and failure, the ways of thinking about what counts in the kingdom are shaped by biblical texts and the reading of biblical texts together at a deeper implicit level rather than the easy task of pulling out a text that proves the position that we reached on quite other grounds.

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When you speak of the church, you seem to be talking about the body of Christ in its most universal sense. Are you suggesting that the biblical model for decision-making you are proposing is applicable to both highly structured churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, and denominations composed of independent congregations?

Yes. What I mean by the church above all is the local ecclesia. I think that we tend to think ecclesiologically in terms of organization instead of organism. Our starting point ought to be with the organism, which is

I think that we tend to think ecclesiologically in terms of organization instead of organism. Our starting point ought to be with the organism, which is where two or three are gathered together in the name of Jesus.

where two or three are gathered together in the name of Jesus. So that every Roman Catholic parish, for example, is church. Every Baptist congregation is church in a Pauline sense and is called to discernment. Clearly different kinds of polities and different kinds of ecclesiastical structures demand that this ongoing organic process of discernment in communities is one that also has to face institutional realities. And, therefore, *mutatis mutandis*, what needs to be changed, must be changed when thinking about how to do this thing I am trying to propose. But if one were to draw from my book the inference that I am presenting a model by which a national conference might go about making a decision, then that would be to misread my

book. I am not talking about groups such as a national bishops' conference or the Southern Baptist's conference or the Methodist conference kind of thing. I'm thinking much more about the local assembly as the place for discernment.

And our readers will love that. One particular aspect drew our attention to your book for this issue of Leaven. You say, "This is certainly not a sociological analysis." What do you see to be the main difference between the biblical model and the sociological model?

Well, I guess the simple distinction would be that a sociological analysis is descriptive and a biblical model is prescriptive.

Chapters two and three of Scripture and Discernment are additions to your original edition. Chapter two deals with the question of authority of the New Testament in the church and chapter three discusses literary diversity in the New Testament and theology. Why did you feel that it was important to add these two chapters? By the way, thank goodness you did add them!

Thank you. They seem to me to be of tremendous importance as answering theoretical difficulties that were posed or implied in my first treatment but were not sufficiently answered. I think of particular importance is the one on the authority of the New Testament in the church. I gave that chapter first as a presentation quite a long time ago in Indianapolis at Christian Theological Seminary. Since then I've become even more convinced of something like what I suggest in that book about the three levels of authorizing that take place in the New Testament, that of authoring a certain kind of existence, that of authorizing a freedom of interpretation, and thirdly of providing a set of *auctoritatis* or authorities. It seems to me that this provides a useful way of breaking out of a literalist mindset on one side and of a "let's just go for the big picture" sort of mindset on the other side. Hence we must take every voice in scripture seriously, and we must take them into account. But we do so with the freedom of the children of God that scripture itself authorizes and with the understanding that our ultimate criterion is what might be called the mind of Christ—this fundamental identity to which we appeal. The question of authority is very important. But an equally difficult question is what do we do about the very diversity of the New Testament? This is a new problem for us, since we have

discovered literary criticism. It wasn't a problem for ancients. They carried out theology in quite a different mode. What do we do about this? And again what I come down to there is that it is a problem if we're trying to proof-text, but if we are trying to form the mind of Christ in communities, then reading gospels as gospels, reading epistles as epistles is not a problem. It is, in fact, the way forward.

That's very helpful. Chapter four in your original book is entitled "Discernment." The material in this chapter appears in Scripture and Discernment in a chapter entitled "Practice," whereas you introduce new material under the title of Discernment in the revised work. What led you to this revision?

The main thing that led me to this revision is the realization that the hardest question of all for churches had been left unanswered in the first version. And that is, granted the importance of discernment—what are the criteria? How do we carry this out? How do we know when God is speaking in human stories, and how do we know when sin is speaking? Does the church have to say yes to any nonsense? Or can it say no? And if it must say no, on what grounds does it say no? I needed then to turn to Paul in thinking this through because Paul is our New Testament author who really engages it, especially in 1 Corinthians. And so I tried to read Paul as suggesting what I call a formal criterion of discernment, which is edification. The church must say yes to that which builds the church. Now this is a fascinating criterion because we see Paul himself in 1 Corinthians actually suppressing speaking in tongues—a gift of the Spirit!—if it is not translated and thus does not build the church. This has become very interesting because the church may need to say no not only to vice but also even to gifts of God that are disruptive or divisive, if they do not build the church. The second criterion then is material. I ask the question, If the church must say yes to what edifies, then what edifies? And here I tried to develop Paul's understanding of sanctification, of holiness, and tried to provide some guidelines as to how the church today might think about holiness as a criterion for it. And it seems to me that the answer to the question to what must the church say yes is that the church must say yes to that which builds it up in its distinctive identity as a holy people of God. If something does not build the church up into a distinctive identity of the people of God, the church is not interested.

Very good. I'm thrilled with this. It reminds me of why we enjoyed having you here for the Kershner Lectures.

Well, I surely enjoyed my visit.

You conclude both editions of your books with three case studies, two of which are the same in both editions, namely the role of women in leadership and the church's response to homosexuality. But whereas in the first edition you discuss divorce and remarriage, in the later edition you have a section entitled, "Stewardship, the Sharing of Possessions." Was there any particular reason for this change?

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And it seems to me that the answer to the question to what must the church say yes is that the church must say yes to that which builds it up in its distinctive identity as a holy people of God.

As somebody who is married to a divorced woman, I felt that the issue of divorce and remarriage could legitimately be seen as special pleading. I also thought it was an issue in some denominations more than others. And finally I realized that my initial three cases all took the form of what might be called crisis issues or problem issues. And I wanted to take stewardship because it was both positive and chronic. The issue of

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stewardship is one that faces every church all the time. It is not raised by some particular issue, but rather is raised by the existence of the church itself. And finally, I really wanted to say something about stewardship as the response of the faith community itself to how it uses its resources as a discernment of faith rather than stewardship as how individuals of the community support the community. And I think that it is a very important theological adjustment for every faith community to face issues of stewardship all the time contextually. Should we respond to the poor in our community by a soup kitchen, or should we cooperate with another congregation in this regard? Should

we buy new hymnals? Should we build an organ? These are all issues having to do with the life of the community. And what I find fascinating is that in each case there's always somebody in the church who will say, "Of course that's what we should do." But this is said on both sides of the issue! Consider what appears to be an obvious example: Should we use a windfall donation for the poor or for new hymnals? And it would seem, in the eyes of some, that it's obvious that we should give this money to the transients. But what is needed here is to wait a while. Let the community of faith talk a little while about what the function of worship is in this community, and so forth.

Final question. Do you have any suggestions as to how the leadership of a local congregation can use Scripture and Discernment in preparing themselves to deal with the kind of decision-making that minimizes divisive conflict?

It seems to me that if the leadership in a local congregation were to read this book together, they would find some clues. The last chapter where it talks about practice might prove especially helpful. This chapter might give them some guidance on how to form a group that reads scripture together and learns to think theologically together. Ideally, then, this group would then become facilitators for other groups within the church, so that what had been learned together could be shared and experienced with other groups. This

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could be happening simultaneously. Thus the staff or a leadership group could be meeting together on a weekly basis to read the Acts of the Apostles, to read Paul together, thinking together, but under no pressure to make a decision, but rather to learn to think theologically. They then could become facilitators of other groups in the congregation. Hence what we have is what I call the chronic process, the reading together in the form of an ecclesial hermeneutic, that is, reading as church to hear what scripture says to the churches. This process becomes the shaping in the mind of Christ, i.e., that forming in the mind of Christ, which

is preliminary to the hard questions of how to respond to a crisis and how to deal with an issue of deviance or dispute in the community.

You don't wait for the crisis before you start the process.

Exactly. It's already much too late. If I could share briefly what is fascinating to me—I was asked to try to work with this book for the Episcopal Diocese of Birmingham in October on the issue of homosexuality. A leadership group and I spent a full day several months previous to this thinking through a day which was spent with lay people and clergy from the Archdiocese thinking together about the issue of sexuality, but we quite deliberately did not pose it in terms of homosexuality; but rather from the perspective of how we have experienced the life of faith from within our perspective of being a sexual creature. I think that it's really important for us to take a step backward or maybe two steps, three steps backward as a community to begin to reconnect with each other as persons of faith who have stories that have shaped us if we want to move forward to the far more difficult question, i.e., how do we arrange ourselves as a community of faith?

Luke, thank you so much for this contribution to Leaven. Our Emmanuel librarian informs me that we still have a good traffic on the tapes of your Kershner lectures as well as on your books.

Bob, thank you. I am honored to have been asked to do the interview with you, and I hope it's been helpful. I still remember very fondly my sojourn with your faculty. So, I'm very appreciative.

