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Incorporating Wisdom Christology into the Phronesis of Courtyard Church of Christ

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to address an identified problem Courtyard Church of Christ members were having with decision-making in a way that promoted *shalom* and reflected Christ to the world. I proposed that Wisdom Christology could assist in the decision-making process and formed an intervention team of five additional people from within the congregation to explore the situation through participatory action research. We met for six sessions in the early months of 2020. The team embarked on a thorough examination of Wisdom Christology through the Scriptures climaxing in the Wisdom Hymn of Col 1:15–20. Our subsequent collective understanding of Wisdom guided us in the creation of a four-part intervention plan to incorporate Wisdom Christology into the congregation's *phronesis*.

The first component of the intervention plan is a twelve-part sermon series on Wisdom Christology using twelve key passages from the Old and New Testaments. Second, the members are invited to attend Wisdom Feasts in small groups in homes to discuss real-life decisions they are facing. This is done with the assistance of a mnemonic device pamphlet that was created by the intervention team. Finally, the intervention brings the church into a silent retreat to observe Wisdom's revelation in creation. The culminating effect of this plan is intended to help the members make decisions more confidently and for those decisions to promote *shalom*, thus bearing witness to Christ in the world.

Fundamental aspects of this project are that God has a plan for Wisdom to bring people into reconciliation, and Wisdom is revealed in all of creation. Also, wisdom is fully embodied in Christ. Therefore, Wisdom is available in Christ's example, but also by participating with Christ who is present in the body of the church. This plan helps the church restore Wisdom as a primary virtue of the Christian faith and helps them to recognize Wisdom in their midst for maturity in *phronesis*.

Incorporating Wisdom Christology into the *Phronesis*
of
Courtyard Church of Christ

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology
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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry in Homiletics


By

Tiffany A. Dahlman

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Doctor of Ministry


Assistant Provost for Residential Graduate Programs

Date

3/30/22

Thesis Committee



Jeff W. Childers, Chair



Carson E. Reed



Myles Werntz (Jan 26, 2022 14:17 CST)

Myles P. Werntz

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To Courtyard, who permitted me the honor of peering into your beautiful lives, making judgments about them, and then partnered with me to propose solutions. Thank you for trusting me. And to my family who sacrificed time with me so that I could complete this goal. This wisest of our wisdom may be nothing more than the foolishness of God, but if this humble prayer in 160 pages brings me into deeper *shalom* with all of you, it is enough.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This is a project on decision-making and the Christian life. Any project on decision-making must first at least broach the debate between free will and determinism. It is estimated that the average person makes 226.7 choices about food every day.¹ For example, I will choose to drink coffee instead of green tea this morning because I am an American, and this is what most Americans tend to do. The beef used in tonight's dinner will be 80 percent lean instead of 93 percent because it is cheaper and what my budget allows. In this hypothetical scenario, I will not even consider using a beef substitute, like tempeh or bulgur wheat because I have never heard of those choices. So, how frustrated can I rightfully be when the meal is not satisfying? How accountable am I when a poor diet makes me sick? Making a "better" choice was not an option for me. When one multiplies this effect to the thousands of choices made each day, well beyond the realm of food, a person may conclude that any project that seeks to improve decision-making is futile and privileged, because choices are exclusively limited to possibility.

It is true that innumerable factors influence human choice. "As we have learned from numerous psychological studies, our choices may be free, but they are not free from

1. Frank Graff, *How Many Daily Decisions Do We Make* (NC Science Now, February 7, 2018), <http://science.unctv.org/content/reportersblog/choices>.

influence.”² This project does not deny the force of influence in decision-making; in fact, it embraces it. Such factors as personality type, whether one leans more toward a deontological or teleological ethic, education, the presentation of the available choices, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, accessibility, trauma, and countless other factors contribute to the decision-making process. God created humans to be wonderfully complex creatures and the fallen world in which we live is often unjust. Therefore, it is no wonder that the pressure to make 35,000 choices a day can be paralyzing and create chaos, even among Christians.³

However, a position of sheer determinism denies the foundational doctrines of the church. Determinism’s foundational argument is:

1. You do what you do, in any given situation, because of the way you are.
2. To be ultimately responsible for what you do, you must be ultimately responsible for the way you are—at least in certain crucial mental aspects.
3. You cannot be ultimately responsible for the way you are in any respect.
4. Therefore, you cannot be ultimately responsible for what you do.⁴

Yet, much of Scripture rests on the assumption that a person is indeed responsible for what she does. This is a position deeply embedded in Church of Christ culture. It is one that can diminish compassion and promote excessive individualism, both flaws this

2. Adam Waude, *Making Choices: Can Too Many Choices Be Bad For Us, and How Much Can We Trust Our Own Decisions?* (Psychologist World, 2016).
<http://www.psychologistworld.com/cognitive/choice-theory>.

3. The figure “35,000 choices a day” is quoted many places without scientific substantiation. The number is used here as a realistic, commonly held assumption that shows—more or less—how many choices people are charged to make daily.

4. Galen Strawson, “The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 75, No ½ (1994), 5–24.

project will address. Nevertheless, free will and accountability for choices are evident in Scripture. Adam chooses to eat the fruit, Cain chooses to murder Abel, the Exodus midwives choose to save Israelite babies, Elisha chooses to burn his plow, the rich young ruler chooses to return home, and Jesus chooses to endure Golgotha. Not only that, but each of these individuals is held accountable for his or her actions.⁵

There exist some interesting exceptions that inspire debate. *Did Judas have a choice about betraying Jesus? Could Pharaoh's heart have softened?* Rom 9–11 has left even the most astute interpreters walking a tightrope between free will and determinism. Even so, it is the premise of this work that these exceptions are not paradigmatic of Christian moral responsibility. This project assumes that people have a moral responsibility to make holy choices, but our good and just God is not out to trick us in the complexity of moral responsibility. The arc of the story of God is built upon two factors: the grace of God and human choice to respond to it. Therefore, a premise of God's grace undergirds this work. God's justice responds to motives found within the heart, and God does not expect from a person what that person is unable to do.⁶

In another extension of grace, God gifts humanity with the church, where there *are* people who know how to make “beef” with bulgur wheat and who have access to resources others do not. Determinism asserts that people cannot do what they do not know to do and that people's actions are the consequences of who they are. Therefore, to diminish the impact of determinism on decision-making, this project will emphasize the benefit of wisdom found within the church over decision-making as individuals.

5. See Gen 3 and 4; Exod 1; 1 Kgs 19; Mark 10; Luke 22, respectively.

6. See 1 Cor 4:5.

Description of Ministry Context

As will be seen in the data presented, the individuals who meet at Courtyard Church of Christ struggle to make decisions that they can categorize as consistently *good* in the eyes of God. This struggle likely affects the wider Christian community. Many of the choices that leave Courtyard reeling are small, like whether to volunteer to read scripture in service. Other times they are overwhelmed by more significant decisions, such as “Should I marry this person?” or “Should I launch this ministry?” Observational and survey data (discussed below) revealed decisions made quickly but regretted months or years later. In some cases, the individuals allowed circumstances to make the decision for them because they were paralyzed by the choice. Decision-making is unavoidable, yet the pursuit to make wise decisions is also human. Wisdom Christology is an approach Christians can use to make better decisions in the wisdom of Christ, but this approach is largely unknown among Courtyard members.

Courtyard Church of Christ is a small church plant that was founded in 2016 in Fayetteville, North Carolina. The congregation meets in a modified two-story home. Upstairs is an open area for assembly, an office, kitchenette, restrooms, and a nursery. Downstairs are two classrooms, plus a kitchen, a coffee bistro, and a gathering area. This space allows for a hundred people in the assembly, though this would be crowded. The space is designed and decorated to foster a comfortable environment with wood floors, chairs around tables, warmly painted walls, and soft lighting with candles, pillows, and blankets.

The population of Fayetteville is 209,889, and the median household income is \$43,882. The church is in one of the poorest areas of town, where 96 percent of the local

elementary school students qualify for free lunch. The town is split racially with 41.5 percent black residents and 45.9 percent white.⁷

However, these statistics must be held in concert with separate statistics from Fort Bragg, the largest military base in the country. The 161,000-acre base sprawls across the middle of town and employs 53,000 soldiers. Additionally, there are over 100,000 military retirees and family members, so the Army touches every aspect of life in Fayetteville, including its churches.⁸

Courtyard Church of Christ is highly transient, one effect of the military's pervasiveness. Soldiers and their families live here three to four years on average before moving on to another base. Fort Bragg is home to the 82nd Airborne Division, the Special Forces qualification course, the 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne), Delta Force, and other elite units. These soldiers and their families do not have control over many major decisions in their lives, like what job they are assigned, what hours to keep, where to send their children to school, when or where they will move, what house they will live in, or what doctors to use. This factor contributes to the complexity of the decision-making process explored in this project.

In addition to important life decisions deferred to the military, deployments affect decision-making maturation as well. All soldiers and their families are affected by deployments, but special operations soldiers have PTSD rates twice that of the regular

7. "QuickFacts Fayetteville, North Carolina," in the United States Census Bureau, 2017, accessed February 20, 2019. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fayettevillecitynorthcarolina/PST045217>

8. Military US Bases, "Fort Bragg," accessed February 19, 2019, <https://www.militarybases.us/fortbragg>.

army.⁹ Courtyard Church of Christ is not immune. According to a demographics survey taken at the time of the intervention, 74 percent of Courtyard's families have a military connection, 17 percent have 100 percent VA disability ratings, and 22 percent disclosed a PTSD diagnosis. Traumatic brain injury, addiction, and myriad physical disabilities are comorbid with PTSD diagnoses. More than one-third of Courtyard's members are divorced or divorced and remarried. Other marriages struggle due to strains brought on by being in the military.

Further factors reveal Courtyard's context and culture, all of which affect *phronesis* (the ability to not only discern a choice, but to follow through on a right decision at the right time). There are 70 members on the roll, though attendance averages in the 40s with a high turnover rate. At the time of the intervention, 66 percent are college-educated, about 20 percent with graduate degrees. Racial and ethnic minorities make up 36 percent of the congregation; several are immigrants from Ghana and Caribbean islands. The congregation is 54 percent female, and 36 percent of adults are single. The median age is about 27.

As previously mentioned, choices are influenced by education and experience, in addition to cultural worldview. Due to the higher levels of education and global perspective in the congregation (from both members who are immigrants and members who have extensive overseas military tours and duty stations), the church should have the tools to effectively navigate decision-making, such as the ability to hold complexity and value alternate lenses in the decision-making process.

9. Matthew Hing, Jorge Cabrera, Craig Barstow. "Special Operations Forces and Incidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms," *Journal of Special Operations Medicine* (2012).

In addition to ethnic and age diversity, Courtyard is diverse in faith heritage and therefore theology, which also informs decision-making. For example, those with a more immanent view of God see signs in nature and relationships that influence their decisions, while those with a more transcendent view depend more upon the Bible to guide decisions. A slight majority of Courtyard members (52 percent) have a Church of Christ faith heritage. A couple of regular attenders are agnostic. Some families have come to us from local mega non-denominational churches. Currently, others are transplants from Methodist, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Disciples of Christ, Baptist, and Catholic churches. Most of the transplants would still claim their original denomination as their faith heritage even though Courtyard is their church home. There is no pressure at Courtyard to renounce one's denominational heritage. Rather, we enthusiastically embrace the Restorationist plea, "We are Christians only, but not the only Christians."

Core Values

Courtyard Church of Christ has several core values that affect wisdom. One of these is the infallibility, rather than the inerrancy, of Scripture.¹⁰ Therefore, the leadership reminds members to align themselves to the larger story of God and redirects them from fruitless debates over controversial doctrines. Also, Courtyard seeks harmony between faith and science; it regards "all truth as God's truth." For instance, a member who is a chemist held a series of classes with the objective of teaching science that revealed God's

10. Infallibility and inerrancy are loaded words, seldom defined without an agenda. In this case, infallibility is used in contrast to some of the more dogmatic claims of inerrancy listed in the Chicago Statement of Inerrancy, like Article XII that claims that the Bible is free from error even in the areas of science and history. To regard Scripture as infallible, in this case, means to believe that the biblical authors were inspired to tell the truth about God, humanity, and how the two can be in reconciliation with each other and the rest of the creation. Courtyard's understanding of "infallible" regards Scripture as written for us, but not to us; sometimes (by genre) descriptive instead of prescriptive, and often not intended to be read literally.

majesty and sovereignty, not in a “God of the gaps way” but in a way that invited the members to see God working in all of creation, thus maturing their understanding of God’s character.¹¹ Members are encouraged to seek wisdom in the collective voice of the church, including women and children, who participate fully in the assembly. Finally, Courtyard values authenticity. Due to the personalities of the founding families, Courtyard has become a place where shallow engagement is discouraged. Therefore, decision-making struggles are typically verbalized by members.

Leadership

Courtyard’s leadership is nontraditional for Churches of Christ in North America in that there is not an elder board over a pulpit minister. Instead, three individuals with unique ministerial callings, experience, and gifting comprise a leadership team that serves and guides the members to mature as ministers themselves. My Master of Divinity specializations are Old Testament and spiritual formation with significant coursework in spiritual direction. One of the other leaders has been in church eldership for decades and the other is active-duty military, mentoring soldiers in a classroom environment. The leadership seeks to provide space for members to be guided through life’s daily decisions in the presence of Christ through information and formation: Bible study, spiritual direction sessions, group formation through spiritual disciplines, and retreats.

11. “God-of-the-gaps arguments use gaps in scientific explanation as indicators, or even proof, of God’s action and therefore of God’s existence.” See *Biologos* for more about why this relationship between faith and science is dismissive of science and can be unintentionally catastrophic to faith. <https://biologos.org/common-questions/are-gaps-in-scientific-knowledge-evidence-for-god/>

Observations That Pertain to the Project

Individual and group appreciative inquiry interviews were conducted to discern the level of decision-making difficulty. Questions asked included, “What works well in your decision-making process?”, “How does Courtyard help you make decisions?”, “Where could your decision-making processes be improved?”, and “How could Courtyard help?” I also covertly observed the members navigate decisions for a period of three months and logged these observations in a journal. The majority of the congregation completed an anonymous survey about decision-making. These results revealed that Courtyard has numerous strengths, but there are areas of needed growth as well. For example, the congregation is riddled with anxiety. Congregants complain of panic attacks, anxiety that wakes them up at night, the inability to attend service or church events because of social anxiety, and paralysis in decision making. The phrases “I don't know what to do” and “I wish I had/had not done this” recur in pastoral counseling sessions and in casual conversations. Ministries are neglected because of claims that members are too busy, while at the same time members profess a lack of fulfillment because they are not involved with life-giving ministry.

Concurrent with this observation, I noticed that a group I consider to constitute a core of the congregation has adopted a new hermeneutic since attending Courtyard. According to their testimonies, those from a Church of Christ background came to faith through the “five steps of salvation” and were taught to live their lives by book, chapter, and verse under a hermeneutic sometimes referred to as *patternism* or CENI (command, example, necessary inference).¹² Though they do not use the acronym CENI, they have

12. John Mark Hicks, *Searching for the Pattern: My Journey in Interpreting the Bible* (Nashville: Self-published, September 2019).

been heard using the words, “command,” “example,” and “pattern.” Conversations also revealed a dualism between the life of the church and personal life and a scriptural emphasis on Paul over the Gospels in their formative spiritual years. As a result, most of the congregation learned to live their lives by the Scriptures alone, with limited explicit or conscious exposure to the character of Christ or the Holy Spirit. Bibliolatry was an accurate diagnosis for several of them.¹³

Since attending Courtyard, these same people have largely abandoned religious fundamentalism, including CENI, and adopted a post-critical hermeneutic. “Post-critical is a term used to indicate an appreciation for the emphasis upon the need for critical thinking, but post-critical thinking is more modest in its claims about what it knows and recognizes that all-knowing entails personal and subjective aspects.”¹⁴ They have been taught and strive to read the Bible contextually instead of proof-texting. This shift is evidenced in adult Sunday class conversations, comparisons of sermons they composed in earlier years with more recent ones, and observation of the ways they disciple each other. It was common in the past to hear phrases like, “Where is the biblical example of that?” or “This practice is acceptable worship because it is in the Bible.” Those with a Church of Christ heritage, as well as those from a more fundamentalist background, common in our international members, would often cite single Bible verses to prove doctrinal points. Now, they will appeal to *stories* in the Bible that point to a *theological*

13. Bibliolatry is defined as “a high veneration of the Scriptures, to the point that, according to critics, the Bible is nearly worshipped.” Donald K. McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 33.

14. Lawrence Wood, *Theology as History and Hermeneutics: A Post-Critical Conversation with Contemporary Theology* (Lexington: Emeth Press, 2005), vii.

pattern. If someone cites a single verse to make a point, inevitably someone else in the room will ask about the verses before and after it. It is more their habit now to open the Bible as an infallible text, instead of an inerrant one, to discern truths about God and humanity rather than to find black-and-white answers to all of life's questions. The people of the church would not know to use this language, but they now seek God in scripture more from the standpoint of Wesley's quadrilateral than in bibliolatrous ways. Currently, Courtyard Church of Christ is learning to trust the Spirit to teach them through other means of grace, such as the spoken word in the faith community, reason, the insights the Spirit reveals to the church throughout history, the revelation of God in creation, and prayer,¹⁵ in addition to the Bible (though the Bible is supreme). Formative readings of Scripture are offered in balance with informative readings, and often a theological interpretation of Scripture is valued over historical-critical readings.¹⁶

A working hypothesis is that this hermeneutical transition, in addition to the challenges brought about by the military lifestyle that many have, contribute to the congregation's anxiety about life decisions. Whereas in the past much of the congregation imitated well known NT verses in decision making and strove simply to do what the Bible said (from a literalist reading), now I perceive growing trends of trying to discern

15. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) was used as the primary text in an adult Sunday school class on how to consider genre in biblical studies. Though helpful for literary criticism, this text teaches strong historical-critical methodology. Courtyard seeks to know as much as possible about the context of Scripture, but they regard the goal to know precisely what the passage "meant to them then" as elusive, and Fee's claim "that it cannot mean anything new today that it did not mean to them then" as counter to the biblical witness of more nuanced revelation through time. See M. Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000).

16. With various measures of severity and understanding, John Mark Hicks's autobiographical journey from patternism to theological interpretation, as recorded in *Searching for the Pattern*, is typical for those Courtyard members with a Church of Christ history.

God's will through the Spirit, the life of Christ, and the narrative arc of the text in theological pinpoints. The beauty of mystery is welcome alongside the death of legalism; however, the loss of “book, chapter, and verse” assurance has occasionally left people reeling in the deep regarding *phronesis*.

Furthermore, the lack of say in so many of life's decisions due to the military's role in their lives may contribute to the church's struggle with *phronesis*. As mentioned, the military chooses when a person moves and in what neighborhood they live, when to deploy, and how much time a soldier has with his or her family. The military tells the soldier what to wear, how to wear it, what to eat, what to weigh, and what jobs to perform. The soldiers spend twenty to thirty years either telling others what decisions to make or saying, “Yes, Sir” and “Yes, Ma'am” in response to choices made for them. The soldier does not work typical hours, so this way of navigating choice and decision-making is done day and night for years on end. Many of them live where they work, and the decisions affect the soldier's entire family, like where the children go to school and what doctors the spouse can use. It is likely that this unusual relationship with decision-making influences *phronesis* for decisions made outside of the military's control. The VA words it this way, “In the military, these things are not only provided but there is often little choice (e.g., you eat at determined times in a certain place, duty station determines your dress). Given the lack of choices while in the military, the vast array of choices in the civilian world can sometimes be overwhelming.”¹⁶ In response to this— what the VA categorizes as a “common challenge”—the soldier and family may be paralyzed by the

16. US Department of Veteran's Affairs, “Common Challenges During Re-adjustment to Civilian Life,” Veterans Employment Toolkit (August, 2021).
https://www.va.gov/vetsinworkplace/docs/em_challengesreadjust.asp

prospect of making major decisions or more rigidly hold to individual choices as a means of compensating for the lack of control in military-related decisions.

That said, Courtyard’s special circumstances notwithstanding, all people are faced with such challenges as competing worldviews, mass media input, the loss of universally acknowledged truth, and postmodernism that can contribute to anxiety in decision-making. In this sense, Courtyard is hardly unique. It is the position of this project that a biblical understanding and a plan of action toward Wisdom Christology would help the individuals of Courtyard Church of Christ make decisions that result in peace and godly witness.

Assessment of the Problem

An identified gap of knowledge exists for the members of Courtyard Church of Christ between their decision-making process, *phronesis*, and Wisdom Christology, which affects reconciliatory *shalom* and their witness to the world. This gap was identified through my years-long interactions with the congregation as a pastor, but more specifically through an anonymous survey that addressed Wisdom Christology directly, observation, and role-playing.

Defining Phronesis

For clarity, it is necessary to explain the use of the word *phronesis* in the problem and solution of this project. *Phronesis* is a Greek word that may seem unnecessarily foreign when the more familiar word *discernment* would suffice. Yet, this project uses *phronesis* because of its nuance. Ruth Haley Barton defines *discernment* as “the ability to separate, to discriminate, to determine, to decide or to distinguish between two things. Spiritual discernment is the ability to distinguish or discriminate between good (that

which is of God and draws us closer to God) and evil (that which is not of God and draws us away from God).”¹⁷ *Discernment* is the appropriate word for what happens within a person as he or she decides between two choices. It is a noble and necessary Christian pursuit, and much has been written on it in the canons of church history. *Discernment*, however, does not connote the resulting action made from the internal decision, which is the goal of this intervention. Furthermore, the choices that the congregation is seeking to navigate are not typically polarized into choice A or B, and often the members seek a more particularized answer than what is good or evil in God’s eyes. Certainly, this project seeks to help the congregation choose between good and evil, but also to do a specific good within God’s realm of good options. As such, Aristotle’s words on *phronesis* are more precise to the work this project undertakes.

Aristotle uses the word *phronesis* to describe a capacity for practical wisdom, the sort of wisdom that distinguishes a person who can navigate the “middle of a circle” that is life wherein one does the “right thing” “to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, in the right way.”¹⁸ *Phronesis* is not so much about choosing the best of two options, as *discernment* implies, (though that may be part of it, depending upon the situation), but about navigating daily life within one’s heart *and* actions. Though explorations about *phronesis* began with Aristotle, Christians adopted the word and have applied it to disciples’ decision-making process. The use of the word in Christian discipleship is not new to this project by any means. For example, Swinton

17. Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2012), 11.

18. Aristotle and Lesley Brown, *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford World’s Classics. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 36.

and Mowat define *phronesis* for disciples of Jesus as “A form of practical wisdom which combines theory and practice in the praxis of individuals and communities . . . It aims for an embodied, practical knowledge that will enable a particular form of God-oriented lifestyle.”¹⁹ Notice the combination of internal discernment and action. *Phronesis* encompasses both knowing what to do and doing it. Furthermore, Bass assigns *phronesis* to the faith community, which is where this project takes place. She defines it this way: “*Phronesis* is practical, grounded in ordinary experience, and learned over time in the company of others for the sake of others.”²⁰ For her, *phronesis* is not merely choosing between two polarized ideas, but a spiritual discipline, unfolding with maturity, that equips the Christian to navigate the decisions of daily life, done best with the community of faith. With all of this considered, for this project, *phronesis* is the preferred word over *discernment*. *Phronesis* connotes inner knowing with God-honoring action in the complexities of daily decisions and recognizes that because these decisions affect others, they are best made with others. The mission of this project’s intervention team was to investigate how Wisdom Christology could enhance *phronesis* even further so that this inner knowing and resulting action is induced by Christ as our Wisdom.

Anonymous Survey

Twenty-three adult members filled out an online Wisdom survey anonymously. The survey revealed that 42 percent believe that they make a decision weekly (25 percent daily) that gives them pause. These decisions ranged from job choices to whether to stay

19. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. (London: SCM Press, 2016), 25.

20. Dorothy Bass, Kathleen Cahalan, Bonnie Miller McLemore, James Nieman, and Christian Scharen, *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016) 5.

married to ministry ideas. Alarming, seventeen percent of respondents claimed to never have faced a decision that gives them pause, which could reveal a lack of consideration in the decision-making process.

When asked, “What was the first thing you did in the decision-making process?”, 45 percent said something that may be categorized as spiritual, such as meeting with a minister, praying, or searching the Bible. Seventy-five percent of those surveyed said that wisdom should be a part of the decision-making process, and all respondents said that there is a relationship between Christ and wisdom. Yet only 30 percent said they would be able to explain the relationship between Christ and wisdom to another person. 10 percent of those surveyed said that Christ only affects wisdom for decisions made about church matters, while 20 percent said that they were *unaware* of any relationship between Christ and wisdom, while 5 percent decided that Christ and wisdom were unrelated. Fifty-five percent acknowledged that they consider Christ and wisdom in decision-making, while 25 percent said that they knew they should do so, but do not, largely because they do not know how.

Participants were asked to rank what they consider most important in the decision-making process. The number one answer from the choices given was “It is what Jesus would do.” This reveals a desire to imitate Christ. A close second was “The solution is logical and stands the test of reasonable interrogation.” Obviously, Christ does not figure overtly in this answer, but this answer does honor the place of reason in *phronesis*. The incarnational answer, “The decision reveals who Christ is in me” was tied for third with “It's what the Bible says.” The fourth-ranked answer was “The decision is what I want to do and is in my best interest.” Overall, respondents said that imitating

Christ affected their decision-making process more than the concept of participating in Christ.

The anonymous survey showed a gap of knowledge between the members' decision-making process, *phronesis*, and Wisdom Christology. It is proposed that a correction to this gap would diminish members' internal chaos, regret, and stagnancy in the decision-making process, as well as Christ-center their witness to the world.

Observation Log

I intentionally listened for evidence of decision-making wrestling among the church members over a three-month period and recorded my observations in a notebook. The observations included conversations I heard in public spaces within the church building between individuals or in groups. I recorded evidence of wrestling with decisions in pastoral counseling sessions and phone conversations with members. I also included instances of communal discernment within the church. In the end, twenty-five incidents were recorded. A sample list that demonstrates the breadth of decisions is here.

1. What ministry should our small group pursue in the community?
2. Should I have surgery now or postpone it?
3. How do I know if an idea I have is my own or the Spirit's?
4. Should I finish my degree or keep my dream job?
5. Should I date someone outside of my faith?
6. Should I leave the military or re-enlist?
7. What can be done to combat modern slavery?
8. Is God leading us to a different church building/gathering space?
9. Should my family stay or evacuate for the impending hurricane?

10. Should I place membership here or not?

It was noted that when the decision was communal, and even more so when I was facilitating the conversation, the church was more likely to introduce spiritual disciplines to discern an answer, like prayer, searching the Scriptures for insight, or fasting. An individual asked in one pastoral counseling case, “Would it be a good idea to journal the possibilities with God and write down what I see God do?” “Peace” was mentioned four times, as in, “I am waiting to feel peace about one option,” or “I’ll know the right answer when there’s peace.” One person mentioned, “looking for doors God is opening.” A Christian movie, watched with other Christians, heavily informed one person’s decision. One person asked, “Where is the Gospel in this decision?”

The majority, from what I heard in the covert observations, did not introduce spiritual disciplines or Christ into the decision-making process, nor did they intentionally pursue wisdom. The factors that determined the choice were practical, such as “Which choice has more money?” “I feel overwhelmed by this [option],” “Let’s take a vote,” “I saw a TED talk about that!” “My family is pressuring me to do this,” “What resources are available,” “I’m going to just let someone make the decision for me,” “I’m going to call my mom,” and “Let’s think about it for a few days.”

The observation revealed that church members are willing to talk to each other about areas of their lives that are at a crossroads, in matters large and small. It also revealed that they are seeking direction and desire to be free from the paralysis and discomfort that accompanies the inability to decide. However, it also affirmed that much of the time they are “shooting in the dark” when it comes to *phronesis*. Resources in Christ, Scripture, and the church are underutilized, and wisdom was not mentioned at all.

Role-Playing

Another method I used to gather information about church members' current decision-making process was role-playing. Twenty-one members gathered in a home, and I asked them to role-play through four questions that required a decision to be made. I did not give them any context about Wisdom Christology or inform them why I was asking the questions. I placed five people in the first scenario and told them, "You all are friends from church, and it's a Saturday night. Decide where you're going to go for your night out." They contributed to the conversation in line with their personalities, the more dominant making decisions and the more passive going along with the plan. In less than five minutes they decided to go to one of their homes for barbeque. There was no mention of anything spiritual, to include ministry, Christ, or characteristics of wisdom in the conversation. This first question was intentionally not overtly spiritual.

I proposed the second scenario to everyone in the room. The question could more easily fall into the realm of spirituality. "You have been dating someone for over a year, and the individual has proposed marriage. How do you decide whether or not to accept the proposal?" I asked each person to write three means of discernment on a piece of paper without discussing them with anyone. They shared their responses. Eight out of the twenty-one mentioned something spiritual, but the spiritual means (which was "pray" in six out of the eight) was not first on the list for any of them. Four of the twenty-one had "compatible faith" in their list. The other predominant answers were "compatibility," "good communication skills," and "common goals." A conversation arose through the sharing about the ultimate determinate for whether one should marry, and the room

unanimously affirmed that an affirmative to the question, “Can I stand to see this person die a terrible death and stand by him or her?” was a supreme indicator.

The third question was overtly spiritual, but still at the individual level. I opened the conversation to the whole room, asking them to pretend that they were charged to teach a devotional for church. “How do you prepare for this devotional?” Everyone responded, and every person mentioned something spiritual. In fact, nothing was suggested that was not spiritually informational or formational. Answers included *lectio divina*, checking commentaries, reading the passage in small pieces, and letting it ruminate for a day at a time to see what God reveals, “check the context,” “talk to Tiffany,” “ask Christian friends from different backgrounds what the passage means to them,” and “write down my thoughts in a journal as the Holy Spirit reveals them.” Interestingly, Christ was not mentioned at all, which is pertinent for a project of Wisdom Christology.

Finally, I brought a different group of five into the center and asked them a question that required a decision for the community instead of the previous individually based ones. “Church shootings are increasing across the country. Should Courtyard arm itself to counter a possible live-shooting emergency?” They were very quiet for nearly a minute. Then they delved into a conversation about practical discernment, like “conduct a church poll,” and “research why churches are targeted.” They talked about meeting with local law enforcement and assessing the building for points of weakness. One soldier mentioned, “We should ask and see who’s already carrying every week anyway.” They arrived at a plan of action, involving a congregational poll and a meeting with local law enforcement. Nothing spiritual was mentioned.

Before this group was dismissed, I asked a follow-up question, “Do you think there are any spiritual or theological aspects to consider?” The group grew sheepish and appeared embarrassed in body language. One woman in the group who classified herself as “sort of Christian” broke the silence. “Is fear what God wants us to feel and how do we handle fear?” There were no responses to her, just quiet. One man said, “Yes, we should consider theology, but in this matter, only after addressing the practical needs.” A woman concurred, “Yes, like, will people leave the church over this issue, and is that taking care of them spiritually?” Finally, a man said, “The spiritual considerations need to be handled at the individual level, like if Joe Stuffy is too eager to carry, then that reveals a spiritual problem we need to deal with in him.” The body language, tone, and speed in this conversation were different than the other three. This decision clearly gave them pause, and they were not sure how to put the pieces together in a way that honored God and each other.

The role-playing revealed that the more overtly spiritual the decision to be made, the more quickly and thoroughly the members turned to spiritual means to solve it. There were struggles to operationalize incarnational, or embodied, faith that participates in Christ. In addition, the more significant the decision, the more likely they were to be stumped by it. And other than one reference of, “What would Jesus do?” in the arming the church scenario, Christ was not mentioned at all. The role-playing exercise pointed to a lack of awareness of Wisdom Christology to decision-making at the individual and corporate level.

Imitation and Incarnation as Means to Wisdom:

A Note on the Data Collection

To imitate Christ as a path to *phronesis* means to make the decisions Jesus made as modeled in the Gospel writings. For example, Jesus frequently dines with people considered to be unclean or sinners in Luke’s Gospel; therefore, a church member faced with a similar choice would choose to do the same. Imitating Jesus can also mean making decisions that align with Jesus’s commands, like those listed in his Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5–7. So, the church member would choose to settle a property matter quickly (5:25) or take a weekend to purge the house of excess (6:19–24). Imitation can also inform *phronesis* inspired by Jesus’s character, revealed in His actions. In this case, a Christian would choose compassion in a decision that gives them pause because Jesus modeled compassion when healing the crowds in Matt 14:14. Christ gives the Christian much to imitate by example, teaching, and character.

Courtyard’s decision-making question, “What would Jesus do?”, mentioned in the role-playing and several times in the anonymous survey, is an imitative means to *phronesis*. The Bible commands Christians to imitate Christ. Jesus tells the disciples to wash others’ feet as he washes theirs. Paul imitates Christ. Peter tells the church to “follow in Jesus’s steps.”²¹ Imitation is a healthy mode of discipleship supported by Scripture and church tradition. For example, Thomas à Kempis’s 1420 work *Imitation of Christ* is said to be the most widely read devotional book outside of the Bible, which

21. Foot washing: John 13:12–15; Paul imitates Jesus: 1 Cor 11:1; Peter teaches the church: 1 Pet 2:21.

underscores the impact of imitation on the church.²² Yet as important as the ideal of imitation is, the biblical witness does not consider imitation alone as the substantiation of the Christian life. For instance, shortly after washing their feet, Jesus tells the disciples that he will abide in them and they and him (John 15:4). A considerable portion of the Pauline corpus emphasizes the incarnating nature of Christ in the believer. The confession “Christ is in you” and “Christ is in me” recurs and is meant to equip the churches for the Christian life (Rom 8:10, Gal 2:20). Even à Kempis’s classic moves to give close attention to the internal realms in Books II and III. Imitating Christ and incarnating Christ, though similar in some ways, are not identical.

At this point, it is necessary to distinguish this idea of a “second incarnation”—Christ in the church—from the doctrine of the incarnation, otherwise it is implied that Christians become “little Christs”—fully God and fully human as Jesus was, which is not the intended implication the use of “incarnation” in this paper.²³ The incarnation is a historical event, a confession that Jesus Christ is God, born in flesh around 4 BCE, and this truth has been proclaimed by the church through the Nicene Creed for centuries. To say that Christ incarnates the church, or even the believer, is not to diminish the event of

22. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Wheaton: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1998).

23. C. S. Lewis used “little Christ” language, and I agree with it as he used it, though it has been misunderstood. He writes, “The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose.” C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 171. The concept of Christ in us, or us in Christ—as Lewis says—thus making us “little Christs” raises concerns without a crucial clarification, one that Lewis affirms. Namely, there is only one Christ. Christ’s indwelling within the believer at conversion does not make them divine, but instead unites them with Christ’s divinity and empowers them to make righteous decisions.

the original incarnation or even equate the two, for the church is made of humans who are fully human and not gods, fully or partially.

Yet, Paul tells the churches, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). He says, “Christ is all and in all” to the Colossians to help them live in equity and unity (Col 3:11).²⁴ For the same purpose, Jesus uses equally intimate language, but he places the abiding in both himself and the believers, “May they [future disciples] also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity” (John 17:22–24).²⁵ This enfleshed abiding of Christ in the church and the believer is so intimate Shelley and Harris call it a “second incarnation.”²⁶ They explain, “If there is legitimacy to Paul’s metaphor [of the body] and the theological rationale behind it, there is at least some sense in which we may call Christ’s church a second incarnation.”²⁷ Also, “As God was incarnate a first time in him, so he seeks to be incarnate perpetually through the church that dares to wear his name.”²⁸

To use the word “incarnation” to describe Christ’s continued presence within the believer and the church is not to say the believer is divine, but nor is it to imply that the

24. More passages about Christ’s incarnation in the church are explored in chapter 2.

25. Jesus also says, “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch is not able to bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither you, unless you abide in Me” (John 15:4).

26. For more information on how awareness of second-incarnation theology can form the modern church, see Rubel Shelley and Randall Harris, *The Second Incarnation: A Theology for the 21st Century Church* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2001).

27. Shelley and Harris, *Second Incarnation*, 48.

28. Shelley and Harris, *Second Incarnation*, 240.

Christian is justified living as an island apart from the rest of the body. This is a second concern with Lewis's "little Christs" terminology. It can connote the sufficiency of individualized faith. Assuredly, the church is comprised of individuals who are accountable for the decisions they make individually, but the many parts are intended to come together as the one body of Christ where a greater depth and breadth of wisdom is located. (The previous discussion about determinism emphasizes this.)

Not all scholars appreciate the word "incarnation" to describe Christ's current relationship with the church. Christopher Holmes cites T. F. Torrance in his opposition:

The church in the Spirit is filled with Christ's presence. . . . Christ is at work. He is prophetically present forming the church into the church, to be the people of the new covenant. The church shares in Christ; it is in him, assimilated into him, becomes what it is only in relation to him. But it is not his incarnate presence or a kind of extension of him. Rather, "In all its union with Christ, the church remains distinct from him and must never be confounded with him."²⁹

Holmes acknowledges the mutually intimate abiding of Christ within the church and the church within Christ. The church is filled with Christ; Christ is present in the church; and the church shares in Christ, is assimilated into Christ, becomes itself in relation to Christ, and is in union with Christ. Despite all of these "in" and "within" prepositions, Holmes does not approve of the phrase, "the church incarnates Christ" because, in his assessment, that word does not sufficiently distinguish Christ from the church. His concern is valid considering how many leave Christ because of the church's poor reflection of him.

So, what is the best terminology to explain this mystery where Christ is *in* the church but not *as* the church? There are several options: indwelling, abiding in, in

29. Christopher Holmes, "The Church and the Presence of Christ: Defending Actualist Ecclesiology," *Pro Ecclesia* 21 (2012): 274; quoting T. F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2009), 357.

intimate union with, participating with, incarnating, immanent presence, etc. Each option is rank with challenges, often tangled in the depths of the meaning of prepositions.

Indwelling connotes the Holy Spirit over Christ and *participating* seems more parallel than intimate. In the end, despite its complexities, I chose *incarnate* for this paper to contrast *phronesis* that is born solely of the imitation of Christ. The word has challenges, but its use assumes that any “second incarnation” is not a one-to-one parallel with the doctrine of the incarnation. In addition, Christ’s incarnation—His abiding, enfleshed, indwelling presence among Christians—does not justify amputated individualism, limit Christ to the church, nor make us anything other than fully human.

The use of the word *incarnate*, implying that Christ abides in the believer and the church, as well as the believer and the church abiding in Christ, startles the church to see Christ in each other and to remember that “Christ is in all” as we wrestle through similar problems as did the church in Colossae, namely, how to mature in wisdom (Col 3:11). Assuredly, Susan singing in the row behind John is not Christ, but the fullness of the Wisdom of God is in Christ who is enfleshed in Susan; therefore, if a decision is giving John pause it would behoove him to inquire with Susan, to participate with Christ in her, even as John remembers that Christ—and therefore Wisdom—abides in him as well. As will be addressed throughout this paper, Paul told the Colossians to “teach and admonish one another with all wisdom,” and the call to remember the incarnating presence of Christ among them motivates the church to make decisions together.

The incarnating presence of Christ within the church as means of *phronesis* is seldom addressed. Imitation is more prevalent. However, imitation alone as the means to *phronesis* has at least three significant flaws. One, simple imitation does not address

many of the decisions Christians make daily. For instance, there is no biblical account of Jesus navigating the ethics of biogenetics for the members struggling with infertility. There is no record of Jesus making parenting decisions to help the family that is raising a special needs child. To tell a member to imitate Christ when making decisions is hardly clarifying, whereas an incarnational wisdom helps apply the wisdom of Christ to the issues of different times and contexts.

Second, imitation alone does not distinguish the Christian from any other people group and therefore does not bear witness to Christ in the world. One of the first mentions of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible is in Deut 4:5-7.

See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you the statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who when they hear all these statutes, will say, surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people! For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the lord our god is whenever we call to him?

Here witness is listed as an intended consequence of wisdom in ancient Judaism. The surrounding nations were to see God's people making wise decisions and by them know that God was near Israel. The witness to foreign nations was not that the people of God were imitating a distant or deceased being, but that the incarnating presence of a living God heard the Israelites' supplications and thus equipped them with practical wisdom in a way unattainable to those outside of Israel.

Third, the "What Would Jesus Do" movement came with individual bracelets. The question, "what would Jesus do" lends itself to personal decisions, such as "Which job should I take?", "Should I wear a mask if I'm ill?", "Is pharmacology or nursing a better choice for me?" These types of decisions, under the microscope of what Jesus would do, are prone to be made in isolation. In contrast, an emphasis on the incarnating

Christ as explained above invites the decision-making to where Christ's body moves—the church. This project seeks to address individual and church-wide decisions, but the involvement of the church, even for individual decisions, is part of the proposed solution, for this is consistent with the character of Wisdom in the biblical account.

In summary, Courtyard Church of Christ has a lack of Wisdom Christology awareness; therefore, *phronesis* is strained. Members are often uncertain in the face of decisions, and the uncertainty contributes to internal chaos, paralysis, or even the deflection of choices onto happenstance or other people. The shift from fundamentalism or patternism to theological interpretation is incomplete as it affects *phronesis*. As is common in more fundamental heritages, a false divide exists between sacred and secular spaces so that inconsistent methods of decision-making are employed. In addition, a more particularized lack of awareness between imitative and incarnational Wisdom is present, even in the rudimentary areas where Wisdom Christology is currently understood. Even so, it is the position of this project that the members are accountable to use their free will to make God-honoring choices, and this is possible with one of God's means of grace, Wisdom Christology in the church.

Problem Statement

The problem of this project thesis is that there is a gap between Courtyard Church of Christ members' current decision-making processes and Wisdom Christology.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this project is to develop a plan of action that equips Courtyard Church of Christ with Wisdom Christology as a primary means of *phronesis* that produces internal *shalom* and witnesses to the world a people incarnated by Christ.

This project began just before Christmas in 2019 and continued over about four months into 2020 with an intervention team that met mostly at Courtyard Church of Christ. Our first session was an orientation where we discussed the problem and purpose of the project with some initial brainstorming about what wisdom is. Consent forms were collected, the prospectus was reviewed, questions were answered, and the session ended with *lectio divina* on the Deut 4 passage mentioned above.

Session two was spent reading and discussing pertinent wisdom passages in the Old Testament from Gen 3:6, the books of history, and prophets (e.g., Isa 11 and Ezek 2); special attention was given to wisdom literature such as Job 28 and Prov 8. The session ended with *lectio divina* using Prov 8, where we prayed through the characteristics of Wisdom revealed in the chapter, how they reminded us of Christ, and what God was inviting us to do with this information until we met again.

Session 3 began with the Bible Project video on the book of Proverbs, which covers Woman Wisdom thoroughly, and we discussed how this portrayal compared to their original understanding of wisdom. We spent the remainder of the time reading apocryphal texts on wisdom, like Sir 1 and Wis 7–9. We highlighted where we saw Christ in these readings, and the session ended with *lectio divina* through Wis 7:24–28.

Session 4 explored wisdom in the Gospels, first in Matthew, where Jesus is found inviting anyone who has ears to hear to a public wisdom school. In turn, it is attended by the poor, little children, those who labor and are heavy laden, and the teachable. We charted what Matthew taught us about Jesus in comparison to what we read about Wisdom in Proverbs. We then looked at John's rich description of Jesus as wisdom where Jesus's wisdom school is private, secret, with special revelations of wisdom for

those in the school. We compared the seven I Am sayings in John to descriptions of wisdom in the OT, read John's prologue as a wisdom hymn, and charted wisdom's V-shaped journey outlined in the upper room discourses of John 14 through 17. We closed this session with an invitation to complete the sentence "*Christ as Wisdom is _____.*"

Session 5 unearthed Wisdom Christology in the rest of the NT. The session began with *lectio divina* using the wisdom hymn in Col 1:15–20. We also read 1 Cor 1:10–2:14, Eph 1:16–19, Eph 3, and Jas 3:13–17. The purpose of this session was to show how the early church incorporated what we had studied about wisdom in the Canon into the life of the church and Christian discipleship.

Session 6 was done via Zoom because Covid quarantining had begun. We brainstormed and contributed to a shared Google Doc to compose together a definition of wisdom and an intervention plan that incorporated what we had learned about wisdom, its purpose for the church, and its role in decision-making. Our initial ideas were completed in this session, and then the team members were encouraged to return to the shared document over the course of a month to revise the definition and the intervention plan.

I compiled the team's final ideas into an intervention plan and emailed it to them in the summer of 2020. The team filled out their evaluations from this plan, and an evaluation was sent to Brookline Church of Christ in Boston for triangulation.

Basic Assumptions

Basic assumptions I hold in this project are that church members want to make more peace-filled decisions that bear witness to Christ in the world. I assume that once understood in the biblical witness, Wisdom Christology will be of value for the congregation as it was to the earliest Christians (and as wisdom was a virtue for the Jews

before them). The intervention assumes that the sermons, dinners, and retreats that are part of the intervention are heard and participated in by the congregation while also assuming that individuals in the church will have varied interest and depth of participation.

Definitions

Phronesis: “A form of practical wisdom which combines theory and practice in the praxis of individuals and communities. It aims for an embodied, practical knowledge that will enable a particular form of God-oriented lifestyle.”³⁰

Shalom: “A life where wholeness and well-being are present, perfectly portrayed in Eden before the fall.”³¹ The completion of *shalom* is humankind in reconciliation internally, with God, creation, and each other.

Wisdom: “The ability to apply the truths of divine revelation to the various relations and circumstances of life.”³² This is a simple definition that has stood the test of time.

Wisdom Christology: The study of God’s wisdom embodied in Christ.³³

30. This word is defined in greater detail previously in a separate section, but John Swinton and Harriet Mowatt’s definition is used here for simplicity as it is sufficiently encompassing. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 25.

31. Bill Arnold and Bryan Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 483.

32. D. M. Welton, “The Old Testament Wisdom (Chokma),” *The Biblical World*, 10.3 (Sept. 1897), 183–89.

33. Wisdom will be capitalized in the paper when it is used synonymously with Christ or in reference to Woman Wisdom of the Hebrew texts. It will be lowercase when used as a common noun, as in reference to wisdom as virtue.

Delimitations

This project was created for and in the context of Courtyard Church of Christ, and though much of it could be applied in other churches, even outside of the Churches of Christ, the project is intended for the ministry at Courtyard Church of Christ.

Limitations

The project is limited by the transient nature of Courtyard Church of Christ. The intervention team was consistent, and each is still a member at the time of writing. However, church members who seek to apply the intervention may move before they are able to participate in all its pieces and therefore glean less of its intended effect. Another limitation is the Hawthorne effect.³⁴ It is assumed that the intervention team wanted the project to succeed and for the congregation to be portrayed in a positive light; therefore, a bias permeates the project. Finally, a plan of action alone does not develop *phronesis* in a congregation. It must be carried out in the willing and surrendered souls of the church.

Conclusion

“The ability to apply the truths of divine revelation to the various relations and circumstances of life” is a challenge for all Christians, but the context of Courtyard presents specific complications.³⁵ The hermeneutical shift from literalism to theological interpretation brings less certitude and therefore less peace. In addition, Courtyard’s military majority characteristically has a different relationship with decision-making than non-military connected Christians. This is not to say that Courtyard’s members are

34. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 82.

36. D. M. Welton, “The Old Testament Wisdom (Chokma),” *The Biblical World*, 10.3 (Sept. 1897), 183–89.

unique in their need for wisdom. The redeeming value of ancient biblical wisdom literature is evidence that the search for wisdom in day-to-day decision-making is a pervasive human condition. Even so, Doctor of Ministry interventions typically are imagined within and target for a specific congregational context, so the proposed intervention seeks to offer concrete steps for Courtyard members struggling with decisions that give them pause in a way that not only imitates but participates with the incarnating Christ among them, resulting in *shalom* and a witness of a people to whom Christ is near.

CHAPTER II

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

A robust theology of biblical wisdom has the potential to transform the decision-making process in Christians. Wisdom permeates Scripture, sometimes inconspicuously as a child born in the quiet before the beginning (Prov 8:22–26), and other times boldly as a woman shouting from the city gates (Prov 8:1–4). Wisdom offers experience, knowledge, and common sense, but the biblical portrayal of wisdom is much more extensive than a natural ability to decide between two ordinary choices in day-to-day living. In fact, biblical wisdom is cosmic in scope and attainable for anyone (to whom God chooses to gift it) and invites all people onto its path. As such, to understand Scripture’s definition of wisdom that culminates in Wisdom Christology—a belief that God’s wisdom is embodied in Christ for the benefit of the church—is to reveal a path for decision-making that produces *shalom* in the church and bears witness to the character of God to the world.

As explained, this project assumes not only the doctrine of the incarnation but the reality of a second incarnation, Christ’s indwelling presence in the church. Christ lives in the church, and Christ is wisdom; as such, the church improves in decision-making by imitating Christ *and* by recognizing the incarnating nature of Christ within them and the world. In the analysis on the second incarnation in the previous chapter Christ was located in the church, but it is pertinent to this project to clarify that Christ is not bound to the church; rather, Christ is cosmic (John 1), just as wisdom is described to be (Prov 3:19,

Wis 7:24). Jesus announced himself to have “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18). Waves submit to his authority (Mark 4:39), and fig trees wilt when he commands (Mark 11:14). This is not to erase distinction between the church and the world or legitimize every act of social justice as Kingdom work.¹ Yet, the doctrine of the Trinity that equates Christ with God demands Christ’s omnipotence. Shug Avery in the *The Color Purple* spoke as a wise woman when she declared, “I think it pisses God off when you walk by the color purple in some field somewhere and don’t notice it.”² Christ is not the wildflower, but the connection between Christ and creation, parallel to Wisdom’s weave through creation, is undeniable in the examination of the subsequent passages. Therefore, the fullness of Wisdom Christology, including but not limited to imitation, moves the church beyond a functional Christ who produces a mere Christian ethic further into Christ who is guiding in them and revealing around them. Christ’s presence has the potential to help them make decisions in a way that produces a contagious *shalom* in which the church is sanctified through the reconciliatory process of new creation, which will be most clearly seen in Col 1:15–20.

Theological Construct

The story of Wisdom in Scripture begins before creation (Prov 8:22–26), but this construct will begin in Deuteronomy. Examples of Wisdom’s character will be expounded upon through the Hebrew Scriptures, especially wisdom literature, including some apocryphal references. Wisdom’s embodiment in the Gospels in Christ is critical to

1. Scot McKnight, in a controversial but reasonable position, warns of the dangers of locating the Kingdom of God universally instead of within the church. Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2014).

2. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*. (London: Penguin Books, 2019), Letter 73.

the examination, and the construct will culminate in Paul's wisdom hymn to the church in Colossae in which Jesus mimics Wisdom's journey from God to the church. Finally, influential conclusions by scholars in wisdom studies will be examined before applications for the church are drawn from the sapientology revealed in the overall witness.

Deuteronomy: Wisdom's Intent

Deut 4:5–7 was mentioned earlier to show that wisdom was intended to bear witness to God's nearness.

See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you the statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who when they hear all these statutes, will say, surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people! For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the lord our god is whenever we call to him?³

This passage presumes that God delivers wisdom to those who seek it. The people of God are not merely copying the advice of an ancient teaching text, like Amenemope, but they are calling out to a living being who hears because he is near and responds in allegiance to the covenantal relationship with a particular community of people.⁴ Wisdom for daily life was given to Moses by a very near God, and Moses passed it along to the people as God continued to remind the people of his nearness. As a result, there is an assumption that the surrounding people groups would conclude that God's people are set apart in their astute discernment because their God is with them.

3. Deut 4:5–7, NRSV

4. Amenemope is an ancient Egyptian teaching text similar in style and purpose to the biblical book of Proverbs.

Hebrew Scriptures: Wisdom Reveals and Conceals

Wisdom's Accessibility for Solomon

The impetus of this project was the observation that American churches rarely bring wisdom's witness to the world. Few people groups outside of Christianity look at the local church and proclaim, "This is a wise and discerning people! Surely God is near them!" Several studies emerged during the Trump presidency and the following pandemic that evaluated why Christians are more susceptible to conspiracy theories, like QAnon and the belief that Covid-19 was intentionally manufactured in a lab. One author claims Christians lead the way in these falsehoods because of "incomplete catechization and of a resurgence of gnostic heretical thinking, encouraged by the new social media communication tools."⁵ Another highlights common elements between Christianity and QAnon that contribute to a significant number of QAnon's adherents identifying as Christians.⁶ This Christian vulnerability to conspiracy informs decision-making and affects the Christian witness.⁷ The outside world does not perceive this gullibility positively.

The outside world did not mock Solomon's wisdom, however. Solomon famously asks for and receives wisdom from God in 2 Chr 1, and the breadth of it is recounted in 1 Kgs 4:29–34. Wisdom inspired him to write proverbs and songs. It taught him about science: flora and fauna and the animal kingdom. His God-given wisdom aided his

5. Bena Iosef, "Conspiracy Theories during Coronavirus Times - the Saplings of a New Gnosticism inside the Church," *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Orthodoxa* 65.2 (2020): 45–56.

6. Lulian Dinulescu. 2021. "The Interference of the Far-Right Ideology Qanon with Christianity." *Strategic Impact* 78 (1): 118–34.

7. Yannick Imbert. 2021. "Criticism and Legitimacy of 'Cultural Marxism': Implications for Christian Witness in the Postmodern World." *Unio Cum Christo* 7 (1): 59–76.

decision-making and produced conflict resolution (1 Kgs 3:16–28). Solomon gets wisdom as easy as asking for it, and the world takes notice. “From all nations people came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom” (1 Kgs 4:34).

The Queen of Sheba saw that Solomon’s wisdom was unique. The witness of it neither induced scorn nor conclusions that God’s people are fearful, hateful, or small-minded. Rather, the Queen concluded the opposite. She was “overwhelmed” by the vastness and goodness of it, and it bore witness to a previously unknown God now worthy of praise. “How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness” (1 Kgs 10:8–9). In this case, wisdom had the effect Moses predicted in Deuteronomy and caused other nations to praise God.

Wisdom’s Elusiveness for Job

Though not as significant to this intervention as the other books of wisdom literature that will be explored in the next section, one does find in Job’s wisdom hymn (ch. 28) a warning against assuming wisdom’s availability and attainability. Yes, Solomon merely asked for it, but others, like Job, searched in good faith for extended periods of time only to conclude that wisdom is elusive. “It [Wisdom] cannot be found in the land of the living. The deep says, ‘It is not in me’; the sea says, ‘It is not with me’” (Job 28:13b–14). A frustrated church singing Job’s song will typically stop the pursuit of wisdom or turn exclusively to secular sources for wisdom, which is why an intervention that holds the tension between wisdom’s availability and elusiveness is needed. As

uncomfortable as it can be, the people of God must at times rest in mystery and God's timing. The Hebrew Bible tells of sages among the nations of Egypt, Edom, Persia, and Babylon, but it sets apart the wisdom of YHWH as precious though not necessarily obvious to anyone, especially those who do not fear YHWH.⁸ In Job's wisdom hymn, destruction and death have only heard a rumor of wisdom, and God alone knows where to find it (28:22–23).

Wisdom's Witness in Daniel

The witness of wisdom in Daniel holds the aforementioned tension between availability and elusiveness well. It also shows the breadth of wisdom's potential to help in decision-making, bring about peace, and bear witness to God in the world. Here, Daniel finds himself in the middle of a battle between the wisdom of God and that of the Persians. Nebuchadnezzar had troubling dreams, and he wanted to know what they meant. The Persian astrologers could not answer the King's question, so Daniel turned to his friends for help. "He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision" (Dan 2:18–19). Daniel acknowledges wisdom is elusive, but through prayer it can be revealed, Lord willing. Daniel turns to friends of faith in the pursuit of wisdom, and he seeks wisdom for their sake over a selfish pursuit.⁹ In turn, God blesses Daniel with

8. Stories of sages are scattered throughout the Old Testament. In some cases they are renowned, and in other cases they are blatantly debunked. See Gen 41; Exod 7; 2 Sam 15:12–17:23; 1 Kgs 4; Jer 50:35; Obad 1:8; and Esth 1 for examples.

9. Daniel's experience with God's wisdom resembles Dorothy Bass's definition of *phronesis*. "Practical, grounded in ordinary experience, and learned over time in the company of others for the sake of others." Dorothy C. Bass, Kathleen Cahalan, Bonnie Miller McLemore, James Nieman, and Christian Scharen. *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 5.

wisdom through a vision, less obvious than wisdom read in the black and white writings of the Torah. Daniel's resulting hymn elevates God's wisdom over that of other sources, but it also extols the nature of wisdom as revealing and concealing. "He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness" (Dan 2:22). The hymn also uses an interesting blend of singular and plural pronouns. "I give thanks and praise, for you have given *me* wisdom and power, and have now revealed to *me* what *we* asked of you, for you have revealed to *us* what the king ordered" (2:23, italics mine). In Daniel, the pursuit of wisdom has no guarantees, but the odds of attaining it are increased when it becomes a community effort for the sake of God's glory.

Daniel goes on to use this wisdom from God to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream about a series of unfolding kingdoms, and the reader is re-introduced to the precedent of wisdom's witness begun in Deut 4:6–7. This foreign king testifies to the greatness of YHWH in response to YHWH's wisdom in YHWH's people. "The king said to Daniel, 'Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery!'" (Dan 2:47).

Hebrew Wisdom Literature and Apocryphal Texts: Wisdom Personified

Walking the path of wisdom necessitates the ability to recognize the path among counterfeit options. Therefore, wisdom's characteristics must be distinguishable. The previously mentioned wisdom citations in the Hebrew Bible show some of these characteristics. God's wisdom is precious like gems, but sometimes, as in Job's life, the gems are hidden deep within the unmined earth. However, wisdom is typically available to those who fear the Lord. Job and Daniel both seek it through friends. Furthermore, in

Deuteronomy and as evidenced with Solomon and Daniel, God’s wisdom on display has the power to bring outsiders to the point of confession of YHWH’s sovereignty. Wisdom is a virtue of God that produces clarity and life, and, when revealed, points back to the glory of God.

Hebrew wisdom literature further develops wisdom’s characteristics beyond a virtue of God into a robust character, “what amounts to a full storyline.”¹⁰ Therefore, when all the subsequent characteristics of wisdom are compiled, wisdom is easily recognized among the competing voices. This portrait comes to life in the book of Proverbs. Tim Mackie illustrates Wisdom in a video on the book of Proverbs as a woman and her thread, “an invisible creative force . . . an attribute of God woven into the fabric of creation. Anyone can access and interact with *hokmah* to create a beautiful life for themselves or others.”¹¹ Wisdom in ancient Hebrew poetry is a creating force that holds all things together, like a seamstress who sews a quilt composed of every piece of glory found in creation to make a beautiful path to the Divine.

It is not surprising to find such a clear portrait of wisdom in Hebrew poetry because the study of wisdom has an extensive history among ancient civilizations. Wisdom writings, not to mention sages and scribes of every sort, were gathered together in Alexandria, Egypt by the 3rd century BCE.¹² Jewish wisdom writings were not

10. Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 38.

11. Tim Mackie, “Wisdom Literature: Proverbs,” *The Bible Project* (The Bible Project, May 4, 2016): <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/wisdom-series/>.

12. Michael David Coogen, “Christian Interpretation in the Premodern Era,” *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*, fully rev. 4th ed., college ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 215.

excluded, and through the genre's thousand-year evolution, Hebrew wisdom literature's main character, Woman Wisdom, emerged as a full-bodied character.¹³ She begins as a child delighting over God's creation, and she is a Lady who comes into her voice and is accessible in Proverbs, made righteous by her contrast to Dame Folly (Prov 7–9). Her “way,” described as a “straight path,” leads to safety, fidelity, sobriety, income, and health (Prov 1:33; 2:9, 13; 3:5–8, 18; 8:18–21, etc.). Woman Wisdom invites everyone to heed her invitation onto this path. These proclamations take place at city gates, on high places, and in public squares (Prov 1:20–21; 8:1–6; 9:3). Woman Wisdom is precious and unique, like gold and rubies (Prov 8:10–11), but near and available to anyone who accepts and heeds her call. Woman Wisdom is more than an elixir for symptoms; she is the source of healing, life itself. “For those who find me find life and receive favor from the Lord” (Prov 8:35).

Her story development does not end with Proverbs. If “questions of theodicy were answered in her [Wisdom's] song,” Wisdom added a stanza with each Hebrew struggle until she became the song of the Jews.¹⁴ The apocryphal wisdom writings add to her list of recognizable characteristics. For instance, she is an immortal professor in Sirach with the books of the Law in hand, headed to Israel. “Wisdom, therefore [in Sir], gains a history”.¹⁵ Wisdom of Solomon presents *hokmah* sharing essential characteristics of God (see below). She is a perfect reflection of the goodness of God (Wis 7:26). Finally, in 1

13. Ben Witherington III dates the development of biblical Wisdom material between 960 BCE to 100 CE. *Jesus the Sage*, 2.

14. Michael E. Willett, *Wisdom Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992).

15. Willett, *Wisdom Christology*, 15.

Enoch, Wisdom is wanderlust (1 En. 42). Her travels become significant as they are mirrored in Christ, as will be further explored later. It is prudent to include Wisdom of Solomon's description of Wisdom here, as it is rich with Wisdom's characteristics. It also communicates a crucial aspect of this paper: the parallels between Wisdom and Christ, some of which are italicized in the quotation below. Christ, like Wisdom, is said to be holy (Acts 3:14), unique (John 3:16), pure (1 Pet 2:22), fully human while fully God, the full and perfect expression of God (Heb 1:3), all-powerful, our friend (John 15:14), and light (John 8:12).

For in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, *holy, unique*, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, *unpolluted*, distinct, *invulnerable*, loving the good, keen, irresistible, *23 beneficent, humane*, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle. *24* For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her *pureness* she pervades and penetrates all things. *25* For she is a *breath of the power of God*, and a *pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty*; therefore *nothing defiled gains entrance into her*. *26* For she is a *reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness*. *27* Though she is but one, *she can do all things*, and while remaining in herself, *she renews all things*; in every generation she passes into holy souls and *makes them friends of God*, and prophets; *28* for *God loves nothing so much as the man who lives with wisdom*. *29* For she is more beautiful than the sun and excels every constellation of the stars. *Compared with the light she is found to be superior*, *30* for it is succeeded by the night, but *against wisdom evil does not prevail*.¹⁶

Nancy Van Antwerp notes that the above passage lists twenty-one characteristics of Wisdom followed by five metaphors that “convey an intense intimacy with God.”¹⁷ This intimacy with God points ahead to the Upper Room Discourse between Jesus and the disciples, which will be explored further in this chapter, but characteristics like

16. Wis 7:22–37, italics mine notating where Wisdom has explicit parallels to Christ in the NT.

17. Nancy J. Van Antwerp, “Sophia: The Wisdom of God,” *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 31.1 (2007): 19–32.

“light,” “the image of God,” “the glory of God,” and the ability to make one a “friend of God” are found in Christ. Antwerp rightly notes that “Protestants are woefully ignorant about the Apocrypha and do not appreciate the images and parallels to the book of Wisdom in the NT that were so instrumental in the early church's formulation of its Christology.”¹⁸ The characteristics of Wisdom revealed in the apocryphal books are fulfilled in Christ, and Jesus references them often. Therefore, Christians who seek wisdom through Wisdom Christology benefit from a deep awareness of Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, and other ancient Jewish Wisdom writings with which Jesus and the first-century writers were familiar. For, if God-fearers can recognize wisdom in Christ, then Christ becomes the path to wisdom.

The Gospels: Christ as Wisdom

Jesus embraces the characteristics of wisdom as his own in the Gospels. It is pertinent to mention that to speak of a savior as the embodiment of a personified female virtue of God is unique. No other prophet in Judaism was said to have become an attribute of God.¹⁹ This view of Jesus goes beyond the idea of *mashal*, or a prophetic sign, such as Hosea’s marriage to Gomer, which was familiar to Jews. As Witherington explains:

No one, so far as one can tell, up to that point in early Judaism had dared to suggest that he was a human embodiment of an attribute of God—God’s Wisdom. . . . Some explanation for this remarkable and anomalous development must be given, and the best, though by no means the only, explanation of this fact is that Jesus presented himself as both sage and message of the sage—God’s Wisdom.²⁰

18. Van Antwerp, “Sophia,” 29.

19. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 204.

20. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 204

Remarkable as it is, this self-proclamation is undeniable in the Gospel of John.²¹ In fact, “the fourth Gospel was written expecting the audience to recognize the sapiential overtones of the book.”²² Here, attuned to Wisdom’s backstory in the Hebrew poets, one does not meet an analogy run amok, but rather Wisdom tabernacling among them. John boldly introduces the world to Jesus the Sage in his Gospel, where “a Wisdom Christology solidly underlies John’s depiction of Jesus the Word of God.”²³

Wisdom and Jesus

To the unaware, claims of an overt Wisdom Christology in the Fourth Gospel seem dubious. But the implausibility is rooted in the modern Christian’s unfamiliarity with the Wisdom of Solomon and other apocryphal texts, ignorance against which Van Antwerp warned. The breadth of Wisdom’s personified storyline is on full display in Wisdom of Solomon where it was Wisdom who provided water from the rock with Moses in the wilderness (Wis 11:4). Wisdom fed Israel manna (16:26). Wisdom rescued Abraham and Lot, and a pillar of salt is left to remind humanity of the folly in the choice “to pass wisdom by” (10:6ff). Wisdom embodied Moses so that he could do signs and wonders, and Wisdom gave him the gift of prophecy (10:16, 11:1). Wisdom gives voice to the mute (10:21). Likewise, in John, it is Jesus who is the living water (John 4:10). He

21. Wisdom Christology is also a dominant feature in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus publicly calls out for people to listen to him, like at the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus references Solomon’s wisdom in 12:42 and 13:54. Moreover, where Luke uses “wisdom” in 11:49, Matthew has Jesus use the personal pronoun (23:34–39). The most significant parallel between wisdom and Matthew will be addressed further in the paper. John’s sage is quieter and more private, meeting people in one-on-one settings, like at night with Nicodemus, but other characteristics of Jesus the Sage are on brighter display in John than they are in Matthew. For the sake of brevity and to remain in the realm of the author’s area of knowledge, Wisdom Christology will be explored in John’s Gospel.

22. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 369.

23. Alyce McKenzie, *Preaching Biblical Wisdom in a Self-Help Society* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 202.

is the Bread of Life (6:35), and John’s Gospel is structured around seven signs that point to Christ as Wisdom. “The Johannine Jesus understands himself to be the Word of Wisdom who had aided God’s people throughout all previous generations.”²⁴ The Johannine audience would have recognized Wisdom in Jesus at every turn, but this section will address three characteristics of Wisdom pertinent to Wisdom Christology as means of *phronesis* found in Christ in John’s Gospel.

Wisdom’s Intimacy with God

As seen in the Proverbs 8 birth narrative and Wisdom of Solomon 7, God and Wisdom’s relationship is intimate. Job, Proverbs, Sirach, and Wisdom of Solomon all specify Wisdom being with God at creation. Wisdom claims in Proverbs, “I was given birth before he made the world” (8:26). Philo—the Jewish philosopher—viewed Wisdom as the mother of humanity, spouse of God, and daughter of God.²⁵ God and Wisdom did not go their separate ways after creation. Wisdom remains the “breadth and power of God,” “the pure emanation of God’s glory,” and “a mirror to the workings of God”; she “renews all things” and serves as an intercessor between God and humanity; “in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets” (Wis 7:22–30). Wisdom is the revelation of God’s character and knowledge, and she can fulfill this role because she knows God intimately, has been with God from the beginning, and continues to cooperate in the reconciliatory work of creation with God.

24. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 374.

25. Philo. *Legum Allegoria II* and *Quod Deterius Potiori Insidiari Soleat*, “The Works of Philo.” (<http://www.godrules.net/library/yonge/103yonge1.htm>.)

Many of these themes are found in John's presentation of Jesus, markedly on display in John's prologue. It is helpful to note that Wisdom of Solomon uses *Logos* and *Sophia* interchangeably, as did John's contemporary, Philo. At first, Philo used *Logos* inspired by Greek thought and *Sophia* by Jewish thought without distinction. Eventually, Philo relegated *Sophia* to the heavenly realms, and *Logos* was used for more practical wisdom, until *Sophia* was rarely referenced at all. Some, like Schüssler Fiorenza, conclude that Philo made this move because of the feminine connotations with *Sophia* that the male noun *Logos* did not have.²⁶ Yet, for whatever reason, "Philo's demotion of *Sophia* and elevation of *Logos* may have had a greater impact on what subsequently happened to *Sophia* than any other classical writer."²⁷ This raises important questions somewhat beyond the scope of this paper about the effect of patriarchy from the church's loss of Wisdom Christology. One cannot help but wonder not only if the position of women in Christ would have played out differently in church history if John 1 read "In the beginning was *Sophia*," but if wisdom as an ultimate virtue of God for the church would not have faded into near oblivion. Either way, John is alluding to Wisdom when he uses Philo's choice word, *Logos*, in the prologue, rich with characteristics of *Sophia* from Wisdom of Solomon.

Regarding themes of intimacy in the prologue, *Logos* is God and is with God at creation (1:1–3). Jesus is the one in the closest relationship with God (1:18). The creative power of God flowed through *Logos*, and God chose not to create anything without the

26. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 137–39. Further, Fiorenza draws a line from Philo and John's choice to use *Logos* over *Sophia* as an impetus for the subsequent marginalization of women in the Christian story.

27. Van Antwerp, "Sophia," 24.

accompaniment of *Logos* (1:3). Furthermore, Wis 7:25 comes to pass in John 1:14 where the glory of God is revealed in the Son.

Beyond the prologue, Jesus says something significant about intimacy in John 17:5, “So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.” Here is an affirmation not only of the prologue’s claims but also the Father/child imagery found in Prov 8:29–30, “when he [YHWH] marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a [little child]; and I was daily in his delight, rejoicing before him always.”

Wisdom’s intimacy with God in John manifests itself by the Father and Son being one in will, knowledge, and love.²⁸ Nowhere are these themes more prevalent in the NT than in the Upper Room Discourse in John 13–17. Jesus says directly, “I and the Father are one” (17:11). He continues, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (15:10). Jesus says throughout John that he is subject to the will of the Father. He speaks what the Father tells him to say (8:28). Yet, he and the Father are so in sync that Jesus’s words and actions are a natural outpouring of his knowledge of him. John 8:55b says, “I do know him, and I keep his word.” Obedience flows from knowing.

More than that, obedience flows from love. “If you love me, you will obey my teachings” (John 14:15). Jesus and the Father’s intimacy is enhanced by their love (3:35, 5:20, 10:17, 15:9, 17:23–26). Five times John tells us that the Father loves the Son. This parallels Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 4 and 8, who promises a good life to those who enter the loving relationship she offers. “I love those who love me and those who seek me

28. Willett, *Wisdom Christology*, 68.

find me” (8:17). Job’s wisdom hymn says that God knows where Wisdom is and searches her out (28:23, 27). Since creation, God and Wisdom have been together and long to remain together. God loves her. “She [Wisdom] glorifies her noble birth by living with God, and the Lord of all loves her” (Wis 8:3).

The intimacy between God and Wisdom, embodied in Christ, is pertinent to this paper because it stretches *phronesis* beyond the realm of imitating best practices found in Proverbs or in Jesus’s behavior and into the realm of knowing Wisdom through a loving relationship with God in Christ. John’s Gospel offers an invitation into *shalom* through an intimate relationship with embodied Wisdom—the same dynamic Jesus espouses between himself and the Father in the Upper Room. (And notably, a relationship he extends to the disciples.)

Wisdom Reveals and Teaches

The job of a Jewish sage was to reveal God’s wisdom. Contrary to common belief, there is no evidence of sages running wisdom schools in ancient times, but they did attract disciples.²⁹ After all, wise people share what they know (Prov 15:7), especially in an oral culture. Therefore, it is no stretch to see John portray Jesus as the ultimate Sage, *as* Wisdom, and attracting disciples.³⁰

As seen in wisdom literature, Wisdom reveals the characteristics of God, and teaching is her preferred mode of revelation. She “cries out in the street” and “raises her

29. A. R. Millard, “Sages, Schools, Education,” In *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 704.

30. Witherington makes a point of distinguishing that Wisdom (or *Logos*) did not incarnate *in* Jesus, but rather *as* Jesus, “That is, we are not talking about two distinguishable entities here but two stages in the career in one being” (*Jesus the Sage*, 370). I would distinguish that though all of Wisdom is alive in Jesus; Jesus, even *as* Wisdom, is more than Wisdom.

voice in the square” (Prov 1:20). She is there shouting on the corner and at the city gates (21). She pleads, “Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you” (23).

Therefore, it is not surprising that John structures Jesus’s revelations and teaching around seven “I Am” sayings and seven signs. The strongest case that John has a Wisdom Christology, second only to the evidence of the prologue, can be made from the “I Am” sayings. Every one of them either has a direct or conceptual parallel in Wisdom. “I am the Light of the world” is the most profound (John 8:12). Wisdom is the light that never goes out (Wis 6:12); her teaching shines “like the dawn” (Sir 24:32); she offers light for the eyes (Bar 3:14); she is contrasted against the darkness of unrighteousness (Prov 4:18–19). In addition to claiming to be the light of the world in chapters 8, 11, and 12, Jesus brings literal light to the blind (9:5–7).

John’s other “I Am” sayings have origins in Wisdom as well. “I Am the Vine” (John 15:1) alludes to Wisdom’s vine that “buds forth delights, and my blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit” (Sir 24:17).³¹ “I Am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35) is Wisdom’s banquet in Proverbs. “Come eat of my bread and drink the wine I have mixed” (9:6). Also, “Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits. . . . Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more” (Sir 24:19, 21). In John, Jesus surpasses Wisdom by offering bread and wine that satiate. Wisdom also feeds those who fear the Lord “with the bread of learning” and the “water

31. This entire chapter is a beautiful representation of Wisdom Christology with the fragrance of Wisdom, fruit of Wisdom, Wisdom tabernacling among the people, Wisdom like a tree “planted by the water,” and calling, “Come to me,” with a memory “sweeter than honey.”

of wisdom” (Sir 15:3).³² “I Am the Gate” (John 10:9) is Wisdom speaking “at the entrance of the city gates” (Prov 1:21). “I Am the Life” (John 14:6) is Wisdom promising, “he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord” (Prov 8:38, in addition to many other references to Wisdom’s life in Proverbs). “I Am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11) is conceptually referenced as discipleship in Wisdom numerous times. “Do not forsake her [Wisdom], and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you” (Prov 4:6); and “who places his children under her [Wisdom’s] shelter, and lodges under her boughs; who is sheltered by her from the heat, and dwells in the midst of her glory” (Sir 14:27) has obvious pastoral implications.³³

In John, Jesus does not teach on the highways and byways as Wisdom does (though Jesus does precisely this in Matthew’s Gospel). In John, Jesus is *discipleship* Wisdom, teaching the inner circle behind closed doors. “The Fourth Evangelist is intent on conveying the deeper significance of Jesus, the deeper Wisdom, the sort that learners can only understand after considerable time in school.”³⁴ Jesus reveals the nature of God, power over evil, and glory of God to the masses through the signs he does publicly, but his public discourses are shrouded in mystery, and he moves in secret (John 7:10, 34ff). This should not come as a surprise because this abstruse *meshalim* is a discipleship praxis of Wisdom. Remember Job, “But where shall Wisdom be found? And where is the place

32. Jesus claims to be the Living Water in John 4, and water continues as a prominent theme from the wedding at Cana onward. Water is also a parallel theme to Wisdom, alongside bread and separate from it. She is a fountain, rejected by Israel (Bar 3:12); and a river (Sir 24).

33. “I Am the Resurrection” (11:25) is conspicuously missing in Wisdom reference, but this could show that Jesus is more than what was expected, not only fulfilling Wisdom, but able to do what had been attributed to God alone, thus removing all possibility of polytheism. It also points to God creating the world through Wisdom, the ultimate act of birth and rebirth in the metanarrative.

34. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 380.

of understanding? Mortals do not know it, and it is not found in the land of the living” (Job 28:12–13).³⁵ Likewise, Jesus meets Nicodemus at night, leaving the Pharisee wondering how a man can re-enter a mother’s womb (John 3:4). He meets an unclean woman alone at a well, and his conversation with her has her scanning the horizon for a body of live water she has somehow missed all these years (John 4:15). At one point the people say that Jesus is possessed because his words make so little sense to them (John 7:20), and repeatedly people ask, “Where is this man going that no one can find him?” Poor Thomas is at his wits’ end by ch. 14 crying out, “Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how do we know the way?”

Despite the mystery, Jesus, like Wisdom, gets his message across: come to me and find life. Those in the Johannine community who knew Wisdom will recognize it in Christ. Likewise, those at Courtyard will recognize Wisdom as they draw near to Christ, for the biblical witness tells of a reciprocal relationship between Christ and Wisdom. Furthermore, this sort of discipleship–wisdom in John is significant for the modern church because it can increase patience when Wisdom conceals. As Job cries and John’s Jesus shows, sometimes Wisdom is difficult to find, but the odds of discovery are increased when one knows Wisdom’s characteristics and seeks direction by drawing close to the body of Christ, where Wisdom lives.

Wisdom’s V-Shaped Journey

As mentioned in a previous footnote, “I Am the Resurrection” is not a wisdom claim in ancient Jewish wisdom literature. However, conceptually (e.g., “I Am the Good

35. Bar 3:9–4:4 also explores how Wisdom is seen on the earth, but the people do not understand her ways.

Shepherd”), the resurrection as a form of ascent is unambiguous. Wisdom’s “V-shaped journey” is well-documented in the wisdom literature,³⁶ and “for John, understanding this pilgrimage of Wisdom, the whence and whether of *Logos*, is the key to understanding who Jesus is.”³⁷ Simply put, the Jews knew Wisdom went on a journey of descent and ascent. Wisdom “dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud” (Sir 24:2, 4). Eventually, God sent Wisdom to earth to make people “friends of God, and prophets” (Wis 7:27). Moreover, her mission was to reveal the nature of God in the previously mentioned five ways: the breath and power of God, the pure image of the glory of God, the reflection of eternal light, the spotless mirror of God’s works, and an image of God’s goodness (Wis 7:24–25). She also offers life and a variety of blessings to her disciples (Prov 3:13–18; 8:1–5; Sir 15:1–8; 24:19–33; Wis 7:7–14). But things go badly for Wisdom while on earth. Enoch’s hymn to Wisdom tells the tale. “Wisdom could not find a place in which she could dwell; but a place was found [for her] in the heavens. Then Wisdom went out to dwell with the children of the people, but she found no dwelling place. So Wisdom returned to her place and she became settled among the angels” (1 Enoch 42).

Jean Laporte claims that there are three dominant images of Wisdom: Tabernacle, Law, and Eden.³⁸ There is not time to address each here, but it is relevant to mention that God sent Wisdom specifically to the holy tent in Zion for her earthly mission (Sir 24:10).

36. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 380.

37. R. E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 145–46.

38. Jean Laporte, “Philo in the Tradition of Biblical Wisdom Literature,” in *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 103–42.

After searching over “every people and nation” for a place to abide, God commanded Wisdom to tabernacle in Israel. “Thus, in the beloved city he gave me a resting place, and in Jerusalem was my domain” (Sir 24:3–12). Frequently, Proverbs claims that Wisdom was hated, rejected, and the people would have none of her. This rejection precipitated her ascent back to God (Prov 1:24–33).

John’s Jesus, as Wisdom, makes the same V-shaped journey. The travel plan is laid out in the prologue. “He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:2), and from this place, Jesus was light and life. John the Baptist was sent from God (John 1:6), but the Fourth Evangelist clarifies that John was not the Journeyman to watch. Jesus was the true light who “came to what was his own” in flesh and lived among the people (John 1:11, 14). Quickly, the people rejected Jesus, though a few accepted him and were blessed for their faith (John 1:12). His ascent is predicted in the Upper Room Discourse.

Individuals then and now choose to accept or reject Jesus, as the Jews did Wisdom. “The Johannine cosmology is dualistic, and so is the anthropology. A person either believes that Jesus is the revealer of God and experiences life or denies it and falls under judgment. There is no middle ground!”³⁹ The “accept or reject” mandate is the same “two ways” patterned in later wisdom literature.⁴⁰ In John, upon meeting Jesus, people are brought into literal and metaphorical light and life, or darkness and death (John 3:19–20). Consider the Nicodemus narrative. Jesus assimilates the Wisdom pattern

39. Willett, *Wisdom Christology*, 100

40. “The doctrine of the two ways, prominent in later Judaism, postulates two classes of men, each rather immutable, the way of evil and the way of the righteousness (Prov. 8:20). The former leads to darkness and death (Prov. 4:19, 20:20; Job 3:4). The latter leads to light and life (Prov 2:13, 18). The two ways are often symbolized in light and darkness (Prov 4:18–19; Wis 5:6),” John Coert Rylaarsdam, *The Proverbs: Ecclesiastes; The Song of Solomon* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1992).

of ascent, descent, and rejection to himself. “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. . . . No one ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (John 3:11, 13). This movement recalls 1 Enoch. Not only does Wisdom ascend, descend, experience rejection, and ascend again in 1 En. 42, but in 1 En. 48–50 the Son of Man, who also existed before creation, is indwelt by Wisdom and reveals her to the righteous through secret things, “as light to the Gentiles” even, and brings judgment to those who do not drink from her water (Enoch 48:1–7). Nicodemus does not choose life through water and Spirit in John 3, but the next person to meet Jesus, the Samaritan woman, does (John 4), as does the blind man in chapter 5. The Jews who witness the blind man’s healing do not. Jesus rebukes them, “You refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:40). This pattern continues throughout the Gospel: some say he is good and know him while others reject him (John 8:28; 7:12). Like Wisdom the street preacher, Jesus calls, “Come and see” (John 1:39) and “Follow me” (John 1:43). Everyone who encounters his revelations through signs and sermons is given a choice to believe in Jesus as the Son of God and have life or reject him and perish.

A final point to be made about Wisdom’s theme of rejection and ascent comes from John 2. There is much discussion about why the Fourth Evangelist places the temple clearing at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, but the Evangelist’s Wisdom Christology justifies this decision. Sirach’s storyline (in which Wisdom was sent by God to Jerusalem to abide in the holy tent; yet, is rejected by the people and brought back to God) may supply helpful background (Sir 24:3–12). In John, immediately following Jesus’s first miracle (what most consider to be the act that begins his public ministry), “Jesus went up

to Jerusalem” (John 2:13). Enraged at how his Father’s house was being polluted, Jesus clears the money tables with whips and exclaims, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (2:19). The disciples are quick to understand what is going on this time. “His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me’” (2:17); and the Evangelist elaborates, “But he was speaking of the temple of his body” (2:21). “Up” and “down” language permeate the discourse, which may be alluding to Wisdom’s ascent and descent. More assuredly, the temple clearing clarifies from the start of his ministry that Wisdom does not have a home in Zion; as predicted, Wisdom is rejected and will return up to the Father. From the prologue to the epilogue and everywhere in between, the fourth Gospel flows from the force of the dominant stream, Wisdom. The Evangelist intimately knows Jesus the Sage—Wisdom incarnate—whom God sent to tabernacle among the people, be accepted by those who believe, rejected by others, and return to the Father of glory.

The Upper Room Discourse is imbued with this directional verbiage as well, and this is where Wisdom’s journey becomes most pertinent for the goal of this paper. Wisdom’s V-shaped journey supports the paper’s proposal that Wisdom Christology helps the church with *phronesis* by means of a “second incarnation.” If Christ is ascended, then the best the church can do is what it has always done—imitate the life of Christ and obey the teachings of Scripture. The surrounding nations will not declare that we are a people whose God is near because of our revealed wisdom. Our God is not near; rather, he is ascended into a distant heaven. But Jesus redraws Wisdom’s V-shaped journey in the Upper Room. Jesus promises that he will be with the disciples forever (John 14:16). He will not leave them as orphans but will come to them (14:18). He tells

the disciples that they will see him (14:20–21) and know him because “you are in me, and I am in you” (14:20), a phrase that not only redraws the V-shaped journey with an additional, downward vertical line but prophecies Wisdom’s continued presence among the believers. The incarnation of Christ as Wisdom among the disciples is not a fleeting presence, but an ongoing one, for the Father and the Son “will come to them and make our home with them” (14:23).

Wisdom’s journey in Jesus is pertinent to this project because it teaches the church that Wisdom is habitually near and therefore discernible and attainable. That said, the Wisdom the church is seeking belongs to God and is God’s prerogative to reveal, and therefore can never be “simple.” But God is not playing a game of hard-to-get. Wisdom reveals itself and desires that we are aligned to its path. Sharon Ringe sums up Wisdom in Christ well at the beginning of her analysis on John’s Wisdom Christology; “[John] celebrates Wisdom’s intimacy with God and her role in the creation, and it identifies other motifs of her subsequent vocation to search for a people who will feast at her banquet and follow the ‘way’ she teaches and thus become ‘friends of God’ (Wis 7:27).”⁴¹ This analysis of Wisdom Christology shows that it offers a path—even if it is at times a mysterious one—for Christians to discern what to do and when to do it through the presence of Christ tabernacling among them.

41. Sharon Ringe, *Wisdom’s Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 1.

Colossians 1:15–20: A Wisdom Hymn

Introduction

The nearness of Christ within the Church is a necessary Christological truth for this paper. Some passages, in addition to the Upper Room Discourses, that support the belief that Christ is in the Christian (therefore Wisdom is within) include Gal 1:15–16, 2:20, and 4:19; Paul’s teaching to the Corinthians in 2 Cor 4:6–12 and 13:5; Rom 8:10; and Eph 3:17. But the entirety of the Wisdom Hymn in Colossians 1 points not only to a Christ who is near but one who has and is working among us to bring all things out of chaos into reconciliation, which is the primary mission of Wisdom. James Dunn says, “What pre-Christian Judaism said of Wisdom and Philo said of *Logos*, Paul and the others say of Jesus.”⁴² He continues, “All of these passages express what can properly be called a *Wisdom Christology* in one form or another. That is to say, the language of these passages is the language used of the figure of Wisdom literature of the OT and particularly intertestamental literature.”⁴³ Dunn locates Col 1:15–20 as one of the most significant passages in the NT writings where this is the case. N.T. Wright declares these six verses “rightly reckoned among the most important Christological passages in the New Testament.”⁴⁴

Here is the hymn in full, translated literally by N.T. Wright:

¹⁵ Who is the image
of God, the invisible one
firstborn of all creation

42. James Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 167.

43. Dunn, *Christology*, 164

44. N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Vol. 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 67.

16 for in him everything was created
 in the heavens and on the earth
 the visible and the invisible
 whether thrones or dominions
 whether rulers or authorities
 everything has been created
 through him and unto him.

17 and he is before all things
 and all things in him hold together.

18 and he is the head
 of the body, the church.

Who is the beginning
 the firstborn from the dead
 so that in everything he might become pre-eminent

19 For in him all God's fullness
 was pleased to dwell

20 and through him to reconcile
 everything to him(self)
 making peace through the blood
 of his cross (through him)
 whether things on the earth
 or things in the heavens.⁴⁵

The Hymn's Wisdom Structure

The hymn is composed in three strophes. Though the word *wisdom* does not appear in the poem, its allusions are undeniable. Schweizer goes so far as to suggest, "The theology of the group that created this hymn is obvious. One could quote the parallels to the first stanza word by word in the Wisdom literature."⁴⁶ Walter Wink narrows the claim when he argues the entire hymn is dependent upon the Wisdom of

45. Wright, *Colossians*, 69. Witherington comments, "Paul was very likely not the originator of the Christological hymns [including this one], nor of the use of Wisdom traditions to construct them. These hymns suggest a rather widely held common form of Wisdom Christology in early Christianity" (Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 253).

46. Eduard Schweizer, "The Church as the Missionary Body of Christ," *New Testament Studies* 8.1 (October 1961): 7.

Solomon.⁴⁷ Table 1, organized by the hymn’s progressions of themes, demonstrates the parallels between Hebrew wisdom literature and the hymn.

Table 1: A Comparison Organized by Theme of Characteristics of Wisdom in the OT and Christ in Col 1:15–20

| Theme | Wisdom | Christ in Colossians 1:15-20 |
|--------------|---|---|
| Image of God | “For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty . . . a spotless mirror of the working of God.” (Wis 7:25-26) | “He is the image of the invisible God” (1:15) |
| Firstborn | “The Lord begot me, the firstborn of his ways.” (Prov 8:22) | “...the firstborn of all creation” (1:15) |
| Creation | 1. The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; ²³ I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be. When there were no watery depths, I was given birth . . . when he marked out the foundations of the earth. ³⁰ Then I was constantly at his side” (Prov 8:22–24, 29–30) 2. “God created me [Wisdom] in eternity, before time began, and I will exist for all eternity to come.” In this eternal place, Wisdom “ruled over all the earth and the ocean waves, over every nation, over every people” (Sir 24:9, 6) ⁴⁸ | “For in him everything was created in the heavens and on the earth the visible and the invisible whether thrones or dominions whether rulers or authorities everything has been created through him and unto him” (1:16) |

47. Walter Wink, “Hymn of the Cosmic Christ,” in *The Conversation Continues. Studies in Paul and John in Honor of J. L. Martyn* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 235.

48. Other Wisdom parallels include Prov 3:22; Wis 9:9, 6:21, 7:8; and Prov 8:15 (regarding the connection between Wisdom and the creation of thrones).

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Holds All Things Together (tightly linked to “reconciliation”)</p> | <p>“For wisdom is a kindly spirit . . . Because the spirit of the Lord has filled the world, and that which holds all things together knows what is said, therefore those who utter unrighteous things will not escape notice, and justice, when it punishes, will not pass them by” (Wis 1:6–8)⁴⁹</p> | <p>“...and all things in him hold together” (1:17)</p> |
| <p>New Creation and Reconciliation</p> | <p>1. “Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things” (Wis 7:27)</p> <p>2. “The fear of the Lord is the crown of wisdom, making peace and perfect health to flourish. ¹⁹ She rained down knowledge and discerning comprehension, and she heightened the glory of those who held her fast” (Sir 1:18–19)</p> | <p>“Who is the beginning the firstborn from the dead so that in everything he might become pre-eminent, For in him all God’s fullness was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile everything to him(self)” (1:18–20)</p> |

The theme of Wisdom gathering people around a table, being a means of peace, and holding all things in order is implicitly or explicitly expressed in nearly every chapter about her.⁵⁰ Isolated passages do not do justice to the overall message that with Wisdom “everything is right with the world,” but when one reads about Wisdom in Sir 1, 24; Wis 7; or Prov 1, 8, and 9, her mission of reconciliation between God and the cosmos and God and humanity, which is the means to *shalom*-induced *phronesis*, is overwhelming.

49. A similar sentiment is found in Wis 8:1. The Jews believed Wisdom lived in *Torah*, a theology largely attributed to Ben Sira, which contributes to the conversation about the Colossians hymn where Paul moves Wisdom from *Logos* to abide in Christ. For example, “Each of the Lord’s messengers succeeds at its task. / Everything is held together by his word” (Sir 43:26).

50. The theme of Wisdom’s banquet, with bread and wine, will be important in subsequent chapters about the intervention team, but is beyond the scope of this section (Wis 7:19–21; Prov 9:1–6; Sir 24:9).

One notable example of Wisdom’s *shalom*-producing power, adopted by Jesus for himself, is found in Sir 51:23b–27 and Matt 11:25–30. Both passages begin by telling the listener that Wisdom is available to the simple (the uneducated in Sirach and the metaphorical “infants” in Matthew). Both Wisdom and Jesus invite those in need of learning to receive “instruction” from them (Sir 51:26; Matt 11:28). In both cases, the metaphor of a yoke is used to relieve the simple one’s burden (Sir 51:26; Matt 11:29). Furthermore, the common consequence upon the simple for receiving this instruction is rest (Sir 51:27; Matt 11:29). Sirach and Matthew are set next to each other in Table 2 for comparison.

Table 2: A Comparison of Wisdom in Sirach and Christ in Matthew

| Sirach 51:23–27 | Matthew 11:25–30 |
|---|--|
| <p>Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction. ²⁴ Why do you say you are lacking in these things, and why do you endure such great thirst? ²⁵ I opened my mouth and said, Acquire wisdom for yourselves without money. ²⁶ Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction; it is to be found close by. ²⁷ See with your own eyes that I have labored but little and found for myself much rest [serenity],</p> | <p>²⁵ At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸ “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,”</p> |

Though the undeniable references to Wisdom in the Colossians hymn are allusions, Paul directly identifies Christ as Wisdom in other letters, such as 1 Cor 1:1–2:14, going so far as to say, “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24).⁵¹

Returning to the Colossians hymn, the first strophe emphasizes Christ and the original creation. The third strophe emphasizes Christ and the new creation. The middle strophe serves as an axis for the two where Christ is confessed to be cosmic, yet earthly; the architect of reconciliatory peace in the pre-Christian era as well as within the church where “all things are held together.” The previously addressed V-shaped journey of Wisdom “so characteristic of early sapiential Christological hymns, chronicling the drama of creation, salvation, and glorification” is evident through the three strophes.⁵² The poem’s synthesis is found in wisdom. “Throughout the hymn, we are not talking about God’s creative power per se, nor of Christ per se, but of Christ whom Christians came to recognize as the embodiment and definition of wisdom.”⁵³ This reframing toward wisdom opens room for the hymn to offer insight for *phronesis*.

The Hymn’s Occasion and Purpose

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss fully the scholarship on the background to the Colossians controversy, but it is evident from the verses surrounding the hymn that the church in Colossae was engaged in some sort of wisdom-seeking practices involving angels, likely connected to peripheral branches of Judaism and philosophy. This is the logical conclusion to Paul’s recurring reference to mystery,

51. This discussion presumes Pauline authorship of Colossians. Different views on authorship or the background of Colossians do not substantially affect the arguments of this discussion.

52. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 268.

53. Dunn, *Christology*, 193.

wisdom, and understanding located in Christ, as though he is redirecting misplaced searches for insight. “Hollow and deceptive philosophies” are mentioned outright in 2:8 along with “the worship of angels and dwelling on visions” (2:18). Paul’s inclusion of circumcision and other Jewish traditions indicates at least some of the heresy originating with Jewish groups who are telling the Colossians what to eat and drink and how to worship (2:16–23). Witherington points to the hymn itself as evidence of a Jewish audience (perhaps originally a hymn to Wisdom). The personification of Wisdom was mature in first-century Judaism, and “the use of both sapiential material and the Christological use of the psalms to compose [Wisdom] hymns points to early Jewish Christians still closely connected to Judaism and its living holy traditions and ways of contemporizing scripture, as composers of these hymns.”⁵⁴ What Paul adds to it, assuming parts of the hymn are not unique to Paul, is the pervasive centrality of Christ as the sole locus of wisdom in an attempt to redirect the Christians in Colossae from angels and hollow philosophies to Christ in their pursuit of answers to life’s questions.

Exclusively Jewish or not, the church at Colossae pursued esoteric routes for *phronesis* in areas of life that ranged from worship to family life and sensuality, but Paul condemns them as insufficient compared to Christ as wisdom among them. “Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (Col 2:23).

Paul’s message in Colossians for us and them is to be brought to maturity in Christ alone. The ability to discern Christ’s wisdom revealed in secular spaces is part of

54. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 254.

this maturity, but it begins with believing the fullness of wisdom lives in Christ, a truth, as traced in this paper, that weaves through the canon. “To realize one is complete in Christ is sure proof against the dangers of immature Christianity—the constant search for spiritual novelties, the unnecessary anxieties and fears . . .—which threaten Christians in the modern world no less than in the ancient world.”⁵⁵ The intent of the hymn is to convict the church that this is true. People seek wisdom from many sources to bring reconciliation to their lives and extend peace to their souls, but it is only fully found in Christ, in whom all things hold together.

The Hymn’s Context

The surrounding context of the Wisdom hymn affirms Christ as the locus for mature *phronesis*. A prayer of thanksgiving precedes the hymn, in which Paul prays for at least eight things for the church: (1) to be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (which points to this being a problem among them), (2) so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, (3) fully pleasing to him, (4) as you bear fruit in every good work (5) and as you grow in the knowledge of God. (6) May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, (7) and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, (8) while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light (Col 1:9–13). In sum, this is a prayer for maturity in the faith. Words like “being filled with,” “bearing fruit,” “growing in knowledge,” and “prepared to endure” encompass the process of maturity. The prayer serves as the first part of the section’s *inclusio* on maturity. The second part is found in Col 2:2–3. “I want their hearts to be encouraged and

55. Wright, *Colossians*, 45.

united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Again, the reader hears a future-facing call to maturity outside of false sources of wisdom. The call for maturity is affirmed in the content of the *inclusio*, where Paul says, "It is he [Christ] whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (1:28). Paul does not expect Wisdom Christology to produce perfect choices immediately, but he is confident that if the church seeks *phronesis* in Christ, then the church will mature in it. In time, they will be filled with "all spiritual wisdom" so that they can live God-pleasing lives, produce fruit for the world to see, and be brought to unity (a particular problem among them).

Pertinent to this paper, it is significant that Paul says within the *inclusio*, "To them [the church] God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory" (emphasis mine) (Col 1:27). He reiterates the incarnating presence of Christ in the church in 3:10–11, drawing from the wisdom hymn's third strophe theme of new creation: "[you] have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal, there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all *and in all!*" (emphasis mine). As such, the means of the church's more perfect reconciliation, through maturity, by Wisdom, is partnering with Christ's presence among them. Paul is not directing the Colossians to bring order to their lives by imitation alone, but rather through the fullness of Christ within, just as Jesus taught the disciples in the Upper Room.

Wisdom is sought by imitation when Christians look back to Jesus's example and the eternal truths of ancient wisdom literature, but it is sought incarnationally by looking within the church to the reconciling Christ, all the while maturing forward to the completion of the new creation. It is within this call for maturity through Christ, who is near, that Paul composes his wisdom hymn. Thus, "What Paul is speaking of here is not an esoteric knowledge, confined to private religious experience or exclusive sects. It is knowledge of God's will, which is open to all people. This knowledge is given through all spiritual wisdom," which Paul locates in Christ among them.⁵⁶ Whereas John traced Wisdom's foretold V-shaped journey and predicted Christ's on-going presence among the disciples with an additional downward dotted line, Paul fills it in with black ink to teach the church to align to Wisdom among them for the sake of mature, God-honoring lives.

Conclusion

Summary of the Biblical Witness

Wisdom's path through the Bible has been mapped from Deuteronomy to Colossians. Many side roads were left unexplored, like Wisdom Psalms, allusions to Wisdom in the prophets, the Gospel of Matthew, many of Paul's words to Corinth, Phil 2:5-11, and Heb 1:1-4. Yet the crucial insights about Wisdom gleaned from the passages explored here are ample to provide biblical grounding for the theological approach adopted in this project.

In Deuteronomy, God gives practical wisdom to the people of God, and its application is intended to bear witness to the world through people who make good

⁵⁶. Wright, *Colossians*, 61.

decisions in a remarkably effective way. Solomon, Daniel, and Job teach that Wisdom is both revealing and concealing.⁵⁷ For Solomon, wisdom is revealed merely by asking for it, and for Daniel, it is revealed through visions. In both cases, wisdom's witness points to YHWH. The Queen of Sheba declares, "I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard . . . How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the Lord your God" (1 Kgs 10:7-9). Nebuchadnezzar confesses before Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery" (Dan 2:47).

Yet, Job teaches that God sometimes conceals wisdom. It does not originate in humans; therefore, people are at the mercy of God's revelation of it. It is rarer than any gem. That said, God did reveal to Job what he needed to know, that God is God and Job is not. In this, the reader learns that practical Wisdom is not the result of magic spells spoken correctly; rather, it is hidden within the essence of God, and likewise revealed in the witness of the cosmos. Reverent awe is the beginning of such wisdom.

The rest of the Hebrew poetry and the apocryphal wisdom texts make plain Wisdom's personality. The book of Proverbs is more than lists of guidelines for good living. Its initial chapters introduce the reader to Woman Wisdom where the depth of Wisdom's potential is exposed. Woman Wisdom weaves a thread of *shalom* throughout the cosmos, on every high hill and city gate. She holds all things together from before the

57. The concept of wisdom presenting as both revealing and concealing is Alyce McKenzie's in a section of her book titled "A Gift and a Search", though she examines the contrast between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. *Preaching Biblical Wisdom in a Self-Help Society* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

creation of the world until now. The masterpiece she weaves, most clearly seen in the twenty-one characteristics of her in Wis 7 and Prov 8, is truth, life, and beauty. This *welcome* drapes a banquet table where all are invited to sit as intimate friends of God. These are characteristics that aid in *phronesis* among the faithful.

In addition, the personality traits of Wisdom are so pronounced in Christ that one can conclude that though Christ is more than Wisdom, Wisdom is perfectly fulfilled in Christ. This is a dominant allusion in John, an agenda of his ancient biography, where the disciples learn that Wisdom is more than rule-following. It is intimacy with Christ. Jesus sits at the head of the table of reconciliation, where Wisdom can no longer be confused with a mere idea or virtue of God. Wisdom tabernacles in the personhood of Christ. John's Jesus shares Wisdom's intimacy with God, tenacity for teaching with a goal of new birth, and travels the V-shaped journey from God's side to Jerusalem and back again.

The effect of this Christology is applied to the church when Paul adapts a Wisdom hymn for the believers in Colossae. Here, the early church is invited into a relationship with Christ as Wisdom over cheap tokens of it, such as angels and philosophies of the age. The result of this realignment is a more perfect *phronesis*. The church sings of Christ's shared characteristics with Wisdom in creation and reconciliatory power to unite them together, to "hold everything together," which has the potential to produce *shalom* and fruit for the world to see.

The Questions That Remain: Review of Key Scholarship

This project is assembled upon several theological foundations about biblical wisdom and Christ, derived from the foregoing analysis. First, Wisdom is a preeminent

characteristic of God that guides people along the way of life. Second, Wisdom is cosmic in that it is revealed in all of creation, including in the advice of fellow God-fearers and the Spirit of Christ's instruction in the heart of the believer. Third, walking on the path of Wisdom produces reconciliation internally and externally. Fourth, Christ embodies the fullness of Wisdom, and Christ tabernacles in the church, so the church becomes a locus for Wisdom (though not to the exclusion of Christ's omnipresence in creation). Therefore, to know Christ is to know Wisdom. As such, a life of Wisdom bears witness to Christ in the world.

The question remains, "How does the church access such effective Wisdom in Christ?" The intervention team formulated a four-part intervention to answer this question, the details of which will be explored in the next chapter. It is worth noting here that such an intervention was needed because there is currently very little written to guide churches to this end. With the canonical theological foundations explored, the following is an overview of some of scholarship's input on *accessing* Wisdom Christology as outlined in the theological foundations of this project. Scholarship on the subject is too rich to investigate fully, but the following overview highlights a lack of material that helps churches incorporate Wisdom Christology with *phronesis*, the problem that precipitated the need for this project.

Books on "discernment" are plentiful. Some of these resources come from a Christian perspective; many do not. "In our time, wisdom is effectively replaced by reason."⁵⁸ But discernment resources written for Christians, like *Decision Making and*

58. Colin Gunton, "Christ, the Wisdom of God," in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found*, by Stephen Barton (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1999), 250.

Spiritual Discernment by renowned spiritual director Nancy Bieber, and Nouwen's classic, *Discernment*, locate the source of answers in the Holy Spirit. These books are extremely beneficial, but Christ is not their emphasis. This may seem like splitting hairs on the Trinitarian head, but Wisdom through Christ offers churches a more tangible frame for discernment than the Holy Spirit, though neither should be sought without the other.⁵⁹ The church has historically struggled to understand "the forgotten member of the Trinity;" whereas scripture helps the church know the person of Christ. The church can quote Jesus, imagine him as a child, recount his steps in Galilee, feel the nails in his hands, and laugh at his proverbial humor. The church has a much more difficult time identifying with the Holy Spirit in such tangible ways. Furthermore, Scripture helps us intimately know the fictional person Woman Wisdom, a fully developed character as seen in the above passages, who is conceived of as abiding in Christ. The more the church understands the characteristics of Wisdom, the more likely the church is to recognize Wisdom.

Highly regarded scholars have written Christological works on Wisdom. The most thorough might be *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* by Ben Witherington III.⁶⁰ Others, like Barton's anthology, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found: Wisdom in the Bible, the Church, and the Contemporary World*, have insightful essays, like the one by

59. I recommend *Discernment* to anyone seeking to make better decisions, but Michael Christensen and Rebecca Laird, Students of Nouwen who wrote the introduction to *Discernment*, summarize well the Holy Spirit emphasis in Nouwen's work as "a lifelong commitment to remember God, know who you are, and pay close attention to what the Spirit is saying today" (ix). Nouwen summarizes his approach this way, "We actively wait for the Spirit to move and prompt, and then discern what we are to do next" (8). An overt Wisdom Christology at the center of discernment is missing. Henri Nouwen, *Discernment* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).

60. Sharon Ringe's *Wisdom's Friends* is a wonderful little book that makes a solid case for Wisdom Christology as the intent of Christ's portrayal in the Johannine community.

Daniel Hardy titled, “The Grace of God and Earthly Wisdom,” where he defines biblical wisdom as “the place where truth coincides with goodness. . . . Hence, wisdom has to do with questions as to how the peace of God is realized in the order of the world, and in the lives of human beings.”⁶¹ Such statements reorient the discussion to theological signposts instead of popular notions about wisdom (or secular ones about reason). Older anthologies, like Wilken’s *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity*, provide missing links through essays like Jean Laporte’s “Philo in the Tradition of Wisdom,” so that John’s use of *Logos* and his overall Christology make more contextual sense.⁶² But in both anthologies, the sections on Paul and Wisdom are limited to 1 Cor.⁶³ The Colossians Hymn gets only six pages of attention in Witherington’s tome and eight pages in Dunn’s *Christology in the Making*, yet it is the Colossians hymn that unveils the cosmic breadth of Wisdom Christology’s potential for mature decision-making in the church. It is N. T. Wright who writes and speaks exhaustively on the connection between the Hebrew portrayal of Wisdom and Wisdom Christology in Col 1:15–20, and this seems to have cleared the vision for later commentators, like Marianne Meye Thompson, who spend a significant time exploring Christ as Wisdom in the hymn.⁶⁴

That said, commentaries and theological examinations only go so far in helping the church *access* Wisdom Christology for *phronesis*. Daniel Ebert attempts to address

61. Daniel Hardy, “The Grace of God and Earthly Wisdom,” in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found*, by Stephen Barton (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1999), 233.

62. Laporte, “Philo,” 103–42.

63. See Richard Hays’s essay “Wisdom According to Paul” in Barton’s anthology and Birger Pearson’s essay on “Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom Speculation and Paul,” in Wilken.

64. Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

this in *Wisdom Christology: How Jesus Becomes God's Wisdom for Us*, but despite his thorough commentary—an exploration of Wisdom in the NT—his tangible applications for the church are narrowed to three ideas that he covers in fewer than two pages:

1. Have a humble spirit.
2. Suffer for others.
3. Pursue peace and reconciliation, culminating in the platitude, “God’s wisdom is Christ-centered and cross-shaped.”⁶⁵

Tremper Longman also attempts to help the church access wisdom for phronesis in *The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel*. After an extensive examination of wisdom in the OT (a fine companion to Ebert’s exploration of the NT), Longman has an appendix titled “Wisdom in the Twenty-First Century.” Here he lists nine characteristics of a wise person.⁶⁶

1. The Wise Person Fears God
2. The Wise Person Knows Scripture
3. The Wise Person Is Hermeneutically Savvy
4. The Wise Person Learns About God from All Sources
5. The Wise Person Knows How to Read Text, Circumstances, and People
6. The Wise Person Obeys Divine Instruction to Form Habits that Mold Character
7. The Wise Person Knows How to Suffer
8. The Wise Person Lives with Ambiguity and Mystery
9. The Wise Person Grows in Wisdom

A person could combine these two lists and have a decent blueprint to access wisdom. However, neither of these works place the discernment process in the body of Christ, where the Colossians hymn says Christ, as our Wisdom, is head. Furthermore, Longman categorizes wisdom into three types. The first is practical, which he equates

65. Daniel Ebert, *Wisdom Christology: How Jesus Becomes God's Wisdom for Us* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 190.

66. Tremper Longman, *The Fear of the Lord Is the Beginning of Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 275. The parentheses are Longman’s.

with emotional intelligence. He goes so far as to say of Wisdom in Proverbs, “Proverbs is a book that on the practical level offers to make its attentive reader wise (emotionally intelligent).”⁶⁷ As such, a person need not be a God-fearer to access wisdom. He or she could simply enroll in one of the hundreds of courses on emotional intelligence through the industrial-organizational discipline. Longman’s second category is ethical, which he admits is needed for wisdom to be truly biblical, for “Proverbs wants to make a person good as well as successful.”⁶⁸ Finally, Longman explains the theological level where “fear of the Lord” undergirds decision making as “wisdom requires the right attitude toward God.”⁶⁹ So, where Ebert neglects the depth of OT Wisdom in his Christology, Longman neglects Christ as the fullness of OT Wisdom. Neither locates its access in the church.

The most helpful work on this subject may be an anthology titled *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is and Why It Matters*, edited by five notably wise scholars: Dorothy Bass, Kathleen Cahalan, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, James Nieman, and Christian Scharen.⁷⁰ The editors explore wisdom through essays on ordinary life, each one offering a new insight about how wisdom works, reveals, and leaves a person a bit more contemplative than the day before. The chapters are written in first person narrative with poetic titles like “Spooning, Swimming, Camping, Dancing, and Eclipsing.” Yet, the book is written for theologians and remains in deep waters where, for instance,

67. Longman, *The Fear of the Lord*, 9.

68. Longman, *The Fear of the Lord*, 10.

69. Longman, *The Fear of the Lord*, 13.

70. Bass et al., *Christian Practical Wisdom*.

comparisons are made between Aristotle’s writings on wisdom and Mary Warnock’s philosophy in an essay on Christian imagination.⁷¹ The average church member who seeks wisdom in Christ will be hard-pressed to find it here. That said, Bass’s introduction to the anthology is lavish with helpful insight. For example, she contrasts *phronesis*—a wisdom that can be learned through observation—with *sapientia*, a “cosmic wisdom people can only dispose themselves to receive from God,” and encourages church bodies to benefit from both. “For Christians, wisdom is an actual, communal, embodied response to an eschatological breaking-in that provides reconciliation now, judges our failure fully to receive and embody it, and promises its future fulfillment. Therefore, such knowledge stands in close relationship to dispositions of gratitude, repentance, and hope.”⁷²

Finally, Doctor of Ministry projects and academic journals have been written that explore various aspects of Wisdom Christology and the church. Katherine Gould Epperly completed a thesis in 1981 that traced wisdom in the canon and proposed ways wisdom could inform Christian education.⁷³ Grace Ji-Sun Kim composed a feminist dissertation on how Wisdom Christology could liberate Korean North American women through both a Korean and Christian understanding of wisdom.⁷⁴ David Paul Morton wrote a thesis on

71. Bass et al., *Christian Practical Wisdom*, 239. Ruth Haley Barton’s *Pursuing God’s Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* is possibly the closest in its attempt to achieve what this project does, but like Bass’s work, it is geared toward church leaders making ecclesial decisions rather than church members seeking to mature in *phronesis*.

72. Bass et al., *Christian Practical Wisdom*, 9.

73. Katherine Gould Epperly, *Guidelines for Creating a Wisdom Style of Ministry* (Claremont School of Theology, 1981).
<https://www.proquest.com/openview/e9dc02422c0da4bcde8bae2817171a55/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>

74. Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *The Grace of Sophia: A Korean North American Women’s Christology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

spirit-filled Christology for the life of the church that addresses decision-making in the church, but again, the emphasis is on the Spirit.⁷⁵

The foregoing survey reveals a gap in work on Wisdom Christology that is specifically aimed at helping lay Christians make *shalom*-inducing decisions from within the life of the church, where Christ, our Wisdom, is head, for the sake of the world. The following proposal will include key factors derived from the biblical witness, like the availability of wisdom in the church for *phronesis* in matters that affect all areas of life; how to recognize Christ's wisdom by its revealed characteristics, and how to access wisdom through individual and communal disciplines that align to the biblical precedent. Therefore, following the theological trajectories we have discerned by tracing key themes associated with wisdom in the Christian canon—culminating in the Colossians wisdom hymn and drawing on the insights of pertinent scholarship on the subject—this intervention seeks to create a plan to help the church access the abiding Wisdom within, thus improving its *phronesis*.

75. David Paul Morton, *A Spirit-Filled Christology in the Life of the Church* (Fuller Theological Seminary, 2001) <https://www.proquest.com/openview/634f059f4de0f48d29e7f79ef0b8e799/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Chapter one described Courtyard Church of Christ and its culture and identified a problem: there is a gap between members' decision-making processes and Wisdom Christology (belief in Christ as our Wisdom). Chapter two explored the theology of Wisdom Christology in the canon and extra-canonical wisdom literature to show that the characteristics of Wisdom are embodied in Christ and intended for the church's benefit. Chapter three will connect these theological conclusions about Wisdom Christology to the gap between Wisdom Christology and *phronesis*. In addition, this chapter on methodology will describe the intervention team and outline the sessions where they met to develop a solution to the problem. However, the chapter begins with a historical note on how the church found itself in this predicament.

Wisdom Christology's Precedent and Diminishment in the Church Universal

The biblical canon proclaims wisdom to be a primary virtue of God. As explained in the last chapter, wisdom is more than a collection of abstract facts or insight on how to apply them. Biblical wisdom is a cosmic invitation to be aligned into the way of *shalom*, and Christ is the embodiment of this reconciliation. The Jewish people prioritized this virtue so highly that wisdom was personified as Woman Wisdom. Even as Paul proclaimed the supremacy of "faith, hope, and love," he wrote songs to the churches extolling Christ as Wisdom among them. Yet, in our time, wisdom has waned as an ultimate virtue. I asked Courtyard members several times over the course of a year, in

various settings, “What are the primary characteristics of God?” Wisdom was never mentioned. The loss of wisdom’s place as a paramount virtue for the Christian has had an effect. What wisdom accomplished in the canon—from bearing witness to God’s sovereignty to producing rest, confidence, and reconciliation in the believer—has diminished in the church. The qualitative data derived from Courtyard demonstrated this, and the intervention team sought to rectify that problem.

Christians who seek to improve *phronesis* can inhabit wisdom by learning its characteristics as revealed in the Scriptures and copying them (imitation), but Christians can also be aligned to wisdom through Christ who embodies them (incarnation). Many books have been written on the former: the definition and value of wisdom and how to apply it for a good life. This intervention is unique in that it emphasizes the latter incarnational benefits (while not dismissing the former). A crucial element to Christians making wise decisions lies in the awareness that embodied wisdom is *near* in the living Christ; therefore, to pursue wisdom is more than applying proverbial guidelines from ancient teaching texts or even imitating Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, wisdom’s full measure is found in surrendering to the incarnating, dynamic, and cosmic Wisdom amid the church. As such, an ecclesial practice of Wisdom Christology paves the way to *shalom* and Christological witness.

Though the subject of ecclesial *phronesis* located in Wisdom Christology appears to be a gap in the research, Wisdom Christology is as old as Christianity. Influential students of both ancient Alexandria and Antioch, like Origen, Didymus, and Chrysostom, wrote commentaries on ancient wisdom literature with Christ in mind.¹ To them, Jesus as

1. Robert Louis Wilken, *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), xviii.

Wisdom was no outlying idea, but rather, a natural extension of the tradition with which they were long familiar, as we see in Origen. “And happy indeed are those who in their need for the Son of God have yet become such persons as not to need him in his character as physician healing the sick, nor in that of a shepherd, nor in that of redemption, but only in his character as wisdom, as the word and righteousness.”²

Wisdom Christology was the object of allegorical reading strategies in this era as well. Philo, a strong influence on many patristic authors, wove Wisdom as the allegorical daughter of God through OT narratives. For him, Sarah becomes divine Wisdom, and her son, Isaac, is the joy that Wisdom produces.³ But despite these extravagant examples of sapientology, the patristic authors were right to place Wisdom in Christ. Unfortunately, this recognition faded. As Origen predicted, the church usurped Jesus the Sage by interposing Jesus the Savior, Jesus the Physician, and Jesus the Shepherd.⁴ Certainly, Jesus is all of these. But the diminished recognition of Jesus as Sage, the full embodiment of Wisdom, appears to have negatively influenced the *shalom* and witness of the church, as the data revealed at Courtyard.

Appreciation for Christ as Wisdom decreased further by the mid-fourth century when heresies arose involving the nature of *Sophia* that the orthodox were eager to crush.

2. Origen, “The Word Was in the Beginning, I. E., in Wisdom, Which Contained All Things in Idea, Before They Existed. Christ’s Character as Wisdom Is Prior to His Other Characters.,” Bible Hub, accessed July 3, 2021, https://biblehub.com/library/origen/origens_commentary_on_the_gospel_of_john/22_the_word_was_in.htm.

3. Philo. Legum Allegoria II and Quod Deterius Potiori Insidiari Soleat, “The Works of Philo,,” <http://www.godrules.net/library/yonge/103yonge1.htm>.

4. F. W. Burnett and C. Bennema, “Wisdom.” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, edited by Joel Green, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 996.

Byran Shafer traces Wisdom's move to the shadows.⁵ He shows that Christ's portrayal as Wisdom was common in outlying groups, like the Montanists. For instance, a female Montanist prophet wrote of a vision she had of Jesus who came to lay beside her in a female form: "[she] came to me dressed in a bright robe and cast wisdom in me and revealed to me that this place is holy and that Jerusalem will descend from heaven here."⁶ Reacting to *Sophia's* place in such groups, only glimpses of Wisdom Christology were permitted to shine within orthodox Christianity, e.g., in *Hagia Sophia*, the magnificent church built in Constantinople around AD 535.⁷ The connection of Christ to *Sophia* quieted significantly until the late nineteenth century.

In 1861 the hymn *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* (sung by millions every Advent), reintroduced Christ as Wisdom *en masse*, among mainline Christians at least. One stanza reads in part, "O come, thou Wisdom from on high, Who ord'rest all things mightily; To us the path of knowledge show, And teach us in her ways to go." Modern feminist theologians, like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Elizabeth A. Johnson, published works reigniting the conversation, at least in academia, about Jesus's connection to Wisdom in 1994 and 1999, respectively.⁸ Therefore, this project's focus on incarnating

5. Byron E Shafer, "Wisdom Christology," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 41.1 (2009): 52–78.

6. Epiphanius, Panarion Epiphanius 49, as quoted in Karen Toijesen, "Women, Christology, and Women Prophets," in *Jesus Then & Now: Images of Jesus in History and Christology*, eds. Marvin Meyer and Charles Hughes (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2001), 187.

7. Hagia Sophia Istanbul. (n.d.). *Hagia Sophia*. Hagia Sophia Info. Retrieved October 1, 2021, from <https://www.hagiasophia.com/hagia-sophia-info/>.

8. E. A. Johnson. *Jesus-Sophia: Ramifications for contemporary theology*. (Cambridge: Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, 1999). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

Christological Wisdom has precedent, even if the connection has long been subdued in the church for an array of complex reasons.

Wisdom Christology and Courtyard Church of Christ

Wisdom Christology is the reasonable answer to Courtyard's struggle with *phronesis* because the problem is similar to the one Paul addressed in Colossae, even as the cultural details are different. Courtyard is not seeking guidance for daily life through visions of angels, but rather in secular spaces, which is haphazard at best. America no longer shares a common moral tradition, so Christians nibble wisdom from a myriad of places. "Some members of our congregations are intentionally moving down the wisdom smorgasbord line that is our culture, choosing wisdom from various secular sources on which to nosh."⁹ Church members are as likely to get advice on what to do and when to do it from a TikTok video, a sitcom, or a psychologist's Twitter thread as they are from Scripture. That said, Wisdom's incarnating nature and persistent call through all of creation does not automatically dismiss these nuggets on the smorgasbord line. But Christ must be re-centered into the feast.

The relationship between *phronesis* and reconciliation, as shown in the Colossians hymn, cannot be overstated in this endeavor. The decisions that people make draw them closer to or further from peace with themselves, others, creation, and God. The choice to speak or not to speak can repair or disrupt conciliation. The same is true in decisions about marriage, ministries, moving, and meals, all choices that Courtyard members listed as ones that give them pause. The choices of daily life, large and small, have the potential

9. Alyce McKenzie, *Preaching Biblical Wisdom in a Self-Help Society* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 41.

to align us to God's self or to distance us. Therefore, there are vast consequences to the Colossians hymn's claim that through the cross Christ reconciles *all things* to himself. This reconciliation happens at the individual level "so that individual believers find peace with God" and also "at the cosmic level, so that opposing powers are finally subjugated. But there is another level that should not be overlooked: the wisdom of the gospel brings reconciliation at the social level."¹⁰ Wisdom reconciles Jews and Gentiles in Colossae and Ephesus, enslaved people and masters in Philemon's home, and can reconcile sister June with brother John in the local church today. Paul's choice to use the hymn in the context of the Colossians controversy "moves Wisdom from the heights of Christology to the flesh and blood of our common life . . . where the poem of praise is intended to have an immediate practical application to reconciliation in the life of the church."¹¹ It is this immediate, practical application that this project seeks to access.

For that to happen, the intervention team needed to begin by gaining awareness of wisdom in the biblical text themselves. It was hoped that the intervention team would derive the same principles of wisdom as I—the principal investigator—did in the theological analysis. To review, these principles of wisdom are that wisdom is revealed and available to those who seek after it; though, it is given by God according to God's measure and timing. Wisdom has the capability to align those who fear the Lord onto a movement of reconciliation that encompasses all of time and creation. The results of this reconciliation are *shalom*, life, and a witness to Christ in the world. Ultimately, Wisdom

10. Daniel Ebert, *Wisdom Christology: How Jesus Becomes God's Wisdom for Us* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), 108.

11. Ebert, *Wisdom Christology*, 112.

embarked upon a journey from the presence of God to Jerusalem and back to God and now abides in the church through Christ. Though these are the principles I hoped would guide the intervention, as an equal member of the participatory action team, I chose not to insert my conclusions. Instead, the intervention sessions were structured in a way that fostered discussion about insights that arose organically as we examined the pertinent texts together. From there, the intervention team’s task was to brainstorm ways to reorient the church to this abiding Wisdom as a means to help church members better decide what to do and when to do it so that reconciliation with themselves, each other, creation, and God could be experienced.

Qualitative Research

This project uses qualitative research. Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in that qualitative research studies “empirical materials—case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interviews; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observations; historical, interactional, and visual texts” to extract meaning from a lived experience, in this case, that of the body that meets at Courtyard Church of Christ.¹²

Participatory Action Research

This intervention was a type of Participatory Action Research. Any organization can use Participatory Action Research, but “D.Min. projects are ministry interventions designed to address particular problems for specific contexts.”¹³ They are typically

12. Denzin and Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3–4, as quoted in Timothy Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 59.

13. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 60.

grounded in singular, local churches. In this case, the project addresses the above-stated problem at Courtyard Church of Christ. Participatory Action Research has the congregation as the primary actor who defines the problem and proposes the solution. This Doctor of Ministry project modified that model somewhat so that there was a partnership between a team, selected from within the congregation, and a principal investigator (myself).¹⁴ The partnership between the principal investigator and the intervention team was genuine, with reciprocal contributions, dialogue among equals, transparency in data, and practical solutions proposed by the whole.

Overview of the Project Intervention

The intervention team consisted of five people, in addition to me. One non-participant note-taker also attended all sessions. Our purpose was to gather as individuals with contextual experience with Courtyard, address the identified problem related to decision-making within Courtyard, and take action to solve it through theological and theoretical research, articulated in the proposed intervention.¹⁵

The members of the intervention team were chosen according to several criteria. The team participants were Courtyard members of at least two years tenure who did not have a projected military (or other) move in the immediate future. Also, it was intended that the group should reflect the demographics of the church in age, gender, ethnicity, and faith heritage. This aim turned out to be unattainable due to Courtyard's transient nature and the number of members who felt overburdened by other responsibilities and environmental strains. One gap in this intervention was that our international members

14. This type of Participatory Action Research is explained in Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 58.

15. These steps are outlined in Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 64.

were unable to participate. In addition, though some of the members originally asked to participate represented a variety of religious backgrounds, all the members who were able to participate had a Church of Christ heritage. Despite the demographic shortcomings of the group, the resulting team was committed, aptly diverse, and composed of core members of the congregation. They consisted of one white male church leader in his late sixties; one middle-aged white male lay leader; a Latin American young adult in his thirties; and two white female young adults in their thirties. I, the principal informant, am a middle-aged, white, female church leader.¹⁶

Our note taker served as a non-participant observer, and she is a bi-racial, young adult in her twenties, employed as an Applied Behavioral Analysis therapist, and enrolled in university. I spoke with her outside of the official sessions to mitigate the lack of some aspects of diversity and to gain input about the efficaciousness of the team's proposed solutions. Her input did not raise any concerns to me about the team's work. The note-taker read chapter 6, "Note Taking", in Sensing's textbook, *Qualitative Research* so that she knew to record the setting, activities (to include conversations and body language), content, and what notably did not happen.¹⁷ She wrote on the left side of double-column notes, and I added my initial insights in the right column immediately after each

16. Though people tend to locate diversity in important areas of gender, ethnicity, and age, Northwestern University's Diversity Wheel is a helpful visual for the vast array of meaningful diversity in groups. The former types are labeled as Internal Dimensions of diversity on the wheel, but other umbrella categories include Community, Social Life, and Institutional dimensions of diversity. The intervention team was richly diverse in these other areas. For instance, there were singles, divorced, and married members; varied socio-economic statuses; different levels of higher education; different personality types, military status, family histories and traumas, and environmental histories. <https://www.ncu.edu/about-ncu/diversity/diversity-wheel#gref>

17. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 183–84.

session.¹⁸ In addition, each session was video recorded with the consent of the team so that I could review the sessions later.

The team met over six sessions between December 20, 2019, and March 13, 2020, on Friday nights from 6:30-8:00 p.m. in the Courtyard bistro. We sat in a circle where we could face one another and discuss openly. Covid disrupted our process; however, the theological examination, definitions, and brainstorming about intervention plans were complete before lockdown. We took a month's break to pray and consider the practicalities of the intervention plan and met again in a hybrid format in April 2020 to put the plan on paper. One team member was deployed with the military, so he joined us via Zoom while the rest of the team met in person, this time upstairs in the auditorium so that we could space out significantly with masks. The team then used email to work out the details of the intervention. At this time, a stay-at-home order was in effect, and the stress of Covid removed the project thesis from the top priority of the team for a few weeks until we could regather our stamina and focus. It became clear through the earlier email exchanges that there were a couple of major revisions that we wanted to make to the plan, so we met again on July 27, 2020, to formulate these changes. This meeting was also in a hybrid format in the church auditorium. Once this was done, evaluations were sent out via email and completed for triangulation by early September 2020.

Session 1

Session 1 began in the bistro of the church with all the team sitting in a circle. I used a whiteboard to generate ideas and pose questions. The prospectus for this project was emailed to the team members two weeks prior, and they were encouraged to read

18. See Appendix C.

through it beforehand and bring any questions with them to the first session. I did this because the theological depth of the project's foundation may have required at-home reading and processing to supplement the work in the sessions. It was clear by questions and references that the men in the group read the prospectus ahead of time. Such pre-work was not as evident in the women.

We covered logistics first, like verifying the session schedule and collecting the consent forms. Then I explained the nature of the work so that expectations and parameters were known. We discussed the difference between a D.Min. and a Ph.D. as well as the nature of Participatory Action Research. The team was excited to have the opportunity to work together on an intervention.

I then transitioned into defining the meaning of keywords related to the project, like *phronesis*, Christology, and wisdom—all derived from the title of the project thesis. The conversation around *phronesis* lasted the longest, about twenty minutes, and led to a question about whether such a project as this was worth our time because of determinism. One man asked, "If *phronesis* is knowing what to do and when to do it, and determinism assigns limits to this knowing, can an intervention make any difference?" This team member had more thoughts about determinism than the others. It was evident he had spent a considerable amount of time struggling with this idea after reading the prospectus, and he had several poignant discussion-inducing questions. In the end, after referencing a few Scriptures, the team decided that though determinism affects our choices, people are still responsible for making the best choice they can make at the time. There is free will within this pool of available choices; therefore, using Wisdom Christology to help people make better choices within the available choices was deemed a worthy exploration.

We then moved on to the other keywords. I asked them, “What is Wisdom Christology?” Their answers varied. They said, “The wisdom of Christ,” “making decisions in church,” “discernment,” “I don’t know,” and a more exhaustive answer that pulled directly from the prospectus and the book of Proverbs. I proposed working definitions of these words separately, and then put them together in the definition, “The study of wisdom embodied in Christ.” The team spent a considerable amount of time discussing the word “embodied” and its implications for whether we see Christ as one to imitate or one who incarnates. This distinction was new to three of the members, and one continued to struggle with it throughout the sessions. Two other members had previously thought through the distinction but not to the extent of examining the fullness of its ramifications upon *phronesis*. We ended this section by acknowledging the importance of imitating Christ but agreed imitation could not be the end goal because (1) “Jesus did not deal with everything we do,” (2) “Imitative faith can be fear-based and ingenuine,” and (3) “Imitation does not require faith. Atheists can do that.”¹⁹

Now that the key terms were defined and agreed upon, and each member understood his or her part in the intervention process, we transitioned into the observations and survey data I collected that led to the problem statement for the project. Each member of the group remembered completing the survey. We discussed the results, and with the key term definitions in mind, the team’s words and body language affirmed they were beginning to understand the need for this project. There was increased discomfort when we discussed the second data collection, the role-playing exercise that I conducted months earlier. Not all the participants were a part of that, but they were all

19. Various team members gave these reasons, and they were written on the white board.

intrigued by the results. All the team members were unaware of the third data collection, the journal of covert observations. The discomfort peaked here, and there were questions like, “Did you write about X problem?” and comments like, “Well, I was in a bad frame of mind then,” or “I would have handled it differently now.” I did not share the details of any of the problems I observed, but I was able to use the team’s tension to build rapport and trust through the process. I did this by explaining a problem I had and the data I collected on how I addressed the problem, admitting that Wisdom Christology was not my intuitive solution. Sharing the results of the data, minus identifying details, further helped the team understand the need for the project.²⁰ Specifically, they identified a concerning gap between sacred and secular decision-making processes and a lack of immanent Christology. This led to the team formulating a problem statement nearly identical to the one I composed in the prospectus. (Though, of course, some had already read it, even if they did not fully understand it before our session conversation.) I asked the team what our purpose should be, considering what we learned that night. We agreed on the purpose statement: to develop a plan of action that equips Courtyard Church of Christ with Wisdom Christology as a primary means of *phronesis*.²¹

The session ended with *lectio divina* through Deut 4:5–7. This was the passage that began my inquiries into God’s intent for wisdom in faith community, so I wanted to

20. John Kotter claims that urgency is a necessary catalyst for change, so when the team saw themselves in the data, they were highly motivated to make decisions differently and find a solution together. *The 8-step process for leading change: Dr. John Kotter*. Kotter. (2021, November 24). Retrieved from <https://www.kotterinc.com/8-step-process-for-leading-change/>

21. At this point, the team did not have the theology to complete the purpose statement as it came to be written in the project-thesis, which reads in full, “to develop a plan of action that equips Courtyard Church of Christ with Wisdom Christology as a primary means of *phronesis that produces internal shalom and witnesses to the world a people incarnated by Christ*.” (Italicized portion is what was added later.)

introduce it to the team to see what God spoke to them through it. Also, the sessions were planned to trace wisdom from the OT to Colossians in canonical order, so it was logical to introduce Deuteronomy in session one. Each participant shared her or his reflections on the passage after the guided prayer. The dominant themes that arose from the passage were the effect wisdom has on witness, the importance of knowing the Scriptures, and the nearness of God in Christ for us as we navigate the decisions of life. The session ended in prayer for wisdom.

Session 2

The team's second session was held in the same location. One member, the older male church leader, was absent due to illness, so he was sent the recording after the session. Everyone sat in a circle, and the meeting was opened with a brief prayer.

I asked the team to review what we learned the previous session. One member of the team retained information significantly better than the rest and could quickly find references in the prospectus and his notes from the last session. The team concluded that they were carrying over the following from the last session: Courtyard has a gap in its decision-making and understanding of Wisdom Christology. That gap is what the team is seeking to address through scriptures about wisdom and Jesus. From Deut 4:6–7, God intended for wisdom to bear witness to God's presence among God's people and to help them make good decisions. They were all engaged and eager to begin examining the scriptures.

The goal for this session was to look at the more significant OT passages about wisdom. Due to time and the nature of the project, the team would not be able to spend much time in any one passage. A six-week course could be written to solely explore these

passages we intended to peruse in two hours. But for the purpose of better understanding God's wisdom with the people of God who lived before Jesus, I chose the following passages. The team's significant conclusions are written after each one.

Genesis 2:9, 3:6; Proverbs 3:13–22: Wisdom the Tree of Life

A study of Gen 2:9, 3:6; and Prov 3:13–22 sparked a conversation about humanity's innate desire to know more and where people turn to gain this knowledge. The team concluded that God's wisdom "is a tree of life" to us (Prov 3:18), and this measure of wisdom needed to be sufficient for us rather than grasping at wisdom that was not ours to take or that leads to death, like from the Tree of Good and Evil from which Eve ate because it was "desirable for gaining wisdom" (Gen 3:6). The team began to recognize that God's wisdom is distinct from wisdom as a general category. In addition, the team returned to the idea of wisdom's alluring nature, highlighting that wisdom is "precious," "pleasant," and "an ornament around your neck" and that "nothing you desire can compare to her" (Prov 3). The team did not contrast this beauty to the beauty Eve found in the fruit she was not supposed to taste (Gen 3:6). When I asked about this contrast, they concluded that God made the Tree of Good and Evil, where Eve sought wisdom. Therefore, it was logical for that fruit to be "pleasing to the eye." It was not that the wisdom on the Tree of Good and Evil was bad, but that it was unavailable to Eve. They discerned that all of God's wisdom is beautiful, though not all of it is intended for us at any one time. This passage illustrates what came to be a favorite aspect of wisdom that the team members were drawn into in subsequent sessions: wisdom's beauty.

Deuteronomy 34:9

Reading Deut 34:9 led to a conversation about how people attain God’s wisdom. The team was familiar with Solomon asking for wisdom, but they did not know Joshua received wisdom by the laying on of hands. Along with the idea of wisdom for God’s mission being passed from originator to successor, they found the coordinating conjunction “so” insightful because it indicated that Joshua’s wisdom was a reason the Israelites chose to listen to him. They were quick to connect this to wisdom’s witness in Deut 4:6–7.

2 Chronicles 1:7–12; 1 Kings 4:29–34, 11:41

The team also immediately made connections between passages about Solomon’s wisdom (2 Chr 1:7–12; 1 Kgs 4:29–34, 11:41) to Deut 4:6–7. The men more than the women of the group clung to 1 Kgs 4:34 where people came from all nations “to listen to Solomon’s wisdom,” but the whole team concluded that it appeared as though God’s wisdom was intended to bear witness to God’s presence in the greater world.

One team member commented on how practical Solomon’s wisdom was. It gave Solomon insight into politics, military maneuvers, songs, poetry, botany, biology, and agriculture. The same member tied this to the intervention’s *phronesis* goal. “If we are trying to help the church make better decisions about everyday things, this shows us that God’s wisdom is able to address everyday things.” The energy in the group escalated at this point. Some had bored body language, but now they picked up pencils and sat up straighter. The team looked up the following passages more quickly from here on and had deep engagement with the Scriptures and each other. I noted that it was interesting how the passage about wisdom they seemed to know the best was also the one that piqued

their interest and revealed a significant concept for the intervention—asking for wisdom for *phronesis*.

Job 28: A Wisdom Hymn

I asked the team to read the hymn of Job 28 silently, notating what stood out to them about wisdom. We shared our insights after reading quietly for about seven minutes. One male team member said that the last line, “The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom,” stood out to him. He elaborated that God’s wisdom, according to this hymn, was not found in any material thing, but instead “in God’s will.” The instrumentation of obeying God’s will and fearing the Lord as means of embodying wisdom remained a dominant theme for this team member throughout the process. I noted that such emphasis was consistent with his legalistic Church of Christ background and desire for boundaries that marked God’s will. I knew from many previous conversations with this team member that a need to be certain of one’s salvation through tangible markers was important to him and that he favored God as “Lord” over “teacher” or “friend.” The rest of the team acknowledged that fear of the Lord was important as the source of wisdom, but it became so important to this member that other team members would lovingly joke about it whenever “fear of the Lord” came up in our readings. Their lighthearted sentiment shifted near the final session though when everyone agreed upon the significance of the fear of the Lord in the problem we were seeking to solve. This experience reiterated the truth of the theology we were studying—that God’s wisdom can be revealed in the members of the church. It was because of this that “fear of the Lord” was included in the team’s definition of Wisdom Christology that was composed at the end of the sessions.

Wisdom Psalms: 19, 37, 73, 119

We spent most of our time on Psalm 19, and I encouraged the team to read the other Wisdom Psalms at home. The pervasiveness of God’s wisdom was noted in Ps 19. This Psalm seemed to give them the imagery they were looking for to describe wisdom because they all highlighted the phrase, “They are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb” (Ps 19:10). In fact, this imagery led to a few minutes of storytelling about their childhoods and eating honey from the comb in nature and how this connects to finding God’s wisdom in the created world.

One of the women began yawning often at this point in the session and slowly engaged less and less. The others remained deeply engaged. I asked the woman who was tired to read the next passage for us.

Proverbs 1:20–33; 2–4

Due to time constraints, we read just Prov 1:20–33, and I encouraged them to read chs. 2–4 at home. Proverbs 1 was well received by the two men, who connected it with the fear of the Lord. One of them said, “Wisdom won’t wait for you!” and the other said, “If you don’t want to know God, that choice will lead to destruction.” The two women noted the reference to fruit in v. 31. “[Those who do not accept Wisdom] will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.” They connected this to Eve eating the fruit that killed her because it was knowledge she was not intended to have. The connection was not entirely appropriate since God created the Tree of Good and Evil and the fruit of Prov 1 was outside of God’s wisdom, but I did not correct it because the team was gaining an understanding that to indulge in wisdom that is not meant for us is destructive, whereas to partake of God’s wisdom intended for us leads to “being at ease,

and free from harm” (Prov 1:33). At this point, the team consistently noted how often wisdom’s effect of *shalom*, rest, and safety recurred, along with images of beauty.

Isaiah 11:1–3

The team noticed several parallels to Jesus in Proverb’s description of wisdom, but the connection to Jesus was undeniable in the Messianic prophecy in Isa 11:1–3, which reads the “Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord” will fall on “the shoot from the stump of Jesse.”

At first, one of the male team members asked, “Who is this about?” A female member quickly responded, “Jesus” and suggested that we read John 1 because she thought they might inform each other. Another member read John 1, and then the whole team agreed that Isa 11 was referencing Jesus; though, a conversation about the nuances of the Trinity and Isaiah’s reference to the “Spirit of the Lord” went on for a few minutes. One of the members said at the end of the conversation, “Because of this prophecy, we need to look for Wisdom in Jesus.” The previous passages taught the team the characteristics of wisdom and how people receive wisdom. This passage more than any of the previous prepared the team to look for these characteristics in Jesus.

Daniel 2:20–23: A Wisdom Hymn

The last OT passage we considered was Daniel’s Wisdom Hymn (Dan 2:20–23). The team concluded from it that Wisdom belongs to God and that God reveals Wisdom’s mysteries. They pondered the word “reveal” (v. 22), and it seemed to coalesce everything they previously read about how Wisdom was given to people by God; however, there was confusion about the hymn’s line, “he gives wisdom to the wise” (v. 21). “If people are

already wise, why are they getting wisdom?” They concluded that wisdom can be given in measures to those who need it for what they need it for at the time, according to God’s will. There was a conversation about how wisdom is not gum in a gumball machine; people cannot expect it to be given in the measure they request it simply by asking for it. After all, Job struggled to find wisdom anywhere. It was prophesied that Jesus would receive it through the Spirit, of course, but Joshua gained it by the laying on of hands. The team struggled to find the consistent pattern for wisdom’s appropriation that they were looking for before their conversation about this hymn in Daniel, but the idea of God revealing wisdom perhaps in part rather than in full doses was comforting and clarifying to them.

The team also talked about how wisdom was revealed to Daniel through a dream. They tied this to other ways wisdom was appropriated in the other passages and concluded that wisdom is revealed through all of creation. One team member said, “I really need to pay more attention to what is going on around me! God may be trying to show me something, and I’ve missed it!”

Conclusion of Session 2

At this point I asked everyone to stand up and stretch after which I invited them into a time of prayerful reflection on Prov 8 to close our session. Each person had highlighters and a hard copy of Prov 8 (NIV). I told them I was going to slowly read the chapter as prayer, and I asked them to highlight the characteristics of wisdom they heard in one color. I did this and gave them three or four minutes of silence after I finished reading to complete the task. Then I told them I was going to read Prov 8 again, and I asked them to put a star beside all the characteristics of wisdom that reminded them of

Jesus. They did this, and I gave them a few minutes of silence after I read to complete the task. Finally, without reading the chapter again, I asked them to take a second color and highlight the word or phrase that stood out to them the most. I allowed them to compose a word, phrase, or concept that came to them even if it was not explicitly stated in the chapter. I ended the prayer, thanking God for revealing insights to us about Wisdom Christology, and then asked the group to share their findings.

The words or phrases that stood out to them were “find me and find life,” “Wisdom before understanding,” “fear of the Lord” (from the same person who consistently clung to this phrase), “for everyone,” “teachings and good counsel,” and “peace, and no confusion/clarity.” The team listed dozens of characteristics of Wisdom, in addition to those above. They were drawn to Wisdom’s eternal nature, how the Lord made Wisdom before anything else, and how Wisdom was with God before creation. This led to confusion about the eternal nature of Christ—centered around variations of this question: “If Christ is Wisdom, was Christ created?” I responded to this by reminding the team of the poetic nature of the passage and by encouraging them to continue to see what the Scriptures teach us about Wisdom, the NT included. I did clarify that though our hypothesis is that all of Wisdom is found in Christ, Christ is more than mere Wisdom. Beauty and Wisdom’s pervasiveness in creation were recurring themes in this conversation.

Finally, I asked them what descriptions of Wisdom they starred as reminders of Jesus. Here is a partial list:

- “Wisdom calling out reminds me of Jesus’s teaching. There’s a lot about Wisdom teaching, and Jesus was called a rabbi” (vv. 1, 33).

- “Wisdom at the city gate reminds me of when Jesus said, “I am the gate” (v. 3).
- “When Wisdom says what is true, I think of Jesus being our Truth and unable to lie” (v. 7).
- “The recurrence of gems, like silver and gold, and wisdom more precious than rubies reminds me of Jesus’s parables about the Kingdom of God” (v. 10).
- “Wisdom and Jesus are both perfect judges” (v. 14).
- “Jesus said, ‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God’” (v. 17).
- “We’ve read about Wisdom being a vine or having fruit. This reminds me of Jesus saying, ‘I Am the Vine, and you are the branches and all of the stuff in the New Testament about good fruit’” (v. 19).
- “The inheritance language is similar to what we have in Christ” (v. 21).
- “Verse 22 sounds like John 1.”
- “Wisdom invites us to follow her like Jesus said to follow him” (v. 32).
- “Jesus stands at the door and knocks. This is like verse 34, where whoever stands at Wisdom’s door and listens for Wisdom will be blessed.”
- “Obviously, all of the references to life and eternal reward connect to Jesus” (vv. 35–36).

In closing, I asked them to read over these passages again, especially Prov 8 and 9, before we met again and to note any other insights God revealed about Wisdom to be discussed at the next session. The session ended past the scheduled time, but they lingered around to talk—mostly about the content of the session—for nearly thirty minutes before leaving.

Session 3

Session 3 was held in the same place as the previous two sessions. I modeled the session in the same format as session 2, so I will not elaborate on it in as much detail, but I will highlight the themes upon which the group focused and their conclusions. As in session 2, I found it most helpful to the intervention and consistent with the nature of Participatory Action Research for the team to come to their own conclusions together as we explored wisdom passages. This approach took longer than if I had simply taught them everything I know about Wisdom Christology, but I wanted the intervention to be born from insights the Spirit revealed to the team rather than ones they were regurgitating from me. So, as with session 2, we opened in prayer, asking God to reveal to us truth about wisdom and Christ, and sought to learn together with my conclusions muted as to not overly influence the subsequent intervention.

Session 3 explored apocryphal wisdom. This was unfamiliar territory. No one in the group had read anything from the Apocrypha before, but it was important to include these writings in our examination because Jesus pulls from them in his ministry, Paul and the early Jewish Christians knew these texts, and I wanted the team to see the references when we got to the NT.

We began with a review from session 2. The man who retained information from the prospectus well led the conversation. He offered a short summary of the insights gleaned from the OT, with emphasis on Wisdom's hidden nature, revealed only to those whom God chooses, and that to follow Wisdom prevents destruction and chaos in daily life. Once he completed his overview, another man brought up how Wisdom was revealed in all of creation, including dreams and through other God-fearers. The first man

pushed back some on this point. He said that after thinking about it since the last session, he thought it was important to clarify that Wisdom is not creation, but Wisdom belongs to God who calls us to search and find the Wisdom God chooses to reveal through God's creation. Everyone agreed this was a needed clarification. A woman mentioned, "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," and said that though we joked about that last time she was convinced that it was important to carry forward into our intervention, whatever that may be.

Then, to complete the review and prepare the team for the next portion of scripture with Wisdom, I had them watch the Bible Project Wisdom Series video on Proverbs, where Woman Wisdom is portrayed as an older woman who weaves a red thread through creation, inviting others to be woven into it.²² Four of the five team members were drawn to this video, three especially, and expressed how clarifying it was for them. They expressed that through the video they understood that Wisdom was not simply something to study in the Bible, but an aspect of God that "lives through us." One member said, "Wisdom isn't just about decision-making! This is about ordering all of creation!" The others agreed, and one commented how difficult it was going to be to compose an intervention that addressed such an expansive concept. One of the men commented, "I don't know how I've been reading the Bible all my life but never saw Wisdom. It's not like it's hidden. It's everywhere!" Another elaborated, "It's everywhere in creation, not just the Bible."

We embarked on apocryphal literature after a short break. Once settled, I handed them excerpts about Wisdom that I had printed onto hard copies from the sources

22. The Bible Project. *Overview: Proverbs*. YouTube. from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzmYV8GNAIM&ab_channel=BibleProject (2016, May 30).

cataloged below. We read and discussed each one in order. But first I offered thoughts about the Apocrypha so that the words we read from it could be received without the obstacles created by past religious teaching. I asked the team how many years passed between Malachi and Matthew. One woman guessed five hundred, which was fairly accurate. Another team member commented, “Many years of silence,” which was an apt segue to the actual lack of silence there was during those intertestamental years.

I gave a summary of each of the following books before we read passages from them to give the books context. We explored the following in order.

Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) “In Praise of Wisdom.” 1:1–30; 15:1–20; 24:1–29; 51:13–30

I referenced Ecclesiasticus as “Sirach” to avoid confusion with Ecclesiastes. As we read, I asked participants to mark characteristics of Wisdom that stood out to them as well as characteristics that reminded them of Jesus. Then we went around the room and shared our insights. The main take-aways were that nothing in Sirach contradicted what they learned about Wisdom from the OT passages; in fact, the passages in Sirach elaborated on the same themes, like Wisdom “always existed” (1:4). Another significant point of the conversation was that God portions Wisdom as God chooses; one does not gain Wisdom through a magic formula (1:10, 25). The wise sought Wisdom in prayer, asked for her, “inclined their ear” toward her, “directed their soul toward her,” and “lodged at the house of her instruction” (Sir 51). As a result, this person found wisdom but the team noted that this was a lifelong journey, distributed at God’s pleasure.

The team’s reiteration of fear of the Lord was confirmed in Sirach, as this is a running theme in ch. 1. They were delighted by the beauty attributed to Wisdom in Sir 24 and noted the sensory-rich nature of Wisdom. Wisdom “grew tall, like the cedars of

Lebanon” (24:13). Her “breath was the spicy smell of cinnamon, of sweet perfume” (24:15). Wisdom’s “blossoms gave way to rich and glorious fruit” (24:17). They highlighted the strong allusions to Jesus at the end of Sir 24.

Come to me, all 19 “Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits. 20 For the memory of me is sweeter than honey, and the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb. 21 Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more. 22 Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame, and those who work with me will not sin.”

A couple of the team members began thumbing through the NT to find where Jesus spoke similar words, and one commented again how he could not believe he never made the connection between Wisdom and Jesus.

I used this interest to point out Sir 24:4–12 because it, in cooperation with 1 En 42, would inform their Wisdom Christology. Wisdom’s V-shaped journey is mapped in Sirach, in which wisdom “sought a resting place” (v. 7). God told Wisdom, “Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance” (v. 8), so Wisdom found a home in Jerusalem (v. 11). It is in this phase of Wisdom’s journey that Wisdom’s beauty is made known and the invitation to eat and drink of Wisdom is offered (vv. 12–21). The team made the connection between this journey and Jesus’s meal with the disciples in the Upper Room on their own.

1 Enoch 42

Next, I drew their attention to the second apocryphal book under consideration, 1 Enoch. We read ch. 42, which completed the map of Wisdom’s journey, at least as it was marked in the pre-NT writings. Here the reader learns that, though Wisdom sought to make a home among the chosen people, “Wisdom found no place where she might dwell, so a dwelling place was assigned her in the heavens” (v. 1).

Wisdom of Solomon (7:21–8:1, 8:13–21, 9:1–21)

In studying Wisdom of Solomon, the team was again drawn to the recurrence of Wisdom's revealing nature. "It is of one nature but reveals itself in many ways. It is not made of any material substance, and it moves about freely. It is clear, clean, and confident" (7:22). One could feel relief in the room when this verse was read. The team commented that they felt they were on the right track, believing that Wisdom is revealed in all of creation and for all people, and though God is in control of who receives Wisdom and who does not (and when), Wisdom remains "clear." One man said, "Wisdom is a mystery *and* an answer." A woman commented again on how difficult she anticipated an intervention to be that appropriately held this tension about Wisdom that the scriptures were teaching. This led to a conversation about how the intervention is intended to be a plan of sorts for people to attain Wisdom, yet the scriptures are showing that the process of attaining Wisdom is actually mysterious, unpredictable, and entirely up to God. Some team members agreed but reminded the rest that we have learned very tangible ways Wisdom has been revealed to people. With this cue, I asked the team to list some of those ways on the whiteboard to process what we had learned so far about how to attain wisdom. They listed the following:

- search for it
- ask for it
- pray for it
- laying on of hands
- observe and listen for wisdom in creation
- pay attention to dreams and the words of others who fear the Lord

- fear the Lord and keep his commandments
- look for characteristics of wisdom, like life, beauty, peace, and holiness

This list offered clarity and allowed us to continue the study. I pointed their attention to Wis 9, where Wisdom is revealed in the patriarchs of the faith, like Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Jacob. One member of the group noted how similar Wis 7:23–30 sounded to Jesus, especially John’s Jesus. We discussed some of these parallels, like Jesus as our friend (vv. 23, 27), the breath of God (v. 25), the perfect reflection of God (v. 26), and the one who makes everything new (v. 27).

Philo

After we listed the characteristics of Jesus we saw in Wisdom, I moved the conversation to Philo. I explained that he was a contemporary of the apostles, including Paul and John, who wrote about Christ as Wisdom. Philo was a Jewish philosopher who melded Hebrew and Greek thought. He wrote significant works that influenced the NT writers. It was important to understand Philo’s identification of *Logos* with the Wisdom of Proverbs for the intervention.²³ I explained how Philo used *Sophia* and *Logos* interchangeably. The team’s body language expressed confusion as to why I was bringing this up, so I asked, “Is the word *Logos* in the New Testament?” They all said, “no.” I guided them back to John 1 and explained the etymology of the Greek word translated “Word.” This visibly shocked them, and their body postures changed again to a position of alertness. One member asked why Philo’s writings were not in the canon. I realized they were taking in too much new information and backed up to clarify that we were

23. *Ebr.* 31, as expounded in Jiří Hoblík, “The Holy Logos in the Writings of Philo of Alexandria,” *Communio Viatorum*, 56.3, 2014, 248–66.

considering Philo as a non-Christian contemporary of the NT writers, not as an inspired writer; however, his writing affected Jewish thought significantly, and therefore Christian thought. As such, we do not read Philo as scripture, nor do we give undue credence to his writings. But we do need to understand how his writings informed the writings of the NT authors and why Jesus was described as Wisdom the way he was.

I explained that Philo was pivotal in moving the connection of Wisdom with Torah to creation, which was an insight the team acutely noticed in the OT readings. I also told them that Philo interpreted Wisdom to be a god in herself, the wife of God, the son of God, a bi-sexual and non-binary being.²⁴ At this, one member asked, “So, is John saying that Jesus is cross-gendered?” Another team member answered this person by saying, “Philo isn’t an inspired writer, so John isn’t saying Philo was right. I think John is just using Philo’s *Logos* language to explain what Wisdom really is.” Another team member said, “Or *who* Wisdom is.” Another male team member said, “John 1 seems to be setting the record straight about Wisdom and Jesus because Philo was influencing so much thought.”

I confirmed the latter conclusions and added that Philo was a missing piece to interpret John 1 as a Wisdom poem about Christ. Addressing Philo, as confusing as it was at first, helped the team understand that one of John’s goals was to portray Jesus as the Wisdom of God. In the end, the team found this conversation helpful, and I allowed it to go a bit off-topic as we considered how the events of culture affect faith and our doctrines even today.

24. *Ebr.* 30–31; *Cher.* 46; *Fug.* 62

At this point, nearing the end of our time together, I asked them to reread the material in between sessions, and we closed the session by praying in a circle for wisdom for the person next to us.

Session 4

Session 4 began with a *lectio divina* session in Prov 9:1–6. I chose this passage from the OT, even though this session would explore the Gospels, because of its heavy eucharistic allusions to Wisdom. I used it as a bridge between what we studied previously and what we would learn about Christ as Wisdom that night. I facilitated this in a more traditional way; I gave each member of the team a blank piece of paper and colored pencils and asked them to graphically reflect upon the four questions I would ask throughout the time of prayerful reading. I read the passage three times. The first time I asked them to record in word or art the word or phrase that stood out to them. The second time I asked them to reflect on how the passage connected to them today. The third time I asked them to compose or draw an invitation God was extending to them through the passage. We shared our reflections and artwork. It is noteworthy that in some way or another, each team member mentioned “feast with Wisdom,” either as a phrase that stood out to them or an invitation. This revelation remained prominent throughout the rest of the theological study and became a part of the intervention.

By this point in the examination of the Scriptures the team was not surprised to find Wisdom “hidden in plain sight” in the Gospels, as one team member worded it. We compared Matt 11:25–30 with Sir 51:23–27, where both Wisdom and Jesus invited the weary to come to them to find rest. They were far more interested in comparing Matt 26:26–29 with the Proverbs passage we had just prayed through. The team’s interest in

“Wisdom feasts” grew, and there was a lot of excited conversation that ensued about “Wisdom feasts” being a part of the intervention.

I redirected them to John’s Gospel, where I wanted to devote most of our time. I told them that though Matthew’s Wisdom school is public for anyone who has ears to hear it, John’s Wisdom school was more private with special revelations for those in a master class. The team noted that this tension between how Matthew and John portray Jesus’s wisdom helped make sense of the tension through which they were struggling in how the OT taught a person to attain wisdom. The two Gospels affirmed that Wisdom is clear, calling out, and available to anyone, but it is also hidden, revealed at God’s will, and at times elusive. Rather than trying to choose one approach over the other, the team decided that this tension, affirmed in the existence of two Gospels, was simply characteristic of how Wisdom worked, and the tension had to be embraced in the intervention, whatever that might be.

We spent most of our time in the Upper Room Discourse. Here, the team compared Wisdom’s V-shaped journey with Jesus’s words in John 14–17. They also compared the description of Wisdom from Wis 7:24–28 to Jesus’s words in John 15:9–15, where both Wisdom and Jesus make us “friends of God.” Furthermore, we read John 17:20 where Jesus’s eternal nature and pure reflection of God are addressed in 17:20 and following, also characteristic of Wisdom.

I ended our discussion on John by asking the team to note the intimate language found in the Upper Room Discourse. Wis 7:24–28 speaks of Wisdom “penetrating all things,” “renewing all things,” “passing into holy souls,” and inviting people to “live with Wisdom.” They noted that, likewise, Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to prepare a

room for them. He prays, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe you have sent me” (John 17:21). This verse seemed to connect all the theological dots for the team. Just as God’s wisdom was near God’s people in Deuteronomy, so Jesus asks to incarnate us. Just as the purpose of wisdom’s nearness in Deuteronomy was to make God known among the surrounding nations, Jesus also hopes that His incarnating presence in the church will cause “the world to believe that you have sent me” (17:21). The characteristics of wisdom, such as intimacy with God, perfection, wise judgment, beauty, and peace, were revealed. The team saw all of this in Jesus to such a degree that the notetaker tallied eight times that session when someone on the team commented something to the effect of, “I can’t believe I never saw this before. It’s so clear.”

It did not take as much time to go through the Gospels as it did the previous portions of Scripture because the allusions to Christ were being made throughout the journey. That freed time at the end of this session to come to a summative statement. I asked them to write down the rest of this sentence: “Christ as Wisdom is _____.” I gave them ten minutes of silence, and then we shared our answers. They were as follows:

- “Christ as Wisdom is an avoidance of destruction or even going down that path.” (This was a young male, who reiterated the theme of destruction outside of Wisdom versus life in Wisdom throughout the study.)
- “Christ as Wisdom is light which guides us in God’s will, a beacon that always guides us in the right direction.” (This was a male who reiterated the fear of the Lord throughout the study.)

- “Christ as Wisdom is our shepherd, protector, friend, and salvation.” (This was an older male co-leader of the church.)
- “Christ as Wisdom is our life—our everything. Overall, above all, the answer to all.” (This was a young woman who reiterated the theme of Wisdom’s pervasiveness in creation throughout the study.)
- “Christ as Wisdom is our clear, true vision that leads to a full life, joy, the creation of new things—the honey of Eden.” (This was a young female who reiterated the theme of beauty throughout the study.)
- “Christ as Wisdom is an invitation for all people into an intimate, loving, mentored friendship that provides all that we need on our way toward a reconciled life with creation and God.” (I contributed to this list so that we could put them all together later when formulating a definition for Wisdom Christology).

We closed this session by taking prayer requests, specifically for wisdom to guide prevalent decisions. Then we prayed in a circle for each other, but moving in the opposite direction around the circle from the session prior.

Session 5

Session five covered NT passages about wisdom beyond the Gospels. The intent was for all the theological insights gained from the previous sessions to culminate in the Wisdom Hymn found in Col 1:15–20. Therefore, we began this session with a traditional *lectio divina* in the Colossians hymn. I wanted to give them significant time in the hymn because, though it is a Wisdom Hymn, the word Wisdom is not overtly mentioned.

Again, I distributed blank paper and colored pencils and asked the team to record in word

or art the answer to the three questions that I asked. First, after I slowly read the hymn, I asked them to note what word or phrase stood out to them. Second, after I read the hymn the second time, I asked them to notate on their paper how the passage connected to their daily life. Last, I asked them to record an invitation from God that they heard through the passage. I closed the prayerful reading, and we went around the circle to share our insights. The words and phrases (in some cases theological ideas) that caught their attention were “created by and for Jesus,” “reconciled,” “holds all things together, both visible and invisible,” “when all things are reconciled, especially in myself, there is rest.”

They said that the passage connected to their life in the following ways: “In Jesus, all things are held together, and I see this to be true when I look at the areas of order and chaos in my life. The areas where Jesus is at the center have more order and peace.” “I recognize that I was created by and for Jesus, with the rest of creation, so therefore I *am* reconciled to Jesus. This is a present reality.” “Jesus is still the head of the church, and churches fall apart when Jesus is moved from that position.” “God’s will will be done in me because I am in good standing with God.” “I am reconciled to God right now.”

Since it came up, a conversation ensued about the present state of our reconciliation to God through Christ. This was a shocking revelation for one young woman on the team. It seemed to re-frame her entire concept of salvation. She said that instead of living her life working hard to become reconciled to God she could have peace that she *is* reconciled to God through Christ now. That truth gave clarity of mind in *phronesis* instead of trying to make reconciliatory decisions from a chaotic mind that believed it must choose right to remain in God’s good graces. The team discussed this idea, specifically how much easier it was to make decisions when you knew you had

friends or a parent who would not leave you or stop loving you even if you made the wrong choice. There was tremendous peace correlating one's present reconciliation to the subsequent ability to make better choices. Some time was spent addressing the past, present, and future reality of God's reconciliation through Christ in us.

Finally, we shared what God was inviting us to do with this passage. One older team member said, "I'm invited to discern if Jesus is in the areas of chaos in my life." Another shared, "I'm invited to be an active part of the reconciliatory process God is doing in the world." Another man said, "I'm invited to seek God's wisdom and do His will." The young woman with the revelation about reconciliation said, "I'm invited to remember that God wants peace with all things—inside of me and in all of creation—and that happens through Christ."

The last team member said, "I'm invited to rest in trust when I make a decision with the information that I have that I believe is made in Christ." This woman became emotional when sharing her invitation. The team comforted her by affirming how anxiety-inducing it is to be in chaos or to lose sight of the fact that our current reconciliation in Christ is sound, even as we continue to navigate the myriad choices in daily life. One man highlighted Col 1:20, where "making peace" was more than the absence of war. Rather, it was the opposite of chaos where "all things are held together" in Christ. I asked, "Is this the definition of *shalom*?" They all agreed that it was and preferred to use the word *shalom* over "peace" henceforth because *shalom* captured a fuller sense of the reconciliation that happens in Christ.

Though "wisdom" was rarely mentioned, this time of prayerful reading through Col 1:15–20 succeeded in coalescing the major themes we previously explored into a

robust Wisdom Christology. After some brainstorming on the whiteboard, we summarized our insights into Col 1:15–20 by saying, “We are and will be reconciled to God through Christ, and this reconciliation—which is the work of Christ as our Wisdom—brings *shalom* in the world, including in me.”

From here we examined the context of the hymn. I told them that Paul wrote it to the church to correct false teaching among them, likely about seeking wisdom outside of Christ, through angels or asceticism. In sum, Paul taught the Colossians that gaining special knowledge through esoteric practices is a problem, and the solution was a cosmic Christ.

I wanted the team to explicitly make the connection between the hymn and Wisdom, so we looked at the broader passage, vv. 9–23. I had them identify Paul’s prayer for the church in vv. 9–14 (that they be filled with the “knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,” etc.) I asked them to read ahead to Col 2:6–10 where Paul reiterates his desire for the church to not be “taken captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy” (v. 8), for “in Christ you have been brought to fullness” (v. 10). This led to a conversation about where we may be taken captive by philosophies of our age in our search to address the questions of our lives, instead of seeking Wisdom through Christ who is in us. They listed sources like podcasts, Google searches, people they respect, pros and cons lists made in isolation of others, self-help books, and counselors.

One woman then asked the inevitable question, “If we’ve learned that Christ’s Wisdom is cosmic and potentially working anywhere, like the thread from the Bible

Project video, can't Christ's Wisdom be speaking to me in a podcast or through my counselor? I understand that it was wrong for the Colossians to be looking for Wisdom in angels, but my counselor is really good!" The team discussed this for a while—how the cosmic nature of Christ's Wisdom can be found in "secular" spaces. Another woman asked, "If Christ's Wisdom is reconciling all of creation, then how do I know if it is Christ's Wisdom or a 'hollow philosophy' like Paul is warning against?" I answered that that was, in essence, the mission of the team: to discern for the church a plan that helps them recognize Christ as our Wisdom among us over and against competing voices of worldly wisdom so that they can experience the *shalom* of reconciliation. The team got quiet, then laughed. One man said, "That's a really big job!"

Then the woman who asked the original question offered, "I think it's easy to recognize, no matter where it's found, if we remember the characteristics of Wisdom we've listed from the passages we've studied." I went to the whiteboard again to record their list of Wisdom's characteristics: beauty, peace, life, and order. However, this time they added "evidence of things being held together in Christ." They had trouble articulating what that meant practically, but they all agreed there was a deep feeling of it inside of themselves when they experienced that type of reconciliation. That *knowing*, they suggested, was the strongest indicator of being in Christ's Wisdom.

To dig deeper, I asked them what it felt like to be out of that place of reconciliation and to share examples of that experience from their lives. This was easier for them. Several of them mentioned, "anxiety that disrupts daily life or sleep." "Murder and destruction of life" was suggested. "When I fall to temptation and feel chaos inside." "I know I'm out of reconciliation when I lose my temper or feel like I'm not in control of

myself.” To this one person countered, “I fear not being in control, so when I’m working hard to take control I know I’m outside of God’s Wisdom. The passage says Christ is the head, not me.” “I know all things are not held together in Christ in my world when I get very busy and stubborn, trying to do all the things my way.” “It happens when I resort to military thinking that is reactionary or has mindless actions.”

From here, one member suggested the importance of quiet listening as a means to Wisdom. It seemed to him that all the above-mentioned experiences of chaos could be battled with quiet prayer. The team affirmed the suggestion, and another person added, “Not only prayer but getting in nature. If Wisdom is holding everything together in creation, we should pay attention to creation.” A couple of the members brought up a silent retreat they went on with me the year before and how many answers to life’s questions they gained in that time of silence in creation. The team emphatically agreed that prayer in creation needed to be a part of the intervention plan.

Time was getting away from us, but I wanted them to read a few places in the NT where Christ as our Wisdom was explicitly stated, so we turned to 1 Cor 1:18–2:14. We discussed the following points from this passage:

1. Does preaching have a role in helping people with Wisdom? They agreed that it did, though preaching was probably not going to give the whole answer. They talked about how preaching could over-simplify the struggle, and 1 Cor 2 taught that there is a mystery in Christ’s Wisdom. It could and should be declared, but preaching needed to be done with other disciplines, like seeking wisdom in creation, to be complete.

2. How did Paul define “wisdom from God” in v. 30? Paul listed “righteousness, holiness, and redemption” as characteristics of God’s wisdom in Christ. The team affirmed that these are three attributes that accompany decision-making. “Which decision is right with God?” “Which decision is aligned with those who are set apart as Christians?” “What decision honors our reconciliation in Christ?”
3. Where do you see parallels in this passage with what we’ve learned about wisdom in other biblical passages? The team made many connections here. One was God’s prerogative to reveal wisdom to whomever God chooses, in this case, “the mature”. Another point was that wisdom is in us. They were awed at 2:11–12 where the Spirit of God searches within God for wisdom, and that same Spirit abides in us; therefore, we have access to wisdom well beyond what the church typically engages. One man said, “Why do we go to the world when we have this great gift inside of us?” They concluded that there was a supernatural revelation to Christ’s wisdom that was far removed from the practical ways the church typically seeks wisdom, like through a sermon, a counselor, or a podcast, and this needed to be at the forefront of the intervention.

We ended the session with a crucial passage, Jas 3:13–17, where two types of wisdom are presented. We traced the characteristics of each, worldly wisdom and wisdom from heaven. They listed the eight characteristics of wisdom from heaven: purity, peaceability, gentleness, willingness to yield, full of mercy and good fruit, and without a hint of partiality or hypocrisy. I asked the team if we should simplify our mission and ground the intervention in these eight characteristics. “Do they embody what we have learned in the fullness of Scripture about Wisdom Christology?” Unanimously,

and quickly, they answered, “no.” One person said, “These are good when the problem is so hard that you need a checklist to eliminate some choices, but it’s not enough.” The team agreed. One woman mentioned, “If Christ’s Wisdom is cosmic, it can’t be reduced to a checklist.” The team decided it should be mentioned in the intervention and available as a tool, but the emphasis needed to be more explicitly on Christ among us, “the relationship of the church with the head of the Church.” There was a fear that a checklist, like James offers, would encourage decision-making in isolation, and this was not consistent with how they understood Col 1, where wisdom is among the “body.”

Their homework before the final session was to consider a problem that was giving them pause and, with all that we learned about Wisdom Christology, to apply our insights to that problem and note what, if any, clarity was given. I closed the session in prayer, and we dismissed.

Session 6

This session again met in the church bistro. Everyone was in attendance. Before the session began, I privately went to the note-taker with a chart of words discerned when I went through the field notes from the previous sessions and charted the ones that recurred the most in our conversations. I asked the note-taker to tally how often she heard these words during session six so that I could code them later and discern what themes rose to the top in our study of wisdom.²⁵

After an opening prayer, we immediately turned our attention to the decision each person identified that week and how they sought Wisdom to address it. I also asked each person to include whether the sessions’ insights changed how they would have otherwise

25. These words and the coding results are explored under Researcher Angle in chapter 5.

pursued a decision. I began with the problem of whether to hold corporate worship services with the emergence of Covid-19. (This was March 13, 2020, the same week we ultimately decided not to meet in the building.) I said that I first turned to the scriptures, specifically the parable of the Good Samaritan. Courtyard was in a series on Luke at the time, so Luke 10 was fresh in my mind. This led me to pray about what loving those in front of us looks like. I told the team that I took time comparing the choices the leadership team came up with to the character of God. I asked, “Which decision exhibits love? Mercy? Goodness?” I also consulted Christian ministry friends in the same predicament and read the available science. Then I waited for an answer, careful to observe what God might be revealing around me through creation. The leadership did not yet have a decision for this problem, but I noted I was much more intentional with the decision-making process than I would have been before when I could imagine myself, even subconsciously, jumping to a decision that aligned with my political or social group over what Christ was inviting.

A second team member said they was struggling to decide about whether to drop legal charges on a loved one who had broken the law. This person also considered the characteristics of God and wrestled with God’s grace in tension with God’s just-ness. This person tried to discern the locus of a person’s “fear of the Lord.” “Is it my job to put this in people, or are they to respond to God with fear of the Lord on their own?” In the end, in a way that surprised this person, the family chose grace. The person said the sessions made a big difference in *phronesis* because the sessions replaced the old question, “What would Jesus do?” with “Do I see Jesus in this decision as I see Jesus in this person the decision is about?” I noted that this second question was not explicitly

stated previously in our studies, but it was the question that arose within them as Wisdom was sought in a real-life decision. For this person, that question encompassed the corpus of our studies.

A third person was struggling to decide how best to get out of debt. His process began with a look inside himself where he recognized there was chaos about the debt and that he had “adapted to behavior outside of God” that needed to be brought back into reconciliation. He, through prayer and reflection with God, identified the specific sins of apathy and sloth that were contributing to the debt. He was intentional about confessing this sin, even in the group context. As he was seeking wisdom about how to solve this problem, he met a man in need and decided to give him \$5, which was one-tenth of what the team member had on him at the time. This greatly bothered him, and he said, “I want to be a person who can give more at the ready, not \$5, and it’s my own sin that is preventing that from happening.” He spoke to his wife about it, and they chose to create a budget that would release them from debt in a period of months. They invited in Christian accountability partners. The team member said that the session helped him label the internal chaos as a symptom of being outside of the place where Christ is holding all things together; therefore, he knew to invite Christ as Wisdom into that area of chaos to correct it.

A fourth person shared a struggle to decide about re-entering into a relationship with someone with whom there was an extensive history. The person did a long list of things inspired from the sessions to seek wisdom for this decision: talked to trusted people, listened to them, waited on God (with specific timeframes established), observed the partner’s behaviors and journaled them, spoke with a counselor, and prayed. The

sessions helped this person have language for the chaos inside about the decision.

Because of that, the team member was able to discern that love, the power of God, and humility were factors on one side while fear, pride, and sin were factors on the other. The person would not have been able to communicate the core obstacles to decision-making in this instance if the class had not taught the value of entering silence with God and that Christ's cosmic wisdom is available in many places. This led the person to seek answers from a wide variety of sources and to take that input into silence with God for insight.

The fifth person shared that she was seeking wisdom on whether to continue to live with a roommate. The team member drew from the wisdom allusions of honey and fruit. She saw these symbols on the people involved as she looked for evidence of wisdom. The visual helped her discern. She spoke with friends and her minister (me) about the problem. She said that the sessions taught her that wisdom is like the thread in the video, weaving everywhere in unexpected ways, so she was spurred to think creatively about solutions. She and the roommate came to a creative solution, to which she credited Christ's wisdom. She became emotional at the end and said, "From these classes, I know that I am reconciled with Christ, and that means I *can* make good decisions. I am capable to do that because Christ is in me. But I also know it's now/not yet Wisdom, so it's okay if I make a bad decision. I'm still reconciled. Now, in a way I never did, I respect all of creation—all of it—her, me, others, everyone, and everything involved in the decision. I'm paying more attention." (The sixth person on the team chose not to share but said that the wisdom material from the sessions was significantly informing his decision-making processes.)

From here, I asked the team to brainstorm a definition of Wisdom Christology on the whiteboard. We sought to articulate it in one sentence. This proved more difficult than I anticipated as they struggled to decide which attributes of Wisdom to include in the definition. They began with their session four notes that ended with the sentence “Christ as Wisdom is _____.”. The goal now was to combine all of that into one definition that could be a part of the intervention. Eventually, after many scratch-outs, re-ordering, and rewrites, they agreed that the best definition that included everything they felt was essential about Wisdom Christology was “Wisdom, existing before the beginning, is a pervasive and supreme characteristic of God, fully embodied in Christ, wherein all creation came into being and continues to create *shalom* through anyone who, in the fear of the Lord, hears and honors Wisdom’s call, and therefore freely receives life from Wisdom’s banquet of order, beauty, friendship, and light.”

To close, I asked them to begin considering how this definition can inform the decisions of the church. We brainstormed some ideas on the whiteboard. They suggested a sermon series. Someone else said perhaps we needed to begin with a class on hermeneutics so that the members of the church would know *how* to read the Bible for wisdom rather than looking for “plug-and-play” verses to imitate. One person suggested a church blog where members could post problems and people comment or interact with advice. In the end, the team decided this was too impersonal. One member suggested regular *lectio divina* sessions in the church to help them read scripture for wisdom rather than imitation only. Time in creation and “Wisdom Feasts” were reintroduced.

I told them we were going to take a month's break to pray through our insights and consider what to include in the intervention plan. We would reconvene April 20th to

compose the intervention to address our identified problem: there is a gap between the decision-making process and Wisdom Christology for the members at Courtyard.

Sessions 7 and 8

Sessions one through six were the theological foundations for the intervention. The intervention plan itself, though introduced at the end of six, was composed in sessions seven and eight, as well as through some email correspondence. Therefore, sessions seven and eight will be mentioned here, but the details of the intervention will be given in chapter 4.

Session seven took place in April at the church building. This time we met upstairs where we could spread out with masks to safely communicate the details of the intervention in person. One member was deployed, so he joined us via Zoom. A four-part plan was composed in this session, the details of which appear in the next chapter. Immediately after this point, a stay-at-home order was put into effect, so session eight was delayed until July 27, 2020. This meeting was also in a hybrid format in the church auditorium. We made necessary revisions to the plan in this meeting. Once this was done, evaluations were sent out via email and completed for triangulation by early September 2020.

Evaluation

Procedures for Data Collection

The intervention session data were recorded through multiple means. Sessions were recorded on video, field notes were taken each session, and summative evaluations in the form of a three-question exit questionnaire were sent out after the last session. A note-taker, who was not a member of the intervention team, took the field notes on a pre-

made, double column form.²⁶ I gave her tips for taking them, and she notated significant conversation points as well as the setting, mood, and body language of the team participants.²⁷ She recorded the field notes on a separate sheet for each session. I included my observations in the second column of the field notes immediately after each session.

I emailed a premade exit questionnaire to the intervention team and an outside evaluator after the intervention was created. The team and the outside evaluator emailed the questionnaires back to me within thirty days.

Procedures for Data Analysis

With the data in hand, I analyzed it with triangulation and coding. Triangulation compiles reflections from three perspectives as a means to “cross-check data that provides breadth and depth to [one’s] analysis and increases the trustworthiness of [one’s] research.”²⁸ The triangulation was done with insiders—the intervention team and me, the researcher—and outsiders—Brookline Church of Christ. Sensing posits, “The participants in the project are often the most valuable sources for evaluation;” however, my observations as the resident expert, in combination with an outside group that is of a similar context not influenced by the Hawthorne Effect round out the data for validity.²⁹ The content of these evaluations is in the next chapter after a description of the intervention plan that was evaluated.

26. See Appendix D.

27. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 185.

28. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72.

29. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 75.

Conclusion

Courtyard Church of Christ's context was described in chapter 1. Observations and data collection revealed a specific problem in the congregation in their ability to make decisions that resulted in *shalom* and bearing witness to Christ in the world. A better understanding of Wisdom Christology, to the degree that it can be embodied uninhibited within the church, was identified as a solution to this problem. Wisdom Christology was explored through the canon and in apocryphal literature in chapter 2. Chapter 3 traced the intervention team's discovery of Wisdom Christology through many of the same passages, with overt connections to the specified decision-making problem at Courtyard. Chapter 4 will detail the intervention plan the team created to address the problem through what they learned about Wisdom Christology in the six sessions.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The intervention team gathered in April 2020 to create an intervention plan for Courtyard Church of Christ that addressed the decision-making problem in the church with Wisdom Christology. They reviewed their notes at home, re-read the passages and the prospectus, committed time to prayer, and applied some of the wisdom-seeking principles they learned to their own problems in the weeks between session six and this meeting. Therefore, they were full of ideas and quickly agreed upon a four-step intervention. The intervention plan included a sermon series on Wisdom Christology, small group Wisdom Feasts, silent retreats in creation, and a Wisdom Pamphlet for quick reference.

Wisdom Christology Sermon Series

As a result of the process, the team unanimously concluded that the congregation needed a theological grounding in Wisdom Christology to apply it to their decision-making processes. The images of Wisdom calling out to the people, inviting anyone with ears to align to her teaching led them to believe that a sermon series was an appropriate place to begin. Sunday morning is when most of the members are together, so this would equip the most people with the theology necessary to apply the other portions of the intervention.

There was a discussion on whether sermons or a Sunday morning class series would be more effective. They proposed that a class series could be used to supplement the sermons, but sermons, as a unique spiritual discipline, allowed the church to be drawn into one wisdom-rich passage at a time, to understand it, and be offered a specific invitation into its main idea without interruption. They proposed that the nature of preaching embodied the nature of Wisdom in the areas of clarity, beauty, and invitation, and they desired this consistency between Wisdom's example in the biblical text and mode of delivery to the people.

A twelve-part sermon series was planned. The team chose twelve passages that formed them the most from our sessions. They were Deut 4:5–8; 2 Chr 1:7–12; 1 Kgs 4:29–34; Job 28:20–28; Prov 3:13–19; Prov 8–9; Dan 2:20–23; Matt 11:28–29; Wisdom in John (the I Am Statements and Upper Room Discourse); 1 Cor 1:182:16; Eph 3:7–11; Jas 3:13–18; Col 1:15–20.

It was customary at Courtyard to have a monthly memory verse. Photocards with a memory verse printed on them were distributed to each family on the first Sunday of the month for them to display in a prominent place in their home. The memory verse was rehearsed together on Sundays and small prizes were given or games were played at the Agape Feast at the end of the month to increase accountability for families to memorize the passages. As such, the team suggested that the monthly memory verses come from the Wisdom passages in the sermon series to give the families additional opportunities to abide in the Wisdom texts.¹

1. Covid interrupted many of Courtyard's practices, including monthly memory verses. However, Courtyard did add "Sunday Social" during Covid, which is a Zoom gathering three of the four Sunday nights of the month. Sunday Social is a time for the participants to ask questions about the sermon or service, offer counter-perspectives to it, and share their insights from the passage under consideration that

Wisdom Feasts

The second part of the intervention the team composed was Wisdom Feasts. The imagery of Wisdom's banquet table from Sir 15 and Prov 9 was significant to them. The imagery helped them connect Wisdom to Jesus and encapsulated Wisdom's invitation for all into Wisdom's characteristics of goodness, abundant life, and order. I think this imagery spoke so loudly to the team because Courtyard's worship services culminate at the communion table. Courtyard's church culture further emphasizes the communion table with an Agape Feast at the end of every month. The communion bread is always homemade because we believe that people should "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps 34:8). Language about "everyone being invited to the Table" and there being a "seat at the Table for all people to participate" is common in the church. Therefore, it was natural for this dominant part of Courtyard's orthopraxis to spill into the intervention plan.

A second reason Wisdom Feasts were a natural part of the plan is that they encourage input from all people. Though the team believed a sermon series was right and necessary, they wanted to balance this with opportunities to hear Wisdom speak through everyone, and dinners provide this egalitarian space.

The team planned Wisdom Feasts as follows: The intervention team would organize the church into groups of three or four family units so that healthy and diverse dynamics were formed. The small groups would meet for a meal around a table in a home three times over the course of three months. The times and locations would be left up to

week. Sunday Social ends with members sharing specific actions of application they intend to do that week. Should the intervention plan go into practice, Sunday Social would be used to supplement the sermon series on Wisdom Christology in a similar way as the team suggested for the memory verses.

the small group. The purpose of the feasts is to navigate the decision-making process together, but the intervention team was acutely aware that this can only happen in communities of trust where all the members have the same guiding principles. Therefore, the Wisdom Feasts were scheduled to follow the sermon series, and the feast conversations were to increase in intimacy incrementally.

The first feast merely fosters familiarity with the process and the people around the table. Participants are asked to talk about a past decision they made in light of what they learned about Wisdom Christology in the sermon series.² The second meal invites the participants to share a current, less significant decision they are trying to make. The decision is articulated to the group, and the members around the table are encouraged to offer Wisdom from the principles they learned about Wisdom Christology, grounded in a belief that Christ's Wisdom is incarnating each of them and present among them. Finally, the third meal invites the same people to share a more difficult and significant decision they are navigating and for the others to share Wisdom to help the person make a decision that results in *shalom* and bears witness to Christ.

As shared meals in homes go, it was understood that a lot of the time would be spent "off-topic" in small talk, getting to know each other, and casual fellowship. The team anticipated this not as a hindrance, but as an aid to the communal discernment process because real decision-making struggles will only be communicated in communities of trust, and trust grows in unscripted times together in homes.

2. Each family would have a copy of the Wisdom Pamphlet (the fourth part of the intervention) to guide the decision-making process and remind them of the principles they learned about Wisdom from the sermon series.

Silent Retreat in Creation

The third intervention the team wrote into the plan is a silent retreat in outdoors. All the members of the team participated in a weekend silent retreat that I had facilitated the year before. The purpose of those annual retreats was to help people sabbath purposefully and experience the presence of God. They were not done to navigate decision-making nor to seek Wisdom specifically. Those retreats were formative and in a few cases life-changing experiences for the team members, so they wanted to incorporate them into the intervention plan, but with a Wisdom focus.

They also wanted them included because of the strong connection between Wisdom and creation that they derived from the scriptures. If Christ, our Wisdom, is holding all of creation together (Col 1:17), was there before creation (Prov 8), and is reconciling through creation now (Col 1:20), then being in creation is a necessary step for one to align with the breadth of Wisdom. The team cited a goal of the intervention plan to reach as many in the congregation as possible. Therefore, the idea of a weekend retreat as they had experienced was abandoned for a day-long retreat that would be more accessible for people's schedules. They decided the retreat should be offered twice a year, and members can register for the one that is the most convenient for them. There are several campground options within a ninety-minute radius of the church that have walking trails, creeks, ponds, and wildlife. They suggested that people attend the day retreat with a specific dilemma in mind that needed to be addressed with Wisdom. I would facilitate the retreat with spiritual disciplines, predominantly silence, but also journaling and a list of items in creation that God used to speak to God's people in scripture, like water, rainbows, and ravens. I would also guide the participants individually in a *lectio divina*

session using a passage of Scripture that addressed their specific dilemma. The day would end by breaking the silence and a time of communal sharing to process what Wisdom was revealed with God in creation.

Wisdom Pamphlet

The last part of the intervention plan is the creation of a pamphlet.³ This was also the most controversial part of the intervention. One team member proposed the idea because she thought it was needed to counterbalance the cosmic mystery of Wisdom. She said that the other parts of the intervention allow for the mystery, but some people need something more concrete to take with them to apply to decision-making. Some on the team thought that a checklist-type pamphlet would undermine what they learned about Wisdom in the scriptures, namely that it is God's to give, not ours to unlock with a magical acronym. But the woman held her ground and reminded the group of the crippling anxiety that comes from paralysis in the decision-making process. She claimed that difficult decisions can leave people in a mental space where they need something more concrete to, if nothing else, remind them how to engage the Wisdom-seeking process. She reiterated that an acronym on a pamphlet did not have to simplify the process into a bad theology but could help guide people into the mystery of the process. Eventually, she won the team over to the idea.⁴

The pamphlet was also the hardest part to create. It went through several revisions via email communications within the team. Some versions were deemed too complicated

3. See Appendix E.

4. Surprising everyone, the D.E.C.I.D.E. pamphlet became a favorite and especially formative piece of the intervention, not only for the intervention team but also the outside evaluators.

to commit to memory. Others were redundant. The shortest one was thought to amputate the cosmic nature of Wisdom. Eventually, the following acronym was implemented:

D = Define who you are, who God is, and the problem giving you pause.

E = Evaluate why the decision is giving you pause.

C = Compare the options to Christ.

I = Imitate and Incarnate Christ in the remaining choices.

D = Dig for Wisdom.

E = Enter into and examine your choice.

The acronym was put on a visually pleasing tri-fold pamphlet with sub-points for consideration under each letter.⁵ The pamphlet was intended for use for any decision the church member is making at the individual level, though no distinctions were anticipated for communal decision-making, but also to guide the Wisdom Feast conversations.

Intervention Plan Conclusion

The team chose these four interventions to address the decision-making problem at Courtyard. The interventions invite other church members into Wisdom according to the principles the team had come to understand through Scriptures. The interventions they discerned and designed allow for imitative and incarnating alignment to Christ. They respect God's prerogative to conceal Wisdom, as God chooses to reveal Wisdom to those who seek it in fear of the Lord. The Wisdom Feast especially draws the Body toward the head, where all things are held together, replacing order over chaos. The intervention equips the church with a theological foundation of Wisdom Christology and space to discuss those principles. The retreat places the church in God's creation, where Wisdom

5. See Appendix E.

is reconciling and revealing, and gives them tools to record what they see. Finally, the intervention gives those in a decision crisis—a state that the church poll said sometimes left church members paralyzed or making foolish decisions—a step-by-step resource to follow to get them going on the Wisdom-seeking process. With the intervention steps proceeding in order, from the sermon series to the Wisdom Feasts, and then the silent retreat with the pamphlet used as a guide throughout, the team was confident that the gap between decision-making and Wisdom Christology at Courtyard would be closed, resulting in healthier *phronesis* with *shalom* and a Christ-like witness to the world.

Triangulation Evaluation

Insider Angle

I emailed each member of the intervention team an evaluation questionnaire in August 2020 once the intervention plan was composed.⁶ This was the insider angle of the triangulation. All five participants returned the evaluation. The first question asked, “Do you believe this Plan of Action has the ability to help Courtyard Church of Christ members incorporate Wisdom Christology into their *phronesis*? Why, or why not? What changes do you anticipate seeing within the congregation should the Plan of Action be incorporated?” All five members affirmed their belief that the plan would be efficacious; however, they were careful to emphasize that the measure of effectiveness was dependent upon the measure of completion. Incorporating only one or two of the four interventions would be far less effective than if a person incorporated all four. Specifically, if completed, the team expected to see more pause in decision-making, a more

6. See Appendix C.

Christocentric life in general, greater inner peace post-decision, less anxiety, and a more accurate witness of Christ to the world through Christ-centered decisions.

The second question asked, “Consider the Plan of Action for Wisdom Christology in relation to decisions in your life that currently give you pause. Will this plan of action help you make a decision and bring *shalom* within and/or bear witness to Christ in the world? If yes, how?” Two of the five members failed to share a personal or specific decision. Instead, they answered in generalities. This raises concerns about the effectiveness of the intervention because hesitance to be transparent about specific decisions that are giving them pause after months of working together may indicate a corresponding lack of transparency at future three-session Wisdom Feasts. The interventions will be less effective when applied to generalities. The other three members did offer specific examples and explained that the intervention plan helped them have intense confidence in the choice they made, produced greater awareness of competing wisdom forces at play, caused them to be more observant of God’s Wisdom in the world around them, and slowed down the decision-making process from a reactive space to a responsive one with improved communication. The team’s answers were consistent with the work we did in the sessions with little slippage. There was one exception. One member said, “It helped me remember not only ‘what would Jesus do,’ but ‘what did Jesus do.’” This person continually emphasized imitating Christ over partnering with the incarnating Christ in the intervention process, so it was not a surprise to read this. The other evaluations emphasized incarnating principles more than imitative ones.

Finally, the evaluation asked, “Is there anything you feel should have been added to or omitted from the Plan of Action that the team developed?” Only one member of the

group had suggested additions. The others wrote comments like, “This plan has already impacted my life in a huge way, and I think it will impact the church as well,” and “The last-minute addition of the D.E.C.I.D.E. mnemonic was key to its effectiveness. I was skeptical of it at first, but a portable guide brings it all together for max effectiveness.” The member who had suggestions was concerned that the plan did not sufficiently address the reality that more than one decision may be within God’s will. The member agreed the plan was effective and is using it, but in hindsight suggests adding to the sermons or the pamphlet something that teaches “God weaves creation together like a thread and sometimes there aren’t right or wrong answers when there are characteristics of Christ/Wisdom on many different paths.” All five of the members were eager to engage in the implementation of the intervention as it is written with the church and desired to be a part of that implementation process.

Outsider Angle

A second evaluation questionnaire was sent to Brookline Church of Christ in Boston, MA. Originally, a local Church of Christ was asked to contribute an outsider angle because they share Courtyard’s geographic and military context. They returned this invitation with an email response stating they were unable to participate. Only then did I turn to Brookline, where participating in the doctoral process of a female church leader would not be a hindrance, and there was greater confidence that the evaluation would be completed for its own merits without interrupting doctrinal complications.⁷ Brookline does not share Courtyard’s military context, so any struggles in *phronesis* they have would be unrelated to that factor. However, Brookline also has a high turnover rate

7. No reason was given from the original church for the refusal to participate, though their discomfort with our egalitarian leadership had been previously articulated.

because of its proximity to local universities, like MIT. Brookline is also a small, family-style church. It is egalitarian, like Courtyard; therefore, the voice of Wisdom would be welcome through all members in contexts like the Wisdom Feasts. In addition, Candace Nicolds, the pulpit minister at Brookline, was eager to engage the process with the rest of her leadership team. The same three questions were posed to Brookline as to the intervention team. In response to question one, about the projected efficacy of the intervention plan, they responded that they believed the plan, especially the pamphlet, would be helpful in the decision-making process because it is a tool that helps church members “intentionally internalize the principles and process in order to more quickly, perhaps eventually subconsciously, apply them to future decisions.” They noted that the Wisdom dinners add accountability to the process. Brookline concluded that the intervention would work for an individual as well as communal decisions, but its greatest advantage may be that it gifts the congregation “with a common vocabulary and process” so that they can work together toward wisdom in decisions far into the future.

In response to question two, Brookline applied the plan to decisions about forming a congregational vision. They noted that the plan would have to be slightly adapted to fit their context, “but only in how it is presented to the congregation. The theological content would fit well with our overall goals as a leadership body to equip our congregation with the skills needed to navigate life incarnationally.” Brookline did not address the retreat portion of the intervention, but it was alluded to in their appreciation of the plan's call to “slow down to evaluate why certain decisions give us pause and then consider what of each option is incarnational.” A final aspect of the plan that Brookline found beneficial to their communal decision-making process was the “communal, small-

group, aspect of the ‘dig for wisdom’ step [on the pamphlet] in order to help foster a sense of community and as a reminder that we are not Christians in isolation but are a part of community as God’s design.”

Finally, Brookline was asked if there is anything that they would add to or take out of the intervention plan. They thought that a church should embark upon this plan with realistic expectations. Specifically, Wisdom Christology for *phronesis* requires “prolonged teaching on this topic, or revisiting the topic regularly. This would help make it a part of the identity of the congregation, especially as the makeup of the congregation changes over time.” This was a significant point considering Brookline and Courtyard share a culture of congregational transience.

Researcher Angle

My evaluation of the intervention comprised the third angle in the triangulation. I recorded my observations and conclusions in the field notes after each session, and I completed the same evaluation as the insider and outsider angles.

Also, I coded keywords and themes that recurred in the intervention process. Qualitative coding is essential to “determine main themes that emerge from the categories.”⁸ These recurrences reveal not only themes but slippages and silences between the theological construct and resulting intervention. I used concept mapping to chart the thematic recurrences.⁹ First, as mentioned in chapter three, I created a list of recurring themes and words from the first five sessions, like “creation,” “imitate,” and “*shalom*.” Then I asked the field note-taker in session six to tally each time those words

8. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 203.

9. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 206.

were used during the session. I then charted the results of her tallies in a numerical concept map. Outside of “Wisdom” and “Christ,” the top recurrences were “creation” and the idea of availability or Wisdom’s pervasiveness in words like “seek and find,” “cosmic,” “omnipresent,” and “available.” “*Shalom*” had more than a dozen recurrences, counted separately from “order,” while “chaos” and “order” were mentioned a dozen times each. “Reveal” recurred often, as well as “fear of the Lord.” The words “imitate” and “incarnate” were used six times each that session; “friend” (as in Wisdom is a friend to us), “life,” “feast” (or other food/drink words to symbolize Wisdom), and “beauty” tied for five times each.

I did not anticipate the themes of chaos and order to recur as often as they did, especially in how the team connected these themes to destruction and life, respectively. Fear of the Lord recurred more than I anticipated, as did allusions to food and feasting, and beauty. Conversely, distinctions between imitating and incarnating Wisdom did not recur as often as I anticipated; however, the theme was common and reflected in other ways, like through creation (an aspect of incarnational Wisdom) and teaching (an aspect of imitative Wisdom). The same concept coding was applied to the three exit questionnaires to reveal recurrences, silences, and slippages.

In response to the first question on the exit questionnaire, “Do you believe this Plan of Action has the ability to help Courtyard Church of Christ members incorporate Wisdom Christology into their phronesis?”, I expressed an emphatic “yes.” The team formulated a plan that addresses multiple learning styles and seeks wisdom in the written, spoken, and living Word of God. I applied the plan of action to a specific decision, “What sermon series should the church begin next?” The decision took longer to make using the

intervention plan. I took the time to go through each letter of the D.E.C.I.D.E. mnemonic, and I was forced to consult the input of more people. Yet, I can attest now, more than a year later, that the church's exploration through the book of Acts was the most formative sermon series we have done in six years. The last question on the exit questionnaire asks if there is anything I would change about the intervention. Currently, there is not, but I would suggest the intervention team regroup after the plan runs its course with the congregation to assess its weaknesses and strengths and make any needed adjustments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after many hours exploring the theological foundations of Wisdom Christology, a competent team formulated a four-part intervention to help close the gap between Courtyard Church of Christ's decision-making process and God's Wisdom in Christ. The plan includes a sermon series to give the congregation a common vocabulary and understanding of Wisdom in the Bible, Wisdom Feasts to reveal Christ's Wisdom in the community of faith, silent retreats to observe Wisdom in creation, and a portable pamphlet with a decision-making mnemonic device to help the individuals of the church apply the principles of Wisdom Christology to their daily decisions that give them pause. I, the insider team, and the outside evaluation from Brookline Church of Christ affirmed the projected efficacy of the intervention because it was proven helpful when applied to our own decisions. However, some modifications regarding longevity and adaptation for unique decisions may need to be made as it is implemented at the congregational scale.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

So far, this paper has identified a decision-making problem in Courtyard Church of Christ, and Wisdom Christology has been proposed as a solution. Chapter 2 presented a Wisdom Christology drawn from the Old and New Testaments along with the apocryphal texts. Chapter 3 explained how this Christology connects to Courtyard's problem and how it was presented to a participatory action team within the church that was tasked with creating an intervention. Chapter four outlined the team's four-part intervention that attempts to align the church's decision-making processes with Wisdom Christology. In this chapter, I will offer my conclusions about the project from the triangulated data presented and discuss the project's implications for me and for the church.

Interpretations

Applicability

It is my conclusion that the intervention will have applicability not only to the identified problem at Courtyard Church of Christ but to other churches with a similar problem. Applicability will depend upon several factors, however. First, participants must be convinced of the need for such an intervention. Outcomes will be hindered if the participants enter the intervention process by coercion or obligation instead of from a place of genuine urgency in decision-making. Urgency can be bolstered by church leaders collecting their own data about decision-making in their churches before

embarking on the intervention process. Church leaders should present these results to their congregations so they can see a qualitative gap between decisions and desired *shalom*. The means of data collection Courtyard used have applicability to other churches. Polls can be taken, role plays enacted with fictional decisions, and observation journals kept so that reliable (and anonymous) results can be presented to the churches.

Second, the project's applicability is expanded if the members of the intervention team utilize the four-parts of the intervention themselves and are willing to share their success testimonies with the church. Evidence of how the intervention worked in their lives will create an environment of trustworthiness around the project.

Third, the breadth of applicability of this intervention is dependent upon evaluation and modification of it in relation to each church's unique membership. The intervention should not be seen as a static, completed system but rather as a set of dynamic means of grace that can be adapted to meet the needs and decisions of the members who use it. For example, the sermon series may need to be done in cohort with Sunday school classes to answer questions for increased comprehension. Wisdom dinner locations may need to shift from homes to church spaces to accommodate children, or they may need to be extended from three meals to five to sufficiently address a particular group's struggle with a decision. Upon implementation, it may be discerned that a letter in the mnemonic needs to be changed to something more helpful for that context. The intervention's success across broad demographics is dependent upon the project's details being held loosely so that the intended effect—*shalom* through Wisdom—can be applied to the people, even if this means regular evaluation and modification.

Despite modifications that may need to be made in the intervention's details, the project's applicability to other churches has the principle of proximal similarity.¹ Though not all churches that seek to apply the intervention have a strong military or international membership, they do share a common mission: to live in the model and being of Christ. Decisions are made by members in all churches, regardless of context, and Christ is the center of the church. This we have in common. In addition to making decisions, the theology that undergirds the intervention is universally applicable to Christians. Therefore, the project has a strong potential of transference for church applicability.

Credibility

The intervention's credibility is verified in several ways. For one, it has reflective confirmation.² The intervention team members confirmed the conclusions of the data when the conclusions were presented to them in the sessions. They saw themselves in the poll results and observation journal notes, even though both means of collection was anonymous. Upon reflection, the intervention members confirmed an ongoing struggle with decision-making, as proposed in the project's problem statement.

There is also credibility from the triangulation. As explained in chapter 4, the intervention was assessed for similarities and slippages through triangulation. The triangulated data was consistent across the insider, outsider, and researcher feedback, thus giving credibility to the data. I have spoken about the project at length with church members and leaders in other congregations who suspect they have a similar problem, and they believe that a Wisdom intervention identical or similar to the one composed at

1. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 217.

2. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 221.

Courtyard would address their decision-making problems as well.³ These outsider perspectives give the project applicability and credibility.⁴

Reflexivity

Reflexivity considers the principal researcher's relationship to the project.⁵ It is assumed that my role and presence influenced the final project. After all, my previous work in Wisdom Christology and the data collection around the hypothesized problem with *phronesis* at Courtyard were in place before the first session with the intervention team. The team was handed this theological framework and hypothesis from which to start its work; as such, the result is different than if the team began discerning an unidentified problem within Courtyard together. In addition, as the principal researcher, I chose the areas of study in the sessions, and my opinions were likely weighted more heavily than others because I was considered the expert in the room. This assumption, even if unconscious, derives from my position as the lead minister of the congregation and my years of biblical studies education. There were also times when I corrected conclusions that I thought fell outside of the biblical arc of Wisdom Christology or redirected the conversation to explore areas of Wisdom that I believed could be particularly meaningful for the intervention, like the distinction between imitating Christ and Christ's incarnation among us. Even the choice to highlight Col 1:15–20 over 2 Cor 1:18–2:16 as the primary text informed the outcome.

3. For example, someone asked me about this project at a North Carolina preachers group of which I am a part. The subsequent conversation and questions from the other ministers in the group lasted most of our meeting, and they asked me to present the project's intervention from beginning to end at our next meeting because they saw applicability for their congregations. That presentation led to requests for notes, slides, and phone conversations about applicability in their contexts, which is now underway.

4. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 223.

5. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 224.

To mitigate this, I offered significant time for conversation and reiterated to the team that in this context I was an equal partner in the process. My work with Wisdom Christology in graduate school and experience as a spiritual director (where Christians seek Christ as they wrestle with decisions) gave credibility to my opinions, even as they weighed heavier in the intervention process than those of the rest of the team.

Furthermore, I assigned session notetaking to an unbiased observer. This removed some of my preconceived notions from the triangulation. I rigorously examined the session notes for slippages and areas of disconnect and sought to correct those by listening more deeply and asking follow-up questions in the subsequent sessions.

There were areas in which I was unable to overcome my influence on the project. For instance, I had a desire for the project to succeed and biases toward certain aspects of Wisdom Christology that, though acknowledged, likely influenced outcomes. Even so, these biases did not interfere with the result of the project to any greater extent than any other Doctor of Ministry Project intervention that uses Participatory Action Research.

Significance and Implications

Sustainability

The intent of this intervention was to incorporate Wisdom Christology as an aid in the *phronesis* of Courtyard Church members. However, this goal is only as sustainable as its implementation. Church leadership will need to commit to guiding the congregation through all four parts of the intervention, assessing where changes need to be made, modifying the intervention, and resiliently moving forward. The intervention is dependent upon a competent preacher to preach the Wisdom series, the hospitality of members opening their homes to dinners, and the availability of a retreat center for the

silent retreats. Sustainability is also dependent upon the congregation finding worth in the process which can be enhanced by the intervention team's testimonies and enthusiasm.

Personal Significance

I gained meaningful insights about myself through this intervention process. I learned early in the process the importance of allowing the congregation's problem to be defined from the data collection instead of assuming I knew the problem, and therefore its source and solutions. My instinct is to move systems along quickly and efficiently, but the value in waiting for the system's full narrative to emerge was undeniable and beneficially slowed down my reform efforts in other areas of congregational ministry as well. The intervention process forced me to set assumptions aside and to observe the reality of what was going on within the body. Then, through diagramming recurrences from the observation log and poll results, I was able to discern the true problem and its complex origins. The same principle applied to the intervention sessions. I withheld my instincts and solutions and surrendered them to the wisdom of the group. In the end, this resulted in an intervention that was more creative and varied—and hopefully more effective—than I would have composed on my own.

In addition, relationships among the team were strengthened, and the six of us have a language derived from the sessions that the rest of the congregation does not. This taught me the value, as a minister, of creating space for small groups to bond in specialized areas. The process of listening, learning, compromising, and creating toward a specific goal (regardless of the topic) birthed depth in relationships that cannot be mimicked in other ways typical in congregational environments, like Sunday morning classes and small groups that do not have a Participatory Action Research framework.

Ecclesial Significance

Courtyard is a diverse congregation, with frequent turnover due to the international community and the military, and it can be a challenge to foster connectivity among members. Connectivity, or reconciliation—to use the theological term—was an unexpected consequence of the project. The intervention team resonated with the metaphor of Wisdom as a thread that God is weaving through all of creation, including themselves. The intervention plan responded to this metaphor by inviting the congregation to gather around tables to seek Wisdom for problems in their daily lives. This results in the church members being woven together through Wisdom Christology and the process of seeking it in a way that a potluck or Sunday service cannot attain. Any process that invites the church to gather around Christ has transformational significance, and this project invites them to do that. As such, the intervention has the potential not only solve the problem of chaos in decision-making but also to promote reconciliation among members.

More than that, the church can be reconciled to God as their decisions begin to align closer to God's will for their lives. This alignment should have the same results as in the biblical accounts when God's people were aligned to Wisdom's call: *shalom*; life; beauty; order over chaos internal and externally; and the witness of Christ in the world. This transformational effect will produce testimonies that increase faith and motivate the church to continue using the intervention plan's process for living with Wisdom.

Finally, the proposed intervention will heighten Wisdom as a primary virtue of God among Courtyard's members. Depending upon their religious heritage, some Courtyard members focus on Christ as Savior from sin, the liberator from oppression, a

teacher of right doctrine, or a friend to walk with them along the way. None of those need to be neglected, but the intervention will unite the body in a vision of Christ as Wisdom, which has the potential for effects beyond decision-making. To list them now would be speculative, but one can imagine a church that in turn embraces a theology where scripture, reason, church history, and personal experience are honored in discipleship since Wisdom is revealed in all of those areas.⁶ A fourfold method for theological reflection informs not only decisions that give pause in daily life—both individually and corporately—but also the formation of doctrine and the mission of the church. This leads a church to look up as much as it looks down into the Bible, and that can foster a community where more perfect love in relationships is prioritized over dogma.

Questions for Further Research

Can a characteristic of Christ as broad as Wisdom be sufficiently captured in a four-part intervention and thus be transformational for a local church? It is the belief of the team that the intervention is expansive enough to sufficiently address the identified problem of decision-making within the church; however, much of Wisdom Christology remains unexplored and beyond the scope of this project. Those areas warrant further research and implementation.

In addition, differentiation could be made between the effect of Wisdom Christology on personal decisions versus communal ones. It would be worthwhile to chart these effects through qualitative data collection, like interviews and polls, after the

6. These, of course, are the four parts of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, a means for making theological decisions that prioritizes scripture, but also seeks God where the Spirit is revealing in Christians past and present. *Glossary: Wesleyan quadrilateral, the*. The United Methodist Church. (2015, May 26). Retrieved October 18, 2021, from <https://www.umc.org/en/content/glossary-wesleyan-quadrilateral-the>.

intervention plan outlined is put into practice. Were the effects the same or different for individual and congregational decisions? If there are marked differences, a revision to the plan could be made to address the distinction because, as the plan reads now, the intent is for the intervention to aid in both categories of decision-making.⁷

Finally, I have struggled since I began work in this field in seminary with the choice to pursue Wisdom Christologically instead of pneumatologically. Surely Wisdom is sourced in both Christ and the Spirit; yet a project like this requires a narrower focus, and the arc of Wisdom Christology in the biblical narrative appealed to me with greater force. That is not to say that passages that place Wisdom in the Spirit are not in the narrative. God gifts people with the Spirit of wisdom to build the tabernacle (Exod 28). Joshua is filled with “the spirit of wisdom” as Moses’s successor (Deut 34:9). Paul prays for the churches to receive “the Spirit of wisdom” (Eph 1:17). The way Wisdom moves and weaves throughout the OT is very much attuned with the behavior of the third person of the Trinity. Nevertheless, the references in this paper to Christ as Wisdom, both prophetically and in Jesus, are legitimate. The choice to explore Christology over pneumatology was not an attempt to falsely divide the Trinity, but neither did I want to merge the two together in a way that would evanesce their distinct roles.

There are at least two portions of Scripture where the cooperative Wisdom work of Christ and the Spirit are mentioned. The first is Isa 11:2 where the seven-fold spirit is prophesied to fall upon the Messiah. Part of this anointing is “the Spirit of wisdom and understanding.” Therefore, the Spirit of wisdom is upon Christ, who is our Wisdom.

7. It is noteworthy that this question arose several times with the intervention team, and they repeatedly did not see how the process would differ between individual and corporate decisions.

Furthermore, Paul acknowledges the role of Wisdom in both Christ and the Spirit with the Corinthian church when he tells them that though they seek wisdom, “the world through its wisdom did not know God.” So, he preaches Christ to them. He declares “Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1Cor 1:21–24). This is an explicit reference to Christ as God’s Wisdom. But Paul goes on in ch. 2 to tell the church that the hidden wisdom of God is revealed to them in the Spirit as the Spirit moves from the heart of God to the people of the church (1:10–12). In this case, Paul appears to place Wisdom in Christ and the Spirit interchangeably.

Therefore, a reasonable follow-up question to this project is, “Is Wisdom’s greatest effect for decision-making found in Christ or the Spirit?” I made the decision to explore Wisdom through Christ. Nouwen and others, as mentioned in chapter one, explore the role of the Spirit. Far less has been explored Christocentrically, and this approach built upon my previous work. As mentioned in chapter one, an emphasis on Christ seems more tangible for the average Christian who is struggling to find God in the chaos of uncertainty. But a similar project could be done with a pneumatological lens that would perhaps produce a different, yet equally worthwhile, intervention.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to formulate an intervention plan for Courtyard’s problem with decision-making that would offer clarity, produce *shalom* in those decisions, and bear witness to Christ in the world. Chapter 2 suggests a theological foundation for Wisdom Christology as the solution to this problem. Wisdom’s purpose, character, use, and ultimate identity in Christ within the church were presented. This theological foundation was connected to Courtyard’s decision-making problem in

chapters three and four, where the process of producing a four-part intervention plan through a participatory action team was described. Part one of the intervention teaches the church the theological foundation of Wisdom in Christ through a twelve-part sermon series from twelve wisdom texts. Part two invites the church to gather in small groups around tables to discuss decisions they are facing. A mnemonic pamphlet was created to guide this process, both at Wisdom feasts and for decisions made independently. Finally, the plan welcomes the church into a silent retreat where they seek Wisdom in silence and creation.

In retrospect, I would have done a couple of things differently. I was hesitant to include anyone on the intervention team who did not enthusiastically want to be a part of it because I assumed lack of enthusiasm could lead to interrupted attendance or marginal engagement. The consequence of this choice was that no one from Courtyard's international community was on the team. They were asked to be, but showed little interest, so I did not force the matter. If I were to do it again, I would meet with a couple of our international members to talk to them about the project, address their hesitancy, and see if enthusiasm could be stoked because their voice—currently a quarter of the congregation—is starkly missing from the intervention.

Second, I would have asked the intervention team to regularly share personal decisions that are giving them pause and apply what we learned about Wisdom so far to those choices. I did this during one session but doing this more often might have increased trust so that the members would be more vulnerable and forthcoming about specific choices they are facing. Generalities plagued the process; though, the team included congregational wisdom as a major part of the intervention because they

recognize its value. Trust is the missing piece in any context between recognizing congregational wisdom as helpful for making personal decisions and sharing the details of those decisions in community. Having the team share personal decisions more often could be a means to enhance this trust.

The intervention team intends to implement this plan in 2022, and we pray that it will meet the problem and produce its intended outcome, to improve *phronesis* at Courtyard Church of Christ so that reconciliation is tangible among them and evident to the world.

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APPENDIX A
IRB Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885



October 16, 2019

Tiffany Dahlman
Department of Theology
Abilene Christian University

Dear Tiffany,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "A Plan of Action to Incorporate Wisdom Christology into the Phronesis of Courtyard Church of Christ",

(IRB#19-103) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects as:

- Non-research, and
- Non-human research

Based on:

The activity does not involve a systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge. [45 CFR 46.102(d)]

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

APPENDIX B
IRB Consent Form

ACU IRB # _____

Date of Approval __/__/__

Appendix 3
Consent Form

Introduction: A Plan to Incorporate Christological Wisdom into the *Phronesis* of Courtyard Church of Christ

You may be eligible to take part in a project that creates a plan to incorporate Wisdom Christology into the decision-making process of the members who worship at Courtyard Church of Christ. This form provides important information about that study, including the risks and benefits to you, the potential participant. Please read this form carefully, and ask any questions that you may have regarding the procedures, your involvement, and any risks or benefits you may experience. You may also wish to discuss your participation with other people, such as your family doctor or a family member.

PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION: This project is being conducted to better understand the decision-making process of church members so that a decision-making plan can be created to help them make decisions that lead to peace, reconciliation, and Christian witness in the broader community. The project will examine both the biblical witness of Wisdom Christology and Courtyard Church of Christ's context. A plan of action will then be created from this combined information.

If selected for participation, you will be asked to attend eight sessions with the intervention team over the course of three months. Each session is expected to take ninety minutes, but may last two hours. During the course of these sessions, you will be asked to participate in the following procedures: to discuss your own decision-making process, to study Wisdom Christology in the bible, to work with the team to create a plan of action for wise decision-making for church members, and to evaluate the plan of action in a one page exit report. No technology or technical skill is required.

RISKS & BENEFITS: There are risks to taking part in this project. Below is a list of the foreseeable risks, including the seriousness of those risks and how likely they are to occur:

There is unlikely physical risk. Social risk includes sharing personal information in the confines of a confidential group about decisions you make in your life and how those decisions are made. There is minimal risk that someone in the intervention team would violate the confidentiality agreement. Money is not involved in the study, so there is no financial risk.

There are potential benefits to participating in this study. Such benefits may include participation in the creation of a plan of action to incorporate Wisdom Christology into the life of the church, and therefore aid friends and family within the congregation to make

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decisions that bring peace. The project facilitator cannot guarantee that you will experience any personal benefits from participating in this study.

PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY: Information collected about you will be handled in a confidential manner in accordance with the law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Aside from these required disclosures, your confidentiality will be protected by a confidentiality agreement each member of the group will sign and I, as the project facilitator, will enforce each session

For Focus Groups: The principle investigator cannot guarantee your confidentiality outside of this focus group. While the principle investigator will take measures to protect your identity and responses as outlined above, she cannot guarantee that other focus group participants will do the same. We encourage all participants to maintain the confidentiality of other participants in the group. The principle investigator requests that you do not share any private information obtained during your participation or any other information that may identify the other participants unless you are legally required to do so. Participants are encouraged to consider the limitations of confidentiality in the focus group setting.

Participation is voluntary. At any time, you may decide not to share information or you may discontinue participating in the group altogether.

CONTACTS: If you have questions about the study, the Principal Investigator is Tiffany Dahlman, M.Div., D.Min. Candidate, and she may be contacted at

(910) 728-7129
dahlmananne@yahoo.com
 4624 Storm Cat Lane
 Hope Mills, NC 28348

If you are unable to reach the Principal Investigator or wish to speak to someone other than the Principal Investigator, you may contact Dr. Jeff Childers or Dr. Carson Reed at Abilene Christian University. If you have concerns about this study, believe you may have been injured because of this study, or have general questions about your rights as a project participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Executive Director of, Megan Roth, Ph.D.. Dr. Roth may be reached at

(325) 674-2885
 megan.roth@acu.edu
 320 Hardin Administration Bldg, ACU Box 29103
 Abilene, TX 79699

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

ACU IRB # _____

Date of Approval ___/___/___

Additional Information

This study will take place at Courtyard Church of Christ in a small group of approximately five members. Meticulous notes and videos of each session will be recorded by the principle investigator and kept in a secure location.

Your participation may be terminated early by the investigators under certain conditions, such as if you no longer meet the eligibility criteria, the principle investigator believes it is no longer in your best interest to continue participating, you do not follow the instructions provided, or the study is discontinued. You will be contacted by the investigators and given further instructions in the event that you are withdrawn by the investigators.

Consent Signature Section

Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all of the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You should receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

PLEASE NOTE: ELECTRONIC SIGNATURES ARE NOW CONSIDERED AN ACCEPTABLE FORM OF DOCUMENTATION. PLEASE CONSIDER USING THIS WHEN DEVISING ELECTRONIC CONSENTS.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining
Consent

Signature of Person Obtaining
Consent

Date

APPENDIX C

Note-Taking Protocol

1. Each week record the participants that show up for the session. In Session 1 be sure to note demographic observations such as age, sex, and nationality.
2. Notes will be recorded in a two-column format. The note-taker will record all observations on the left column. The primary investigator will record observations in the right column immediately following the session.
3. While the notes are not expected to be verbatim, record the name of the person speaking, the main idea of what they are saying, and any observations about tone, body language, or non-verbal communication that may be pertinent.
4. At the end of the session, the notes should be turned in to the primary investigator.

Sample Note Template: Field Notes PI Observations

| Field Notes | PI Observations |
|-------------|-----------------|
| | |

APPENDIX D

D.E.C.I.D.E. Pamphlet



A GUIDE FOR MAKING DECISIONS IN CHRIST

D - DEFINE who you are, who God is, and the problem giving you pause.

Remind yourself of these theological truths:

- God is sovereign, and we are God's beloved creation.
- All of creation came through Christ, and wisdom is revealed within it.
- Through Christ, I am reconciled to God in this moment.
- God gives people wisdom when they ask for it to bear witness to Christ to the world.

E - EVALUATE why the decision is giving you pause.

Be honest about your motives and biases, and evaluate how receptive you are to Wisdom's urgent call.

C - COMPARE the options to Christ.

Is Christ obviously not in one of the initial choices? Use James 3:17 to help eliminate choices not 'of heaven.'

I - IMITATE and INCARNATE Christ in remaining choices.

Does a remaining option imitate a command or example of Christ? Intentionally seek wisdom by identifying characteristics of Christ incarnate in the remaining options, like reconciliation, justice, life, or peace.

D - DIG for wisdom

Dig for wisdom in prayer first, waiting and watching for wisdom's thread to be revealed. Observe wisdom in creation; seek wisdom in the living, spoken, and written Word; discern wisdom in truth-telling sources, like social sciences & Christian brothers and sisters. Remember God's story in scripture and your life.

E - ENTER INTO & EXAMINE a choice.

Remember Christ may be found in more than one option. Examine the fruit of Christ's life in your choice in the following weeks.

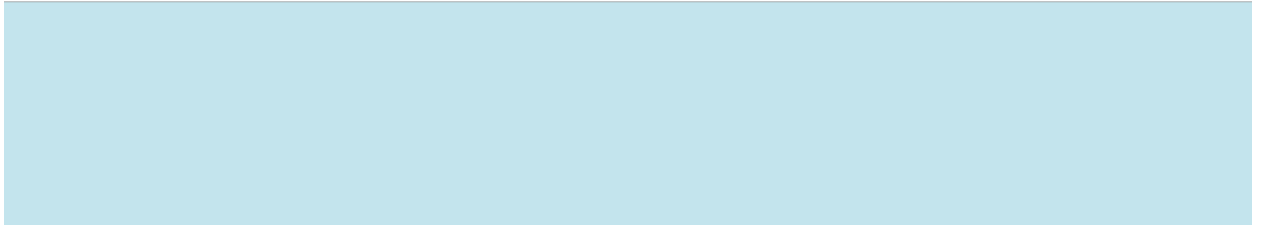
D . E . C . I . D . E .

D. = Define **E.** = Evaluate **C.** = Compare **I.** = Imitate & Incarnate **D.** = Dig **E.** = Examine


APPENDIX E

Insider/Outsider/Principal Researcher Evaluation Exit Questionnaire

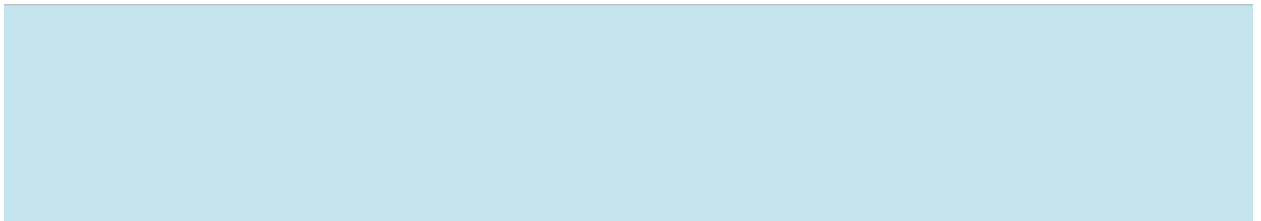
1. Do you believe this Plan of Action can help Courtyard Church of Christ members incorporate Wisdom Christology into their *phronesis*? Why, or why not? What changes do you anticipate seeing within the congregation should this Plan of Action be incorporated?



2. Consider the Plan of Action for Wisdom Christology in relation to decisions in your life that currently give you pause. Will this plan of action help you make a decision and bring *shalom* within and or bear witness to Christ to the world? If yes, how? Please explain two to four concrete ways you will utilize this project in your *phronesis*.



3. Is there anything you feel should have been added to or omitted from the Plan of Action the group developed? Can you list any helpful changes to meet the stated goal?



BRIEF VITA

Tiffany Anne Dahlman was born March 5, 1977, and was raised in the Churches of Christ in St. Louis, MO. She attended York College from 1995–1999 where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English, a Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education, and a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies. She served in missions, mostly in Southeast Asia off and on for several years, while also teaching English at the secondary level and participating in a variety of lay ministries in local churches. She began seminary once the last of her four children started school and graduated from Asbury Theological Seminary on May 26, 2018, with concentrations in Old Testament and Spiritual Formation. Currently, Tiffany serves as lead minister for Courtyard Church of Christ in Fayetteville, NC, is the Program Director for the Bachelor of Science in Christian Service and Formation degree through Abilene Christian University Dallas and teaches adjunct Bible and ministry courses for York College and ACU Dallas.