

Discovering God's Will

Following are excerpts from a script of a video presentation by President Stephen M. Veazey. It originally was released in November 2011 and was updated in September 2020. You can watch it and download a Listening Guide for use individually or in small groups at www.CofChrist.org/discernment.

Faithful discipleship includes faithfully seeking with other disciples a clearer understanding of God's will. This process is ongoing so we can be open to new insights whenever they come. It is particularly vital when the church faces situations or questions that do not have easy or clear answers.

As humans, we humbly confess "we see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12 NRSV). That is, no matter how much of God's nature we think we understand, dimensions of God's truth remain hidden to us.

At the same time, scripture invites us to seek greater understanding of God's vision. This helps us grow as disciples so we can make a vital contribution to Christ's mission:

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

—Matthew 7:7–8 NRSV

As we ask, seek, and knock in humility and faith, we are blessed with insights that enrich our relationships with God and others. Sometimes clarity comes in moments of great enlightenment. Often it comes over time as we pray, study, listen to others, and experience life.

As a church we benefit from a fruitful approach to seeking a clearer sense of God's will. This approach is rooted in the broader Christian tradition. It is enriched greatly by Restoration principles, scriptures, and experiences. It has served us well in the past and will bless us in the future if we consistently use it.

The Community of Christ way of seeking a better understanding of God's will is built on confidence in God's Continuing Revelation, one of our Enduring Principles. We sincerely expect that "The Lord hath yet more light and truth To break forth from his word" (*Hymns of the Saints*, "We Limit Not the Truth of God," No. 309). It also seeks to integrate proven spiritual practices through which we, in community with others, can experience more fully God's guidance.

As an introduction, we present the primary elements of the Community of Christ way of seeking and discovering God's will in a visual model. While any model has limits...using it can help us better understand the principles. It is best to start with a holistic view.

Exploring the Model

The center of the model is God, the eternal community of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, who is one God. God has created and is still creating. God has purpose and vision for creation.

Our journey begins by recognizing God is God, and we are not!

It continues by shedding our agendas or current conclusions. This “holy indifference” is often the most difficult step. We can achieve it only through spiritual trust that quiets our willful egos and fear of losing control. The constant call is to let God be God!

Connecting our lives with God’s truth is a primary ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit opens our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds to see the proper application of divine will. It moves in and among people to bear witness, renew life, form community, and open future possibilities in harmony with God’s will.

Spiritual attention and spiritual practices help us better respond to the Holy Spirit. Spiritual attention is an attitude of being open and alert to the Spirit’s presence. Spiritual practices include spiritual centering, quiet, prayer, creative scripture study, fasting, and meditation.

The next layer of the model identifies “lenses” through which we gain a better sense of the Spirit’s witness. In Community of Christ these are:

- Scripture
- Reason and knowledge
- Tradition
- Personal and community experience
- Continuing Revelation
- Common consent

To discover a clearer sense of God’s will we apply our understanding of the church’s mission and life together in Christ. The area outside various elements of the model is defined as Embody Christ’s Peace.

Just as Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is our peace (See Ephesians 2), we are called to embody our best understanding of the peace of God through Christ in our lives and the world. Sometimes this requires us to revise attitudes, beliefs, and practices with ones more attuned to divine nature. This is spiritual growth. The Apostle Paul describes this process in Ephesians 4:13 as growing in the “full stature of Christ.”

Exploring Community of Christ Lenses

Scripture

Scripture is essential to understanding the nature and will of God. In the church’s official scripture statement, “Scripture in Community of Christ,” we uphold scripture as indispensable!

We also teach that scripture must be applied through the lens of God’s most decisive revelation in Jesus Christ. God’s Word, which is God’s creative and reconciling activity, is not revealed fully in the words of any language, but in a person who was fully human and fully Divine. Therefore, all scripture stands under the scrutiny and authority of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.

So if specific scriptures don’t agree with our best understanding of the revelation of God in Christ, the love, teachings, and vision of Christ prevail.

The view that stirs the most discussion is the church's stance that scripture's authority does not come from the belief that it is historically, scientifically, ethically, and theologically perfect. Why is this so?

Scriptural literalism is a fairly recent trend pushed hard in Christianity by fundamentalism. A vocal minority within Christianity insists on a literal, inerrant reading of scripture as the only reliable source of truth. In Community of Christ, we do not accept this approach.

This is not a new position.

We do not consider it [the Inspired Version] infallible, nor do we consider the Bible infallible. We do not consider anything that passes through human hands to be infallible. We do not believe in the plenary inspiration of the Bible; we hold that everything which passes through human hands is fallible.

—Joseph Smith III, evidence in the Temple Lot suit

Our church teaches that scripture is inspired and essential to our knowledge of God. We insist that scripture should be interpreted responsibly through informed study guided by the Spirit.

In other words, understanding scripture is not just a matter of reading a passage and assuming what it means for all times and places. Responsible interpretation is done in dialogue with others and includes study, prayer, reason, tradition, and Continuing Revelation as guided by the Holy Spirit.

Doctrine and Covenants 164:6c reminds us:

Faced with difficult questions, many properly turn to scripture to find insight and inspiration. Search the scriptures for the Living Word that brings life, healing, and hope to all. Embrace and proclaim these liberating truths.

This counsel encourages us to search *within* scripture for the “Living Word.” It is presented and received as good news in the lives of hurting people. It draws people to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. It bears the fruit of love, reconciliation, healing, and hope for all.

Reason and Knowledge

Another important lens is reason and knowledge. This lens affirms that we have to use our minds and available knowledge to strengthen our understanding of God's ways.

I was told a story once about the scientist, George Washington Carver. One day Mr. Carver was in a peanut field. He stooped and pulled a peanut plant from the ground. Holding it to the sky he said, “Creator, what is in this peanut plant?” As the story goes, the Creator responded, “George, I have given you a good mind, you figure it out!”

From the church's earliest days, members were urged to “study it out in your mind” (Doctrine and Covenants 9:3b) and to “become acquainted with all good books” (Doctrine and Covenants 87:5b) to learn truth. We have always been a people who sought greater

understanding of truth through “study and faith.” For example, in 1968, when the church was facing complex social and theological issues, the following counsel was given:

My servants of the leading quorums are commended for their diligence in seeking more light and truth *from all available sources*. For have I not told you that my glory is intelligence and he that seeketh learning by study and by faith will be rewarded?

—Doctrine and Covenants 149:5

Consideration of available information is not the opposite of trusting in the Spirit. Study and thinking are how we love God with our hearts *and our minds*.

Knowledge about many aspects of creation, including human life, has increased dramatically over the centuries. This includes information not even conceivable to those who shaped scripture in earlier centuries. The task of continued interpretation, through faith and study, is left to us and future generations.

However, it is important that we do not take the insights of scholarship and science at face value. In faith matters, conclusions of the human mind must be considered carefully and their value determined through prayerful reflection and Spirit-led deliberation.

Tradition

Tradition is the body of belief, wisdom, and practices produced over the years as the faith community seeks to live the gospel. It includes the larger Christian tradition and our own Community of Christ story. If we lose touch with our faith tradition, we lose an important source of identity and guidance.

Tradition is not a matter of rigidly maintaining positions or practices. Rather, tradition is the faith community’s ongoing conversation with its sacred story, Enduring Principles, theology, and policies.

Tradition, when understood in this way, identifies the church’s recognized sources of official reference and teaching. In Community of Christ, that includes:

- Scripture
- Basic Beliefs statement
- Enduring Principles (core values)
- Hymns
- Christian and Restoration history
- World Conference resolutions
- Official interpretations by church leaders
- Official statements by World Church leadership bodies
- Official administrative policies and procedures

While affirming tradition’s value, it is equally important to recognize times when new situations and the Spirit’s movement challenge tradition. We have only to recall Peter’s rooftop vision that set the early Christian church on the path to becoming more inclusive of Gentiles to understand this principle (Acts 10).

A more recent example is the church's acceptance of prophetic counsel that called for the ordination of women (Doctrine and Covenants 156).

Regarding tradition, the church is counseled:

Be respectful of tradition and sensitive to one another, but do not be unduly bound by interpretations and procedures that no longer fit the needs of a worldwide church. In such matters direction will come from those called to lead.

—Doctrine and Covenants 162:2d

Personal and Community Experience

Obviously, we bring our personal experiences, culture, beliefs, feelings, and personalities to our quest to better understand God's will. Any experience that is thought about or communicated to others is interpreted experience.

That is why personal experiences among individuals can be quite different. Sometimes there even can be “dueling testimonies” of the Spirit's guidance. This is especially true when considering sensitive, emotional, or complicated issues.

In Community of Christ, we take the wide range of personal experiences seriously as we seek direction. Struggling with diversity of experience is an important aspect of becoming real community.

However, as a general rule, personal experience and intensity of feelings should not be one's primary or only authority in faith matters. Because of our fallible natures, personal experience must be tested against the broader experience and wisdom of the faith community.

The most reliable spiritual discernment occurs with others. We have been counseled recently to “listen together” to the Spirit's voice (Doctrine and Covenants 162:5c).

Obviously, “listening together” includes being open to the Spirit's movement during discussions in small groups, congregations, and national, field, and World Conferences.

While some understand shared experiences in different ways, collective experience as “a prophetic people” is vital. As we seek to better know God's will, our faith community must consider its shared experience of the Spirit's guidance.

Continuing Revelation

We believe in the importance of Continuing Revelation to establish direction for the church. Our Basic Beliefs call us to be a “prophetic people.” We hold that

God graciously reveals divine will today as in the past” and that “in humility, individually and in community, we prayerfully listen to understand God's will for our lives, the church, and creation more completely.

—*We Share: Enduring Principles, Continuing Revelation*, page 12

When considering the “lens” of Continuing Revelation it is important to establish several principles:

- Revelation is encounter with God that involves God’s self-disclosure. It comes when and how God chooses.
- Human response to revelation always involves interpretation because its meaning is communicated through the filters of the human mind and language.
- There are revelatory experiences in religious movements regarded as foundational and formative. One example is God’s action to free the Hebrew slaves as described in the Book of Exodus. Another example is God’s self-disclosure and real presence (incarnation) in Jesus Christ.
- Continuing Revelation involves ongoing encounter with God and Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. It provides added insight or deepens understanding of formative experiences. It “unveils” dimensions of earlier encounters with God that have been unrecognized or perhaps misunderstood.
- Continuing Revelation often is equated with prophecy, and prophecy often is defined as predicting the future. That is a limited definition of prophecy. Continuing Revelation is not so much forecasting the future as it is presenting inspired concepts and vision that help create the future for which God yearns.

In general practice, Continuing Revelation involves study, prayerful reflection, spiritual practices, and discernment that helps groups perceive God’s will more fully.

In the worldwide church, we express our belief in Continuing Revelation through the prophet-president’s calling to bring inspired counsel. If the World Conference approves inspired counsel for the Doctrine and Covenants, it becomes part of the church’s scripture. This means scriptural interpretation must take into account the whole body of scripture, including the most recent sections of Doctrine and Covenants.

Given our natural tendency to want to settle down where we are comfortable, Continuing Revelation keeps the church moving toward fulfillment of God’s vision as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The use of a “living body of scripture” can be extremely challenging. Continuing Revelation often brings new ideas or insights about long-standing beliefs. This causes some people to resist what is being shared because it unsettles what they thought was certain.

A ministry of the Holy Spirit is to help the church trust and embrace Continuing Revelation, especially when acceptance calls for revisions of long-held practices. The church has been told:

...as you gain ever more confidence in sensing the leadings of my Spirit, you will begin to see with new eyes, embrace the truths that are waiting for your understanding, and move joyfully toward the fulfillment of the tasks that are yours to accomplish.

—Doctrine and Covenants 159:8

Common Consent

And all things shall be done by common consent in the church, by much prayer and faith; for all things you shall receive by faith.

—Doctrine and Covenants 25:1b

Joseph Smith III defined the church as a *theocratic democracy*. This means God’s Spirit leads the church. The Spirit leads through leaders who are approved and supported by the will of the people. It also means members have a significant role in determining church direction in response to the Spirit’s guidance.

Common consent helps ensure the church uses all the “lenses” and that no one person’s or group’s perspective dominates.

Common consent is open consideration of issues, in a spirit of worship, during which all opinions may be voiced. It includes thorough consideration of proposals in conferences at all levels. It also involves consideration of inspired counsel at World Conference, which then can become authoritative throughout the church.

Ideally, common consent is much more than decision making by simple-majority vote. At the same time, common consent does not require unanimity.

We achieve common consent when we consider all viewpoints through prayerful discussion and when the church community expresses a sufficient level of support.

Common consent at its best is a process of education, discussion, prayer, and consideration. It requires patience, cooperation, and spiritual sensitivity. It encourages minority or opposing voices that may contribute vital insights.

Common consent is not perfect because it involves imperfect humans. It works to determine the best decision at a given time under current circumstances.

The foundational question for common consent is: “What is our best perception of God’s will for us together at this time under these circumstances” (Adapted from “Common Consent and Parliamentary Procedure,” *Saints’ Herald*, March 1974, page 3). Decisions made by common consent are always subject to future review through the Spirit’s guidance.

Regarding common consent, the church has been told to trust the work of the Holy Spirit as it speaks in and through the voices in the faith community. Common consent has served the church well as a way of helping to determine direction when practiced in a spirit of prayer, love, and cooperation. The church continues to gain experience with alternative common-consent processes that help ensure a variety of perspectives is heard, minority voices are respected, and decisions are made when there are high levels of support for proceeding in a certain way.

Integrating the Various “Lenses”

A key to effectively using the “lenses” is to understand they do not function independently. The Holy Spirit connects them as it illuminates truth and grows us as “responsible” disciples of Jesus Christ. Therefore the “lenses” are best understood as interdependent.

Another key to applying the Community of Christ way is to recognize that all elements are not only important, but essential! If we focus on just one or two, we run the risk of missing some vital dimension of God’s will.

Conclusion

Now, as we begin to apply the Community of Christ way of discovering a clearer sense of God's will, may we do so with confidence in our capacity to work together in patience and love. Let us be encouraged and hopeful as we entrust our future to this promise:

Beloved children of the Restoration, your continuing faith adventure with God has been divinely led, eventful, challenging, and sometimes surprising to you. By the grace of God, you are poised to fulfill God's ultimate vision for the church.

—Doctrine and Covenants 164:9a

