

# Discerning the Spirit: the first act of mission<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

It is a great privilege to be asked to give this second lecture in honour of Prof Olav G. Myklebust, who did so much to establish the place of mission studies in theological education. It is encouraging to see how his legacy is being continued here in this school and during this mission week.

I come from England, and there – of course – we should all respect the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Archbishop, Dr Rowan Williams has defined mission as “finding out where the Holy Spirit is at work and joining in”. In other words, mission is the work of God’s Spirit, to do mission we must join in the Spirit’s work, and we so must learn to recognise what the Spirit of God is doing in the world before we can participate in mission. Or, to use the title of this lecture: discerning the Spirit is the first act of mission.

Actually, I am not quite satisfied just to take the Archbishop of Canterbury’s word for it – and you may not be either. So I would like to begin at the beginning to review what the connection is between the Holy Spirit and mission, and then discuss the reasons why discernment is the first missionary act. At the end I shall suggest some criteria for discernment and consider the process of discerning the Spirit. As I see it, what we are doing this morning is “mission pneumatology”.

## **Mission and the Spirit: mission pneumatology**

Let us begin our investigation of the relationship between the

Holy Spirit and mission by looking at the biblical material. There we find that there are broadly three starting points for interpretation of the biblical references to the Spirit, which yield significantly different pneumatologies of mission. The first, the “pentecostal,” begins with the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The second, “catholic,” view starts with the Holy Spirit’s involvement in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. And the third, “orthodox,” perspective goes back to the Spirit’s role in creation as the hermeneutical key. In the first interpretation attention is drawn to the sudden appearance of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, when the fearful and uncertain disciples were gathered in an upper room praying. The Spirit came in from outside as a roaring wind and flames of fire, and enabled them to speak in other languages. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter immediately went outside to testify before a crowd composed of representatives of many nations, who heard the message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and responded by repentance, baptism, and joining the community. This event was simultaneously the birth of the church – the fellowship of the Spirit – and the beginning of Christian witness in the power of the Spirit, which carried the gospel from Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria and across the world, as told in the rest of the book of Acts. In this story, the work of the Spirit is most evidenced in the Gentile mission of the Apostle Paul and in the life of the congregations that he founded. In the “pentecostal” view, the Holy Spirit bursts onto the scene as a new and powerful force which becomes characteristic of the Christian mission. The Spirit is experienced in forgiveness, healing, guidance, and empowerment as the church grows and spreads across the world.

Sometimes the impression is given in the “pentecostal” perspective that this grand entrance is the first appearance of the Holy Spirit in Scripture and that the Spirit comes on stage only after Jesus has gone off. However closer examination of the Lukan record shows that this is not the case: the Holy Spirit is first mentioned with reference to John the Baptist (Lk 1:15). The “catholic” interpretation pays greater attention to the role of the Spirit in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and tends to view the mission of the church as a consequence of this. It begins with the Annunciation, when Mary is told that she will conceive a child “by the Holy Spirit,” or with Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan, when the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove. Jesus is seen as

the source of the Spirit, whom he promises will be sent from the Father. The disciples receive the Spirit directly from the risen Christ, who breathes the Spirit into them. In this way the Spirit appears as a presence within them, which binds them to Christ, rather than a force from without. In the Johannine corpus the Spirit is associated with unity and love (as Augustine noted), rather than with power. This produces a great deal of interest in the indwelling of the Spirit and the intimate way in which the Spirit as Paraclete expresses the abiding presence of Christ with the disciples after Jesus has gone to the Father.

Reading the Bible from the “orthodox” perspective, beginning with the Spirit moving over the waters at creation (Gen 1:2), emphasises the material and creative dimension to the Spirit’s work and broadens its scope to include the whole created order. The Hebrew word for “spirit” is *rūach*; the most common meaning of which is “wind”. Because it is unseen, it was understood to be caused directly by God (cf Gen 8:1; Am 4:13; Ps 104:4). The breath of God is creative of life (Ps 33:6) and also destructive, “the blast of God’s nostrils” being used to describe God’s contempt and anger (Ex 15:8; 2 Sam 22:16; Job 4:9). In Genesis 2:7 God breathes into Adam to constitute him a living soul. Job testifies: “The spirit (*rūach*) of God has made me, and the breath (*něshāmā*) of the Almighty gives me life” (33:4). On the other hand, the Spirit is given in a special way to leaders such as Moses, Joshua, Samson, Saul and David to empower them for powerful tasks, and sometimes withdrawn from them (Num 11:17; 27:18; Judg 13:25; 1 Sam 16:13-14; cf Mk 12:36). *Rūach* is described as the source of creativity (Ex 31:3) and exceptional ability (Dan 6:3), but it is mostly closely associated with the gift of prophecy (e.g. Zech 7:12). When the Spirit came upon certain people, they prophesied (Num 11:29), and they spoke the word of the Lord by the power of the Spirit (2 Kings 2:15; Isa 61:1; cf. Mt 22:43; Mk 12:36; Acts 1:16; 4:25; 28:25). Furthermore the prophets looked forward to an outpouring of the Spirit in the last days. Isaiah expected this would lead to fruitfulness, justice and peace, and indeed national deliverance by the Spirit as in the past (32:15-20; 63:11-14). Joel had a vision of the Spirit coming on “all flesh” (those of low social status – servants and women – are particularly mentioned), leading to prophesy, dreams and visions (Joel 2:28-29). Ezekiel looked forward to God putting “a new spirit” (or “heart”) within the nation of Israel, reviving them from the

dead and causing them to live according to the Covenant (11:19-20 *inter alia*; 37:1-14). This new life of abundance and obedience will come about through the Son of David, the Messiah, the Servant of the Lord, who will be specially ordained by God for this task, and who will extend salvation to all nations (Isa 11:1-8; 42:1-4). The “orthodox” perspective draws attention to the continuity between the Testaments and to the fact that the Spirit was already known before the incarnation of Jesus Christ and before Pentecost.

Sixteen years after its publication, *Transforming Mission* is still, in my view, the most comprehensive and useful text book for mission studies. In that book David Bosch draws attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in mission. He shows that, according to Luke in Acts, mission is a promise, not a command, and that the Holy Spirit, poured out on the church at Pentecost, “initiates”, “guides”, and “empowers” (the church’s) mission. Thus mission is not prompted by slavish obedience to authority but is motivated by the Spirit (Bosch 1991: 113-4). This “pentecostal” interpretation undergirds Bosch’s celebrated missionary approach of “bold humility” (1991: 489) as opposed to “missionary war” (: 222-6). Bosch also points out that the Holy Spirit is prominent in the Gospel of Luke in the ministry of Jesus, emphasising that “the church lives in continuity with the life and work of Jesus” (: 87). Though he does not discuss the birth narratives, this suggests a “catholic” view in which the Spirit is the continuation of the presence of Christ.

The biblical foundations of Bosch’s work owe their origin to his doctoral studies on christology and the Kingdom in the 1950s under Oscar Cullmann (Bosch 1959). It has often been noted that he hardly considers the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. The very short section on “Mission in the Old Testament” is only to argue that mission is essentially a New Testament phenomenon (Bosch 1991: 16-20). Therefore, Bosch’s study is founded on a study of the mission of the church in the New Testament, and there is little or no attempt to relate this to the mission of God by the Spirit which began at creation. This severely limits Bosch’s missiology and pneumatology so that mission and the involvement of the Spirit in the world appear to begin only with the incarnation and Pentecost and, as a result, the Spirit’s presence and activity is seen to be only in the church. In the new ecumenical paradigm which Bosch describes, pride of place and by far

the most attention is given to “mission as the church-with-others” (1991: 368-389). The other “elements” are also activities of the church so that, although Bosch embraces the *missio Dei* paradigm, mission still appears to be achieved by effort, organisation and strategy on the part of the church. Because of this, the possibilities raised by *missio Dei* for deriving mission from the very nature of God are not fully realised. The North American writer and publisher Bill Burrows has called this a “Jesusological pneumatology” in which the Spirit is an “afterthought used to explain God’s activity in the church in connection with Jesus, ignoring the mystery of the Spirit as an equal modality or *persona* of the divine nature” (Burrows 1996: 121-138).

His lack of attention to the “Old Testament” is not the only reason Bosch does not develop an “orthodox” or creation missiology. As Philip Towner has pointed out in the *Evangelical Quarterly*, it is also because he does not consider the mission theology of the gospel of John, who has in view the whole cosmos (Towner 1995: 99-119). In the later part of his book, there are a few places where Bosch does allow for the wider work of the Spirit in the world and is prepared to be surprised by the Spirit (Bosch 1991: 379, 489, 494. See also 150, 517). He writes, “[Mission] is mediating the presence of God the Spirit, who blows where he wishes, without us knowing whence he comes and whither he goes (Jn 3:8). Mission is ‘the expression of the life of the Holy Spirit who has been set no limits’” (1991: 494). But these quotations are difficult to reconcile with the biblical foundations. This neglect of the Spirit in creation means that *Transforming mission* is inadequate to deal with issues related to creation that have concerned missiologists recently. Bosch offers little help on issues such as ecology, gender and indigenous spiritualities. For a full understanding of mission as *missio Dei*, we have to consider the full sweep of God’s involvement with the world, which began at creation and continues to the end.

To sum up so far, mission and the Holy Spirit are indeed closely related, not only because the Spirit is the enabler of the church’s mission but because it is through the energies of the Spirit that God is bringing about God’s purposes in the world. When we think about mission, it is this activity of the Spirit that we are called to join. The presence and activity of the Spirit is prior to the church’s mission. When we participate in what is already being brought about by the Spirit, we affirm the Spirit in the world.

### **Mission pneumatology: affirming the Spirit in the world**

Christian missions and missionaries have not always been very good at affirming the Spirit in the world. We have often been accused – and sometimes rightly – of being destructive and critical of what came before the arrival of the Christian gospel. We have not only criticised, we have even demonised it. We have also sometimes had very little hope or interest in anything that happens outside the Christian church. We have been reluctant to praise or support initiatives of other groups to do good, or speak the truth.

In the present climate of antagonism between religious groups and conflict between religious and secular parties, we are called to demonstrate the reconciling nature of God's mission (2 Cor 5:18-21; Schreiter 2004). It is no longer acceptable for Christians to be negative about everything “non-Christian”, nor is it possible when we recognise the work of the Spirit in the world through time and space. When we appreciate the history of the Spirit and the freedom of the Spirit, we realise there are wide possibilities of discovering the presence and activity of the Spirit outside the boundaries of church or Christian society, and so we can ungrudgingly and whole-heartedly affirm many aspects of our world today. I will briefly mention some of the theological developments that are possible because of a pneumatological approach that connects the Spirit of Christ in the New Testament with the Spirit of God known in the Old.

First, the theology of the natural environment developed by Jürgen Moltmann (1985; 1992) and others begins by affirming that the Holy Spirit is active in the whole created world on the basis of the Old Testament references we have discussed. Belief in the on-going vivifying work of the Spirit (e.g. Ps 104:30; Job 33:4) led John V. Taylor (1972), for example, to stress creation and creativity in mission in his book on the Holy Spirit and mission, *The Go-between God*. The link between the Spirit and healing has led to a concern for the body as well as the soul in mission, especially in women's theology from the Third World (Ruether 1996). So, Christian mission now engages with ecological issues and takes a holistic approach because, as the Nicene Creed states, the Holy Spirit is acknowledged as “the giver of life”.

Second, the theology of inculturation would be unthinkable if we could not affirm that the Holy Spirit is at work in human cultures that are not Christian. Using pneumatological constructions,

Karl Rahner (1975: 1760) and Paul Tillich (1963: 245-65) in particular saw that the Spirit is experienced in human cultures, and have encouraged Christians to affirm them, and to think of mission as the inculturation of the gospel.

Third, liberation theology proceeds from the basis that the Spirit is at work in the world to bring freedom. Jesus Christ was anointed by the Spirit of God to “bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). Theologians of liberation from Asia particularly, such as Samuel Rayan, have taught us to recognise the Spirit in social movements that empower the poor and marginalised (Rayan 1992).

Fourth, theology of dialogue has a pneumatological foundation, first laid by Stanley Samartha in the World Council of Churches (Samartha 1981a: 10-14). The unpredictability of the Spirit (John 3.8), who leads into all truth (John 16.13), forms one basis for the openness to others that is required in dialogue. There is no dialogue if truth is only coming from one of the partners. So the Spirit may be recognised in a world of many faiths.

Fifth, ministry of reconciliation, which is now widely recognised as the most appropriate mission paradigm in a world of conflict (Schreiter 2004: 11-15), is also the ministry of the Spirit (2 Cor 5:18; cf. 3:8). The Pentecost event itself shows a new way of being together: no longer Jews alone, no longer Gentiles alone, but Jew and Gentile together in the Spirit (Yong 2003). The Spirit is present in reconciled diversity.

In Britain we are getting excited about the upcoming centenary of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. In 2010, not only in Britain but in many other parts of the world – and maybe here in Norway – events are being planned to mark that anniversary. Looking back one hundred years, so many things have changed. One of the things that have changed most is our theology of mission, and much of this is due to our realisation that mission is not a task of the church, added to all her other duties, but a way of being church and living in Christ that is oriented to the world. Instead of talking about the mission of the church and making long lists of the tasks the church should do, we think of who the church is: the church is missionary, or missional. That is, we are in mission rather than doing mission. We are aware that mission is bigger than us, God is present and active in the world by the Spirit to accomplish God’s purposes in Christ. We are called to be part of this, to join in what the Holy Spirit is already doing. As we read in Romans 8:14-17:

*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

So we can agree with Archbishop Rowan that mission amounts to joining in what the Holy Spirit is doing. But, as British New Testament theologian Professor James Dunn has also pointed out, if this is so, then "the first act of mission" has to be to discover the way in which the Spirit is moving in the world in order to join in (Dunn 1998: 72). In other words, we need to turn our attention from affirming to discerning.

### **Mission pneumatology: discerning the Spirit**

David Bosch may have missed a pneumatological perspective on mission, but then he had good reason to be cautious about embracing an understanding of the mission of the Spirit in the world, apart from the church. Bosch was aware that there were those who used pneumatology to push the church or Christian community aside and embrace secular or pluralistic approaches. He documents the development of the *missio Dei* theme by J.C. "Hans" Hoekendijk and others in the 1960s' "secular Christianity". Out of frustration with the inadequacy of the institutional church to fulfil the increasing mission demands being put on it, they not only promoted a view that the mission of God was larger than the mission of the church, but even went so far as to exclude the church's involvement (Bosch 1991: 382-89). Since God deals directly with the world, they argued, the contribution of the church or Christians is not necessary (Bosch 1991: 392). And so the church, with its testimony to Jesus Christ, was bypassed. This led to the endorsement of revolutionary social movements as movements of the Spirit (Yates 1994: 196-97). A similar tendency to do pneumatology as an alternative to christology resurfaced in theology of dialogue in the 1970s, where some were too ready to dispense with traditional Christian doctrines that were found objectionable to people of other faiths. Samartha's work itself seems to suggest that the Hindu philosophy of *advaita* (or non-duality) was the proper framework for interfaith dialogue, as if



enlightened believers of all religions shared the same pluralistic spirit. Again, an understanding of the Holy Spirit only loosely connected with Jesus Christ can be observed in the Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation programme of the World Council of Churches in the 1980s and 90s, especially as revealed at the Canberra Assembly of the WCC in 1991, where Chung Hyun Kyung, a young Korean theologian used the medium of Korean shamanism to do eco-feminist theology. The pneumatological theme, "Come, Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation", suggested to some that Christians should embrace each and every movement for human development or environmental concern. At Canberra, the Orthodox churches, who had suggested the theme, strongly objected to what they saw as a "growing departure from biblically-based Christian understandings" (Reflections of the Orthodox participants 1991: 280). They found that "the very great ease" with which some people affirmed "the presence of the Holy Spirit in many movements and developments" indicated a lack of discernment (: 281). They insisted that pneumatology is inseparable from christology and from the doctrine of the Trinity (: 281). Evangelicals at Canberra made a similar statement (Evangelical perspectives from Canberra 1991).

Part of the confusion at Canberra was because the prominent Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky had popularised the idea that there are two parallel economies of God, the missions of Son and Spirit, and these are what Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon described as "the two hands of the Father" (Lossky 1957: 135-55, 156-73). This suggestion of a certain "hypostatic independence" was seized upon by those dissatisfied with the institutional church, with traditional Christian doctrines and with patriarchalism in Christianity in order to develop secular, or pluralistic or eco-feminist theologies. These conclusions cannot, of course, be drawn from Orthodox theology, as the Orthodox response at Canberra showed. Lossky himself called the church "the centre of the universe" (1957: 178), and it would certainly be contrary to Orthodox tradition to suggest that the Spirit's mission is in any way subversive of the church or Christian community. One of the foremost Orthodox theologians today, John Zizioulas argues that Lossky misrepresented the Orthodox position: the "two hands" should be thought of not as two economies but as a double economy within one mission. Both Son and Spirit are cooperating together to bring about God's purposes, and it is not possible to think of one

without the other (Zizioulas 1985: 124-29). When we discuss *missio Dei*, therefore, we need to consider how the economy of the Spirit, which we join, is related to the economy of the Son. The question for mission pneumatology is therefore how to express the complementarity of Son and Spirit so that we both affirm the biblical witness to the movement of the Spirit in the whole creation and also recognise the particular witness of the Spirit to Jesus Christ.

Christian pneumatology does not focus on a generalised spirit, or on a merely cosmic spirit. Nor does it encourage naïve affirmation of life in all its forms. Christians talk about a particular spirit: the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the God as known in Jesus Christ, the Spirit of Jesus Christ himself. This is not the same as saying that the Spirit is limited to the Christian or the church. The Spirit of God is present and active in the whole creation and so, as Amos Yong, the Pentecostal theologian of religions has pointed out, the experience of the Holy Spirit need not be christologically perceived (Yong 2000: 68). But – for the Christian – the criteria for discernment of the Spirit cannot be other than christological. What defines Christians as Christians is that they understand the Spirit of God to be the Spirit of Jesus Christ. This is the only criterion for discernment on which Christians can agree. Jesus Christ both received and gave the Spirit; he is revealed as the focus of the Spirit's activity and the channel of the Spirit's power of new creation. From the Christian perspective, the Spirit's nature is to testify to Jesus Christ (Jn 15:26): "The testimony of [or to] Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev 19:10). Jesus Christ is "the face of the Spirit" (Bevans 1998a: 103; 1998b: 108-109) and so Christian discernment of the Spirit amounts to seeing Jesus Christ. It is the characteristic and shared belief of Christians that the Spirit of God is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. But Christians do not necessarily believe that the work of Spirit is limited to the historical Jesus and the institutional church that has descended from that.

So how do we discern the Holy Spirit? First, if we are to discern the Spirit, we need to know what we are looking for. My main research has been on theologies of the Holy Spirit in Asian contexts, in particular India and Korea (Kim 2007). What this shows is that the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit is influenced by the meanings that are associated with "spirit" in the wider society. This causes me to ask what we mean by "spirit" in

the West, and how this influences our reading of the Bible and interpretation of Christian tradition. My sense is that in Europe, since the Enlightenment particularly, we have had a very impoverished concept of “spirit” and need to learn from Christians in other cultures in order to understand the *Holy Spirit* better.

The comparison of India and Korea raises a second question of whether there is only one Spirit to discern, or if we discern the one Spirit from among many spirits (cf. Yong 2000: 127, 140). The answer to this question may well depend on cosmology. There seem to be broadly two different cosmologies of spirit: “One-Spirit” cosmology and “many-spirits” cosmology. These may be regarded as extremes, and perhaps most world-views lie somewhere in between, but they may be helpful for the purpose of analysis. “One-Spirit” cosmology tends toward the view – dominant in classical Hinduism, for example – that there is one universal “Spirit,” and does not generally consider “spirits” (plural). The European Enlightenment encouraged a “one-Spirit” world-view – the universe was simply “God and man”; whereas “many-spirits” cosmology – as in Korean shamanism and other local religious beliefs – envisages a complex universe in which the Holy Spirit is one among many others. “Many-spirits” cosmology may be – but is not necessarily – dualistic. Both these typologies may be recognised in contemporary Europe.

In much discussion of pneumatology, the Spirit of God is simply described as “the Spirit” (with a capital ‘S’) or even just “Spirit” (with no article attached). But in the context of many spirits, the adjective “holy” is important to distinguish the one from the many spirits. Regarding the “Holy” Spirit as one among many spirits makes sense of much New Testament language about the spirit-world, which thinkers influenced by the Enlightenment disregarded, or labelled as superstition. In the societies of biblical times, spirits were good as well as bad: angels are “ministering spirits” (Heb 1:14), and there are the spirits of the prophets, for instance.<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:10 lists “discerning the spirits” (plural) as among the gifts of the Spirit; perhaps this refers to distinguishing the one kind from the other, as in 1 John 4:1, where believers are advised to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God”. This is a question that needs further investigation than is possible here, where we will content ourselves with discernment the Holy Spirit – bearing in mind that there are many other spirits at work in the world.

Third, a decision needs to be made as to where to look for the Spirit. This is difficult. Some look up to see the Spirit descending from heaven, bestowing authority and sanctifying, whereas others experience the Spirit below, as the ground of our being. Some expect the raw power of the Spirit rushing in from outside to purify and transform, and others look deep within to encounter the Spirit in the depths of being. Some may look primarily for the Spirit in those around in the fellowship of the Christian community; others may look beyond to see the Spirit in their neighbours. The Spirit may be encountered in silent meditation or in charismatic worship, in movements of liberation or in interfaith dialogue. The Spirit may simply be perceived as a presence, or seen as an event or activity. I suggest that we should keep an open mind on the issue of the identification of where the Spirit is and how the Spirit works. Indeed, given the biblical freedom of the Spirit, it is unwise to limit expectations to any particular *locus* or *modus operandi* but we should be ready to be surprised by the Spirit because, "The church can ... never be sure where the Holy Spirit is not" (Oleska 1990: 331).

A fourth consideration is the question of who defines the criteria for discerning the Spirit. This question was raised by Chung Hyun Kyung at the WCC Canberra Assembly. Instead of white Western men and Orthodox theologians, she argued, it was time third-world women discerned the Spirit (Kinnamon 1991b: 16). In retrospect the controversy which ensued after Chung's presentation at Canberra was seen to represent a power struggle between "classical" and "contextual" modes of theologizing (World Council of Churches 1991: 241). It is not possible to reach agreement on the issues here but, in my view, no one is obliged to accept someone else's identification of what is good or spiritual, however strong their tradition, however weighty their theology, or however much power they wield. This is especially so if their exercise of that authority is incompatible with the Spirit of Christ (Mk 3:29; Mt 12:31-32). If Christians wish people to agree with their identification of the Spirit they must be Christ-like. But even so, Christians cannot presume or claim with certainty to have the Spirit themselves, as individuals or as community. As Stanley Samartha once wrote, "The claim that God's presence is with us is not for us to make. It is for our neighbours to recognize" (Samartha 1981b: 670; cf. 1 Cor 14:20-25). Discernment should not be a matter for individual conscience alone, but a community activi-

ty (see, for example, Acts 15:28; World Council of Churches 1998: 57). Discernment is “an ecumenical question,” to be resolved through intra-Christian and even inter-religious dialogue (Samartha 1990: 58). It is a serious matter to substitute another spirit for the Holy Spirit (Reflections of Orthodox participants 1991: 281); mistaking the Holy Spirit for an unclean spirit is described as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, a sin which cannot be forgiven (Mk 3:29; Mt 12:31-32) because the sinner is cut off from the very means God has given of seeing the truth.

There is a further word of caution suggested by Amos Yong: discernment is only ever of concrete situations and never in general, and “[w]hat is discerned as the Holy Spirit or some other spirit in this or that particular situation today, may be decidedly reversed or no longer applicable when the situation is examined tomorrow” (Yong 2000: 287). That is: discernment is always provisional. Decisions and perspectives may need to be revised; the church is always reforming. Alliances of Christian mission with other movements may be made on the basis that they share the same spirit, but they will be temporary and for short-term goals only. The Spirit of Christ cannot be captive to any of the spirits of the world. Discernment requires wide horizons, in view of the breadth of the Spirit’s mission; openness, because of the unpredictability of the Spirit’s movements; and humility, since the Spirit is the Spirit of Almighty God.

We have mentioned that the criterion for discernment is christological but this needs further interpretation. There are at least four criteria in the Bible for discernment but none of these is watertight because in the Bible itself there is a qualification. The first two criteria are commonly acknowledged (e.g. World Council of Churches 1991: 256; see also Clapsis 1991: 344; Oleska 1990: 331-33; Schweizer 1989: 411; cf. Dunn 1998: 71, 30-31, 323-27; Gorringer 1990: 38-39.).

- The first criterion is *ecclesial*: the confession of Jesus as Lord by the Christian community, which is made possible by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3; 1 Jn 4:2). But this criterion is not watertight. It is hoped that the Spirit is present in the Christian community – and most churches claim this – however it should be remembered that it is the Spirit who defines the church and the Christian, not the other way round. As Jesus pointed out, there are many who call “Lord, Lord” but who are not obedient to Christ (Mt 7:21-22).

- The second criterion is *ethical*: the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, and so on (Gal 5:22) – in the up-building of the community. The Spirit changes lives, producing Christ-likeness. Nevertheless, we must remember that, according to Scripture, Christ-like good works are not invariably a sign of the life of the Spirit – they may be the result of unregenerate legalism (Rom 7:6). Not only the works, but the whole character of faith is important (Jas 2:18).

The second two criteria have emerged more recently in ecumenical discussion.

- The third criterion is *charismatic*: the practice of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-11). Discerning the Spirit in this way is the particular contribution of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement. Where there is empowerment to prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, compassion (Rom 12:6-8), there is good reason to believe God is at work (by the Spirit) (cf. Yong 2000: 224). But on the other hand, as Paul reminds the Corinthian church, gifts alone do not guarantee the presence of the Spirit. Exercise of a spiritual gift is not a sign of the Spirit's presence if it lacks love (1 Cor 13:1-3).
- The final criterion is *liberationist*: this criterion is the contribution of liberation theology, which emphasises the preferential option for the poor. The effect of the Spirit's anointing on Jesus Christ was that he announced good news to the poor (Lk 4:18), and so consideration for the poor must be a touchstone for all spiritual claims. We must always ask, "Who is benefiting from this theology or ministry?" But there is also a caveat to the criterion of liberation: the liberation struggle must be waged in a way that is non-violent, a way that is loving to our enemies (Mt 5:43-48). Liberation movements are not of Christ if they aim to crush the enemy. The vision must be to live in peace with them when liberation is achieved (Rom 12:18) (Dorr 2000: 128).

Some Christians prefer one of these four criteria and some prefer another. Any one of them could indicate the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, but none constitutes conclusive proof of the Spirit's presence or activity, so the criteria should therefore be taken as indicators rather than as concrete evidence of the presence and activity of the Spirit of God, which Christians recogni-

ze as the Spirit of Christ (cf. Schweizer 1989: 40). Perhaps we are on surer ground when all these criteria occur together.

It will be clear by now that discernment is not an easy task: it is a complex process and an inexact science. Solomon asked for “an understanding mind ... able to discern between good and evil” and God gave him wisdom (1 Kings 3:9, 12). The ability to discern is the fruit of wisdom – God’s wisdom rather than human wisdom (1 Cor 2; Jas 3). That is, the ability to distinguish the spirits is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit; therefore it is not a mechanical activity (Schweizer 1989: 406; Hübner 1989: 335). Justin Ukpong, a Nigerian Catholic theologian has suggested that discernment may be “more a matter of experiencing rather than rationalizing on the action of God” (1990: 85). If the Holy Spirit is understood as a person with whom it is possible to have relationship, it is reasonable to suppose that discernment involves intuition as well as the mind.

On the road to Emmaus, the eyes of the disciples were opened and they recognized Jesus (Lk 24:13-35). This incident provides a parable of discernment. Recognizing Jesus Christ involves both the heart (their hearts “burned within them” – verse 32) and the mind (they were “talking and discussing” – verse 15). It involved both the disciples’ knowledge of the Scriptures (:27), and also their personal intimacy with Jesus Christ and the way he behaved (he was known “in the breaking of the bread” – verse 35). It was a shared activity, the results of which were confirmed by the wider community (:33-35). And the disciples needed to be open to the possibility that Jesus Christ would be where they had not expected (:25-26), and at the same time true to Christian testimony (:22-23). Like Jesus, who appeared as a fellow traveller on the road, viewed from a perspective below, the Holy Spirit may at first be indistinguishable. The transcendent or eternal nature of the Spirit of Jesus Christ cannot be predetermined or assumed but only discerned, experienced, and proved in the life of believers. Finally, though there is a process of discernment in the Emmaus account, in the last analysis this is a story of revelation, “he was made known to them” (:35). As both Ukpong points out, the fact that “discernment of spirits” is listed as a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:10) shows that the Spirit is needed to discern the spirits; that is, discernment cannot be reduced to applying criteria and following procedures; it is an aspect of Christian spirituality, the result of “living by the Spirit” in relationship with Jesus Christ (Gal 5:13-26; Rom 8:1-17; Ukpong 1990: 82; cf. Schweizer 1989: 40).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we have discussed why mission may be understood as “finding out where the Holy Spirit is at work and joining in” – and I hope we can now agree with Archbishop Rowan after all. We have also seen that, while this definition encourages the affirmation of the wide presence and activity of the Spirit in the world, it also makes discernment the first act of mission. There is no neat, failsafe technique for discerning the Spirit, but there is guidance offered in the Bible. Though Christians agree that the criterion for discerning the Spirit is Christ, they differ in their preferred criteria for discernment because they differ also in their vision of Jesus Christ.

This debate about discernment of the Spirit need not be confined to Christian circles. In the plural world in which we live, there are many spirits – religious and secular, natural and supernatural, political powers and authorities and personal spirits and demons. Different faith and ideological communities have their own criteria for deciding what is right and wrong. Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and those of other faiths will use their own criteria to recognize where God is at work, or what is holy or spiritual. Those of a secular persuasion may apply still other criteria to discern what is true and right. There is considerable overlap between these different value systems but at the same time we will not always agree on what is valuable, right or true. If Christians discern according to the criterion of Jesus Christ, it does not necessarily mean that they are imposing their faith on others, or trying to make the whole world Christian, either explicitly or implicitly. The criteria used by any group are simply the expression of a particular commitment. The question of whose spiritual vision is most closely in touch with God or Ultimate Reality or the universe will only be answered at the end. In the meantime, if we are to live together in our common home – the earth – all communities need to respect one another’s perceptions and share resources for discernment. The Christian contribution to this debate will always be Christ-centred.

## Noter:

- <sup>1</sup> The Myklebust Memorial Lecture, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Oslo, 7 Feb 2007.
- <sup>2</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, “Pluralism and the problem of the discernment of spirits” in Emilio Castro (comp.), *To the wind of God’s Spirit: reflections on the Canberra theme*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990, 77-86 (80-81).



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