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Wisdom and Congregational Mission

David Lemley

Stone-Campbell churches engaged in practical theology are wired to ask, “Is it biblical?” Is this interdisciplinary inquiry into missional faithfulness, drawing on social sciences and the broad Christian tradition, relevant to New Testament Christianity? The biblical wisdom tradition, intersecting Jesus’s call to discipleship in Luke, is a way of understanding practical theology as proclaiming the good news in word and deed. This article will consider Thomas Groome’s movements of *shared Christian praxis* as a model for disciple communities pursuing biblical practical wisdom.

Wisdom and the Cross

Wisdom is a mark of Jesus’s ministry, a witness to God’s work in and for the world, and a sign of Christian faithfulness. In the New Testament, Jesus is identified with wisdom (1 Cor 1.24), the ideal of being in the world before God. Wisdom accompanies and empowers communities of disciples for ministry (Acts 6.3) and faithfulness in adversity (Jas 1.5). Christian wisdom is distinguished from other sources of wisdom, both by the quality of knowledge it effects (1 Cor 2.13) and the way of life it generates (Jas 3.17). For Paul, this distinction is made clear in the cross as a hermeneutic of wisdom: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1.18).¹ The cross is foolishness to those seeking wisdom for self-maximization but, for those seeking God’s power, the cross is the way of wisdom.

Luke’s gospel affirms these aspects of wisdom—its source, use, and function—through the ministry of Jesus. Ultimately, Jesus’s cruciform life and ministry tests true wisdom. Wisdom marks individual spiritual development and the formation of missional community. Christian maturity is a process, attained through integrating life in Jesus’s three-part call: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9.23).

Wise disciples consider what within them stands in conflict with Jesus (denial of self), what around them comprises their call to serve (cross-bearing), and what choices and actions pattern Jesus’s way in the world (self-offering love). In framing Jesus’s invitation to discipleship, Luke’s gospel uniquely suggests that one must take up the cross daily. Luke’s attention to the immediate vocation of Christians in the midst of diverse circumstances and peoples of everyday life comes through in how wisdom is portrayed. Practical theology, as a method of developing congregational wisdom, serves to mobilize God’s people for the daily wisdom of life together and love in action.

Biblical Wisdom and Practical Theology

Practical theologians describe the development of discipleship and congregational mission as formation in practical wisdom. Educator and minister Thomas Groome describes wisdom as “the holistic learning outcome”

1. New Revised Standard Version

of Christian education.² Scripture identifies wisdom as an activity of the whole person—intellect, affection, and volition³—actively engaged in the world before God. And wisdom calls for both communion with God and others; it rises from being with others in the world. As individuals and communities engage in a process of developing wisdom, new ways of being in the world emerge. “Christian wisdom presents the task of informing, forming, and transforming people in the ‘character’ of Christian faith. The truly wise are those who so live.”⁴ Groome calls this practical wisdom demonstrated in the lives of a Christian community shared Christian praxis.

Groome suggests five movements forming shared Christian praxis in ministry:⁵ First, a community must describe their present action, as a church and as a part of the wider culture. Second, the community must critically reflect on this present action. Third, the community brings aspects of the Christian tradition into dialogue with their action in context. Fourth, the community places their own views and stories in dialogue with insights received in movement 3. Finally, fifth, the community develops a decision for lived Christian faith in response to this process. As an outcome of this process, practical wisdom is grounded in the life, faith, and decisive action of the community, imbued in each member’s heart, mind, soul, and strength.

While Luke’s approach is not systematic, the gospel’s appeals to wisdom correlate Groome’s process to cruciform discipleship.

- Movement 1 requires a clarifying description of present action. What are the sources and outcomes of our habits and practices together? John the Baptist’s preaching for repentance in Luke 1 calls the disobedient to new relationships and behavior marked by wisdom. For disciples, *self-denial* includes recognition of how the self stands in the way of participating in the good news.
- Movements 2 and 3 bring a critique of present actions into dialogue with the Christian vision. How does our present way of being in the world relate to Christian faithfulness? Critiquing unresponsiveness to John the Baptist’s prophetic call, Jesus calls for an honest assessment of “this generation’s” present attitudes and actions. Jesus challenges the Pharisees by bringing the wisdom of the prophetic tradition into clear contrast with their way of life. This critical analysis and application of biblical critique are a means of setting aside what hinders *cross-bearing*.
- Movements 4 and 5 discern how insights from the third movement relate to the members of a particular community, and a way forward that fits participants, mission, and context. What shape must our life together take, in order to participate in God’s mission here? In Luke 21, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as generating wisdom for disciple-specific, community-specific, and context-specific ministerial strategies. Disciples are, finally, people demonstrating *self-offering love* through Christ, in the Spirit, to the Father, as God’s reconciling agents in the world.

Jesus calls for those who would follow him to carefully read themselves, their context, and God’s revelation. Wisdom marks each step of discerning faithfulness in discipleship and ministry along Jesus’s way.

Deny yourself: Naming Present Practices (Movement 1)

The call of Jesus comes to congregations, as to individuals, in the everyday realities of a particular time and place. The call to follow Jesus asks a community to consider, what are we doing here? This process begins a

2. Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 30. Groome more often uses the term *conation* to describe these outcomes, but considers *wisdom* a synonym.

3. *Ibid.*, 31.

4. *Ibid.*, 32.

5. While Groome’s method calls for a level of expertise exceeding the following description, attention to his prompts provides a useful structure for discerning and implementing faithful ministry. Groome writes for educators and pastors, but *Sharing Faith* employs theoretical models emphasizing cultural and philosophical hermeneutics. However, his movements could be thoughtfully guided in a way that a diverse congregation could fruitfully engage at every level (and must, if it is to be effective). I will not do the theoretical aspects justice here, but attempt to provide a basis, in the ministry of Jesus, for engaging this means of discernment toward missional faithfulness.

thick description of culture, recognition of systemic issues framing our assumptions about people and society, and a better understanding of our own actions within our setting.

In announcing the birth of John the Baptist, Gabriel says to Zechariah, “With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before [Jesus], to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1.17). The way of Jesus begins with a clear look at the way things are—the state of hearts, lives, and the structures in which we live. In Groome’s movement, the path to shared Christian praxis begins with an expression or perception of our own, and/or our society’s praxis. We become conscious to what is going on,⁶ recognizing that our own decisions and actions are bound up in cultural realities that often go unexamined.

Congregations are called to prepare the way by taking a realistic view toward their position among those to whom they are called to announce the kingdom. This means naming what is done and what is left undone. This is a moment to take stock of inventory and recognize the relationship between what God’s people have to give and the hunger of the world we serve. It is a time to name our place in the social structures that run around and through our daily activities. What prompts our attitudes, behaviors, programs, and ministries? What assumptions are evident in each of these? We begin the exploration of everyday life, an opportunity to make the familiar unfamiliar, to examine our micro-level practices and the macro-level patterns that sustain them. At times, we discover that our own impulses and actions are not far from the motives of our cultural context. We have the opportunity to consider what makes us human together, and what God may call the church and the world to see differently.

This interpretation of ourselves in our context calls us to ask, when we tell God’s story, are our neighbors in it? We may enter this honest assessment with a particular practice or theme in mind. Perhaps we are curious about why our benevolence ministry is in decline. Perhaps we are beginning to notice a growing number of younger families near our meeting place, and wonder how we are good news to them. This movement requires some focus to be productive, and it is useful to determine what aspect of our observation is immediately deserving of our attention.

Inherent to this movement is a denial of self that is evident throughout Jesus’s ministry. Rather than explain, defend, or deny the implications of our identities and lifestyles, we must set aside what we intend for our communities and programs, and evaluate whether our life and work are truly self-seeking. Is it, as we all are to some extent, a product of our context? Is it, as we all are to some extent, a product of God’s work in the world? In order to see rightly, a church must move beyond the productivity born of self-interest and consider how to invest in the fruit of self-denying participation in God’s will. This begins with authentic listening and then calls us to discernment.

Take Up Your Cross Daily: Critical Reflection (Movement 2) and Receiving the Christian Vision (Movement 3)

This intentional listening to our lives and our communities is guided by wisdom. In the ministry of Jesus, wisdom is no respecter of persons; the religious have no corner on the market of lived faithfulness. Jesus addresses wisdom in the intersection of the religious and those they consider outsiders. In addressing both the committed and the unconverted, Jesus affirms the wisdom tradition that emphasizes lived faith.

Groome’s second movement calls for critical reflection on present action. In Luke 7.24–35, we again encounter wisdom in relation to John the Baptist. Jesus confronts the crowds with their inability to see clearly what is going on, whether in the case of John’s stark prophetic performance outside society, or in Jesus’s prophetic presence within it. Here we find the theme of a generation that is unable to see rightly God’s work in the world, and, thus, unable to effectively join it.

They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,
‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not weep.’

6. Groome, 177.

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’
Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.” (Luke 7.32–35)

A critical eye is not the same as a discerning spirit. The crowds misinterpret both John’s radical stance against culture and Jesus’s radical alignment with those he comes to seek and save. But wisdom is not in the critical children in the marketplace, but in those who bear the fruit of the kingdom, wherever they may stand.

The narrative continues in a direction that illustrates Jesus’s point. Eating in the house of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus’s feet are anointed and bathed by a woman “who was a sinner” (Luke 7.37). When Simon questions Jesus’s ministry based on allowing this, Jesus asks Simon to judge an analogous situation—who would love more, the debtor forgiven a greater or lesser amount? The response is simply a matter of conventional wisdom, but Jesus’s affirms the sinner rather than the religious: “Your faith has saved you.” Faith, which results in seeing rightly, is demonstrated in works directed toward God. In 11.29–32, Jesus again confronts this generation. While the Pharisees claim Abraham’s lineage, Jesus says the Gentile “queen of the South” who came to listen to Solomon has better judgment than these religious elites who ask for a sign.

In these interactions we see a model for critical reflection on present practice. The measure of right faith is beyond good theology and religious practice. Here, we bring our capacities for reasoning, remembering, and imagining to a critical evaluation of ourselves and our stories. If we take a broad view of our practices and those of our social setting, what is evident in our own seeking? What is evident in the seeking our neighbors are doing? Are we searching for validation, for vindication, while those outside our fold are in motion toward the wisdom of God, through enacted faith? These points of illumination and tension should draw our critical reflection.

In movement 2, Groome calls for formation in wisdom through collaborative evaluation that deepens our listening to one another and our neighbors. Having identified some area of focus, we bring all our reflective capacities to decoding our observations. And we test and expand our observations through telling and hearing stories.

Groome’s third movement brings individual and corporate stories into dialogue with God’s story. What resources from the Christian vision—from Scripture, from teachers, from our worshiping community—bring clarity to our understanding of what we’ve observed? In Jesus’s ministry, this is the point at which the prophets must be heard. The wisdom of God, faith in action, is no more plainly integrated than in the lives of the prophets. The very nature of their work is the embodiment of faithful response in context, typically with disregard for the consequences. The prophetic witness speaks to the tensions and illuminates the opportunities that our listening reveals.

This critical engagement may require us to see our own complicity. In Jesus’s use of wisdom, this is particularly the effect of allowing the prophetic witness to interpret our lives. In his convicting list of woes levied at the Pharisees and lawyers (Luke 11.37–52), Jesus describes the injustice worked by those who burden the people with teachings beyond what these teachers are willing to carry alongside them. This conception of righteousness attends neither to God’s love nor God’s justice. This is the lead-in to Jesus’s statement that these are the people who build tombs for the prophets their ancestors killed: “Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets . . .” (Luke 11.49–50). The prophetic witness is unheeded and entombed to prevent further threat to the social structures that exploit and exclude the vulnerable.

In this process of bringing our stories into God’s story, we begin the real work of taking up our cross. The place where our action bears on or against the good of our society, we must follow the denial of self with the work of taking on the burden God calls us to carry on behalf of others. We also find, here, the easy yoke of

Jesus, as release from the burden of self is followed by the Spirit's power that energizes and equips us to demonstrate the gospel. Responding to the prophet's interpretation of our lives and context is both a terrifying loss of our own securities and an illuminating release to trust in God.

This movement also clarifies what is meant by taking up the cross daily. It is one thing to judge an unjust society; it is another to respond to our complicity by realigning our daily routines, relationships, and responsibilities. In evaluating our communal identities and ministry practices, we may discover aspects of our life together that put our neighbors in vulnerable positions—excluding, burdening, or neglecting. Here the prophetic witness overlays our imaginative listening and calls us to redemptive participation in Jesus's way.

Thomas Groome suggests that we find an overarching criterion for receiving God's vision clearly. He suggests this is the reign of God: "the comprehensive symbol, suggested by the tradition itself, for the heart of what the Christian Story/Vision means for people's lives."⁷ God's reign is the good news for those within and beyond the church; it is an adequate hermeneutic for our ministries, our communities, and ourselves. However, Groome recognizes that the nature of that reign is blended with all kinds of secondary criteria—our particularities, tendencies, aptitudes, and other characteristics which might influence the way we see God's reign.

I suggest that Jesus's call to discipleship—self-denial and cross-bearing for the sake of others—is one way we test our vision of God's reign. The Christian vision will always conform to the self-offering love of God. As we prepare ourselves to see beyond these personalized notions of God's reign, we also recognize that God's reign arrives in very immediate and contextually specific ways. A sign of God's reign, in fact, is the coming of the Spirit to gift each individual in their unique time and place for the shared work of building up Christ's body in God's mission.

Follow Me: Appropriating God's Story (Movement 4) and Decision for Lived Christian Faith (Movement 5)

Throughout Luke, Jesus's disciples are called to see his mission as their own, with varying responses. When confronted with the prophetic call to participate in Christ's self-offering love, they balk just as contemporary disciples continue to do. The lingering self works against the way of the cross, resisting the call to self-denial and wholehearted self-offering love. However, the witness of Scripture relates the fruit of wisdom in these first disciples, as Jesus's followers take up cruciform praxis, toward the Father, for the world.

Groome's fourth movement recognizes the specific gifting and calling conferred on each local body of believers. Whatever the implications of the prophetic witness, we find it to be both particular in who is to be served, and who is to serve. Neither ministry's performers nor subjects may be abstracted. The calling to ministry is affirmed in the gifting for ministry, as we take stock of our unique stories in light of God's story and calling.

This movement calls the congregation to "know thyself" in light of their learning about context and vision. A community lays the wisdom of the Christian vision over the realities of potential actions and actors. Our present praxis is placed in dialogue with what God is revealing to this community in movement 3. We must make this story our own, taking this narrative on in our lived experiences. Our horizon must merge with the horizon of God's reign. Movement 4 intends to "enable participants to critically appropriate the faith community's Story/Vision to their own lives and contexts," integrating the Christian vision "by personal agency into their own identity and understanding."⁸ Through this evaluative, dialectic work, communities "uncover what is true and valuable" and separate "what is true and life-giving from what is distorted and destructive in order to 'move-on' with renewed commitment."⁹ Wisdom is the response of a people made ready, prepared for the Lord, as through John the Baptist's prophetic ministry.

Cross-bearers set out on a difficult and dreadful path, but it is the way to union with God—the joy set before Jesus, toward which we join his journey. The once-for-all suffering of Jesus is our model, not for

7. *Ibid.*, 228.

8. *Ibid.*, 250.

9. *Ibid.*, 253.

martyrdom but for radical trust and loving action for others. As we take on our roles in the narrative arc of self-denial, cross-bearing, and Christ-following, we begin to see the joy and the hope of the task ahead.

This new vision can, however, be disorienting; and it was for Jesus's disciples. The weight of cross-bearing elicits the question: how long must we endure? As Jesus makes plain the violent history at hand for Jerusalem, the disciples are prompted to wonder, "Teacher, when will this be?"

Perhaps they wish they'd never asked, as Jesus includes among signs that the end is near a litany of trouble, persecution, and betrayal to befall his followers. Yet, in the midst of this personal and social destruction, wisdom is again a life-giving presence: "This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict" (Luke 21.13–15).

At this point, we are tempted to strategize, delegate, and specialize our way into institutional effectiveness. Wisdom, however, calls for a better (and, grace permitting, additional) approach. Rather than prepare a ministry plan, we must foster a witness of wisdom. Our ministry will be a gift—God's gift to us, God's gift for our context. The words and deeds of congregational mission rise from a deeply embedded trust that God's Spirit is a present and active interpreter, working prior to our own effort. As Jesus's disciples demonstrate, our despair for the loss of our institutions and cultural agency is only as deep as our dependence on them is to begin with.

Jesus concludes with this teaching, "By your endurance you will gain your souls" (Luke 21:19). This endurance is a steadfastness that clings to wisdom from God in a dynamic variety of times and places, recognizing that the church will be asked to prepare for faithfulness to a particular calling and gifting, rather than effectiveness that outperforms or outlasts a cultural competitor's social capital. Wisdom reveals what will endure. As John the Baptist preached it, ministry is action befitting "the wisdom of the righteous."

In Groome's fifth movement, our congregation brings new understanding to decisive ministry. Having evaluated our present practices, listened to our context, attended to God's story, and faithfully considered our roles in it, we place love in action; we demonstrate the outcome of practical wisdom. Ministry emerges as a decision for shared Christian praxis. At the end of our hermeneutical task is a choice, a decision to perform wisdom in our current situation and calling: "to enable participants, by God's grace working through their own discernment and volition, to make historical choices about the praxis of Christian faith in the world."¹⁰

Movement 5 emerges with continued dependence on movement 4, but also pulls the congregation again to movement 1. Having evaluated some central practice, theme, or symbol central to our life and ministry, we continually submit our life and witness to what wisdom would have us do.

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10. Ibid., 266.