

Discernment

Listening with the ‘ear of the heart’

“The Spirit not only inspires in us the words, but guides the movement of our hearts.”

John Calvin

Discernment

Toward a definition: What it *is* and what it *is not*. A series of definitions which aim to describe this important but sometime illusive practice of faith.

First off - what it is *not*: Discernment is not about what color carpet to buy for the living room, or whether to have a burger or sushi for lunch. These are simple matters of choice which can be decided using nothing more than impulse, personal preference, and common sense.

Discernment is needed when the matter at hand is not easily decided by personal preference, impulse, or common sense. Discernment is for the big gnarly questions which require prayer and which have significant consequences. We may practice discernment about a great many small matters - but when we do that we are simply laying the groundwork and establishing the skills and habits we will need when confronted with something truly worthy of discernment.

Examples of discernment-worthy matters would be: Do I take the new job offered to me? Should I move and care for my elderly parent? What should I do in my relationship with my spouse? Should I marry? Should I separate? Should the church embark on a new ministry initiative? Should we call this or that minister?

A Collection of Definitions:

“True discernment calls us beyond the well-tended gardens of conventional religious wisdom to the margin between the known and the unknown, the domesticated and the wild.”

John Mogabgab *Weavings* November/December 1995 *Discerning the Spirits*



"Cassian said that discernment is the eye and lamp of the body . . . The monk who discerns

- is kept from veering to the left in careless sin, sluggishness of spirit, and pretext of control;
- is kept from veering to the right in stupid presumption and excessive fervor beyond restraint.

Cassian also offered the image of the test applied by the money-changer who discerned true gold. We are to place thoughts on the scales of our heart and weigh them with exacting care. '1. Is it filled with what is good for all? 2) Is it heavy with the fear of God? 3) Is it genuine in the feelings which underlie it? 4) Is it lightweight because of human show or because of some thrust toward novelty? 5) Has the burden of vainglory lessened its merit or diminished its luster?'

For Cassian, humility was the path for the search. A monk was to disclose his thoughts to his spiritual guide. Self-disclosure and obedience, which produce humility, lead to discernment." from Discerning God's Will Together by Morris and Olsen p.30.

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“...The fundamental meaning of discernment is discrimination. Before we can discriminate, however, we have to notice both outside and inside ourselves, both circumstances and our inner responses. We have to make judgments about what is more conducive to our spiritual life, and then to judge that *this* thing is better than that one, *this* action is better than other options for achieving the goal. . . Entering into discernment, then, means becoming increasingly able to notice where God is at work in the world and in one’s own life, increasingly desirous of choosing the ‘more’, and, God willing, increasingly generous with one’s own life in response.” Elizabeth Liebert *The Art of Discernment* ix-x.

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“Discernment is the result of a grand effort at interior liberation, leading to encounter with God and to a fully free personal choice, which is a personal response to a personal call from God. To live discernment is to find God in all things.” The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, p. 163 by Cowan & Futrell.

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“The heart of discernment is to pay attention to what is going on inside.” John Ackerman

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“[The big questions] do not present a clear and obvious choice. In situations like these, we cannot think our way to a good choice; we have to pray our way. For these choices, the spiritual tradition provides the process of discernment. The original meaning of the word in Latin is quite telling: *discernere* is ‘to sift apart’ as in sifting wheat to remove the chaff.” Kris Haig in *Hungry Hearts* Vol. XI #2.

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“While we tend to use the term discernment freely, when we speak of spiritual discernment, we refer to ‘a prayerful, informed, intentional effort to distinguish God’s voice from other voices that influence us.’” Irene Turner quoting Suzanne G. Farham, Stephanie A. Hull, and R. Taylor McLean. *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberation*

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“God is always speaking to us – individually and as people of God – at different times and in many ways: through dreams and visions, prophets and messengers, scripture in tradition, experience and reason, nature and events . . . Discernment is the spiritual practice that accesses

and seeks to understand what God is trying to say.” Michael Christensen & Rebecca Laird in *Discernment* (a collection of Henri Nouwen quotes) ix.

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“For Henri Nouwen, *spiritual discernment* is hearing a deeper sound beneath the noise of ordinary life and seeing through appearances to the *interconnectedness* of all things, to gain a vision of how things hang together (*theoria physike*) in our lives and in the world. Biblically, *discernment* is spiritual understanding and experiential knowledge, acquired through disciplined spiritual practice, of how God is active in our lives, which leads to a life ‘worthy of our calling’ (Col. 1:9). It is a spiritual gift and practice that ‘ascertains and affirms the unique way God’s love and direction are manifested in our lives, so that we can know God’s will and fulfill our calling and mission within the mysterious inter-workings of God’s love.’” Henri Nouwen *God’s Will, Acceptance of* (1990) unpublished notes.

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A Catechism for the Christian Discipline of Discernment

Q: What is the goal of discernment?

A: To know what is the will of God for you -- with the byproduct of growing deeper in love with God and those around you.

Q: What gives us the hope of knowing God's will?

A: We are promised in scripture that when we seek, God will be found.

{Jeremiah 29:11-13} "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for evil, to provide for you a future with a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart."

{Romans 12:1-2} "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may demonstrate what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Q: Is discernment an individual or a community based discipline?

A: Both. However, we should not participate in group discernment unless we have first practiced discernment in and about our own life.

Q: Why should we practice discernment on our own before participating in community discernment?

A: Because discernment of God's will begins with the relationship we have with God. As we seek God, offering our bodies as a living sacrifice and praying without ceasing, we become acquainted with God's ways and we become certain of God's love for us. When we are seeking God with all *our heart* -- we are assured that God will meet us. To attempt the practice of discernment in a group without having practiced it as a way of personal faith would be like joining an athletic team and attempting to play a team sport without ever having played or practiced before.

Q: Does that mean that discerning God's will is a decision to *live all of life seeking God* more than it is a procedure I follow when I have a concern?

A: Yes. We learn to know God's will and we find courage to follow it as we grow in a loving and trusting relationship with God. When we trust and love God we find that discernment becomes as natural as being able to anticipate the response of a close friend or spouse whom we've loved for many years.

Q: What benefits accrue to those who live seeking to discern God's will?

- A:
- 1) The sure knowledge of God's love for us.
 - 2) A sense that our lives and actions have meaning because they participate with God in establishing God's kingdom.
 - 3) The fruits of the Holy Spirit -- *Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Gentleness, and Self-control.* {Galations 5:22}

Q: Are there potential pitfalls when we seek to discern God's will?

A: Yes. Those who want to discern God's purposes should keep watch for these 'red flags:'

- 1) Failure to be disinterested. It is easy to substitute our will for God's will. Our goal is nicely summarized by the following mantra, "God's Will Only. Nothing More. Nothing Less. Nothing Else. God's Will Only.
- 2) If you have a sense of absolute certainty about what to do, be sure to remember Paul's observation, "I find it to be a rule, that when I intend the good -- evil lies close at hand." {Romans 7:21}
- 3) If it depends on you only. God rarely leads us away from the community of fellow believers who will test our sense of discernment for authenticity. Further, God rarely entrusts to only one person's judgment the movement of God's Spirit.
- 4) If we think it has to be done right now. The present is the portion of discernment which is hardest to interpret. All practice of discernment allows substantial time for God to clarify and correct what we believe has been discerned. Remember that one fruit of God's Spirit is *patience*.
- 5) If it has anger or the need to fault/shame others. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them. . . We love, because God first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates a neighbor -- that person is a liar; for anyone who does not love neighbors who they can see, cannot love god whom they have not seen." {1st John excerpts from Chapter 4}
- 6) If it is a secret or mystery which we will not share with others. It is very problematic to act on discernment which has not been shared with peers and has not let others test it for authenticity.
- 7) When what we discern is more about having our own desires/needs met than it is about the redemption of God's world. When we practice discernment we must be vigilant against any selfish attempt to 'get our way' or to 'arrange a private solution' which fails to consider the needs of all.

8) Trying to discern hurriedly.

“It is because it kills love that hurry is the great enemy of the spiritual life. Hurry lies behind much of the anger and frustration of modern life. Hurry prevents us from receiving love from the Father or giving it to his children. That is why Jesus never hurried. If we are to follow Jesus, we must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives — because, by definition, we cannot move faster than the one we are following.” John Ortberg in *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*

The Tyranny of the Urgent - Our lives are filled with urgent voices which demand our attention and threaten great calamity if ignored. And yet, it is seldom true that one can listen attentively to the still small voice of God when being accosted by the bellicose voice of the urgent. If we want to discern we must refuse to be bullied by the urgent attending to that which is truly needful while ignoring the rest.

Q: Is discernment *only* about praying and seeking spiritual enlightenment?

A: No. When we engage in discernment we seek enlightenment through every resource available.

- 1) We seek out other voices to remind us that we don’t know every dog-gone thing:
 - of friends, colleagues, mentors, family
 - of those who have heretofore kept silence
 - of those who are of a different mind
 - of experts in the field

- 2) We use all of the faculties of our mind:
 - reading books, articles, sermons, prayers
 - searching to collect the best understanding of the issue at hand.
 - we think and reflect for hours about the question at hand.
 - we experiment with various possible options . . . living as if they were our decision for a week in order to test them.

- 3) We use God’s gift of imagination to ‘think outside the box.’

- 4) We ‘listen’ to our emotions and intuitions knowing that God speaks to us by both consolation and desolation.

Discernment 101

I. **Select the matter which you choose to bring to God for discernment.**

- A. Be specific
- B. Phrase it so that it can be answered clearly.

II. **Proceed to lose your own willfulness — You *must* be *indifferent*.**

A. **God's Will:**

Nothing More . . .

Nothing Less . . .

Nothing Else . . .

B. Give up your own opinion — yielding yourself utterly before God. To accept Christ is to yield self-will to the will of God by allowing yourself to be ‘yoked’ to

Christ. “Take my yoke upon you *and learn from me* [my italics]. Disciples

are no longer autonomous agents . . . we are servants of God

C. Test for indifference —

- 1. If you sense lingering willfulness return to Letter A above, take your time, indifference is a *process* of becoming open to God alone

III. **Root your question in Sacred Scripture**

- A. What places in scripture seem to speak to this issue?
What images from scripture offer enlightenment?

IV. **Listen**

- A. What voices do you need to hear?
- B. What voices have been silenced?

C. Sit silently listening for God seeking to know God's will. (as long as you dare)

V. Explore all the options

A. How many possible paths or options can you think of (keeping within the discipline of the guiding principal named in section I)?

List them.

B. Take each and improve upon it until it is as good as you can imagine.

Make each the best it can be.

VI. Weigh the options

A. What fruits will each likely bear? Are they the fruits of God's Spirit?

B. What is the source of this option — test for any selfish or known ulterior motive.

C. John Cassian's five way test:

1. Is it good for all?

2. Is it heavy with the fear of the Lord?

3. Is it genuine in the feelings underlying it?

4. Has it lost its substance (weight) because of human show or some

thrust toward novelty?

5. Has the burden of vainglory lessened its merit or diminished its luster?

D. Live for a week or more with each option assuming that you took it. Search for Consolation and Desolation relative to each option.

VII. Choose and then state the way you discern to be God's will.

A. *When discerning in a group* ask the following question of each participant:

“May we proceed in the way just stated?”

They, in turn, choose one of only 4 possible answers.

1. I like the way as stated. (consensus)
 2. I am concerned, but I will support the way just stated. (consensus)
 3. I am uneasy . . . reasons . . . but will stand aside. (consensus)
 4. I cannot support the way just stated. (non-consensus)
- B. If group is seriously divided, not there yet, or at an impasse - consider the following as ways to move forward (*no priority in order*):
1. Revisit the guiding principal and test for indifference, then repeat the discernment movements listed above.
 2. Take time for further prayer and reflection.
 3. Cast lots.
 4. Appoint someone to decide for the group.
 5. Vote by majority rule.
 6. Drop it.

VIII. Rest with/in the discerned way

- A. What does your heart say to you?
- B. Consolation? Desolation?
- C. Give the decision at least a week of prayerful reflection wherein God may move you to consolation or desolation about the matter.

D. GOD'S WILL:

NOTHING MORE . . .

NOTHING LESS . . .

NOTHING ELSE . . .

A Way of Thinking Theologically About Discernment & the Holy Spirit

1. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE INTERIORITY OF GOD

First Corinthians 2:10-11 Revised English Translation

“For the Spirit explores everything, even the depths of God's own nature. Among human persons, who knows what a person is but the person's own spirit within? In the same way, only the Spirit of God knows what God is. This is the Spirit that we have received from God. We did not learn this from books or going to school; we learned it from God who taught us person to person through Jesus.”

2. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE INTERIORITY OF OUR SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Romans 8:26-27 NRSV

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

3. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE INTERIORITY OF ALL CREATION

Heaven and earth are created by God's design and are sustained by God's love. God provides for all creation through the work of the Holy Spirit. (Ps. 104:27, 145:15)

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Thus to become a discerning person - one expects to find God in all things:

- 1) **The metaphysical** - God, the mystery outside what we can know.
- 2) **The physical** - All of creation.
- 3) **In oneself** - in that truest part of one's life. The Holy inner life which is the life of Christ within.

FOR BEGINNERS:

Discernment is done with application of doctrine, scripture, and objective criteria.

FOR THOSE FARTHER ALONG:

Those farther along will be able to recognize internal movements as signs of the struggle to know God. Reason and will give the direction.

FOR THOSE WHO ARE SPIRITUALLY MATURE:

For the spiritually mature, feelings and movements of the spirit are the very language of God —and illumination is the interpretation of that language.

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To *discern* is to sort out, to distinguish between the Holy Spirit and other spirits.

To *diagnose* is to seek a solution to something that has no solution because it is mystery.

Discernment, on the other hand, seeks a discriminatory appreciation of mystery and a desire to respond to the mystery according to God's will. For this reason corporate discernment is enhanced by dialogue rather than discussion by deep sharing rather than debate.

ENEMIES OF DISCERNMENT:

† **Hurry —**

- * “It is because it kills love that hurry is the great enemy of the spiritual life. Hurry lies behind much of the anger and frustration of modern life. Hurry prevents us from receiving love from the Father or giving it to his children. That is why Jesus never hurried. If we are to follow Jesus, we must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives — because, by definition, we cannot move faster than the one we are following.” John Ortberg in The Life You’ve Always Wanted
- * *The Tyranny of the Urgent* - Our lives are filled with urgent voices which demand our attention and threaten great calamity if ignored. And yet, it is seldom true that one can listen attentively to the still small voice of God when being accosted by the bellicose voice of the urgent. If we want to discern we must refuse to be bullied by the urgent attending to that which is truly needful but ignoring the rest.

† **Willfulness —**

- * One cannot be discerning and willful at the same time. We either want God’s will, or we want some *other* will (our own, that of the institution, of the culture...).
- * If you have a sense of absolute certainty that you are right - you cannot discern. Remember that for now, “we see through a mirror dimly...” and that whenever we “intend the good - evil lies close at hand.” (I Cor 13, and Rom. 7:21)

† **Anger / the need to Shame Others —**

- * God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ... 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

† **Secrecy or Sense that *only you* know what God wants —**

- * The will of God is rarely confined to one person (particularly in the context of communal discernment). The process of group discernment *requires* that everyone contribute the things they think they have discerned. Keeping secret what you think you heard is problematic. The way we test our discernment is to let others know it and adjudicate its merit along with us.