

CHAPTER 5

RELATIONSHIP STRAIN

When John Wesley sent Joseph Pilmore and Richard Boardman as his first mission team to colonial America in 1769, Methodism had already taken root in “unauthorized fashion.” Zealous and independent-minded lay people were preaching and organizing for renewal as Methodists.¹ The large ocean and different culture distanced Wesley not only from these lay people but also his missionaries. After a time Pilmore wrote in his journal:

For more than two years Mr. Wesley, who should have been as a compassionate father to us, has treated us in a manner, not to be mentioned... I was greatly amazed that Mr. Wesley should treat me as if I had been the foulest offender and an enemy to God and Mankind!²

Pilmore’s term, “compassionate father,” is the relationship he had come to expect from Methodism’s founder. He was “greatly amazed,” however, by the relationship that ensued. As the movement had grown, relationships were increasingly becoming strained. This stress strikes at the core of our gospel and identity. The gospel is relational and it calls people into a relational community. Our relationships are the means of our life and our work. From conception and birth our very system of life reveals a dependency upon relationships. That holds true spiritually. In other words, relationships are everything. The Scriptures make that plain everywhere. Asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus replied:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matt. 22:37-40)

¹ Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism: A History of the United Methodists and Their Relations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 61-69.

² *The Journal of Joseph Pilmore* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 206.

This is not the language of morality but relationship. This is not “be good,” but “love.” Jesus rightly observes that the prophets are always calling Israel to account for how they relate to God and one another. Jesus goes so far as to say, “Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did to me,” and “Whatever you did not do for the least of these, you did not do for me” (Matt. 25:40, 45). In other words, our relationship with Christ is affected by how we relate to others. Jesus taught that our drink and food is in relating to him (John 4:10-14, 6:55-56), and that others will eat and drink through us (John 7:37-39, 14:12). In an emotional resurrection encounter, Jesus asked Peter three separate times, “Do you truly love me?” Following Peter’s answer, he would say each time, “Feed my lambs, take care of my sheep” (John 21:15-80). This was a call not merely to preach. It was a call to relate, for people’s food and drink, the strength of their life and promise of their future, come in those relationships. Jesus declared that the character of our relationships is our calling card (John 13:34-35). Paul stated that when we believers sue one another, we are totally defeated (1 Cor. 6:1-7) and declared that we are temples as individuals and as a team (1 Cor. 3:16-17, 6:19, Eph. 2:19-22). Consequently, all people, believers and nonbelievers, can potentially experience God in their relationships with us as individuals and as teams. That likelihood decreases, however, when those relationships are strained.

The Loss of Trust

For a long time, sociologists have observed this debilitating process of relationship-strain in the body of Christ. Max Weber and others describe it as the “routinization of charisma.”

In the early years of the movement, Weber explained, the charismatic prophet and his disciples typically lived communally and out of one purse. There were few, if any, rules; little organization; and an absence of hierarchy among the followers. However, after the inevitable death of the charismatic leader, the movement tended to routinize. Within a few years, the prophet’s oral teachings were written down and became sacred—infallible “holy writ.” The fellowship of the disciples became structured into a priestly class with different offices. Rituals (including reenactments of some of the prophet’s acts) developed to contain and dispense the ‘truth’ associated with the leader. What was so direct, spontaneous, and immediate in the first generation of the movement became formalized, ritualized, and in time bureaucratized. Weber labeled this process the “routinization of charisma.”³

³ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 26.

For Weber, charismatic leaders were people who were recognized by others because of gifts and vision that struck people, not only as extraordinary but as superhuman or divine.⁴ The exceptional nature of these gifts or charisma inspired confidence and attracted a following. However, when the charismatic leader died, followers felt obligated to devise ways and means to perpetuate the experience people had through that leadership.⁵ Followers would select individuals to lead them who were loyal to that mission. At that point, the driving force of a movement shifted from the charisma to group discernment. Rather than charisma defining who leads, the group decided. Trust became located in a group rather than in charisma.

To some degree, that was a battle that repeatedly afflicted the Israelite community in the Sinai desert when Moses' leadership was challenged. In the controversy with his brother and sister (Num. 12:1-15) and with the Levites (Num. 16:1-50), God's response reinforced the notion that charisma signaled who should lead. David embraced this notion as he refused to avenge himself against King Saul who jealously pursued him. He declared:

“Who can lay a hand on the LORD's anointed and be guiltless? As surely as the LORD lives,” he said, “the LORD himself will strike him; either his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the LORD forbid that I should lay a hand on the LORD's anointed.” (1 Sam.26:9-11)

David's amazing faith and respect for that charisma surely was affected by his relationship with Samuel. When David fled from King Saul, he hid with Samuel for a time (1 Sam. 19:18-24).

The transfer of trust from charisma to community happened formally in Methodist history when John Wesley selected Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke to superintend the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. The American Methodists refused the appointment. Instead, they chose to elect Asbury and Coke as their leaders. They would be led by their consent only.⁶ Weber noticed a western tendency to develop rational, bureaucratic democratic structures in place of charismatic leaders.⁷ Thus, as movements age, they tend to become increasingly bureaucratized and inflexible.

⁴ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: The Free Press, 1947), 358-359.

⁵ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 134.

⁶ Norwood notes in *The Story of American Methodism*, 77, that the problem of Wesley's authority crops up with increased tension after the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He contends that until Wesley's death in 1791, Asbury and all the leaders were troubled by conflict between their loyalty to Wesley and his inadequate understanding of the American work. See Norwood, 98-101, for the election of Asbury and Coke.

⁷ See Wagner, *Churchquake*, 134 and Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 26.

It is interesting to hear different perspectives on the early church. Those involved in bureaucratized movements tend to see the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (from Eph. 4:11) as offices affirmed by the church rather than leaders commended and heeded because of their charisma. Yet, the context is the charisma God gives to people not offices or responsibilities that the church recognizes. As discussed in Chapter two, only two offices, or fields of responsibility were acknowledged in New Testament writing, the elder and the deacon. They were ordained or established in the Christian community. Beyond that, the church was blessed with charismatic individuals, commended by their fruit, who equipped the believers in accord with their gifts and faith. These were the many apostles (as opposed to the Twelve), prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

As the group moves more and more of its attention and trust away from charisma to the judgment of the group, offices established by the group become increasingly important. Clerical collars and vestments become ways of celebrating offices of the church rather than the charisma of the Spirit. Miller writes:

Religious life that appropriates the primitive forms typically has very little distance between the leaders and the people. Believers achieve direct access to the realm of the supernatural, which more domesticated forms of religion, over time, have found increasingly unseemly and magical. Applying this model to new paradigm religion explains, among other things, why clergy dress like ordinary members, why they insist on biblical literalism (i.e., as a way of undercutting more authoritarian claimants to power), and why they emphasize lay ministry.⁸

In contrast to the new paradigm churches that Miller studied, authority comes with the office and not the gifts in “routinized” churches. Leadership depends upon the group’s consent not God’s investment of charisma in individuals. People skilled in articulating and teaching the group’s tradition of charisma are preferred over new charismatic leaders. Miller observes:

The more routinized a movement becomes, the less room there is for charismatic leadership. People are not ‘called’ to service so much as ‘appointed’ to well-defined offices. Professions of purity of heart and absoluteness of devotion give way to less demanding expressions of adherence to a creed and observance of particular moral norms. Enthusiasm for proselytizing also wanes because religion is not the center of one’s life, but just one group membership among others.⁹

⁸ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 181.

⁹ *Ibid.*

These lesser demands result from a shift in mission. The mission shifts from ministering charisma or grace as it comes in new forms to perpetuating and celebrating the grace of God from an earlier era. The casualty of all this is trust. A preservationist vision is by nature untrusting and begins to police rather than empower. Individuals are given less trust, and the work of the Spirit in their lives is distrusted or ignored. The community slowly distances itself from the contemporary work of the Spirit and the genuine charisma that brought it birth years earlier. Relationships with God's new charismatic leaders, who call the community forward, are turbulent as the community looks primarily to the past for guidance and evaluates people on their allegiance or connection to that past.

This loss of trust, strain in relationships and distancing from charisma dominate the historic denominations and dog the newer ones. Less than a century old and known for their focus on religious experience or charisma, the Assemblies of God now are experiencing the crippling effect of this process. Margaret Poloma writes extensively about the "dilemmas" the denomination is experiencing.¹⁰ She notes that charismatic experience or its expression in people's life has been tamed or domesticated.

Despite the evidence of ongoing religious experiences, a few observers would question that the charismatic fervor of the early Pentecostals has been domesticated over the decades. Although charisma is still very much part of the Assemblies of God, in theory as well as in practice, there has been a noteworthy shift from an emphasis on "magical charisma" supported by prophetic leaders to priestly or more routinized forms. The very success of the Assemblies and the inevitable development of a bureaucratic organization has produced certain tensions.¹¹

That temptation to temper people's response to God's grace comes partially as a result of the erosion of trust in the charisma and in charismatic leaders. It also is rooted in the community's discomfort when their movement has grown and garnered acceptance and respect. Individuals' experiences of the charisma appear increasingly unseemly and threaten the social approval of the movement.¹²

¹⁰ Margaret Poloma in *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads*, 101, warns that The Assemblies of God denomination shares with other religious movements the danger of eroding trust in charisma. She notes that the experience of God readily gives way to dogma, ritual, and organization, and that groups quickly become intent on perpetuating themselves rather than the religious experiences that birthed them. See Part 2, pages 99-212 for a discussion of the dilemmas the denomination faces (also 94-98).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹² Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 181.

The larger a movement grows, the more temptation there is to distrust both the charisma that propels the movement and the people God uses to minister it. Trust erodes simply because of the numbers. As we saw with Pilmore and Wesley, relationships become increasingly superficial and stressed. When trust is lacking, regulations and hierarchical supervision are frequently imposed.

A study explored that very dynamic in Italy's local government. For nearly a thousand years, southern Italy's localities have suffered with rigid, hierarchical structures while northern communities have excelled through relational networks. The reason for the north's administrative effectiveness is that they cultivate "small organizations... built on the trust of people for one another."¹³

Denominations as they grow and age, however, suffer increasingly from impersonal and large bureaucracies where trust is lacking. Lyle Schaller reports that the level of internal distrust is far higher today for United Methodists than it was in the early decades of the nineteenth century. He found that the uneducated circuit rider was the recipient of a higher level of trust than is today's seminary graduate with 19 or 20 years of formal education. He further observed the denomination's growing mistrust of laity through their gradual replacement by clergy in major ministries of the movement.¹⁴

In any group, lack of trust is problematic. Marriages fail for lack of it. Partnerships dissolve. Flexibility is restricted. Those we distrust the most are confined to cells, registered at police stations or tracked with electronic devices. Mistrust shackles. Faith, on the other hand, empowers. All throughout the Scripture God exercises faith in individuals. Deborah, Hannah, Esther, Elizabeth, Mary and Anna all are entrusted with grace and responsibilities that alter destinies. God empowers Moses, Joshua, David, Peter, Paul and John by believing in them. God entrusts individual believers with the Holy Spirit and all kinds of spiritual gifts. Indeed, nowhere does God elect a committee. Individuals are as critical purveyors of truth as any committee. Often individual prophets were sent by God to confront the collective vision. Trust must always be in God rather than a group. Everywhere, God sends individuals... because God believes in them... even when we do not. Yet this does not mean that God sends individuals in isolation. The gospel is relational. Although individuals should not abdicate their responsibilities to a group, they are indeed called to relationships and to

¹³ Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

teamwork. Moreover, faith leads us to relate rather than regulate. Faith motivates us to invest in people. Faith and love are companions. The Apostle Paul wrote that love believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things (1 Cor. 13:7). When love is exercised, relationships are established and deepened; and the faith, resident in that love, unleashes people.

The Substitution of Regulation

As trust diminishes in groups, regulations sprout. This unfortunate trend plagues denominational churches. Rather than cultivating relationships that empower individuals to wisely lead congregations, denominational leaders legislate. Denominational relationships increasingly are saddled with, if not replaced by, rules.

The much-celebrated denominational merger in 1968 that created The United Methodist Church provided an instant increase in numbers and thrust leaders together who did not know one another. The strain resulted in an explosion of rules. Langford and Willimon observe:

A comparison of our *Discipline* between 1972 and 1994 reveals our frightening inability to modify our mode of operation. *The Discipline* of this period is mainly distinguished by the rapid growth of coercive legislation—rules mandating more committees, more funds derived from our congregations, and more bureaucracy for the general church. At the same time, there have been more regulations and committees in the local churches required by the general church. We went from several paragraphs in 1964 on local church stewards, the central administrative body of the congregation, to over *thirty pages* in our 1992 *Discipline* regulating the membership, structure, and duties of the administrative boards or councils, a trend that theologian Albert Outler once dismissed as “benevolent despotism.”¹⁵

The more highly regulated our faith communities become, the more ironic our proclamation of freedom is. Is freedom a good thing? Does it bless people? Does it provide them an opportunity to explore and fulfill their God-given potential? Then why do we saddle people with rules for their communal life? Why do we want ecclesiastical uniformity instead of creativity? Ted Haggard rightly observes:

We have a paradox. The message of the gospel provides spiritual freedom, but our local church structures too often steal our innocence and produce bondage, slowly draining us of the very spiritual life and joy we are supposed to minister to others. Eventually we become like our predecessors:

¹⁵ Lanford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 22.

whitewashed tombs looking good on the outside but powerless and maybe even deadly on the inside.¹⁶

We become rule-oriented rather than Spirit-led. We jump hoops and go through processes rather than cultivate relationships that feed souls and alter destiny. We focus on structural matters rather than the condition of souls. We frustrate young leaders with lengthy, bureaucratic processes, rather than warmly develop and unleash them in the world. American Methodism, at its inception a movement of the young,¹⁷ has been regulated and bureaucratized into an abode for the elderly.¹⁸ “All those rules had a good reason,” we are told. Indeed, they may have tidied the place up and made it much more comfortable; but that has never been the focus or character of an advancing movement. Haggard, once again, writes:

Most young Davids within the Christian world start with an innocent heart before God and a trusting attitude toward churches. They love His life and are innocent before Him. But when they discover cumbersome systems and unnecessary processes that do not contribute to effective ministry, these disillusioned Davids quickly decide they can do more elsewhere. Therefore, our local churches may unnecessarily be losing some of our brightest and best future leaders.¹⁹

A church that multiplies rules and regulations demonstrates a preference for comfort rather than creativity. It rarely will keep, much less attract, youth that are visionary and zealous. Instead, the character of its people will become increasingly self-serving and self-righteous.²⁰

Collective Decision-making

As a movement’s trust gradually transfers from the “grace” of God (at work in people) to collective wisdom, decisions increasingly become the providence of ever widening circles of people. What individuals quickly did, committees deliberate over. Doing becomes increasingly difficult as deliberation engulfs more time and energy. United Methodist Bishop Wilkie finds this exasperating.

¹⁶ Haggard, *The Life-giving Church*, 46.

¹⁷ According to Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, p. 100, Methodism’s founding leaders were young and inexperienced unlike the artistic depiction of their founding conference.

¹⁸ Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 106-107.

¹⁹ Haggard, *The Life-giving Church*, 44-45.

²⁰ Pride is taken in not what God accomplishes through us in the lives of others, but in our processes, in how we do things.

Originally, we were called *Methodists* because we had a plan, an organization, a *method*. But now our methodology approaches madness, our organizational genius consumes our most sophisticated talent. Our structure has become an end in itself, not a means of saving the world. I became intensely aware of this myopia when I was a pastor. The evangelism committee met, but did not make any calls. The social concerns commission gathered, but did not write any letters. The educational leaders complained about scriptural illiteracy, but did not read from the Bible. The Council on Ministries assembled to hear reports from the committees but took little action. The Administrative Board sat in session to approve the budget, but no one was saved. We went home tired, thinking we had done our church work.²¹

The organization of the local church in United Methodism has been guided by two principles.²² The first is coordination. Every activity is to be coordinated with every other activity. Nothing is to be done without being “coordinated.” The parts of the body must always be in sync with each other. It is, therefore, critical that every activity is delayed until the other parts know the planned action. This may sound really spiritual, but I doubt if one arm “knows” or “cares” what the other arm is doing. I suspect coordination is among the last things that a finger and toe could ever be responsible for. Coordination, last I knew, was the sole responsibility of the head. In the church, Christ is the head (Eph. 1:22-23). We have enough work to do without taking over His job. When the parts try to coordinate, two things happen. Endless delays and detours result as communication takes place, and relationships are stressed because the demand for coordination appears prideful, at minimum, and is controlling. The Apostle Paul’s warning to the Roman believers seems relevant here. He told them to accurately understand their role and stop withholding permission:

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership,

²¹ Wilkie, *And Are We Yet Alive*, 29-30.

²² See Willimon and Wilson, *Rekindling the Flame*, p. 92, for an articulate discussion of these principles and their impact.

let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.
(Rom. 12:3-8)²³

The second principle guiding the corporate structuring of United Methodist local churches is involvement. United Methodists structure their work in order to involve the maximum number of people in as many decisions as possible. The results of this practice are that large numbers of people expend enormous amounts of time and energy in institutional administration rather than life-changing ministry. Following procedure becomes the focus of church people,²⁴ not partnering with Christ in changing lives. Consequently, church members and leaders act as if “participating in the administration of the local church is the primary task of the Christian.”²⁵

In contrast, church analyst Kennon Callahan declares:

The purpose of the organizational structure in the local church is not to “involve” people. Years ago, the myth was spawned that the way to involve people is to put them on a committee, and the results of that myth have been among the most harmful and destructive factors contributing to many congregations’ status as declining or dying churches. The purpose of the church is to involve people in God’s mission in the world, to involve them in worship that is corporate and dynamic and in a group wherein they experience significant relationships of sharing and caring.²⁶

Callahan calls for a streamlined structure in the local church for making decision.²⁷ Bishop Wilkie agrees. He asks, “Where did we get the idea that we should run a church the way Congress runs the government?” He declares, “United Methodists need to become ‘lean’ again. That will not be achieved by majority vote.”²⁸

Langford and Willimon would like to slice the United Methodist local church structure down to a charge conference and five committees.²⁹ In my view, only two local

²³ Note how this “permission giving” attitude toward individuals trusts the grace (the charisma) rather than the group in doing and organizing ministry.

²⁴ Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 52, note that United Methodism’s present structure gives congregational leaders the impression that the main task of a congregational leader is to attend meetings focused entirely upon the internal maintenance of the congregation.

²⁵ Willimon and Wilson, *Rekindling the Flame*, 92.

²⁶ Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church: Strategic Planning for Mission* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Wilkie, *And Are We Yet Alive*, 33.

²⁹ Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 49, call for a board of trustees, committees on nominations, finance and pastor-parish relations and a reconfigured church council.

church committees are necessary for United Methodists in the United States right now: a board of trustees and a pastor-parish relations committee. Since United Methodist churches acquire property and gain both advantages and protection through incorporation as a non-profit organization in the United States, a board of Trustees is important. Since United Methodist elders and licensed pastors are appointed to lead congregations by their bishops, a pastor-parish relations committee provides a critical and uniform means for communication. Other structures may be beneficial and recommended, but there is no inherent wisdom in them that convinces me they should be uniformly required. Instead, it is best to trust and encourage local church leaders to create structures that fit their charisma, their people and their mission.

The Subversion of the Individual

If committees are mostly eliminated, who makes the decision? How will things get done? A far more important question, however, that is just as practical, asks, “How does God want to build spiritually-equipped, healthy, and mature congregations?”³⁰

I recall John Wimber sharing about a plane trip on which he began laying out plans to form a new congregation. Earlier, in a Detroit hotel room his dissatisfaction with his relationship with God and his leadership in the local church welled up into a crisis moment. In a moment of tears and anguish, he had heard in his spirit God say, “John, I’ve seen your ministry, and now I’m going to show you *mine*.” On the plane with his yellow pad, he scratched out some ideas, but his prayerful conversation with God convinced him that they were his plans, not God’s. He was to let the congregation be Christ’s church where the Holy Spirit raised up the leaders and launched the ministries. It was to be a community where charisma was trusted. Wimber’s role was to teach, equip and empower the believers, and the Spirit would direct them. The church would be formed step by step as God raised up individuals, charismatic leaders, leaders appropriately impassioned and gifted for each ministry that God wanted to accomplish through them. Wimber’s decision to focus and organize in accord with the charisma, the gifts, the Holy Spirit’s work in or “anointing” on individuals gave birth to one of the fast growing movements of Christ in the past two decades, the Vineyard Christian Fellowship.³¹

³⁰ Wimber, *Power Healing* 43.

³¹ With the exception of the plane trip, much of this story is told in Wimber’s book, *Power Healing* 27-34, 44-45.

In my experience as a leader of bureaucratically run denominational congregations, there have been two parallels to Wimber's focus and experience. Both profoundly shaped the congregations I led. In the first congregation, I shared in a sermon the experience of a destitute family from the area. As I spoke, I made a conscious decision to allow myself to feel God's pain for them. The next few minutes were quite embarrassing for my family and me as I wept uncontrollably. Within weeks and without a single committee or board meeting, individuals launched a ministry to the poor that became massive and soon defined our congregation in the community. I lent nothing to the effort but my tears and not a single plan was ever processed through a church committee. Nearly ten years later, in a different congregation, not wanting to feel God's pain about anything while speaking, I found myself red faced, with my nose running, my voice cracking and my tears gushing again, able to preach only in short phrases about the power, potential and great need for prayer. This time, much more slowly, but just as passionately, individuals committed themselves to lead new, "unauthorized" ministries. They prayed, networked with others in prayer and developed prayer ministries that dramatically changed the nature, direction and reputation of the church. Without the benefit of a single board or committee decision, the congregation offered a very different ministry to its people and a radically different presence in its community.

In Wimber's church and in these other two instances, individuals who felt the tug of the Holy Spirit made decisions. They developed their teams, raised any funds that church leaders did not provide and ministered effectively.

An adage, guiding an increasing number of leaders, says, "No one is lazy except in the pursuit of someone else's idea."³² Consequently, when the church opts for central planning by a committee and then recruits people to fulfill its vision, it is working against the basic nature of people. When a planning retreat is held and a group decides that it wants this or that ministry, it is arraying itself against the forces of nature as God designed us. However, if a charismatic leader committed to a particular ministry leads the planning retreat, and if the members of the group are there because they believe in the charisma expressed through him or her and are committed to the vision, then the church is working in accord with its God-given relationships and charisma.

³² Ahlen and Thomas, *One Church, Many Congregations*, 39.

Decision by committee, planning by committee, ministry by committee often subverts the sanctity of the individual person. Individuals not committees are made in the likeness of God. Thus, individuals are meant to make decisions; and there ought to be compelling reasons before interfering with their decisions. Individuals can be held accountable for their decisions. It is far more difficult to hold a committee accountable. It is natural and imperative to relate to individuals. It is difficult to relate to a committee. The Holy Spirit indwells individuals, anoints individuals, endows individuals and empowers individuals. Thus, when Paul exhorts believers to remain under the influence of the Holy Spirit (to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit), he tells them to “submit to ONE another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:18-21).

It is not that God opposes group decision-making. The point is groups are not leaders, individuals are. Groups are not workers, individuals are. The wise individual gets counsel from others (Prov. 15:22); furthermore, no one is a leader until there is a team. However, team ministry and committee or group decision-making are two radically different processes. In the Bible, there are several examples of group decision-making. Some are devastating decisions, such as the refusal to enter the Promised Land (Num. 13:1-14:45) and Israel’s request for a king (1 Sam. 8:4-20). Others reveal the leadership of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:1-7, 15:1-32). In Acts 15 a dispute was threatening to tear the church apart. Would Gentile believers need to become Jewish in practice to follow Christ? The Bible never directly identifies the leaders who supported that idea. It simply calls them “believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (Acts 15:5). However, some of them must have carried considerable influence in the church. Some suspect James, but that assessment could be unfair.³³ In the end, Gentile believers were not required to embrace Jewish practice but instead were asked not to engage in certain things that would hinder Jewish people from coming to faith (Acts 15:19-29).

Some see this collective action as a model for church decision-making. However, if they wish to use this as a model, they must look deeper. First, all believers were not responsible for the decision, only apostles and elders. These were individuals commended to embrace this responsibility by the charisma of the Spirit at work in and through them.

³³ James is sometimes suspected because his answer seemed to carry so much influence, as if he was the lead voice for the circumcision movement that gave way in this matter, and also because his answer showed consideration for Jewish sensibilities.

Second, the counsel was convened to settle a dispute. It was not a regular monthly meeting of people who shared responsibility for administering something. Those kinds of groups breed disputes; this council was convened to settle a dispute that resisted resolution. Third, the text offers us insight into how the decision was made. In verse 4, Paul and Barnabas reported to the church the harvest of new believers among the Gentiles. During that assembly some leaders expressed that these Gentiles must be circumcised and made to obey the Law of Moses (verse 5). In verse 6, the apostles and elders met. After a good deal of discussion, Peter shared how God chose him among the apostles and elders (by charisma) to share the gospel with the Gentiles. He declared that God signaled their acceptance, just as they were, through charisma, the giving of the Holy Spirit to them. He continued by affirming that it is this charisma (grace) not Jewish law that saves people and warned his fellow leaders to not unduly burden the Gentiles (verses 7-11). The leaders became silent and listened to Paul and Barnabas share how the charisma had been at work among the Gentiles in marvelous signs and wonders (verse 12). James finally spoke. He began, referring to the charisma that Peter discussed and that signaled God's acceptance of the Gentiles. He commented on how this very thing is supported by prophecy. After quoting Amos, he offered his judgment (verses 13-21). It is apparent that charisma, expressed in individual lives and ministry and also revealed in Scripture, was the focus of their trust. It, not group process, signaled God's will to them. In all, these apostles and elders trusted the charisma expressed through Peter, Paul, Barnabas, the Gentile believers and Amos. Rather than diminishing or subverting what God was doing through individuals, they focused on what God was doing through individuals.

This is critical. Group decision-making is fine when it respects God's work in individuals and seeks to understand and promote it. When Paul counseled the Corinthians about their sexual behavior, he wrote, "And I think that I too have the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 7:40). His appeal was to the charisma at work through him, not to an office of the church or to the endorsement of others. In other words, to dismiss his words on sex and marriage, because he was celibate, was to ignore the work of God, the charisma expressed in him. When we honor that charisma in others, our relationships become sources of divine healing and power.

Donald Miller declares that historic denominations will only regain their leadership if ministry (including the decisions) is given back to the people. For him this means flattening

those hierarchical structures that subvert the sacred at work through the individual.³⁴ It means empowering individuals by recognizing their authority to minister. It means honoring individuals and unleashing them to minister.

Denominational churches must move from committees that deliberate to teams that minister. We must move from bureaucratic processes that shackle individuals to ministry relationships that develop and unleash individuals. We must move from offices that glorify positions to leadership that recognizes gifts and the work of the Spirit in individuals. We must refuse the prison and aura of mistrust inherent with regulations and honor the creativity and entrepreneurship of the Holy Spirit in individuals. We must focus our vision and confidence not on the wisdom of a group but on the grace of God.

We are recipients of divinely ordained relationships both within and outside the body of Christ. Those relationships are the field of our work. They are the means of our life as Christ ministers to us through them; and they are the food and drink for others as the Spirit works through us. We must embrace those relationships even when they are strained by charisma that appears unseemly. We must foster relationships in some way even when they are stressed by the unfamiliarity of growing numbers. We must protect those relationships along with the sanctity of the individuals we embrace in them. Only when we do that, will we not quench Christ's Spirit among us.

³⁴ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 187.