



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for

Where Wisdom Is Found

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to articulate the rich heritage of Christian wisdom in both its theoretical and practical dimensions. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

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Fear of the Lord is not only the beginning of wisdom. According to Scripture, the proper fear of God is also the end as part of the consummating gift of salvation. What kind of fear leads to wholeness, love, and freedom from self-indulgence, rather than groveling servitude?
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We in the Church must re-establish a connection with Christians who have gone before us in a way that is meaningful to those who will come after us. Could there be any greater wisdom, or harder challenge, than Jesus’ injunction to love one another across generational lines as he loved us?



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Focus Article:

📖 Fear of the Lord
(Where Wisdom Is Found,
pp. 11-18)

What do you think?

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Fear of the Lord

Fear of the Lord is not only the beginning of wisdom. According to Scripture, the proper fear of God is also the end as part of the consummating gift of salvation. What kind of fear leads to wholeness, love, and freedom from self-indulgence, rather than groveling servitude?

Prayer

Be our vision, High King of Heaven: we turn to you for wisdom on our way.

Inform our minds so that we may have the very mind of Christ: may we understand our place and our purpose in your world.

Help us in the power of your Holy Spirit to hear your true word to us and to respond in living worship to you.

Amen.

Responsive Reading: Psalm 25:10-14

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

**For your name's sake, O LORD,
pardon my guilt, for it is great.**

Who are they that fear the LORD?

He will teach them the way that they should choose.

**They will abide in prosperity,
and their children shall possess the land.**

The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them.

Reflection

Time and again the biblical sages teach, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10). Yet fear as a pathway to wise living and proper relationship with God seems to us both unattractive and mysterious. After all, we fear "whatever we feel has great power of destroying us, or of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain," Aristotle observes. How can fear of God be central to the life of faith, which is meant to draw us closer to God in love?

Russell Reno explores the great paradox that "the covenant begun with Abraham and fulfilled in Christ both casts out and encourages fear." For those who love God fully, "there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). Yet even Abraham, who in his faithfulness is "the father of all" believers (Romans 4:16), is commended for maturing into proper fear of God (Genesis 22:12). With this in mind, Reno concludes, we must avoid the temptation to think that fearing God is just a primitive form of piety or a symptom of immature faith.

In Scripture he finds implicit distinctions among three types of fear that play very different roles in faithful discipleship.

- ▶ *Worldly fear can diminish human life.* This "shrinking anxiety about the future" comes from realizing we can be destroyed by human sinfulness, powerful institutions, and natural processes beyond our control. Of course, we should plan our lives with care (Proverbs 8:12) and fear the legitimate power of authorities (Romans 13:3). But worldly fear too often "debilitates, paralyzes, and



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undermines our faithfulness” and “the kind of justice that emerges out of trembling anxiety is outward and unstable.” For these reasons, worldly fear has no lasting place in God’s kingdom.

- ▶ *Spiritual fear of God’s judgment directs us away from sin and toward righteousness.* We should grieve over our sins. “If we tremble before the thought of final judgment (see Mark 13:32-37), we can better avoid transgression. In this way, a fear of divine punishment is pedagogical,” Reno notes. “This guiding fear, however, must come to an end after the faithful enter their reward, for they have attained righteousness and no longer need the pedagogical fear of punishment.”
- ▶ *A lasting, heavenly fear honors God’s holiness and love.* We rightly experience “a shrinking, repentant awe” in the presence of the transcendent God. As we die to our sinful selves, our “fear is less concerned with punishment and more concerned with purification,” Reno writes. “The eternal and unfathomable difference between God and creature explains the everlasting fear that is consistent with a love that draws us ever nearer.... Our confident faith in [Christ’s] saving death is entirely consistent with a fearful sense of the depths into which he went on our behalf, depths from which we turn away in shuddering, instinctive horror... As the old spiritual says of the cross, ‘it causes me to tremble, tremble.’”

Study Questions

1. Discuss the difference between worldly fear and the two forms of spiritual fear that Reno mentions. What things do we most dread with worldly fear today? How can these worldly fears come to predominate over our spiritual lives?
2. How does Reno respond to the concern that fear of God’s punishment “corrupts a true faith” because it “casts doubt on God’s mercy” and “simply reflects a cowering, anxious hedonism that organizes commitments according to long-term calculations about pleasure and pain”?
3. Discuss the difference, according to Reno, between the spiritual fear of divine punishment and the lasting, heavenly fear of God.
4. What sort of fear is implicit in each of these passages: Genesis 22:12, Psalm 25:14, Psalm 111:10, and 1 John 4:18?

Departing Hymn: “Be Thou My Vision” (vv. 1 and 2)

Be thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art —
thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my Wisdom, and thou my true Word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
thou my great Father, I thy true son;
thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.

Irish hymn, 8th century; translated by Mary Elizabeth Byrne (1880-1931); versed by Eleanor H. Hull (1860-1935)

Tune: SLANE



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Focus Article:

📖 The Christian Way of Knowing
(*Where Wisdom Is Found*, pp. 19-26)

Suggested Article:

📖 Humble Wisdom
(*Where Wisdom Is Found*, pp. 56-62)

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The Christian Way of Knowing

The virtue of faith guides the Christian way of knowing and enables the Church to witness faithfully to the gospel in the midst of challenges to knowledge and truth in our postmodern culture.

Prayer

Responsive Reading: Colossians 1:15-20

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Reflection

What can we know about ourselves, the world, and God? How do we know it? The answers to such questions, Jonathan Wilson writes, are greatly contested in our culture due to the breaking down of the modern view that knowledge is objective and impersonal correspondence with reality that we know with certainty. Postmodern thinkers argue knowledge is only an interpretation (or, more radically, a construction) of reality.

Both modernity and postmodernity assume human knowing is our own accomplishment. In contrast, the Christian way of knowing is grounded in the *virtue* of faith in Christ. Too often we do not think of faith as a *virtue*, as a habituated way of living. Instead, we reduce faith (under the sway of modernity) to one's assent to a list of true statements, or (by the lure of postmodernity) to one's choice to trust Jesus, a choice devoid of intellectual content. These thin views of faith, Wilson says, leave us vulnerable to the dangers of modernity and postmodernity.

The New Testament characterizes the virtue of faith in Christ as a gift that is personal yet communal, and cosmic in scope.

- ▶ *Faith is personal* – not “private” – since it transforms one's whole being by relationship with a person, Jesus Christ. Against modernity, this implies “knowing cannot be reduced to a mental act” achieved from “a detached, objective stance,” Wilson writes, for we know persons “through our whole being as persons.” Against postmodern skepticism, the virtue of faith teaches, as Lesslie Newbigin has argued, “The great objective reality is God but he is also the supreme subject who wills to make himself known to us not by a power that would cancel out our subjectivity, but by a grace that calls forth and empowers our subjective faculties, our power to grow in knowledge through believing.”



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- ▶ *Faith is a gift from God* that results from humility, not pride, and should lead to humility, not pride. This counters both the modern view “that knowledge is achieved through human effort in our quest to master the world,” and the postmodern view that knowledge is “a contest for power.”
- ▶ *Faith is communal*, for it is engendered through the disciple community, the body of Christ, in which “diverse gifts of the Spirit...[enable] us to discern the work of the gospel today, participate in that work, and be formed by our participation in it.” Postmodernity will agree that knowing is communal, but in contrast to its fear that this leads to subjectivity, “the practice of faith as communal forces us to rely on the Spirit-gifted community, not on ourselves as individuals.”
- ▶ *Faith is cosmic in scope* because “in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). “Of course,” Wilson notes, “this does not mean we can understand any thing without loving attention and diligent study. Rather, only through Christ do we know things in their proper relationship and in reality.”

“To the postmodern suspicion that all knowing is an exercise in power, we offer faith as a gift that transforms our will to power and teaches us to live peaceably,” Wilson writes. “For too long the disciple community has accepted the modernist construal of knowledge that denies to faith the status of knowledge. Postmodernity has helped expose the errors of modernity, but only the gospel can provide us with a sure guide for our knowing. Far from being something other than knowledge, faith is the only way by which we can know all things truly – as reconciled to God in and through Jesus Christ.”

Study Questions

1. Jonathan Wilson warns that we may be tempted to accept the modernist account of knowledge on the one hand, or to wholeheartedly embrace the postmodernist critique of knowledge on the other. Why does he reject each of these accounts of knowledge? Does he think that the modernist and postmodernist views are “partly right”?
2. Why is it so important, according to Wilson, that we understand faith in Jesus Christ as a *virtue* rather than just a mental act (one’s assent to a statement of faith) or a commitment of will (one’s decision to trust Christ)? Does the virtue of faith include assent and commitment?
3. How is the virtue of faith in Jesus Christ related to the study of such things as geography, psychology, and calculus?
4. In the program of the Robbins Chapel stained glass windows, how is the virtue of humility depicted as an intellectual virtue in relation to Christian wisdom?
5. In William O’Brien’s hymn, “Wisdom’s Way,” how are the four New Testament characteristics of the virtue of faith in Jesus Christ – it is a gift that is personal yet communal, and cosmic in scope – depicted?

Departing Hymn: “Wisdom’s Way”



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Focus Article:

📖 The Wisdom of James
(*Where Wisdom Is Found*,
pp. 27-37)

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The Wisdom of James

The Letter of James, reverberating with themes of biblical wisdom from ancient Israel through the traditions of Jesus and Paul, calls us to be a wise community that walks and talks the “wisdom from above.”

Prayer

Scripture Reading: James 1:1-5, 17-27

Meditation

James calls wisdom the cause of perfection. He knows that faith is tried and tested in affliction. There is no need to ask God for perfect people. What we need are wise people. This is why he encourages those who want to be on top of their afflictions to ask God for wisdom.

Oecumenius (10th Century), *Commentary on James*

Reflection

What would Christian wisdom look like, and how could we obtain and maintain it, if the conventional views of goodness and the practices of life in the empire around us are corrupt? That is the focus of the Letter of James, written to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion [*diaspora*],” a metaphor for faithful disciples who experience life as “exiles, dislocated and marginalized within an alien world because of their faith,” Robert Wall suggests.

Those early disciples faced many hardships which could lead them toward joyful confidence and a steady allegiance to God (1:2-3), or “give birth to sin...and to death” (1:14-15). The outcome in each case would depend very much on how one responded to the test and the state of one’s hearts (1:13-14). In that cultural pressure-cooker, how could disciples learn to trust God as a generous benefactor and ask God for the know-how they lacked in order to deal with their trials in a wise manner?

Admittedly, James’s “wisdom after so powerful a build-up may seem anticlimactic: ‘let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger’ (1:19b).” Yet in this letter’s three central essays, Wall finds “a fresh and elaborate commentary of this ‘implanted word that has the power to save your souls’ (1:21).”

- ▶ *A wise community walks the talk* (1:22-2:26) by listening quickly to the “perfect law of liberty” that demands merciful treatment of the poor and powerless. Wall translates James 2:1, “Do you have the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” Jesus’ ministry among the poor should be the community’s model of faithfulness. “Abraham and Rahab, are mentioned to underwrite the wisdom of caring for the poor in their distress,” Wall notes. “Their cases are introduced by the common sense assertion that the mere profession of orthodox faith does not save anyone if not demonstrated by works.”
- ▶ *A wise community talks the walk* (3:1-18) through its careful choice of words. Some leaders/teachers may slander one another or to bend the gospel in order to elevate their status. The community should choose leaders who exhibit “wisdom from above” (3:17;



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cf. 1:17-18) rather than those with a selfish character formed by a wisdom that is “devilish” (3:14-16a).

- ▶ *A wise community slows anger* (4:1-5:6) which arises from self-centered desire for material profit. After sharply contrasting friendship with God (cf. 2:23) and “friendship with the world” (4:4; cf. 1:27; 3:6), James dramatizes the corruption of wealth with two examples: the merchant whose travels take him “to such and such a town” rather than God’s kingdom (4:13-17), and the rich farmer who defrauds his workers (5:1-6). “These are the functional atheists who live their lives as though God does not exist,” Wall notes. They “make foolish choices as though there is no future apocalypse when God will judge all people according to what they have done, whether the ‘right thing’ or ‘sin’ (4:17; cf. 4:11-12; 2:13).”

The closing verses (5:19-20) enlist the community members to instruct and forgive “lapsed believers who have ‘wandered from the truth’ of God’s word (cf. 1:18, 21).” Wall concludes, “The real wisdom of James is clarified by these final words of hope: the repentance and restoration of those believers who have failed their test of faith is mediated by the community made wise for salvation by the instruction of this letter (cf. 2 Timothy 3:15).”

Study Questions

1. What advice does James give about “being quick to listen”? If a congregation tries to heed this wisdom today, what obstacles to this practice will it face in the surrounding culture?
2. Discuss James’ instruction about being “slow to speak.” What cultural attitudes or practices make this difficult for us?
3. Discuss James’ instruction about being “slow to anger.” What cultural attitudes or practices make this difficult for us?
4. James 5:7-20 can seem quaint. How does Robert Wall interpret this passage about “the future of the wise community”?
5. Discuss Michael McCullar’s observation: “Scripture places experiential knowledge alongside supernatural insight provided through the Holy Spirit. There is no sense of ‘going it alone’ ...in the letter penned by James.”

Departing Hymn: “God of Grace and God of Glory” (vv. 1 and 5)

God of grace and God of glory,
on your people pour your power;
crown your ancient Church’s story,
bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour,
for the facing of this hour.

Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore;
let the gift of your salvation
be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
serving you whom we adore,
serving you whom we adore.

Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969), alt.

Tune: CWM RHONDDA



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Focus Article:

📖 Wisdom Transformed by Love
(Where Wisdom Is Found,
pp. 38-45)

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Wisdom Transformed by Love

In his rich treatment of the virtue of wisdom, Thomas Aquinas insists that not only must wisdom be transformed by love, but also love must be transformed by wisdom. Thus the contemplative life overflows into a life of self-giving love and service.

Prayer

God of vision, wisdom, love and mercy, we hear your attributes proclaimed. We sing your praise. We bow beneath your majesty.

You have taught us that by respecting and responding to who you are, we find the wise way. Teach us how to build upon that firm foundation, not the manipulating wisdom that achieves our own will, but the palace of wisdom that celebrates your work and will in this world. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 8:1-13, 22-31

Reflection

Wisdom's allure in Proverbs 8 is that her call for everyone to embrace what is true, good, and just, is embedded in the very fabric of the orderly universe God has fashioned. The wisdom we need for a well-ordered practical life, she reminds us, is entwined with our rightly understanding the Creator and creation.

On this point we have much to learn from Israel's sages, for too often we have allowed the two facets of wisdom—the theoretical or contemplative life and the practical or active life—to drift apart. We have caricatured the options before us as having faith or works, as being just a head-in-the-clouds theologian or a social-gospel campaigner, an arid academic or a naïve activist.

How can we recover a full-orbed perspective on wisdom? Tom Hibbs suggests that we study the account of this virtue by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Aquinas believed the pursuit of wisdom is "more perfect, more noble, more useful, and more full of joy" than all other human pursuits, for by it, we attain a "portion of true beatitude" and approach to the "likeness of God."

Aquinas was a member of the newly formed Dominican religious order, which urged a return to the gospel and recovery of early church life. "The Dominican vision of the Christian life is one in which an initial longing for, and love of, God is deepened and informed by assiduous study and prayer," Hibbs notes. "Aquinas believed our love for God and desire to serve God are manifested in the pursuit of wisdom, both contemplative and practical." Therefore, he taught that wisdom

- ▶ *begins and ends in wonder.* With the ancient philosopher Aristotle, Aquinas agrees that our desire to know springs from our sense of our own ignorance; we want to understand connections among things, to grasp their fundamental causes. This sense of wonder, or desire to "put it all together," ultimately leads us to God. Also, wisdom leads to another kind of wonder that acknowledges the limits of our knowing.

For Aquinas, the great delight and beauty of theoretical wisdom—the contemplation of God—has this ecstatic character: "our abilities to understand what is good...are, in their encounter with beauty, enlarged in the sense that we are increasingly aware



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of being in the presence of what is really good,” Hibbs observes. We are so transfixed that we forget ourselves and lose a sense of time. “Wisdom is hardly a self-regarding virtue; much less is it a calculative skill or an activity of the intellect utterly isolated from affection or love.”

- ▶ *begins in God's gift.* Aquinas transformed the ancient ideal of wisdom with this idea from Scripture: “God, who is the creator of all that exists, descends to us in wisdom and love in order to raise us to him in friendship.” Our love for God in return is not formed by “the repetition of certain kinds of acts (which is how we attain natural moral virtues); instead, its original and abiding source is divine grace, a wholly unmerited gift.” Wisdom begins with an encounter with God.
- ▶ *leads to faithful action.* “The active life in which, by preaching and teaching, one hands on to others the things contemplated is superior to the life that is devoted exclusively to contemplation because the former presupposes an abundance of contemplation,” Aquinas concludes, for “Christ chose such a life.” For Aquinas, contemplation results not only in “a greater appreciation of divine beauty,” but also “an impulse to be a vehicle of that beauty’s presence in the world,” Hibbs writes. “In Christ, we see the beauty of the divine life and our desire to participate in that life is inflamed.”

Study Questions

1. In his rich treatment of wisdom, which ideas did Thomas Aquinas borrow from the ancient pagan philosophical tradition? How did he transform these ideas in light of Scripture?
2. For Aquinas, what role does beauty play in the contemplative life and active life? How does beauty integrate the two?
3. Which form of a wise life—the contemplative or active—appeals to you? Why? How might Aquinas urge you to appreciate and integrate the other facet of wisdom in your life?
4. Discuss the significance of Aquinas’ view that we encounter God and divine beauty primarily through acts of worship, for worship is God’s way of meeting us where we live in order to raise us to him.

Departing Hymn: “God Is Love; His Mercy Brightens” (vv. 1, 2, and 3)

God is love; his mercy brightens
all the path in which we rove;
bliss he wakes, and woe he lightens:
God is wisdom, God is love.

Chance and change are busy ever;
man decays and ages move;
but his mercy waneth never:
God is wisdom, God is love.

E’en the hour that darkest seemeth
will his changeless goodness prove;
from the mist his brightness streameth:
God is wisdom, God is love.

John Bowring (1825)
Tune: SUSSEX



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📖 Sharing Wisdom as an Act of Love
(*Where Wisdom Is Found*, pp. 66-73)

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Sharing Wisdom as an Act of Love

Marilynne Robinson's beautiful novel *Gilead* is a powerful realization of the integral relationship of wisdom to love. It illuminates the qualities of character that one must possess if the wisest of one's words are not to be vacuous or inaccessible to their hearer's understanding.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 4:1-9

Responsive Reading: based on Psalm 111

Lift up your hearts in thanksgiving to the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Great are the Lord's works, full of majesty and splendor.

Praise will be his forever and ever.

His words are truth and justice; faithfulness informs his law.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Holy and awe inspiring is his name.

Praise will be his forever and ever.

The fear of this Lord is the beginning of all wisdom.

They who live in it grow in understanding. Amen.

Reflection

Let's be honest. When we hear "Listen, children, to a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight" (Proverbs 4:1), what sort of parent-child talk do we think is coming next? If our imaginations have been marinated in those endless television sitcoms where wise children spring amazingly from clueless, blustering parents, we may expect to hear an embarrassing little sermon. We would not be looking for something like a love letter, tenderly delivered by one generation to the next.

Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer prizewinning novel *Gilead* reimagines for our day the sort of loving parent-child instruction that was central to biblical wisdom. It presents itself as a memoir of seventy-six year-old Reverend John Ames written in 1956 to be preserved for his seven year-old son until he is of an age to read it. Ames, who knows he is dying, shares his counsel in order to bequeath to his son a sense of intergenerational identity.

Near the beginning of his memoir, Ames writes: "See and see but do not perceive, hear and hear but do not understand, as the Lord says. I can't claim to understand that saying, as many times as I've heard it, and even preached on it. It simply states a deeply mysterious fact. You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it." These biblical words of disclaimer, David Jeffrey notes, are an early sign Ames will speak "without taint of self-righteousness or condescension."

From Reverend Ames, we might learn to share counsel with others and listen well to the wisdom in Scripture:

- ▶ *He practices thoughtful self-criticism.* From personal stories he tells, we see that Ames has lived the truths he teaches. Yet he defers to the opinions of others – his father and grandfather, and theologians with whom he often disagrees. Ames "holds deeply considered and well-formed opinions," Jeffrey notes, but "reckons it to be impossible for any individual to judge of a matter accountably



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without the aid of divergent as well as complementary perspectives.”

- ▶ *He values conversations* with friends in his pursuit of wisdom. He weaves in conversations with fellow pastor and neighbor Robert Boughton, “persons in all types of categories of relationship, past and present,” and books that “remain present to his consciousness as voices in an ongoing colloquy.”
- ▶ *He reflects and speaks with an undertone of prayer.* “For me, writing has always felt like praying,” Ames confesses, “even when I wasn’t writing prayers, as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone.” Ames tells his son that he is praying for him. Later he reports praying in adversity, and praying for the needs of others—his own and Boughton’s church members—sometimes through the night.
- ▶ *He recognizes that truth abides beyond our measure.* “Nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense,” Ames says in a remarkable passage. “In the matter of belief I have always found that defenses have the same irrelevance about them as the criticisms they are meant to answer.... There is always an inadequacy in argument about ultimate things.... [Proofs are] never sufficient to the question, and they are always a little impertinent...because they claim to find for God a place within our conceptual grasp.” Thus, Jeffrey concludes, “the culminating theological wisdom Ames wishes to impart to his son, namely that in matters of faith it is seldom fruitful to look for ‘proofs’ but always fruitful, in effect, to try to live in obedience to Christ.

Study Questions

1. What traits make John Ames a winsome source of wisdom?
2. If a parent or adult mentor had written such a memoir for you as Ames writes for his son, what would it mean to you?
3. *Gilead* reminds us of our “failure to transmit the wisdom of the generations even to those we most love,” David Jeffrey says. What signs of this do you see in our culture, your family, or congregation? What steps can we take to change?
4. Ames is glad his son, with mom’s help, is memorizing Scripture, for the lad’s pleasure in “the magnitude of the accomplishment” will pale in comparison to the value of such wisdom later, when the meaning of the remembered words comes inwardly to life in a richer way. Discuss this remark.

Departing Hymn: “Happy the Home When God is There” (vv. 3 and 4)

Happy the home where prayer is heard,
and praise is wont to rise;
where parents love the sacred Word
and all its wisdom prize.

Lord, let us in our homes agree
this blessed peace to gain;
unite our hearts in love to thee,
and love to all will reign.

Henry Ware, Jr. (1794-1843)
Tune: ST. AGNES



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 So Great a Cloud of Witnesses
(Where Wisdom Is Found,
pp. 74-82)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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So Great a Cloud of Witnesses

We in the Church must re-establish a connection with Christians who have gone before us in a way that is meaningful to those who will come after us. Could there be any greater wisdom, or harder challenge, than Jesus' injunction to love one another across generational lines as he loved us?

Prayer

The way of the Lord is wise.

The council of the Lord leads to understanding.

Walk in the fear of the Lord and gain wisdom.

We will humble ourselves before the Lord and gain insight.

In living this way, you will reveal God's mind to this foolish, frustrated world.

We will know ourselves and we will be fully known. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 2:1-11

Reflection

We do not grow into wisdom quickly or in isolation. Christian wisdom—in both its theoretical and practical dimensions—must be built up over time as the Body of Christ, the Church, purposely hones its judgment and refines its practices in light of the gospel. To grow in wisdom, then, requires that we honor and critically sift the insights of earlier generations of disciples. But it is this vital connection with our past, Jeanie Miley fears, which we are in great danger of losing.

"At some point, you have to decide what kind of relationship you're going to have with the past," a wise woman recently said to Miley. "And that means *the* past and *your* past. You can't run away from the past, either the good stuff you want to inflate or the hard stuff you want to forget, and so you might as well decide if you're going to be a friend or an enemy to your history."

Congregations lose contact with *their* past when they adopt the prevailing values of our youth-worshipping culture. "We tend to discard yesterday's ways and buildings in a rush to see who can be the first with the latest trend," Miley notes. We lose touch with *the* Christian past when we neglect "to mine the deep veins of meaning in our history."

"My generation has been so busy trying to out-run age and to defy death," she confesses, "that we have modeled disrespect of older people, disdain for what is quickly deemed irrelevant and outmoded, and a worship of 'what's happening', what's new, and youthful and 'in.'"

To access the wisdom from *the* past and *our* past that we need to continue to produce healthy spiritual fruit, Miley suggests:

- ▶ *We recount how God has been faithful to us in the past.* "Children love to hear the stories of how their elders did things in the past. They need to know the ways in which we overcame difficulties; they need to hear stories of faith that connect them with their own heritage, but inspire them into their own futures," says Miley. Telling them stories of faith from the Bible and religious tradition can "put authentic heroes in our children's lives so that they will not have to substitute celebrities or pop 'icons' where real heroes



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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belong.”

- ▶ *We engage in intergenerational conversations about our relationship to the past.* As we “examine which traditions need to die a natural death and which ones have life and energy to them...we must be able to own the victories and the failures of the past, and have the humility to learn the lessons of each without being too attached to either.”
- ▶ *We confront our culture's individualism.* If congregations are going to be conformed to the image of Christ, they must “challenge the detrimental and destructive ideas of church as a capitalistic venture and a competitive organization” which takes its cues from “the narcissistic behaviors of the worlds of consumerism, entertainment, sports, and marketing.”

The Church stands “at a crucial juncture in history,” Miley concludes. “The old ways are passing away, and the new ways are not yet clear to us, but in this in-between time...we can call upon the wisdom of the ages and the wisdom of those who have gone before us to stabilize us and ground us in what is nourishing and life-giving.”

Study Questions

1. According to Jeanie Miley, what attitudes in our culture are obstacles to intergenerational sharing of wisdom?
2. In your congregation, how do older members share their personal stories of faith with children or young people, and teach them stories from Scripture and tradition that connect them to their own heritage?
3. How does your congregation encourage intergenerational conversations about both *your own community's past* and *the Christian past*?
4. When Jeanie Miley asked the older women in her congregation to share some wisdom from their life in the community of faith, they demurred. “I don't have anything worth passing down,” several said. Why was this troubling to her? How would you respond to her request?

Departing Hymn: “For All Your Saints, O Lord” (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

For all your saints, O Lord,
who strove to live by faith,
who followed you, and kept your word,
receive our grateful praise.

They all, in life and death,
with you, their Lord, in view,
learned from your Holy Spirit's breath
to suffer and to do.

Your earthly members fit
to join your saints above,
in one communion ever knit,
one fellowship of love.

Richard Mant (1837), alt.

Suggested Tunes: FRANCONIA or ST. THOMAS (Williams)

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Fear of the Lord

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To carefully distinguish three sorts of fear: worldly fear, fear of divine punishment, and heavenly fear grounded in God's love.
2. To examine the roles that these fears play in the life of faith.
3. To employ these distinctions among sorts of fear to interpret difficult biblical passages.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Where Wisdom is Found (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Be Thou My Vision" locate the familiar tune SLANE in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a "Conference"

A "conference," in the language of early Christian communities, is a session of instruction with a wise teacher. In his appealing conference "On the Fear of God," Dorotheos of Gaza (c. 500-c. 560) puzzles over what sort of fear the psalmist has in mind in the exhortation, "Fear the Lord all you who love him" (cf. Psalm 34:9). "There are two kinds of fear: one preliminary, the other perfect; the one found in beginners—as someone called it 'of the devout'; the other in those perfected in holiness, of those having arrived at true love," Dorotheos writes. "[The latter person] forms a desire for God because he loves God himself, loves him and knows what is acceptable to God. Such a man is goodness itself, knowing what it is to be with God.... Such a man fears and keeps God's will, not for fear of punishment, not to avoid condemnation, but, as we have said, because he has tasted the sweetness of being with God: he fears he may fall away from it; he fears to be turned away from it." (*Dorotheos of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings*, p. 109)

True love, Dorotheos suggests, certainly drives out the *preliminary fear* (cf. 1 John 4:18), but with its intense intimacy and sweetness, it engenders the *perfect fear*.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer printed in the study guide in unison.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

"Wisdom does not require any special intellectual gifts," Ellen Davis has observed. "The fruit of wisdom, a well-ordered life and a peaceful mind, results not from a high IQ but from a disposition of the heart that the sages (wisdom teachers) of Israel most often call 'fear of the Lord.'" (Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the*

Song of Songs, 2000)

To help us understand this puzzling insight, Russell Reno carefully distinguishes two sorts of spiritual fear from worldly fear. Though each form of spiritual fear plays a critical role in the attainment of Christian wisdom, only the form that Reno calls “lasting, heavenly fear” endures in those saints who have been drawn into the “perfect love” of God. He interprets this fear that “lasts into eternity” in light of Christ’s mediating death on the cross.

Study Questions

1. The objects of worldly fear are things in creation – such as sinful human beings, powerful institutions, or natural processes beyond our control – that can seriously harm or destroy us (or the people and things we love). The object of spiritual fear, on the other hand, is an aspect of God – either that God is righteous and punishes sinful disobedience, or that God is holy and loving.

Depending on their age and life situations, members might mention a variety of things that they dread with worldly fear: food insecurity and poverty; ill health, aging, suffering, and death; intimidation and lack of respect; natural disasters; failure in school, one’s career, or marriage; shame or punishment by others; and so on. Select two or three of these fears and discuss how they might tempt us to harm other people, to not care properly for the creation, and to harm ourselves by developing traits of selfishness, greed, envy, lust, anger, injustice, deceit, and other forms of sin.

2. Reno believes “these simple-minded views confuse worldly fear with spiritual fear.” He offers this analogy from the intellectual life: “Fear of ignorance or error can be colored by shame and anxiety, but this emotion does not work at cross-purposes to an animating love of truth. The same holds for fear of divine punishment. Sinners should recoil from the thought of a righteous judge capable of knowing and punishing all transgressions, and this fear is no more inconsistent with a love of God than fear of error contradicts a love of truth.”
3. As we saw in the answer to the first question above, in both forms of spiritual fear we are responding to an aspect of God. The spiritual fear of divine punishment is “pedagogical” in guiding us “away from sin and toward righteousness,” Reno suggests. “This guiding fear, however, must come to an end after the faithful enter their reward, for they have attained righteousness and no longer need the pedagogical fear of punishment.” In other words, while God remains righteous and prepared to punish sinful disobedience, those who are perfected in faithfulness no longer need to fear God’s punishment.

The second form of spiritual fear lasts forever because it grows from “the eternal and unfathomable difference between God and creature” which is “consistent with a [divine] love that draws us ever nearer.” Here Reno offers another analogy: “When we walk across bridges we may enjoy every confidence that the engineers have done a good job and the span will not collapse – and yet, who does not feel hints of terror when looking over the edge and into the depths of the chasm below. This is all the more true of our salvation in Christ. He is our trustworthy mediator, our bridge to eternal life in God, and our confident faith in his saving death is entirely consistent with a fearful sense of the depths into which he went on our behalf, depths from which we turn away in shuddering, instinctive horror.”

4. Assign four groups to review Genesis 22:12, Psalm 25:14, Psalm 111:10, and 1 John 4:18 in context, and report their conclusions to everyone. Reno carefully reviews the Abraham and Isaac story and suggests that in Genesis 22:12 the angel praises Abraham for exhibiting the mature spiritual fear that Reno calls “lasting, heavenly fear.” Psalm 25:14 relates fear of God to learning God’s covenant and developing friendship with God. Perhaps the psalmist is emphasizing the pedagogical function of the spiritual fear of punishment: it brings us to understand our sin and thus prepares us to seek God’s forgiveness (Psalm 25:11). Or the psalmist may be saying that friendship with God grows as we develop the lasting, heavenly fear that appreciates the awesome holiness and love of God. Psalm 111:10 is a classic statement relating the fear of God to the development of wisdom: members might discuss whether all three sorts of fear play some role in our living wisely and growing in relationship with God. Surely 1 John 4:18 is saying that perfect love of God “casts out” worldly fears; would perfect love also eliminate spiritual fear of God’s punishment?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

The Christian Way of Knowing

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand faith in Jesus Christ as a *virtue*, or habituated way of living.
2. To explore how the Christian way of knowing is grounded in the *virtue* of faith in Christ.
3. To contrast the Christian way of knowing with the modernist and postmodernist accounts of knowledge in our culture today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Where Wisdom is Found (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

We often hear the word “postmodern” used to describe movements in art and architecture, sociology and history, philosophy and theology. What do these movements have in common? They agree that people cannot be *absolutely certain* – that is, have no possible doubts – about what they claim to know or value as good. Many Christians would accept this lack of certainty as a mark of our finitude as creatures and fallenness as sinners. But many postmodern thinkers draw a further, more disturbing conclusion: that knowledge claims are only statements of how an individual, or a community, proposes to view reality. Thus, when people assert what they think is true or good, they are trying to force their “interpretation” on others. Every claim to knowledge becomes a subtle grab for power.

If we cannot avoid this more radical conclusion, “the best that we can hope for is that those who gain power will create a more humane world,” Jonathan Wilson notes. “This distress in our culture is even more intense for Christians than for society in general. For society, debates about the nature of knowledge are contests for political power and for one or another view of our society. But for Christians the meaning of these debates is even deeper. They are debates about people’s relationship to God – or, better, about God’s relationship to individuals – and about people’s eternal destiny.”

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give the group discernment as you prayerfully reflect on the Christian way of knowing.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This study introduces the immensely important, complex relation of faith in Jesus Christ to human knowing. Jonathan Wilson contrasts the Christian way of knowing to the modernist account of knowledge, which is

losing its sway in our culture, and to the postmodernist views of knowledge (as an interpretation or an exercise in power) that are emerging from the critique of modernity. Do not let the details of his analysis distract you from the main point: we must think of faith in Jesus Christ as a *virtue* if we want to grasp how faith is related to knowing. This relation is obscured if we reduce faith to one's assent to a list of true statements (for we'll focus only on whether the faith-based statements are supported by reason, or compete with our research), or if we reduce faith to one's choice to trust Jesus that has no intellectual content (since this makes faith either a private expression of preference, or an exercise of power over others).

Study Questions

1. Jonathan Wilson agrees with modernists that the goal of knowing is truth, but he fears "modernity has often exercised a corrupting influence on Christian witness to the gospel" by reducing knowledge to a mental act that is unconnected to "our own history and personalities." That is, modernity does not see knowing as personal (in the sense of involving the whole person) and communal; instead, the modernist invites us to 'bracket' our faith in order to think objectively. Wilson believes the modernist is overconfident about achieving certainty through human efforts and procedures of knowing.
Thus far, he agrees with a postmodernist critique of modernity. Yet postmodernists mistakenly conclude that knowing is irreducibly relative (to individuals, or to communities). Also, a postmodern turn from knowing to personal feeling can tempt us "to package the gospel as an answer to [one's personal] quest, but such a quest is an expression of 'consumer spirituality' that turns the gospel into something that meets my needs as I perceive them, not a genuine 'thirst for God' that participates in the redemption of the gospel."
2. Faith as a virtue is an achieved state, or disposition, of the human self involving what one notices, what one cares about, how one weighs options, how one deals with other researchers, and so on. Faith in Jesus Christ would include assent to certain beliefs and commitment of loving trust, but as a virtue it is more. Faith as a virtue transforms "our very *way* of assenting and consenting." The modernist reduction of faith to a mental act of assenting to statements may reduce humans "to disembodied minds who know 'objective truth'.... [But] we who know Jesus Christ by faith are not disembodied minds but persons with our own history and personalities through which we come to faith."
3. Faith in Jesus Christ is no substitute for "loving attention and diligent study" of a subject, Wilson says. "Rather, only through Christ do we know things in their proper relationship and in reality." Later he writes, "This means that all the ways in which we know – through our emotions, wills, minds, and bodies – must be transformed by the virtue of faith in order to conform to the Christian way of knowing." When one's subject matter deals with human nature, like psychology, Christian beliefs about persons and their capacities might shape one's investigations. In other subjects, like geography, Christian commitments might influence what one investigates and how one applies one's knowledge.
4. Humility is presented as the first of six intellectual virtues, which culminate in wisdom. In the lower panel, or predella, the figure of Bernard of Clairvaux pauses from writing his manuscript, *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*, when he sees a vision of Mary and the Christ Child. Bernard's very act of pausing from his writing calls attention to Christ as his inspiration and guide. In his book Bernard argues humility is essential to knowing, because pride "blots out the light of truth, so that if your mind is full of it you cannot see yourself as you really are." In the upper panel, the biblical figure of Rachel is depicted as a shepherdess, which relates her own humility to that of Christ, the Good Shepherd.
If time permits, the group may study the Wisdom window, which depicts Boethius and King Solomon, and explore its relation to the Trinity windows in the chancel.
5. The cosmic scope of wisdom is depicted in the first three verses of "Wisdom's Way" which have a Trinitarian structure, describing the outworking of wisdom in God's creative activity, Christ's incarnation, and the Spirit's guidance in faithfulness. Verse four summarizes that this wisdom is a divine gift "wrapped in love" by Christ, "the Way, the Truth, the Life." The life-encompassing personal and communal aspects of Christian wisdom are implicit in the prayer of the community in verse five: "walk with *us* along the way; / grant *us* knowledge and discernment / as *we* serve you day by day."

Departing Hymn

"Wisdom's Way" is on pp. 53-55 of *Where Wisdom is Found*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

The Wisdom of James

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Three Session Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Read James 1:1-2:26 / 3:1-18 / 4:1-5:20
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss appropriate sections of Wall's article
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 / 2 and 5 / 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the Letter of James describes the wise community of Jesus' disciples.
2. To discuss this letter's instruction on three topics—listening quickly, speaking slowly, and slowing anger—and the obstacles we face in heeding this advice.
3. To examine the letter's underlying conception of Christian wisdom as a divine gift received and exercised through the disciple community.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Where Wisdom is Found (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "God of Grace and God of Glory" locate the familiar tune CWM RHONDDA in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

"Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle supported wisdom based on sagacious experience combined with personal intelligence. In effect, the individual could think his or her way through life's issues through a combination of brainpower and experience," Michael McCullar has written. "Conversely, Scripture places experiential knowledge alongside supernatural insight provided through the Holy Spirit. There is no sense of 'going it alone' in the scriptural wisdom writings, especially in the letter penned by James." ("James in Wisdom Literature," quoted in *Where Wisdom is Found*, p. 64)

Human wisdom—in regard both to theoretical knowledge and practical know-how—is not something we can accomplish and maintain by ourselves. Rather, it requires the community of faithful disciples. This is the challenging heart of the counter-cultural message of the Letter of James.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for the wisdom of the Letter of James, which can be a mirror for examining our disciple communities.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read James 1:1-5 and 1:17-27 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study introduces the Letter of James as a Christian instruction in wise living. If you devote only one session to this topic, emphasize the *diaspora* context of the early Christian communities, present the underlying

conception of Christian wisdom as a divine gift received and exercised through the disciple community, and sketch what Robert Wall calls “the three essays” at the heart of the letter’s instruction. If time permits, ask three individuals to read the “essays” aloud.

Since Robert Wall’s essay, “The Wisdom of James,” is a wonderful, brief commentary on the entire Letter of James, consider extending your group study to several sessions in order to explore the letter more carefully. For example, in one session you might review the cultural context of the letter’s first audience (1:1-21) and discuss the first essay on “quick listening” (1:22-2:26). In another session, discuss the second essay on “speaking slowly” (3:1-18) and consider the conception of Christian wisdom as a divine gift received and exercised through the disciple community. In a third session, discuss the essay on “slowing anger” (4:1-5:6) and consider how the wise community responds to folly and unfaithfulness among its members (5:7-20).

Study Questions

1. The theme in the first essay is obeying the “perfect law of liberty” as a community through merciful actions toward the poor. Members may mention obstacles like the *individualism* that prevents us from identifying with the poor, or working with others to help them; a *consumer mentality* that asks “What’s in it for me?”; an *avoidance of responsibility* that says “It’s the government’s business”; a preference for *privacy* and *keeping one’s distance* that leads us to pay someone else to deal with the poor; *fear that we are not trained* to fix the problems; etc.
2. The theme of the second essay is finding careful teachers that communicate Christian wisdom faithfully, especially to members within the community. In addition to all of the cultural obstacles mentioned in response to question one, which apply here as well, members might mention the *desire to be admired* for teaching novelties, *envy of other’s wisdom*, etc. Consider what spiritual and educational practices prepare a person to receive “wisdom from above” and be a good communicator of Christian wisdom. How can wise congregations encourage those who are timid to share their wisdom, without pushing them toward vanity?
3. The theme of the third essay is avoiding the anger that arises from greed and envy, from a losing comparison of oneself with other people’s accomplishments or wealth. This is difficult in a market economy because we tend to value ourselves on the basis of our success in being consumers – in having more and better (more desirable, rare, or environmentally friendly) products or services. We are tempted to take a consumerist approach to personal relationships, which will turn us into consumers of one another. Those “practical atheists,” the merchant (4:13-17) and rich farmer (5:1-6), seem like only slight exaggerations of the crafty consumers we admire. How can wise congregations teach members to live as stewards of divine gifts of wealth and possessions?
4. Some may think this section is quaint because it predicts “the coming of the Lord is near” (5:8) and centers attention on an unusual practice of “anointing [the sick] with oil in the name of the Lord” (5:14). Wall sees 5:7-12 and 5:13-20 as parallel statements, each with “a triad of exhortations that recall important catchwords from the letter’s opening.” Anticipating the coming triumph of Christ encourages readers to reject the ways of the empire and embrace the community’s wisdom. Wall notes, “Patience and prayerfulness are the twin dispositions of an apocalyptic worldview.” Anointing the sick with oil may invoke the presence of Christ who “will raise them up” at the end of the age or in physical healing. Discuss how these practices, and the forgiveness of wayward members (5:19-20), witnessed to the truth of Christ’s reign. Are these or similar practices appropriate in the Church today?
5. In the extended quotation (*Where Wisdom is Found*, p. 64), Michael McCullar contrasts the ancient Greek conception of wisdom as “based on sagacious experience combined with personal intelligence” with the scriptural conception of wisdom as a divine gift received and exercised through the practices of the disciple community. Discuss how the Letter of James emphasizes the roles of God and the community in the formation of Christian wisdom. For many people today, “wisdom” has negative connotations of being disengaged from real life, self-aggrandizing, and even prideful. How would James respond to these charges?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Wisdom Transformed by Love

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss the tension between a contemplative life and an active life.
2. To introduce Thomas Aquinas's full-orbed view of wisdom as theoretical/contemplative and practical/active.
3. To consider how our encounter with God's beauty leads to the integration of the contemplative and active dimensions of wisdom.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Where Wisdom is Found (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "God is Love; His Mercy Brightens" locate the familiar tune SUSSEX in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

"Words are polluted," the novelist Walker Percy (1916-1990) warned. "Who is going to protect words like 'love,' guard against their devaluation?" Percy's judgment and challenge is issued to our modern world which has coarsened the language of virtue and vice.

Tom Hibbs takes on the challenge of guarding against the devaluation of wisdom, a central virtue in the Christian life. "The problem may be less severe with the language of wisdom if only because it is protected from abuse by disuse," he notes. "While we inevitably use terms such as 'courageous,' 'hopeful,' and 'generous,' we almost never employ 'wise.' The closest we come to 'wisdom' is in our terms 'prudent,' or 'learned,' or 'smart.' These terms themselves, none of which is equivalent to 'wisdom,' have been debased and in many cases transformed into what the ancients would have called vices rather than virtues. Contrary to our modern understanding of it, wisdom involves more than mere accumulation of information; it is more than mere problem-solving ability. It is not just cleverness. T. S. Eliot wonders at the loss of this virtue in the modern world, 'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?'"

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer printed in the study guide in unison.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Proverbs 8:1-13 and 8:22-31 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The rich treatment of wisdom by Thomas Aquinas may not be easy to understand and explain, but it is certainly worth the effort. He understands the two conflicting desires that we all have for a life focused on study, reflection, and greater understanding of ourselves and the world we care about, and a life devoted to active, loving service of other people and care for the creation. We may be tempted to choose one form of life and denigrate those who choose the other, but Aquinas teaches us to hold the two ways of life together in creative tension. That is how Christ, whom he calls “begotten wisdom,” lived.

Study Questions

1. The idea that wisdom begins and ends in wonder is part of the ancient philosophical legacy. Aquinas draws the idea from Aristotle (384-322 bc), who in his *Metaphysics* argued that our desire to know the ultimate causes of motion in the universe leads us to believe in an unmoved mover, who moves all things as an object of desire. “Thus, the hunger to behold the ultimate cause of reality, even to be transformed into that cause, is part of the philosophical tradition, as much as it is part of the Christian heritage,” Tom Hibbs writes.

Aquinas transforms this view with the biblical idea “that God, who is the creator of all that exists, descends to us in wisdom and love in order to raise us to him in friendship.” God infuses us with faith and responsive love. God manifests his wisdom in creation and through the perfect human life of Christ, whom Aquinas calls “wisdom incarnate.”

2. The ancients debated which sort of life, contemplative or active, would give one the most and highest pleasure. They thought of the “contemplative life” as filled with intellectual *activity*, with the enjoyment of the truth and beauty before one. (Think of a grandparent enjoying a grandchild – not changing diapers or correcting behavior, but fully dwelling in the child’s presence.) The “active life” included the projects of caring for oneself and others, of building and maintaining community. Would we take pleasure in accomplishing these goals of caring and community building if they were no longer necessary, if all that is complete and good was given for us to enjoy?

Given that we *must* care now for ourselves, for others, and for the creation, how should we balance contemplation and practical action?

3. Contemplation is so delightful for us, Aquinas believes, precisely because it is an encounter with beauty that stretches and improves our human capacities. Hibbs summarizes: “our abilities to *understand* what is good...are, in their encounter with beauty, enlarged in the sense that we are increasingly aware of being in the presence of what is really good. Our *desires* for the good...are so taken up into the object of beauty that they can be said to ‘hand themselves over’ to the object of their delight so as to remain in the object.” Beauty is also at the heart of the active life. When we lovingly care for ourselves, for others, and for the creation, we participate in, we image, God’s beauty. “The life in which contemplation overflows into action is an imitation of the divine activity, wherein God, both in his original act of creation and even more marvelously in his redemptive descent, communicates his wisdom, goodness, and beauty to creatures.”
4. Hibbs summarizes Aquinas’s view: “In our present life we cannot literally see God and gaze on divine truth directly. Thus, through revelation about appropriate ways of worshipping God, divine things are ‘expressed in words’ and ‘proffered to the senses’ (ST, I-II, 99, 3, ad 3). The practice of giving back to God fitting praise and gratitude allows the ‘ray of divine light to shine on us under the form of certain sensible figures’ (ST, I-II, 101, 2).”

How would Aquinas’s view of worship – as worship being God’s gift of friendship, coming to us in a way that accommodates himself to our human condition – change the way we value a worship service? In your personal and corporate worship, what elements of beauty intimate the divine beauty that draws us out of ourselves and makes us aware of God’s presence? Consider the architecture of the worship space, the use of images and symbols, the presence of nature (through broad windows), the use of music and silence, opportunities to share testimonies, the physical presence of other worshipers, and so on. Does everything in the service have to be “perfect” and go according to plan in order for it to be beautiful in the way Aquinas describes?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Sharing Wisdom as an Act of Love

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore how Reverend John Ames, the protagonist in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, is a model for sharing counsel and listening well to the wisdom in Scripture.
2. To consider how we can transmit wisdom of the generations to those whom we love in our families and congregations.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Where Wisdom is Found (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Happy the Home When God is There" locate the familiar tune ST. AGNES in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Interview

Interviewer: "What were the challenges in writing about a religious man, a good man?"

Marilynne Robinson: "I had no problem writing about a religious man. I know preachers are conventionally represented as frauds or scoundrels, hypocrites at best. In general, I try to steer clear of conventions. I know good characters are supposed to be uninteresting. . . . If the word 'good' implies narrowness, judgmentalism, or hypocrisy, then 'good' has become a synonym for 'bad,' nothing a writer would wish to explore sympathetically. But if goodness implies the attempt to be a positive presence in the world, a good father or mother, a good friend, or simply an honest human being — that requires a great deal of sensitivity and attention, as everyone knows who has tried it. . . . Self-seeking is dull and monistic by comparison. In any case, making my narrator both religious and good (though blind to some essential things as well) allowed me to give him a large, active, reflective mind." [Michelle Huneven, "Divine Invention," *LA Weekly* (January 20, 2005)]

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for opportunities to receive counsel from our elders, and to share our wisdom with the next generation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Proverbs 4:1-9 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

If members have read *Gilead*, keep the focus on Marilynne Robinson's depiction of Reverend Ames. If they have not, encourage members to recall occasions when they received loving counsel from their parents or adult

mentors. Explore the obstacles in our culture for sharing the wisdom of the generations within our families and congregations.

Study Questions

1. David Jeffrey highlights Reverend John Ames's thoughtful self-criticism, appreciation for and careful weighing of the opinions of others (even people with whom he disagrees), caring for others expressed through prayerful attention to their needs, and acknowledgement of the limits of his own insights and of human knowing. A thread that runs through these traits is Ames's humility. Ames speaks with "little or no presumption of obligation, only a natural hope of communion," Jeffrey notes. His "advice [is] born of experience, yet each such element is delivered without taint of self-righteousness or condescension."

Encourage members to discuss occasions when they received loving counsel from their parents or adult mentors, or shared their counsel with others, especially to a younger generation. What qualities of character in the advisor made all the difference in how his or her words were heard? Also discuss those occasions when counsel was not well given or readily received. What went wrong?

2. Hopefully, for many members this will be an opportunity to recall and express gratitude for loving counsel they received from an older generation. However, be sensitive that other members would not wish to hear advice from their parents or significant older adults in their life; these members may want to explain why, or they may be reluctant to discuss the context. Still other members may deeply yearn to have had such loving counsel, and they still grieve the fact that death or separation has prevented this time of sharing. You might discuss how your congregation can minister to those who are in each of these situations.
3. Encourage members to make a list of the major obstacles within our culture, families, and congregations to intergenerational counsel of any sort—e.g., our culture does not teach us to value the wisdom that comes with age; tragedy or divorce may take parents away from younger children; to pursue educational and career opportunities, grown children may move far away from their parents; often we become so busy that we do not take time for serious conversations with anyone; generations increasingly are separated by dramatic changes in popular culture, technology, and so on. Now add the obstacles to our sharing "the wisdom of the generations," the hard-won truths and time-tested practices of family life, culture, and religious faith tradition—e.g., we value new ideas and ways over time-tested truths; we do not make time to record family stories, study our own religious tradition, and so on.

Choose one of two of the obstacles and discuss how members might reorder priorities or amend practices to overcome those obstacles to seek counsel from an older generation or share wisdom with a younger generation.

4. Rote memorization of anything, including Scripture, is out of fashion today. Perhaps we are too worried that memorized words will remain intellectually undigested. After all, though Augustine believed "the wisdom of what a person says is in direct proportion to his progress in learning the holy scriptures," he warned, "and I am not speaking of intensive reading or memorization but real understanding and careful investigation of their meaning" (quoted in *Where Wisdom is Found*, p. 63).

Ames's insight is that his young son's memorization of passages whose meaning he cannot now understand, will be more valuable later in life when, through much experience, he grasps the meaning of the words in a richer way. Perhaps members can share stories of memorizing scripture passages, hymn texts, prayers, or poetry as a child, that much later in life became more spiritually meaningful to them.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

So Great a Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, and 2 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how growing in Christian wisdom requires that we honor and critically sift the insights of earlier generations of disciples
2. To identify obstacles in our culture to intergenerational sharing of wisdom.
3. To discuss how congregations can foster intergenerational conversations about both their own community's past and the Christian past.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-14 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Where Wisdom is Found (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "For All Your Saints, O Lord" locate one of the tunes, FRANCONIA or the more familiar ST. THOMAS (Williams), in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Jeanie Miley recounts her visit to Iona, the small island off the western coast of Scotland where in 563 Saint Columba established one of the most important monasteries in early medieval Europe. "Iona draws pilgrims from around the world for short visits and longer retreats. Those who visit Iona speak of 'tapping into ancient strength and wisdom' and 'feeling the power of the early Christians' there," she writes. "The ruins of the nunnery reminded me that we have not yet gotten it right about serving God, but the fact that pilgrims flock to those ruins indicates a yearning to retrieve something precious and rare from the cloud of witnesses who lived out their faith on that island. Returning to the mainland of Scotland, I thought about how alienated the generations are within most churches, each with its separate programs and services. I thought about how much we need each other and how part of the problem is that we value what is new more than what is old."

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading responsively the prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Proverbs 2:1-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Though ancient Israel's sages assumed "the Lord gives wisdom" (Proverbs 2:6), they were sure that great gift must be received, cultivated, and treasured through intergenerational dialogue. Thus it may be a sage speaking to a pupil, or a parent talking to a child that we overhear in Proverbs 2:1-11. In this discussion, Jeanie Miley explores the obstacles to intergenerational sharing of wisdom in congregations today. Miley is a great storyteller and in her article, "So Great a Cloud of Witnesses," she practices what she preaches: she shares wisdom by

recounting her stories of faith. As you discuss her insights, share some of Miley's stories. And encourage members to share their own stories of faith with one another.

Study Questions

1. Jeanie Miley focuses on three cultural attitudes. First, our "youth-worshipping" attitude values being young, looking young, acting young, and defying death; this stance devalues the experience and contributions of older people. Second, our "individualism-run-riot" leads to a "go-it-alone" approach for each person. Finally, we share a *disdain of tradition* in general, and Christians particularly "are conflicted about how to relate to [their own] past and move into the future." Do you think other cultural attitudes should be added to this list of obstacles?

Miley regrets her generation's leaving behind "the deep, eternal wisdom of adults...in the ash heap of plastic surgery, a reckless abandonment of tradition, a terrible fear of growing older, and a relentless need to be relevant." Is this only characteristic of 'Baby Boomers,' or do other generations share this disregard of age and tradition? Is our penchant for distinguishing and clichéd tagging of "generations" helpful, or is part of the problem Miley is describing? Some observers believe that young people today are more interested in recovering the past than their parents were. Do you agree? If so, what accounts for this difference?

2. Discuss how older members participate on a regular basis in your congregation's formal organizations for children and young people — e.g., Sunday School, children and youth groups, mission organizations, etc. Consider how older members interact with children and youth in other settings — e.g., supper clubs, family-based mission projects and trips, whole-church gatherings and Bible studies, projects that focus on the congregation's heritage, worship planning, etc. Would children and young people get to know the faith stories of older members over time through worship, congregational prayer times, etc.?
3. Unfortunately, as congregations grow and establish more generation-specific programs of study and worship (for children, youth, young adults, married adults with families, senior adults, etc.), they may provide fewer opportunities for intergenerational conversations on any topic. So, you might begin by discussing when members from different generations come together for worship, study, and fellowship. Also consider how more active members interact with homebound older adults.

Discuss how these conversations can involve *the community's past*. Do children hear an oral history of the congregation? Is anyone recording interviews with senior members? Has the congregation published its history? Are stories about the congregation shared in the context of worship? Do old and young share stories around the table at congregational meals? Also consider how these conversations might involve *the Christian past*. Are quotations and stories of faith from Christian history included in the worship guide or newsletter? Are there opportunities for young and old to explore the story of the Church together?

4. None of the older women were willing to share "some wisdom from their life in the community of faith that they would want to pass on to future generations." Jeanie Miley worries, "Was the resistance born of *humility* or *lack of awareness* about how profoundly their lives and their faith over a long period of time had impacted our congregation?...Had they been so busy doing good and living out their faith that they had not taken the time, or not had the time, to own the good gifts they had given to others? Or was there in them that *terrible sense of shame* about being old in a culture that worships youth? Were their reactions a result of coming to accept that whatever they might say would be passed over because, after all, what do the old know about life in this twenty-first century?"

If you were asked to share some wisdom from your life, how would you respond? Discuss how your response might depend on who made the request, on the specific context of the request (e.g., the congregation is facing an important decision, a history of the church is being written, etc.), on how your comments would be recorded and shared, and on who would be listening to or reading them. If you wanted to garner wisdom from the older members, whom would you seek out and how would you approach them for their counsel?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.