Discernment, Practical Wisdom, and Christian Spirituality: A Study in Practical Theological Method

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DISCERNMENT, PRACTICAL WISDOM, AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY:
A STUDY IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL METHOD

By

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A.M.D.G.

U.I.O.G.D.

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DISCERNMENT, PRACTICAL WISDOM, AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY:
A STUDY IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL METHOD

(Order No. )

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ABSTRACT

Many practical theologians have acknowledged the central place of practical wisdom (phronesis) within their hermeneutics. This acknowledgment has attributed to a flourishing dialogue between practical theology and ethics, philosophy, systematic theology, and the social sciences. Fewer approaches to practical theology, however, have engaged Christian spirituality, and particularly the practice of discernment, in shaping their hermeneutical frameworks. This dissertation contributes to the study of practical theology and practical theological hermeneutics first through a critical-confessional examination of the relationship between the practice of discernment in Christian spirituality and practical wisdom, and second through the formation of a practical theological hermeneutic of discernment.

The dissertation argues that practical wisdom is tradition-constituted, and within Christian tradition, practical wisdom is characterized by the practice of discernment. To
this end, the dissertation examines two different approaches to practical theology common in the American context (a critical-correlational approach and a critical-confessional approach) and the different ways in which practical wisdom is conceived in these approaches. The dissertation then argues that if practical wisdom is central to practical theological hermeneutics, and wisdom within Christian tradition is characterized by attending to and discerning the action of the Holy Spirit, then practical theology within the Christian tradition should practice discernment of the Holy Spirit in its hermeneutics. In light of this, the dissertation examines discernment as a practice, virtue, and method of inquiry within the Christian spiritual traditions of the fourth century desert elders of Egypt, Benedict of Nursia, and Ignatius of Loyola. The practices of discernment found among these figures then play an important role in the development of a hermeneutic of discernment in the remainder of the dissertation. Practical theological hermeneutics and practical wisdom are more than a method of inquiry, but a virtue and practice embodied by Christian communities and constituted by Christian tradition. Following this understanding of wisdom and practical theological reflection, the dissertation identifies the contributions a hermeneutic of discernment can make for theological scholarship, including education, through its attention to context, to the movement of the Holy Spirit, and to affective dimensions of knowing, with particular reference to the formation of wisdom.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

While leading a small class discussion among M.Div. students at a Boston area theological school about the spirituality found in Johannes Baptist Metz’s work, *Poverty of Spirit*, I was reminded of the central aim of practical theology by one student’s authentic, personal question. The student asked, “How do I get there?” The question came from the student’s deep desire to love God, to follow God, and to know God deeply in her own life. I began to think that her question was consistent with the goal of practical theology: the formation of persons, communities, and their practices toward a more faithful understanding and love of God in their particular lives. “Ultimately,” I thought to myself, “your question is about how we are formed into ways of being, what practices and communities of practice help or hinder that formation, and, perhaps most significantly, how we discern in all of this the vision and desire of God.” This student’s question formed the basis of this dissertation, for I continued to wonder how the Christian practice of discernment, seeking the will of God through openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit, might define and shape practical theology as formative of a way of being characterized by wisdom. Furthermore, I felt her question highlighted a necessary element of theological education—formation for wisdom, education in the ways of Christian discernment.

The Problem and Its Significance

This dissertation seeks to discover what the practice of discernment, gleaned from an exploration of three traditions of discernment within Christian spirituality, might offer
the developing understanding of practical wisdom within the discipline of practical theology, with a primary focus on the American discourse in practical theology. In doing so, this dissertation will also explore implications for the study of Christian spirituality and theological education.

Edward Farley, among others, has expressed concern for the loss of understanding theology as *habitus*, a way of being, a cognitive disposition of the soul characterized by wisdom. A *habitus* is constituted by practices and embodied by a community of practitioners that span time and space. Many practical theologies have sought to recover this understanding of theology by locating the teleological concern of practical theology as the formation of faithful practices (Swinton and Mowat), faithful discipleship (Kathleen Cahalan, James Nieman), and life abundant (Dorothy Bass, Craig Dykstra). The end of such theology is a way of life, a lived theology, embodied by practices that are faithful to the vision of God, discerned through centuries of wise practitioners. In light of Farley’s notion of theology as *habitus*, as sapiential knowledge “of God and what God reveals” attendant upon the life of faith, authors such as these therefore understand practical theology, and theological pedagogy, as a process aimed at the formation of wise persons engaged in


5. Farley, 35.
faithful practices (Bonnie Miller-McLemore6), or enabling faithful living (Swinton and Mowat’), “narrated in and native to the Christian community”8 (Cahalan and Nieman). The way of knowing championed by these authors (and other practical theologians) is practical wisdom (phronesis), which is developed through reflection-on-practice, and which Miller-McLemore calls “theological know-how.”9 Such is the kind of wisdom that some practical theologians believe characterizes habitus, a wisdom that can discern the vision of God and the faithfulness of practice within a particular context. The central guiding thesis of this dissertation is that Christian discernment is essential for understanding how practical wisdom might function within practical theology. In developing this thesis, I reaffirm theology as habitus and the goal of practical theology as the formation of faithful practices and practitioners.

The centrality of practical wisdom is not particularly new to practical theology (for instance, it is central to the work of Don Browning10) or to the project of theology itself, but within the Christian tradition, practical wisdom demands to be understood more fully as Christian discernment. This understanding of practical wisdom as Christian discernment is hinted at by some who study Christian spirituality, such as Claire Wolfteich, who argues

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7. Swinton and Mowat, 6.

8. Cahalan and Nieman, 68.


10. See Don S. Browning, A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991).
that practical knowing should be understood as spiritual wisdom that "desires to know the Spirit of God."¹¹ This "desire to know the Spirit of God" characterizes the very heart of the theological project as habitus, for discernment shapes the practices and ways of being that are formative of a Christian life, lived in accordance with the vision of God known in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Discernment is that practice by which a Christian person or community understands and shapes his or her or its life in faithfulness to the vision of God and the ways of God's Spirit. Discernment shapes the practices that embody the Christian habitus, its way of life, and therefore, within the study of practical theology in the Christian tradition, practical wisdom ought to be understood more fully as Christian discernment.

The development of the discipline of practical theology toward a teleological concern for wisdom demands a closer relationship between the disciplines of practical theology and Christian spirituality.¹² This dissertation argues that what is needed now in practical theology is a more thorough theological reflection on the pneumatological basis of practical wisdom within the Christian life and how the practice of discernment relates to practical wisdom in the Christian tradition. I believe that in turning to a study of the tradition of Christian discernment, we may find an understanding of practical wisdom that is open to the movements and promptings of the Holy Spirit, for it is in openness to the movements of the Spirit that the life of the Christian "has its being" (Acts 17:28).


¹² See Wolteich, op. cit. The interest in dialogue between practical theology and Christian spirituality comes from both disciplines. The 2008 Association of Practical Theology biennial conference in Collegeville, Minnesota was entitled, "Toward Wisdom and Transformation: Practical Theology and Spirituality," while some Christian Spirituality scholars such as Matthew Ashley and Philip Sheldrake define Christian spirituality through the lens of spiritual practices.
Discernment adds an important spiritual dimension to the study of practices and contexts within the discipline of practical theology. The questions and conclusions of a practical-theological study are often incomplete without consideration of the actions of the Spirit in a particular practice and context. Consequently, a central question of the work of practical theology, indeed of the work of theology itself, is a question of spiritual discernment. Any theological or practical-theological investigation within the Christian tradition that seeks to employ practical wisdom or seeks to place the formation of wise persons or the transformation of contexts and practices as its goal must take account of the desires of God known in the movement of the Spirit. Hence, such an investigation would do well to consider the practice of discernment as central to its questions, methods, and conclusions.

The practice of discernment has strong biblical foundations in the Christian tradition, for Christians are told that they should expect “to be guided by the Spirit” (Gal 5:18; Rom 8:14), to “test everything” (1 Thess 5:21), and to “test the spirits to see whether they belong to God” (1 Jn 4:1). The practice of discernment, then, is ultimately rooted in biblical revelation for the Christian, as many scholars have attested. This dissertation understands discernment as a practice that is defined by the Christian narrative (sacred scripture), the Christian community (the church), and the Christian tradition. Through discernment, the Christian person or community seeks to know and follow the will of God in a particular context through openness to the Holy Spirit, and as such, the person or

community grows in companionship with God in Christ. Discernment has been practiced throughout much of the Christian spiritual tradition—as discernment of good and evil spirits (e.g. the desert Mothers and Fathers), as discernment of the movements of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Benedict of Nursia; Ignatius of Loyola), and as discernment of God’s will (e.g. Augustine’s *Confessions*; Francis de Sales; Ignatius of Loyola). The tradition of discernment continues to develop in every Christian person and community that seeks to be faithful to God’s desires and open to the Holy Spirit.

The aims, tasks, and methods of practical theology gain important grounding in Christian spirituality when practical wisdom is understood in light of the Christian practice of spiritual discernment. This study has important implications not only for the study of practical theology, but also the process of theological education, and the enterprise of theology itself. Scholars of theological education, such as Miller-McLemore, John Witvliet, and Thomas Groome, have pointed to the development of wisdom as central to the task of theological education.14 This study explores how and to what extent spiritual discernment plays an important role in the development and expression of such wisdom and what can be gained in understanding the goal of theological education when one attends to the practice of discernment. Furthermore, Christian theologians who wish to investigate the role of practical wisdom and the centrality of the Holy Spirit in the task of theology may gain helpful insights from this study. The understanding of virtues and practices of the Christian tradition may benefit from this study. Practices within the Christian tradition

such as peace-making, hospitality, working for justice, honoring the body, and keeping Sabbath require discernment. Discernment helps to form these practices; it helps shape these practices in particular contexts, guiding the forms that they take. This study hopes that insights and wisdom gained from an investigation of Christian practices of discernment might help the work and the daily practice of discernment and decision-making of theologians, ministers, religious leaders, congregations, and all Christians who seek to practice discernment and to grow in wisdom and companionship with God in Christ.

**Sources of the Study**

Foundational for this dissertation is the understanding of practices and practical wisdom described by scholars such as Alasdair MacIntyre and those practical theologians, such as Bass and Dykstra, who build on MacIntyre’s understanding of practices, practical wisdom, and *habitus*. MacIntyre (as well as Martha Nussbaum) describes practical

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17. MacIntyre’s seminal work in virtue ethics has influenced not only Christian ethicists, but also practical theologians, most especially for his definition of a practice: “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (MacIntyre, 187). For MacIntyre’s importance in practical theology see, for example, Swinton and Mowat, op. cit.; Nancy Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Nation, op. cit.; Miroslav Volf, and Dorothy C. Bass, op. cit.
wisdom as tradition-constituted.\textsuperscript{18} That is, the shape and form of practical wisdom is dependent on the \textit{habitus}, the way of life, and the historically-extended tradition of practices and narrative (sacred scripture) embodied by the community (the church). On the foundation of MacIntyre’s description of practical wisdom, and the description of practical theology by theologians such as Bass and Dykstra, I hope to show that practical wisdom ought to be understood as discernment in the study of practical theology within Christianity. Insights from these scholars help to form the definition of practical theology that this dissertation employs, which is derived partly from Swinton and Mowat: critical, theological reflection on the practices and spiritualities of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world with a view toward the formation of faithful Christian practices and practitioners.\textsuperscript{19}

For my discussion of the practice of discernment in the Christian tradition, I rely on the spiritualities of three significant sub-traditions of Christianity: the Desert Mothers and Fathers, Benedict of Nursia, and Ignatius of Loyola. These three traditions contribute particular insights for the practice of discernment that I have judged as especially significant for the study of practical theology. They provide examples of the connection between practices, \textit{habitus}, and discernment that is central to this dissertation’s understanding of practical theology.

\textsuperscript{18} Martha C. Nussbaum, \textit{The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy}. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Nussbaum’s text also plays a supportive role in this dissertation for a description of practical wisdom.

\textsuperscript{19} Swinton and Mowat, 6.
The Sayings of the Desert Mothers and Fathers provide an example of what Douglas Burton-Christie calls the “desert hermeneutic” or “critical-participative analysis” which he likens to discernment. The Desert elders show how interpretation and discernment are formed by a way of life, a *habitus*, which is embodied in and learned through practices. Benedict provides a rule for a way of life in community and practices that are formative of that way of life. In the process, the rule provides examples of discretion, discernment, and practices that develop openness to the Spirit and obedience to the will of God. The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola are written for Christians seeking to discern the will of God in their own lives. The *Exercises* emphasize prayer and openness to the Spirit through attending to the inner movements of the soul and indifference to movements that are not of God. This dissertation judges that these three sub-traditions of Christian spirituality elucidate its foundational thesis that a practical theology that seeks to be formative of faithful discipleship depends on wise discernment, which itself is developed by formative practices embodied within a way of life, and that these practices themselves are formed and reformed by wise discernment.

**Method and Outline**

This dissertation begins with a critical theological exploration of the various aims, tasks, and methods of the discipline of practical theology, as well as the place and function

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of practical wisdom, employed within the work of major scholars of this discipline. Such scholars include Browning, Osmer, Miller-McLemore, Bass, and Dykstra. Practical wisdom plays an important role in the practical theologies of these scholars, and this dissertation builds upon some of their definitions and uses of practical wisdom (Bass, Dykstra, and Osmer) and seeks to critique or nuance those of others (Browning), in light of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, who presents practical wisdom as tradition-constituted. The dissertation seeks to show that this understanding of practical wisdom is significant for a conception of theology as *habitus*.

Chapter two has two main emphases: 1) Theological exploration of the various aims, tasks, and methods of the discipline of practical theology, and the place and function of practical wisdom, employed within the work of major scholars of this discipline. This serves as both a literature review in practical theology and practical wisdom and a description of the contemporary context of practical theology, with particular attention to two different approaches common in the American context—a critical-correlational approach and a critical-confessional approach. 2) Theological exploration of the aim, task, and method of practical theology, and the place and function of practical wisdom, for which this dissertation argues. Whereas the first emphasis is a review of the aims, tasks, definitions, and methods of contemporary practical theology, the second emphasis is an argument for the aim, task, definition, and method of practical theology favored by myself and those practical theologians whose work is most similar to my own. This approach is largely a critical-confessional approach, which is a faithful and warranted approach within the discipline of practical theology. As described throughout this dissertation, the reason
for this approach to practical theology here attends upon my understanding of theology as *habitus*, practical theology as aimed toward the formation of persons and practices that constitute a Christian *habitus*, and discernment as formative of practices and dispositions of character that constitute a Christian life, lived in faithfulness toward the desires of God known in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

From the exploration of practical wisdom in contemporary practical theological scholarship in chapter two, I will proceed in chapter three to a practical theological analysis of the tradition of discernment found within the texts of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, Benedictine monasticism, and Saint Ignatius Loyola. This practical theological analysis will explore how these texts and traditions define “discernment” and how they situate the practice of discernment within a particular *habitus* and context. These three sub-traditions of Christian spirituality have been chosen, not only because they are excellent examples of the formation and practice of good Christian discernment, but also because the practices, virtues, and dispositions of character found within their writings are both central to their own practice of discernment, and judged by this study to resonate with any practice of Christian discernment. Such practices and dispositions include: (in the desert literature) solitude, scriptural recitation, inner freedom and inner quiet; (in the Benedictine literature) discretion, stability, obedience, humility, and community; (in the Ignatian literature) indifference, openness, and prayer. These practices and dispositions of character are not only maintained through discernment, but they are also essential for forming the habits of good discernment and wise decision-making.
I will then proceed to my central focus in chapter four: critical theological reflection on the connection between the understanding of practical wisdom developed in chapter two and the insights from the Christian tradition of discernment developed in chapter three of the dissertation. In contrast with other practical-theological hermeneutics, I present the outlines of a hermeneutic of discernment. In this chapter, I hope to develop an understanding of practical wisdom in the Christian tradition that is rooted in the practice of discernment, and I also hope to show that such an understanding of practical wisdom is proper to a study of practical theology that aims at the formation of faithful practices and practitioners.

Chapter four employs a critical confessional correlation of the sources of practical wisdom within contemporary practical theology and the Christian practice of discernment. A critical confessional correlation maintains that the sources of the Christian tradition are normative for Christian theology, particularly practical theology, for practical theology often employs interdisciplinary approaches that correlate norms derived from non-Christian sources with Christian sources. Since this dissertation understands the guiding telos of practical theology as the formation of faithful practices and practitioners, it judges that the Christian tradition and its sources remain normative for the practice of discernment and the formation of Christian disciples. While ‘Christian tradition’ may be broadly conceived, this study understands ‘Christian tradition’ as the ongoing life of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church, marked by faithfulness to the biblical canon, the
historical creeds (most notably the Nicene Creed), and Christian worship. The three sub-traditions studied in this dissertation are certainly a part of that tradition, and have added to it, despite their being situated in three different time periods. This dissertation holds that practical wisdom is necessarily a tradition-constituted virtue, and I seek to show in this chapter how the practice of discernment is related to practical wisdom within Christian tradition.

This normative theological step in chapter four is necessary for making suggestions for the discipline of practical theology and discernment within the Christian tradition, and this normative turn of the dissertation also seeks to initiate possibilities for further research by developing, in chapter five, implications of this study for the study of Christian spirituality and theological education. I suggest in this chapter that the practice of discernment could be a significant aspect of theological education in many of its fields, including theological ethics, pastoral theology, and systematic theology. Most significantly, educating for discernment could be an important aspect of forming wise ordained and lay leaders in the church.

This study’s conclusions concerning practical wisdom and the practice of discernment may also have significant implications for the study of Christian spirituality. I suggest in chapter five that this study’s understanding of practical wisdom and discernment can guide a practical-theological approach to the study of spirituality. This

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21. The four “marks” of the Christian church—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—are listed here as part of the descriptors of this dissertation’s use of the term “Christian tradition,” so that the discussion of Christian tradition herein may carry with it an ecumenical reach and perhaps resonate among various Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant communities.
study’s conclusions regarding discernment and practical wisdom may help shape a definition and methodology for the study of Christian spirituality.

Limitations

This dissertation does not seek to make an original contribution to the study of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, Benedict, or Ignatius; it seeks to make an original contribution to the study of practical theology. As such, this dissertation works with primary sources in translation and relies on secondary scholarship (historical, theological, textual commentary) in understanding, describing, and exploring these three spiritual traditions. This is a limitation, but by no means a serious impediment to the central thesis and goal of the dissertation. Practical theology and Christian spirituality are interdisciplinary studies, and they often rely on the established work of other scholars who have expertise in historical and textual work.

This dissertation focuses its attention on the American discourse in practical theology (and theological education) rather than attempting to make claims that have a global sweep. This study gives particular, though not exclusive, attention to American scholars in practical theology. Nevertheless, in doing so this author hopes that the dissertation may resonate with the work of scholars outside the U.S. – and indeed non-English speaking scholars as a whole – and contribute to it, even if the secondary scholarship found herein is primarily written in English.

This dissertation does not speak to the whole of the Christian tradition of discernment. The three Christian spiritual sub-traditions were chosen for this study
because of their importance as classics of the Christian spiritual tradition, because of their ongoing influence on contemporary Christian practice, and because this dissertation judges that the particular spiritual practices and themes found in these spiritualities are important for considering the place of discernment and practical wisdom within an understanding of practical theology as having the formative goals outlined in this introduction. Here again, the hope remains that this dissertation’s claims might resonate across Christian traditions—including various Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant communities—regarding Christian narrative and practice.  

CHAPTER TWO
PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND PRACTICAL WISDOM

Introduction: A Brief History of Practical Theology in Light of Its Methodological Developments

The discipline of practical theology continues to be in flux, characterized more by an inclusive community of scholars, ministers, and practitioners who express their work as “practical theology” than by definitive consensus on the location, definition, method, and ends of the discipline. The discipline of practical theology can at times seem to be bound by “a common center” and at other times by “thin threads.”¹ This dissertation argues for the practice of discernment as central to practical theological hermeneutics within the Christian tradition. Most practical theological hermeneutics, as will be demonstrated throughout this dissertation, make reference to practical reasoning and practical wisdom as the interpretive method and wisdom at work in practical theology;² therefore, it is important to review some of the methods, locations, and aims of different types of practical theology to see how practical wisdom and discernment might be located as interpretive method. For that reason, this dissertation must first examine some of the characteristics of current practical theological methodology—such as the location, telos, and definition of practical theology—and its historical development. This first section will broadly trace the

¹ Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Practical Theology: Bound by a Common Center or Thin Threads?" *International Journal of Practical Theology* 10, no. 2 (2007).

historical developments of the function and definition of practical theology, while the following two sections will examine more closely two particular approaches to practical theology that relate to the dissertation’s interest in discernment, practical wisdom, and theological hermeneutics.3

In the early Christian church, practical theology would most likely characterize theology as a whole, rather than a distinct discipline within it; most theology was found in the context of pastoral letters, homilies, or ecumenical councils. Theology was firmly rooted in the church, for Christian instruction, and for Christian practice. The rise of western universities in the thirteenth century began to change the place and function of theology as a whole, effectively splitting the study of theology into two different disciplines: “speculative theology,” studied at the university, and “practical theology,” studied in ecclesial contexts outside of the university. As the universities continued to develop new disciplines along with the specialization of knowledge, by the eighteenth century theology in the university was a collection of sciences, or different disciplines within the study of theology, namely biblical theology, historical theology, systematic (or dogmatic) theology, and practical theology. The “four-fold pattern” eventually emerged from the distinction in the academy between theoretical and applied sciences.4 This situation in the study of


4. Farley, 78.
theology set the stage for an attempt to unify the purpose of theology and defend its place in the academy.

A major development in the history of practical theology begins in the early nineteenth century, with Friedrich Schleiermacher’s publication of the *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*. In this work, Schleiermacher sought to describe the purpose unifying the different parts of theological study. According to Schleiermacher, theology is a “positive science,” akin to law or medicine, wherein “the practical task of guiding the Christian church both unites the several disciplines and makes them theological.”

Schleiermacher understood theology to consist of three interdependent, yet hierarchically ordered, parts: philosophical theology (the “root”), historical theology (the “body”), and practical theology (the “crown”). The work of theology proceeds in one direction: from philosophical theology to practical theology. According to Schleiermacher, philosophical theology provides the theoretical foundations, historical theology provides the material of theology, and practical theology “studies and indicates the appropriate rules, procedures, and methods to be used in overcoming the gap between the ideal and the actual.” Practical theology, therefore, consists in studying technique; it studies the application of theories already worked out in philosophical and historical theology. As a result, practical theology in the academy tended toward the education of ministerial technique; just as there were professional schools for lawyers and medical doctors in the academy, there were divinity schools and seminaries for ministers. This “teleological unity” of theological study—the

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6. Ibid., 48.
training of ministers—is what Edward Farley came to call the “clerical paradigm” of practical theology. From the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, this model of practical theology dominated the academy, in both Protestant circles and Roman Catholic circles (as pastoral theology).  

Two major works of practical theology in the latter half of the twentieth century helped to open up the great diversity that we see in the discipline today: Edward Farley’s *Theologia*, and Don Browning’s *A Fundamental Practical Theology*. Farley introduced the problem of the “clerical paradigm” and helped to lead discussion about the nature and purpose of practical theology away from sole emphasis on the training of clergy. Farley laments the loss of theology as a knowledge (wisdom) “of God and what God reveals,” and he laments the development of theology into a body of sciences united by subject matter (historical theology) and goal (training of clergy). Farley attempts to recover the understanding of theology as *habitus*, a “cognitive disposition and orientation of the soul... which has the character of knowledge,” that knowledge being wisdom. Theology as *habitus* will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, because it serves as a principal

7. Farley, 85.

8. For a discussion of this model in Catholic history, see Kathleen A. Cahalan, “Locating Practical Theology in Catholic Theological Discourse and Practice,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 15, no. 1 (2011). Cahalan notes that before the mid-twentieth century, “Catholic theology was produced primarily through not exclusively within and for seminary education, whose sole purpose was the education of priests” (3). After the Second Vatican Council, although theology “was charged with becoming more open and directed to social and cultural realities, more *pastoral*” (4), “seminary education was no longer the determining factor of Catholic theology” (7), and pastoral theology in the Catholic university is often “viewed as process-oriented, in opposition to the rigorous, scientific, or theoretical forms of doctrinal theology. The perception is that pastoral theology contains little theological substance itself, but is instead an application of the ideas established in other areas” (8). Farley’s critique of Protestant theological education is similar.


10. Ibid.
foundation for this dissertation’s understanding of the relationship between practical theology, wisdom, and discernment.

Browning’s work is significant for his use of Hans-Georg Gadamer in describing the relationship between theory and practice within practical theology, for his discussion of phronesis in practical theology, and for his description of practical theological methodology as “practice-theory-practice.” Browning’s work with social sciences helped solidify the interdisciplinary nature of practical theology and helped solidify what has become generally accepted in the discipline, that practical theology studies what Ganzevoort has recently termed “lived religion”; it studies practices in their various contexts. Browning’s work will be discussed throughout this dissertation as well, for it serves as both a foundation and a foil for this dissertation’s understanding of the nature of practical theology, practical wisdom, and discernment.

The development of practical theology through the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century has been marked by great expansion and diversity of practical theological models and projects. Current models include empirical, liberationist, feminist and womanist, ministerial, discipleship, ecclesial, political, and public. At times, there appears to be a common center among these models, while at other times only thin threads appear to be binding them within the discipline of “practical theology.” Differences and similarities in location (ecclesial/societal continuum), implicit or explicit goal (telos), methodology, and definition continue to develop in the discipline.

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11. For a description of “lived religion” as the common object of study among practical theologians, see Ganzevoort, 3-4.
Being that the history of the study of practical theology has led in the last 30 years away from a focus on the “clerical paradigm,” most practical theologians have located their work in practical theology on the church as a whole (an ecclesial focus), the church as related to and for the world (a modified ecclesial focus), and moral or religious life in the world (a societal focus).\textsuperscript{12} As Ganzevoort has recently pointed out, the location and function of different approaches to practical theology lie on a continuum.\textsuperscript{13} Most practical theologians would agree that praxis is central to the object of study within practical theology, however, different scholars focus on different fields of praxis: the praxis of ordained ministry, or the church, or society and culture, or religious and moral praxis in the world. These different fields correspond to the short continuum listed above (ecclesial/societal focus).\textsuperscript{14} Differences in methodology abound among practical theological works, and once again, points on a continuum help to define the various approaches and their goals. Dingemans’s separation of approaches as “empirical-analytical,” “hermeneutical,” and “critical-political,” or liberative, is helpful, as well as Poling and Miller’s “critical scientific,” “critical correlational,” and “critical confessional.”\textsuperscript{15} Both of these maps help locate the various types of practical theology listed above. These maps also help one to locate the normative outlook that the different types of practical theology might have. Finally, all practical theologies have an end or goal, whether it is

\textsuperscript{12} These distinctions come from Maddox.

\textsuperscript{13} Ganzevoort, 6-7.

\textsuperscript{14} For a description of the church and society continuum in the study of practical theology, see James N. Poling and Donald Eugene Miller, \textit{Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985).

\textsuperscript{15} See Dingemans, 87-91; and Poling and Miller, 31-33.
explicit or implicit. Some practical theologies aim at societal transformation, some at ecclesial transformation, some at empirical or phenomenological description of praxis with the goal of critical examination and testing of ecclesial or societal theories, traditions, and practices. Practical theology often aims at transformation in some sense, even if that transformation is implied. While “coalescence of approaches”\textsuperscript{16} and “supporting connections”\textsuperscript{17} continue to define the general scope of practical theology, understanding the explicit or implicit telos of a particular practical-theological methodology can lead to understanding the guiding outlook and purpose of that type of practical theology.

**Defining Aspects of Practical Theology: Two Hermeneutics**

For the purposes of this dissertation, which seeks to describe a hermeneutic of discernment in practical theology particularly in relation to the role of practical wisdom in practical theology, the present section of this chapter will explore two approaches to practical theology, namely a mutually critical hermeneutic of correlation and a critical confessional hermeneutic.\textsuperscript{18} These two approaches engage in different conceptions of practical wisdom as the crux of their hermeneutics, which will be described throughout the present chapter. This dissertation seeks to describe a practical theological hermeneutic of discernment in part through critical reflection on the relationship between practical

\textsuperscript{16} Dingemans, 91.

\textsuperscript{17} Ganzevoort, 13.

\textsuperscript{18} A similar division of approaches are provided by Kathleen Cahalan, “Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church’s Ministry” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9, no. 1 (2005). She identifies the above approaches as “fundamental practical theology” or “late modern” (a mutually critical hermeneutic) and “Christian practices” or “countermodern” (a critical confessional hermeneutic).
wisdom and the practice of discernment. Though this dissertation maintains that a hermeneutic of discernment is most similar to a critical confessional hermeneutic, it will also show how a hermeneutic of discernment can bridge these two approaches. To this end, this section will describe differences in these approaches to practical theology through an investigation of the location, definition, method, and especially the telos of practical theology according to these approaches. The present section does not intend to be an exhaustive examination of each approach, but it seeks to highlight some of the major issues in the discipline of practical theology, particularly the issues surrounding practical theological ends and interpretive methods that this dissertation seeks to address and in relation to which this dissertation seeks to contribute an alternative vision.

Public Norms and Christian Practice: A Mutually Critical Hermeneutic

Don Browning presents an example of the type of practical theology that considers itself a philosophical and hermeneutical approach that seeks transformation of and dialogue with society, generating publicly accessible truth claims, through a mutual critical correlation of Christian tradition and social scientific and philosophical sources outside of Christian tradition. Browning is concerned with the ability of practical theology to speak and make claims in the public square and in the academy while still being rooted in the church.

Browning defines practical theology as “critical reflection on the church’s dialogue with Christian sources and other sources of experience and interpretation with the aim of
guiding its action toward societal and individual transformation.\textsuperscript{19} For Browning, the emphasis on societal transformation remains paramount. The goal of his practical theology, as identified by Poling and Miller, is the development of a public account of proper action in the world that is not confessionally dependent.\textsuperscript{20} Browning, in describing his method, has written that it begins in faith and ends in a mutually critical dialogue.\textsuperscript{21} As such, Browning may be considered as a practical theologian who locates his work in moral/religious life in the world. Browning's interest in publicly defensible validity claims\textsuperscript{22} in a pluralistic society and interest in practical theology as a philosophical and hermeneutical pursuit in the interest of societal and individual transformation clearly shape his method, location, and definition.

Browning's method of practical theology is hermeneutical, yet, as Dingemans notes, open to empirical methods.\textsuperscript{23} Browning's method of practical theology has been taken up by many practical theologians,\textsuperscript{24} or some form of his basic structure has been used by most practical theologians. Such structure demonstrates the practical theological concern with praxis, and it demonstrates the interest for beginning with reflection on practice. Briefly,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Browning, 36.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Poling and Miller, 45-46.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Browning, \textit{Fundamental Practical Theology}, 69.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Dingemans, 89.
\end{itemize}
Browning’s method of practical theology includes four movements: descriptive theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and strategic practical theology. All these movements make up a practical theological study, and each of these movements is considered by Browning to be theological. Browning’s method is hermeneutical throughout the four movements, including the first: “To describe these practices and their surrounding meanings is itself a multidimensional hermeneutic enterprise or dialogue.”

He seeks to describe and uncover the implicit and explicit theologies that lie behind practices, given that he considers practices to be “theory-laden.” A thick description is interested in the histories, values, and cultures that lie behind people’s practices that a purely empirical method may not uncover. Descriptive theology and historical theology begin to investigate the sources of normativity.

In the historical theological movement, Browning turns to the resources of the Christian tradition, such as Christian history and biblical sources of Christian norms regarding the practice(s) that are being studied. In both the descriptive and historical movements, Browning investigates what Dingemans identifies as “layers” of normativity. These layers Browning identifies as the five dimensions of practical reason: the visual (narrative), obligational (moral), tendency-need (premoral goods understood through psychology, sociology, etc.), environmental-social, and rule-role dimensions.

26. Ibid.
27. Dingemans, 95.
The third movement, systematic theology, is a mutually critical correlation of (1) the resources of the Christian tradition and (2) the practices and their surrounding meanings investigated in the first movement. We might say that this is a mutually critical correlation of the layers of normativity found in the first two movements. Both sources of norms are considered to be mutually critical, and therefore the Christian tradition does not have priority in its norms over contemporary practice and other sources of interpretation and experience. Mutually critical correlation is governed by practical reason,29 which Browning describes as having an “outer envelope” (a tradition’s narrative—the visual level) and an “inner core” (which he identifies as “mutual regard” through an analysis of Kantian ethics and the “love commandment” in the Gospel of Matthew).30

While he agrees with cultural-linguistic theologians that theological inquiry is always traditioned,31 Browning’s emphasis on societal transformation and publicly accessible and defensible truth claims prompts him to enter into mutually critical dialogue on the basis of an ethical foundation (the inner core of practical reason) that transcends the particularity of any one religious tradition. Therefore, some writers have described Browning’s subject field location in practical theology as moral/religious life in the world and his teleological interest in a practical theology that is philosophically appropriate to the

29. Browning's description of practical reason and phronesis is central to his understanding of practical theology, and will be discussed more fully in a section below entitled, “Practical Wisdom and Practical Theology.”

30. Ibid., 11-12.

31. Ibid., 70, 101-102.
public square and public criteria, *in order to be publicly (societally) transformative.* In light of this, his method begins in a religious tradition (Christian) and moves through mutually critical dialogue, which aims at social transformation through the advancement of publically valid truth claims. The final movement of Browning’s method is the strategic practical theological movement. In this movement, suggestions are made based on the first three movements regarding the transformation of practices. Practical theology does not end in research, but seeks to make changes in practices and in contexts. Browning’s contributions to the discipline of practical theology, as well as the contributions of other mutual critical approaches, are significant. Browning’s contribution of a fundamental practical theology, which includes descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic elements of theology, along with his discussion of hermeneutic and ethical elements of practical theology, and his work with social sciences have shaped the discipline and this dissertation. While the limitations of his approach will be discussed throughout this dissertation, an important limitation to note at this point is the lack of explicitly Christian theological reflection in his emphasis on social science and public ethics: “The trajectory of practical thinking is toward the common good of society, and therefore extends beyond any one community or ecclesial tradition. Because he spends considerable time explaining how the community engages practical reason toward a social ethic, he fails to explain in theological terms God’s relationship to practical reason.” Understanding Browning’s approach is important for this dissertation because, as will be discussed further in this chapter,

32. See, for instance, Maddox, op. cit.; Polling and Miller, op. cit.
Browning's methodology centers on practical reasoning and practical wisdom as a *hermeneutic of mutually critical correlation*. I will argue, contrary to his position, that practical theological methodology in the Christian tradition centers on practical wisdom as a *hermeneutic of discernment*.

**Christian Habitus and Faithful Practice: A Confessional Hermeneutic**

This dissertation's position on the location, method, and *telos* of practical theology begins with a concern shared by Farley: the loss of theology as a *habitus*, a way of being, a cognitive disposition of the soul characterized by wisdom.\(^{34}\) According to Farley, theology has lost this self-understanding through the medieval separation of speculative theology and practical theology, where practical theology dealt with spiritual practices and speculative theology dealt with beliefs, to the rise of the university and the fragmentation of the theological sciences, to Schleiermacher's understanding of theology as a positive science concerned with the application of theory to practice under the teleological unity of the training of ordained ministers, that is, the “clerical paradigm.” Though Schleiermacher sought to unify theology under the teleological unity of the training of ministers, it had the unfortunate effect of further separating theory from practice and making practice the mere application of theory. Theology remains in this state for the most part, as many seminaries still teach theology as a compilation of areas of knowledge (biblical, historical, dogmatic, practical), rather than as a cognitive disposition of the soul, a unity of theory and practice.

\(^{34}\) Farley, 35.
Farley claims that understandings of theology hinge on two senses of the term: first, as "an actual, individual cognition of God and things related to God, a cognition which in most treatments attends faith,” and second, as “a discipline, a self-conscious scholarly enterprise of understanding.” It is in the first sense that Farley defines theology as *habitus*. It is my understanding that the second sense follows the first sense, that is, that the discipline of theology, particularly practical theology, follows the primary sense of theology as cognition of God that attends faith. It is in this understanding that theology is in one sense a *habitus*, a way of being characterized by wisdom and constituted by practice within the Christian tradition and community, the church, and in another sense (which follows along the first sense), critical and faithful reflection on Christian practice characterized by wisdom. The Christian tradition of discernment characterizes the way of knowing (wisdom) operative in both senses of theology.

To the extent that theology as a *habitus* is characterized by wisdom, the *telos* of practical theology may be considered to be the formation of faithful practices and faithful discipleship. A way of life is constituted by practices, and we may come to understand and critically reflect on that way of life by investigating the explicit and implicit theologies within those theory-laden practices. As I will describe further in this chapter, this critical reflection and investigation amounts to a practice of discernment, for discernment critically

35. Ibid., 31.


reflects on the faithfulness of practices that constitute a Christian way of life. Swinton and Mowat define practical theology as “critical, theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God’s redemptive practices in, to, and for the world.”38 In this definition, we can see both Cahalan’s and Nieman’s concern for forming faithful discipleship and Dykstra’s and Bass’s concern for life abundant. Practical theology, as defined in this way, engages in critical reflection; it is not merely application of theory but a hermeneutical enterprise in that practices are understood to be deep and complex and are understood within particular contexts.39

Swinton and Mowat also claim that practical theology is theological in the sense that “theology is (or at least should be) the primary source of knowledge which guides and provides the hermeneutical framework within which Practical Theology carries out its task.”40 Such an approach would be defined by Poling and Miller as being a “critical confessional” approach in which “the Christian tradition is normatively prior, the hermeneutics for its interpretation is of primary importance, and the secular sciences are used cautiously in order to minimize the influence of norms alien to the Christian tradition.”41 Practical theology is thus located within a particular habitus, the church, which is understood through Christian narrative, tradition, and practices. It is interested in

38. Swinton and Mowat, 6.
39. Ibid., 6-7.
40. Ibid., 7.
41. Poling and Miller, 31.
the faithfulness of practices to the redemptive vision of God by attending to Christian tradition and narrative in particular contexts. Cahalan writes that such an approach seeks “to offer Christian interpretations of practices that express ‘a Christian way of life’” among practices that “are informed by all kinds of cultural messages, some positive, but most destructive.”

Pete Ward has recently argued that many approaches to practical theology tend to “edit out the doctrinal,” noting,

To be a Christian, I would want to say, is to indwell and be indwelt by God. This presence of God is mediated in language and in practices. ...Doctrine does not function as theory but as mediation. This kind of observation I think shows a way that Practical Theology can develop its own distinctive way to move beyond its modernist captivity. To do this however it needs to take doctrine and tradition much more seriously. ...Not by adopting notions of ‘applied theology’ but by seeing doctrinal expression as part of the lived while not being reduced to the lived.

The “modernist captivity” of practical theology that Ward refers to above is epitomized by Browning’s mutually critical approach, which seeks to establish ethical criteria and wisdom for practice outside of a particular narrative and tradition. Practical theology is critical reflection on the faithfulness of practices within a particular lived context, with the aim of forming faithful practices and practitioners within their particular lived contexts. In order to move toward these ends, practical theology must, as Ward notes, “take doctrine and tradition much more seriously.” A hermeneutic of discernment, described throughout this dissertation, does just that.

Practical theology is concerned not only with the practices of the church, but also the practices of the world and how the church serves the world in its mission as witness to

42. Cahalan, “Three Approaches,” 77.

the vision of God for the world. This means that even though the Christian narrative and tradition holds normative priority, practical theology is interdisciplinary and must make use of the social sciences in order to understand better the contexts of the world in which the church lives in mission. For understanding these contexts, one would have to enter into the interdisciplinary aspect of practical theology, noted above by Browning’s emphasis on the “thick description” of practices and their contexts as part of practical theological methodology. Some use of the social sciences to describe a context and culture within which the person or community lives is essential to making a critical and theological reflection on practice. However, the Christian tradition must remain normative in practical theological study if practical theology is to remain essentially theological in its norms, methodology, and telos. Critical-Confessional approaches to practical theology often seek to avoid the influence of norms alien to the Christian tradition, because they view the task and telos of practical theology as the formation of faithful practices and faithful practitioners/disciples. John Howard Yoder makes a wise criticism of theologies that use Christian terms as validation for secular sciences when, referring to “contemporary incarnational theology,” he states that often the term is used to validate and support an idea of essential or common humanity that is drawn from and rooted in sources other than the Christian tradition of which incarnation is said to ratify.44 John Milbank is likewise correct when he argues that the social sciences already have implicit theologies, and “if

theology no longer seeks to position, qualify, or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology.”

While the method for practical theology being advocated here is similar to Browning’s in basic structure (description and interpretation of contextual practice, critical reflection on historical resources from the Christian tradition, theological reflection on how Christian practice can be faithful within a particular context, and finally strategic reflection on the transformation of practices), it is not the same as the method of mutual critical correlation, which, as I argue below, tends to position Christian sources of knowledge such that any distinctive Christian identity is foregone in favor of claims that are acceptable to public criteria of validity. If public criteria of validity dominate the teleological aims of mutual critical correlation for practices in the public square, then it seems that these criteria will be normative of the Christian tradition, and not ultimately “mutually critical.” In other words, the ends of mutual critical correlation (publicly acceptable, non-confessional validity claims) tend to position theology to such an extent that, in the end, Christian tradition and scripture have comparatively little normative weight in practical theological reflection. Such an approach to practical theology seems more concerned with establishing the validity of claims acceptable to a pluralistic public than critically reflecting on how Christian practices in the church and in the world might be more faithful to the vision of God known in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Methods of mutual critical

correlation for church praxis other than Browning’s make the same move—mutual critical correlation seems to propose a “wider world,” an “objective” standpoint from which one can correlate often contradictory norms. If one correlates the norms of various social sciences with norms from the Christian tradition in an equal dialogue, by what norms or standards does one choose which norms (social scientific or Christian) are normative for the present situation? The approach described as mutual critical correlation presumes to adopt an objective viewpoint from which to judge how to correlate competing norms; yet this “objective norm” turns out to be the philosophical tradition of Enlightenment liberalism. Theology, then, is in danger of becoming positioned by a “wider world,” wherein “that wider world is each time just one more subculture.”

Scholars of practical theology have also raised criticisms of critical confessional hermeneutics and approaches to practical theology that focus on norms derived from Christian tradition. Cahalan writes that such approaches may be critiqued as “maintaining the status quo or returning to some previous status quo” in that thus far “these authors have paid attention to describing what practices are and what a Christian interpretation of particular practices might be, but they have not fully articulated the principles for critically assessing Christian practices” in light of the idea that “practices are not neutral but in fact can mask and hide all kinds of distortions that foster social control of one group over


48. Ibid.
another.”49 In this sense, such approaches to practical theology have been critiqued for lacking as yet a "thick" understanding of culture, such as that seen in Browning’s work, which uses insights from the social sciences to describe tendencies and needs, and the work of liberation and contextual theologians who “look to the ways local cultures shape and influence religious belief and practice.”50 In light of this, a hermeneutic of discernment may bridge the two approaches described above. As will be described in the following chapters, a hermeneutic of discernment is necessarily grounded in local contexts and thick descriptions, while at the same time remaining conscious of how such descriptions carry norms that must be engaged in light of Christian narrative and tradition in order to discern the action of the Holy Spirit in particular situations and contexts.

The insights derived from a critical confessional hermeneutic can have transformative resonance in society, even though the publicly transformative character of the church’s faithful witness is not always immediately perceived. The church does not effect transformation in society by grounding its theology in Enlightenment liberalism or other non-Christian sources, but by being firmly rooted in the church community and the Christian tradition, and by being a witness to the world through practices and discipleship that are faithful to God’s active presence to, for, and in the world.51 The efficacy of Christian practices and spiritualities is based on their faithfulness to the Christian narrative and


50. Ibid., 91.

tradition, the ends of practices that are integral to the way of life—Christianity—within which these practices are embedded and make sense in the first place. While a practical-theological study may begin with a description of the context of the practice with the help of the social sciences to “complexify” the situation, such a study must then proceed to normative reflection on Christian practice, and an account of how Christian practice and spirituality may remain faithful to the vision of God within the particularities of a given context and life of persons and communities. Through this kind of theological reflection, contexts and practices may be transformed, not ultimately so that they may be more efficient, but that they may be more faithful: “Thus the efficacy of the practice (the good to which it is aimed), is not defined pragmatically by its ability to fulfill particular human needs (although it will include that), but by whether or not it participates faithfully in the divine redemptive mission.” This dissertation asserts that this kind of theological reflection is akin to the practice of discernment, and in seeking such ends, the discipline of practical theology has much to learn from the Christian tradition of discernment.

**Practical Wisdom and Practical Theology**

Practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, has played an important role in practical theology over the past fifty years, particularly in the American context of practical theology. The brief account, earlier in this chapter, of the history of practical theology noted the increasing interest in *praxis*, participative reflection-on-action that gives rise to

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52. Swinton and Mowat, 13.

53. Ibid., 22.
transformation, as the object of practical theological study. This is the case in philosophical hermeneutic approaches, liberative and feminist approaches, and approaches aimed at ministerial and ecclesial development in the American academy. For many practical theologians, *phronesis* represents the kind of knowing that those who reflect on practice ought to develop. *Phronesis* is neither merely theoretical knowledge nor technical knowledge, but “a wisdom that interrelates the universal and the particular.”54 Such a description of *phronesis* has been derived from practical theologians’ interpretations of Aristotle, Hans-Georg Gadamer,55 and Richard Bernstein.56 Browning’s description of *phronesis* will serve as the paradigmatic understanding of *phronesis* within the practical theological typology that I have identified as mutually critical. I wish to contrast this understanding of *phronesis* with my own understanding of *phronesis*, one that derives from the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and the practical theologians that make use of his insights, in order to advocate for an understanding of practical theology that is centered around the practice of discernment and that takes account of the movements and promptings of the Holy Spirit for understanding God’s vision for particular practices and contexts. First, however, I begin with Aristotle since the term *phronesis* begins with him.57

54. Maddox, 166.


57. Since Aristotle is a common source for the philosophers and theologians discussed below, and anyone discussing practical wisdom, it is important that I discuss his understanding of it. Though I argue that extra-Christian sources should not be normative for Christian praxis, my argument does not imply that one should not use extra-Christian sources at all. By “extra-Christian sources,” I mean nontheological understandings of Christian practice that see it primarily through the logic of secular sciences that are alien to
Aristotle

Aristotle’s discussion of phronesis begins in the *Nicomachean Ethics* with his discussion of happiness and the life of virtue. Aristotle begins by putting forth the goal of all human action: “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly, every action and every intention is thought to aim at some good; hence men have expressed themselves well in declaring the good to be that at which all things aim.” Some ends sought of action, such as wealth and power, seem to be chosen not for themselves but for some other end. Aristotle identifies this end to be happiness. He contends that happiness is sought for itself, whereas other goods that people seek (wealth and power) are chosen for the sake of happiness:

Happiness is thought to be such an end most of all, for it is this that we choose always for its own sake and never for the sake of something else; and as for honor and pleasure and intellect and every virtue, we choose them for their own sake (for we might choose each of them when nothing else resulted from them), but we also choose them for the sake of happiness, believing that through these we shall be happy.

Happiness, Aristotle asserts, is that which most people regard as living well and acting well. According to this, Aristotle states: “For just as in a flute-player or a statue-maker or any artist or, in general, in anyone who has a function or an action to perform the goodness or

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59. Ibid., 8.
excellence lies in that function, so it would seem to be the case in a man, if indeed he has a function.\textsuperscript{60} 

This is the point at which Aristotle introduces the nature of virtue, the well-functioning of a human person. He begins by positing the function of a person as “an activity of the soul according to reason or not without reason.” And “when excellence with respect to virtue is added to that function,” he concludes, “the good for man turns out to be an activity of the soul according to virtue, and if the virtues are many, then according to the best and most complete virtue.”\textsuperscript{61} A flute-player plays well, that is virtuously, when she plays the flute with the excellence that lies in that function. The conclusion that we might begin to see, according to Aristotle, is that the life of virtue is conducive to happiness. The person, then, who lives and acts well is said to be happy: “happiness is a certain kind of activity of the soul according to virtue.”\textsuperscript{62} Since happiness is based on activity, Aristotle contends that happiness may be present irrespective of the vagaries of human misfortune. Though one may suffer pain and misfortune, “nobility shines out even here, when a man bears many and great misfortunes with calm and ease, not through insensibility to pain, but through nobility of character and highmindedness.”\textsuperscript{63} 

Since virtue is an activity of the soul, it is learned through habituation: “we become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre. Similarly, we become just by

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 9. 
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 10. 
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 13. 
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 15.
doing what is just, temperate by doing what is temperate, and brave by doing brave deeds." According to Aristotle, for every action, there seems to be a vice of excess, a vice of deficiency, and a virtue of moderation between excess and deficiency. Therein lies the well-functioning of the person. Hence, Aristotle defines a virtue as “a habit, disposed toward action by deliberate choice, being at the mean relative to us, and defined by reason and as a prudent man would define it.” The “mean relative to us” is an important aspect of virtue: in matters concerning action, such as in health and medicine, there is no uniformity, and action that may habituate virtue in one person may habituate vice in another, for it matters how that person is situated in respect to the mean. A coward (vice of deficiency) must practice less restraint and caution in order to perform brave acts and habituate fortitude, while one who is foolhardy (vice of excess) must be encouraged to practice more self-restraint in order to embody the virtue of fortitude. Some actions, as Aristotle points out, have no mean and are always vicious, such as murder. A virtue, therefore, is needed that would enable a person to find the mean of action in a given situation for “actions deal with particulars,” and “it is not easy to state by a formula how much or in what manner a man must deviate in order to be blamed; for judgment in these matters depends on each particular case and on sensation.” Here enters the virtue of phronesis, translated as “practical wisdom” or “prudence.”

64. Ibid., 21.
65. Ibid., 29.
66. Ibid., 29 (emphasis added).
67. Ibid., 72.
Phronesis is known as the “charioteer of the virtues,” for this virtue directs the others in discovering good action. Phronesis is neither scientific knowledge nor art since “the object of action may vary” and “the genus of action is different from that of production.” As such, Aristotle concludes that phronesis “is a disposition with true reason and ability for actions concerning what is good or bad for man.” 68 Phronesis is practical wisdom; it is the disposition and ability to know and choose what is good, what is virtuous. Martha Nussbaum describes Aristotle’s notion of practical wisdom as “intuitive perception” that enters deeply into particularity, with all of its vulnerability: “Aristotle claims that practical deliberation must be anthropocentric, concerning itself with the human good rather than with the good simpliciter.” 69 Aristotle did not envision phronesis as the kind of knowledge that apprehended ideas; phronesis guides action, not truth-claims. Health is known to be good for the human person through the intellect, but the way of achieving health for a particular person is known through practical wisdom gained through experience.

Practical wisdom is acquired through experience of good deliberation in choosing what is virtuous regarding a particular action. As such, Aristotle argues that phronesis cannot exist without the virtues, and the virtues cannot exist without phronesis. “Virtue is a habit not only according to right reason, but also with right reason; and right reason about such things is prudence,” and “a man cannot be good in the main sense without prudence,

68. Ibid., 105.
nor can he be prudent without ethical virtue." As such, we find an important aspect of Aristotle’s understanding of *phronesis*: it cannot be understood apart from the rest of the virtue tradition. In this sense, *phronesis* is tradition-constituted, that is, it is formed by a *habitus*. Aristotle is clear in the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that his inquiry concerning ethics is political, that is, it concerns a community and a *habitus*. An understanding of *phronesis* that views it as an individualistic technique of reason, rather than as a *virtue that is part and parcel of a particular way of being* constituted by particular practices that embody the narrative and tradition of a community, is a misunderstanding of Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis*.

For Aristotle, *phronesis* is developed within a *habitus*—the community, practices, and virtues of the Greek *polis*. The person of good judgment is formed by the values of a *habitus*. “Aristotelian practical wisdom is not a type of rootless situational perception that rejects all guidance from ongoing commitments and values.” A person of good character then, is one who has developed such a character by internalizing “though early training certain ethical values and a certain conception of the good human life as the more or less harmonious pursuit of these.” Here we find the basis of the “right rule” that Aristotle

70. Aristotle, 115.

71. Ibid., 2.

72. The reflections in this paragraph on Aristotle’s *phronesis* and its relationship to community, *habitus*, and tradition are developed from a reading of Alasdair MacIntyre, and will be expanded in the next section, which deals specifically with MacIntyre.

73. Nussbaum, 306.

74. Ibid., 306.
speaks of as having a central place in practical wisdom. Nussbaum, in the above quotations, seems to be describing a *habitus* and tradition. This formation of the person of good character becomes the “right rule” of which Aristotle writes. Thus, we should not understand practical wisdom as something that is ultimately individualistic. In this light, practical wisdom is intimately connected with a communally embodied standard of tradition. Along these lines, Nussbaum writes: “Nor does particular judgment have the kind of rootedness and focus required for goodness of character without a core of commitment to a general conception—albeit one that is continually evolving, ready for surprise, and not rigid.”76 This evolving, general conception is an historically extended tradition. *Habitus* and tradition provide the values by which good character is formed: “He or she will be concerned about friendship, justice, courage, moderation, generosity; his desires will be formed in accordance with these concerns; and he will have derived from this internalized conception of value many ongoing guidelines for action, pointers as to what to look for in a particular situation.”77 Formation of the prudent person, within a commitment to a *habitus* and tradition that define what it is to be wise, is central to the nature of practical wisdom. This reading of Aristotle is confirmed by the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, particularly in his work entitled *After Virtue.*78

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75. Ibid., 299.

76. Ibid., 306.

77. Ibid.

Alasdair MacIntyre

MacIntyre begins his treatise on virtue ethics with an analysis of the contemporary state of moral thinking, then provides an historical argument for how the contemporary state came about, and concludes with an analysis of Aristotle's ethics and MacIntyre’s own attempt to recover the tradition of virtue. Three key themes that are essential to MacIntyre's description of virtue ethics and *phronesis* are practices, narrative, and tradition.

MacIntyre describes the current state of moral thinking as characterized by two contrary elements: (1) “interminable public arguments” characterized by “conceptual incommensurability” and (2) arguments which, none the less, purport to be “impersonal rational arguments.” MacIntyre names this state of moral thinking “emotivism,” and he describes emotivism as “the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.” However, MacIntyre’s historical account of moral thinking notes that, in modern emotivist ethical argument, the language of an earlier ethical tradition abounds. Emotivist argument still uses the language of right and wrong, justice and injustice, etc. MacIntyre argues that this points to a tradition of moral evaluation that was not characterized by personal preference, but rather by rational evaluation based on the internal goods constitutive of a practice.

79. Ibid., 8.

80. Ibid., 12.
MacIntyre blames the loss of the classical moral tradition (Aristotelian tradition) on the Enlightenment project of trying to find rational grounding for ethical criteria without any teleological view of human nature, that is, ethical criteria outside of a particular narrative and tradition. However, “once the notion of essential human purposes or functions disappears from morality, it begins to appear implausible to treat moral judgments as factual statements.” As such, all that remains are moral “rules” that are divorced from a teleological concept of human action. Without this context, without a particular way of life that gives meaning to practices, the criteria (the rules) for moral evaluation are incommensurable and therefore subject to the will and preference of individuals. All that remains for moral thinking is the force of one’s will and preference disguised as evaluative moral rationality.

MacIntyre’s attempt to recover the virtue tradition is marked by his insistence that “we need to attend to virtues in the first place in order to understand the function and authority of rules.” MacIntyre identifies three essential aspects of Aristotelian virtue ethics that may be taken up for a recovery of that tradition: practices, narrative, and tradition. He defines practices teleologically, locating their meaning in “goods internal to that form of activity” that “are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of

81. Though Kant attempted to find that grounding in reason, Diderot and Hume attempted to locate it in the human passions or desires. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, claimed that the basis of the ethical is to be found in a choice or “leap” that lies beyond reason.

82. Ibid., 59.

83. Ibid., 119, emphasis in original.
excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity."\(^{84}\)

Hence, virtue is that disposition or quality of character that allows one to achieve those goods internal to an activity, and is itself partially definitive of what that activity is. This is Aristotle’s vision of flute-players and good flute-players noted above—the practice of flute-playing is defined by the “excellence that lies in that function,” or as MacIntyre notes, the internal goods realized in doing the activity (practicing) well.

Practices, furthermore, are historically embedded and play out in the narrative unity of a human person’s life—“a narrative which links birth to life to death as a narrative beginning to middle to end.”\(^{85}\) For MacIntyre, it is clear that behavior cannot be conceived outside of “intentions, beliefs and settings”\(^{86}\) that characterize the unity of an individual life, that is, “the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life.”\(^{87}\) The narrative unity of one’s life is further defined by a conception of the ends of a narrative: for individual and social lives to be intelligible, MacIntyre argues that “like characters in a fictional narrative we do not know what will happen next, but nonetheless our lives have a certain form which projects itself towards our future.”\(^{88}\) Therefore, “to ask ‘What is the good for me?’ is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion.”\(^{89}\) The virtues then, both

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 187.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 205.

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 208.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 218.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 216.

\(^{89}\) Ibid., 218.
“sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good,” and are partially definitive of the goods internal to the practices that constitute the narrative unity of a life, a *habitus*.

Using MacIntyre’s terms, we might say that a *habitus* is the teleological narrative unity of an individual or community shaped by the living tradition of practice. A practice is always engaged not only in relationship with other contemporary practitioners, but also with previous practitioners whose “achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point,” and as such, practices and virtues (including *phronesis*) are constituted by a tradition. MacIntyre notes the centrality of tradition: “the individual’s search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual’s life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life.” MacIntyre points out the importance of tradition in seeking the good of one’s life. He is careful to note as well that tradition is not the comfort of the unchanging, but rather a living, evolving “historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.” Note how this is similar to the “internalized conception of value” mentioned above by Nussbaum, that is essential to the nature and function of practical wisdom.

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90. Ibid., 219.
91. Ibid., 194.
92. Ibid., 222.
93. Ibid.
Following MacIntyre’s argument above, one might argue that *phronesis* is the virtue that guides practices toward virtue, according to the internal goods of practices and the goods and ends of a single life, and as such is the foundational virtue in the development of a *habitus*, which is constituted by practices. The *habitus*, historically extended in a tradition, then serves as that “internalized conception of value” that is, in turn, formative of practical wisdom. Here we have a cycle of personal and communal formation rooted in the interplay of *habitus*, tradition, narrative, community, practices, virtue, and *phronesis*. *Phronesis* is the virtue that guides formative choices within practices—practices that constitute a *habitus*. *Phronesis* is a “capacity for judgment which the agent possesses in knowing how to select among the relevant stack of maxims and how to apply them in particular situations.” MacIntyre notes the centrality of *phronesis* for the formation and maintenance of a tradition: *Phronesis* is a virtue that enables persons “to pursue both their own good and the good of the tradition of which they are the bearers even in situations defined by the necessity of tragic, dilemmatic choice.”

MacIntyre’s reading of Aristotelian ethics emphasizes the development of *phronesis* within a *habitus* constituted, shaped, and formed by a narrative, tradition, and practices that embody that *habitus* within a community of practitioners. His understanding of practices and practical wisdom has become foundational for practical theologians like John Swinton, Harriet Mowat, Craig Dykstra, and Dorothy Bass, as well as Christian ethicists like

95. MacIntyre, 223.
96. Ibid.
Stanley Hauerwas and James McClendon, while this has not been so for other practical theologians. Most notably, Don Browning argues that tradition and narrative make up an “outer envelope” for practical wisdom, rather than an “inner core.”

Don Browning

Browning’s work, especially in *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, presents an understanding of *phronesis* formed in part by his reading of Aristotle, Gadamer, and narrative philosophers such as MacIntyre. Browning’s understanding of *phronesis* is ultimately influenced by his teleological interest in a practical theology that is philosophically appropriate to the public square and public criteria, in order to be publicly (societally) transformative. Browning’s understanding of practical wisdom is rooted in his concern that practical theology “start in faith yet end in a mutually critical dialogue between Christianity and other perspectives toward the end of shaping the common life.”97 I argue below that this concern and Browning’s understanding of practical wisdom ultimately minimizes the centrality of narrative, tradition, and *habitus* for practical wisdom, and therefore positions practical wisdom (and practical theology) too far from the narrative, tradition, and *habitus* that give practices, virtues, and practical wisdom any grounding or meaning in the first place. In other words, while Browning argues that narratives and traditions constitute “the vision that animates, informs, and provides the

ontological context for practical reason,”98 his argument ultimately ends up marginalizing their significance for the essential, or “core,” meaning of practical wisdom.

Browning notes that, while moral inquiry begins in tradition, it does not depend on tradition in all respects.99 He explains this in two ways. First, Browning argues that, while Aristotle recognized that “we must be persons of virtue before we can discern the good,” he also recognized that a “principle of rationality was needed to refine the wisdom of our virtues.”100 Browning notes that Aristotle identified this principle as the mean between excess and deficiency, and that “the specific task of phronesis is to discern and apply the rational principle that would supply the mean between the excesses.” Browning admits that the principle of equal regard derived from the Christian narrative and the principle of the mean derived from the narrative of the Greek polis are extraordinarily different.101 Nevertheless, Browning points out the presence and necessity of both a narrative and a principle of rationality in moral inquiry. Second, regarding this distinction, Browning writes, “It is useful to distinguish between the beliefs or narrative background of a moral principle and the moral principle itself,” noting that similar moral principles may be found in different traditions and narratives.102 Browning expresses this distinction in practical wisdom, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, by putting forth an understanding of the “outer envelope” (the narrative and tradition) and the “inner core” (the principle of equal

99. Ibid., 177.
100. Ibid., 175-176.
101. Ibid., 177-178.
102. Ibid., 178.
regard) of practical wisdom. While the outer envelope of practical wisdom may change, the inner core remains the same. This conception of practical wisdom allows Browning to present a practical-theological method that begins in Christian faith, proceeds through mutually critical dialogue, is appropriate to the pluralistic public square where confessional norms are not considered valid truth claims, and may present strategies for the transformation of societal practice.

Browning describes practical wisdom beyond tradition through reflection on the relationship between tradition and experience and the logic of practical reason and equal regard. The above description of the inner core and outer envelope of practical wisdom flows into Browning’s “revised correlation method,” which argues that experience talks back to tradition and seeks “to correlate tradition with contemporary experience.” Browning here is seeking to establish a measure of distance from narrative and tradition in order to engage in a dialogue that “requires avenues to experience through reason and a broader empiricism of a kind that the hermeneutical and historicist schools do not fully understand.” This dialogue, which constitutes practical reason, takes shape in Browning’s practical theological hermeneutic, which “begins in historically situated contexts, moves backward to understand more deeply the classical ideals that have formed it, but further tests the adequacy to experience of these retrieved formulations as we move

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103. Ibid., 179-191.
104. Ibid., 181.
105. Ibid., 182.
forward into the future.” Browning seeks to bring an objectivity to this dialogue “that widens the scope of social agreement by clarifying the structures of our experience and helping us come to terms more adequately with the givens of nature, human nature, and our social and ecological environments.” Browning asserts that this is not an “absolute objectivity,” but one which “grasps more adequately some of the intractable givens in experience” (human tendencies and needs), experience that Browning often describes as “the thick and brute aspects of experience that do not completely yield to the linguistic constructions we place upon them.”

Browning also describes practical wisdom beyond tradition through reflection on the logic of practical reason and the logic of equal regard. He maintains that the “various rationalities” of practical reason “help create a social objectivity that facilitates deliberation and consensus both within and between traditions.” These rationalities include: conventionality, reconstructive memory, discerning human needs (involving introspective induction, comparison, and objective empiricism), and discerning systemic constraints.

106. Ibid., 182.
107. Ibid., 183.
108. Ibid.
109. Ibid., 180.
110. Ibid., 183.
111. Ibid., 183-187. These rationalities serve as a means of getting at human experience, human needs and tendencies, and the “constraints of our social and ecological environments” (186), presumably beyond a particular narrative. Browning's reflection on these rationalities invokes philosophical logic and syllogism, psychotherapy, and empiricism, as well as the use of various social sciences demonstrated in chapter 6 of his book. It is my contention, as it is also the contention of others, that these “rationalities” are themselves part of a narrative—the narrative and tradition of empiricism, or of psychotherapy, or of various other social sciences.
These rationalities, along with the ethic of equal regard and the narrative “outer envelope,” form a “hermeneutically conceived practical reason” that “acknowledges that we bring our fore-concepts to experience and always construe experience partially in terms of them,” yet also holds that “careful attention to experience over time shows that some tradition-laden theories address our moral and epistemological problems better than others.”

Browning characterizes the logic of equal regard as structured by reversibility (that “any claim we make on others they should be able to make on us”) and universalizability (that this reversibility “should be in principle generalizable to all social actors who impinge on my action”). While Browning claims that these principles are limited by context and are not foundationalist, I disagree that there can be practical wisdom (or even a principle of equal regard) beyond its tradition.

Equal regard is not the same in different narratives and traditions, even when the logic of equal regard, as Browning understands it, has the structure of “reversibility and universalizability.” Browning insists that reversibility and universalizability are “historically situated” and “these constraints do not alter the formal structure of equal regard,” however, this is not the case. Equal regard in the liberal democratic tradition is different from the radical understanding of love in the Christian tradition; in these cases, “equal regard” is not simply differently situated, but rather the formal structure itself is

112. Ibid., 183.
113. Ibid., 187.
114. Ibid., 188.
115. Ibid., 189, emphasis in original.
different because perceived goods like “universal” and “reversible” are defined differently and involve different ends within the two different traditions. Though Browning relies on Immanuel Kant, Alan Donagan, and Paul Ricoeur in describing the “deontological” rather than “teleological” character of equal regard, he cannot escape the teleological character of terms such as “reversibility” and “universalizability” themselves. The goods of a single life and the internal goods of practices are defined by the narratives and traditions within which those goods (including reversibility and universalizability) and practices make any sense in the first place.

In the end, Browning’s understanding of practical wisdom seems to look for a meaning, or “core,” of practical wisdom that is ultimately outside of a narrative and tradition, while from the narrativist perspective, narrative and tradition give practices and practical wisdom any meaning in the first place. What is at stake for practical wisdom in the tradition of Enlightenment liberalism is the well-being of persons in a democratic society and pluralistic world, while what is at stake for practical wisdom in the Christian tradition is the salvation of the world. While the latter involves elements of the former, the two are radically different. While Browning’s concern for the relationship between particular situations and practical wisdom seems to be the fulfillment of “fundamental human needs and tendencies,” this dissertation’s concern is most centrally aimed toward the faithfulness of practices and practical wisdom within the Christian tradition, which, while inevitably fulfilling human needs, also understands those needs and tendencies in a much different light, and with very different ends, than other narratives and traditions do.

116. Ibid., 178-188.
In the interest of publicly accessible validity claims, Browning cedes the centrality of particular narratives to the demands of “public” criteria that is, in the end, yet another narrative: the narrative of Enlightenment liberalism. Hence, in Browning’s understanding of practical wisdom and practical theology, the particularity of the Christian narrative and tradition (or any religious tradition for that matter) must ultimately yield to the demands of the tradition of Enlightenment liberalism. While ostensibly giving a central and formative role to narrative and tradition, Browning ultimately reasserts an Enlightenment liberal understanding of practical wisdom. Browning’s argument appears to be one more attempt to carry out the Enlightenment project of grounding public discourse about morality on grounds that any rational person (in other words, a person abstracted from his or her particular religion, tradition, culture, or society) would accept without having to appeal to authority or tradition. Narrative and tradition, however, do not simply contextualize and locate practical wisdom, nor do they merely animate and inform it—they form and define the very nature and function of practical wisdom. Whereas Browning seems to understand phronesis as an act of deliberation, of “practical reasoning” described in terms that are similar to his description of mutual or revised critical correlation, I contend that phronesis is a virtue—practical wisdom or prudence—essentially constituted by the values of the narrative, practices, and tradition within which a person and community are formed. If so, we must learn to talk about Christian phronesis or phronesis in the Christian tradition, much like Hauerwas and others argue that ethics must have a qualifying adjective.117 It is within this tradition-constituted understanding of phronesis

117. Brad Kallenberg, “Positioning MacIntyre within Christian Ethics” in Murphy, et al., Virtues
that practical wisdom in the Christian tradition may be characterized mainly by the faithful practice of Christian discernment.118

Practical Wisdom in Christian Life and Theology

In order to develop the argument that practical-theological reflection is akin to the practice of discernment, we must revisit briefly the notion that theology is a habitus, a cognitive disposition of the soul characterized by wisdom, most notably the wisdom described above as Christian practical wisdom, a wisdom that involves critical, participative, theological reflection on the practices of the church with the aim of forming faithful practices and practitioners. While this Christian practical wisdom will be fleshed out in the next two chapters as characterized by the practice of discernment, I will conclude this section on practical wisdom and practical theology with some reflections on practical wisdom and the Christian tradition. What has been argued so far in this chapter concerning practical theology, practical wisdom, virtues, and habitus leads me to consider practical wisdom and practical theology ultimately as related to spiritual formation.

Theology is not the mere application of theory, but both the formation of and function of a habitus, marked by prudence (phronesis). The Christian habitus is both a

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118. From this point forward, I use “practical wisdom” and “Christian practical wisdom” as well as “discernment” and “Christian discernment” interchangeably, per this explanation. As noted in my introduction, the location of this dissertation is the Christian tradition and community, and the reflections on theology, practical wisdom, and discernment are rooted in that location.
product of and formative guide for critical reflection on the faithfulness of Christian practice. In this sense, theology (particularly practical theology) is closely aligned with spirituality, spiritual practices, spiritual formation, and spiritual discernment. I will further discuss this relationship in the next section. Presently, I wish to reflect upon the important contribution made by Craig Dykstra’s understanding of *habitus* and Christian theology: “I suggest that what such habitus involves is profound, life-orienting, identity-shaping participation in the constitutive practices of Christian life. If theology is habitus, then it follows that we learn theology (are formed in this habitus) by participation in these practices.”\(^{119}\) In focusing on Farley’s first sense of theology (“an actual, individual cognition of God and things related to God, a cognition which in most treatments attends faith”), Dykstra rightly notes that it is learned through participation in practices that are formative of persons and communities. Dykstra rightly highlights participation in practices, which is central to the kind of participative, reflection-on-practice that characterizes practical wisdom and discernment. This echoes the claim I made above: the wisdom functioning in theology is critical, *participative*, theological reflection on the practices of the church with the aim of forming faithful practices and practitioners. Such wisdom is the heart of theological knowledge at all levels of learning and complexity, from the education of children to the education of Christian ministers, leaders, theologians, and adult practitioners.\(^{120}\) Participation in practices will make up a central piece of my reflection on

\(^{119}\) Craig Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice in Theological Inquiry and Education” in Murphy, et al., Virtues Practices, 176.

the implications of Christian discernment for the study of Christian spirituality and theological education in chapter five. In an excellent commentary on Farley's conception of the “clerical paradigm,” Bonnie Miller-McLemore aims a more critical eye at what she identifies as the “academic paradigm,” wherein “theology became something for the academy alone.” She envisions a day when “thinking about faith critically and embodying it richly and effectively” will no longer be considered as “mutually exclusive enterprises of knowledge and wisdom.” The present dissertation looks forward to this day too, as it considers critical reflection and faithful embodiment as characteristic of the practice of discernment and practical wisdom in the Christian tradition.

Within the Christian tradition, practical wisdom is characterized by faithfulness to the Christian narrative within a particular context and community. This wisdom grows as one is formed in the practices of the Christian community, the church. Christian wisdom is embodied within the community and its practices, and therefore “Sustaining and forming the community becomes then the chief end of human existence and the truth value of a master story is found in its ability to shape characters who will be adequate to the task of living out that story.” The “good judge” that is the standard of practical wisdom in Aristotle’s account of practical deliberation in the Christian tradition is the person of Christ. Christ is the center of the Christian habitus. Christ is known in the Christian narrative of his life and in the tradition and practice of the Christian community, the church.

121. Ibid., 25.
122. Ibid., 37.
reason, Christian practical wisdom is ultimately about formation—spiritual formation of Christian persons and communities in values derived from the narrative of Christ and tradition of the church. This formation is sustained by Christian practices, which help to inculcate the virtues of the Christian life in faithful practitioners. In this sense, Christian virtue is not about following rigid rules, but in becoming like Christ, and in making wise and faithful decisions in particular situations having been formed by God’s grace and faithful practice. The question that practical wisdom asks of Christian practice is, “How can this practice be faithful to the vision of God known in the Christian narrative, tradition, and community in this particular context?” In this sense, practical wisdom in the Christian tradition is ultimately concerned with faithfulness—with faithfully discerning the vision of God for a particular person and community. Practical wisdom is inextricably linked to the tradition of Christian discernment.

Practical Wisdom, Discernment, and Christian Spirituality

The moral life and the spiritual life are inseparable. Philip Sheldrake notes, “There is an increasing awareness of the basic unity between the moral and the spiritual life:”

A number of writers have suggested that the joint task of contemporary spirituality and moral theology is to explore renewed understandings of ‘virtue’ (that is, what enables a person to become truly human within a commitment to Christ and aided by the action of grace) and ‘character’ (or what we should be, rather than do, if we are to become fully human persons).124

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The unity that Sheldrake describes may be found within the relationship among *habitus*, practical wisdom, discernment, and Christian spirituality. The virtue of *phronesis* is central to the spiritual practice of discernment. The spiritual person is the one who can wisely discern the vision of God in particular situations while being formed by the values of the Christian *habitus*. Christian spirituality involves the practice of discernment by one who is a “good judge” in the Aristotelian sense—one who possesses Christian *phronesis*, and has been formed in the Christian community, the church. In light of this discussion, Christian spirituality and its relationship to Christian *phronesis* can also be compared to the relationship between passions and *phronesis* that Nussbaum derives from Aristotle: “A well-formed character is a unity of thought and desire, in which choice has so blended these two elements, desire being attentive to thought and thought responsive to desire, that either one can guide and their guidance will be one and the same.”

Christian ethics and Christian spirituality is to be so formed in Christ that one is able to practice deliberation in this way. Christians are not practical deliberators in the Platonic sense—passionless applicators of a theological *techne*—they are Aristotelian deliberators: Christians, their wisdom, and their passions are formed in Christ’s life, passion, death, and resurrection, known in the narrative of Christ and in Christian practices, embodied within the tradition of the church past, present, and future.

Practical theology and the study of Christian spirituality have been accurately described by Claire Wolfteich as closely intersecting disciplines. This description lies in the

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125. Nussbaum, 308.
resonance she finds between her own work and Farley’s description of *habitus*.\(^\text{126}\) Wolfteich maintains that both practical theology and the study of spirituality attend to the “lived experience of faith” and “critical study of that experience.”\(^\text{127}\) While practical theology reflects upon the explicit and implicit theologies that are embedded in religious practice, the study of spirituality contributes “a deeper vision of the animating power of the life of faith and the way in which spiritual practice may lie at the heart of the theological endeavor.”\(^\text{128}\) Wolfteich draws attention to the formative nature of both practical theology and the study of Christian spirituality: Each discipline attends to lived faith and its practices through participative (that is, self-implicating), critical theological reflection. Wolfteich relates this participative critical reflection to “phronetic knowing,” and further makes the connection between *habitus*, wisdom, practical theology, and Christian spirituality: “I argue that practical knowing should be called not only or even primarily ‘pastoral wisdom,’ but most fundamentally spiritual wisdom or *habitus*, an orientation of the soul that desires to know the spirit of God.”\(^\text{129}\) This spiritual wisdom that Wolfteich describes echoes what I have described as Christian practical wisdom, characterized by the practice of discernment, which seeks to think about faith critically and embody it richly. As I will discuss in the next two chapters, the practice of discernment involves both critical

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126. Wolfteich, 135.

127. Ibid., 122.

128. Ibid., 135.

129. Ibid.
reflection on and faithful participation in practices that seek to embody the vision of God for the life of the Christian community and the world.

The connection between practical wisdom, Christian spirituality, and the practice of discernment hold significant consequences for practical theology. Dutch practical theologian Gerben Heitink points this out when he writes,

The central problem practical theology must face is the hermeneutical question about the way in which the divine reality and the human reality can be connected at the experiential level. This question focuses attention on the pneumatological basis of the theological theory of action. The fundamental choice to be made in this respect has its impact on the daily praxis in the church.  

Heitink points to the indissoluble relationship between spiritual discernment and practical theological inquiry, and he implies that every practical theology has an implicit pneumatology. This insight points us directly to questions concerning the practice of discernment and how it informs practical theology. It also implies, as Wolfteich points out, that questions of discernment and spirituality are not merely a matter of private piety, but go “to the heart of issues about body and spirit, social and environmental justice and holiness,” among other areas where faith and public life intersect.  

Within critical reflection on the faithfulness of Christian practices in particular contexts, one must enter into the practice of discerning the vision of God and the actions of the Holy Spirit.

While literature on discernment is vast, a study of the relationship of discernment and Christian spirituality to practical wisdom within the study of practical theology is hardly available. Scholars of Christian spirituality and of practical theology have written


131. Wolfteich, 127.
about discernment and about practical wisdom, but there is not yet a comprehensive study
that brings the insights of the Christian spiritual tradition of discernment to practical
wisdom as it is understood within practical theology. In the field of practical theology,
Richard Osmer\textsuperscript{132} writes of a “spirituality” of wise judgment and practical wisdom in his
recent book \textit{Introduction to Practical Theology}, but he does not analyze figures from the
Christian spiritual tradition for insights or norms regarding the practice of discernment.
Osmer derives a spirituality of wise judgment from an analysis of Scripture, and not from
figures of Christian history.\textsuperscript{133} Luke Timothy Johnson has written about discernment as an
ecclesiological practice in Christian scripture, but he has not discussed the tradition of
discernment in Christianity after the apostolic period.\textsuperscript{134} Mark McIntosh provides an
historical outline of discernment in the Christian tradition, as well as criteria and signs of
good discernment derived from the Christian tradition, but he does not dwell much on
practical wisdom nor its place within practical theology.\textsuperscript{135} Dermot Tredget has recently
written a brief article on practical wisdom and discernment in the Rule of Saint Benedict,
but his analysis of Benedict converses not with the literature of practical theology, but

\begin{enumerate}
\item Osmer, \textit{Practical Theology}, 81.
\item Osmer’s section on “prophetic discernment,” does draw insight from Lisa Dahill’s reflections on
Dietrich Bonhoeffer and discernment, however, Osmer spends only three paragraphs on Bonhoeffer.
\item Luke Timothy Johnson, \textit{Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church} (Nashville:
\item Mark Allen McIntosh, \textit{Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge} (New
York: Crossroad, 2004).
\end{enumerate}
rather that of business management. Claire Wolfteich has touched upon the intersection of practical reason and discernment in the lives of lay Roman Catholics. The present study will build upon such contributions, yet it will offer a more particular exploration of the writings of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, Benedict of Nursia, and Ignatius of Loyola and will give particular attention to discernment and practical wisdom within the context of practical theology and theological education. The work of scholars of practical theology and Christian spirituality points toward an understanding of the practice of discernment as central to Christian formation and discipleship, to practical wisdom within the Christian life, to the act of interpretation in theology, and to decision-making within the lives of persons and congregations. An understanding of how discernment is practiced by saints and exemplars of the Christian tradition and how their insights might influence thinking about practical wisdom and the continuing practice of discernment by theologians, religious leaders, and congregations is therefore needed in both the academy and the church.

I now turn to an examination of three traditions of discernment in Christianity, hoping that the practices of these saints and exemplars of the Christian tradition might direct this study of practical wisdom and discernment toward the bearing of much good fruit. These saints are models of wise and faithful Christians that the church lifts up as examples of faithful discernment and practical wisdom. In this sense, they exemplify in the


Christian tradition what Aristotle says of the wise person, that he or she embodies the “right rule” of practical wisdom and Christian discernment. I turn my attention to the traditions of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, Benedict of Nursia, and Ignatius of Loyola.
CHAPTER THREE
THREE TRADITIONS OF CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT

Introduction: Christian Theology, Spirituality, and Discernment

As I noted in chapter two, Christian theology as *habitus* is a sapiential knowledge, a unity of knowledge and practice “narrated within and native to”¹ the Christian church and tradition. In light of this, Christian theology cannot be considered unconnected to the “lived faith” of Christian spirituality and the practice of discernment. In the present chapter, I wish to present the practice of discernment within the traditions of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, Benedict of Nursia, and Ignatius of Loyola. In presenting each tradition, I will discuss (1) the context within which the tradition and text(s) developed, (2) the spiritual virtues and practices of the tradition that illuminate the centrality of discernment, and (3) how the tradition’s practice of discernment reveals a theological hermeneutic particular to that spiritual tradition. In chapter four, I will present a practical-theological hermeneutic developed by the intersection of the reflections on practical wisdom in chapter two and the traditions of discernment in the present chapter.

Within an understanding of theology as *habitus* must reside an inextricable connection between theology and spirituality. It is in light of this connection that this dissertation argues that the practice of discernment offers a practical-theological hermeneutic within the study of theology. As described early in the previous chapter, the loss of theology as *habitus* has had consequences for understanding the connection

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¹ Cahalan and Nieman, 68.
between theology and spirituality.² Spirituality came to be seen as the application of theory already worked out in dogmatic, or systematic, theology. After the Enlightenment, as religious doctrines began to “appear as eccentric options with no natural spiritual consequences,” spirituality became more privatized and focused on individual, interior experience.³ Such a spirituality and theology no longer has the character of a habitus. Claire Wolfteich laments this understanding of spirituality among some practical theologians, “who too often assume that spirituality focuses primarily on the individual’s personal journey of faith.”⁴ Such an understanding of spirituality cannot hold, for, as described in the previous chapter, a practice cannot be conceived of without the narratives, traditions, communities, and virtues that define it. Sheldrake describes it thusly: “religious experience is never simply the product or possession of an individual person who is isolated from a community of faith or from an inherited religious tradition.”⁵ Sheldrake further states that individual religious experience (prior, or naked, experience) cannot be an object of theological study outside of its context, what I have described as habitus:

Religious experience presupposes a context of beliefs and symbols within which it can be known precisely as religious experience. To put it more simply, some understanding of Christian belief and of Christian symbols precedes any sense that experience has a Christian explanation. Equally, there can be no direct access to ‘pure experience’ for students either of theology or spirituality. Our contact is only with what is remembered or deemed worthy of recording. This underlines the fact that what we study is not only historically conditioned but already theologically

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² For an historical discussion of the “divorce of spirituality and theology,” see chapter two of Sheldrake’s *Spirituality and Theology.*

³ Sheldrake, 6.

⁴ Wolfteich, 128.

⁵ Sheldrake, 12-13.
interpreted. Spirituality may be concerned with ‘Christian spiritual life as experience’ but our understanding of ‘Christian’, ‘spiritual’, ‘life’ and ‘experience’ are dependent on our theological assumptions. Theological criteria of interpretation and evaluation have already implicitly come into play.\(^6\)

Since our contact with “pure experience” is so tenuous, and our contact with past and present experiences must necessarily be understood within a context of historically-traditioned practices and beliefs, it seems that what remains to consider is how a Christian person or community ought to go about interpreting experience, practice, and contemporary situations within a Christian habitus. In other words, what remains is to ask how a Christian person or community should interpret a situation, understand the vision of God and movement of the Holy Spirit in that situation, and respond with practice faithful within that particular situation to the ways of God known through Christ and in the Spirit.

The task is one of discernment. Discernment lies at the heart of the union of theology and spirituality, and in that union we may describe theology as a habitus, a sapiential knowledge.

Discernment lies at the heart of this union because spirituality is ultimately something one does: Christian spirituality is a “classic constellation of practices which forms a mystagogy into a life of Christian discipleship.”\(^7\) As a constellation of practices, a spirituality is necessarily formed by the choices made through discernment—the discernment of God’s vision for a community and its practices. How a community or individual goes about discerning God’s vision for its practices shapes its spirituality and its

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6. Ibid., 21 (emphasis original).

faithfulness, within its own particular, evolving community and context, to God's salvific vision for Creation. Furthermore, the union of spirituality and theology rests upon this practice of discernment because "From the perspective of fundamental theology, a given spirituality can define the horizon, or perhaps better, the atmosphere within which theology is undertaken and which permeates its methods and results." This understanding of the connection between theology and spirituality speaks to the understanding of theology as habitus that I discussed in the previous chapter. Discipleship, with the various spiritualities that constitute discipleship, is the ground of the theological process:

Analogously, theological arguments and results cannot be legitimated solely in terms of logical coherence or by appeal to facts... Rather, it is the broader world of the Christian community—constituted by the relationship to God through Christ that is discipleship—to which the theologian belongs that allows the world to show up the way it does. Theologians are formed and initiated into this life-world by academic and spiritual exercises.

The formation of spiritualities and their practices, of communities and theologians, depends on the practice of discernment in deciding what form these persons and practices and communities should or should not take, given their contexts. Ultimately, what theologians, including scholars, ministers, church leaders, and faithful practitioners, are doing when they engage in theology is practicing discernment, whether formally (theologians) or informally (faithful practitioners). As will be described in this present chapter...

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8. Ibid., 162.

9. Ibid., 165 (emphasis original).

10. In chapter four, I describe a hermeneutic of discernment as part of practical-theological analysis. This is an example of a “formal” mode of discernment that includes interpretation and analysis of context,
chapter, and especially in the next chapter, discernment seeks to navigate the practices of the Christian tradition and the experience of historical persons. Reflecting on the “criteria for Christian spirituality,” Lawrence Cunningham notes, “We live ‘between the times.’ As followers of the Spirit we must stand with the ‘cloud of witnesses’ with the firm realization that we are not yet there. Our never-ending task is to exercise what the tradition calls *discernment.*”\(^{11}\) In other words, our task is to “test everything” (1 Thess 5:19-22), and in the testing, the Christian community necessarily stands within an historical tradition of practice that both shapes and admonishes contemporary practice. The importance of standing with a “cloud of witnesses” within the Christian tradition necessarily leads to some last introductory remarks on the place of tradition in Christian spirituality and on the notion of a spiritual classic.\(^{12}\)

As I noted at the end of the second chapter, it is important in Christian theology and spirituality to turn toward the saints and exemplars of the Christian tradition to find wisdom for contemporary practice. In light of this assessment, the present chapter looks at the practice and characterization of discernment within the disciplines of three such exemplary spiritual traditions within Christianity. Before entering into a discussion of

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\(^{12}\) Note that Ashley defines Christian spirituality as a *"classic constellation of practices"* that are formative of discipleship.
those spiritual traditions, however, I must discuss how it is that spiritual traditions lead the ongoing formation of the Christian tradition and how contemporary Christian disciples and theologians shape the tradition. This discussion will be picked up again and given a more detailed examination in chapter four, when discernment is examined specifically as a practical-theological hermeneutic.

The Christian tradition is not a static entity, but an evolving process, much like MacIntyre noted that a tradition is an “historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.” In light of this, I argue that the tradition is both normative for practice and evolving. This plays a central role in the conception of discernment (both my own and the spiritualities discussed in this chapter) for, as noted above, discernment seeks to navigate both the practices of the Christian tradition and the experience of historical persons. In this sense, tradition is a body of practices, governed by discernment and the discovery of how one is to practice the Christian tradition in light of the action of the Holy Spirit. Terrence Tilley, in *Inventing Catholic Tradition*, presents a similar concept of tradition:

... religious tradition is best understood as an enduring practice or set of practices including a vision (belief), attitudes (dispositions, affections), and patterns of action. To put the strength of the present approach briefly... knowing a tradition is much more fundamentally a knowing how to live in and live out a tradition. If traditions are recognized to be networks of enduring practices, then one knows them when one knows how to participate in them.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{13}\) MacIntyre, 222.

\(^{14}\) Terrence Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), 45 (emphasis original).
Note Tilley's reference to the importance of “vision,” which is Tilley's word for narrative,15 and “attitudes (dispositions, affections) and patterns of action,” which will be significant in our understanding of discernment according to Ignatius Loyola in this chapter and in the next chapter. Both the Christian tradition itself and the discernment of that tradition by communities is a process.16 The situation is complex: “The historical tradition of Christianity, shaped by creed, ethos, and worship, is both circumscribed and elastic. It has a definite shape, but it is a shape that is in process and not finished. The great tradition is, and should, be polyphonic.”17 Nevertheless, the church must find ways to discern, within the tradition, “what is risible, dangerous, or destructive of the Gospel.”18 Thus the goal of such discernment, as it pertains to the formation of Christian discipleship and tradition, remains the formation of practices that are faithful to the Christian narrative, which is itself embodied by the historical practices of a tradition in process. In this way the Christian tradition is both normative for practice and evolving; discernment guides the circular process of tradition in which historical practices faithful to the Christian narrative and attuned to the promptings of the Holy Spirit hold normative weight for the formation of contemporary practices, which are themselves re-formations of historical practices in a new context, while remaining faithful to the Christian narrative and tradition and attuned to the promptings and actions of the Holy Spirit.

15. Ibid., 115: “MacIntyre tightly connects practices and traditions with the narratives (the vision, in the account here) that they carry and that carry them.”

16. Cunningham, 172: “the invocation of that tradition itself is always a process.”

17. Ibid., 175.

18. Ibid.
What has been written thus far in this chapter serves as seed for the following chapter, in which a practical-theological hermeneutic of discernment will take shape and grow and then eventually bear fruit in chapter five. The importance of tradition, *habitus*, context, and faithfulness for a hermeneutic of discernment will be taken up more concretely in the next chapter. Presently, three points from Lawrence Cunningham concerning the central importance of the Christian tradition for understanding Christian spirituality will serve to set the background for this chapter’s examination of three spiritual traditions of discernment: (1) the need for “a capacious sense of our common history, tradition, story telling, and lore... Without that grasp of history we have no story, or at best, one which is truncated.”\(^{19}\) (2) We “are negligent, however, to the degree that we fail to foster the forgotten stories in the tradition,” and thus “we must constantly turn back to the sources of our common heritage both for admonition and for instruction.”\(^{20}\) (3) The tradition aids against the “persistent danger in absolutizing present experience as normative.”\(^{21}\) Cunningham advocates for the importance of turning to the tradition of Christian practice in discerning faithful practice in contemporary contexts, and the reader should keep these points in mind as this chapter, and the following chapters, unfold. For instance, the hermeneutic of discernment described in chapter four will highlight the central importance of Christian tradition and the forgotten or marginalized stories within that tradition for engaging critical reflection concerning how to interpret contemporary

19. Ibid., 175-176.
20. Ibid., 176.
21. Ibid.
experiences and practices without treating all sources of interpretation as normative for present Christian practice. There are also some cautions that the reader should be aware of in turning to texts of the tradition, as well.

Columba Stewart makes a good case that his initial enthusiasm for the literature of the Desert Mothers and Fathers needed to be tempered over time as he saw some of its shortcomings in relationship to the contemporary needs and contexts of modern Christians.\textsuperscript{22} There are accounts of body-soul dualism and self-negation through absurd fasting and worse practices that the tradition has come to reject. There are accounts of women as temptresses and such that the tradition has come to reject. Stewart raises cautions for contemporary appropriation of the texts concerning the “ascetic orientation of the literature” and the “suspicion of desire and of its relational and physical manifestations,”\textsuperscript{23} as well as the “paucity of female experience”\textsuperscript{24} found therein. This leads Stewart to warn that the desert literature is often “exclusive of our experience” and that “our questions were not necessarily theirs, for reasons we cannot always understand or explain.”\textsuperscript{25} These cautions support the contention in the next chapter that the hermeneutic of discernment described therein must employ the norms of the Christian tradition \textit{as it has come to be discerned and developed} by the Christian community, the church, through the grace and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As such, the tradition of the church (as it comes to

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\textsuperscript{22} Columba Stewart, “‘We’? Reflections on Affinity and Dissonance in Reading Early Monastic Literature” \textit{Spiritus} \textbf{1}, no. 1 (2001): 98-100.
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\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 98.
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\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 99.
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\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 100.
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discern the Christian gospel in each generation) is normative while in process for the correlation of historical practice and contemporary practice and context. As Ashley has pointed out, Christian spirituality ultimately concerns the practice of the church past, present, and future: theology “relies on the experience of the Church (both present, and as retrieved from the past).”

At the same time, one must ask how much the spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers needs to confirm contemporary spiritualities. In some ways, it should stand both as a comfort (a sense of familiar struggles and joys with which one can enter into it) and a challenge (a sense that, even in some of the stranger or more radical aspects of its spirituality, it calls the church to greater faithfulness, deeper practice, and more attentive discernment). Weighing the challenges of a spiritual classic, Burton-Christie notes that “sensitivity to the particular character of experience expressed in a classic work and to its irreducible complexity can sometimes yield a new appreciation for what made such a work compelling in the first place. It can help open, rather than close, the horizon of interpretation.”

A Christian community cannot too readily dismiss the challenge to growth because it has trouble finding any comfort or any familiar concerns in an older spirituality. There is undoubtedly great wisdom for Christian spirituality found in the

26. Ashley, 163.


28. In some texts of the Christian spiritual tradition there are, however, not merely instances of strangeness, but cultural language and assertions (particularly assertions against the full dignity of women) that, as I noted above, the tradition has come to reject. In light of this, I argue that the development of the Christian tradition has, and continues to, correct discrepancies and divergences from faithfulness to the Christian narrative. For instance, I would argue that spiritual traditions that denigrate women and use
texts of the desert monastics, because this wisdom has been confirmed by the fruits that it bore for the ancient practitioners themselves (the desert monastics and monastic practice through Cassian, Benedict, the Cistercian renewal, and onward) and contemporary practitioners who continue to discern and embody the wisdom of desert spirituality (Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Roberta Bondi, the Catholic Worker movement, the new monastic movement, and others). It is in this sense that I describe the desert elders, Benedict, and Ignatius of Loyola as three exemplary spiritual traditions within Christianity. These traditions are "exemplary" because they are established examples of good and faithful practice, and the Christian tradition has come to confirm this in its development over time. Contemporary Christians continue to go back to their writings and spiritualities as sources of guidance within new contexts. For example, while the Benedictine Rule remains the principle text for the guidance of Benedictine monks and nuns, it also remains language that is suspicious of women or derogatory toward them, actually shows a lack of faithfulness to the Christian narrative and tradition, and instead shows too great of an influence by historical patriarchal culture, for example, some of the desert apophthegmata that portray women merely as temptresses and nothing else. Such lapses in faithfulness and submission to cultural mores are corrected through faithful discernment and the development of the Christian tradition over time, guided by the grace of the Holy Spirit. In this way, part of Christian discernment in contemporary contexts and cultures requires the recovery of lost or marginalized experiences and narratives within the Christian tradition (as noted above by Lawrence Cunningham) that they may be reconsidered in light of the Christian tradition as it has come to be, rather than as it was in a particular era of history. We see here how in the past, just as now, the alien logic of non-Christian sources of knowledge may steer Christian practice away from faithfulness to its particular narrative and habitus. Furthermore, it must be noted as significant that texts like Benedict’s Rule and the Spiritual Exercises were written with the understanding that they would be adapted to new contexts while at the same time directing authentic and faithful Christian response to such new contexts. For an example of an approach to the Spiritual Exercises in the contemporary context of women’s experiences, see Katherine Marie Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert, The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women (New York: Paulist Press, 2001).

a significant text for lay Christians and non-Benedictines as well.\textsuperscript{30} The fruit that these exemplars have borne continues to nourish Christian spirituality in various contexts around the world among men, women, and children alike.\textsuperscript{31} As noted in chapter one, I have taken up these three particular traditions of discernment for this dissertation because their particular insights into discernment speak to the \textit{telos} and tasks of practical theology.\textsuperscript{32} Attending to the texts of the Christian tradition opens the horizon of interpretation that seeks to form practices that are faithful to the ways of God within a particular context, while being acutely aware that one must attend to the tradition as it continues to develop in the church.

One begins to see here the role that discernment plays in the development of Christian theology and the Christian tradition, and how theology itself is framed by Christian spirituality. The way of life that Christians are called to is constituted by historically extended traditions of practice. Christians turn to these traditions, to the


\textsuperscript{31} These contexts include missionary Benedictines in Africa, “new monastic” communities in the United States, and direction of the \textit{Spiritual Exercises} in Asian contexts.

\textsuperscript{32} See chapter one, limitations section: “This dissertation does not speak to the whole of the Christian tradition of discernment. The three Christian spiritual sub-traditions were chosen for this study because of their importance as classics of the Christian spiritual tradition, because of their ongoing influence on contemporary Christian practice, and because this dissertation judges that the particular spiritual practices and themes found in these spiritualities are important for considering the place of discernment and practical wisdom within an understanding of practical theology as having the formative goals outlined in this introduction.”
Desert Mothers and Fathers, to Benedict, to Ignatius (and many others) in order to understand better the practice of discernment and to have greater insight into the “classic constellation” of Christian practices. The observations of this introduction help frame the discussion of discernment in the present chapter and in the following chapters. The traditions of discernment discussed in this chapter offer wisdom for the practical-theological hermeneutic discussed in the following chapter, wherein one might begin to understand how to incorporate the wisdom of the Christian tradition in order to deepen contemporary Christian practices so that they might bear fruit and deepen a person’s or a community’s growing companionship with God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

**The Desert Mothers and Fathers and the Desert Hermeneutic**

This dissertation’s approach to the practice of discernment by the Desert Mothers and Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries in Egypt focuses on the collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the *Sayings of the Fathers*. These sayings became central to the spiritual formation of monasticism in the West—Benedict’s rule for monks recommends the reading of these sayings before Compline. The desert monastic tradition came to the West most notably through John Cassian and Evagrius Ponticus through their monastic foundations and writings: “They systematized it, interpreted it, and presented it as they understood.”³³ often with their own styles and approaches. The sayings, however, “preserve the unstructured wisdom of the desert in simple language. These are records of

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practical advice given out of a long life of experience in monastic and ascetic discipline.”³⁴ For this reason, it can be argued that the Sayings hold the best example of the practice of discernment in the desert. These sayings will serve as a beginning in drawing a connection between practical wisdom and discernment in the Christian tradition.

The Sayings eventually came to later generations in two collections: the Alphabetical Collection, which groups sayings and narratives under the names of monks listed according to the Greek alphabet, and the Systematic Collection, which groups sayings according to various themes such as “humility,” “patience,” “unceasing prayer,” and also “discernment.”³⁵ While it is not the purview of this dissertation to enter into textual analysis or historical criticism of these collections, I wish to relate some of the general conclusions of prominent scholars regarding the texts of the Sayings: (1) the Sayings were first written in Greek, but drew from earlier Coptic oral tradition; (2) the Sayings focuses on the wisdom of monastics who lived primarily in Lower Egypt, from c. 330 AD to c. 460 AD; and (3) the final collection of these accounts was done in Palestine toward the end of the fifth century, where it was “with its traffic in pilgrims to and from the sacred sites, that these stories of the Egyptian monks spread throughout the ancient Christian world.”³⁶

Most stories found in the Sayings revolve around the relationship between an older, wiser monk—an abba or amma—and a younger monastic aspirant. Often, a saying will begin with a young monk asking an elder for a “word of salvation”: “Abba, give me a word.”

³⁴ Ibid.


³⁶ Ibid., 170-171.
Alternatively, other sayings simply recount the words of elders: “Abba Poemen said...” It is important to note in this genre that the wisdom and discernment related comes from an encounter. Each saying carries within it the specificity of a particular monk in a particular context with particular needs. Furthermore, this encounter occurs within a *habitus*: “The essence of the spirituality of the desert is that it was not taught but caught; *it was a whole way of life.*” The wisdom offered within the *Sayings* often promotes a way of life or practice to be taken up by the hearer; there are no “esoteric doctrines” offered as wisdom in the *Sayings*, for they come from the relationship between an elder and another monk or a community of monks. Knowledge and practice were so intertwined in the wisdom of the desert, that one might summarize such wisdom in saying, “without practice, there is no word.” A story of the desert elucidates this. When some young monks went to Abba Felix and asked for a word, he remained silent. After asking him for a long time, he replied:

> There are no more words nowadays. When the brothers used to consult the old men and when they did what was said to them, God showed them how to speak. But now, since they ask without doing that which they hear, God has withdrawn the grace of the word from the old men and they do not find anything to say, because there are no longer any who carry their words out.

The wisdom found in the interactions between spiritual mother or father and disciple is one of praxis, reflection-on-practice. When the great Anthony of Egypt was beset by spiritual drought and “attacked by many sinful thoughts,” he asked God “How can I be saved?” In answer, Anthony “saw a man like himself sitting at his work, getting up from his

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38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 242.
work to pray, then sitting down and plaiting a rope, then getting up again to pray.” He then heard an angel say to him, “Do this and you will be saved.”

Another such story: “A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, ‘Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.’” The first story shows how wisdom is learned and embodied through the practice of work and prayer (and balancing the two), while the second story shows how wisdom is learned and embodied through the practice of solitude and silence. A young monk approaching an elder for a “word of salvation” often receives wisdom in the form of a practice—“a key specially fitted to open a particular monk’s heart.” As Benedicta Ward has noted, the Abba or Amma “was the one who discerned reality and whose words, therefore, gave life.” Such elders needed to be well-experienced in the wise practice of discernment: “The insight of the ‘old men’ came from their long experience in the desert, their own apprenticeship under a venerable teacher, and, of course, their own prayerful reflection.” The prayerful reflection that Harmless alludes to represents the heart of Christian wisdom and discernment: praxis, the reflection-on-practice that characterizes theological discernment. The wisdom and discernment of the desert elders came from the experience of wise practice within a way of life that defined those practices. Their “words of salvation” were

40. Ibid., 2.
41. Ibid., 139.
42. Harmless, 172.
44. Harmless, 172.
consequently geared toward the same kinds of practice, yet also particular to the needs of the young monks seeking them.

The Desert Hermeneutic and Practice

The wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers ultimately rests in how they practiced discernment. There is no systematic doctrine of prayer or fasting found in the Sayings. What is found in the Sayings is a particular approach to discernment, and a particular hermeneutic that characterizes spiritual practice in the desert. As Benedicta Ward notes, “they had the hard work and experience of a lifetime of striving to re-direct every aspect of body, mind, and soul to God, and that is what they talked about.”45 This is why we find that many of the sayings of the elders are not consistent with one another.46 Since many of the sayings tell of encounters, the advice given is particular, and while one monk is told to fast “only a little each day,” another is told that he cannot gain the fear of God with a belly “full of cheese and preserved foods.”47 What is consistent, however, is both the elders’ approach to discernment and the esteem with which they held discernment. The importance of praxis and discernment for the desert monastics can be seen indirectly by the way they interpreted Scripture, and directly by how they spoke of

46. Ibid., xx.
47. Ibid., 192.
discernment itself (sayings specifically related to discernment). Douglas Burton-Christie identifies the way they interpreted Scripture as the “desert hermeneutic.”

Burton-Christie writes that his text, The Word in the Desert, is ultimately about “hermeneutics and holiness, an examination of how the early desert monks interpreted Scripture and how their approach to interpretation shaped their search for holiness.” As such, he describes the connection between knowledge, practice, and interpretation. The desert hermeneutic shows both how the monks’ interpretation of Scripture formed their spiritual practice, and also how their spiritual practice formed their interpretation of Scripture.

Though the connection between Scripture and desert monasticism has been clear to many readers throughout history, Burton-Christie points out that others have not thought so, and these believed that desert monasticism proved a significant departure from the Christian life. Burton-Christie contends that the desert monastics’ approach to Scripture shaped their way of life. Most importantly for this dissertation, he also contends that practice shaped their approach to understanding Scripture (knowledge of the Word of God), a kind of embodied knowledge. In the desert hermeneutic, one begins to see the connection between practice and interpretation in the history of Christian spirituality, for which discernment is the fulcrum upon which knowledge and practice pivot.


49. Ibid., 15.

50. Ibid., 11. Principal among these is Edward Gibbon, whose History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776) influenced a negative view of monasticism for generations. He characterized the desert elders as fanatical, irrational ascetics who, rather than living the gospel, had abused its precepts. See also: Harmless, 468-469.
Burton-Christie’s presentation of the desert hermeneutic begins with the philosophies of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer. He begins by noting the important distinction between oral and written texts, both of which were present in the desert: “oral texts...are not fixed expressions encountered through the act of reading but are by their very nature encountered only in the presence of a living mediator through an aural experience.”\(^5\) The spoken word of Scripture at the weekly synaxis is how most monastics (many of them illiterate) would have encountered Scripture. Burton-Christie further describes the aural encounter with Scripture as a “word event,” that had transformative power. Such was the word both of the elder who lived the word of Scripture and the word of Scripture itself: “there was no clear distinction between the words which came from the sacred texts and the words which came from the holy exemplars.”\(^5\) Reflecting on the work of Ricoeur, Burton-Christie notes the “surplus of meaning” that texts have and the power of a text to “project a world” of meaning: “These possibilities of meaning can be understood as the project of the text, the outline of a new way-of-being-in-the-world which the text projects ahead of itself. The challenge of interpretation is precisely to engage that project or world.”\(^5\) Therein lies the “desert hermeneutic”: “Because there was so much emphasis in the desert on practice, on living with integrity, the monks interpreted Scripture

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51. Ibid., 18.
52. Ibid., 108.
53. Ibid., 19, 20 (emphasis original).
primarily by putting it into practice.”\textsuperscript{54} An especially poignant story from the desert shows this relationship between the word of Scripture and practice:

Evagrius said that there was a brother who had no possessions except a Gospel book and he sold it in order to feed the poor. He said something worth remembering: ‘I have sold even the word that commands me to sell all and give to the poor.’\textsuperscript{55}

The desert monks interpreted Scripture by putting it into practice in the context of their own lives in the desert outside of the city, where they lived semi-eremitical lives of simplicity and charity. Burton-Christie notes that the desert elders’ reflection on Scripture did not come to fruition in theological commentaries, but in “lives of holiness transformed by dialogue with Scripture.”\textsuperscript{56} Their interpretation of the word of Scripture was embodied by practice, and this practice required the discernment of how to practice Scripture in the cultural context of the desert elders. Such discernment involved a fusion of horizons.

Burton-Christie makes use of the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer by way of his concept of “effective historical consciousness” and interpretation as a “fusion of horizons.” Gadamer argues that “The historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world.”\textsuperscript{57} As was noted earlier in this chapter and in chapter two regarding tradition and experience, interpretation is done by persons within historical contexts. Such interpretive fusions between text and context, Burton-

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 20.


Christie notes, “are not barriers to understanding, but the very means by which meaning is initially opened up to a person.”\textsuperscript{58} Furthermore, as Gadamer notes, the fusion between historical text and practices and contemporary context drives the development of a tradition:

The horizon of the present does not take shape at all without the past. Understanding is always a process of fusing such horizons... and in the working of tradition such fusion occurs constantly. For there, the old and new grow together again in living value without the one or the other ever being removed explicitly.\textsuperscript{59}

In the case of the desert hermeneutic, the fusion of horizons is between the word of Scripture and the contexts of the Egyptian desert and Late Antiquity in the Roman Empire. In the case of monks and travelers coming to the elders for a word of salvation, there was a fusion between the horizons of the elder’s practice, the word of Scripture, and the context and needs of the particular person seeking advice. This interpretive fusion is played out in the desert precisely because “the monks interpreted Scripture primarily by putting it into practice.” As such, the holy person himself or herself became a “new object of interpretation.”\textsuperscript{60} Burton-Christie describes the “dynamic of experience and interpretation” within the desert hermeneutic in terms of a hermeneutical circle. He describes the circle thusly:

The desert fathers believed that only those with experience could adequately interpret sacred texts. They considered discernment and self-knowledge essential for enabling the discourse of the text to continue in a new discourse... Yet because one becomes holy precisely through practicing the texts, those without the same experience must continue to practice, and become purified so they may enter more


\textsuperscript{60} Burton-Christie, \textit{Word in the Desert}, 20.
deeply into the world of the text. Similarly, prayer and the sacred texts mutually inform one another, prayer adding to the understanding of the texts and the texts feeding and deepening the experience of prayer.61

Scripture gave the desert monastic a world in which to enter and understand his or her own world, but in order to understand that world and live into it, he or she had to practice Scripture in his or her own context. As Burton-Christie notes in the above passage, this hermeneutical circle of practice and interpretation required the virtue and practice of discernment. This dissertation argues that the same is true of theology in our own context in the 21st century; discernment is essential “for enabling the discourse of the text to continue in a new discourse.”

The last significant piece of the desert hermeneutic offered by Burton-Christie is that the emphasis on understanding though praxis and living the word of Scripture leads to transformation of life. The desert hermeneutic is transformative. According to Burton-Christie, words are expressed in lives, and therefore “the risk of interpretation can bring about transformation,” which “suggests the importance of praxis or applicatio.”62 The desert hermeneutic suggests learning by doing. When a word of salvation was sought, elders frequently told their disciples to embody Scripture in their actions. Abba Antony tells one such monk: “whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures.”63 As he lay dying, Abba Benjamin instructed his disciples (quoting 1 Thess. 5:16-18): “If you observe the following, you can be saved, ‘Be joyful at all times, pray

61. Ibid., 23.
62. Ibid.
without ceasing and give thanks for all things.”"\textsuperscript{64} For the desert monastics, true knowledge of Scripture was found in embodying Scripture in their lives. Noting these and other sayings that illuminate “doing the word,” Burton-Christie concludes that “Holiness in the desert was defined, finally, by how deeply a person allowed himself or herself to be transformed by the words of Scripture.”\textsuperscript{65} Harmless notes this relationship as well. He relates a story about a person who came to Antony claiming to have memorized the Bible and practiced much fasting. When Antony asks, whether “is being despised the same as being honored,” “poverty the same as wealth,” and “loss the same as gain,” and the person answers “no,” Antony replies, “You have neither fasted nor learned the Old and New Testaments. You have deceived yourself.” Noting this story, Harmless claims “Genuine knowledge of scripture was lived knowledge, making one’s own the values and way of life that the scriptures called for.”\textsuperscript{66} The desert hermeneutic highlights the “practical, spontaneous, and informal” use of Scripture found in the sayings, a method of interpretation that Burton-Christie consequently describes as “pastoral-ethical-ascetical.”\textsuperscript{67}

This “pastoral-ethical-ascetical” hermeneutic of Scripture consequently shaped desert spirituality. Burton-Christie describes the power of Scripture in the desert as “creating, amid conflicting thoughts and aspirations, a sense of serenity and unity and

\\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 44.  
\textsuperscript{65} Burton-Christie, \textit{Word in the Desert}, 23.  
\textsuperscript{66} Harmless, 246.  
awareness of God’s presence.” Burton-Christie notes how much of desert spirituality is derived from the transformative interpretation of Scripture in the desert. He notes that desert asceticism, guided by moderation, cultivated self-knowledge: “Scripture served sometimes as a foil to help the monks overcome the most obvious forms of self-deception, sometimes as a mirror in which they could examine their motives and actions clearly, and other times as a guide to be followed with care.” He notes also that Scriptural texts concerning renunciation led to detachment from worldly things and the freedom from care that characterize desert spirituality. Probably the most famous example of this in desert spirituality is the conversion of Abba Antony, who embarked on his monastic life after hearing in church the invocation of Christ, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Mt. 19:21). Burton-Christie further notes that Scriptural awareness of sin led monastics to a spirit of humility that shunned judgment of others, developed compassion, and showed mercy through hospitality. The desert elders took seriously Christ’s compassion and injunction to avoid judgment: “An old man said, “Judge not him who is guilty of fornication, if thou art chaste: or thou thyself wilt offend a similar law. For He who said, ‘Thou shalt not fornicate’ said also ‘Thou shalt not judge.’” Alternatively, the experience and practice of solitude effected the hermeneutical lens that the desert elders brought to Scripture: “understanding how

68. Ibid., 129.
69. Ibid., 194.
70. Ibid., 238-240.
the probing light of solitude searched out the frailties of the human heart helps to explain why the monks focused so much attention on biblical texts about the need for humility and mercy.” Allegorical interpretation of Scripture among the desert elders aided the work of their “pastoral-ethical-ascetical” hermeneutic. Allegorical interpretation helped place the monk or spiritual aspirant into the story of salvation recounted in Scripture, as Jeremy Driscoll notes:

But allegory is a tool that enables him to discover a deeper mystery; namely, that there is a continuity between the history of Israel—in this case, one particular detail about a head-cook burning down a temple—and the struggle of the monk. With such a discovery the monk's life is taken up into a drama far larger than a personal struggle with gluttony, or for that matter, any other of the principle evil thoughts. The monk is living the very story of the Bible.73

Scripture, the desert hermeneutic, and spiritual practice in the desert all contributed to the formation of a way of life, a Christian habitus in the desert characterized by practical wisdom.

From here, one need not go far to recognize the similarities between the desert hermeneutic and practical theology. While a more thorough analysis of the significance of the desert hermeneutic for a hermeneutic of discernment in practical theology will be taken up in the next chapter, I wish to point out briefly some areas in which practical theology intersects with the desert hermeneutic. Both display Gadamer’s notion of a “fusion of horizons” in their interpretation of texts. As noted in chapter two, the four


movements of practical theology identified by Don Browning\textsuperscript{74} include a systematic theological movement that amounts to the “fusion of horizons” between the thick description of a contemporary context and historical and dogmatic texts of the Christian tradition. In the case of the desert hermeneutic, these horizons include Christianity in Late Antiquity Egypt and Christian Scripture. The desert hermeneutic also focuses on embodied learning and praxis as a way of knowing, characterized by practical wisdom; as noted in chapter two, a similar approach to wisdom is found in many concepts of practical theology.\textsuperscript{75} Burton-Christie’s description of the Greco-Roman paideia—philosophy as a way of life—and its influence on the desert hermeneutic is similar to the description of habitus in chapter two of this dissertation. In the Greco-Roman paideia, “The philosopher’s positive attitude toward culture determined both the day-to-day life within the philosophical school as well as the particular exercises followed in the quest for holiness,” however, the desert monastics broke from the mainstream of society and formed a new paideia “born of the silence and solitude of the desert and of the Word of God.”\textsuperscript{76} Finally, we might identify a connection to practical theology in Burton-Christie’s emphasis on transformation in the desert hermeneutic. A goal of practical theology has been identified in chapter two as the transformation of practice. Just as the desert hermeneutic sought the transformation of lives, practical theology aims toward developing deeper and more

\textsuperscript{74} Don Browning, \textit{A Fundamental Practical Theology}. This fusion of horizons in Browning’s systematic movement characterizes the place and function of practical wisdom in his understanding of fundamental practical theology.


\textsuperscript{76} Burton-Christie, \textit{Word in the Desert}, 53 and 54.
faithful Christian practice. The aim for both is deeper understanding and embodiment of holiness. Discernment has been discussed in chapter two and earlier in this present chapter for its relationship to Christian practical wisdom and Christian spirituality; the following section discusses the desert monastics’ understanding of discernment including why, and to what extent, they valued discernment.

Discernment in the Desert Mothers and Fathers

The single practice that best marks the desert hermeneutic and the interplay of Gospel text, life context, and praxis in the lives of the desert elders is the practice of discernment. Throughout the Sayings, we read accounts of the centrality of discernment within the spirituality of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, including the following: Abba Anthony said, “Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God.” The word for discernment here is diákrisis, the same term found in 1 Cor. 12:10, in which Paul tells the Corinthians to “test the spirits” (diákrisēis pneumatōn). Given the description above of the desert hermeneutic and the desert monastics’ practicing of Scripture, it is not unimaginable that discernment would be an important practice in desert spirituality. Antony Rich describes the relationship between discernment in Scripture and discernment among the desert elders thusly:

Thus, while there is a demonstrable shift away from a spiritual gift of diákrisis pneumatōn to an independent and unqualified gift of diákrisis, this was not so much a departure from the biblical concept of diákrisis as an attempt to apply it practically. The monastic understanding of diákrisis, therefore, did not develop

specifically from the biblical διάκρισις pneumatōn, but from a general understanding of biblical διάκρισις of which διάκρισις pneumatōn was a part.78

Rich notes that the practice of discernment in the desert referred to a broader practice of choosing between alternatives in various practices and contexts. In this sense, the desert monastics sought to practice a biblically-inspired discernment that was used “to separate out and weigh up moral, spiritual, natural and psychological aspects of life and arrive at a value judgment concerning them.”79 It is in this sense that discernment is for the desert monastics—for all Christians—central to the formation of Christian spirituality and a Christian habitus. Rich names discernment according to the desert elders “a spiritual critical faculty by which it is possible to develop the spiritual life.”80

Among the Apophthegmata, there are different categories of sayings that can be identified as evidence of discernment: 1) sayings that explicitly use the term, 2) sayings that are listed under the heading of “discernment” in the Systematic Collection, and 3) sayings that do not fall into the previous two categories yet show evidence of discernment. Rich notes that sayings listed under the heading of “discernment” in the Systematic Collection that do not explicitly use the term, διάκρισις, are important for understanding how sayings in the third category may be identified.81 The identification of sayings in the third category leads Rich ultimately to claim that “Diákrisis governs every aspect of the

78. Antony D. Rich, Discernment in the Desert Fathers: Diákrasis in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 231. I have elected to give the transliteration typesetting in the place of Rich’s original Greek font for ease of typing and reading in this dissertation. This is true for all following quotations of Rich’s Discernment in the Desert Fathers.

79. Ibid., 11.

80. Ibid., 231.

81. Ibid., 127.
monk’s inward and outward behavior.” In other words, discernment is so central to the spirituality of the desert monastics that almost all of the Sayings can be read in light of it. Since discernment is the practice that weighs, navigates, and makes judgments concerning the intersection of Scripture, context, and ascetic and charitable practice, it may be affirmed that discernment is the quintessential mark of desert wisdom. Rich continues:

It is essential for the correct use of praktikē in the monk’s pursuit of his goals, which necessarily incorporates humility and charity. It enables the monk to identify the level of praktikē appropriate to him as well as the way of life best suited to him... In short, diákrasis is presented as a tool essential to the monk’s whole way of life and he needs to learn how to use it properly.82

As Burton-Christie noted, integrity of life was central to the monastic understanding of holiness, and we might say that discernment was the central practice and virtue for a monk’s maintenance of interior faithfulness with outer practice. Rich notes a particular saying that lists what the “life of the monk” consists in, including work, obedience, non-judgment, discretion in speaking and relating to others, rejection of sin, and control of the passions (apatheia). The saying ends with the phrase, “but to do everything with diákrasis, in these things is (the life of) the monk.”83 This saying summarizes Rich’s thesis that all of monastic practice and virtue can be seen in the light of discernment. Practice was the embodiment of the monastic interior life; practice fed and was fed by a monk’s interior disposition, and thus discernment, which read and judged these things, was essential to monastic spirituality—its practices, values, and Scriptural hermeneutic.

82. Ibid., 127-128.
Discernment achieves this importance in desert spirituality because of its nature as practice, virtue, and way of knowing. I have touched upon the understanding of discernment as practice—the monk practices discernment in reading and judging situations, actions, and desires. Abba Poemen said, “It is written, ‘When these three men are together, Noah, Job, and Daniel, there am I, says the Lord.’ Noah represents poverty, Job suffering and Daniel discernment. So, if these three works are found in a man, the Lord dwells in him.”

Rich notes that Daniel represents discernment for his ability to interpret dreams, and thus relates to the monks’ use of discernment in interpreting “circumstances and situations of all kinds.” In this sense, discernment is an essential practice—like renunciation and ascesis—by which “the monk can oversee and defend his spiritual life.”

Note also here the saying of Abba Anthony from earlier in this section: “Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God.”

Discernment governs the means and purpose of fasting for a particular monk or community, and in this sense, it is an essential practice and virtue for other central desert monastic practices. As a virtue, discernment is often listed with other virtues of the monastic life, such as humility and obedience. Noting a saying listed under “discernment” in the Systematic Collection that speaks of the central virtues of obedience, humility and manual labor, Rich writes: “The inclusion of this saying under the diákrisis heading indicates that diákrisis was understood to unite the inward aretaí of humility and

84. Ward, Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 175.
85. Rich, 141.
86. Ibid.
obedience with the zealous hard work of outward *praktikē*... and so *diákrasis* acts as a bridge between inner and outer life.”  

In this sense, discernment is a virtue learned in practicing good judgment in the actions and contexts of the Christian life. It is both a practice and a virtue, yet also a bridge between practice and virtue that unites interior disposition and outward practice. Another saying from the discernment heading in the Systematic Collection reveals this connection between interior disposition and outward practice: “The abbot Agatho said, ‘If an angry man were to raise the dead, because of his anger he would not please God.’”  

In this saying, the one who is angry lacks discernment, for he is unable to balance and unite his interior disposition and outward practice. This integrity of life built upon the virtue and practice of discernment was for the desert monastics, as for many of the early Christian Fathers, true *gnosis* or knowledge. The following story about the learned Arsenius exhibits this: “Someone said to blessed Arsenius, ‘How is it that we, with all our education and our wide knowledge get no-where, while these Egyptian peasants acquire so many virtues?’ Abba Arsenius said to him, ‘We indeed get nothing from our secular education, but these Egyptian peasants acquire the virtues by hard work.’”  

The virtues and a discerning heart could only be acquired through the experience of monastic practice in the desert. For the desert elders, this was the knowledge that brought one closer to understanding of and union with God. The nature of discernment as both practice and virtue, and the kind of knowledge born of it,

87. Ibid., 140.

88. Waddell, 103.

opens up intriguing hermeneutical possibilities for practical theology. Discernment does not merely stand for a method to be applied in practical-theological study, but a wisdom—a virtue—that is embodied in the practices of a particular community and defined by the tradition and narrative within a *habitus*.90

The Desert Mothers and Fathers present a picture of discernment that has many layers as a practice, virtue, and knowledge born out of the way of life of a Christian community in a particular context. This way of life was founded on the Gospel narrative and the living tradition of the Christian church, lived in a particular context. The spirituality of the desert elders presents an account of discernment as central to the life of holiness wherein understanding of Scripture must be embodied in particular practices that are faithful to the Christian tradition in particular contexts. Discernment is the practice, virtue, and process of Christian hermeneutics and meaning-making—the center of the formation of Christian praxis, spirituality, and *habitus*. It is in this sense that without practice, there is no word.

**Benedict of Nursia and the Benedictine Hermeneutic**

Continuing with the theme of formation, practices, *habitus*, and discernment, we may now consider the document most significant for the formation of monastics in the history of Western Christianity, and today: the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. The Rule was written for the formation of a community that sought to know and follow God together as

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90. This will be explained further in the next chapter on the hermeneutic of discernment within practical theology.
Christians seeking to live the Gospel. Benedict calls the monastery a “school for the Lord’s service,” and Benedict’s rule provides a way of life based on the Christian early monastic tradition and on Scripture. Benedict’s Rule provides an excellent example of how a way of life is formed in community by practices defined through the tradition and narrative that give meaning to those practices, and of how discernment shapes and forms those practices within particular lives and contexts. It is difficult to overstate the significance of the Benedictine Rule for the formation of faithful Christian communities. It continues to be referenced and used by contemporary monasteries and intentional communities, and Alasdair MacIntyre famously ends After Virtue waiting for “another St. Benedict.”

The preeminent Benedictine scholar Adalbert de Vogüé summarizes the Benedictine Rule by way of Gregory the Great’s Dialogues, which refer to a monastic Rule “noteworthy for its discernment and brilliant in its language.” De Vogüé goes on to claim that “Without any doubt this is the monastic Rule said to be written by Benedict, copied in countless manuscripts over the course of the centuries.” Benedict’s Rule, however, was in no way the first monastic rule, nor the only extant monastic Rule. The Pachomian Koinonia, the

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92. For the significance of Benedict’s Rule in the Neo-monastic movement, see Rutba House (Organization), School(S) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2005); Gerald W. Schlabach, ”The Vow of Stability: A Premodern Way through a Hypermodern World.” Mennonite Life 53, no. 3 (1998); Jon R. Stock, Tim Otto, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2006); and Jonathan R. Wilson, Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: From After Virtue to a New Monasticism (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010).

93. MacIntyre, 263.

regulations of Basil of Caesarea, the Augustinian Rule, and Cassian’s *Institutes* predate Benedict. Benedict refers to and draws from Basil, Augustine, and Cassian in his own Rule.

Regarding the succession of monastic regulations in the West, de Vogüé notes:

...beginning with the first regulations of Lerins—the so-called ‘Rule of the Four Fathers’ and the ‘Second Rule’—we note a tendency to use the term *regula* for the normative text, always very brief, that governs the monastic community. Five of these short writings, produced by the Lerinian monasticism and its offshoots, form a line that stretches from the beginning of the fifth century to the first third of the sixth.\(^\text{95}\)

While the Lerinian rules were Gallic, de Vogüé notes also a line of monastic regulation born in Italy in the beginning of the sixth century, starting with the *Rule of the Master*. Some time after 530, Saint Benedict of Nursia began putting together his own rule, drawing heavily from the *Rule of the Master*. Since Benedict relies so much on the *Rule of the Master*, de Vogüé notes that one can understand the *Rule of Saint Benedict* best “in conjunction with its source text, which can clarify both its origin and meaning. In fact, it is before the background of the Master that we can best discern the intentions and choices of Monte Cassino’s founder.”\(^\text{96}\) By reading the Benedictine Rule in relation to the *Rule of the Master*, one can begin to see both how Benedictine practices and community shaped Benedictine wisdom, and how Benedict’s discernment formed monastic practices and values that have lasted to the present day.\(^\text{97}\)

\(^{95}\) Ibid.

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 44.

Benedictine Practices, Community, and Formation

A way of understanding the discretion and practical wisdom shown by Benedict is to compare his Rule to the *Rule of the Master*. Whereas Benedict retains much of the monastic theory of the Master, he often comes to different practical interpretations of that theory, which in turn deepen and revitalize that theory for monastic practitioners. As de Vogüé notes, the wisdom that Benedict employs in the development of his Rule is derived from his experience of daily life in monastic community as much as from his monastic forebears:

While he is inclined to reproduce doctrinal statements with certain modifications only, when it comes to *praxis* he prefers to re-work things his own way. ... These Benedictine innovations are doubtless to be explained by a longer experience of common life and its difficulties. The rather theoretical vision of the Master is confronted in Benedict’s work by the givens of daily existence.98

Therefore, the great insight of Benedict is his use of discretion in maintaining the heart of monastic tradition by balancing the radical call of monastic life with the needs and contexts of his own monks. Such is his aim when he writes, “In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love.”99 The love and salvation of all, and that they might prefer nothing to Christ, is Benedict’s ultimate aim for writing his Rule. 100 In this sense, the Rule serves as an excellent example of discernment in community life and leadership within the Christian tradition.


100. Ibid., 295.
The practical differences between Benedict and the Master highlight the emphasis that Benedict gives to discretion and balance in developing his Rule, and therefore give some intimation as to the kind of discernment envisioned by Benedict. Like the desert elders, it is the kind of discernment that seeks to navigate practice and inner disposition within different contexts and among different personalities. Such is the reason why Benedict writes that the abbot must be a person who is able to serve “a variety of temperaments, coaxing, reproving and encouraging them as appropriate.” Such practical choices on Benedict’s part highlight the relationship between discernment and practice in the Rule.

The significant differences between Benedict and the Master often surround Benedict’s practical concern for the well-being of the community and its members in all their plurality. Such can be seen in Benedict’s treatment of common ownership in the monastery (chapters 33-34). De Vogüé notes that Benedict follows Augustine rather than the Master in this section: whereas Benedict characterizes common ownership in the monastery through the early community of disciples in Jerusalem who “held everything in Common” (Acts 4: 32) and distributed goods “to each according to his needs” (Acts 4:34), the Master does not. De Vogüé argues that “Such Augustinian considerations, lacking in the Master, tend to develop a sense for the diversity of persons and a concern for good relations among the brothers which Benedict sums up in the word ‘peace.’ ”... This preoccupation with good mutual understanding, a novelty with respect to the Master’s

101. Ibid., 177.
Rule, will characterize Benedict’s entire work.”102 Benedict’s concern for the well-being of the lesser members of the community including the sick, the elderly, and the young also displays discretion and a sensibility toward the good of all that seems to be lacking in the Master’s regulations. Benedict orders that “Care of the sick must rank above and before all else, so that they may truly be served as Christ” and “sick brothers must be patiently borne with.”103 Concerning the old and the young, Benedict also makes wise exceptions:

> Although human nature itself is inclined to be compassionate toward the old and the young, the authority of the rule should also provide for them. Since their lack of strength must always be taken into account, they should certainly not be required to follow the strictness of the rule with regard to food, but should be treated with kindly consideration and allowed to eat before the regular hours.104

The sections on the sick, young, and old show Benedict’s concern for the weak and his “concern for establishing and maintaining affectionate relationships among the brothers;” de Vogüé notes that this displays “a concern for mutual charity that was missing in the Master.”105 Following MacIntyre’s understanding of practical wisdom described in the previous chapter, Benedict here shows that discernment entails choosing from the maxims that are part of the tradition and applying them well in particular situations. The central Christian maxims of mutual love and charity guide Benedict’s discernment and formation of a way of life wherein the “good of all concerned” prompts both strictness and discretion.

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104. Ibid., 235, 237.

Another difference between Benedict and the Master that highlights the former’s concern for the good of all and mutual charity is the hospitality and charity extended to guests in the Benedictine monastery. The Rule of the Master orders that “a visitor, be he a brother or a layman, should not be fed more than two days without working,” while no such stipulation is copied by Benedict. Furthermore, whereas the Master spends much time in his Rule developing practices that encourage and order the monks to be suspicious of guests—guests are to be housed in rooms without things belonging to the monastery for fear of theft, two brothers are to “make it their business to keep an eye on them within the monastery” “without their being aware of it,” and guests are to be locked in their rooms at night—Benedict orders that “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ.” Benedict adds a further stipulation that “Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received; our very awe of the rich guarantees them special respect.” This treatment differed significantly from the bourgeois world surrounding Benedict, and from the Master who orders no special treatment for the poor and pilgrims. Reflecting on this, Benedictine scholar Aquinata Böckmann notes, “The reason for such a reversal is not simply human compassion, but the Christian faith that becomes effective in love. One does not inquire whether the poor are clean or in rags, honest or fraudulent; the sole fact that they need


108. Ibid., 259.
help calls for eager care and concern.”

Benedict also orders that the abbot and community prostrate themselves before guests upon their arrival and wash their feet, which prompts Böckmann to note that “Care means more than simply giving and helping (categories the Master uses primarily to describe behavior toward the poor).”

These differences between Benedict and the Master show a discernment similar to the desert elders. Benedict’s Rule is replete with references to Scripture and of the communal prayer of the psalter Benedict writes, “Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God.” Through the daily office, the communal prayer of the psalter and the hearing of readings from Scripture, the Benedictine monks were well acquainted with Scripture. This Opus Dei is the center of Benedictine life to which “nothing is to be preferred.” The Benedictine is formed into the world of Scripture just as the desert elders were, through the constant narration (and re-narration in the context of their daily monastic lives) of Scripture. Here the world of Scripture is fused with the world of the Benedictine monk. A monk’s intimacy with Christ is formed through this fusion. Such is the root of Benedict’s preferential concern for the poor, the young, and the stranger in his Rule discussed above. In this we may recognize how Benedict’s discernment, his formation of monastic regulation, was rooted in the worldview of Scripture, as Christ’s own preferential concern for the poor is seen throughout the Gospel (MT 25:31-46; LK 1:49-53, 4:16-21, 14:12-14).

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110. Ibid., 193.

111. RB 1980, 243.
Owing to the above description of Benedictine practices and community, what Burton-Christie writes of holiness in the desert could be said of holiness in Benedict’s Rule, that it was defined by how one came to be transformed by Scripture. Benedict’s discernment is marked by how the narrative of the Gospel shapes his decisions. His own experience of monastic life and community is read through the lens of the Gospel, and his discernment is formed by that intersection. In Benedict, discernment of spiritual experience is ultimately grounded in the performance of Scripture in a particular context with deference to the experience of his predecessors. \(^{112}\) A final example of Benedict’s discernment, similar to the discretion of the desert elders, is of particular importance for the present discussion. In the 49\(^{th}\) chapter of the Rule, Benedict writes that while “The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent,” few “have the strength for this,” and therefore, he instructs his monks to decide for themselves, with the abbot’s permission, what particular service or sacrifice they will make in preparation for Easter “with joy and spiritual longing.”\(^{113}\) De Vogüé offers an interpretation of this chapter that is significant for my consideration of Christian discernment:

> These instructions, which call to mind a Benedictine spirituality in the most precise sense \((RB 4, 46: “To desire eternal life with all one’s spiritual passion”)\) tends to the rehabilitation of desire itself, whereas the doctrinal part of the Rule of the Master spoke only of “carnal desires” or “evil desires.” The same inflection can be seen in regard to the “individual will,” so often condemned before, and now

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\(^{112}\) Benedict’s spiritual predecessors include the desert elders, Cassian, Basil, and Augustine. He recommends the reading of their works for spiritual growth, and he frequently compares the “sloth” of monks in his own day (including himself) with the perfection of “the Fathers.” For example, in the final chapter of the Rule wherein he recommends the reading of Basil’s rule and Cassian’s \(Conferences\) and \(Institutes\) he notes, “For observant and obedient monks, all these are nothing less than tools for the cultivation of virtues; but as for us, they make us blush for shame at being so slothful, so unobservant, so negligent” \(RB 1980, 297\).

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 253.
presented as the source of meritorious Lenten sacrifices. Even so, Benedict is careful when concluding to make all these spontaneous offerings subject to the approval of the abbot, lest the monks become vainglorious and presumptuous.¹¹⁴

There are several important insights here for the topic of discernment. First is the effect Benedict’s discernment has on his understanding and reformation of the doctrinal part of the Rule of the Master. Benedict’s interpretation of Scripture through putting it into practice in monastic life leads to a different interpretation, a “rehabilitation” of desire itself. Where the Master only sees spiritual destruction in desire, Benedict discerns that desire itself is not an evil, but that desire is central to the spiritual life. One might argue that the desire to “prefer nothing whatever to Christ” and the “good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love” found in chapter 72 of the Rule is a lens through which to understand Benedictine spirituality and monastic life.¹¹⁵ Second, Benedict here upholds the importance of personal will and affectation in the process of discernment. This will be a central theme of Ignatius of Loyola’s approach to discernment. Nevertheless, Benedict contextualizes the good of desire within the call of Christ to obedience, poverty, renunciation, and the practices that embody these virtues in the Christian community, particularly the monastic community. Ignatius, too, will contextualize the good of individual will and affectation for discernment within the Christian tradition, narrative, and community, the church.

Central to the formation of Benedictine discernment is the community, with Christ as its center. As seen above, the person of Christ and the Gospel narrative are foundational

¹¹⁴. De Vogüé, Saint Benedict, 88. De Vogüé translates “with joy and spiritual longing” as “with the joy of a spiritual desire.”

¹¹⁵. RB 1980, 295.
for Benedictine wisdom, discernment, and practice. The community is the place in which the formation and practice of discernment occurs on a daily basis. As noted above, Benedict’s discernment is guided by the “good of all” that Christ might be preferred to all things. The place of this discernment is in the life of the community, and the dynamic of community life and its practices is formative of discernment. Community frames the monastic (and Christian) way of life, and this way of life, embodied in particular practices of the Christian faith, shapes monastic (and Christian) discernment and practical wisdom. In the first chapter of the Rule, where Benedict describes different kinds of monks, he notes that anchorites (hermits) are those “who have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time, and have passed beyond the first fervor of monastic life. Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil.”116 Benedict presupposes that an anchorite’s practices and wisdom would have been formed in communal monastic life before setting off on his or her own into the eremitic life. Furthermore, the virtue of obedience that Benedict strives to form in his monks is not limited to obedience to the abbot and the Rule, but is directed toward all the relationships in community life: “Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the abbot but also to one another as brothers, since we know that it is by this way of obedience that we go to God.”117 A final image of the importance of community in Benedictine formation and discernment comes from the third chapter of the Rule. Therein Benedict describes the summoning of monks for counsel:

116. Ibid., 169.
117. Ibid., 293.
As often as anything important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call
the whole community together and himself explain what the business is; and after
hearing the advice of the brothers, let him ponder it and follow what he judges the
wiser course. The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that
the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger.118

These verses provide another example of that Benedictine theme central to decision-
making, the diversity of treatment connected with a concern for the charity of all, which
“reveals a sense for the differences between persons in conjunction with a concern to help
each one of them.”119 Once again, Benedict’s Rule has diverged from that of the Master, as
de Vogüé notes: “Instead of the two reasons considered by the Master who emphasized the
need for good reasoning and fairness, Benedict has substituted what is really a
supernatural motivation: ‘Often the Lord reveals to a younger person the best counsel...’”120
No doubt Benedict was aware of the many times in salvation history God chose the younger
(Samuel, David, Jeremiah, and others). This insight of de Vogüé reveals the root of practical
wisdom in the Benedictine tradition—the grounding of reason in Scripture, the narrative of

Benedictine Discernment and Practical Wisdom

Benedictine discernment and practical wisdom stems from many of the themes
above, especially the relationship between community and leadership (the abbot) and the
centrality of Christ and the Gospel narrative. In light of this, this section describes some of

118. Ibid., 179, 181.
120. Ibid., 51.
the particular marks of a “Benedictine hermeneutic”—community, *habitus*, and formation. In this sense, the “Benedictine hermeneutic,” like the “desert hermeneutic” described earlier, claims that interpretation is lived and living—the tradition-constituted practices of a community—interprets.

Much of the wisdom described in the Rule of Saint Benedict can be discovered in the sections dealing with the leadership of the monastery, the description of the abbot (notably chapters 2 and 64) and those of other significant position in the monastery: the deans (chapter 21), the *senpectae* (chapter 27), the cellarer (31), the prior (chapter 65), and the porter (chapter 66). Dermot Alan Tredget notes that in these chapters, one can find an implicit description of “practical wisdom” according to Benedict.121 Benedict describes the monks who are to be given these positions variously as being “wise,” “having discretion,” and “discerning.” The deans of the monastery “are to be chosen for virtuous living and wise teaching, not for their rank.”122 Such a regulation bears resemblance to the one described earlier calling together all the community for major decisions in which even the youngest was to be heard from. The *senpectae* are “mature and wise brothers who, under cloak of secrecy, may support the wavering brother, urge him to be humble as a way of making satisfaction, and *console* him *lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow* (2 Cor 2:7).”123 The abbot, using “every skill of a wise physician” sends these monks to those “wayward

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brothers” who have been excommunicated for some fault against the rule. The clearest description of practical wisdom that Benedict gives may be found in the chapter (64) concerning the election of an abbot:

Excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous or oversuspicious he must not be. Such a man is never at rest. Instead, he must show forethought and consideration in his orders, and whether the task he assigns concerns God or the world, he should be discerning and moderate, bearing in mind the discretion of holy Jacob, who said: If I drive my flocks too hard, they will all die in a single day (Gen 33:13). Therefore, drawing on this and other examples of discretion, the mother of virtues, he must so arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from.

In this description of the monastic superior, we see Benedict’s concern for the good of all through navigating the particularities of individuals and the virtues and maxims of monastic life. The biblical example of Jacob’s discretion, the narrative and tradition that forms Benedict’s understanding of practical wisdom and discernment, grounds Benedict’s picture of the abbot. Tredget summarizes these intimations of practical wisdom in the Rule by noting that “Particularly important is wisdom in the role of teacher and passing on this wisdom to others by example and deeds rather than words.” He further concludes that “wisdom has a medicinal and healing quality. The one who possesses this form of wisdom is a spiritual doctor and healer rather than an administrator, manager or adjudicator.”

As noted in the previous chapter, Aristotle uses a medical example to explain practical

124. Ibid. “Excommunication” in the Benedictine Rule included exclusion for the disobedient monk from common meals, exclusion from leading a psalm or refrain at prayer, exclusion from giving a reading at prayer, solitary work, and possibly exclusion from common prayer altogether (RB 1980, 221-223). It is interesting to note here that community was of such central importance to Benedictine monasticism that varying degrees of excommunication and exclusion from community life was the primary focus of punishment and correction.

125. Ibid., 283 (emphasis original).

126. Tredget, 718.
wisdom—that while one may know that health is good for the human person, one must also know how a particular person can be made healthy. Like the wise physician, Benedict, in concern for the well-being of all, seeks to lay out a rule that challenges the strong and comforts the weak. Discernment navigates these particularities, and the abbot must practice it well.

I noted above that Benedict gives a supernatural or spiritual reason for calling all the monks for counsel when an important decision is to be made. Rather than emphasizing fairness and good reasoning like the Master does, Benedict states that “the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger.” We can infer from this that Benedict does not only gather the whole community together to discern what is faithful practice, but to come to understand the movement of the Holy Spirit and the vision of God for the community. Faithful practice is attuned to the movement of the Holy Spirit in the community. Such movement is discerned in both Scripture and the life of the community that faithfully embodies Scripture in its practices. In this way, the Benedictine hermeneutic is like the desert hermeneutic: Scripture is interpreted through faithful practice and faithful practice embodies Scripture. Discernment discovers the movement of the spirit through the critical and faithful examination of the intersection of practice, Scripture, and context. This process of discernment drives the living tradition of communities. In the monastic context, the decision still belongs to the abbot, but the discernment is necessarily corporate, and understanding the vision of God is necessarily a corporate endeavor:

This process is not a democratic exercise. The decision remains with the Abbot. The purpose of the consultation is to discern the will of God, which is why Benedict places great emphasis on listening to all, especially the young. Benedict recognizes that in addition to scripture and the rule, the Holy Spirit might want to speak to the Abbot through one or several of his monks. This process does not remove from the abbot the burden of making the decision. But hopefully it makes it easier to discover the “will of God” in a particular situation.

Benedict’s understanding of corporate responsibility for discernment is even extended beyond the walls of the cloister. Included in the regulations for the election of an abbot, Benedict makes a stipulation stemming from the concern for a corrupt and unfaithful monastery that might seek to elect a corrupt and unfaithful abbot who would acquiesce in the community’s vice:

May God forbid that a whole community should conspire to elect a man who goes along with its own evil ways. But if it does, and if the bishop of the diocese or the abbots or Christians in the area come to know of these evil ways to any extent, they must block the success of this wicked conspiracy, and set a worthy steward in charge of God’s house.128

Here we see that Benedict’s understanding of discernment included the necessity of the whole Christian community’s input regarding such important matters as the election of an abbot, if the whole monastic community were to conspire against the vision of God for itself. Otherwise, as noted above, while the practice of discernment belonged to the whole community, the burden of the decision belonged to the abbot and leadership.

Central to Benedictine life and discernment is the person of Christ. Christ is the example par excellence in Benedict’s Rule. Christ and the narrative of his life, death, and resurrection as lived by his disciples in the church grounds monastic practice and

128. Ibid., 281 (emphasis added).
discernment. Böckmann notes the importance of Christ as monastic exemplar in Benedict’s Rule, particularly in places where it diverges with the Master:

Whenever Benedict differs from the Master in his teaching, he refers to Christ, for example, Christ in the sick (36). The concern for excommunicated brothers is motivated by reference to the Good Shepherd (27). The loving reception of the poor and of strangers is founded on the reference that in them it is Christ who comes (53.1, 7, 15), Christ, the incarnate mercy of God (53.14). Monastic life means following Christ, serving Christ, the true King. Christ is present through the abbot; he is the unifying center of the community, leading us on the way to the Gospel.129

How the example of Christ might be lived in a particular context is the object of discernment, and that process of discernment, which here is undertaken by the community under the leadership of an abbot, itself is contextualized within a particular way of life (Christian monasticism), its practices, and its tradition. The same might be said of the Christian community—discernment is a process that navigates how Christians might live the Gospel in particular contexts, and this process is undertaken by a community and its leaders in communion with the whole church and its leaders, all of which are formed into a Christian habitus, through its practices and tradition of practice. This process is the way in which persons and communities come to know and live into the vision of God for their particular life context.

Benedict’s Rule shows the connection between discernment, practice, community, habitus, and formation. In the Rule, we see the groundwork for the life of virtue that flourishes in a particular habitus like MacIntyre describes. There is no coincidence that he chooses to end After Virtue with a vision of a “new Benedict.” The Rule presents a Christian community wherein members are formed into the life of Christ though practices that

129. Böckmann, 71.
embody the narrative of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. These practices are formed by the ongoing discernment of the community and its leaders within the particular context in which it lives. In this life, and through these practices and discernment, the community comes to know the vision of God for itself. As Burton-Christie noted, interpretation is something that is lived; Benedict’s Rule is an example of one way of living that is faithful to the Gospel. That being said, we might add that practical theology helps to guide, develop, and critically and faithfully reflect upon the formation of a Christian *habitus*. In this sense, the task of practical theology is to practice discernment, wherein practice, theory, and context come together in the formation of a community and its *habitus*. Benedict is a model of such discernment, wherein he “is a man of the church, who wants to live consciously within its traditions and catholicity,” who “stands on the pillars of orthodoxy” yet “is a man of liberty, opening himself and his monks to diverse movements within the church and in the world.”

In this, we may recognize the same hermeneutical principles of the desert elders and also of the Christian practical wisdom described earlier.

### Ignatius of Loyola and the Ignatian Hermeneutic

While the practice of discernment among the desert elders revealed the connection between discernment, practice, and *habitus*, and the practice of discernment in the Benedictine rule revealed the connection between discernment, tradition-constituted practices, and community, we now turn to the writings of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, which perhaps more directly address specific ways of discerning the vision and will of God for a

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130. Ibid., 97.
person's life and the movement and prompting of the Holy Spirit. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius presents "rules" both for the discernment of spirits and for the discernment of God's will. Unlike the previous sections, which examined discernment and practice, this section will examine specifically the rules for the discernment of spirits and the discernment of God's will. These help form the picture of an Ignatian hermeneutic that guides Christian praxis. Taken together, the Ignatian rules for discerning spirits and God's will present his "instructions for responding to the Holy Spirit," and through these we find important insight for a practical-theological hermeneutic that is rooted in faithful Christian practice born out of openness to the Holy Spirit and awareness of the signs of the times.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) lived in a dynamic time in history, and his writing reflects a worldview that was born of his spiritual experiences, particularly those that led to his conversion. The era in which Ignatius lived saw much political, religious, and cultural change: the rise and strength of monarchical nations in England, Spain, and France with their burgeoning global empires while the political and cultural era of medieval feudalism was waning. Ignatius lived during the birth of the Protestant Reformation, as Martin Luther was excommunicated in 1521 (the year of Ignatius's conversion) and Henry VIII became head of the Church of England ten years later. The Council of Trent opened in 1545 to address the need for clearer doctrine, reformation of abuses, and correction of

practice in the Roman Catholic Church. Like many theologians, Ignatius’ theology was formed by the intersection of the context of the world, the needs of the church, and the witness of the Gospel: “Ignatius became very alert to these circumstances, and his desire to meet the needs of the Church played a large part in the formation of his spirituality.”

Much of his spirituality can be attributed to his conversion experience, wherein he came to desire to love and serve Christ and find fulfillment in Christian discipleship: “Ignatius developed an intense desire to be associated intimately with Christ, and to cooperate with him in achieving God’s plan of creation, redemption, and spiritual growth as that plan was slowly unfolding in the history of salvation.” This discipleship included a firm desire to know and follow Christ in his body, the church. It is from this desire that the ultimate characteristic of Ignatius’ spirituality, what can be seen in the “First Principle and Foundation” of his *Spiritual Exercises*, may be discerned: “the greater glory of God.” Ganss notes that “glory” implies praise and service, and that “God should be found in all one’s actions, and one should order them all to his glory.” This ultimate characteristic of Ignatius’ spirituality is central to his *Autobiography, Spiritual Exercises*, and the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, the religious order founded by Ignatius. It is also within this characteristic that we might see the central importance of discernment for Ignatius, that in seeking this *telos* of Christian discipleship, one must practice discernment in coming

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133. Ignatius and Ganss, 11.

134. Ibid.

135. Ibid., 12.
to realize the Holy Spirit’s promptings for how one’s life might be ordered according to God’s greater glory.

Ignatius of Loyola’s rules for discernment are situated in the context of the *Spiritual Exercises*, wherein the exercitant’s’s\(^{136}\) relationship with God “is a one-to-one, personal relationship of loving communion: God loving the person, communicating with him, and leading him to find what God wills.”\(^ {137}\) The grounding of Christian discernment is prayerful relationship with God, and the *Spiritual Exercises* seek to foster such a relationship. Such is evident in both the production and the genre of the work. Ignatius began working on the *Spiritual Exercises* in 1522, and continued to make additions and revisions until its publication in 1548. The process of developing the work implies Ignatius’ growing relationship with God over the period of writing the *Spiritual Exercises*. As he grew in wisdom and discernment in his relationship with God in the Spirit, Ignatius was able to develop the work, which itself is a manual of practices for growing in relationship with God and discernment of one’s life choices. Unlike other works of Christian spirituality, the *Spiritual Exercises* is not an exposition on the spiritual life, nor is it a recounting of mystical experiences. The *Spiritual Exercises* is “comparable to a book on ‘how to play tennis’”;\(^ {138}\) it is a manual of faithful practices, and in this sense it is akin to Benedict’s Rule. Like Benedict’s Rule, the *Spiritual Exercises* situates practices of discernment within a broader

\(^{136}\) The term for one who engages in the *Spiritual Exercises*, whereas “director” would be the one who directs, or leads, the exercitant in the *Spiritual Exercises*.


\(^{138}\) Ignatius and Ganss, 50.
formation in prayer. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, we see again that wisdom is shaped within a context of formative practices, a *habitus*. The *Spiritual Exercises* was written not merely to be read by a person, but practiced.\textsuperscript{139} Ignatius wrote the work to serve as a guide for directors who would be counseling exercitants in the performance of the exercises. The work guides directors “in their conversational presentation of topics, principles, methods of meditating and contemplating, directives for making a right-ordered choice or ‘election,’ and the like.”\textsuperscript{140} While the exercises are structured as a four-week retreat, Ignatius “clearly intended the book to be a flexible guide from which a director would select and adapt what was likely to be most helpful to this particular retreatant in his or her circumstances (SpEx [18-20]).”\textsuperscript{141}

Ignatius begins the *Spiritual Exercises* with some introductory remarks and instructions about engaging in the Exercises, and in the first explanation he states:

By the term Spiritual Exercises we mean every method of examination of conscience, meditation, contemplation, vocal or mental prayer, and other spiritual activities... given to any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 51. The term “retreat” is derived from the performance of the *Spiritual Exercises* wherein an exercitant would “withdraw from ordinary occupations (whence arose the name "retreat"), in order to make four or five contemplations a day, alone with God in complete solitude.” The *Spiritual Exercises* is divided into four "weeks," detailing the contemplations to be made during each day, and introducing in the second week the methods for making an “election.” Ignatius and other directors whom he trained would give retreats for one week or for two or three days, adapting the Exercises to the needs and time constraints of the exercitant (Ignatius and Ganss, 51).

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 121.
The Exercises often involve imaginative practices of prayer, such as the contemplation of a particular scene in the life of Christ or salvation history, engaging both the heart and mind of the exercitant by asking him or her to imagine himself or herself in the scene. In doing so, the Exercises help form the intellect, will, emotion, and imagination of the exercitant, preparing him or her for discerning the prompting of the Holy Spirit and the vision of God for his or her life. After the introductory remarks, at the beginning of the First Week, Ignatius presents the Principle and Foundation of the Spiritual Exercises: “Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of this to save their souls.”\textsuperscript{143} The Principle and Foundation further states that the things of creation are to be used only so that they help lead a person to this end, that to do this, one must make oneself “indifferent” to them,\textsuperscript{144} and that “I ought to desire and elect only the thing which is more conducive to the end for which I am created.”\textsuperscript{145} The Principle and Foundation also serves as a basis for some of the key characteristics of Ignatian discernment, particularly indifference.

The Exercises are separated in to four “weeks,” with each week featuring a number of contemplations and prayers each day, with the express focus of growing in relationship with God by meditating on Christ and salvation history, on one’s own life and place within

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 130.

\textsuperscript{144} The Classics of Western Spirituality translation provides an important explanation of “indifferent” in Ignatius’ spirituality: “undetermined to one thing or option rather than another; impartial; unbiased; with decision suspended; undecided. It implies interior freedom from disordered inclinations. Variously nuanced by contexts, it is a key technical term of Ignatius’ spirituality and very frequent throughout all his writings. In no way does it mean unconcerned or unimportant” (392, n.17). Indifference is an important aspect of the discernment of God’s will in Ignatius’ spirituality, as will be discussed later.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 130.
that history, and on the discernment of the movement of the Holy Spirit and will of God within one’s life. The First Week features meditation on and contemplation of the Fall and human sinfulness, including the excitant’s own sins. The Second Week “presents exercises proper to the illuminative way, the acquiring of virtues in imitation of Christ.”

This includes meditations upon Christ’s call to all his disciples, the Incarnation, the Nativity, and the public ministry of Christ. Among these exercises, Ignatius introduces principles for the discernment of a life choice, including “Three Times Suitable for Making a Sound and Good Election,” “The First Method of Making a Sound and Good Election,” and “The Second Method of Making a Sound and Good Election.” These principles for discernment are derived from the Principle and Foundation, especially the end for which humanity was created and the principle of indifference. The Third Week presents exercises for the contemplation of Christ’s journey to Jerusalem, his passion, and his death, while the Fourth Week presents exercises for the contemplation of Christ’s joys—his Resurrection and appearances—and for the contemplation of God’s love in the creation and salvation of all that is: “By now the excitant has reviewed God’s entire plan of creation and redemption evolving in the history of salvation, from creation, through the fall of the angels and Adam, the Incarnation, and redemption, which lead one all the way to one’s destiny in the beatific vision. The excitant, too, has been striving to fit himself or herself cooperatively into this divine plan.”

146. Ibid., 52.
147. Ibid., 162-165.
148. Ibid., 53.
Christ’s death and resurrection, seeks confirmation of whatever choices or resolutions were discerned throughout the performance of the exercises.\textsuperscript{149} These meditations on the intersection of one’s own life narrative and the narrative of Christ, as told in the church, provide an important frame for Ignatian discernment, to which I now turn.

**Discernment of Spirits**

Crucial to the understanding of Ignatius’ methods of “making a sound and good election” are his “rules for the discernment of spirits.” These rules are placed as appendices to the *Spiritual Exercises*.\textsuperscript{150} It must be noted first that while the discernment of spirits is crucial to the discernment of God’s will (making an election), the two are not the same:

Directions for discerning spirits aim at helping us (1) to discriminate, among the mass of inner movements, those which are merely from ourselves and those which are prompted in us by some spirit and (2), among these spirits possibly involved, to discriminate those which are prompted by the Holy Spirit from those prompted by an evil spirit. Such discernment is not by itself a discernment of what is God’s will in a concrete situation for choice that is facing us.\textsuperscript{151}

When I discuss Ignatius’ methods for discerning God’s will later in this section, however, the discernment of spirits will be shown to play an important role in judging the movement

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 201-207.

\textsuperscript{151} Toner, *A Commentary*, 12. Toner is also careful to note that Ignatian discernment of spirits is different from, though connected to, moral discernment and discernment of the signs of the times. Discernment of spirits relates to the interpretation of “the *experiences* of those whose hearts are set on God and those who are going from bad to worse” (11, original emphasis).
of the Holy Spirit in, and God’s vision for, a person’s life. Such is why discernment of spirits is discussed first.

The discernment of spirits, as was recognized by the desert elders, is of central importance for understanding one’s interior disposition, commitments, and spiritual struggles. It is foundational for understanding the motives and impulses that drive action, and consequently for understanding and shaping distinctive Christian practice and life. For these reasons, discernment of spirits must not be limited only to when a person is in the midst of a major life decision: “We need to discern daily and respond in such ways as are indicated in these rules if our lives are not to drift or to lose their firm direction; if we are not to miss God’s grace, or to be weakened, misled, and plagued by vexing uncertainties or confusions; or finally, to be brought to discouragement and disinterest in any intense Christian life.”\(^\text{152}\) In light of this, Ignatius gives rules for a person to identify “diverse motions”\(^\text{153}\) within themselves, and discern whether they are prompted by a good or evil spirit, so that he or she might accept the good and reject the bad. These “diverse motions,” are described by Toner as including an important range of thoughts, feelings, and actions: “What Ignatius refers to by motions in the soul is the flux of thoughts (such as judgments about God, self, the world, plans, lines of reasoning, lines of association, or imaginings), and of affective acts (such as love, hate, desire, or fear), and of affective feelings (such as peace,

\(^{152}\) Ibid., 15. Though Ignatius’ rules for discernment found in the *Spiritual Exercises* is directed toward individual discernment, we might find some wisdom here for communal discernment, especially when considered in conjunction with Benedictine discernment. The implications of Ignatian discernment for communal discernment will be discussed in the next chapter, but for now it is enough that the reader’s attention be drawn to my assertion that Toner’s reflection here on firm direction, being misled, discouragement, and daily discernment could very well be applied to the discernment of spirits and Holy Spirit by Christian communities.

\(^{153}\) Ignatius and Ganss, 201.
warmth, coldness, sweetness, bitterness, buoyancy, or depression).” Toner is right to note as well that these motions are neither good nor bad in themselves, but that they do tend to have a positive or negative effect on one’s faith life, when cooperated with in particular lives and situations; essentially, “what effect they actually have depends on what we do with them.” Furthermore, Ignatius does not intend to imply that every human thought or feeling is prompted by the working of a good or evil spirit. Toner is also right to note that human tendencies are equally affected by good and bad habits, and human intellectual and moral weakness and strength, while the “motions of which Ignatius speaks should be understood neither as produced in a person who is totally passive, nor as always arising altogether spontaneously and without any spiritual agents ever taking advantage of human dispositions and tendencies in accord with their own good or evil intentions.” The main interest of Ignatius’ directions concerning the discernment of spirits is that there are some affective thoughts and actions that can be identified as being prompted by God, and some that can be identified as being prompted by a spirit contrary to God.

Along these lines, it is also important to note that when speaking of the influence of evil spirits or forces contrary to God, Ignatius is not speaking about possession or extraordinary sensation. Toner notes that the motions and experiences of which Ignatius writes are “the experiences we all have day after day, sometimes intensely, usually in a more quiet way, but always dangerous for life in the spirit if we do not recognize what is

155. Ibid., 38.
156. Ibid., 37-38.
happening, understand it, and know how to counteract it so as to maintain our hearts open
to the Holy Spirit during dark days as well as bright ones.”

Furthermore, Ignatius is less
interested in developing a disputation concerning the nature and being of evil spirits, and
more interested in presenting practical direction for understanding, and being open to, the
movement of the Holy Spirit in one’s life while also understanding and rejecting the
influence of evil in one’s life. The thrust of Ignatius’ rules for discernment of spirits, and
therefore a crucial piece of his teaching on discernment of God’s will, is the recognition of
movements within oneself that draw one toward God and the recognition of movements
within oneself that draw one away from God:

Growth into such purity of heart is God’s work in us, impossible to achieve merely
by our own efforts, but not to be effected by God without our free response and
effort. So it is of essential importance to be able to recognize when God is acting on
our consciousness and to know when it is not God, but our own selves, or the
prodding of the world, or of Satan. Only so, can we by our free choice open
ourselves to God’s influence and close out anything opposed to it.

For a person’s practice in recognizing and discerning the movements of these contrary
spirits, Ignatius provides important principles for understanding when and why a
particular spirit is prompting a particular motion within the person.

157. Ibid., 33.

158. My phrase, “the influence of evil in one’s life,” is purposely meant to broaden the practical
implications and wisdom of Ignatius’ rules for the discernment of spirits. Toner, as well as many other
commentators, have expanded Ignatius’ notion of “evil spirits” to dispositions and structures contrary to the
vision of God. For this dissertation’s understanding of discernment in a contemporary context, “the term ‘evil
spirit’ will be extended to include not only evil spirits in the proper sense of the term, that is, created personal
immaterial beings, but also the dispositions of evil within ourselves, the evil structures of society, all that can be
a source of inner movements (of thoughts, affective feelings, and affective acts) contrary to what the Holy
Spirit wishes to work in our lives through faith, love, and hope” (Jules J. Toner, Spirit of Light or Darkness?: A
Casebook for Studying Discernment of Spirits (Saint Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), 12).

159. Toner, A Commentary, 39.
Ignatius’ rules for the discernment of spirits begin with understanding the person who is the subject of discernment. Upon this, all else rests. Mark McIntosh notes that Ignatius “begins his first set of principles to guide discernment with a sage admonition: attend to the context of a spiritual sign with a person’s life-direction.”\textsuperscript{160} According to Ignatius, the effects of good and evil spirits are different depending on the life-direction of the person experiencing them:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The First Rule.} In the case of persons who are going from one mortal sin to another, the enemy ordinarily proposes to them apparent pleasures. He makes them imagine delights and pleasures of the senses, in order to hold them fast and plunge them deeper in their sins and vices. But with persons of this type the good spirit uses a contrary procedure. Through their habitual sound judgment on problems of morality he stings their consciences with remorse.\textsuperscript{161}
\end{quote}

For a person whose life is tending toward vice in time of discernment, an evil spirit brings consolation—fantasies and excitement—while a good spirit brings desolation—remorse, doubt. Ignatius’ Second Rule deals with regressing Christians:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The Second.} In the case of persons who are earnestly purging away their sins, and who are progressing from good to better in the service of God our Lord, the procedure used is the opposite of that described in the First Rule. For in this case it is characteristic of the evil spirit to cause gnawing anxiety, to sadden, and to set up obstacles. In this way he unsettles them by false reasons aimed at preventing their progress. But with persons of this type it is characteristic of the good spirit to stir up courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and tranquility. He makes things easier and eliminates all obstacles, so that the persons may move forward in doing good.\textsuperscript{162}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{161} Ignatius and Ganss, 201 (emphasis original).

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
For a person whose life is tending toward virtue and love of God in time of discernment, however, an evil spirit brings desolation—anxiety and a sense of futility—while a good spirit brings consolation—encouragement and a sense of peace. Toner makes a wise note regarding life-direction and how it matters: “The essential question is not at what point a person would be on a scale from serious vice to high virtue if the progress or regress should be stopped. It is rather this: What is the presently stable direction or thrust of his or her life? The way each spirit’s action affects a person depends not so much on how good or bad the person is at the time as on the fundamental disposition and direction of development.”163 What matters for Ignatius is the interaction of a person’s life direction with the action and influence of good or evil spirits. In this sense, it must be noted that the relationship between habitus, practice, and discernment discussed above in the teachings of the desert elders and of Benedict comes to be important for Ignatian discernment, as well. We see here that the development of a habitus, and the virtues and practices that are constitutive of it, is normative for discerning spiritual experiences, as McIntosh also notes: “the nature of the spiritual influence only becomes discernible through the development of a life. Again, the direction of interpretation is beyond the purely interior into the realm of concrete effects and practices.”164 A significant conclusion drawn from this understanding is that discernment is a process that unfolds gradually as decisions are made and lived into and then further discerned as the initial decision begins to bear fruit in a life. A person or community must continue to take note of its development and inner motions and discern

163. Toner, A Commentary, 52.
164. McIntosh, 95.
the working of a good or evil spirit—one of faithfulness or one contrary to faith.

Experience in this helps develop greater sensitivity in the discernment spirits, as Ignatius notes, “Thus the person, by understanding this experience and taking note of it, can be on guard in the future against these characteristic snares.”165 As a person’s or community’s practice becomes more faithful, so does their discernment of the Holy Spirit.

Discerning God’s Will

During the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius gives two “methods” for “making a sound and good election.”166 Within these methods, we find Ignatius’ wisdom for discerning the will167 and vision of God for one’s life in particular instances and circumstances.168 As noted earlier, Ignatian principles for discerning God’s will are

165. Ignatius and Ganss, 206.

166. Ibid., 163-165. Ganss notes that for Ignatius’ term elección, “choice” or “selection” could be used, “but the term ‘election’ so permeates all the literature on Ignatian spirituality from his day till now that we think it better to retain this traditional term” (Ibid., 412 n. 82). The term will be retained in this dissertation as well.

167. An important distinction is needed here for explaining what, exactly, regarding God’s will is discernible according to Ignatius’ methods and rules. Toner summarizes the distinction as follows: the term “God’s will” in the making of an election is understood as “God’s positive, preferential but non-necessitating will regarding a person’s free choice in a concrete situation when none of the alternatives for choice is commanded or forbidden by God” (Toner, What is Your Will, 6). In other words, the discernment regards alternatives for choice that are morally permissible and within the purview of an individual’s free choice. Ignatius writes, “It is necessary that all the matters about which we wish to make an election should in themselves be either indifferent or good” (Ignatius and Ganss, 161). Ignatian discernment of an election seeks to discover which choice in a given person’s context is more for “God’s greater glory.” Toner also notes that Ignatian discernment of God’s will may also relate to the free choice made by a group (Toner, What is Your Will, 5).

168. Concerning daily discernment and making an election, Ganss notes: “Although the main structure of Ignatius’ text chiefly concerns a person deliberating about election of a state of life, here in [170] (as also in [178 and 189] below) he broadens the horizon of his text itself and states that the principles for an election may be applied to anything important to the spiritual life and not sinful” (Ibid., 412 n. 85). Not only
dependent on the relationship of loving communion and communication fostered in the 
*Spiritual Exercises*. This includes faith in the Holy Spirit’s guidance for following God’s will;
that is, “if we can be justifiably confident that the Holy Spirit has led us, we can be
justifiably confident of having found God’s will.”\textsuperscript{169} Essential to this confidence is the
realization that the Spirit moves a person in discernment through the person’s own
thoughts and affections, as seen in the previous section on the discernment of spirits. This
is why the discernment of spirits is essential to Ignatian methods for making an election.
Spiritual experiences, thoughts, and affections that lead persons and communities in their
choices must be discerned themselves while, and prior to, making such choices. Also
essential to Ignatian discernment of an election is the Principle and Foundation noted
earlier, “the greater glory of God.” In his introduction to the making of an election, Ignatius
is keen to point out his distinctions between ends and means in discernment: “Accordingly,
anything whatsoever that I elect ought to be chosen as an aid toward that end, without my
ordering or dragging the end into subjection to the means, but with my ordering the means
to the end,” and as such, “nothing whatever ought to move me to choose such means or
deprive myself of them, except one alone, the service and praise of God our Lord and the
eternal salvation of my soul.”\textsuperscript{170} Toner derives three essential conditions for discernment
from Ignatian directives on making an election: 1) the sincere intention to follow God’s
will, 2) the desire to know God’s will, and 3) indifference to every alternative for choice

\begin{footnotes}
\item[170] Ignatius and Ganss, 161.
\end{footnotes}
except that it is discerned to be God’s will. As noted earlier, indifference is a key concept of Ignatian discernment of an election, and it is central to Ignatius’ first method for making an election.

Ignatius’ first method for making an election focuses on indifference and reasoning with the intellect, whereas his second method for making an election calls upon human affectivity and imagination. In the first method, Ignatius first notes that the exercitant must keep before his or her mind Principle and Foundation and must find himself or herself indifferent, “without any disordered affection, to such an extent that I am not more inclined or emotionally disposed toward taking the matter proposed rather than letting go of it, nor more toward letting it go rather than taking it.” Toner writes that indifference, in this sense, “denotes indifference to every alternative for choice prior to deciding which one God prefers, which one is more for God’s glory in us.” This does not insinuate passionlessness, but rather a kind of freedom from what Ignatius calls “disordered affection.” Furthermore, the exercitant is advised to be undecided, and to be unswayed neither by poverty nor riches, honor nor dishonor, etc., except that God’s greater glory might be accomplished. Toner argues that, contrary to passionlessness, “indifference depends on an intense affective response of desire to know and do what is more for the

171. Toner, What is Your Will, 8.
172. Ignatius and Ganss, 414 n. 93.
173. Ibid., 163.
174. Toner, What is Your Will, 8.
kingdom of God. This desire, in turn, depends on an intense love of God and neighbor."\textsuperscript{175} Such desire enables a person to be indifferent to alternatives for choice. Such a desire is formed through the various affective and imaginative prayers throughout the \textit{Spiritual Exercises}. This desire for God and love of neighbor is what Benedict writes of when he discusses the “good zeal” of monks. This is also the desire formed through the tradition-constituted practices of the church, including worship, hospitality, forgiveness, and contemplation. Therefore, this desire for God and love of neighbor is central to Christian \textit{habitus} and Christian discernment. Second, Ignatius notes that the exercitant should pray that God might help move his or her mind toward choosing what is for God’s greater glory, and that the exercitant might do this “by reasoning well and faithfully with my intellect.”\textsuperscript{176} Third, Ignatius proposes that the exercitant draw up the advantages and disadvantages (pros and cons) for God’s greater glory of electing for or against the object being considered.\textsuperscript{177} The exercitant then chooses according to “which side reason more inclines.”\textsuperscript{178} Note here that the reason that Ignatius appeals to is formed by the essential conditions for discernment noted above; the reason Ignatius appeals to is tradition-
constituted and formed by faithful practice. Ignatius ends the first method with prayer again, advising the exercitant to offer the election to God and ask for God to confirm it.

Ignatius’ second method for making an election, as noted before, focuses on exercises for the affective imagination. I agree with Toner that Ignatius’ two “methods” are not distinctly separate methods, but are one way of discernment, for the “second method” is only a set of rules: “All these ‘rules’ are calculated to help purify and intensify the discerners’ love and desire, rendering them more fully indifferent to all but God’s will and stronger in their longing for knowledge of that will. In fact, these rules could all be followed to advantage in any preparation for discerning God’s will.”

Ignatius begins the second method with reference to the Principle and Foundation, stating that “the person making the election should perceive beforehand that the love, whether greater or less, which he or she has for the matter being chosen, is solely for the sake of our Creator and Lord.” Next, Ignatius offers three imaginative and affective exercises for deepening and clarifying the exercitant’s discernment. The first exercise asks the exercitant to imagine a person whom he or she does not know, and consider what advice he or she would offer that person “to act and elect for the greater glory of God,” then keep that same advice for oneself. This has become a classic exercise for discernment in multiple contexts: “What would I advise someone else to do if he or she were in my situation?”

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179. Toner, *What is Your Will*, 17. Essentially what Ignatius presents is a method for discernment (the “first method,” the parts of which are called “points”) and rules and imaginative exercises for deepening discernment and desire for God (the “second method,” the parts of which are called “rules”).

180. Ignatius and Ganss, 164.

181. Ibid.
exercises deal with the end of one’s life and one’s final judgment before God: “I will consider, as if I were at the point of death, what procedure and norm I will at that time wish I had used in the present election”; and “Imagining and considering in what condition I will find myself on judgment day, I will think how at that time I will wish I had decided in regard to the present matter.” All three of these exercises help to sharpen one’s indifference by helping the discerner to focus on what matters most—the greater glory of God and the salvation of one’s soul. Imagining ourselves at the point of death, or before God at the end of our lives, how would we wish, and by what norms would we wish, to have made the decision with which we are currently faced? Ignatius knew that an exercitant’s selection of advantages and disadvantages needed to be formed by an intense desire for God and love of neighbor, otherwise it would be easy to be swayed by disordered affections and the false consolations and the desolations of spirits contrary to God’s vision for humanity, known in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Ignatius is also very much aware of the importance of context in discerning the will of God, just as he was in the discernment of spirits. Different contexts and experiences require different approaches to discernment. The two methods that he gives are only proper to the “third time” of making a good and sound election. Ignatius recounts three times (or “modes”) for making a good election: the first is when there is no possibility of doubt in God moving one’s will, the second is when one has received knowledge from an experience of consolation or desolation in the discernment of spirits, and the third is a “time of tranquility... when the soul is not being moved one way and the other by various

182. Ibid., 165.
spirits and uses its natural faculties in freedom and peace.” Toner argues that each time involves a different kind of discernment and different kinds of evidence to be judged, but also that the three times may be united in the process of discernment. In the “first time,” God moves and attracts the person’s will to such an extent that there is no possibility of doubting that God is acting on his or her will, and thus the person should carry out what God proposes. Toner wisely notes, however, that evidence must still be evaluated and discerned in this time: “the first time experience, even with its spontaneous certainty of what God wills, is only data for a discernment by critical reflection on it. By Such reflection, the person who has the experience can arrive at a critically validated reflective certainty or a critically justified doubt about the unreflective certainty.” This insight is of crucial significance for Christian spirituality, as it demonstrates why all spiritual experience must be critically and faithfully reflected on, evaluated through the practice of discernment, before being considered normative or recommended for Christian faith and practice. In light of this, the “second time” context might characterize the context for a particular discernment, wherein the discernment of spirits is necessary in order to ascertain evidence

183. Ibid., 163.

184. Toner, *What is Your Will*, 19. Toner notes that in each mode, there is a common process of “receiving or searching out relevant data,” “critical evaluation of the data,” interpretation of the data, and “weighing of the evidence and drawing a conclusion.” However, each mode has “different kinds of data” and “different principles” for evaluating, interpreting, and weighing the data. There remains much debate concerning the unity and autonomy of the three modes (see Christina A. Astorga, “Ignatian Discernment: A Critical Contemporary Reading for Christian Decision Making” *Horizons* 32, no. 1 (2005).); this dissertation agrees with Toner that each mode can, of itself, be a process of discernment. This is true even of the first time or mode wherein God moves the will without possibility of doubt, since the discerner must investigate and decide whether there is reason to doubt and whether the experience is a “first time” experience or a “second time” experience, one in which the person is affected by the motions of various spirits.

185. Ibid., 11.
to be evaluated and interpreted for making an election. The discerner must decide first if there is a movement of the will as in the “first time” experience, and second if this movement “arises at the prompting of the Holy Spirit and not from some antispirtual or nonspiritual source.” Therefore, the discernment of spirits discussed above is the central process for making an election during the “second time.” Since the “second time” connotes a movement or attraction of the will by a particular spirit (or none at all), the discernment of spirits is necessary so that one can make a good and sound election in the “second time.” The “two methods” of making an election described by Ignatius are proper to the “third time,” because those methods require a freedom of the will during a “time of tranquility” when the discerner is not affected by desolations and consolations prompted by various spirits or other sources. Toner adds that a time of tranquility also implies that the discerner “is free of other distractions, such as tiredness, pain, noise, and so on”; it is a time when “the discerner is unimpeded by anything that would interfere with the ‘free and tranquil’ exercise of reason and judgment.” Taken as a whole, especially within the context of the formative contemplations of the Spiritual Exercises, the rules for the discernment of spirits and for making an election intimate an “Ignatian hermeneutic.”

The Ignatian Hermeneutic

This brief overview of Ignatius’ rules and methods for the discernment of spirits and the making of an election allows me to point out particular characteristics of Ignatian

186. Ibid., 14.

187. Ibid., 18.
discernment that may be helpful in formulating a practical-theological hermeneutic of discernment in the next chapter. These characteristics are: the importance of context, the importance of affectivity, the importance of indifference, the ordering of means and ends, and the importance of eschatological vision. The significance of context for discernment can be seen in Ignatius’ concern that one must judge the movement of a spirit and its source within the current, stable direction of a person’s spiritual and moral life. Discernment is judgment about particulars—how the Holy Spirit is acting in this particular person or community at this particular time in this particular context. The significance of context can also be seen in Ignatius’ attention to the “times” for discernment. Different spiritual experiential contexts require different methods of discernment. In a time of tranquility, one may make accounts of the advantages and disadvantages for the greater glory of God within various alternatives. During a time of desolations and consolations, however, one must first discern the movement and sources of spirits before making an election. Discernment is a process that develops and is confirmed through additional discernment of spirits and additional evidence of God’s will.¹⁸⁸

Ignatius’ emphasis on affectivity is connected to his emphasis on indifference. Affectivity is significant for both the discernment of spirits and the discernment of God’s will. Affectivity ultimately serves as criterion in the discernment of spirits and the “second time” for making an election (the time, which as shown above, plays a role in the first and third times for making an election). Astorga explains the importance of affectivity as such:

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 20-22.
In Ignatian discernment evil, under the disguises of good, is recognized ultimately through what comes to one’s affectivity, for if one were to depend only on the apparent worth of what is proposed to one’s choosing one could be deceived. This means that one must discern the feelings of peace and joy that accompany one’s choices, feelings not produced by psychological conditionings for such feelings of peace and joy are God-given, thus are gifts of grace.  

Furthermore, affectivity is central to the development of indifference, as noted earlier by Toner. It is only through an intense love of God and neighbor that one may be indifferent to all alternatives and undecided until the Holy Spirit shows the choice that best serves the greater glory of God. This was also seen above in the discussion about Benedictine discernment. Benedict rehabilitated notions of desire by emphasizing the desire for God and love of neighbor that characterizes the “good zeal” of monks. Along these lines, Astorga notes that “If affectivity is the criterion, then it must be so ordered by the intimacy and depth of one’s love for God in Christ Jesus.”

This ordered affectivity is rooted in the First Principle and Foundation, which is the ultimate criterion of Ignatian discernment. The First Principle is the “one supreme and inspiring end, the keystone to which all the other elements in the arch of his thought were support.” Ignatius’ approach to discernment provides means in pursuit of this end, means that are ordered to this end and directed by this end. Two imaginative contemplations that Ignatius provides in the “second method” of making an election—the time of death and the time of judgment—help to bring this end into clearer focus and aid indifference. Ignatius’ approach to discernment always keeps the Kingdom of God before it.

189. Astorga, 97.
190. Ibid.
191. Ignatius and Ganss, 12.
In this sense, we might say that Ignatian discernment has an eschatological dimension to it—choices are made with the greater glory of God and living into God’s Reign first and foremost. This wisdom and loving desire for God’s glory is formed within the practices of a Christian *habitus*. Such is the case for the desert hermeneutic, the Benedictine hermeneutic, and the Ignatian hermeneutic; the intimacy and depth of one’s love for God that is formed by faithful practices characterizes the heart of discernment in the desert elders’ stories,\(^1\) in Benedict’s Rule, and in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

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\(^1\) A particularly striking example of this is the following: “Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said to him, ‘Abba as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?’ Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, ‘If you will, you can become all flame.’” Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 103.
CHAPTER FOUR

A HERMENEUTIC OF DISCERNMENT IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Introduction: Discernment in Practical Theology

Thus far, this dissertation has sought to present the practice of discernment as proper to the practical theological task and method. In chapter two, I presented the aims and tasks of practical theology and the important place that practical wisdom (*phronesis*) has in the methods through which many practical theologians address those aims and tasks. In that chapter, I argued that practical theology seeks the formation of faithful practices and faithful discipleship. Practical theology pursues this aim through critical and faithful theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with the practices of the world. Such reflection is embodied in the Christian practice of discernment, which seeks the formation of faithful practices and discipleship through understanding the vision of God, for a particular person or community, known in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. The second chapter also included a discussion of the tradition-constituted nature of practical wisdom and how the practice of discernment embodies practical wisdom for the Christian tradition. Following this, I concluded that the practice of discernment ought to inform practical theological hermeneutics in the Christian tradition.

In chapter three, I discussed the essential link between practical theology and Christian spirituality, and the role that the practice of discernment plays in the formation of practices that are faithful to the vision of God known in Christ through the Holy Spirit and embodied in the narrative and tradition of the church and of the gospel. For this reason,
discernment is the practice that embodies the mode of interpretation proper to practical theology in the Christian tradition. Therein lies the practical wisdom of Christian persons and communities—the wisdom to understand the vision of God for a particular person or community in a particular context, and to form persons and communities within practices and contexts that are faithful to that vision. Therefore, I argue in this chapter that both a theological and spiritual interpretation of contexts (both within the church and the world) and a theological and spiritual interpretation and formation of Christian practices that respond to particular contexts and are faithful to the vision of God known in Christ through the Holy Spirit are essential for practical theological hermeneutics. In this sense, discernment is central to the interpretive, normative, and strategic tasks of practical theology. Discernment involves, as shown in the third chapter, interpretation of both contexts and practices with a view of discovering God's vision for a people within those contexts. This theological and spiritual interpretation takes the form of Christian practical wisdom, that is discernment, which requires attunement to the movement and prompting of the Holy Spirit and critical and faithful evaluation of practices and their contexts.

1. Practices and contexts are always linked together and cannot be examined separately, but in discussing the process of discernment, these can and must be clearly distinguished. Discernment, as described throughout this dissertation, is the process of investigating and interpreting contexts and forming practices that are faithful to the vision of God within the particularities of those contexts. As such, practices respond to particular contexts, and are shaped by those contexts in responding to them. These renewed and reshaped practices, in turn, go on to reshape the contexts and ways of life within which they are practiced. Furthermore, discernment itself is a practice that is shaped by context—as evidence of this, recall how Ignatius’ definition of the different “times and modes” for discernment shaped the particular approach to discernment one ought to take.

2. I will discuss later in this chapter how the practice of discernment, as it was presented in chapter three, is central to both the interpretive and the normative tasks of practical theological method described by Osmer in Practical Theology. op. cit.
The present chapter seeks to explore more concretely a practical theological hermeneutic of discernment. It does so first by revisiting the telos and tasks of practical theology in light of the insights into discernment gathered in the previous chapter on three traditions of discernment in Christian spirituality. Second, this chapter revisits the concept of practical wisdom in practical theology in light of the insights of the previous chapter. Third, this chapter investigates practical theological method in light of the insights of the previous chapter. In this chapter, I hope to flesh out some of the principles and characteristics I consider significant for a hermeneutic of discernment, which are in some cases analogous to characteristics of other practical theological hermeneutics. This chapter does not seek to enforce a definitive practical theological hermeneutic or method, but rather it seeks to invite the reader to consider a hermeneutic of discernment as proper to the study of practical theology, proper particularly to those approaches to practical theology that aim toward the formation of faithful practices and Christian discipleship.

**Practical Theology Telos and Tasks Revisited**

As in chapter two, my discussion of the telos of practical theology must begin with a discussion of Christian *habitus*. As I noted in chapter two, Edward Farley describes theology as a *habitus*, a way of being, a cognitive disposition of the soul characterized by wisdom. He further defines *habitus* in the theological sense as “cognition of God and things related to God, a cognition which in most treatments attends faith.” According to

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3. Farley, 35.
4. Ibid., 31.
many virtue ethicists, *habitus* is the way of life of a community constituted by its distinctive practices. I think that these conceptions of *habitus* are reconcilable, particularly with regard to theology and the practice of discernment. The “cognition of God and things related to God” that Farley describes attends the faith that is formed within the life of the Christian community, the church, and embodied by its practices. Such cognition is born in the faith that is embodied by the practices of a community; Christian wisdom is formed by and operates within a Christian *habitus*, that is, discipleship. In this sense, Christian discipleship is both a way of life characterized by its practices, and a way of being, a cognitive disposition, characterized by wisdom, that is, by discernment. In this way, *habitus* may be considered both a way of life that is embodied by practices within a community and a way of being, a disposition of heart and mind, characterized by a tradition-constituted wisdom (discernment) that is learned in community and through the practices of that community. In Benedict’s Rule, we find both a community’s way of life (its formative practices) and its way of being, its wisdom. This Benedictine Christian *habitus* characterizes both the community’s way of life and its wisdom, that which directs its decisions regarding practices and continuing community formation. On one hand, the Benedictine community and its way of life is formed through its meaning-making practices of work, prayer, hospitality, etc. This way of life characterizes its wisdom and its discernment—this is the sense in which I claimed in chapter two that practical wisdom is tradition-constituted. On the other hand, that discernment, that practical wisdom, 

exercised in community decision-making shapes, forms, and guides the community’s interpretation of new contexts and the practices within those new contexts. The desert elders’ interpretation of texts and of contexts displayed the same relationship; their experience and practice shaped their interpretation of Scripture, and Scripture grounded their practice and the interpretation of their experience in the desert. Discernment is a practice that *shapes and forms* Christian practices, community, and way of life in new contexts and *is shaped and formed by* the practices, the way of life, of the community and its living tradition. Practices shape, form, and embody particular ways of life; discernment, by attending, interpreting, and responding to the Holy Spirit as a kind of meta-practice, shapes the practices that embody and constitute a particular way of life. A process of discernment shapes practices by deciding what direction, form, and meaning a particular practice should take in a particular context. As a virtue, discernment (prudence, practical wisdom, or discretion) describes the habit or disposition of practicing discernment well. In other words, the wisdom that characterizes Christian *habitus*, and therefore Christian theology, is rooted in the wise practice of discernment. This dynamic holds for both academic theology and everyday theology⁶ in the Christian tradition.

Bridging the Gap between the Clerical and Academic Paradigms

The relationship described above among discernment, practices, *habitus*, wisdom and theology, because it holds for both academic and everyday practical theology, helps

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bridge the gap between the clerical and the academic paradigms. As the clerical paradigm was discussed in chapter two, I will focus here on the academic paradigm. Bonnie Miller-McLemore contends that many approaches to practical theology, in seeking to distance themselves from the clerical paradigm, have established an “academic paradigm” that is just as limiting for practical theology. Noting that just as Farley claims that within the clerical paradigm, theology is “something for the clergy alone,” Miller-McLemore claims that “one could easily argue, or perhaps should more accurately argue, that in the academic paradigm theology became something for the academy alone. Congregations avoid theology not because they see it as clerical, as he argues, but because they see it as intimidating and reserved for learned academic experts who have influenced clergy.”

Miller-McLemore argues that, in reaction to the clerical paradigm, many practical theologians have “inadvertently denigrated congregational and pastoral ‘know-how’” as mere technique, ministerial skill, or application.

Miller-McLemore wishes to reclaim the importance of know-how, skill, and practice (including clergy practice) in the study of practical theology, and particularly in theological education for both ministry students and doctoral students, who one day will be teaching

7. In the second chapter, I noted: Practical theology, therefore, consists in studying technique; it studies the application of theories already worked out in philosophical and historical theology. As such, practical theology in the academy tended toward the education of ministerial technique; just as there were professional schools for lawyers and medical doctors in the academy, there were divinity schools and seminaries for ministers. This “teleological unity” of theological study—the training of ministers—is what Edward Farley came to call the “clerical paradigm” of practical theology.


9. Ibid., 20.
future ministers. She reclaims the importance of know-how by drawing attention to the “interconnections between wisdom and know-how, interpretation and performance,” noting that “practice engenders thinking as much as thinking enriches practice.” Miller-McLemore’s emphasis on the relationship between interpretation and application here is very similar to the desert hermeneutic described in chapter three. She links this to Craig Dykstra’s notion of *habitus*: “For Dykstra, *habitus* moves away from technological and abstract knowledge toward knowledge gained in community, through history, as a result of concrete, complex, holistic engagement in Christian faith as a way of life.” Miller-McLemore argues for the importance of learning pastoral skills as part of theological knowing; she argues for the “need to learn more about how people embody knowledge and effect change. That is, we need to know more about the connections between knowledge, practice, action, application, and transformation.” Discernment is common to both everyday and academic theologizing; both involve critical theological interpretation of Christian practice, experience, and context toward the formation of faithful practices and practitioners. In this way, discernment, a practice shared by both practical theologians and faithful practitioners, bridges the practice of critical theological interpretation practiced in

10. Ibid., 36.

11. Ibid., 35.

12. That is, interpretation is shaped and formed by application; interpretation comes to completion only in application. The desert hermeneutic describes the desert elders’ approach to interpreting Scripture as putting Scripture into practice in their own particular contexts, thereby understanding and interpreting the text by living into it and letting the text shape and form their practices and ways of being in their own contexts.

13. Ibid., 29.

both the academy and the church. Discernment is practiced in both the academy and the church “for enabling the discourse of the text to continue in a new discourse.” The goal of practical theology, as has been stated many times in this dissertation, is the formation of faithful practices and practitioners. In light of this, practical theologians, including lay and ordained ministers, together with faithful practitioners, help to enable the Christian habitus to continue in new contexts by practicing discernment in the modes and contexts that are proper to academic or everyday theology: “Those who engage in everyday theology do not need the kind of systematically consistent construction of beliefs that academic theologians desire. A more systematic theological inquiry is only called for when their faith practices break down and generate problems.” Bonnie Miller-McLemore hopes for a time when we “no longer view thinking about faith critically and embodying it richly and effectively as mutually exclusive enterprises of knowledge and wisdom.” This dissertation, as a whole, argues that a reconciliation of these is present in the practice of discernment and its hermeneutic for practical theology—it is critical, theological, self-implicating, formative of faithful practice, and attentive to the action of the Holy Spirit.

15. Richard Osmer, likewise, has used the image of a bridge to describe “practical theological interpretation” in different modes: “(1) practical theological interpretation takes place in all the specialized subdisciplines of practical theology; (2) the same structure of practical theological interpretation in academic practical theology characterizes the interpretive tasks of congregational leaders as well; (3) acknowledging the common structure of practical theological interpretation in both the academy and ministry can help congregational leaders recognize the interconnectedness of ministry.” Osmer, Practical Theology, 12.


18. Ibid. (emphasis original).
Discernment and Practical Theology as Christian Sociology

The tasks of practical theology, which generally proceed from the description of a practice and its context through critical theological reflection to the transformation of that practice, typically include empirical, descriptive, interpretive, historical, systematic, normative, pragmatic, and strategic tasks.\(^{19}\) The practice of discernment, as described in the previous chapter, is also a practical-theological hermeneutical circle, in that it includes critical theological description and interpretation of a present context, normative reflection on faithful practice in the present context, and strategic reflection on the transformation of practice. Such movements are recognizable in Ignatius’ rules (or “points”) for the discernment of spirits and the making of a sound election. While I will draw out the specific connections between these processes of practical-theological interpretation and a practical-theological hermeneutic of discernment later in this chapter, I first must discuss how the movements of a hermeneutic of discernment relate to the tasks and telos of practical theology.

Owing to its inclusion of description and interpretation of practices in context and normative reflection on practices, a hermeneutic of discernment within practical theology may respond to John Milbank’s call for a “Christian sociology.” Milbank claims that “all theology has to reconceive itself as a kind of ‘Christian sociology,’” and describes it “as the

\(^{19}\) These terms come specifically from Browning and Osmer, but as noted in the second chapter, the practice-theory-practice model of a hermeneutical circle remains the general approach of most practical theologians in the American context. For instance, Thomas Groome provides five “movements” for his “Shared Christian Praxis”: “naming/expressing ‘present action’” (descriptive/empirical), “critical reflection on present action” (interpretive), “making accessible Christian story and vision” (historical), “dialectical hermeneutic to appropriate Christian story/vision to participants’ stories and visions” (systematic/normative), and “decision/response for lived Christian faith” (strategic/pragmatic).
explication of a socio-linguistic practice, or as the constant re-narration of this practice as it has historically developed.” He continues to note: “The task of such a theology is not apologetic, nor even argument. Rather it is to tell again the Christian mythos, pronounce again the Christian logos, and call again for Christian praxis in a manner that restores their freshness and originality. It must articulate Christian difference in such a fashion as to make it strange.”20 Such an assertion is made along the same lines as my description of practical wisdom throughout the present dissertation, that is, Milbank argues that social theory is tradition-constituted. Milbank summarizes it thusly: “there can be no sociology in the sense of a universal ‘rational’ account of the ‘social’ character of all societies, and Christian sociology is distinctive simply because it explicates, and adopts the vantage point of, a distinct society, the Church.”21 I contend that practical theology, guided by a hermeneutic of discernment, may function as the kind of Christian sociology described here by Milbank. The practice of discernment analyzes and interprets present practices and contexts of the church and the world in light of Christian habitus and the actions and promptings of the Holy Spirit, by which Christians come to know and respond to the vision and will of God. In this sense, a hermeneutic of discernment is an “explication of a socio-linguistic practice,” that directs a “re-narration of this practice” in new contexts, and therefore, it is a way of interpreting contexts and responding to them with distinctive Christian practice that is faithful to the vision of God known in Christ through the Holy


21. Ibid. Fergus Kerr wrote that Milbank’s thesis was “simplicity itself” in arguing that there is no need to bring social theory and theology together since social theory is implicitly theology and theology is implicitly social theory. See Fergus Kerr, “Simplicity Itself: Milbank’s Thesis” New Blackfriars 73 (1992).
Spirit. As was shown in the previous chapter regarding Ignatius, discernment requires the examination of a particular life context of a person or community and the spiritual-theological interpretation of that context, along with the affective thoughts, actions, and feelings operating within that context. Then, an appropriate interpretation of the movement of the Spirit (and movements against the Spirit) and the vision of God for that community or person in that context can be discerned and practices that are faithful to that vision can be formed. The cycle of the hermeneutic of discernment continues as the person or community enters into new contexts and the “socio-linguistic” practice of the church can be re-narrated and performed as the living tradition of the church continues to take shape.

As such, a hermeneutic of discernment within practical theology is very similar in telos and task to “canonical narrative theology,” defined below:

The theological task is to discern how contemporary experience can be interpreted through the story that the Church tells about Jesus and to identify forms of practice that are coherent with this narrative. This method does not establish abstract rules or principles to guide the reflective process. Rather it invites the Christian to develop a habitus, or way of life, through which the story of Jesus continues to be told in the life of the story-shaped community of the Church.22

In the later section on method in this chapter, I will offer some principles, drawn from the previous chapter’s discussion of discernment, for guiding such a reflective process. At this point, however, it is enough to point out the importance of narrative, community, habitus, and practice for both “canonical narrative theology” and a hermeneutic of discernment. Such is because both the theological reflection defined above as “canonical narrative theology” and that mode of knowing and interpreting that I have named a “hermeneutic of

discernment” consider theological reflection as developed within the \textit{habitus} of the “distinct society”\textsuperscript{23} of the church. The affirmation of this “distinct society” is theologically important, so as to avoid allowing Christian life and identity to be too far removed from the communities and the traditions of practice that embody this identity.\textsuperscript{24}

Kathryn Tanner, and others, raise an important critique of this account of Christian identity in social terms, noting namely that the postliberal view of Christian identity being rooted in a “distinct society” depends upon a Christian way of life “being self-contained and self-originating.”\textsuperscript{25} Tanner argues to the contrary that social identity is more complex and fluid, as it is always developed in relationship with other societies and social realities: “Other cultures provide the materials to be viewed through a Christian lens or cultural framework. What Christians see through that lens or in terms of that framework is therefore composite. Even basic Christian doctrines are always reformulated in new terms

\textsuperscript{23} Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, 381. Note also, as related earlier, Farley’s (1983) depiction of theology (as \textit{habitus}) as a cognition that attends faith, and Cahalan and Nieman’s (2008) description of practical theology as “a distinctly theological discourse narrated in and native to the Christian community” (68). They go on to write, similar to my assertions regarding discernment, “On the one hand, that discourse is grounded and tested in relation to the wisdom of Christian tradition. On the other hand, this witness cannot simply repeat the wisdom of another time or place...” (68). A hermeneutic of discernment is the process of re-narration of the Christian \textit{habitus} in new contexts through critical, faithful theological reflection on Christian praxis in light of the action of the Holy Spirit.

\textsuperscript{24} There are other important theological reasons for considering the church as a people, or a body politic, such as its connection to the people of Israel and its missionary character. See George Lindbeck and James Buckley \textit{The Church in a Postliberal Age} (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003); Stanley Hauerwas, \textit{In Good Company: The Church As Polis} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); and Lesslie Newbigin, \textit{The Gospel in a Pluralist Society} (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989).

\textsuperscript{25} Tanner, 104. See also James M. Gustafson, “The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church, and the University” in \textit{Moral Discernment in the Christian Life: Essays in Theological Ethics}. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).
to reflect the changing cultural scene of the wider society.”

In light of Tanner’s arguments, I would contend instead that the church’s identity itself is predicated on a self-understanding as a “distinct society” or people. Furthermore, I do not wish to argue that Christian identity is “properly maintained by avoiding the influences and alterations that might accrue to it by way of intimate involvement with other ways of doing, feeling, and understanding,” but rather that the practice of discernment seeks to discover the action of the Holy Spirit, or spirits opposed to the Gospel, whether found in the church or the world. Forms of Christian habitus may appear very different in different societies or in relationship to different cultures. Responses to the action of the spirit resulting from a process of discernment (whether over the course of days or years) may be as varied as the contexts within which the discernment is practiced. Nevertheless, there are spirits and institutions that can and should be discerned as contrary to the Gospel. In these circumstances the church is called to bear witness to its own socio-linguistic practice and

26. Ibid., 105.

27. In other words, the church is called (in scripture) to understand itself as a people or a society. Hauerwas and Lindbeck present a theological argument in the works cited above against the possibility of an “invisible” church that is not rooted in an actual social body. See also: “Members of the Church... on the whole remained in their existing political communities and must therefore have regarded the Church as simply a spiritual association of souls” (Milbank, 399).

28. Tanner 104.

29. See Poling and Miller, 59: “Local Christian communities are called faithfully to express the historical confession in their shared life whether or not the transformation of society is immediately evident. In some historical periods, church communities and the larger society will be engaged in meaningful dialogue and some transformation of each will result. In other historical periods, the practice of local communities of faith will be ignored, trivialized, or even persecuted. While transformation of society is the hope and mission of the church... the center of community life is faithfulness to the confession in actual practice.” Also, see Christian Scharen, “Judicious Narratives’, or Ethnography As Ecclesiology” Scottish Journal of Theology 58, no. 2 (2005), 133: “These two, kinds of faithfulness and kinds of tensions, usually share an elective affinity with the social characteristics of a congregation’s membership. Therefore, seeing how a church is both in and of the world helps with the very particular tasks of being a church in but not of the world.”
traditions in discerning its response, not in the interest of making transformation of society immediately evident, but out of concern for faithful witness to the God known in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Discernment has the task of reading and responding to contexts theologically by attending to the action of the Holy Spirit. The action of the Spirit provides a particular dimension of the social existence of the church that cannot be explained through a “universal, rational account” of social theory, but only through a particular theological, socio-linguistic account of the church’s social existence. While Christians can be certain that the Spirit acts in both the church and the world, how to discern and recognize the Spirit acting in the world is only learned in the church. Such is the reason for the centrality of discernment in Christian life and thought. The plurality of Christian communities, contexts, and traditions that form and embody Christian tradition through succeeding generations requires the practice of discernment for recounting, recalling, and examining the historical and contemporary “judicious narratives of ecclesial happenings which would alone indicate the shape of the church that we desire.”

This is also the reason for the importance of description and interpretation of context in theological reflection. As I reiterate and expound upon throughout this chapter, central to the practice of discernment is the reading of historical and contemporary contexts and the reading of historical and contemporary narratives. As I argued in the previous chapter, a discernment must always be made by attending to the course of the life of a particular person or community.

The Tasks of Discernment in Practical Theology

In the previous chapter, I asserted that the understanding of discernment, in desert monastic spirituality, as both a practice and a virtue opened up intriguing possibilities for practical theological hermeneutics. While I will discuss points of contemporary method later in the present chapter, I will elaborate here on the significance of this assertion. Discernment is not merely a method of inquiry, but a virtue embodied by Christian communities. This then shapes the content of the tasks of practical theology in the Christian tradition.

We call persons “wise” or “discerning” when they practice discernment well and faithfully, and have developed, through grace and the habitual experience of good practice, the virtue of discernment. Such was the description offered in the previous chapter regarding discernment, wisdom, and the authority to interpret Scripture in the desert. The wise elder was one who, through prayerful experience of the desert monastic life and “living into” the world of Scripture, was acknowledged as one who could faithfully interpret Scripture and particular contemporary contexts, and therefore was sought out for a “word of salvation.” Discernment is a virtue developed through formation into a habitus, a way of life that in the Christian tradition is embodied by the practices of the church.31 The virtue, and the practice, of discernment is inseparable from the narrative, community, habitus, and tradition that constitute its very meaning and function. This was evidenced in the previous chapter concerning Benedict’s Rule. In the Rule, the monastic community’s practices,

31. As noted in other chapters, for reflection on distinct practices of the church see: Bass, op. cit.; Volf and Bass, op. cit.; Murphy, op cit.
which embody the narrative of the Gospel, are formative of discernment and the attitudes, such as humility, that Benedict highlights as essential for the formation of discernment. In this way, discernment is a social, as well as a personal, virtue:

The related terms ‘discretion’, ‘discrete’, ‘discernment’ are connected with a field of notions like ‘judgement’, ‘decision’, ‘reasonableness’, ‘wisdom’, ‘prudence’, ‘modesty’, ‘gentleness’, acting ‘without noise’. It will be clear that this field of notions is lying within the domain of personal and social practice. It is the domain in which we come to judgment and decision, connected with the attitudes that can play a positive role in these processes.\textsuperscript{32}

In addition to being a virtue embodied by Christian communities, discernment is a method of inquiry. In this respect, it is engaged in by both persons and communities in discovering the vision of God and the action of the Holy Spirit within a particular context. Although discernment is a virtue shaped within Christian communities and their practices, discernment is a practice, as evidenced in the previous chapter regarding Ignatius, that may have particular methods and principles through which it is practiced. Ignatian rules and principles regarding the discernment of spirits and the discernment of God’s will are ultimately rooted in the narrative, habitus, and tradition of the Christian church, and from that flows its “first principle and foundation.” As shown in the previous chapter, Ignatian discernment includes a series of reflective tasks regarding the investigation of the action of the Holy Spirit and the vision of God relating to a person’s or community’s own context within the Christian church. These tasks of Ignatian discernment are similar to the tasks of practical theology: investigation of a life context, interpretation of the context (in light of the movement of the Holy Spirit and other spirits), normative reflection on the vision of

God for faithful practice, and the strategic formation and re-formation of practices.\textsuperscript{33} For a hermeneutic of discernment in practical theology, virtue and method are inseparable: the method by which one goes about interpreting situations and contexts is shaped by the virtue, and therefore the narrative, \textit{habitus}, and tradition of the church, of wise and faithful interpreting and decision-making. I contend, therefore, that discernment is not only involved in the normative task of practical theology, but in the descriptive, interpretive, and pragmatic tasks as well. Recently, Bonnie Miller-McLemore has highlighted the importance of normativity and construction for distinctively theological reflection in all practical theological tasks:

Research in practical theology often follows a pattern latent in case study: we tack theology on at the end. Theology appears as the final step in case analysis. We hesitate to move beyond objective, empirical, fact-finding research to theological insight and disclosure... Less clear is how our descriptive and interpretative work is theological from the beginning, how what we see and describe is shaped by specific confessional sensitivities and religious context. Moreover, description is only the first step in the hermeneutical circle that contributed to practical theology’s revitalization. Description and interpretation by themselves are insufficient. Practical theology’s objective is both to understand \textit{and} to influence religious wisdom in congregations and public life more generally. Many would argue that practical theology is, in fact, not complete without a move from description to normative construction and action.\textsuperscript{34}

A hermeneutic of discernment can play a central role in synthesizing these tasks (descriptive, interpretative, normative, constructive) and in bridging the contexts of academy, church, and public life in the work of practical theology.

\textsuperscript{33} These practical-theological tasks will be addressed in more detail further in this chapter in the section regarding the method of discernment in practical theology. Specifically, I will investigate Osmer’s tasks of practical theology and Browning’s movements of fundamental practical theology.

Ultimately for practical theology in the Christian tradition, normative and constructive reflection on practices and their contexts must confront pneumatological questions.\textsuperscript{35} The action, movement, and prompting of the Holy Spirit must be discerned within the descriptive, interpretive, normative, and constructive tasks of a practical theological study. Wolfteich’s article on the “partner disciplines” of spirituality and practical theology expresses the importance of pneumatological questions for the study of practical theology:

The question ‘How should we act?’ cannot be separated from the questions ‘How is the Spirit acting in this context?’ ‘How is the Spirit acting in us’ and ‘How can we discern or come to perceive how God’s Spirit is guiding us to act?’ Thus, questions of how we understand the Spirit and spirituality are not relevant to practical theologians only if they study spirituality. Instead, such questions are highly relevant to any research project that concerns religious practice.\textsuperscript{36}

As Heitink notes, the connection between divine and human reality at the experiential level is an unavoidable concern for practical theology and “theological theory of action”: “The church with all its members participates in the gifts of the Spirit, to be equipped for its mission in this world (1 Cor. 12:4ff.). The Spirit leads the church toward the truth (John 16:13) and convinces the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8, 11). These presuppositions are basic for the faith of the Christian church.”\textsuperscript{37} This is not to say that the Spirit does not work in the world, but that it is within the church—its narrative, \textit{habitus}, and tradition of practice—that the Christian person and community comes to learn how to

\textsuperscript{35} See Heitink, 193 and Wolfteich, 127.

\textsuperscript{36} Wolfteich, 127.

\textsuperscript{37} Heitink, 193-194.
discern the action of the Spirit. This discernment is akin to practical wisdom, which was discussed in chapter two, and to which I now return.

Practical Wisdom Revisited

Spiritual formation in Christian communities for faithful discernment and wise understanding of the contexts of the church and the world is rooted in the narrative-shaped practices of the church. Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s insight into the epistemological consequences of faithful practice is significant for understanding practical wisdom and practical theology in the Christian tradition:

Unthinking dismissal of learning a craft as “mere know-how,” as if such know-how is easy to master, overlooks its role in the greater pursuit of ministerial wisdom. Famous musicians do not cease doing scales. Learning to play an instrument requires a finely tuned dialectic between daily exercise and artistry. So techne has a place. In addition, phronesis requires embodiment and community. We can only understand this knowledge, as Bourdieu suggests, by gaining greater understanding of how our bodies and social milieu form our knowing—habitus in a much more concrete, grounded, particular, embodied, and relational framework than the more cerebral use of the term by Farley and others. ... Thus, we need to quit insisting our discipline does not apply truths and determine what is involved in application. Repeatedly Browning paraphrased Richard Bernstein and Hans-Georg Gadamer to argue that in the practical wisdom necessary for ministry, “understanding, interpretation, and application are not distinct but intimately related.”38

Miller-McLemore rightly highlights the central importance of embodied practice and habitus in the formation of phronesis. As was seen in both the desert hermeneutic and the Benedictine community, practical wisdom is formed within a community of practice—its narrative, habitus, and tradition. Wise and faithful practice became a way of knowing God

and living the Gospel in the contemporary context. As Miller-McLemore notes, application and embodiment are intimately related with understanding, interpretation, and knowledge. I contend that “gaining greater understanding of how our bodies and social milieu form our knowing,” “embodiment,” and “application” in Christian theology (academic and everyday) all require the practice of discernment. Miller-McLemore’s claim that “our discipline” (practical theology) needs to “determine what is involved in application” speaks directly to the importance of the practice of discernment and a hermeneutic of discernment within practical theology, for as was seen in chapter three, discernment reflects on and guides application.

Developing a hermeneutic of discernment for practical theology is an apt response to Miller-McLemore’s concerns expressed above regarding phronesis, embodiment, habitus, application, and understanding. Discernment, as has been shown, takes account of affectivity, embodiment, and social context (Ignatius) and grounds understanding in habitus and application (Benedict and the desert elders). Discernment is an embodied knowledge, proper to understanding and interpreting Christian life and practice, and as such, it is a kind of phronesis. As a virtue, practical wisdom is formed according to the narratives and practices embodied by a community. A method for applying practical wisdom in a particular situation is derivative of the habitus of the community within which practical wisdom is formed. In Christianity, this community is the church. Like discernment, the status of practical wisdom as virtue with a consequent way of knowing, or hermeneutic, demands that practical wisdom as virtue not be separated from hermeneutic methods based in practical wisdom. In other words, virtue and method cannot be
separated when discussing practical wisdom—the method of inquiry is derivative of the virtue, defined by the *habitus* of the community and its tradition-constituted practices.

Browning’s *Fundamental Practical Theology* provides an example of treating *phronesis* as method (practical reasoning) without enough regard for *phronesis* as tradition-constituted virtue.39 Chapter two argued that such an understanding of practical wisdom in practical theology ends up essentially viewing *phronesis* as a function of Enlightenment-era “reason”: an "objective" fusion of narratives and norms from historical tradition and narratives and norms of contemporary experience that somehow operates beyond traditions, and is in some way universally accessible. Discernment, as discussed in this dissertation, presents a different kind of hermeneutic and a different kind of fusion of narratives, norms, contexts, and experience. Furthermore, as argued in chapter two, any understanding of practical wisdom in practical theology that views *phronesis* (contrary to my own and Browning’s positions) as so contingent and provisional as to obviate the normative significance of tradition outright in questions of the faithfulness of contemporary practice is in error as well.40 The practice of discernment, as described in chapter three, navigates the

39. As argued in chapter two of this dissertation, Browning’s presentation of practical reasoning with an "outer envelope" and an “inner core” does not give enough emphasis to the social embodiment of *phronesis* as a tradition-constituted virtue formed and developed by the narrative and practice of a community. There can be no “objective” *phronesis* because the meanings and norms that it navigates in present situations make no sense outside of a particular narrative, tradition, and *habitus*. MacIntyre appears to agree, describing *phronesis* as a “capacity for judgment which the agent possesses in knowing how to select among the relevant stack of maxims and how to apply them in particular situations.” MacIntyre, 223, and noting also that “the individual’s search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual’s life is a part.” MacIntyre, 222. A “relevant stack of maxims” only exists as part of a particular narrative, *habitus*, and tradition of practice.

40. Nussbaum appears to agree on this point: “Aristotelian practical wisdom is not a type of rootless situational perception that rejects all guidance from ongoing commitments and values.” *Fragility of Goodness*, 306.
importance of historical practice, contemporary experience, and how both of these together may reveal the movement of the Holy Spirit. Discernment investigates and interprets contemporary experience according to what can be known about the Holy Spirit’s action through the narrative, practices, *habitus*, and living tradition of the Christian church.  

In the Christian tradition, the action of the Holy Spirit is central to understanding practical wisdom. Therefore, discussion of practical wisdom in practical theological hermeneutics is incomplete without reflection on the practice of discernment of spirits. Continuing in the vein of Wolfteich’s and Heitink’s assertions that pneumatological concerns are central to reflection on Christian practice, this dissertation asserts that the practice of discernment, and its hermeneutical framework, is the expression of practical wisdom in the Christian tradition. Heitink notes that “The work of the Spirit cannot be put in a framework of method, but it is possible to give room to the kind of communicative action that allows for a listening attitude, in mutual openness and receptivity.”  

This is precisely the work of discernment described in chapter three—reflection on the vision of God through openness to the action of the Holy Spirit. An effective “framework of method,” however, can be found in the hermeneutic of discernment described in the previous chapter and in this present chapter. A “listening attitude,” “mutual openness,” and “receptivity” are formed and directed by elements of desert, Benedictine, and Ignatian

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41. Note here the emphasis on “living tradition,” as was described in chapter three: “the tradition of the church (as it comes to discern the Christian gospel in each generation) is normative *while in process* for the correlation of historical practice and contemporary practice and context.”

42. Heitink, 194.
approaches to discernment. For instance, openness to the Holy Spirit, and the will to follow the Spirit’s direction, is developed through the interpretive process of Ignatian discernment, especially in the critical reflection it gives to the causation (spiritual and non-spiritual) of movements (of thoughts, affective feelings, and affective acts), consolation and desolation, and the life direction and context of persons and communities. Ignatius constantly stresses the possibility of deception and a spirit contrary to the Holy Spirit coming as an “angel of light,” and thus a method of interpretation, a hermeneutic of discernment, is necessary for openness, receptivity, and adherence to the actions and promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Though conceptions of divine-human relationship through the Holy Spirit differ in various Christian spiritual traditions, it must be emphasized that the practice of discernment is necessary for exploring this relationship in particular contexts. Heitink wisely notes that approaches to the work of the Spirit “point to differences in spirituality”:

> Connecting the Spirit more closely with certain elements of the *ordo salutis* (rebirth, conversion) leads to a more dualistic concept with a greater emphasis on dependency. A sacramental view of the work of the Spirit results in an approach to the pastoral praxis that is primarily based on the ordination to the priesthood and a sacramental mediation of salvation. A charismatic approach usually leads to an enthusiastic, active praxis, with more emphasis on witness than on reflection.43

Different Christian spiritual traditions surely have different emphases regarding the work of the Spirit, however, regardless of emphasis the practice of discernment, both as virtue and hermeneutic, is necessary for understanding the work of the Spirit in a particular context. As with the Benedictine model wherein discernment is the responsibility of the

43. Ibid.
whole community including the youngest, so also with discernment in practical theology, which requires the recovery of contemporary and historical marginalized and forgotten narratives.44 Furthermore, a hermeneutic of discernment must be cognizant of the diversity of Christian traditions alive today within the church. Nevertheless, regardless of a particular Christian tradition’s understanding of the work of the Spirit, such as described above by Heitink, the example of discernment provided by the desert elders’ and Benedict’s emphasis on context, narrative, *habitus*, and faithful practice is significant for understanding the *practices* of conversion, sacraments, pastoral praxis, or any practices among the diversity of Christian traditions. Furthermore, Ignatius’ teaching on “consolation without previous cause” is central to discerning experiences of the Spirit. A person’s or community’s experience of the Spirit must be discerned as to whether it is what Ignatius labeled a “first time” experience or not: “the first-time experience, even with its spontaneous certainty of what God wills, is only data for a discernment by critical reflection on it. By such reflection, the person who has the experience can arrive at a critically validated reflective certainty or a critically justified doubt about the unreflective certainty.”45 If the experience is not discerned to be a “first time” experience, then one must enter into a discernment of spirits in order to discover the source and motivation of the spiritual experience. In other words, the critically reflective practice of discernment is central to understanding the work of the Holy Spirit regardless of the particular emphasis

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44. As noted in chapter three regarding tradition: We “are negligent, however, to the degree that we fail to foster the forgotten stories in the tradition,” and thus “we must constantly turn back to the sources of our common heritage both for admonition and for instruction.” Cunningham, 176.

of a Christian spiritual tradition—conversion, sacraments, pastoral praxis, and charismatic experience are all part of the Christian Gospel narrative and broader tradition, and practices that embody this narrative and tradition require the critical and faithful practice of discernment. As described thus far in this chapter, the practice of discernment, and its hermeneutic, may play a significant role in the interpretation of contexts and experiences and in the formation of faithful practice that is the goal of practical theology in the Christian tradition. This hermeneutic of discernment is akin to practical wisdom, such that the practice of discernment is the exercise of practical wisdom in the Christian tradition.

**Discernment and Method in Practical Theology**

Since pneumatological questions are significant for practical theological study and practical wisdom has been shown to be an embodied wisdom defined in the Christian tradition as discernment, a hermeneutic of discernment is significant for practical theological study. Richard Osmer has argued similarly: “The normative task of practical theological interpretation is grounded in the spirituality and practice of discernment... Practices of discernment, thus, are crucial to the work of the interpretive guide. They provide a point of connection between God’s Word of judgment and grace in Christ Jesus and the specific social conditions, events, and decisions for which congregational leaders provide normative guidance day by day.”  

In light of Miller-McLemore’s suggestion that normative theological reflection not be “tacked on at the end,” a hermeneutic of discernment should include spiritual, theological reflection in the descriptive-empirical,
interpretive, and pragmatic tasks of practical theology as well. Discernment, especially
discernment of spirits, is not only a matter for the normative movement or task of practical
theology, but is especially significant for the descriptive and interpretive movements or
tasks of practical theology.

Mark McIntosh provides a “dynamic pattern” of discernment that includes
“moments or aspects” of discernment that will help guide my description of a hermeneutic
of discernment for practical theology.47 McIntosh finds that a pattern of discernment
allows for a holistic presentation of discernment, which he describes as “an organic rhythm
of integrally related moments.”48 McIntosh notes that this is not found in most treatments
of the practice of discernment: “Almost all standard readings of the history and theology of
spiritual discernment deal with a series of discrete functions. I have instead tried to see the
links between each of these as well as to uncover their spiritual trajectory, so to speak,
backward and forward into God.”49 Many presentations of practical theological method
themselves appear to treat the practical theological process of reflection as a “series of
discrete functions” as well.50 The five movements of McIntosh’s pattern of discernment

47. McIntosh, 5 and 6.
48. Ibid., 6.
49. Ibid.
50. For example, see any presentation of practical theological method that includes a process
described in various steps. Much of these are derivative of a general hermeneutical process moving from
description to pragmatic application and around again, but the difficulty always lies in integrating all the
steps into a unified purpose of theological reflection. Such may be the reason why Miller-McLemore found it
imperative to remind the practical theological academy that it is a misunderstanding to think that “practical
theology is largely, if not wholly, descriptive, empirical, interpretative, and not normative, theological, and in
some cases (dare I say) Christian.” In this way, it appears that in practical theological method there is a
persistent temptation to miss the forest for the trees, to become mired in empirical and interpretive social
study and slight normative, theological, critically faithful reflection.
are: (1) “Discernment as faith: spiritual discernment as grounded in a loving and trusting relationship with God”; (2) “Discernment as distinguishing between good and evil impulses that move people”; (3) “Discernment as discretion, practical wisdom, moderation, and generally good sense about what to do in given practical situations”; (4) “Discernment as sensitivity to and desire to pursue God’s will in all things”; and (5) “Discernment as illumination, contemplative wisdom, a noetic relationship with God that irradiates and facilitates knowledge of every kind of truth.”51 This integrated understanding of discernment as a pattern or process that includes these moments is significant for understanding how discernment can deepen practical-theological method. In light of practical theology, Christian discernment includes (1) foundation in Christian faith and habitus, (2) discernment of spirits in the interpretation of life contexts and interior dispositions, (3) discretion and practical wisdom, (4) desire to pursue God’s broader will and vision in particular situations, and (5) illumination and participation in God’s saving action as its telos. A Practical theology that takes seriously the actions of the Holy Spirit and the process of discernment ought to integrate the above aspects into its hermeneutic. For a hermeneutic of discernment, faith and Christian habitus is the foundation of practical theology, discernment of spirits is central to its description of practices and contexts, practical wisdom in the Christian tradition is its guiding epistemology, desire to embody God’s vision for the church and the world is its motivation, and illumination and participation in God’s saving action is its ultimate telos.

51. McIntosh, 5 (emphasis original).
The five aspects of discernment noted above are characteristic of a hermeneutic of discernment for practical theology and are readily recognizable in the three traditions of discernment described in the previous chapter. Christian *habitus* was at the heart of the desert elders’ interpretation Scripture through living into and practicing the word, thereby developing wisdom for interpreting new situations through such interaction with Scripture. Christian faith and the particular *habitus* of a monastic lifestyle were foundational for Benedict’s approach to discernment and formation of practice in community. The “Principle and Foundation” of Ignatian discernment is grounded in faith in God, known through Christ in the Holy Spirit. Discernment of spirits and the ways in which different spirits affect one’s interior disposition in particular contexts was a necessary part of Ignatian discernment of God’s will and the making of an election. As described in chapter three, practical wisdom was central to the epistemology of all three traditions—each tradition described the way of knowledge in determining God’s vision and developing practices faithful to that vision as an interaction between narrative, *habitus*, practice, context, and reflection. Foundational for these traditions and their approaches to knowledge and discernment was a firm desire to know, love, and follow God, whether described as “becoming all flame” by Abba Joseph, or as the “good zeal” of monks by Benedict, or as the “greater glory of God” by Ignatius. As I noted at the end of the previous chapter, the intimacy and depth of one’s love for God that is formed by faithful practices characterizes the heart of discernment. Finally, the three traditions described earlier strive to form lives and practices that participate in the saving action of God, that in the words of Benedict, God might “bring us all together to everlasting life.”
Following Miller-McLemore’s argument noted above regarding the normative nature of practical theology and that “what we see and describe is shaped by specific confessional sensitivities and religious context,” this dissertation asserts that practical theology, in its study of practices and their contexts, should attempt to discern the action of the Holy Spirit not only in its normative task, but in its descriptive and interpretive tasks as well, paying careful attention to the implicit norms and “spirits” imbedded in description and interpretation. In this way, theological reflection may remain at the heart of practical theological study, and not as something “tacked on,” as Miller-McLemore says, at the end. A hermeneutic of discernment is similar in this sense to the hermeneutic proposed by John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, wherein theology is given logical priority over the social sciences within practical theological study. A hermeneutic of discernment finds great importance in the use of the social sciences for describing the context of a practice, but the interpretation of that context must involve discernment of spirits and the Spirit as central to understanding how the church might faithfully respond to that context and form its practices within particular situations. In this way, theology is not left to the final turns of the hermeneutic circle, but is integrated throughout the process.

52. Within the practical theological process of correlating evidence drawn from the social sciences and theological reflection, Swinton and Mowat question whether “it is theologically appropriate to give all of the dialogue partners equal weighting within the research process” (83). They conclude that theology has logical priority over the social sciences within practical theological study: “Within the process of practical-theological research, qualitative research data does acquire its significance from theology. Theology’s significance is therefore logically prior to and independent of qualitative research data... although qualitative research data is both logically independent of and dependent on theological categories in different ways, theological categories are by definition both logically prior to and independent of psychological categories with respect to their significance” (87). Nevertheless, theological reflection and “the perspective of critical faithfulness” only comes in to play in the third step (out of four) in their description of practical theological reflection (95); a hermeneutic of discernment seeks to reflect critically and faithfully on the actions of the Spirit and spirits within a description and interpretation of a present context, alongside empirical research data.
Descriptive and Interpretive Tasks in a Hermeneutic of Discernment

Richard Osmer presents an explanation of the core tasks of practical theology that include: descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic. This present section and the next will discuss how a hermeneutic of discernment may be integrated into those tasks and what it adds to those tasks for practical theological study. The use of “tasks” as a description of practical theological interpretation may offer a more unified picture of practical theological interpretation than a traditional hermeneutical circle of distinct functions or phases, particularly since normative and confessional concerns are operational from the beginning of practical theological interpretation within a hermeneutic of discernment, rather than being “tacked on” at the end. While some practical theologians might argue that this is indeed the case, it is not always clear in the appropriation of their methods of inquiry. Osmer defines the descriptive-empirical task as “Gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts.” Osmer likens this task to a spirituality of presence and “priestly listening” situated in a continuum of formal and informal attending.

Formal attending in practical theological research is drawn from the methods of social science research and may involve quantitative and qualitative research methods for

53. Osmer, 4.
54. Miller-McLemore, “Five Misunderstandings,” 24: “Less clear is how our descriptive and interpretative work is theological from the beginning, how what we see and describe is shaped by specific confessional sensitivities and religious context.”
55. Osmer, 4.
56. Ibid., 33-39.
developing a picture of a context or situation, forming a research plan, and forming research questions.\textsuperscript{57} The empirical-descriptive task may be compared to “descriptive theology” within Browning’s hermeneutic of mutual critical correlation wherein, as noted in chapter two of this dissertation, a “thick description” using various social sciences accounts for a “horizon analysis” that describes “the horizon of cultural and religious meanings that surround our religious and secular practices,” and “Social-systemic, material, and psychological determinants are traced and explained as well as possible.”\textsuperscript{58}

The spirituality of presence and priestly listening situated in a continuum of formal and informal attending that Osmer describes is not foreign to the practice of discernment described in chapter three. Osmer’s spirituality of presence that grounds “investigating the circumstances and cultural contexts of others in more formal and systematic ways”\textsuperscript{59} ultimately depends on “the communion-creating presence of the Holy Spirit.”\textsuperscript{60} Ignatian discernment, as described in the previous chapter, requires investigation of the circumstances and contexts of persons and communities involved in decisions about the faithfulness of present praxis. Following Benedict’s admonition that all in the community be heard from, particularly the youngest, central to an investigation of these circumstances and contexts within a hermeneutic of discernment is listening to and including especially

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[57]{Ibid., 49-53. For more on qualitative research as part of practical theological reflection, see Swinton and Mowat 28-72; also the authors note that the first stage of practical theological reflection “is an attempt to make some initial sense of what is going on, why things are structured in the ways that they are and why people function in particular ways” (94).}
\footnotetext[58]{Browning, \textit{Fundamental Practical Theology}, 47 and 48. Note that Browning’s “descriptive theology” includes both the descriptive-empirical task and the interpretive task of Osmer’s formulation.}
\footnotetext[59]{Osmer, 37.}
\footnotetext[60]{Ibid., 34.}
\end{footnotes}
the narratives of marginalized persons within the community. In order to interpret how the Holy Spirit might be acting in a particular situation, a person or community must first observe and describe the affective thoughts, feelings, and actions surrounding a context. In this way, one might begin to distinguish between spiritual and non-spiritual causes of consolation and desolation. Prior to discerning the action and prompting of the Holy Spirit, a person or community must observe and describe the “life direction” of the person or community, in order to interpret how a spirit might be acting through the affective movements of the person or community: recall that Ignatius “begins his first set of principles to guide discernment with a sage admonition: attend to the context of a spiritual sign with a person’s life direction.” The gathering of such information is crucial both for the discernment of spirits and the making of an election. Description of affective thoughts, feelings, and actions and of the stable life direction of a person or community along with the qualitative research described by Osmer creates both a social-scientific description of the context and prepares a theological-spiritual interpretation of the context according to the actions of the Holy Spirit or other spirits. A hermeneutic of discernment in any practical theological study should engage the kinds of description noted above.

Central to Ignatius’ discernment of the action of the Holy Spirit and of God’s will is the recognition and interpretation of movements or impulses that draw persons or communities toward God and the recognition of movements or impulses that draw persons or communities away from God. If reflection on the action of the Holy Spirit is considered

62. McIntosh, 92.
highly significant for practical theological study, this discernment must be taken into account as part of the interpretive task of practical theological reflection. Osmer defines the interpretive task of practical theological interpretation as “Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring.”63 The main focus of the interpretive task or movement in practical theological reflection is the use of social and aesthetic sciences for investigating the meanings and causes underlying a particular context and practice. Browning’s hermeneutic within “descriptive theology” focuses on the visual (narrative), obligational (moral), tendency-need (premoral goods understood through psychology, sociology, etc.), environmental, and rule-role dimensions of meaning, making use of psychology and philosophy in particular.64 Liberation approaches to practical theological reflection employ Marxist or Feminist interpretations of the dynamics and underlying causes of a particular situation. A hermeneutic of discernment offers another dimension of interpretation for the underlying meanings and causes within a particular situation; it offers a theological-spiritual interpretation of the action of the Spirit (and spirits) within the situation. Note that in McIntosh’s depiction of a “pattern of discernment,” the interpretation of the movements of various good and evil spirits is crucial for faithfully participating in God’s redemptive action. This does not obviate the use of social sciences in the “thick description” of a situation or a context of practice, but it rightly keeps normative theological considerations

63. Osmer, 4. Swinton and Mowat similarly describe the second stage of practical theological reflection: “Here we begin to deepen our initial reflections by entering into dialogue with other sources of knowledge which will help us develop a deeper understanding of the situation” (94-96).

64. Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 105-109. Browning identifies these as the five dimensions of practical reasoning.
as central throughout the process of practical theological interpretation. As shown in the previous chapter, an important foundation for the discernment of faithful practice, or the making of an election, in a particular context is the discernment of spirits, which interprets the causes (spiritual or non-spiritual) of affective thoughts, actions, and feelings that are operative in that context.

Osmer characterizes the interpretive task as a “spirituality of sagely wisdom,” wherein thoughtfulness and theoretical interpretation lie on a continuum of wise judgment. Osmer describes wise judgment along the lines of *phronesis*, while this dissertation has argued, particularly in chapters two and three, that, in the Christian tradition, wise judgment is constituted by the practice of discernment. Furthermore Osmer notes that, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, “As a virtue, or moral capacity, rooted in the character of a person, prudence has a deep connection to spirituality...

Contemporary narrative theologians, moreover, call attention to the conceptual patterns

65. It must be noted that, as argued in the previous chapter, “evil spirits” include “not only evil spirits in the proper sense of the term, that is, created personal immaterial beings, but also the dispositions of evil within ourselves, the evil structures of society, all that can be a source of inner movements (of thoughts, affective feelings, and affective acts) contrary to what the Holy Spirit wishes to work in our lives through faith, love, and hope” (Toner, *A Commentary*, 12). This expansion of an understanding of “evil spirits” is crucial for understanding the importance of discernment of spirits in the descriptive and interpretive tasks of practical theological reflection—including within the term “evil spirits” dispositions of self (psychological) and structures of society (social, political, cultural) emphasizes the importance of including discernment of spirits with the psychological, social, political and cultural interpretations and evaluations present in practical theology’s use of various social sciences. In this way, discernment of spirits does not include only reflection on personal dispositions that may lead persons or communities away from God, but also on societal structures that are contrary to the vision of God known in Christ and which may be sources of inner movements contrary to the work of the Holy Spirit.

66. Osmer, 81-86.

67. Ibid., 84: “It is the capacity to interpret episodes, situations, and contexts in three interrelated ways: (1) recognition of the relevant particulars of specific events and circumstances; (2) discernment of the moral ends at stake; (3) determination of the most effective means to achieve these ends in light of the constraints and possibilities of a particular time and place” (Emphasis original).
that determine what counts as virtue and to the ways the narratives and spiritual practices of different traditions shape the character and wise judgment of their members.” In other words, phronesis is tradition-constituted. If wise judgment lies at the heart of the interpretive task of practical theology, and wise judgment is formed in the narrative, habitus, and practices of the Christian church, then the discernment of spirits should be a significant part of the interpretive task of practical theology in the Christian tradition. This points again to the notion expressed earlier in this chapter about a Christian sociology. Osmer emphasizes that “Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to interpret the relevant particulars of episodes, situations, and contexts takes wise judgment and moral sense, as well as a solid grasp of the theories being used.”68 If practical theological interpretation requires wise judgment and moral sense, defined above as being tradition-constituted and having a deep connection to spirituality, then normative understandings of Christian narrative and practice, including especially the discernment of the movements of spirits, are already present in the interpretive task of practical theology. In a practical theological study within the Christian tradition, one might rightly ask what is distinctively Christian about the interpretation of episodes, situations, contexts, and practices. Such a question points to the inclusion of discernment of spirits in the interpretation of situations and contexts. Within a hermeneutic of discernment, the discernment of spirits is an essential aspect of the interpretation of a context; it is not only present in the normative or systematic phases of practical theological method. In this way, theological reflection and normativity are part of practical theological interpretation from the beginning, and made

68. Ibid., 85.
clearly so from the beginning. In this way, questions of Christian spirituality are central to all practical theological interpretation, rather than only to those studies that deal explicitly with “spiritual practices.”

Normative and Pragmatic Tasks in a Hermeneutic of Discernment

Normative and pragmatic concerns are paramount for a hermeneutic of discernment within practical theology, for the goal of Christian discernment is openness to the action of the Holy Spirit and the formation of practices that are faithful to that action and the vision of God found therein, within the particular context of a person or community. The formation of practices that faithfully participate in God’s redemptive action, known in Christ through the Holy Spirit, in the church and the world is the goal of practical theological reflection within a hermeneutic of discernment. I present in this section some normative concerns and principles derived from the practice of discernment that characterize what a hermeneutic of discernment might look like for practical theology, namely (1) the discernment of God’s will through openness to the Holy Spirit, (2) “telling God’s story” through the formation of practices faithful to the Christian narrative and tradition, (3) an eschatological view of present praxis, and (4) “indifference” in the use of non-Christian sources of knowledge for practical theological reflection, save that they may be appropriated for the “greater glory of God” in particular contexts and practices. It is important to note, as well, that these are normative concerns and hermeneutical principles that ground all tasks of practical theology within a hermeneutic of discernment—they

69. Graham, Walton, and Ward, 78.
shape not only the normative and pragmatic tasks of practical theological reflection, but the descriptive and interpretive tasks as well (particularly through the discernment of spirits, as described above). Furthermore, an important characteristic of Ignatian discernment is the ordering of means and ends, and for this reason, the pragmatic decisions of discernment follow the conclusions of normative reflection. In the next chapter, I will discuss briefly some pragmatic implications of the hermeneutic of discernment for theological education and the study of Christian spirituality.

Osmer describes the normative task of practical theological interpretation as “Using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from ‘good practice.’”70 In conjunction with the interpretive task, which draws on theories of the arts and sciences to understand patterns in particular contexts, the normative task uses theological concepts to describe particular contexts. In this sense, the normative task may include the discernment of spirits as described above in relation to the interpretive task. Osmer’s further description of the normative task is threefold:

First it involves a style of theological reflection in which theological concepts are used to interpret particular episodes, situations, and contexts. In light of what we know of God, how might God be acting? What are the fitting patterns of human response? Second, it involves the task of finding ethical principles, guidelines, and rules that are relevant to the situation and can guide strategies of action. Third, it involves exploring past and present practices of the Christian tradition that provide normative guidance in shaping the patterns of the Christian life.71

70. Osmer, 4.
71. Ibid., 8.
Osmer’s description of tasks must be understood fluidly, that is, normative reflections return one to descriptive and interpretive concerns and, as noted earlier, normative concerns are implicitly part of descriptive and interpretive understandings. In light of an understanding of the fluidity of tasks within practical theological methods, this dissertation does not seek to develop a specific model of practical theological interpretation, but rather to bring attention to crucial characteristics and principles of a hermeneutic of discernment that ought to be considered within any model of practical theological interpretation, especially those wherein the formation of Christian discipleship is the ultimate goal of theological reflection. Osmer’s description of the normative task has much in common with the practice of discernment as described in the previous chapter. The questions, “How might God be acting?” and “What are the fitting patterns of human response?” are paramount in the desert hermeneutic, the Benedictine hermeneutic, and the Ignatian hermeneutic. These are the questions that ground the description and interpretation of situations and contexts. The task of finding guidelines and rules that are relevant to a situation and guide action can be seen in chapter three’s description of the Benedictine Rule and of Ignatius’s rules for making an election. Exploring past and present practices of the Christian tradition for normative guidance (“telling God’s story”) is essential to all three traditions discussed in the previous chapter, for within these traditions the formation of a habitus through the narrative and tradition of the church is essential to the practice of discernment and the formation of wise judgment.72

72. Note the central role that Christian habitus played in the development of the desert, Benedictine, and Ignatian hermeneutics.
The normative concerns within a hermeneutic of discernment listed above also speak to Osmer’s threefold description of the normative task of practical theological interpretation. The question of “How might God be acting?” is the central guiding theme of a hermeneutic of discernment, particularly the discernment of God’s will through openness to the Holy Spirit. Toner’s careful definition of God’s will in terms of Ignatian discernment must be remembered here: “God’s positive preferential but non-necessitating will regarding the free choice made by an individual (or by a particular group) in some concrete situation.”73 In other words, what is sought of God’s will in this discernment is an understanding of God’s salvific vision such that a Christian person or community might come to form practices74 that are most faithful (practices that are “for the greater glory of God”), within a particular context and situation, to God’s redemptive mission in the church and the world. In Ignatian discernment, a person or community attempts to discover what course of action best serves God’s will in a particular situation. While this most often concerns choice between two good alternatives, Christian ethical reflection is necessarily part of the process of compiling alternatives for action. For a hermeneutic of discernment within practical theology, discernment of God’s will and vision centers on whether or not practices “participate faithfully in the divine redemptive mission.”75 In this sense, as shown throughout the previous chapter, the movement and action of the Holy Spirit is known

73. Toner, What is Your Will, 5.

74. Swinton and Mowat, 24: “Christian practices are a reflection of the Church’s attempts to participate faithfully in the continuing practices of the triune God’s redemptive mission to the world.”

75. Ibid., 22: “Thus the efficacy of the practice (the good to which it is aimed), is not defined pragmatically by its ability to fulfill particular human needs (although it will include that), but by whether or not it participates faithfully in the divine redemptive mission.”
within the purview of shared Christian narrative, *habitus*, and tradition. Faithful discernment, then, is learned through participation in the life of the Christian community, the church. This dynamic is present in the desert and Benedictine hermeneutics for which practice opens understanding, and particularly in Ignatian discernment, where the movement and action of the Holy Spirit is known in relation to the life direction of the person or community that is making the discernment.\(^76\) Note also that understanding the “life direction” of the person or community includes understanding the shared narratives and traditions of practice of the particular individual or community involved in a practice of discernment. In other words, it is through participation in the practices of the church that the vision of God and the action of the Holy Spirit become clear.

Furthermore, discernment of spirits and the movement of the Holy Spirit is irreplaceable for the discernment of God’s vision within a particular context and situation, for it is through the Holy Spirit that Christian persons and communities come to know God: “We can guess (intelligently or stupidly) about what God wills, but we can have no justifiable faith that we have found God’s will unless we also have justifiable faith that the Holy Spirit has led us to our conclusion.” The evidence gathered through practical theological description and interpretation “can only justify some probability, some reasonable guess” as to God’s will; “If we are to reach a faith conviction, we must have justifiable belief that we have been led to our conclusion by the Holy Spirit.”\(^77\) Therefore, to

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\(^{76}\) It may be important to remember here Mark McIntosh’s explanation on this point: “the nature of the spiritual influence only becomes discernible through the development of a life. Again, the direction of interpretation is beyond the purely interior into the realm of concrete effects and practices” (2004, 95).

\(^{77}\) Toner, *What is Your Will*, 6.
understand “how God might be acting and what the fitting patterns of human response are,” discernment of spirits and of the Holy Spirit is ultimately necessary.

The second guiding principle in a hermeneutic of discernment, which follows the theme of “How might God be acting?” is “telling God’s story” through the formation of distinctive practices faithful to the Christian narrative and tradition within a particular context. This guiding principle is analogous to canonical narrative method described earlier in this chapter:

The Gospel narratives of Jesus’ words and actions are taken as the key to interpreting not only the rest of Scripture but also the unfolding events of human history. As the incarnation, passion and resurrection constitute the central reality of existence, the challenge facing Christians is to pattern their own life in conformity with this great drama. The theological task is to discern how contemporary experience can be interpreted through the story that the Church tells about Jesus and to identify forms of practice that are coherent with this narrative.78

As with the desert hermeneutic, wherein the narrative of Scripture projected a world into which the desert elders lived by practicing its words and teachings in the contexts of their own lives; as with the Benedictine hermeneutic, wherein the community is formed into the world of Scripture through the constant narration and re-narration of Scripture in the prayer of the Divine Office and in the Rule; and as with the Ignatian hermeneutic, wherein the process of discernment is situated within exercises for developing a loving desire to follow God, a canonical narrative approach to theological interpretation emphasizes living into the narrative of Scripture and the living tradition of the church and thereby forming Christians and their communities into a distinct habitus. Furthermore, the process of discernment and theological interpretation, and therefore the re-narration of Christian

78. Graham, Walton, and Ward, 78 (emphasis added).
lives in new contexts, is founded upon and formed by the dynamic between narrative, *habitus*, practices, and tradition.

This dimension of a hermeneutic of discernment, “telling God’s story,” seeks to discover how Christians might form practices that are rooted in and faithful to the narrative, *habitus*, and tradition of the church known in Christ and through discernment of the action of the Holy Spirit and the vision of God within a particular context and situation. Central to this understanding of discernment is the inclusion of Christian *habitus* and tradition of practice with narrative as constructive of present Christian praxis. As noted in chapter three, the living tradition of the church is constituted by practices that embody the Gospel narrative of the church. These practices become part of the church’s historical embodiment of the Gospel narrative—its tradition—and this tradition is both normative for present praxis and in process. Furthermore, as noted earlier, listening to and including marginalized narratives in understanding historical and contemporary Christian practice is central to embodying Christian tradition in its wholeness. In light of this, Susan Rakoczy notes, “Digging into the Christian tradition has uncovered a great deal of material which had been excluded from ‘the tradition’ because it had been written by women. Such research has broadened and deepened the tradition in significant ways.” 79 The practice of discernment attempts to maintain both continuity and ever-newness in how the church

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embodies its foundational narrative—the Gospel—in each generation and in various contexts. Christian practices formed through the process of discernment address the complexity of human needs and contexts, but they do so within the character of Christian narrative, *habitus*, and tradition:

Christian practices also have a normative dimension that is thoroughly theological in character. That is, our descriptions of Christian practices contain within them normative understandings of what God wills for us and for the whole creation and of what God expects of us in response to God’s call to be faithful. Christian practices are thus congruent with the necessities of human existence as such, as seen from a Christian perspective on the character of human flourishing.\(^\text{80}\)

In this way, a hermeneutic of discernment seeks to form practices that are faithful to Christian narrative and tradition and the vision of God known in Christ through the Holy Spirit. In this way it may be affirmed that in the interpretation of contexts and formation of practices, the “greater glory of God” is sought through the practices of discernment. The principle of “telling God’s story” within a hermeneutic of discernment asks, “What is a faithful Christian response, proper to the context and situation, guided by the discernment of spirits and of God’s vision?” Remaining paramount for a hermeneutic of discernment is coming to understand the vision of God and forming practices within particular contexts that are faithful to that vision, known though the Gospel narrative, the living tradition of Christian practice, and discernment of the Holy Spirit.

A third normative consideration within a hermeneutic of discernment is an eschatological view of present praxis. Such a view of present praxis is common to the three traditions of discernment discussed earlier. Evagrius, one of the more famous desert elders

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particularly for his learning and his summarizing of monastic spirituality in the Praktikos, describes well the eschatological outlook of monastic habitus:

Keep in mind the remembrance of these two realities. Weep for the judgment of sinners, afflict yourself for fear lest you too feel those pains. But rejoice and be glad at the lot of the righteous. Strive to obtain those joys but be a stranger to those pains. Whether you be inside or outside your cell, be careful that the remembrance of these things never leaves you, so that, thanks to their remembrance, you may at least flee wrong and harmful thoughts. 81

The Scriptural narrative of the Reign of God and the Beatitudes served as the ultimate telos of Christian life according to the desert elders. The eschaton was definitive of monastic life and practice. This outlook on Christian practice has remained in monasticism from Benedict to the present day. The Benedictine Rule continues to exhort monks to “Live in fear of judgment day and have a great horror of hell. Yearn for everlasting life with holy desire. Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die.” 82 These are not macabre exhortations, but reminders that the telos of Christian practice is life with God in beatitude. They are exhortations to the love and humility that characterize Benedictine wisdom. As noted in the previous chapter, Ignatius included two exercises that focused on the importance of eschatological vision. Ignatius gives these exercises for fostering indifference and loving desire for God that is required of making a good election: “I will consider, as if I were at the point of death, what procedure and norm I will at that time wish I had used in the present election”; and “Imagining and considering in what condition I will find myself on judgment day, I will think how at that time I will wish I had decided in

81. Ward, Sayings of the Desert Fathers, 63-64.
82. RB 1980, 183-185.
regard to the present matter.”

Ignatian discernment has an eschatological dimension to it, wherein choices are made with the greater glory of God and living into God’s Reign first and foremost.

Because of this, eschatological vision is a significant aspect of a hermeneutic of discernment for practical theology. The eschaton is a central part of the Christian narrative, and as evidenced by the three traditions discussed in this dissertation, it is formative of Christian praxis and wisdom. The narrative of the Reign of God provides a particular Christian vision of the ultimate telos of social existence, and as such, Christian interpretation of social situations, discernment, and formation of practice must bear in mind Christian eschatology; it is part of the "normative understandings of what God wills for us and for the whole creation.”

Furthermore, it is a definitive part of Christian practical wisdom, especially when one takes into account MacIntyre's description of practice.

MacIntyre defines practices teleologically, locating their meaning in “goods internal to that form of activity” that “are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity.”

Christian narrative and tradition provide the teleological grounding that gives Christian practices and ethics meaning. According to Christian narrative and tradition, life and practice is oriented toward the Reign of God as its end: “Christian eschatology replaces

83. Ignatius and Ganss, 165.


85. MacIntyre, 187.
teleology as the end or goal toward which any thing and all things are directed... Christians must recognize that the end of things cannot simply be inferred from their existence or their nature. That is, thinking eschatologically makes us realize that God’s actions are required for the goal or purpose of things to be realized.”

Following this, interpretation of contexts and formation of practices within a practical theological hermeneutic of discernment must be characterized by “thinking eschatologically”—recognizing that the truth of things is not known only by their existence or nature (through the social sciences), but normatively by “a Christian perspective on the character of human flourishing.”

Reflection on an eschatological view of present praxis leads to a fourth normative principle of a hermeneutic of discernment, Ignatian “indifference” in the use of non-Christian sources of knowledge for practical theological reflection, save that they may be appropriated for the “greater glory of God” in particular contexts and practices. Recall that Ignatian “indifference” implies not passionlessness, but freedom from disordered affections and remaining undecided until the vision of God becomes clear within a particular context. Toner notes that “indifference depends on an intense active response of desire to know and do what is more for the kingdom of God.”

Here again we see the importance of the eschatological thinking described above, formed in the practices of the church. Along these lines, within a hermeneutic of discernment for practical theological reflection, indifference implies allowing the Christian narrative and tradition to have normative priority over


88. Toner, What is Your Will, 9.
insights from the social sciences and philosophy. Therefore, indifference within a hermeneutic of discernment for practical theology does not imply *avoidance* in the use of social sciences for description and interpretation of contexts, but *caution*: “This method tends to be suspicious of and cautious about the role of philosophy and science, while at the same time it takes the dialogue with these forms of wisdom seriously. But there is a suspicion that alien norms will usurp the center of any system that is based on mutual collaboration with science.”

Within a hermeneutic of discernment, insights from the social sciences and philosophy can play an important role in describing and interpreting situations and contexts within practical theological study, but they must be considered in light of the discernment of spirits, as described earlier, and viewed in light of the normative standing of Christian narrative and tradition for present praxis. In this way, the *telos* of practical theology within a hermeneutic of discernment is the formation of practices in particular contexts that are faithful to the vision of God and the action of the Holy Spirit known through discernment of spirits. As with Ignatian discernment, wherein the First Principle and Foundation directs discernment and guides indifference in considering various alternatives for choice (poverty, wealth, sickness, health, etc.), a hermeneutic of

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89. Poling and Miller, 51.

90. Important in this understanding of normativity is the description of tradition in chapter three of this dissertation and the importance of recovering and re-evaluating marginalized narratives from that tradition included in that description. Poling and Miller (1985) make a similar point in their description of critical confessional correlation: “The Christian story is not normative in an uncritical way. Rather, the critical confessional method is self-critical and willing to examine its cognitive assumptions and its social location. It seeks to discover the truth about the tradition so that Christians today can find interpretations of their experience which are congruent with the history of God’s revelation” (51). Part of discovering the “truth about the tradition” is important critical, historical research and theological reflection on suppressed or marginalized narratives and traditions within the history of the church. These stories may shed important light on the contemporary forms of Christian tradition and the processes of discernment that help form tradition.
discernment in practical theology is normatively directed by Christian narrative, *habitus*, and tradition with "indifference" in the use of the social sciences and philosophy. For this reason, the approach to correlation within a hermeneutic of discernment is confessionally driven, but not uncritical, sectarian, or monolithic. Indeed, a hermeneutic of discernment may reach pragmatic conclusions similar to those of mutually critical approaches (or liberation and empirical approaches, for that matter). The normative principles, interpretive methods, and goals of practical theology, however, will differ.\(^{91}\) A hermeneutic of discernment does not seek simply to repeat past embodiments of Christian tradition, nor does it seek simply to transmit the conclusions of social theory to Christian communities and practices, nor does it seek "a negotiated settlement arrived at through a process of mediation, compromise or creating a composite"\(^{92}\) of Christian tradition and human experience understood through social theory. This is because discernment is not merely a method, but a virtue requiring habituation and formation of certain dispositions through engaging in practices within Christian community. It is akin to the wisdom learned in monastic community, described in chapter three.

Indifference in the use of the social sciences and philosophy for describing and interpreting contexts does not mean that practical theology within a hermeneutic of discernment does not address human needs and human flourishing, but rather that it seeks foremost to enable “individuals and communities to participate faithfully in Christ’s

\(^{91}\) Note the different ends, tasks, and interpretive methods outlined in chapter two of this dissertation.

redemptive mission,”93 and is concerned with human flourishing “from a Christian perspective.”94 John Milbank has convincingly pointed out the implicit theologies (or “anti-theologies”) embedded within secular social sciences95; while making use of these social sciences, a hermeneutic of discernment in practical theology is careful not to allow norms alien to Christian tradition to determine whether a practice is faithful to God’s vision and redemptive mission in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Along these same lines, Luke Timothy Johnson argues that holiness is the goal of discernment in the church: “As the church is constituted by the power of God at work in a crucified Messiah, so must that remain always its fundamental criterion for discerning what makes it uniquely what it is, what distinguishes its ‘holiness’ or ‘difference’ from the world.”96 In discerning how Christian practices may be faithful in particular contexts to the vision of God and action of the Holy Spirit, a practical theological hermeneutic should give normative priority to Christian narrative and tradition. A consequence of this “fundamental criterion” or norm is the necessity of discerning the “spirits” involved in practical theological hermeneutics: “Indeed, the entire language of our own age, to the extent it speaks of the ‘rights’ of individuals or groups as absolute and nonnegotiable demands requiring recognition by every assembly, must be recognized as deriving from a spirit of the world and not of God.”97 This does not obviate the use of the social sciences in practical theology, but it subordinates

93. Swinton and Mowat, 22.
95. Milbank, Theology and Social Theory.
96. Johnson, 128.
97. Ibid., 130.
them to theological normativity. In this way, Christian practices in response to the contexts, situations, and practices of the church and the world may be defined and evaluated by their faithfulness to God’s redemptive work, known in the Christian narrative and tradition, rather than by their effectiveness according to various secular social sciences. In a hermeneutic of discernment, as noted earlier, social sciences play an important role in the description and interpretation of contexts and situations and the social-systemic, material, and psychological dynamics found therein. Indifference in the use of these social sciences, however, implies (1) consciousness of and undecidedness regarding the *implicit values and norms* imbedded in these social sciences, until (2) normative theological reflection and discernment of spirits brings to light the action of the Holy Spirit and vision of God within the context or situation, so that the values and norms in accordance with “the greater glory of God” might be chosen with respect to the insights of the social sciences.

**Discernment, Self-Implication, and Tradition in Practical Theology**

Significant for the transformation of practices and communities that is the goal of practical theology in the Christian tradition is self-implication in theological reflection. As noted in chapter three, self-implication is an inescapable part of theological interpretation: “it is the broader world of the Christian community—constituted by the relationship to God through Christ that is discipleship—to which the theologian belongs that allows the world to show up the way it does. Theologians are formed and initiated into life-world by
academic and spiritual exercises." Self-implication is an essential aspect of the transformative aim of practical theology, particularly those approaches to practical theology that seek to form Christian practices and practitioners. As described throughout this chapter, this is not done in an uncritical or unscientific way, but it is grounded in the Christian narrative, *habitus*, tradition, and community noted above by Matthew Ashley. A hermeneutic of discernment involves both critical reflection on and participation in practices that seek to embody the vision of God for the life of the Christian community and the world. This relies upon understanding theology as intimately connected with spirituality. Claire Wolfteich describes the relationship between theology and spirituality in such a way: “What the study of spirituality brings is a deeper vision of the animating power of the life of faith and the way in which spiritual practice may lie at the heart of the theological endeavor.” Rooted in this is a desire to know God and live in the Spirit, “as desire to understand the variety of ways that the human spirit seeks, receives, and responds to the Spirit.” This desire arises not from “mere curiosity,” but from “a love of that Spirit.” This desire to understand and love of the Spirit describes the desire and love found in the story of the graduate student with which I began this dissertation. Referencing Burton-Christie, Wolfteich notes the central importance of self-implication within the theology-spirituality dynamic: “This passion does not hinder scholarship but rather ‘constitutes an initial and enduring interpretive key’ even through the process of

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98. Ashley, 165 (emphasis original).

more distanced critical reflection and re-engagement.” ¹⁰⁰ Theological interpretation and the development of wisdom among lay practitioners, clergy, and scholars necessarily involve self-implication. Herein we find the important connection between academic and everyday theology that the practice of discernment and its hermeneutic bridges, which was discussed earlier in this chapter. Within this dynamic of self-implication lies the transformative aim of practical theology: “The transformative aim—a dimension of all practical theology—is present here from the beginning.” ¹⁰¹ The approach to interpretation of Scripture and the discernment found among the desert elders shows this same dynamic.

The desert hermeneutic was described as a way of interpreting Scripture by putting it into practice in one’s own life, thereby creating a conversation between the context of one’s life and the revelatory word of Scripture. Scripture provided a world into which the desert elders could live in their own contexts. Interpreting Scripture meant “striving to somehow realize it in one’s life and to be transformed by that realization.” ¹⁰² For the desert elders, the transformation of lives was the ultimate goal of theological interpretation. Burton-Christie calls this the “cost” of interpretation, that is the transformation that one necessarily risks in practicing theological reflection. Gordon Mikoski hints at the same concept in practical theology:

The postmodern situation also calls for attention to the role of the practical theologian in research and writing. Practical endeavors can no longer focus solely

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¹⁰¹. Ibid.

on an “objective” problem without also taking into account the specific theological and ecclesial commitments, interests, and power dynamics of the practical theologian. To have credibility, contemporary practical theology will need to be responsibly self-implicating and reflexive. ¹⁰³

I have argued that a hermeneutic derived from the practice of discernment in the Christian tradition is both critical and “responsibly self-implicating and reflexive” in its general methodology and goals for practical theology. While Burton-Christie, who describes his approach as “critical-participative,” writes concerning the discipline of Christian Spirituality, within the theology-spirituality dynamic discussed above, the importance of self-implication, transformation, and praxis that is central to a critical-participative approach is highly relevant for practical theology as well. The practice of discernment and its hermeneutic highlights the inseparable relationship between practice, theory, theological interpretation, and self-implication¹⁰⁴ in practical theology.

What has been written thus far points to the conclusion that practical theology is ultimately about formation of persons and communities into ways of being that participate in the work of God for the church and the world. Such theological reflection involves theologians personally in the lived faith of these communities.¹⁰⁵ In this way, practical theologians play an important role in the building up of the church, “the Church’s self-


¹⁰⁴. Given what I have argued throughout this dissertation regarding narrative, *habitus*, tradition, and virtue, I might add “communal-implication” to self-implication since the transformation of persons and practices that practical theology implicates communities as much as persons.

¹⁰⁵. Reflecting on self-implication and practical theology, Claire Woflteich asks, “What kind of transformation are we risking, for example, when we immerse ourselves in the study of congregations or communities different from our own? How does our engagement with spirituality in diverse contexts open up new understandings, new possibilities for dialogue, new attention to ethical imperatives? How might our practical theological work speak a word back to us?” Woflteich, 137.
actualization here and now—both that which is and that which ought to be,” and the development of Christian tradition.

As noted in chapter three, discernment plays an important role in the development of Christian tradition by forming Christian practices, while Christian tradition plays an important normative role in the formation of the virtue and practice of discernment. As with practical wisdom, discernment is a virtue that is part of a particular way of being that is constituted by particular practices that embody the narrative and tradition of a community (the church). Also, as with practical wisdom, discernment is a way of knowing and of forming the practices that embody the narrative and tradition of a community, helping that community’s practices to be faithful to the narrative and developing tradition of practice that embodies that narrative in new and different contexts and generations.

Practical wisdom is intimately connected with a communally embodied standard of tradition; to exercise phronesis, whether in the academy or the church, one must necessarily be part of a tradition. The reflections by Miller-McLemore concerning “how what we see and describe is shaped by specific confessional sensitivities and religious


107. “In this way the Christian tradition is both normative for practice and evolving; discernment guides the circular process of tradition in which historical practices faithful to the Christian narrative and attuned to the promptings of the Holy Spirit hold normative weight for the formation of contemporary practices, which are themselves re-formations of historical practices in a new context, while remaining faithful to the Christian narrative and tradition and attuned to the promptings and actions of the Holy Spirit.” In this way, a tradition is carried or “handed on” (traditio).

108. Nussbaum, Fragility of Goodness, 306: “Nor does particular judgment have the kind of rootedness and focus required for goodness of character without a core of commitment to a general conception—albeit one that is continually evolving, ready for surprise, and not rigid.” This evolving, general conception is analogous to MacIntyre’s understanding of tradition as an “historically extended, socially embodied argument” (MacIntyre, 222).
context,”¹⁰⁹ and by Gordon Mikoski concerning the “specific theological and ecclesial commitments”¹¹⁰ of practical theologians appear to point to an important relationship between practical theologians, practical wisdom and discernment, and the development of Christian tradition. A hermeneutic of discernment illuminates the relationship between the tasks and goals of academic practical theology and everyday practical theology in forming practices and communities within the church to, for, and in the world; it is through the practice of discernment, both in academic and ecclesial settings that Christian tradition, that “enduring practice or set of linked practices,”¹¹¹ takes shape. By helping to ensure and enable practices that are faithful to the work of God known in Christ through the Holy Spirit, the work of practical theology helps to ensure and enable the living tradition.¹¹²

My argument for discernment and its hermeneutic as a kind of practical wisdom proper to the work of practical theological reflection has culminated in the reflections in the present chapter. Scholars who engage in approaches to practical theology that focus on the formation of Christian practices and communities, as well as clergy, church leaders, and congregations that engage in wise judgment and practical theological reflection every day, may benefit from these reflections. Discernment of the action of the Holy Spirit and the vision of God in the particular contexts of the lives of Christian communities is formative of


¹¹⁰. Mikoski, 565.

¹¹¹. Tilley, 57: “Given the understanding of tradition as communicative and identity-shaping, and given that practices as understood herein serve to constitute communicative competence and shape identity, we can construe a tradition as an enduring practice or set of linked practices” (emphasis original).

¹¹². The virtue and practice of discernment enables persons and communities "to pursue both their own good and the good of the tradition of which they are the bearers even in situations defined by the necessity of tragic, dilemmatic choice" (MacIntyre, 223).
the practices and dispositions (virtues) that constitute Christian *habitus* and tradition. The practice of discernment and its hermeneutic is significant for practical theological reflection because practical theology is ultimately *theological*. Claire Wolfteich summarizes this notion quite well: “Practical theology, however it draws upon the knowledge of the human sciences and other disciplines, is most centrally *theology*. As theology, it should be inspired by and critically attentive to spirituality: the movement of the Spirit in concrete communities and contexts and the human practices that embody and cultivate responsiveness to that Spirit.” In the following chapter, I discuss briefly what implications the practice of discernment and its hermeneutic might have on theological education and the study of Christian spirituality.

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113. Many contemporary practical theologians have found the need to stress the theological nature of practical theological reflection. See Mikoski op. cit.; Richard Osmer, Pete Ward, Bonnie Miller-McLemore in *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 1 (2012).

114. Wolfteich, 135 (original emphasis).
CHAPTER FIVE

IMPLICATIONS OF A HERMENEUTIC OF DISCERNMENT FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND THE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Introduction: Formation, Wisdom, Habitus

The emphasis on formation and wisdom in my discussion of a hermeneutic of discernment ultimately leads to a consideration of theological education and the study of Christian spirituality that is rooted in the tasks and telos of discernment. In this chapter, I will present some similarities between discernment and praxis-oriented approaches to theological education and, in doing so, hope to propose some areas where the practice and hermeneutic of discernment may help advance theological education and the study of Christian spirituality. In discussing theological education, my reflections focus on the context of advanced education in schools of theology, divinity schools, and seminaries, either free-standing or ones that are part of a larger university. In this chapter, I discuss theological education in terms of “shared-praxis,”¹ Christian habitus, formation in “pastoral and ecclesial imagination,”² and formation for wise discernment. In discussing the study of Christian spirituality, my reflections focus on spiritual formation, discernment, Christian habitus, and implications for methodology in spirituality studies.

Central to theological education is the concept of habitus, for critical theological reflection is conducted in relationship to the normative meanings and narratives of

¹ Groome, 133.
particular traditions, and critical theological reflection occurs within communities, namely those of the church and the theological academy. Within these communities, constituted and formed around shared practices and narratives, theological education takes place. The recent study of theological schools, *Educating Clergy*, affirms this:

In other words, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, or Muslim communities—or American, Brazilian, or Chinese communities, or professional societies of doctors, lawyers, or chemists, or disciplinary guilds of theologians, practical theologians, or historians—are defined, in part, by their relationship to a trajectory of normative meanings associated with real and mythic events in the past central to their collective identities and activities in the present. These communal norms not only establish boundaries for human knowing and doing in the communities in which teachers engage the learning of students, but they are also repositories of possibility and sources of constructive critique in their interactions with each other.  

Just as theological reflection is “narrated in and native to” traditions of practice, so is theological education. A concept of *habitus* allows one to consider theological education as a whole, as Farley has argued, rather than as a loose confederation of individual theological disciplines. For within a *habitus* of theological education, students are invited into spiritual and intellectual formation within a way of being constituted by practices that are critically reflected on through processes of discernment and theological inquiry. Theological educators who were interviewed for *Educating Clergy* often described “how they envision introducing students to some confluence of the traditions of knowledge and ways of knowing identified with their academic disciplines and religious communities and


4. Cahalan and Nieman, 68.

5. Farley, 40-44.
the traditions of practice associated with religious leadership.”  

Central to this approach to theological education is forming students in habits and skills that are central to the practice and virtue of discernment in both academic and ecclesial settings—critical, faithful theological reflection on theories, practices, and contexts. Whether one is going into ministry, scholarship, or other forms of church leadership, formation in wise discernment is central for theological education.

The purpose of theological education is rooted in the formation of skills and habits of critical analytic thinking, practical knowledge, and normative knowledge. Foster claims that critical analytic thinking “disengages the thinker from everyday contexts of meaning in order to take up the position of a distanced, skeptical observer, testing possible explanations of events by rigorous trial”; practical knowledge “requires engagement as a condition for knowing” and “is always learned in a hands-on manner”; and normative knowledge, which is needed “for grasping the significance of activities and viewpoints,” requires “being inside the situation, not looking at it from a distance.”

As discussed in the previous chapters, the practice of discernment engages these skills and habits—analytical thinking, practical knowledge, and normative knowledge—in its descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks, and for this reason the practice of discernment can serve as a central practice and virtue of theological education. A habit of wise discernment helps to form students—scholars, teachers, ministers, and church leaders—in practical wisdom.

6. Foster, 30.
7. Ibid., 9.
8. Ibid.
and critical thinking. Theological education, and the various disciplines within it—e.g. biblical theology, systematic theology, pastoral theology, practical theology, historical theology—may then be understood not as a collection of separate sciences, but as different aspects of a *habitus*, or cognitive disposition (*theologia*),\(^9\) characterized by the virtue and practice of discernment, which engages both critical analysis and normative theological reflection. The kind of wisdom embodied in the practice of discernment is essential for scholars, teachers, clergy, church leaders, lay practitioners, and spiritual seekers—all the different vocations and interests represented by students at theological schools. Discernment incorporates the critical and participative ways of knowing outlined above, and in this way, it serves as a source of unity within theological education.

Such pedagogical aims are rooted in the practical-theological methodology described in chapter four in conjunction with a hermeneutic of discernment. The study of practices, their historical and contemporary contexts and narratives, and the theological and social theories that are embedded in these practices and contexts comprise, in general, the various disciplines within theological education and the hermeneutic of discernment discussed earlier. The tasks of practical theology—descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic—may also describe tasks within the various theological disciplines in which students are trained at divinity schools and schools of theology: biblical, systematic, historical, pastoral, and practical.\(^10\) These disciplines also variously engage description, interpretation, and normative reflection.


10. Though practical theology includes pastoral theology, I have provided both terms here because Roman Catholic institutions, for the most part, use the designation pastoral theology rather than practical theology. See Cahalan, “Locating Practical Theology in Catholic Theological Discourse and Practice,” op. cit.
interpretation (including the use of social sciences), and normative and pragmatic judgments. In a different way, *Educating Clergy* identifies similar pedagogical tasks: “developing in students the facility for *interpreting* texts, situations, and relationships”; “nurturing dispositions and habits integral to the spiritual and vocational *formation* of clergy”; “heightening student consciousness of the content and agency of historical and contemporary *contexts*”; and “cultivating student *performance* in clergy roles and ways of thinking.”

This is not to say that practical theology or a hermeneutic of discernment can replace the methodologies proper to various theological disciplines, but that theological education as a whole—including the various biblical, systematic, historical, pastoral, and practical theological disciplines—could be understood in light of formation for wise discernment, which necessarily includes skill in interpreting texts, situations, and relationships, understanding theological theories and religious praxis, and ethical and spiritual formation in communion with one’s own faith tradition. This formation for discernment for ministers, scholars, and church leaders takes place in academic and formal ways in schools of theology and in formal and informal ways in one’s own religious community. This approach to theological education as a whole resembles the critical and participative reflection on lived faith implied by a hermeneutic of discernment.

Drawing on the work of Craig Dykstra, *Educating Clergy* situates its teaching practices around the aim of “cultivating a pastoral, priestly, or rabbinic imagination.”

The aim of this approach to theological education is the formation of ways of thinking,

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11. Foster, 33.
12. Ibid., 26.
knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are proper to particular students’ needs for and vocations in scholarship, teaching, ministry, religious leadership, and authentic religious practice. By practicing discernment in their theological studies, students come to learn and embody the virtue of practical wisdom in relation to their own particular Christian traditions by engaging in the goods internal to the practice of discernment. In this sense, discernment may lie at the heart of theological education considered in light of Christian habitus:

Dykstra and Bass identify implications of this insight for a teaching practice in seminary education when they note that “Christian practices contain within them normative understandings of what God wills for us and for the whole creation and of what God expects of us in response to God’s call to be faithful”... Christians in different denominational traditions will argue about particular ways of articulating what those normative understandings are, but they share a common relationship to the Christ event in the course of human history.13

A Christian habitus, then, is what the students are studying, critically reflecting on, and re-shaping within the narratives and vocations of their own lives, while at the same time necessarily participating in and being transformed by. In theological education, habitus is the way of being that is shaped by critical participation in the living Christian tradition and its narratives through engagement in and reflection on practices of faith. In schools of theology and divinity schools, this is often done among an ecumenical and even inter-faith student body, which highlights both the similarities and differences of traditions, personal and communal narratives, and practices alive within Christianity and in the relationship between Christianity and other religious traditions. In this way, theological education in

schools of theology and divinity schools allow students to engage lived faith in an
ecumenical and inter-faith context, wherein students participate variously as both active
and passive participants.

Students participate through critical theological reflection on and participation in
Christian *habitus* in relation to their own Christian or non-Christian traditions with the aim
of forming habits of critical theological reflection proper to their own traditions and
vocations (as leaders, teachers, ministers, practitioners, scholars, and seekers) through the
descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks of discernment as well as those
tasks within various theological disciplines. While biblical theology, historical theology,
and systematic and philosophical theology at these schools are narrated within the Judeo-
Christian tradition, students are encouraged to engage in critical participative reflection on
Christian *habitus* in dialogue with their own religious traditions. The goal is the formation
of wise religious leaders, teachers, scholars, and practitioners through the examination of
lived faith by critical participation (active or passive) and reflection (praxis) in relation to
Christian tradition and *habitus* and the student’s own Christian or, in some cases, non-
Christian religious tradition. My emphasis on both active and passive participation is
crucial, for non-Christian or unchurched students are likely to engage in critical,
participative reflection on lived faith differently than Christian students. While this
dissertation has maintained that Christian theology cannot be done without engaging in
Christian *habitus*, the reality at many schools of theology is that the student body comes (to
a greater or lesser extent depending on the school) from different religious faiths. In such
cases, non-Christians can enter into critical participative reflection on lived faith in a
Christian *habitus* without participating as believers (active participation), but as welcomed guests or observers (passive participation). Ultimately, I am asserting here that there cannot be a “general” study of theology, particularly since theology is narrated within and native to a particular faith community and *habitus*. Theology must be done within a particular religious tradition—“Jewish theology” or “Christian theology,” for instance. Along these lines, schools of theology, if they so choose, can offer courses in Islamic theology or Jewish theology in which students enter into critical participative reflection on lived faith in a Muslim or Jewish *habitus* as believers or as welcomed guests or observers through active or passive participation.

Nevertheless, theological education for all of these students seeks to engage and form in them particular skills and habits proper to, and in conversation with, their own vocations and religious traditions as described above. Students who are studying the theology of another faith are responsible, in conversation with their faculty and the religious leaders of their own communities, to explore how skills and habits engaged through passive participation might relate to the skills and habits proper to their own faith traditions. Some of these skills are listed below, and some are expanded upon later in this chapter. In theological education, teachers model for students and engage them in skills and virtues of critical theological reflection, ministry, leadership, wise discernment, and academic research, which the students bring to their own traditions and vocations noted above. Theological education is, in many ways then, caught rather than taught, as was

14. Indeed, one such skill learned in the kinds of inter-religious interactions described above would be how one’s own tradition relates to or with other traditions.
described in the relationship between a desert elder and a young monk, spiritual aspirant, or traveler. Ultimately I mean to emphasize that such education is not driven solely by content, but by the art of critical, participative theological engagement and the skills and habits necessary for such engagement in the vocations noted above.

Within this context, students engage in critical, faithful reflection on the historical and contemporary practices and theories that constitute their own traditions and those of others. Through this process of critical, participative, and ecumenical reflection, students learn to embody the skills needed for on-going reflection and action in new contexts:

Dykstra’s description of pastoral imagination offers several clues to the formative and transformative power possible in seminary education. Seminary educators seek to form dispositions and the intuitive knowledge, or *habitus*, of a given religious or intellectual tradition in students. They intend for students to embody and equip the transformation of these traditions, as inherited “rules” are changed into “strategies” of new engagement to address new situations and circumstances. This is what Aristotle calls the transformative nature of *praxis*; John Dewey, the *reconstructive* nature of practical knowledge; and Pierre Bourdieu, the *strategies* of enacting a social practice.

This is also similar to the aims and tasks of a hermeneutic of discernment, wherein students learn to interpret present praxis and context in light of the action of the Holy Spirit and respond with the transformation of practices and contexts in ways that are faithful to the vision of God. Discernment is both a virtue and practice within which theological education forms students for their roles as scholars, educators, ministers, church leaders, and faithful practitioners. In this way, one might say that discernment in

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15. Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, xxi: “The essence of the spirituality of the desert is that it was not taught but caught; it was a whole way of life” (emphasis added).

theological education seeks to cultivate both pastoral and scholarly imagination among students. This process is also central to the development of the Christian tradition in new generations and global contexts. Through theological education and formation for wise discernment within their own churches and traditions, students contribute to the body of practices that form the Christian tradition in different times and places: “As they rehearse the knowledge and skills toward which the practice is directed, they are gradually drawn into the deeper structures of its ways of thinking, dispositions, and habits. Over time, the knowledge and skills required to participate in the practice become increasingly familiar, even comfortable and often unconscious…”17 In this way, theological education and processes of discernment continue to form and inform the life of the church and living Christian tradition, as they continue to be embodied within different contexts. Theological education, in light of concepts of habitus and formation for wise discernment, therefore includes aims similar to Thomas Groome’s understanding of Christian religious education as promoting “lived Christian faith in the lives of participants” and being an “instrument of God’s grace to inform, form, and transform people in realized Christian faith toward the reign of God.”18 Such an approach to theological education seeks to bridge the clerical and academic paradigms, bringing to bear all the wisdom of the pastoral, ecclesial, and scholarly imaginations for the life of the church and the promotion of faithful discipleship.

17. Ibid., 28-29.
18. Groome, 18.
Discernment and Shared Praxis

Thomas Groome’s conception of a “shared praxis” approach to Christian religious education bears many similarities to practical theological methodology and my own discussion of discernment in this dissertation. For this reason, I will discuss in this section implications of the practice of discernment for theological education in relation to an overview of Groome’s “shared Christian praxis.”

The shared praxis approach to theological pedagogy includes many of the practice-theory-practice movements and tasks discussed in the previous chapter, such as description, interpretation, normative reflection, and strategic response. Groome’s approach begins with description of and critical reflection on present action, proceeds to a dialectical hermeneutic of correlating Christian vision and present action, and concludes with responses or decisions “for lived Christian faith.” This approach bears similarity to the hermeneutic of discernment described in the previous chapter which included description and interpretation of a person’s or a community’s contexts and narratives, engagement in critical, theological and spiritual reflection on the vision of God and action of the Holy Spirit, and the formation of practices and decisions faithful to the action of the Spirit and the vision of God within that particular person’s or community’s own context. Nevertheless, the unique elements and emphases of

19. I must assert that this section seeks to show how a hermeneutic of discernment might interact with the pedagogical approach of “shared Christian praxis,” and does not seek to give an exhaustive commentary on Groome’s work, which is vast. Rather, it seeks to point out instances where aspects of discernment may relate to the shared praxis approach as one approach to theological education, and perhaps in that way bring some new insights to theological education and shared praxis. I have chosen to reflect on this particular pedagogy because it is very closely related, as I note in this section, to the general tasks and methods of practical theology that reflect a practice-theory-practice approach.

20. Ibid., 146-148.
a hermeneutic of discernment described in the previous chapter, including its principles and norms, are not only similar to or fitting for a shared praxis approach but contribute to it, especially because a hermeneutic of discernment investigates and reflects on the action of the Holy Spirit and other spirits in each task or movement of shared praxis pedagogy. The central importance of formation and examination of lived faith and wisdom in shared praxis pedagogy requires discernment of spirits and of the Holy Spirit. Because of this, the present section aims to show how a hermeneutic of discernment might be integrated into and shape shared praxis pedagogy, thus contributing a fuller pneumatological aspect to theological education and shared praxis pedagogy.

Groome’s approach to Christian religious education centers on the formation of lived Christian faith, wherein the “behavioral aspect of faith demands that Christian religious education be grounded in and a shaper of people’s historical praxis.”21 This central concern of Christian religious education—lived Christian faith—resembles the aim of practical theology outlined in chapter two of this dissertation, that is, the support and formation of faithful discipleship: “Practical theology is deeply interested in the formation of believers... This naturally includes the communal practices that generate such formation and how ecclesial traditions interface with individual faithfulness. It also involves recognizing the larger social conditions and challenges that bear upon discipleship.”22 As noted in the previous section, theological education taken as a whole can be described as practical theology in a pedagogical mode. This can be said of theological education in both

21. Ibid., 21.

22. Cahalan and Nieman, 77.
academic and ecclesial settings, whether among scholars, ministers, or congregations. Such an understanding of theological education would include critical theological reflection on contemporary contexts, Christian narrative and tradition, and the action of the Holy Spirit, such as that described in the previous chapter. Groome’s definition of shared Christian praxis includes these concerns as well: “a participative and dialogical pedagogy in which people reflect critically on their own historical agency in time and place and on their sociocultural reality, have access together to Christian Story/Vision, and personally appropriate it in community with the creative intent of renewed praxis in Christian faith toward God’s reign for all creation.”

Groome’s shared Christian praxis provides five pedagogical “movements” within an “intentional teaching/learning event—class, seminar, workshop, pastoral encounter, sermon, retreat”—that has “some particular historical issue or life-centered theme as its focus of attention.” Each of these movements can be seen to have elements of the hermeneutic of discernment, and the tasks of practical theology, discussed in the previous chapter. This section of the present chapter seeks to explain how a hermeneutic of discernment can shape shared praxis approaches to education in ways which would allow such pedagogy to practice openness toward and interpretation of the movement of the Holy Spirit and other spirits.

The first movement in Groome’s shared praxis approach, “naming/expressing ‘present praxis,’” is normally preceded by a “focusing activity” that aims to engage participants “with shared focus in a generative theme for the teaching/learning event.” A

23. Groome 135.

24. Ibid., 146.
focusing activity may do this “by sponsoring a present action of it or by turning them
toward some aspect of their historical reality in the world to recognize the theme as it is
operative in present praxis.”25 After engaging in a focusing activity, participants are invited
into the naming or expressing of their own or society’s present praxis in relation to the
generative theme or symbol, “as they participate in and experience that praxis in their
historical context.”26 This movement is similar to Osmer’s empirical-descriptive task that
involved “priestly listening” in a continuum of formal and informal attending, wherein
those involved seek to gather “information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in
particular episodes, situations, or contexts.”27 Such a movement may also reflect the
beginnings of “thick description” in terms of Browning’s hermeneutic. Groome describes
the content of this movement as including such description on the part of learners:

Participants can depict how the theme is being lived or produced, dealt with or
realized, “going on” or “being done” in their own or in society’s praxis; they can
express their sentiments, attitudes, intuitions, or feelings toward it, the operative
values, meanings, and beliefs they see in present praxis of the theme, their
perceptions and assessments of it, their commitment regarding it, and so on.28

Importantly included in this descriptive movement are the sentiments, attitudes, intuitions,
and feelings of the participants regarding the present praxis of the generative theme,
providing important material for reflection on the action of the Holy Spirit through the
practice of discernment. Ignatian discernment, as described earlier, requires investigation

25. Ibid., 146. Groome’s discussion of a “generative theme” is influenced by Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of

26. Ibid.

27. Osmer, 4.

28. Groome, 146.
of the circumstances and contexts of persons and communities involved in decisions about
the faithfulness of present praxis. In order to interpret how the Holy Spirit might be acting
in a particular situation, a person or community must first observe and describe the
affective thoughts, feelings, and actions surrounding a context. In this way, one might begin
to distinguish between spiritual and non-spiritual causes of consolation and desolation.
Furthermore, the tasks of the first movement described above, within a hermeneutic of
discernment, begin to engage discernment of spirits—including societal structures and
both good and evil dispositions—and begin to discern how the Holy Spirit might be active
in the sentiments, attitudes, and intuitions of the participants. This discernment of spirits
is an important first step in practicing indifference in the use of sources of knowledge
outside of Christian tradition for interpreting present action in a given context. To this end,
in Ignatian approaches to discernment, spiritual exercises that engage creative imagination
serve to foster indifference, such as imagining oneself at the point of death, imagining
oneself on judgment day, or imagining another person or community in the same position
as the person or community making an election.29 Groome also provides for the expression
of creative imagination in depicting present praxis by allowing participants to engage in
“making and describing, in symbolizing, speaking, writing, gesturing, miming, dancing, that
is, through any form of human expression.”30 As will be noted later in this chapter,
pedagogical exercises that engage learners’ imaginations may help develop and form
practical wisdom.

29. Ignatius and Ganss, 164-165.
30. Ibid., 146-147.
The second movement of shared praxis is “critical reflection on present action”; this movement bears similarity to the interpretive task as described by Osmer. Groome writes that this movement intends to “deepen the reflective moment and bring participants to a critical consciousness of present praxis: its reasons, interests, assumptions, prejudices, and ideologies (reason); its sociohistorical and biographical sources (memory); its intended, likely, and preferred consequences (imagination).”31 This movement resembles the practical theological task of interpretation, wherein various arts and sciences are drawn upon in order to understand and explain the patterns and dynamics underlying the present praxis.32 This movement also resembles Browning’s understanding of descriptive theology, which engages with other sources of knowledge, notably the social sciences, in order to describe “the horizon of cultural and religious meanings that surround our religious and secular practices,” and wherein “Social-systemic, material, and psychological determinants are traced and explained as well as possible.”33 Central to the second movement is critical reflection, which Groome describes as helping to “raise people’s consciousness to ‘see’ their reality as it is and especially to see the poor, oppressed, and excluded, to recognize why things are the way they are, who is benefiting and who is suffering, and to imagine what people of Christian faith can and should do as agents of God’s reign in the world.”34

31. Groome, 147.
32. Osmer, 4.
34. Groome, 195.
Within a hermeneutic of discernment, an important piece of this critical reflection is beginning to discern the action of the Holy Spirit or other spirits in present praxis. As noted in the previous chapter, this does not obviate the use of social sciences in critical reflection on present action or the interpretation of a situation or context of practice, but it rightly keeps theological norms as central throughout the process of practical theological interpretation and pedagogy. The reality to which the second movement of shared praxis directs participants’ consciousnesses includes “not only evil spirits in the proper sense of the term, that is, created personal immaterial beings, but also the dispositions of evil within ourselves, the evil structures of society, all that can be a source of inner movements (of thoughts, affective feelings, and affective acts) contrary to what the Holy Spirit wishes to work in our lives through faith, love, and hope.”

This is not to suggest that the second movement of shared praxis need include the whole process of discernment, but that critical attention to and reflection on Spirit and spirits ought to be brought to participants’ consciousnesses. Christian tradition and narrative shapes how contexts and actions are understood, and for this reason, critical reflection on present action for the purpose of forming a Christian response requires an attempt to understand present action in light of the movement of spirits, since these spirits characterize not only “immaterial beings” but also dispositions, structures of society, and spirits of culture.

Movement three in Groome’s schema of shared praxis includes “making accessible Christian story and vision”: “Its Story symbolizes the faith life of the Christian community over history and in the present, as expressed through scriptures, traditions, liturgies, and

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35. Toner, 12.
so on. Its Vision reflects the promises and demands that arise from the Story to empower and mandate Christians to live now for the coming of God’s reign for all creation.”36 For Groome, Story and Vision cannot be conceived of separately, and he often writes this concept as Christian Story/Vision: “Vision, in this context and used alongside Story, connotes a renewing and creative process that invites discernment, choice, and decision. Together they imply a narrative practical language pattern of presentation and discourse.”37 In this sense, Groome’s conception of Story and Vision reflect my discussion throughout this dissertation of Christian narrative and tradition. Note that tradition was described as continually being formed and re-formed through the process of discernment and the formation of Christian practices in new contexts, and note also that the narrative and vision of Christian faith was described as rooted in the Gospel account of God’s revelation in Christ. As has also been maintained throughout this dissertation, discernment of Christian tradition requires making accessible marginalized narratives and traditions of Christian history that they might be heard and evaluated again in light of how Christian tradition has developed—this too, should be part of the third movement of shared praxis pedagogy. Regarding Christian Vision, Groome notes that it “refers the educator’s task to propose the historical import of Christian Story for the lives of participants. The educator is to raise up as Vision the promises and judgments of Christian faith, its gifts and responsibilities.”38

36. Groome, 147.
37. Ibid., 139.
38. Ibid., 217.
As noted in the previous chapter, “telling God’s story” is an important part of a hermeneutic of discernment. Therein, “the theological task is to discern how contemporary experience can be interpreted through the story that the Church tells about Jesus and to identify forms of practice that are coherent with this narrative.”

Christian tradition is integral to the telling of this story; it is an account of how the Gospel narrative and vision has been lived in different generations, among different peoples, and in different contexts. Groome adds, importantly, that the raising up of Christian Story/Vision does not aim to provide “easy answers to the problems and complexities people must face.” The practice of discernment and its hermeneutic for practical theology and theological education also does not seek to provide easy answers to problems, but seeks to respond as faithfully as possible to God’s vision through attention to the action of the Holy Spirit even within the most complex problems and situations of persons’ and communities’ lives. Such is the reason within the practice of discernment for critical theological and spiritual reflection on the contexts, narratives, traditions, affective acts and thoughts within present praxis before normative decisions can be made and practices transformed. A hermeneutic of discernment seeks to bring together present action and Christian story and vision, while discerning the action of the Holy Spirit, in theological education in ways similar to what


40. Groome identifies the content of movement three as theoria that is “not ahistorical metaphysical ideas but practical wisdom from the Christian community over time” (218). I have written of Christian tradition in a similar way, particularly noting how the kind of discernment discussed in this dissertation helps form Christian practice and tradition. If this content is indeed “practical wisdom from the Christian community over time,” then discernment of the Holy Spirit and of spirits has, and will continue to be, an essential part of this accumulated practical wisdom.

41. Groome, 217.
Groome describes: “Educators are to teach the Vision of Christian faith as something immediate and historical, in that it calls people to do God’s will on earth now as if God’s reign is at hand, and as something new and ultimate, in that it always calls people beyond their present horizons of praxis in faith until they finally rest in God.”42 Here we see the significance for theological education of eschatological thinking that is central to a hermeneutic of discernment. Within a hermeneutic of discernment, eschatological thinking is not simply an aspect of Christian story and vision to be correlated with interpretations of present action in the world, but it is a hermeneutical key to discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit and the vision of God within a particular context. The reign of God, central to Christian Story/Vision, provides an important normative element for interpreting and responding to present praxis in Christian theological education. For this reason, it should play a significant role in shared praxis pedagogy, particularly within a hermeneutic of discernment.

The fourth movement of shared Christian praxis presents a kind of climax of the pedagogy: “a dialectical hermeneutic to appropriate Christian Story/Vision to participants’ stories and visions.”43 The thrust of the hermeneutic of discernment described in the previous chapter is similar in its attempt to “discern how contemporary experience can be interpreted through the story that the Church tells about Jesus and to identify forms of practice that are coherent with this narrative.”44 In this movement, participants begin to

42. Ibid., (emphasis original).
43. Ibid., 147.
44. Graham, Walton, and Ward, 78.
reflect on questions regarding the interaction and relationship between present praxis identified in the first two movements with Christian Story/Vision made accessible in the third movement. Note here the emphasis on context—the particular present praxis identified in movements one and two, and the particular insights from Christian narrative and tradition identified in movement three. This is not a one-size-fits-all pedagogy, and it is reminiscent of the emphasis the practice of discernment places on particular contexts. Groome adds to the fourth movement eschatological reflection: “how are we to live more faithfully toward the Vision of God’s reign?”45 A focus on reading contexts and situations in light of Christian narrative and tradition concerning God’s vision for humanity, known especially through the discernment of the Holy Spirit and other spirits, remains paramount for theological inquiry and education. The purpose of movement four also points to the similarity of the practice of discernment and shared Christian praxis in helping to shape and form Christian tradition:

The essential purpose of movement 4 is to enable participants to critically appropriate the faith community’s Story/Vision to their own lives and contexts. By “appropriation” I mean that participants integrate Christian Story/Vision by personal agency into their own identity and understanding, that they make it their own, judge and come to see for themselves how their lives are to be shaped by it and how they are to be reshapers of its historical realization in their place and time.46

While the final purposes of movement four, with its emphasis on faithful practices and formation of lived Christian faith, may speak to the telos and tasks of practical theology that have been advocated throughout this dissertation and situated within a hermeneutic of discernment, Groome’s discussion of the dialectical hermeneutic often resembles the

45. Groome, 147.
46. Ibid., 250.
hermeneutic of mutually critical dialogue described by Browning and Tracy. Nevertheless, the normative elements of a hermeneutic of discernment described in the previous chapter, including its critical confessional correlation, is both fitting for a shared praxis approach and may even add something to it, especially since it takes into account discernment of the action of the Holy Spirit and other spirits. Lived faith in Christian tradition is not simply a matter of interpreting contexts and actions according to one worldview (that of the social sciences) and correlating them with a Christian worldview. The very interpretation of present contexts and actions must be guided and informed by Christian story and vision—narrative and tradition—from the beginning. I have described the descriptive and interpretive tasks of practical theology within a hermeneutic of discernment in this way. The formative virtues and principles of the practice of discernment shape Christian hermeneutics. In this sense, interpretation is not simply a method of inquiry, but a virtue (discernment) shaped and formed by Christian *habitus* and practice.

Groome describes the dialectical hermeneutics between present praxis and Christian Story/Vision found in movement four of shared Christian praxis pedagogy in the now familiar terms of Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons.” In describing this hermeneutic, Groome states that “the most complete expression of movement 4 is a two-way hermeneutics between stories/visions and Story/Vision that has moments of affirming and cherishing, questioning or refusing, and ‘moving beyond.’” Groome expresses this dialectical hermeneutic for pedagogy in a series of teaching/learning questions: “How does

47. Ibid., 252.
48. Ibid., 251.
this aspect of Christian faith affirm, question, and call us beyond present praxis? From our present lives, what do we find true, and what do we question in this symbol of our faith? And from this, how are we to live our Christian faith in the world?"49 The implication is a mutually critical dialogue between present praxis, as understood not only through persons’ own stories but also through the critical reflection engaged in movement three, and Christian Story/Vision identified in movement three. Groome relies on the work of Bernard Lonergan in order to describe this dialectic further: “Movement 4 encourages judgment in the Lonerganian sense, in that the understanding from one’s own praxis (movements 1 and 2) enters into dialogue with understanding that has arisen from the faith community over time (movement 3), and by a ‘critical reasonableness’ (Lonergan) both are evaluated in light of each other to discern what is true for one’s life.”50 A hermeneutic of discernment seeks to enter into a similar dialogue, however, as noted in the previous chapter, the use of non-Christian sources of knowledge should be engaged carefully and “indifferently” in movements two and four of shared praxis. Here we see that discernment of spirits is crucial in all the movements of shared Christian praxis in reflecting on how present praxis (movements one and two) and historical traditions and practices of the church (movement three) can be understood in light of the action of the Holy Spirit. Shared Christian praxis, like practical theological reflection, should be not

49. Ibid. Carol Lakey Hess recently has written similarly regarding correlation and religious education within the purview of practical theology. She discusses pedagogical approach as “questioning and wrestling.” She broadens some of the pedagogical questions to include “joining with those from other religious traditions to grapple with common religious questions (interreligious education)” (Carol Lakey Hess, “Religious Education” in The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, ed. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 299-307.

50. Ibid.
merely a method of interpretation, but a virtue grounded in the faith of Christian communities guided by the Holy Spirit.

One approach to understanding shared praxis, which Groome labels as an “inculturation” approach, maintains some of the concerns of a hermeneutic of discernment’s approach to correlation. Groome notes that the Second Vatican Council, in calling for “living exchange” between faith and culture, maintained “awareness that there is something of God in all human reality, that God is actively present and revealing Godself in the existential life situations of all peoples.” On the other hand, Groome also notes that “From the ‘faith’ perspective, however, inculturation must retain what is constitutive of Christian tradition without loss of its permanent legacy, what speaks to every time and place. Honoring both ‘partners’ in the relationship is a most difficult challenge, and Christians have not always proceeded wisely.”  

A hermeneutic of discernment answers the very question of what constitutes proceeding wisely for Christians in both its concern for description and interpretation of contemporary contexts and cultures that is guided by the discernment of spirits, and in its concern for the formation of practices in those contexts and cultures that embody God’s vision for the church and the world as understood through discernment of the Holy Spirit and Christian Story/Vision. Again, the emphasis of a hermeneutic of discernment for both practical theology and shared Christian praxis is not

on whether the Holy Spirit can be known in the “present action” of persons and
communities, but on how the Holy Spirit can be known in the “present action” of persons
and communities. The hermeneutic of discernment described in this dissertation outlines
how the Holy Spirit can be known in the present action of persons and communities, both
within practical theological study and shared praxis pedagogies in theological education.

Groome identifies the fifth, and final, movement of shared Christian praxis as
“decision/response for lived Christian faith,” wherein participants begin “—by God’s grace
working through their own discernment and volition—to make historical choices about the
praxis of Christian faith in the world.” The expression of this response may be done
individually or as a group, and its form and content may be “primarily or variously
cognitive, affective, and behavioral and may pertain to the personal, interpersonal, or
sociopolitical levels of their lives.” The central concern of shared Christian praxis is much
the same as the concern of practical theology described in this dissertation: to inform, to
resource, and to form discipleship. The approach to theological education described in this
chapter aims also to inform and to form future scholars, teachers, ministers, church
leaders, and faithful practitioners for critical theological reflection and the practice of
discernment. A hermeneutic of discernment within shared praxis pedagogy teaches
toward this end by allowing participants to grow in reflecting on their contemporary
context, reflecting on Christian tradition and practice, discerning the movement of the Holy

52. Ibid., 148.
53. Ibid.
Spirit and vision of God, and envisioning transformed practice and decision. Groome explains the process of shared Christian praxis thusly:

In gist, a conative pedagogy reflects an epistemic ontology; as such, it engages the consciousness that arises from people’s whole “being” in place and time (movements 1 and 2) and the wisdom and traditions of learning from their community over time (movement 3) and enables participants to hold these two sources of wisdom in a dialectical hermeneutics for appropriation (movement 4) and decision (movement 5).  

An approach to theological education that makes use of practical theological reflection, shared Christian praxis, and a hermeneutic of discernment may help students grow in wisdom and discernment and faithful practice within the various contexts and traditions within which they will teach, minister, and lead in the church and the world. Groome expresses this well by noting that “a separation of ‘education’ from ‘formation’ is false and debilitating to its purposes (see chapter 1) and intent of conation or wisdom... To do otherwise is to settle for a narrowly cognitivist epistemology that separates ‘knowing’ from ‘being’ instead of honoring an epistemic ontology as the foundation for education in Christian faith.”  

Education in the sense of formation requires entrance into critical, participative reflection (in active or passive ways) on a habitus of lived faith. A hermeneutic of discernment within a shared praxis approach is one way to enter into such a formative approach to theological education.

54. Ibid., 217-218 (emphasis original). “Conation” is the word that Groome gives for the learning outcome of Christian religious education, for which wisdom is “an approximate synonym and a term more resonant with Christian tradition” (27).

55. Ibid., 194. As in other aspects of his pedagogy, Groome is influenced here by Freire as well, particularly in the emphasis on praxis as aimed toward transformation (Freire, 51) and the emphasis on the historical being of learners. Freire, 81-84.
Skills Engaged and Learned in Discernment

The pedagogical aims discussed in this chapter include the formation of skills and habits of theological reflection and ministry through critical, participative reflection on lived faith within a Christian *habitus*. Practical wisdom and a hermeneutic of discernment in practical theological reflection within the Christian tradition are constituted by more than method, but by the virtues, affections, and dispositions embodied by communities and by the foundational narrative and traditions of Christian faith. In this section, I would like to highlight three skills particularly engaged through the practice of discernment in theological education: 1) reading contexts (contextual education), 2) imagination (creative education), and 3) self-implication (transformative education). Through the interpretative processes described above regarding practical theological reflection and shared Christian praxis within a hermeneutic of discernment, theological education may help to form scholars, teachers, ministers, religious leaders, and faithful practitioners that are knowledgeable of Christian Story/Vision, creative in their reflection upon Christian tradition and the contexts of contemporary communities of the church and the world, and able to integrate their knowledge in a way of life that is attentive to the Spirit and mindful of present praxis.

A renewed emphasis on the learning of skills for ministry and critical reflection in theological education has developed significantly in the past ten years, and has been voiced by scholars such as, among others, Bonnie Miller-McLemore and John Witvliet. This emphasis is born out of the interest among many practical theologians in formation for
wisdom, *habitus*, and Farley’s concern for a more integrated understanding of *theologia*. In reflecting on the pedagogical aims of theological education, Miller-McLemore points to the “academic paradigm”: “Had Farley named the reduction of theology to the rational, orderly study of doctrine the ‘academic paradigm’ or the ‘cognitive captivity’ of theology perhaps some of the problem might have been alleviated.”56 Such reduction does a disservice to students who will teach, minister, and live in a world of particular contexts, situations, communities, and practices. This leads Miller-McLemore to advocate for reclaiming “theological know-how” in theological education for the “formation of wise persons rather than only intelligible theories.”57 Doing this requires engagement in critical theological reflection on practices and their contexts, and reflection on “the connection between know-how and other kinds of knowledge, between knowledge and action, and between practical knowing and the kind of knowing necessary for knowing God,” and how “different areas of study contribute to its enhancement.”58

Miller-McLemore argues that this “pedagogy of know-how” needs to be explored not only in seminary programs, but also in “doctoral institutions that shape teachers of ministry students.”59 The emphasis is not only on acquiring knowledge of theological theory, but on the acquiring of skills for critical and creative theological reflection and


59. Ibid.
ministry through engagement in and reflection on practices of the church and the world: “Students must engage in *phronetic* theological movement from ‘practice to theory and back again,’ as practical theologian Don Browning says, or, more specifically, from ‘theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices.’”60 This “phronetic theological movement” in the Christian tradition may be conceived of within the practice of discernment; engaging students in the practice of discernment helps to form theological know-how and practical wisdom.

The first particular skill cultivated by the practice of discernment in theological education is reading contexts. The skill of reading contexts is closely aligned with the use of contextual education and case studies within theological education. A hermeneutic of discernment emphasizes not only the description and interpretation of contexts, practices, and communities, but also the affective and spiritual movements discernable within those contexts, practices, and communities. Reflecting on the use of case studies, which may be “historical, cross-cultural, and local,” John Witvliet notes, “Case studies expand our awareness of the diversity of ministry practices, ground theoretical discussions in everyday life, help us perceive the complex interrelated dynamics involved in real life, and train new skills for perceiving what is at stake in any given situation.”61

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Contexts are often complex, and as discussed in this dissertation, a hermeneutic of discernment in practical theology (and theological education) requires a thick description and critical, theological and spiritual interpretation of contexts. Here, the tools of qualitative and ethnographic research may serve students, ministers, and scholars well and may be included in more formal descriptive modes of practical theological reflection and the practice of discernment. As Witvliet points out, “Conversations explore not only actions, but also motives, social and economic influences, and implicit theological convictions”; exploration of these actions, motives, influences, and convictions is crucial for discerning the influence and movements of the Holy Spirit and other spirits. Pedagogically, the aim is to form skills for wise discernment in students, especially perception and intuition: “the point of this work is to train perception, to equip students with significant and instructive questions with which to habitually interrogate their own contemporary practice. In other words, we need to form in ourselves and our students a kind of pastoral intuition...” By practicing discernment in relation to case studies, students begin to inhabit and learn the skills of perception and intuition.

The reflections above also highlight the important place of contextual education, also known as field education, in theological education. Contextual education practices highlight the contextual nature of theological theory, and require students to pay attention to “complex layers of meaning that are embedded” in situations and practices of the church and the world, while teaching students “how to weave a thread of theological

62. Ibid., 135.

63. Ibid.
interpretation through those many layers.”64 Contextual education practices allow students to confront and reflect on what is at stake for local and global societies and communities in the practices, theories, traditions, and narratives that they study.

Contextual education practices engage students’ abilities to navigate the general and the particular: students “bring the important principles they learn in coursework into the dialogical situations contextual education creates.”65 Similar to the use of case studies, contextual education practices help form skills in students pertinent to the practice of discernment. Students learn to read contexts as they are engaged within them, rather than treating these contexts of practice as objects under a microscope. Furthermore, bringing the practice of discernment and its hermeneutic to reflection on case studies and contextual education experiences allows students to reflect on the action of the Holy Spirit in various situations and to form practices that are faithful to the vision of God in particular situations and among particular communities. Students learn to practice wise discernment by actually engaging in the practice of discernment and reflecting on that practice in real-life situations of ministry and practical theological scholarship.

The practice of discernment in theological education exercises students’ imaginations, and the exercise of students’ imaginations forms skills for wise discernment and theological reflection within students. The four weeks of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius invite the exercitant into imaginative contemplations of scenes from the life of Christ. This engaged approach forms a habit of being within the exercitant, from which he

64. Emily Click, “Contextual Education” in The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology, 351.

65. Ibid., 354.
or she is able to consider the situations, contexts, and motives surrounding an act of discernment or life choice. Ignatius compares this imaginative engagement to more logocentric engagement: imaginative engagement “brings more spiritual relish and spiritual fruit than if the one giving the Exercises had lengthily explained and amplified the meaning of the history. For, what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savoring them interiorly.”

Ignatius also notes that these exercises engage the affective thoughts and acts of the exercitant, such that he or she can begin to observe the desolations and consolations partly by which persons and communities come to discern the action of the Holy Spirit and other spirits. As I have argued, this is particularly important for practical theological reflection when deliberating what actions a person or community ought to take in a particular situation and context.

The practice of discernment may engage and exercise students’ imaginations, and the development of their imaginations may help strengthen their practice of discernment. As noted earlier, Ignatian approaches to discernment include imaginative exercises in envisioning another person or community that is facing the same decision of the current person or community, or imagining oneself at the end of one’s life or before God at the eschaton. Groome makes a similar point regarding the importance of creative imagination in the process of shared praxis: “Imagination is rooted in history and begins with present reality—it is not mere fantasy. Nevertheless, it has a creative capacity that brings people to perceive what can be and should be, to fashion new possibilities beyond the ‘givens’ of life;

66. Ignatius and Ganss, 121.
in this way it fuels our moral impetus to do what should be done and to create things as they ought to be.\textsuperscript{67} The spiritual exercises throughout Ignatius of Loyola’s text and within his rules for discernment are formative of excipients’ capacities for judgment. They highlight the importance of imagination and affectivity in practicing wise discernment.

Similarly, Jana Noel has aptly argued that \textit{phronesis} requires \textit{phantasia}:

To begin the practical reasoning process, the image-production sense of \textit{phantasia} comes into play, during which an individual lays out ‘an ideal’ as the end good of reasoning. And then in the \textit{kritika}, interpretive sense, the individual compares the options and makes a judgement about the best action to take. Thus, \textit{phantasia} ‘prepares the desire’ at the beginning of an action deliberation, and it is involved at each step of practical reasoning as it helps to compare and make judgements about the different possible steps to take on the way to that end. And finally, the beliefs, desires, images, end goods, perceptions and interpretations that are involved in this sense of \textit{phronesis} are examined through both deliberation and insight.\textsuperscript{68}

The practice of discernment and its hermeneutic, as described in this dissertation, exercises both \textit{phantasia} and \textit{kritika} as described here by Noel. It is rooted in narratives of faith and Christian \textit{habitus} in considering good ends, it engages imaginative and critical interpretive thinking regarding historical and contemporary contexts and practices and in weighing alternatives for choice in light of indifference and eschatological thinking, and it engages imaginative thinking when considering strategic proposals for transformed practice.

Emphasis on the importance of imagination and affectivity for knowledge and discernment leads to a consideration of the importance of self-implication in theological education. The importance of affectivity in knowledge and discernment points to the

\textsuperscript{67} Groome, 196.

personal and communal stakes involved in theological reflection. Following along the same line as my reflections on communal- and self-implication and discernment in the previous chapter, I wish to note here the importance of self-implication for transformative theological education and how it is engaged through the practice of discernment. As noted in the previous chapter regarding self-implication, Douglas Burton-Christie’s article on the “Cost of Interpretation” argues that even critical reflection on a subject of inquiry follows from loving a subject and being personally involved in its study: “we begin to know a subject by loving it.”69 The desert elders’ approach to understanding Scripture by living into it in the context of their own lives is analogous to what Burton-Christie calls a “critical-participative approach”70 to the study of Christian spirituality. Within a critical-participative approach to theological study, the student’s own questions and contexts help frame the interpretative process, while the texts themselves may speak a transformative word into the life of the student. Such transformation is the “cost of interpretation” that any student takes up when he or she is invested in the study of theology and spirituality. This approach to the study of Christian spirituality involves “careful critical analysis,” which Burton-Christie likens to the process of discernment.71

An approach to teaching and learning that involves the practice and hermeneutic of discernment would include critical reflection on the contexts, theories, and practices of

69. Burton-Christie, 100.

70. Ibid., 106.

71. Ibid. “They also remind us that there is real value and purpose to careful critical analysis (analogous to the demanding critical process the monks called discernment of spirits) of the questions under consideration.”
lived Christian faith in the self-implicating way described by Burton-Christie. Teaching-learning objectives of critical theological reflection on the embodiment of Christian *habitus* and meaning may be addressed by attending to the study of theology in critical and participative ways, which are engaged in the process of discernment. Just as the process of discernment requires both critical and contextual theological analysis and self-implicating reflection, so might pedagogical approaches in theology—particularly practical theology. Discernment and its hermeneutic engage students in critical reflection in the contexts of their own historical praxis, as Groome suggests, and in relation to the historical and contemporary tradition-constituted practices of the church and the world. Furthermore, self-implication in critical, participative reflection serves as an important point of entry and dialogue for students from non-Christian traditions at seminaries and divinity schools. These students bring to the study of lived faith in the Christian tradition their own experiences of faith and pre-understandings of Christian tradition. Within this dialogue, they are able to form skills and habits proper to leadership and practice in their own traditions. In addition to the critical-contextual analysis of texts and practices, students may be encouraged to relate their own experiences as part of the explanation for their interest in a topic. Though reflection on personal experience does not make up the whole of critical theological study, it is a significant and inescapable part. It is the place from which students, teachers, ministers, and scholars approach their study of theology and spirituality, and it is the place at which the objects of their study open themselves to them.

The above skills (reading contexts, imagination, and self-implication) engaged through the practice of discernment are significant for theological education. These
skills—formed and engaged through the practice of discernment, which exercises critical, participative theological and spiritual reflection on contexts, practices, communities, persons, affections, and the movement of the Holy Spirit and other spirits—are important for ministry, teaching, leadership, and scholarship. As theological education seeks to attend to the exercise and formation of these skills, the practice of discernment can work toward that end.

Discernment and the Study of Christian Spirituality

In chapter three, I discussed the inseparable connection between spirituality and theology. Indeed, this was an important point of intersect for discussing the practice and hermeneutic of discernment as central to theological reflection, particularly practical theological reflection. In this section, I will discuss how the practice of discernment and its hermeneutic, as understood through the lens of practical theological reflection (chapter four), may inform the study of spirituality. For this, I am indebted to the work of Claire Wolfteich, who compared approaches to the study of Christian spirituality with practical theological method.72 While a hermeneutic of discernment may inform the study of other areas traditionally associated with practical theology, which I point out next chapter, in this section I wish to explore in particular the relationship between it and the study of Christian spirituality, most notably because the mutual influence of spirituality and practical theology, especially when considered through the lens of discernment, may bear much fruit

72. Wolfteich, 138. She writes, “Don Browning’s four movements of a fundamental practical theology provide a point of reference here. His first three movements of descriptive theology, historical theology, and systematic theology bear a (rough) resemblance to the anthropological, historical-contextual, and theological approaches within the discipline of spirituality.”
for both disciplines, including the various areas of study traditionally associated with practical theology. This section will propose a definition for the study of Christian spirituality and will describe this definition in light of other definitions and approaches to the study of Christian spirituality. In doing so, this section shows how a hermeneutic of discernment in practical theology can contribute to definitions of and approaches to the study of Christian spirituality, particularly in light of how discernment attends to and critically reflects on the action of the Holy Spirit and the faithfulness of Christian practice.

The academic discipline of spirituality has gained increasing attention, and perhaps increasing confusion, in the past twenty or thirty years. Scholars have debated and discussed both the definition of spirituality and its study (its definition, subject matter, and method) and the relationship between theology and spirituality. As with the discussion of practical-theological methodology in chapter two, examination of the aim or telos of different approaches to the study of spirituality may reveal how these different approaches understand the definition, subject matter, and method of the study of spirituality. This dissertation defines the aim or telos of the study of spirituality as ensuring and enabling faithful spiritual practices in one’s context, much like this dissertation’s definition of the aim of practical theology. This definition echoes the concerns of Wolfteich, who notes that the study of spirituality seeks to reflect critically on the implicit and explicit spiritualities embedded in theory-laden practices with the aim of transforming them toward greater faithfulness in their contexts.73 Other scholars, such as Phillip Sheldrake, Matthew Ashley,

73. Ibid.
and Bradley Hanson have echoed these same concerns.\textsuperscript{74} This section will argue that a practical theological approach, particularly one that incorporates a hermeneutic of discernment, best serves these formative aims of the study of Christian spirituality.

Multiple definitions of spirituality and its study abound, and there is likely no consensus on a “clear and universally acceptable definition” of spirituality, but like methods in practical theology, conversation among and complementary of approaches describe the discipline at present.\textsuperscript{75} This dissertation defines the study of Christian spirituality as critical, theological reflection on lived Christian faith (its practices, dispositions of character, and experiences). Furthermore, if spirituality is something lived, something one practices (as Matthew Ashley has contended),\textsuperscript{76} then focusing on critical, theological reflection on practices in the study of Christian spirituality helps to define better the \textit{formative aim} of the study of spirituality as ensuring and enabling faithful practices.

While the above definition focuses on lived Christian faith and its practices, the seeds of a practical theological approach to the study of Christian spirituality are present in other common definitions, such as Sandra Schneiders’s (“the project of life-integration

\textsuperscript{74} Sheldrake, op. cit.; Ashley op. cit.; and Bradley Hanson, “Spirituality as Spiritual Theology” in \textit{Modern Christian Spirituality: Methodological and Historical Essays}, Bradley Hanson, ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 45-52.


\textsuperscript{76} Ashley, 161. Ashley also notes that Christian spirituality studies Christian practice—practices that help form one into a relationship with God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.
through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives”77). Furthermore, important issues in the study of Christian spirituality can be raised through consideration of such definitions. Widely inclusive definitions like Schneiders’s are beneficial in the sense that they are broad enough to invite interreligious dialogue, even with “secular” spiritualities, and a wide range of research topics and approaches.78 Such a definition, however, is so broad that it might tend to ignore the particularity of religious traditions, narratives, and the communities that embody these through their practices. Such broad definitions focus more on a general human longing than on a way of life practiced by particular people of faith: “One problem with general definitions of spirituality common in this approach is that they often reduce the particularities of traditions to a vague generic longing or lifestyle, rather than a deeply rooted way of life that one learns in community. In this way, they obscure the highly contextual and communal nature of spirituality.”79 Furthermore, for this reason, such a definition makes it hard to concretize a formative end to the study of spirituality. Nevertheless, there are implicit formative and normative elements within generic definitions, which are also not as neutral as they seem. Definitions of spirituality must be forthright and critically reflective of the implicit theologies within them, because such theologies ultimately come to form persons and communities and their practices. Matthew Ashley has rightly pointed out that “self-transcendence,” “life-integration,” and “ultimate value” all have implied theologies and spiritualities (in some

78. Wolfteich 131.
79. Ibid., 132.
cases “anti-theologies,” according to Milbank)—and therefore, narratives, traditions, communities, and practices—standing behind them. In light of this, as I noted earlier about theology and practical wisdom, this dissertation is specifically concerned with Christian spirituality, recognizing as well the plurality of traditions within Christianity.

Following these issues of definition, a brief examination of various approaches to the study of Christian spirituality will help bring into focus the merits of a practical theological approach in comparison to these other approaches, particularly with respect to how a practical theological approach, within a hermeneutic of discernment, furthers the formative aims and critical methods that define the study of Christian spirituality. Subset to an understanding of a definition of the study of spirituality is the material object that is studied in Christian spirituality. Some writers such as Schneiders and McGinn focus on experience while other writers such as Ashley and Sheldrake focus on practice. Schneiders identifies the material object of the study of spirituality as “spiritual life as experience” while Ashley writes about a “constellation of practices” because “spirituality is something that one does.” These two understandings can be reconciled in some cases, especially when one attends to the relationship between experiences and practices. Note here what I wrote about “raw experience” in chapter three, arguing that it is difficult to

80. Ashley, 167. Ashley writes, “I do not intend to deny the legitimacy of these sorts of definitions, but it is important to note that these terms are themselves part of an intellectual (often overtly theological) tradition that takes its inspiration from one spirituality: Christian Neoplatonism in general, more specifically, the Eckhartian tradition.”


83. Ashley, 160-161.
have access to (perhaps impossible), as both Sheldrake and Ashley admit.\textsuperscript{84} Any experience must be understood against the backdrop of a life—its narratives, commitments, and practices—for it to be deemed “spiritual.” One only comes to know an experience as “spiritual” if one has prior theological convictions, which lead one to understand that experience precisely as a “spiritual” experience. In light of this, Bernard McGinn, following Walter Principe, rightly identifies “three levels of spirituality”—(1) the real/existential level (the experience itself), (2) the formation of a spirituality based on the person’s or community’s (Theresa of Avila/ Spanish Carmelite) experience, understanding, and teaching of spirituality, and (3) the study of the first and second levels by scholars.\textsuperscript{85} This is a useful schema, so long as one understands that studying the real/existential level raises the concerns expressed above about raw experience.

A focus on practices in the study of Christian spirituality allows for a practical theological approach, which best serves the definition of the study of Christian spirituality in this dissertation (critical, theological reflection on lived Christian faith that aims toward ensuring and enabling faithful practices). Such an approach would incorporate description, historical-contextual reflection, normative theological reflection, and pragmatic proposals for transformative practice. Indeed, the seeds of this approach already lie in other approaches to the study of Christian spirituality, as Wolfteich has shown.\textsuperscript{86} Wolfteich has described these approaches to the study of Christian spirituality as reminiscent of practical

\textsuperscript{84} Sheldrake, 21 and Ashley, 164.


\textsuperscript{86} Wolfteich, 138.
theological tasks. The following describes these approaches and discusses the advantages of a practical theological approach, particularly one within a hermeneutic of discernment.

Four different approaches might be identified in the study of Christian spirituality: the Anthropological/Hermeneutical (Schneiders), the Historical-Contextual (Principe), the Theological (described in McGinn’s writing) and the Practical-Theological approach (Wolfteich). I have discussed the anthropological approach above in discussing Schneiders’s definition of spirituality, which focuses on the description of spirituality in broad terms of human experience. The benefit of this approach is that it invites the use of the social sciences for description and interpretation. The drawbacks were also noted—it tends to ignore the particularities of traditions in favor of a generic human longing. Schneiders notes that spirituality and theology are partner disciplines, but I argue that this view seems to separate spirituality from theology too much. There are implicit theologies within different spiritualities, and there are implicit spiritualities within various theological theories. The two are so necessarily intertwined in Christian spirituality, I find it hard to define them clearly as wholly different disciplines. Claire Wolfteich, among others, has noted that theology brings an important critical and normative aspect to the study of Christian spirituality. The Historical-Contextual approach brings an important contextualization to the study of a historical or contemporary spirituality. As Principe has noted, one cannot understand a particular spirituality apart from the historical, social, and theological context within which that spirituality was developed and is currently

87. Schneiders.

88. Wolfteich, 133-134.
sustained. McGinn, however, has rightly noted that the Historical-Contextual approach “cannot, of itself, address normative questions.” For that, there must be an element of theological reflection. Many scholars of Christian spirituality, however, do not want theological theory to dominate the study of spirituality, and I would contend as well that spirituality should not be understood simply as the application of theories already worked out in systematic theology.

In light of the various approaches described above, I contend that the Practical-Theological approach to the study of Christian spirituality described by Wolfteich has important advantages for two reasons: first, it combines elements of the other three approaches, and second, it best incorporates the teleological aim of the study of spirituality that I discussed above. Wolfteich’s presentation of such an approach follows Don Browning’s method of practical theology, consisting of four movements. The anthropological movement or task is descriptive and uses the social sciences to give a thick description of contemporary practice. The historical movement or task provides critical reflection on the normative texts of the Christian tradition. The systematic theological movement or task within a practical theological approach to the study of Christian spirituality engages a critical correlation of the description of present practice with the texts of Christian tradition. Then, a strategic movement or task seeks to propose directions for the deepening of spiritual practice toward greater faithfulness within the particular context. This is not to say that all scholars of spirituality must be practical theologians or

89. Principe, 43.

90. McGinn, 34.
all must study spirituality in this way—something that Wolfteich herself notes as well. I do think, however, that this is the best method for realizing the aim of the study of Christian spirituality described above, that is, ensuring and enabling faithful Christian practice.

Having noted the advantages of a practical theological approach to the study of Christian spirituality, pointing out the significance and contribution of a hermeneutic of discernment for the study of Christian spirituality is not an insurmountable task, particularly since Christian spirituality centers on the ways of God known in attending to the Holy Spirit.

The role that the practice of discernment and its hermeneutic plays in the study of Christian spirituality follows the principles outlined in the previous chapter regarding the tasks of practical theology in relation to the practice of discernment. The descriptive and interpretive tasks in the study of Christian spirituality should reflect on the actions of the Holy Spirit in some particular context(s); the historical task should reflect on normative texts and practices within Christian tradition in the ways discussed within this dissertation (the mutability of tradition and its nature as a body of practices); the theological or normative task and the pragmatic or strategic task should reflect on the relationship between the action of the Holy Spirit, the practices of the church, the particularities of context, and the narrative of the Gospel. Within all these tasks, the principles of a hermeneutic of discernment (close and careful attention to context, discernment of spirits, “telling God’s story,” eschatological vision, and indifference) are engaged. Such a study is also careful to recognize that “a given spirituality admits of various degrees of participation, depending on the extent to which the entire constellation of practices is embraced (not everyone is ready to kiss leprous sores), and the degree to which they are
integrated into and transform the person’s broader life.” 91 A hermeneutic of discernment for the study of Christian spirituality takes into account the particularity of context, the variety of Christian traditions, and ends of discipleship known from God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

A spirituality is a way of life, a way of being. Christian spirituality then is embodied by practices and historically constituted by the church past, present, and future. As such, it is, as Ashley has noted, an ecclesial reality. Christian spirituality seeks to “incorporate one more deeply into the body of Christ.” 92 The study of Christian spirituality seeks to support this habitus through critical theological reflection on lived Christian faith with the view toward ensuring and enabling faithful practice. This study is critical, because it is not simply the application of theory. It seeks to reflect on explicit and implicit spiritualities with the aim of enabling more faithful spiritualities within their contexts. It is in this sense that the study of Christian spirituality is like the practice of Christian discernment: one studies spirituality in order to seek and share wisdom. For this reason, the dissertation’s argument both began with reflection on spirituality and now has ended with reflection on spirituality. The study of Christian spirituality evinces an important connection between wisdom, practice, discernment, and the lives and contexts of real persons and communities seeking to know and love God. This is why it is important for all practical theological studies to attend to some reflection on spirituality.

91. Ashley, 161.
92. Ibid.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

Hermeneutics and Discernment in Theology, Ministry, and Christian Praxis

This dissertation principally is about hermeneutics. Hermeneutics—interpretation—is involved in every aspect of a life of faith. Every decision as well as every experience involves some act of interpretation. As David Tracy has argued, “Interpretation seems a minor matter, but it is not. Every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting. To understand at all is to interpret.”¹ In both everyday and academic theology, in a church, in a classroom, or on a street corner, interpretation is occurring. In this sense this dissertation has discussed the importance of hermeneutics and interpretation in theology—in ministry, teaching, scholarship, leadership, and everyday practice and experience.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, in Christian tradition interpretation is best understood in terms of discernment and the central importance of being led by the Holy Spirit in interpreting, judging, and deciding. Christians are given hope in scripture and throughout the history of the church that the Spirit is speaking to them in their own lives and through their own contexts and is leading them to God in Christ. Christian interpretation and practical wisdom is made possible by the grace of the Holy Spirit working in persons and communities, and the practice of discernment allows persons and communities to be aware of the Spirit’s movements and faithfully follow her promptings.

toward God. Practical theology seeks to discuss and model *how* discernment might be practiced by Christian persons and communities. Practical theology, through a process of discernment, seeks to form and inform, ensure and enable, Christian practices that are faithful to the vision of God in particular contexts. The pneumatological grounding of Christian hermeneutics and practical theology cannot be ignored. I have argued throughout this dissertation that interpretation is not merely a matter of method and practical reasoning, but rather that interpretation requires practical wisdom and wise discernment, which are as much about virtue and formation as they are about methods of inquiry. The practice of discernment, particularly within practical theological reflection, brings together virtue and method, formation and critical reflection. It is important for both academic and everyday theology, and the practices of scholars, ministers, church leaders, and lay congregants alike. This requires critical reflection on contemporary context and Christian tradition, so that pastoral responses and the formation of Christian praxis might be faithful to the vision of God known through the Holy Spirit, particular to the needs of a people in a specific context. As described throughout this dissertation, the practice of discernment, in interpreting the movement of the Holy Spirit, relies on a thorough understanding of persons’ and communities’ life contexts. Within a hermeneutic of discernment, attention to local contexts and communities is crucial for understanding the movement of the Spirit and forming practices in those communities that are faithful to the vision of God. Recall that Benedict stipulates in his Rule that narratives of faith must be heard from everyone, especially the youngest, regarding decisions pertaining to the community. This points to the importance of hearing every voice in a community’s practice
of discernment, and it is not founded on liberal democratic principles, but rather on the
conviction that God speaks through the Holy Spirit working in the lives of the weak, the
lowly, the despised, and those “of no account” (1 Cor. 27-28). These narratives and
contexts must be taken into account and understood in light of Christian scripture and
tradition when discerning the action of the Holy Spirit within a particular situation.

The central place of the Holy Spirit in Christian discernment and interpretation
should not be denied. As noted earlier in this dissertation, if persons or communities have
good assurance that the Holy Spirit is leading them, then those persons or communities can
have good assurance that they are following God’s will. It is a matter of faith to know that
the Spirit is speaking in the church and the world, but what remains necessary is to
investigate how, and according to what norms, persons and communities come to
recognize the Spirit’s workings, and thereby come to understand God’s vision within a
particular context. This understanding is well expressed in the Roman Catholic document
from the Second Vatican Council, Gaudium et Spes: “the Church seeks but a solitary goal: to
carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit. ...To carry out
such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of
interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (3-4). This dissertation has attempted to
show that, in such different eras as those of the desert elders, Benedict, and Ignatius of
Loyola, the practice of discernment and the formation of Christian practices have included
contextual theological interpretation and normative reflection. Such a hermeneutic of

2. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes, in the Vatican Digital
Library, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-
discernment continues to this day, and is central to the work of practical theology and ministry. That is not to say that this dissertation presents the only viable approach to practical theology, disregarding the important contributions of mutually-critical hermeneutic approaches, liberative praxis approaches, and empirical approaches to the discipline. Rather, this dissertation seeks to contribute to the discipline a reflection on the place of the Holy Spirit in practical theological hermeneutics and method, particularly in light of those approaches to practical theology that see its aim and task as the formation of faithful discipleship in contemporary contexts. It does not do this from the viewpoint of a systematic, theory-focused theology of the Holy Spirit and Christian pneumatology, but rather from the viewpoint of the theory-laden practice of discernment within Christian tradition, particularly the formative hermeneutic of the desert elders, practical decision-making and formation in the Benedictine Rule, and spiritual discernment, discernment of God’s will, and decision-making in the Spiritual Exercises. This dissertation therefore studies discernment as a practice, a virtue, and a hermeneutic and considers these characterizations to be inseparable in practical theology, theological education, and the study of Christian spirituality.

This study cannot foresee where each person’s or community’s exercise of discernment in a particular situation will lead, however, I hope that some of the principles of discernment discussed in this dissertation may help guide persons and communities in the process of discernment, whether formal or informal, or academic, ecclesial, or

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3. This is an important impetus for considering future work by myself or others that may stem from this study, for instance, a practical theological study of a particular community’s or person’s practice of discernment, or the use of a hermeneutic of discernment in a particular practical theological study.
clerical. In the end, the process of discernment is not about "the need to know answers" but about growing in loving relationship with God through the practice of awareness and through faithfully attending to the Holy Spirit in the context of a community's or person's own life. It is in this sense that the practice of discernment allows persons and communities "to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). Indeed, this can be a "dreadful thing," but it is ultimately a decision of love, rooted in faith in the God who loves and seeks to communicate with humanity.

Chapter Review

This dissertation has sought to address the tasks of practical theology, with attention to how the practice of discernment might inform such tasks. The tasks of practical theology are taken up in the practice of discernment with its attention to contextual description and interpretation, normative reflection, and faithful response. The theological contexts of ministry, teaching, and research involve in different ways this practice of discernment. The first chapter of this dissertation introduced the study, and each proceeding chapter has contributed to its argument that the practice of discernment in Christian tradition may provide a hermeneutic for practical theological reflection,


5. Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman summarize these tasks and contexts as the formation of discipleship, ministry, teaching, and research with attention to "current events" and "concrete settings," seeking to "discern existing situations of life and propose eventual directions for action" (Cahalan and Nieman, 66).
particularly for those approaches to practical theology that aim toward the formation of faithful practices and Christian discipleship.

The second chapter presented an account of some methodological assumptions and approaches in practical theology, particularly regarding the understanding of practical wisdom in these approaches. Of particular interest were two approaches common in the American context of practical theology: a mutual critical approach and a critical confessional approach. The tasks, aims, and ends of these approaches were briefly described, and whereas the first engaged a mutually critical hermeneutic of correlation, the approach described in this dissertation has been a hermeneutic of discernment. The second chapter served to locate a hermeneutic of discernment within a critical confessional approach in comparison with other valid approaches. The second chapter also noted some common advantages and disadvantages of these approaches. Critical confessional approaches have been criticized as well. They have been criticized for not attending well enough to “thick understandings” of particular contexts and cultures and for discussing practice in abstraction. A hermeneutic of discernment tries to ameliorate these concerns by emphasizing the importance of the real-life contexts of persons and communities for discernment of the Holy Spirit and spirits, for practical theological reflection, and for the formation of Christian practices. In this way, a hermeneutic of discernment can be seen as a bridge between the mutual critical approach, which highlights the importance of contextual interpretation and use of social sciences, and the critical confessional approach,


which highlights the importance of forming distinctive Christian practice within the church according to the confession of Christian faith. As described in this dissertation, a hermeneutic of discernment seeks to attend to “connections between the lived and the tradition.”⁸ In this way, among others, a hermeneutic of discernment contributes to practical theological methods.

The second chapter also dealt with the connections among practical theology, practical wisdom, and discernment. In discussing the aims, tasks, and ends of practical theology, as well as understandings of praxis, many practical theologians have recourse to the philosophical category of *phronesis*. The second chapter discussed the understanding of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, according to Aristotle, Alasdair MacIntyre, Don Browning, and other practical theologians such as Craig Dykstra. This part of chapter two sought to describe practical wisdom as essentially tradition-constituted, and therefore sought to characterize practical wisdom in Christian tradition as discernment. Christian persons and communities embody practical wisdom in and through Christian scripture, tradition, and practices. Practical wisdom, which seeks to bring together the particular and the universal, is specifically realized in Christian tradition through the practice of discernment, which seeks to understand the vision of God within a particular context by attending to the action of the Holy Spirit in that context. For this reason, the second chapter concluded with reflection on Christian spirituality, and the relationship between discernment and practical wisdom. This reflection led to a discussion of traditions of discernment within Christian spirituality in the next chapter.

⁸ Ibid.
Chapter three presented three traditions of discernment within Christianity—the Desert Mothers and Fathers, Benedict of Nursia, and Ignatius of Loyola. This chapter sought to describe central aspects of discernment as a practice, virtue, and hermeneutic, which is why these three traditions were chosen for the study. Each tradition contributed to an understanding of discernment as practice, virtue, and hermeneutic, which has been significant for this dissertation's presentation of a hermeneutic of discernment for practical theology. The desert elders’ practice of discernment showed it to be a fusion of horizons, wherein scripture provides the narrative or vision into which Christians seek to integrate and live their own particular life narratives. This directed the way in which the desert elders read texts (scripture) and contexts (real-life situations of ministry). Only one who practiced faithfully and was formed in discernment could faithfully read texts and contexts, living into and out of them under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with awareness of the interruptions and influences of other spirits. The desert elders showed discernment to be central to Christian spirituality and practice as a kind of meta-practice that shapes and forms other Christian practices (hospitality, fasting, almsgiving, and others) in particular situations. In this way, the elders referred to discernment as a virtue or disposition shaped and formed by faithful practice and formative of faithful practice. This characterization of discernment as both practice and virtue became important for the dissertation’s description of practical wisdom and practical theological reflection.

The Benedictine Rule provided an example of the relationship between community, formation, habitus, and practical wisdom. In the Benedictine Rule, discernment and discretion are formed similarly to the way in which discernment was formed among the
desert elders—through living into and out of the narrative and vision of scripture in the daily life of the community. The way of life, or habitus, of a community is constituted by practices, and this way of life helps direct the forms of new practices in new contexts.

Central to this process is discernment, which has been shown to be a practice and a virtue that embodies interpretation, judgment, and decision-making. The discernment shown in Benedict’s construction of the Rule, the community, and monastic practice are grounded in scripture, the narrative of Christian faith, and the movement of the Holy Spirit. Reflection on the Benedictine Rule showed that discernment discovers the movement of the Holy Spirit through the critical and faithful examination of the intersection of practice, scripture, and context. Furthermore, this dissertation has argued that this process of discernment drives the living tradition of communities. In light of this, this dissertation has also argued that practical theology helps to guide, develop, and critically and faithfully reflect upon the formation of a Christian habitus. The task of practical theology, then, is to practice discernment, wherein practice, theory, and context come together in the formation of a community and its habitus.

The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises provided significant insights for interpreting the action of the Holy Spirit and other spirits, and thereby making decisions and forming practices faithful to the vision of God in particular contexts. The dissertation discussed how Ignatian approaches to discernment provide ways in which discernment can be seen as practice, virtue, and method in practical theology. Certain characteristics of Ignatian discernment described in chapter three became important for a practical theological hermeneutic of discernment in chapter four. These characteristics included the importance
of context, the importance of affectivity, the importance of indifference, the ordering of means and ends, and the importance of eschatological vision. Ignatian discernment begins with careful reading of a person’s or community’s life context in order to discern the action of the Holy Spirit and other spirits. Awareness of affectivity and indifference in weighing different options for decision are central to making choices in accordance with God’s vision within particular contexts. Ignatian discernment and decision-making are further guided and qualified by ordering means and ends according to an eschatological vision, wherein choices are made with “the greater glory of God” and living into God’s Reign first and foremost. Again, the dissertation highlighted here the importance of *habitus* and formation for practical wisdom. Ignatian discernment, as well as that of the desert elders and Benedict, helped provide guiding principles for Christian practical wisdom and practical theological reflection described in the next chapter.

In chapter four, the reflections on discernment in chapter three are brought to bear on the reflections on practical wisdom and practical theology in chapter two towards the formation of a hermeneutic of discernment in practical theology. This necessitated a revisiting of key themes of the dissertation—the aims and tasks of practical theology, practical wisdom, *habitus*, and practical theological methodology—in light of the practice of discernment. The desert elders, Benedict, and Ignatius all point to the central importance of the Holy Spirit in Christian decision-making and interpretation of experience. Chapter four sought to present some characteristics of a hermeneutic of discernment in light of the central importance of the Holy Spirit in Christian faith and life, in interpretation of experience, in formation of Christian practice, and therefore in practical theology. In this
way, this dissertation hoped to bridge ecclesial and academic contexts of practical theology, noting the importance of critical contextual and theological interpretation found in the practice of discernment for academic research and teaching, as well as for ministry and church leadership and everyday Christian practice and discipleship. Since the practice of discernment may be found in both academic and ecclesial settings, it may function as an important bridge-building hermeneutic of practical theology.

In discussing a hermeneutic of discernment in practical theology, the dissertation took up an exploration of the tasks of practical theology as expressed by Richard Osmer, namely the descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks. Osmer’s presentation often includes academic and ministerial descriptions of these practical theological tasks, and as such, it fits well with this dissertation’s description of how a hermeneutic of discernment can bridge ecclesial and academic contexts of practical theology. Furthermore, the use of “tasks” for describing practical theological reflection allows for consideration of multiple methods of interpretation that take up these tasks in different ways. In light of this, while noting that all these tasks should be part of practical theological reflection, the dissertation offered some key methodological aspects or principles of a hermeneutic of discernment without discussing a specific method. Chapter four explained how a hermeneutic of discernment takes up these practical theological tasks, what it might contribute to practical theological methodology, and how it differs from other approaches to practical theology. Central to this argument has been this dissertation’s constant claim that (1) if wise judgment (practical wisdom) lies at the heart of practical theological reflection, and (2) if wise judgment is known in the narrative, *habitus*, and practices of the
Christian church to be formed by and in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, then (3) the discernment of spirits should be a significant part of practical theological reflection in the Christian tradition. In light of this, chapter four presented four aspects or principles of normative theological reflection within a hermeneutic of discernment: (1) the discernment of God’s will through openness to the Holy Spirit, (2) “telling God’s story” through the formation of practices faithful to God’s vision in Christian narrative and tradition, (3) an eschatological view of present praxis, and (4) “indifference” in the use of non-Christian sources of knowledge for practical theological reflection, save that they may be appropriated for the “greater glory of God” in particular contexts and practices. These aspects of discernment drawn from the practices of the desert elders, Benedict, and Igantius, along with the central importance of contextual interpretation for the practice of discernment, help to make up a hermeneutic of discernment within practical theology.

The fifth chapter explored some potential contributions a hermeneutic of discernment might make to theological education and the study of Christian spirituality. The chapter presented first what practical theologians and studies of theological education have been saying about formation, habitus, and wisdom in education. The chapter linked discernment to habitus and education for wisdom in theological education. Thomas Groome’s pedagogical approach of shared Christian praxis served as an example of education that aims toward the formation of wisdom and wise disciples, ministers, and leaders. The chapter explored how the practice and hermeneutic of discernment might intersect with and contribute to a pedagogy such as shared praxis. Intersections between shared praxis and discernment were explored, particularly the emphasis of both on
contextual, real-life praxis and situatedness of learners and attention to the ways in which Christian story and vision (narrative and tradition) interact with the contemporary situation of learners.

Following this exploration of how a hermeneutic of discernment might be relevant to and contribute to a pedagogy of shared Christian praxis in theological education, chapter five explored how a hermeneutic of discernment within theological education might contribute to the formation of theological scholars, teachers, lay and ordained ecclesial ministers, and church leaders. This section focused on the how the practice of discernment might form and engage critical and spiritual skills within these learners. These skills included reading contexts (contextual education), imagination (creative education), and self-implication (transformative education). All these skills involved the exercise of critical, participative theological reflection through the practice of discernment. Citing other scholars of practical theology and theological education, the reflections in chapter five affirmed the importance of learning skills for academic research and teaching, skills for ministry, and skills for everyday Christian practice and discipleship.

Chapter five concluded with a reflection on the intersection of discernment and the study of Christian spirituality. This part highlighted the inseparable connection between theology and spirituality as a starting point for considering the contributions practical theology and the study of Christian spirituality can make to each other. As in chapter two, this section discussed common definitions of and approaches to the study of Christian spirituality. This section argued that Christian spirituality is comprised of practices, and therefore the critical, theological study of practices is central to the study of spirituality. In
light of this, and in light of the work of Claire Wolfteich, this dissertation argued that a practical theological approach, and a hermeneutic of discernment, might offer significant contributions and insights to the study of Christian spirituality. If the aim of both practical theology and the study of Christian spirituality is ensuring and enabling faithful practice, then these two disciplines have much to offer one another, particularly within a hermeneutic of discernment, because such a hermeneutic focuses on the action of the Spirit in particular contexts. The fifth chapter concluded that a hermeneutic of discernment for the study of Christian spirituality takes into account the particularity of context, the variety of Christian traditions, and ends of discipleship known from God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. To begin to understand spirituality and the formation of spiritual practices within Christian tradition, one must turn to discernment of the Holy Spirit in particular contexts of lived faith. In theological education, in the study of Christian spirituality and practical theology, and in ministerial practice, the practice of discernment and its hermeneutic address real-life contexts and traditions, both the lived and the traditioned, since both of these are integral to one another.

Future Research and Questions

This dissertation has been an exercise in making connections between practical theology and Christian spirituality and discipleship, principally in response to the real questions, desires, and life contexts of students, ministers, church leaders, and Christian disciples who, like the M.Div. student I mentioned in the very beginning of the dissertation, desire to know how to love God, understand God, and follow God in their own particular
lives and in the lives of their communities. These concerns have directed the dissertation throughout its course. In drawing the above-mentioned connections, the dissertation explored how the Christian practice of discernment might define and shape practical theology as a way of being characterized by wisdom. In doing this, the dissertation initially aligned itself with a particular approach to practical theology—the critical confessional approach—and its aims, and in connection with that, it has offered a hermeneutic of discernment within practical theological reflection and study. The claims made within this dissertation centered on the connection drawn therein between discernment and practical wisdom within a Christian way of being. This then led to connections made between discernment and practical theology, discernment and theological education, and discernment and the study of Christian spirituality. In all of this, the dissertation has not sought to make any radical claims of global sweep, but rather to point to significant implications of practical theology’s concern for the formation of Christian practice and discipleship that is faithful to the vision of God. Within this concern must be the central importance of discernment of the Holy Spirit in particular contexts. This dissertation has sought to show that the practice of discernment may have always been at the heart of some approaches to practical theology.

There remains, however, much more to be done. This dissertation has only laid out some hermeneutical concerns and insights. Insights from other Christian spiritual traditions, such as the Salesian tradition or some Quaker traditions, regarding the practice of discernment might present still more insights for a hermeneutic of discernment. Also, significantly, practical-theological studies on specific communities, practices, and issues
need to be done that engage a hermeneutic of discernment. In future work, the present study could be amended by case studies involving ministerial or ecclesial practices and situations engaging methods that incorporate a hermeneutic of discernment. Studies in theological pedagogy could explore how discernment might be fostered through particular activities inside and outside of the classroom. What also remains to be done in specific studies are explorations of how Christian communities, congregations, schools of ministry, and others are practicing discernment in the formation of their own practices. Such studies might explore institutional decision-making in particular communities, curriculum in particular seminaries, the practice of justice and hospitality in particular congregations, as well as the discernment of a particular community’s mission and goals. In doing this, the practice of discernment and its hermeneutic may help shape these communities’ practices and identities, thus shaping Christian praxis and tradition for years to come.


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