ANOTHER MEETING?! SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY INSIGHTS FOR BAPTIST DISCERNMENT MEETINGS

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INTRODUCTION

Human flourishing is the process of becoming what God intended humanity to be.[1] This flourishing occurs not in isolation but within the setting of a divinely discerning local community. For Christians, this community takes the form of the gathering of the local church. It is here, at the gathering of the local believers, that the mind of Christ is communally discerned; that the will of God for the flourishing of the local church is revealed. However, at times, these meetings have not promoted flourishing. In light of this disjunction, and utilising social psychology as a resource, I propose that some light might be shed on potential hindrances to the meeting process. Therefore, this article will begin by demonstrating human flourishing means expressing the *imago Dei* to the highest human capacity, best accomplished within the context of a discerning local congregation of Christ followers. Then, the group processes subfield of social psychology will be examined as a means of evaluating a group's ability to make profitable discernments. In particular, several aspects of group processes, such as groupthink, decision-making schemes, and group size, will be assessed for their impact on group flourishing. Finally, before a model of group discernment is proposed, consonance and dissonance between the Baptist theology view of human flourishing and that of group processes are provided.

TOWARDS FLOURISHING

God has created humanity in the *imago Dei*, the image of God (Gen. 1:27). When creating all the heavens and the earth God called everything which was created good (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), but when creating humanity in the *imago Dei*, God called them very good. God uniquely created humanity to express God's very image in which they were made. The *telos*, or purpose, of humanity can then be said to express God's image in their life to their fullest creaturely potential.[2] To advance towards this telos is goodness for humans, as the end is the imaging of a good God, who has created goodness with creation. A flourishing human is, therefore, one who expresses the *imago Dei* within themselves to their fullest creaturely potential.[3] Furthermore, scripture indicates that Jesus is the image of God (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3), making

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[1] Justin Barret and Pamela Ebstyne King, *Thriving with Stone Age Minds* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2021), 7.
[2] Barret and King, *Thriving with Stone Age Minds*, 5.
[3] Barret and King, *Thriving with Stone Age Minds*, 7.

Him the perfect embodiment of living into the human telos.[4] As such, human flourishing is the process of increasingly living into the *imago Dei* through the imitation of Christ.[5] However, this process of human flourishing is not done in a social vacuum. On the contrary, humans are inherently highly social beings.[6] In light of this fact, for humans to flourish to the greatest possible extent, they must do so in a mutually supportive social context.[7]

For Christians, the local church is meant to be the social context in which one thrives.[8] In this environment, individuals act in a reciprocal relationship as they each attempt and support each other to be faithful Christ-imitators. We see this in the first gathered church. Therefore, it can be said that the church is the location where an individual has the most significant potential for flourishing and when the church thrives, individuals thrive. For a church to thrive, the church members must determine how best to imitate Jesus within their lives and social context.

DISCERNMENT IN BAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY AND TRADITION

Baptist ecclesiology suggests that decisions on how to faithfully imitate Christ within a local context should be made through discerning the mind of Christ in congregational governance. Congregational governance refers to the church being constituted and organised by the mutual agreement of its members.[9] This theology of gathered discernment in congregational governance rests on ideas of the primacy of the local church, the movement of the Spirit and the Lordship of Christ.[10]

THE PRIMACY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Baptist tradition asserts that through the Son and the Spirit, God the Father calls believers into a covenanted relationship in the church.[11] In the initiatory act of baptism, the individual believer is joined to the Lord and their local congregation, which is itself the manifestation of the universal church within a given context.[12] In this covenantal joining, through the mutual gathering of Christ's followers for the preaching of the Word, worship, administering of the sacraments, and committed fellowship with one another, the

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[4] Barret and King, *Thriving with Stone Age Minds*, 8.
[5] Barret and King, *Thriving with Stone Age Minds*, 8.
[6] Barret and King, *Thriving with Stone Age Minds*, 8, 14.
[7] Barret and King, *Thriving with Stone Age Minds*, 8.
[8] Barret and King, *Thriving with Stone Age Minds*, 8.
[9] Stephen Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 95.
[10] Stephen Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 101.
[11] Stephen Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 7.
[12] Roger Jasper, "Hans-George Gadamer and the Mind of Christ: How the Baptist Tradition of Discernment Can Serve as a Resource for the Dialogue between Practical Theology and the Social Sciences," *JEBS* 19 (2019): 111-127, 120; Stephen Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 97.

presence of Christ is manifested in a particular place and time.[13] The role of the local church as the manifestation of the universal body of Christ and His presence shows the primacy of the local church within the Baptist tradition.[14]

THE MOVEMENT OF THE SPIRIT

While it is the mind of Christ that is being discerned within the church, this process is pneumatological in that it cannot be done without the work of the Holy Spirit. For it is impossible for the individual, let alone the community, to relate to God without the aid of the Spirit. To attempt to discern God's mind apart from the Spirit of God would be, as Stephen Holmes claims, an act of idolatry.[15] Moreover, it is through the Holy Spirit's work in illuminating the Scriptures, the narrative of God's will and work in creation, that the mind of Christ can be discerned for the local community.[16] Therefore, because each believer interacts with Jesus through the Spirit and in scripture, each member is necessary for the act of discernment.[17]

THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST

Alongside the primacy of the local church, Baptists hold firmly to the authority of Christ over all of creation, including the church (Col.1:15-18).[18] Therefore, faithful obedience in following Christ is not determined through personal preference or educated guesses but through the discernment of the mind of Christ; church governance is not a democracy but a "Christocracy."[19] Church members' meetings, then, are important within Baptist ecclesiology, as they are how the mind of Christ is discerned for the believers of that local community. As such, it holds that the more productive church meetings are for determining the mind of Christ for their local context, the greater the church members' ability to support each other in their goal of imitating Christ, and tacitly, the more individuals will flourish.

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[13] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 98; Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers: The Baptist Way of Being the Church* (Oxford: The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1992), 52; Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 90.
[14] Stephen Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 101.
[15] Stephen Holmes, "Knowing Together the Mind of Christ," in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Hamyes,* eds. Anthony Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies, 2011), 184-185.
[16] Holmes, "Knowing Together the Mind of Christ," 172; Luke Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 32.
[17] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 101.
[18] Jasper, "Hans-George Gadamer and the Mind of Christ," 119.
[19] Nigel Wright, "The Church Members Meeting," *Baptist Basics* (Oxford: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2016), 3.

AN UNHELPFUL REALITY

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. For a denomination containing a vibrant theology of communal discernment, the reality of this process has often left people bored, unsatisfied or even hurt.[20] Interestingly both Holmes and Cameron suggest that this tedious and unfruitful nature of Baptist meetings is due to a failure of the decision-making process rather than an inappropriate attitude of the believer.[21] Traditionally, the majority of Baptist churches have used a structure of meetings based on Robert's Rules. Robert's Rules are a form of parliamentary procedure used to guide the discussion and voting process within a group.[22] It is the business-like following of this procedure, in combination with flawed group processes, that I believe are hindering individuals from speaking the words of the Spirit, resulting in unpleasant, inefficient, and sometimes hurtful church meetings. I propose, with an understanding of group processes, these stumbling blocks to discernment might finally be removed and thereby contribute to more clearly discerning the mind of Christ.

STUDYING GROUP PROCESSES? INSIGHTS FROM SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

One field of study within social psychology that holds particular significance to the subject of group discernment is that of group processes. Group processes refer to how human beings work together to make decisions and carry out various activities.[23] Group flourishing can be defined as the process in which a group carries out the task or lives out the central ideology from which its identity is based around with greater and greater proficiency.[24] With this in mind, the study of group processes should allow for the evaluation of how well a group can make decisions that would lead towards greater proficiency in achieving their goals of task completion or ideological outworking. Therefore, the study of group processes can be an effective tool for evaluating a group's ability to flourish. For my purposes, the "task" of the group is to become more conformed to the image of Christ by discerning the mind of Christ together. Consequently, an understanding of group processes will allow church groups, and their constituting members, to better imitate Christ, and thrive. As such, the study of group processes holds great significance for church and human flourishing. There are many different aspects of group nature and behaviour that sit under the umbrella of group processes. This article will focus on three significant elements: groupthink theory, group size, and decision-making schemes.

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[20] Holmes, "Knowing Together the Mind of Christ," 172; Cameron, "From Decision Making to Discernment," 1-2.
[21] Holmes, "Knowing Together the Mind of Christ," 180-81; Cameron, "From Decision Making to Discernment," 2.
[22] Lawrence Susskind, "Breaking Robert's Rules," *Negotiation Journal* 22 (2006): 351-355, 351-352.
[23] Charles Stangor, "Group Processes," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology* (2017) https://oxfordre.com/psychology/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.001.0001/acrefore-9780190236557-e-255.
[24] Johnson, Scripture and Discernment, 16-23.

GROUPTHINK THEORY

Groupthink theory became popular in the 1970s and 80s through the work of Irving Janis, who defined it as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to appraise alternative courses of action realistically."[25] In other words, when a group holds a high level of cohesion, members do not feel comfortable sharing or reviewing alternative options when making a decision; worried that they might cause conflict and damage the group dynamic, as well as their place within it.

Reviewing several significant catastrophes, including the Pearl Harbor bombings, Janis concluded that a strong desire for group conformity and cohesion might cause groups to wrongly choose a course of action without properly reviewing alternatives.[26] In this way, while unanimous decisions may appear as if they are a display of firmness, they can be forms of conflict avoidance by individuals in a group.[27]

As part of his initial study of groupthink in major catastrophes, Janis proposed several antecedent conditions and observable symptoms of groupthink tendencies.[28] These possible conditions that could lead to groupthink tendencies were broken down into three main categories: strong cohesion in a group (often labelled A), organisational structural faults (B1), and situational factors (B2).[29] Observable symptoms can be broken down into symptoms of groupthink (C) and symptoms of defective decision-making (D).[30]

Many case studies and social experiments have been done to test the validity of Janis' 24 variables (A-D), with mixed results.[31] Commonly, case studies that evaluated historical disasters found strong evidence for groupthink tendencies among members of groups in authority positions. All experiments that attempted to simulate groupthink behaviours in groups showed uncertain results, with most attempts mainly investigating the validity of variables A (group cohesion), B1-2 (lack of impartial leadership) and B1-3 (group insulation).[32] In each of these experiments, lack of impartial leadership was shown to be the most significant contributing factor in the appearance of groupthink tendencies.[33] Nevertheless, despite limited empirical data, many social psychologists have supported and applied groupthink to diverse applications.[34]

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[25] Irving, L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), 8; James D. Rose, "Diverse Perspectives on the Groupthink Theory – a Literary Review," *ELJ* 4 (2011): 37-57, 37.

[26] Janis, *Groupthink*, 72-97.

[27] Rose, "Diverse Perspectives on the Groupthink Theory," 39.

[28] Golkar Hassan, "Groupthink Principles and Fundamentals in Organizations," *IJCRB* 5 (2013): 225-240, 228.

[29] Rose, "Diverse Perspectives on the Groupthink Theory," 38.

[30] Rose, "Diverse Perspectives on the Groupthink Theory," 38-39.

[31] Rose, "Diverse Perspectives on the Groupthink Theory," 40-45.

[32] Rose, "Diverse Perspectives on the Groupthink Theory," 44.

[33] Rose, "Diverse Perspectives on the Groupthink Theory," 44.

[34] Groupthink have been studied in juries, hockey teams, organizational boards, academia and Chinese culture. Rose, "Diverse Perspectives on the Groupthink Theory," 38-39; Jeffrey Coles, Naveen Daniel and Lalitha Naveen, "Board Groupthink," (2014): 1-33.

While groupthink can lead to defective decision-making, scholars point out that it is not always negative. Due to the strong group cohesion that pressures unanimity, the decision can be made and implemented in a relatively shorter period than if proper diligence was given to possible alternatives.

All the same, even though there are times when groupthink tendencies can be beneficial, groupthink is overall a hindrance to group flourishing. This is because groupthink can potentially cause groups to make defective decisions, which could have severe negative impacts on group health and productivity. Janis helpfully proposed several techniques for mitigating factors that cause groupthink. These techniques are:

- Creating an atmosphere of creating and accepting criticism, in which each member is a critical evaluator.

- Having leaders refrain from sharing their personal preferences, at least in the initial stages of discussions.

- Creating several smaller groups with separate leaders to work in parallel.

- Creating subgroups with the responsibility of reflecting on the feasibility of the proposal.

- Having each group member discuss the proposal with trusted persons outside the group/decision-making process.

- Having outside experts regularly offer challenges to the views of the core group members.

- Appointing a devil's advocate during each meeting.

- Reconsidering all decisions at a second meeting before conclusions are made.[35]

By following these guidelines in group decision-making, groups are more likely to efficiently and accurately make decisions that will lead to an increased proficiency in accomplishing their goal, task or ideological out-workings.

SOCIAL DECISION SCHEME THEORY

Another important aspect of group processes is assessing the outcome of decision-making and the method of reaching a consensus.[36] One theory that is used to evaluate group decision-making is the social decision scheme theory (SDS). Social decision scheme theory assumes that group interaction is a combinatorial process through which an individual's preferences are combined to reach a consensus on a group decision.[37] In this theory, different process options for the aggregation of preferences are called decision schemes.[38]

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[35] Rose, "Diverse Perspectives on the Groupthink Theory," 39.
[36] Charles, "Group Processes," Decision Schemes.
[37] R. Scott Tindale, Tatsuya Kameda and Verlin Hinsz, "Group Decision Making," in *The Sage Handbook of Social Psychology*, eds. Michael Hogg and Joel Cooper (London: SAGE Publications, 2003) 381-406, 387.
[38] Tindale, Kameda and Hinsz, "Group Decision Making," 387.

There are many kinds of decision-making schemes, including: majority/plurality wins, social judgement scheme (SJS), unanimity, random selection, and random dictatorship.[39]

The majority/plurality scheme, for example, occurs when a decision is made when an option receives over 50% of the group's votes.[40] This decision scheme is the most common and was even the chosen method described in Charles Stovel's *Hints on the Regulation of Christian Churches* published in 1835.[41] The majority/plurality scheme works best in judgement tasks, where one option is to be chosen out of a list in which all can be considered equally correct.[42]

Other social decision schemes, while not as popular as the majority schemes, contain some benefits as well.[43] Jordan Davis created the social judgement scheme (SJS) in 1996 to work in more judgmental situations rather than where one of several options must be chosen.[44] In this model, each individual's vote is given a weighting, with exponentially greater weighting given to those closest to the most common preference.[45] In the unanimity scheme, all individuals must agree on the same preference for the decision to be made.[46] Similarly to the majority/plurality scheme, this method suits judgmental tasks with equally correct choices.[47] In the random selection scheme, a decision is made by randomly choosing one preference out of all possible preferences.[48] This decision scheme suits situations in which a difficult decision is to be made, and there are no preferences that are determined to be more correct than the others.[49] Finally, in the random dictator scheme, one member is randomly selected from the group to make a decision based on all voiced preferences.[50]

Each one of these decision schemes suits a particular context and task, yet the most commonly occurring scheme remains the majority/plurality scheme. Research supports this scheme being chosen in most contexts, as it has been shown to be the most likely to produce a beneficial result.[51] However, the majority wins scheme is not without its flaws. As mentioned above, this scheme works better when a group only needs to choose between a list of options, where each option is equally right, rather than a point along a continuum. The majority scheme and other models, such as the SJS, can also be flawed because they

[39] Charles, "Group Processes," Decision Schemes; Stéphane Airiau et al., "Positional Social Decision Schemes: Fair and Efficient Portioning," (2018): 1-2.

[40] Charles. "Group Processes," Decision Schemes.

[41] Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 100.

[42] Charles. "Group Processes," Decision Schemes.

[43] Charles. "Group Processes," Decision Schemes.

[44] Garold Stasser and Beth Dietz-Uhler, "Collective Choice, Judgment, and Problem Solving," in *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes*, eds. Michael Hogg and R. Scott Tindale (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 50.

[45] Michael Hogg, "Social Categorization, Depersonalization, and Group Behavior," in *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes*, eds. Michael Hogg and R. Scott Tindale (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 59

[46] Charles. "Group Processes," Decision Schemes.

[47] Charles. "Group Processes," Decision Schemes.

[48] Charles. "Group Processes," Decision Schemes.

[49] Charles. "Group Processes," Decision Schemes.

[50] Airiau et al., "Positional Social Decision Schemes: Fair and Efficient Portioning," 1-2.

[51] R. S. Tindale and J. R. Winget, "Learning while Deciding in Groups," in *Learning in Organizational Context*, eds. L. Argote and J. M. Levine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-55, 21.

centre on social sharedness and polarisation.[52] Social sharedness refers to the common preferences among individuals in a group. The greater the social sharedness among a group towards a particular preference, the more likely that group is to share and come to a consensus in favour of said preference.[53] Studies also indicate that groups implementing these schemes tend to choose the preference that garners the most significant initial support.[54] Thus, the group's final decision can be heavily influenced and determined at the early stages of the decision-making process and by the dominant culture (social sharedness) of the group.[55] Polarisation occurs as a separation forms between those who share the dominant preference and those who do not.[56] In light of the dangers of groupthink, the majority wins decision scheme has a high potential for bias and poor decision outcomes. For Baptist Churches in Aotearoa, these dangers should be considered carefully, especially given how Pākehā continue to be the dominant culture in the majority of Baptist churches.

Considering that group fruitfulness depends heavily on the ability to make decisions, the significance of SDS for human flourishing becomes apparent. If a group can choose a scheme that is well suited for the conclusion they have to make, they will be better able to make more accurate and beneficial choices swiftly.

GROUP SIZE AND DECISION MAKING

Another factor that is important for group processes is group size. Within discussions of group processes and group size, several vital relationships stand out, such as the impact of group size on decision accuracy and conformity.

One such view on the relationship between group size and group process quality (called the "wisdom of the crowds") holds that the larger a group is, the greater its decision-making accuracy.[57] This view is based on the idea that incorrect information gathered and judgement errors by individuals in the decision-making process will be cancelled out in the process of forming a consensus.[58] Using the majority/plurality decision scheme, this wisdom of the crowds would mean that the larger the group size, the higher potential accuracy a group can achieve, as the amount of information gathered increases the chance of false information being cancelled out.[59] However, evidence shows that this is not always the case. Some studies

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[52] R. Scott Tindale et al., "Shared Cognition in Small Groups," in *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Proesses*, eds. Michael Hogg and R. Scott Tindale (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 9.; R. Scott Tindale et al., "Procedural Mechanisms and Jury Behaviour," in *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes*, eds. Michael Hogg and R. Scott Tindale (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 578.
[53] Tindale, Meisenhelder, Dykema-Engblade and Hogg, "Shared Cognition in Small Groups," 9.
[54] Tindale and Winget "Learning while Deciding in Groups," 21-23.
[55] Tindale and Winget "Learning while Deciding in Groups," 21-22.; Norbert Kerr and R. Scott Tindale, "Group Performance and Decision Making," *Annu. Rev. Psychol* 55 (2004): 623-655, 634.
[56] Tindale, Meisenhelder, Dykema-Engblade and Hogg, "Shared Cognition in Small Groups," 9-10.
[57] Albert Kao and Iain Couzin, "Decision Accuracy in Complex Environments is Often Maximized by Small Group Sizes," *Proc. R. Soc.* 281 (2014): 1-8, 1.
[58] Kao and Couzin, "Decision Accuracy in Complex Environments is Often Maximized by Small Group Sizes," 1.
[59] Kao and Couzin, "Decision Accuracy in Complex Environments is Often Maximized by Small Group Sizes," 1-2.

have shown that small or intermediate-sized groups can outperform their larger counterparts due to their ability to be removed from the high quantity of random information provided in bigger groups.[60] By the nature of their lower numbers, small or intermediate-sized groups have the ability to pool knowledge, but without the restraints of larger group information correlation.[61] Some scholars suggest that groups of 2-3 people lack the diversity needed for idea formation and processing, while groups above 12-13 are too large for efficient interaction and participation.[62] Thus, the ideal group size is 4-11 people, as it provides sufficient room for diverse voices while avoiding the information overload that can be created in a larger group.

Another factor that is affected by group size is group conformity. Group conformity can be broken down into two distinct aspects, normative influence and information influence.[63] Normative influence is a group's ability to determine and control reward and punishment.[64] Information influence is a group's ability to provide information about reality.[65] However, these influences also have influences. This is especially clear as it pertains to environmental elements that impact the level of normative and information influence any group has, such as: task difficulty and importance, private versus public response, and majority size.[66] Interestingly, it appears that in situations where tasks are difficult and important, and where accuracy is essential, there is a higher susceptibility to information and normative influence, causing greater conformity.[67] This is due to the fact that in difficult tasks individuals are more likely to feel uncertainty about their opinion, and therefore follow the majority.[68] Private versus public responses have also been shown to have an influence on conformity pressure.[69] Namely, it appears that when responses are given regarding a certain issue in private, they will experience significant information influence, whereas a public response will result in both information and normative influence.[70] This makes sense as in private there are no other individuals around to encourage ideas of reward and punishment (normative influence), but the responder still only has access to certain pieces of information (information influence). Finally, studies have consistently shown that as the majority voice within a group increases in size, so too will the level of these two forms of influence, increasing conformity pressure.[71]

Further on the topic of majority size in relation to conformity, theories can be split between those that believe infinitely increasing group size will infinitely increase conformity and those that believe that

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[60] Kao and Couzin, "Decision Accuracy in Complex Environments is Often Maximized by Small Group Sizes," 6.
[61] Kao and Couzin, "Decision Accuracy in Complex Environments is Often Maximized by Small Group Sizes," 6.
[62] L. A. Curral, Michael West and Jeremy Dawson, "It's What You Do and the Way That You Do It: Team Task, Team Size, and Innovation-Related Group Processes," *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 10 (2001): 187-204, 191.
[63] Rod Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," *GPIR* 8 (2005): 331-354.; Blackwell, 211.
[64] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 332; Blackwell, 211.
[65] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 332.
[66] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 331, 335, 338.
[67] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 349.
[68] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 349.
[69] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 331, 335, 338.
[70] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 335, 340.
[71] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 332.

information and normative influence are limited after a certain number of influential individuals speak up.[72] For example, S. E. Asch has proposed that the maximum level of information influence is reached in any group once three high-status individuals share their opinions.[73] The reason for this is that additional opinion-sharing would not provide new information but validate what has already been said.[74] In contrast to Asch, theories such as Mullen's claim that as the number of the majority increases, so too does the level of conformity, and that this can carry on indefinitely.[75] This view is based on the idea that the more attention that is focused on oneself, the more one will attempt to match their behaviour to their social context.[76] Therefore, as the majority increases, minority individuals will increasingly stand out, and they thus choose to conform to the majority.[77] After reviewing various models and factors that affect conformity, Rod Bond concludes that the larger the majority within any particular social group, the more significant the pressure for members to conform, but that the minimum number of individuals required to create significant pressure is three.[78]

As seen above, group size is a significant factor in many ways in determining a group's decision-making productivity. While larger groups can make accurate decisions, small or intermediate groups can equally make accurate decisions while also having a greater chance to avoid conformity pressure among their members. As such, larger group size can be detrimental to the ability of a body to make decisions.

ECCLESIOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY: COHESION AND DISSONANCE

Both the process of corporately discerning the mind of Christ shown in Baptist ecclesiology and group processes are relatively coherent with one another. These models of decision-making are built around the idea that humans are highly social beings that live in mutual relationships with those in their social context. Another area of coherence between the two theories is the belief that participation among all individuals in a group is essential in decision-making. Within Baptist theology, this belief stems from an understanding of each individual's ability to hear from God and their responsibility to participate as a covenanted member of the local church. This is supported within the study of group processes by the idea that differing viewpoints are essential for the reduction of groupthink tendencies and conformity pressure within a group. As a field of study, group processes can be used to analyse the discernment process and provide support on how to carry out the discernment practice best to maximise the chance of a fruitful outcome.

However, even though both discernment processes stem from the same idea of social interaction, that does not mean they are in complete alignment. In particular, upon evaluation of group processes,

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[72] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 332.
[73] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 332.
[74] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 332.
[75] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 333.
[76] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 333.
[77] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 333.
[78] Bond, "Group Size and Conformity," 348-349.

research indicates that aspects of Baptist ecclesiology, both in application and theory, may hinder the practice of discerning the mind of Christ.

One way Baptist discernment practices are dissonant with group processes is in the area of unity in gatherings. On the one hand, Baptist theology would hold to the idea that group decision-making is best done when the entirety of the local covenanted community is united in discerning the mind of Christ. Group processes, mainly groupthink theory and the wisdom of the crowd's theory, would hold that a unified body of believers would be able to make quick decisions and act swiftly in implementing such decisions. On the other hand, groupthink theory would also hold that with the heightened sense of cohesion that comes with the covenant nature of the group and the strong sense of unity, groupthink tendencies are more likely to be present, leading to biased decision-making. This is because groupthink theory is not predicated on a shared divine indwelling. Studies of group size and conformity would also likely indicate that the high level of cohesion inside a gathering would lead to a decrease in the pushback against the initial public display of preferences, leading to a biased decision-making process. However, this is not the case because of the emphasis placed on the need for listening to the guiding voice of the Spirit as shared through each and every individual.

Another way in which group processes would be in dissonance with the Baptist theology view of discernment and human flourishing articulated above is in the practical application of the entirety of the local congregation gathering for discernment. For, as mentioned above, not only is it the responsibility of all members to participate in discerning the mind of Christ due to their commitment to their covenanted community, but also necessary as Christ reveals himself to each individual through the mediation of the Spirit. Be that as it may, group processes indicate that larger group gatherings would be detrimental to group productivity with factors such as conformity influences and decreased accuracy.

In SDS and decision-making theories, however, group processes are in dissonance with Baptist theology. Group processes research would indicate that even though it contains risks of manipulability and polarisation, the majority/plurality decision scheme has a high chance of leading a group to make a beneficial decision through the aggregation of individual preferences. Baptist theology would push back against SDS in discernment by pointing out that the goal of discernment in a religious context is not the choosing amongst individual preferences but determining the mind of Christ. To use the language of Rod Bond and Hans-George Gadamer, each individual comes to the gathering with prejudices, pre-knowledge, and perspectives (which Gadamer calls "Horizons"). The goal of discernment is to merge our horizons with the horizon of Christ.[79] In terms of practicality, the majority/plurality scheme is perhaps necessary for coming to a conclusion concerning the will of Christ. However, Baptist theology is fundamentally in dissonance with SDS' focus on preference rather than discerning the mind of Christ.

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[79] Jasper, "Hans-Gorg and the Mind of Christ," 116, 122.

TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH IN BAPTIST DECISION MAKING

Considering the above consonances and dissonances between a view of human flourishing based on social psychology and corporate discernment, the following may be helpful guidelines in the Baptist discernment process.

Firstly, to reduce the risk of groupthink and conformity influences, smaller groups of four to eleven diverse individuals should be gathered to discuss, evaluate, and pray over the coming decision. By beginning the discernment process in small group discussions, there is a lower risk of groupthink tendencies to occur, a decrease in conformity pressure, and a potential increase in decision accuracy. At the end of this initial meeting, each individual should share their discerned knowledge with an impartial leader within their local congregation.[80]

After all initial results are received, the discernment process facilitator should collate the information before sending it out to all church members through private communication, such as an email or letter. This facilitator should be an individual who does not have a conflict of interest with the decision itself, potentially an elder, deacon, small group leader, or trusted congregation member. A period of time should then be given for each member to individually pray and evaluate whether the proposed discernments, so far, match with what Christ has revealed to them, as well as the horizon of Christ revealed in scripture. During this stage, individuals are encouraged to respond with positive and negative critical feedback. While this feedback stage of the process could take place at an in-person meeting, the correlation between majority size and conformity pressure suggests that a distanced approach is more beneficial. Also, by encouraging critical thinking around discerned knowledge, alongside impartial facilitation, groupthink tendencies are mitigated in this stage of the decision-making process.

Finally, the members are to gather in one unified group to hear all collated criticisms and encouragements before anonymously using the majority/plurality scheme to determine the accurate revelation of Christ's will. By following this proposal, not only can decisions be made between alternatives (task decisions), such as the historical method favoured, but questions of identity and belief as well (identity decisions).[81] This is due to the placement of voting at the end of the process, which serves only to confirm what the group has already decided the will of Christ is. At each step in this proposed model, the sovereignty of Christ is maintained throughout the discernment process, and the revelation of the Holy Spirit is relied on through corporate and individual prayer and scripture reading. In this way, when the time comes for voting to occur, the chances of a decision being made based on personal preference decreases.

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[80] The practice of discernment in small groups is one proposed by Stephen Holmes as a way of encouraging previously silenced individuals to speak up. Holmes, "Knowing Together the Mind of Christ,"187.

[81] Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 17.

CONCLUSION

Having explored decision-making in Baptist discernment gatherings and group processes, the two fields were compared for consonance and dissonance between them. Both processes find a harmony, as they both centre around the idea that better group interaction and decision-making will lead to increased group and individual flourishing. But, on the other hand, several significant dissonances exist between the two processes. Namely, group processes challenge the ideas of unity and corporate gathering in the Baptist discernment practice, while Baptist theology challenges notions of social decision schemes in religious spaces.

Based on all the above-mentioned evidence, the proposed integration of social psychology as it applies to group decision-making and the Baptist discernment procedure would yield greater fruitfulness and contribute to the flourishing both of individuals and the local body of Christ as we seek to become like Jesus together.