

What Is Discernment?

Discernment is one of the most needed — and often misunderstood — qualities in the Christian life and in the church today. We live in an age of endless information, competing voices, and teachings that sound biblical but may not be. The ability to distinguish truth from error is not optional for the believer who wants to remain steadfast.

Definitions

General definition: The ability to judge well; the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure.

In Christendom: Typically, discernment refers to the ability to decide between truth and error.

A view we reject: In certain church circles, discernment is understood as a “perception in the absence of judgment” with a view to obtaining spiritual direction. This is often presented as a mystical or subjective spiritual gift that enables a person to know who is saved or to directly receive and explain the will of God. This understanding is not found in Scripture and tends toward subjectivism rather than the objective authority of the Word.

The Greek Term

The key New Testament word is *διάκρισις* (*diakrisis*). It comes from the *κρίνω* (*krinō*) word group, which means “to distinguish, determine, decide, or judge.” The prefix “dia” intensifies the action. So *diakrisis* carries the sense of “the ability to distinguish and evaluate” with careful, thorough judgment.

Importantly, when we look at the context in which this word and concept appear (especially Hebrews 5:14), discernment is not primarily about moral decision-making between good and evil actions. It is about the ability to distinguish good doctrine from bad doctrine — to recognize sound teaching and reject that which deviates from the truth of Scripture.

Biblical Foundation for Discernment

Scripture does not treat discernment as a mysterious spiritual gift given to a select few. It presents it as a mark of spiritual maturity that every believer is called to develop through engagement with the Word of God.

Hebrews 5:11–14

“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of

righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”

The writer of Hebrews is not scolding his readers for failing to live morally perfect lives. He is addressing their inability to handle deeper doctrinal teaching. They are still infants in their understanding, needing milk instead of solid food. The “good and evil” in view here is not primarily ethical behavior but the ability to distinguish sound doctrine from false doctrine. Maturity comes through “practice” — repeated, careful engagement with the Word — which trains the believer’s spiritual senses to discern what is true and what is not.

Ephesians 4:11–16

Christ “gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”

The result of this equipping is stated clearly: “As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.”

Notice the corporate nature of this maturity, though individual application is certainly implied. God has given gifted leaders to the church for the purpose of doctrinal training and reinforcement. The goal is stability — believers who are not easily swayed by every new teaching or clever argument because they have been grounded in the truth through the consistent ministry of the Word.

Two Levels of Discernment

Most believers operate with some level of discernment, but there is a significant difference between what we might call theological discernment and exegetical discernment.

Theological Discernment

This is the “backstop” most Christians have. When you hear a teaching or a theological statement, something in you either confirms it or questions it based on what you have been taught over the years. It is real and valuable. It often comes from sitting under good preaching, reading solid books, or being raised in a sound church environment.

The limitation: Theological discernment by itself cannot defend or prove why something is right or wrong from Scripture. It simply recognizes that “this sounds like what I have always believed” or “this does not sound right to me.” When challenged, many believers can only say, “My pastor teaches this” or “I read this in a book by [trusted author].” That is not a weak

position in itself, but it leaves the believer dependent on secondary sources rather than the primary source — the Word of God itself.

Many sincere believers have grown up with strong theological convictions but find themselves unable to defend those convictions when someone asks them to explain a difficult passage or respond to an opposing view using the Bible alone. This is where growth in exegetical discernment becomes essential.

Exegetical Discernment

Exegetical discernment is the ability to go directly to the text of Scripture, observe it carefully in its context, interpret it according to sound principles, verify the interpretation across the broader testimony of Scripture, and then draw theological conclusions. It does not ignore what others have taught, but it does not rest there. It allows the believer to say, “Here is what the passage actually says, and here is why I understand it this way.”

This is the kind of discernment the writer of Hebrews calls the church to pursue. It produces stability, protects the gospel, and equips believers to serve one another with the truth. It is not reserved for pastors or scholars. It is the normal expectation for every maturing believer.

The Exegetical Process

To develop genuine exegetical discernment, we need a clear, repeatable process. This process is built on two foundational commitments: (1) the Scriptures are the ultimate authority, and (2) we approach the text with inductive reasoning rather than deductive reasoning.

Inductive vs. Deductive Reasoning

Deductive reasoning starts with a general statement or theological conclusion and then examines specific passages to see if they support it. While deduction has its place, when used as the primary method, it can easily lead to eisegesis — reading our ideas into the text rather than drawing the meaning out of the text.

Inductive reasoning starts with the specific text. We observe what is there, ask questions, note relationships, and only then move toward broader principles and conclusions. This is the method that lets the text speak for itself. It is the approach we want to cultivate.

The Literal, Grammatical, Historical Method

The process we use to understand Scripture is the Literal, Grammatical, Historical Method:

- **Literal:** We take the text in its natural, normal sense unless the context clearly indicates figurative language.
- **Grammatical:** We pay careful attention to the grammar, syntax, verb tenses, prepositions, and sentence structure — especially as we are able to work with the original languages.

- **Historical:** We seek to understand the historical and cultural context in which the words were originally written. What did this mean to the original audience?

The Four Steps

These four steps are to be followed in order. They move from careful attention to the text outward to theological understanding and application.

1. Observation

The goal of observation is to see what the text actually says before we try to interpret it. This step answers the basic questions: who, what, when, where, and how. We leave “why” for later.

- Identify the subject, verbs, direct object, indirect object, and prepositional phrases. Simplify the sentence to its main thought.
- Note key terms — especially words that are repeated, unusual, or theologically significant.
- Observe relationships in the text: comparison, contrast, cause and effect, explanation, climax, etc.
- Ask questions of the text — even questions you cannot yet answer. Write them down. This becomes the basis for discovery.
- Identify people in the passage and gather as much information about them as the text provides.

2. Interpretation

Interpretation answers the question: What does this passage mean? We consider the immediate context, the type of literature (narrative, letter, prophecy, poetry, etc.), the historical setting, and the cultural background. Then we say, “I think this means _____.”

At this stage we write down thoughts freely — even thoughts that may later prove incorrect. There are no wrong thoughts at this point, only wrong final conclusions. We deliberately avoid jumping to implications or applications too quickly. The goal is to understand what the original author intended to communicate to the original audience.

3. Verification

Verification tests whether our interpretation is correct by checking it against the rest of Scripture. We work from the inside out:

1. Does this interpretation fit the immediate context and the message of the book or letter in which it appears?
2. Is it consistent with other writings by the same author?
3. Is it consistent with other books of the same genre or time period?
4. Is it consistent with the New Testament as a whole?
5. Is it consistent with the Bible as a whole?

If the interpretation holds up under this testing, we can move forward with confidence. If it does not, we return to observation and interpretation and try again. There is only one correct interpretation for any given text, even if there are multiple legitimate applications.

4. Theological Impact

Finally, we ask what this passage teaches us about God, about Christ, about the Holy Spirit, about humanity, about salvation, or about the Christian life. We consider legitimate inferences and how this truth should shape our thinking, our affections, and our actions.

This is where careful exegesis bears fruit in the life of the believer and the church. But notice the order: theology and application come last, after we have done the hard work of observation, interpretation, and verification. When we reverse the order, we are much more likely to misuse the text.

Practical Example: Testing a Common Claim

One of the best ways to grow in discernment is to take a common teaching or claim and subject it to the exegetical process. We will use a teaching that many believers have heard, especially after national tragedies or natural disasters.

The Claim

Great disasters have struck this country in recent years including hurricanes, drought, floods, tornadoes, fires, earthquakes, and even an attack on our own shores from a foreign enemy.

What then about all of these disasters? Do they mean anything or are they just things that have happened with no ultimate cause behind them? We want to consider a very important text in this regard,

2 Chronicles 7:13-14 - “When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

This teaches that if Christians (or “God’s people”) in our nation will humble themselves, pray, seek God’s face, and turn from their wicked ways, then God will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land — meaning He will stop or prevent natural disasters and bring national blessing and restoration.

This teaching sounds biblical. It quotes Scripture. It calls people to considering God, forsaking evil, do what is right, and prayer, which is good. But does the text actually teach what is being claimed? We will test it using the four steps.

Step 1: Observation

First, we read the verse in its immediate context. Here is the text:

“When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

Key observations from the broader context (2 Chronicles 6–7):

- This is part of God’s direct response to Solomon after the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Chron 7:11-12). God appeared to Solomon at night.
- “My people who are called by my name” refers, in this context, to the nation of Israel in covenant relationship with Yahweh. The Temple was the center of their worship and sacrificial system.
- The disasters listed: drought (“shut up the heavens”), locusts, and plague — are specific covenant curses described in Deuteronomy 28 for Israel’s disobedience while living in the land (see also Leviticus 26 and the parallel account in 1 Kings 8).
- “Heal their land” refers to restoring physical agricultural fertility and removing the specific judgments on the literal land of Israel. It is about rain returning, crops being restored, and pestilence ending, not a general promise of political or economic blessing for any nation.
- The promise is conditional and national. It is given to Israel under the Mosaic covenant and tied to the Temple and the land God gave them.

Step 2: Interpretation

Considering the literary context, historical setting, and grammar, what does this passage mean?

- **Who is being addressed?** God is speaking to Solomon about the nation of Israel and the newly dedicated Temple. This stands within the Davidic covenant and the specific covenant relationship God had with Israel.
- **What is “the land”?** It is the physical land of Israel/Canaan. The judgments affect crops, livestock, and people living in that specific territory. Healing the land means restoring agricultural productivity and ending the covenant curses listed.
- **Who are “my people who are called by my name”?** In this context, it is Israel as the covenant nation chosen by Yahweh. They bore His name in a unique way under the old covenant. This is not a universal description that can be directly transferred to Christians living in any modern nation.
- **What is the nature of the promise?** It is a conditional covenant promise tied to the Mosaic covenant’s blessings and curses. National repentance would result in God restoring the land’s productivity. It is not presented as a universal formula that guarantees the absence of natural disasters for any people who pray and repent.

Step 3: Verification

Does this interpretation hold up when tested against the rest of Scripture?

Within 2 Chronicles and the Old Testament: Yes. The parallel account in 1 Kings 8 confirms the same context. The entire book of 2 Chronicles demonstrates the pattern: obedience brought blessing in the land; disobedience brought judgment, often in the form of drought, invasion, or other covenant curses. The prophets repeatedly called Israel to repent in order to avert or end such judgments (Joel, Amos, Hosea, etc.). This is entirely consistent with Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26.

In the New Testament and the Church age: No parallel promise exists that if the Church (or Christians living in a Gentile nation) repents, God will heal “our land” from natural disasters as a guaranteed outcome. The Church is not National Israel and has no territorial “land” promise comparable to Canaan (Ephesians 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:9-11 — believers are sojourners and aliens). Jesus and the apostles teach that disasters and suffering happen to all people in this fallen world (Luke 13:1-5; Matthew 5:45). Repentance is always needed, but it is not presented as a mechanism for controlling national calamities. The New Testament’s emphasis is on prayer, endurance in trials, trust in God’s sovereignty, and faithful gospel witness (Romans 8:18-25; James 5; 1 Peter 4).

Verification conclusion: The interpretation stands. Second Chronicles 7:13-14 is a conditional covenant promise given specifically to national Israel regarding their physical land and temple-centered worship. It does not teach that if Christians in a modern Gentile nation repent, God will heal that nation from natural disasters. The common claim changes the recipients (“my people”), changes the land, and universalizes a conditional, national, old-covenant promise. It fails the test of verification.

Step 4: Theological Impact and Discernment Conclusion

What does the passage rightly teach about God? God is sovereign over natural events and can use disasters as discipline or judgment. God responds to genuine humility, prayer, and repentance from His covenant people. God desires relationship and restoration more than judgment. God keeps His covenant promises with precision.

Where the common claim goes wrong:

1. It changes “my people” from national Israel in covenant with Yahweh to Christians in a modern nation.
2. It changes “their land” from Israel’s physical territory to a modern nation-state.
3. It ignores the temple and Mosaic covenant context that ties the promise to specific judgments and agricultural restoration.
4. It treats a conditional, national, old-covenant promise as a universal formula for the Church age.

The result of this misapplication is often false expectations (“If enough Christians repent, God will stop hurricanes”) and confusion or disillusionment when disasters continue. It can also distract the Church from its actual mission and identity in this age.

A Biblical Response to Natural Disasters

While we cannot claim 2 Chronicles 7:14 as a formula that guarantees the healing of our land, Scripture still gives clear direction for how God’s people should respond to disasters and suffering. Here are biblical principles:

- **Pray with humility.** Pray for victims, for mercy, for gospel opportunities, and for wisdom (Philippians 4:6-7; James 5:13-18).
- **Serve and show compassion.** Be the body of Christ through relief efforts, giving, and practical help (Galatians 6:9-10; James 2:15-17).
- **Proclaim the gospel.** Disasters remind us that this world is broken (Romans 8:18-25). Point people to Christ and who will one day make all things new (Revelation 21).
- **Endure with hope.** Our ultimate hope is the new creation, not the absence of trials in this life (2 Corinthians 4:16-18; Revelation 21:1-5).

How to Grow in Biblical Discernment

Discernment is a skill that grows through practice. Here are practical steps:

1. **Practice the process regularly.** Take teachings, social media posts, books, and sermons and run them through Observation → Interpretation → Verification → Theological Impact. Start with shorter passages or clear claims.
2. **Prioritize expositional teaching.** Sit under faithful verse-by-verse teaching that models good hermeneutics (Ephesians 4:11-16). This trains your instincts over time.
3. **Read Scripture inductively yourself.** Do not rely only on devotionals or theology books. Open the Bible, observe, ask questions, and seek context. Use tools after you have done your own work.
4. **Test everything (1 Thessalonians 5:21).** Develop a healthy habit of examining claims that sound biblical. Even well-meaning teachers can misapply texts.
5. **Stay humble and teachable.** True maturity includes the willingness to correct previous misunderstandings when Scripture shows otherwise. Discernment grows best in community with other believers who also value careful handling of the Word.

Key Takeaways

1. Discernment is the skill of distinguishing sound doctrine from error. It is developed through maturity in the Word, not through mystical experience.
2. Most believers operate primarily on theological discernment. This is a starting point but is insufficient for defending the faith or spotting subtle error.
3. Exegetical discernment - using inductive reasoning and the Literal-Grammatical-Historical method allows you to test claims directly from Scripture with confidence.
4. The four steps (Observation, Interpretation, Verification, Theological Impact) provide a reliable, repeatable process that honors the text and protects against eisegesis.
5. Popular teachings often fail under exegetical scrutiny because they ignore context, change the original recipients, or universalize conditional covenant promises.
6. Rightly handling the Word builds stability, protects the gospel, equips you to serve others, and brings glory to God. It is worth the lifelong effort.

The Path to Biblical Discernment: From Instinct to Insight



THEOLOGICAL INSTINCT (THE "BACKSTOP")
 Recognizing truth based on past teaching without the ability to prove it scripturally.



DEDUCTIVE

Starting Point:
 A theological conclusion.

Primary Risk or Result:
 High risk of reading ideas into the text (Eisegesis).



INDUCTIVE

Starting Point:
 The specific Bible text.

Primary Risk or Result:
 Allows the text to speak for itself (Exegesis).



1. OBSERVATION & 2. INTERPRETATION

Note what the text actually says before determining the author's original intent.



3. VERIFICATION

Test your interpretation against the context of the book and the entire Bible.



4. THEOLOGICAL IMPACT

Apply the truth to your life only after completing the first three steps.



EXEGETICAL DISCERNMENT (THE "GOAL")

Going directly to the text to observe, interpret, and verify truth independently.

MATURITY THROUGH PRACTICE:

Discernment is not a mystical gift but a skill trained by engaging the Word.