



DISCERNMENT: GROUNDED IN GOD

Four Biblical Foundations for Individual and Group Spiritual Discernment

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Introduction

Some people have an uncanny knack for selecting just the right gift for family or friends. Last Mother's Day my husband demonstrated once again that he belongs to that rare group of people.

Ever since I switched from drinking coffee to tea at breakfast, I've had a problem. What should I do with my used tea bag? Morning after morning, my husband has watched me swirl the tea bag in my cup, looking in vain for a place to put it. The plate of toast is not a good candidate because the tea bag might leak liquid and make the toast soggy. And even though the table surface is washable, I'm a little too persnickety to set the tea bag directly on the table. After awhile I get up, go to the cupboard, find another saucer, and set the used tea bag on it.

What appeared on our breakfast table on Mother's Day morning was a simple but beautiful handcrafted ceramic tea bag holder – just the right size for my morning tea bag. When I saw it, I laughed with pleasure because even though I hadn't yet realized what I needed, my observant husband had been paying close attention.

To choose a fitting gift for another person requires an act of discernment. Because my husband loves me, he cares for my well-being. He listens to me and notices what I need, what I like. He takes delight in choosing gifts I will enjoy. In a similar way,

those who want to engage in fruitful spiritual discernment must enter into a relationship with God – loving, listening, noticing, and making choices in light of God's desires.

Often spiritual leaders such as pastors, elders/deacons, or Sunday school teachers are invited to assist or guide others in the task of spiritual discernment. People come to them wanting to know what God's call or God's will is in their life. Sometimes they expect leaders to give them answers; other times they are looking for five easy steps that will assure a good decision. Neither of these options is satisfactory. More than following prescribed rules, good spiritual discernment requires a loving, intimate relationship with God that makes it possible to recognize God's desires and ways. Only then can God's people faithfully and fruitfully discern God's call in their lives.

Definition of Spiritual Discernment

At the heart of the matter, spiritual discernment means **distinguishing the way of life from the way of death**. When Moses called the children of Israel to choose life and blessing rather than death and curses, he reminded them:

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away...No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and

your heart for you to observe (Deuteronomy 30:11, 14).

In other words, God's presence and guidance are near at hand. God wants to be made known, wants to become our ever-present companion on the journey. We are not left alone to face the challenging task of discerning God's ways in the world.

The Christian Vocation Project team defines spiritual discernment as "our effort to tap into the flow of divine wisdom." They go on to say:

Discernment means distinguishing God's Spirit from other spirits that are present in a given time and place – such as the spirit of a nation, the spirit of the times, the spirit of competition. To put it another way, discernment is distinguishing the voice of God from other voices that speak to us: the voice of our parents echoing from years past, the voices of friends, voices of urgency or fear. These voices are neither bad nor good in and of themselves. God often speaks to us through them. But, if followed indiscriminately, such voices can dominate us and lead us along a wrong path.

Discernment is a prayerful, informed, and intentional attempt to sort through these voices to get in touch with God's Spirit at work in a situation and to develop a sense of direction in which the Spirit is leading. Discernment is more a journey than a destination. We may not find answers for all our concerns, but we can be receptive to God's presence as we ponder the questions.

Sound rational analysis based on the best available information is crucial to good discernment. Yet spiritual discernment goes beyond the analytical to engage our senses, feelings, imaginations, and intuition as we wrestle with issues. It often points toward a decision, but it is **not** problem-solving. The goal of our discernment efforts is to find the mind of Christ (Suzanne F. Farnham, Stephanie A. Hull, and R. Taylor McLean, *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberation*. Morehouse Publishing House, 1996, pp. 5-7).

Because spiritual discernment is always an ongoing process and thus never com-

pleted, Christians are required to continue to trust God's Spirit for direction. Though this open-ended process may be uncomfortable for some, it is a path that honors the dynamic, creative work of God. Seeing endless potential for transformation, God is always making life out of death, always renewing, restoring and recreating.

In writing about communal discernment in the church, Tilden Edwards acknowledges the ongoing nature of this practice by using the language of "sensing" rather than "knowing" to describe the act of discernment. Even though God wants to be made known, "we are dealing with the partially hidden, mysterious, ever-dynamic life of God's Spirit in our midst." Edwards acknowledges that this work can be both frustrating and exciting and "may be maddening to people who want a clear, defined, finished picture of reality."

Edwards goes on to explain:

Congregations, like individuals, find an awesome, intimate Mystery at the heart of their being. To be in living, ongoing touch with this gracious Mystery, one needs a willingness to live while probing an expectant darkness, trusting that enough light will be given for what we need to understand and do at a given time...God will not give up on us, but in our freedom we can give up on God as we miss or refuse the endless openings of the Spirit we are offered day by day (Foreword by Tilden Edwards in *Uncovering Your Church's Hidden Spirit* by Celia Allison Hahn. Alban Institute, 2001, p. viii).

Since there are no shortcuts for good discernment, those who want to choose life and not death need to invest in understanding the process. An important place to begin is with an exploration of scriptural foundations for this practice.

Four Biblical Foundations for Spiritual Discernment

1 ♦ *Grounded in God's Love*

Spiritual discernment begins in love. It is rooted in God's original blessing of all creation and God's desire for peace and wholeness for all people in all places. Genesis 1:27-28 describes the beginning foundation of our relationship with God:

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them,
male and female he created them.
God blessed them, and God said to them,
"Be fruitful and multiply..."

No matter what our personal histories are and no matter whether our lives have been troubled or comfortable, God's first (and ultimate) intention for us is blessing. As beloved children, we carry God's image deep within, an image which can be marred and distorted but not destroyed.

Some Christian traditions have emphasized our original blessed state more than others. The Celtic Christian tradition honored God's desire to bless in a water blessing ritual at the birth of a child. As family and neighbors gathered to celebrate, the watching-women surrounded the mother and child with chants and songs. As the new mother placed three drops of water on the child's forehead, she invoked the Trinity to bless and protect as she prayed:

In the name of God,
In the name of Jesus,
In the name of Spirit,
The perfect Three of power.

The little drop of the Father
On thy little forehead, beloved one.

The little drop of the Son
On thy little forehead, beloved one.

The little drop of the Spirit
On thy little forehead, beloved one.

To aid thee, to guard thee,
To shield thee, to surround thee.

The little drop of the Three
To shield thee from sorrow.

The little drop of the Three

To fill thee with Their pleasantness.

O the little drop of the Three
To fill thee with their virtue.
(Esther de Waal, *Every Earthly Blessing: Celebrating a Spirituality of Creation*. Servant Publications, 1991, pp. 29-30)

Just as Jesus received God's gracious blessing at his baptism, so everyone who follows Christ is offered the same affirmation: "You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased." To be grounded in such love and blessing means to be at home with God, to be secure in God's presence, and at peace with God's purposes. Because God's love toward us never ends (Romans 8:38-39), we can confidently trust in God's guidance and enter the journey of discernment with peaceful hearts.

2 ♦ Grounded in God's Covenant and Call

Though the story of humankind begins in blessing, before long everyone discovers that blessing is not the only theme. The biblical foundation of spiritual discernment continues in Genesis 3 in a story which finds the Creator God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze. Even though the human creatures had already disobeyed God's command not to eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God still seeks them out. God's voice rings through the garden, "Where are you?" – a call for relationship.

The God who loves and blesses at creation does not give up when we disobey or turn away. Instead, God offers a life-giving covenant. Like a doting parent, God reaches out to embrace and guide us:

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk...
I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.
I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.
(Hosea 11:3a, 4)

In the midst of such intimacy, we are invited to become God's people, living in the warmth of daily companionship with our Maker and Savior. And though discernment is grounded in God's love, we must eventually choose whether or not to receive that love and enter into the covenant relationship God offers – a covenant of faithful love. Like the children of Israel, we may turn away from God's outstretched arms. What God desires, of course, is our willing and whole-hearted commitment. That choice is our first major act of discernment.

When we respond to the call to enter a covenant relationship, we also receive a call to use our gifts, energy and creativity for God's purposes in the world – a second major act of discernment. Within each human soul God has planted potential for bringing healing and reconciliation to a world which does not yet fully reflect God's hopes and desires. Though the journey of discovering our gifts may be long and arduous, we are greatly aided by the practice of spiritual disciplines: silence, prayer, meditation on scripture, and worship with God's people. Through these disciplines and through participation in Christian community (spiritual friendships, spiritual direction, small groups, Sunday school, and other structures of accountability), we enter an environment of love and care which stimulates self-understanding and the discovery of gifts.

As we receive the discerning listening of faithful sisters and brothers, we find courage both to name and use our gifts. We learn to discern: What is my deepest desire? What makes my heart leap up? What draws me? Gives life to me and to others? Though it is difficult for many to trust these inner promptings, such careful listening and noticing clarify our call from God. Like Mary, whose first response to God's call was a question, "How can this be?" (Luke 1:34), we may feel overwhelmed. We may even turn away in fear or disbelief and follow other paths. Poet May Sarton speaks

candidly of the consequences of the twisting paths we may choose:

Now I become myself.
It's taken time, many years and places.
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces..."
(*Collected Poems 1930-1973*. Norton, 1974, p. 156)

Yet God persists. As we learn to listen more faithfully to the Spirit who reveals truth (John 15:26), we receive dependable guidance for discerning our call – at least enough light to take the next steps. Often time is needed, the growth of trust, learning the ways of God, and a willingness to risk moving into unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable places. As we take each faltering step in faithful response, the indwelling Spirit of God confirms our movement and empowers us to fulfill our call.

3 ♦ *Grounded in God's Vision*

As important as self-understanding is for the fruitful practice of discernment, it is not all that is required. We also need an understanding of God's ways and God's vision for the world. Because our gifts are given to bring glory to God and to enable us to participate in God's renewing work in the church and in the world, our personal discernment must take place within the larger context of God's desires for our world.

Critical to understanding God's ways is the capacity to recognize **where God is** and **where God is not** in any given experience. How do we recognize God's presence? One mystic used symbolic language to describe God's presence as a fragrance left behind – we can tell where God is at work by a characteristic fragrance!

When John the Baptist was in prison, he wondered whether he still recognized God's presence. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus did not answer the question. Instead he pointed to the same signs of God's presence as the prophets of the Old Testament had proclaimed:

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them (Matthew 11:4,5).

In other words, God is surely present wherever freedom, healing and reconciliation flourish. Whenever we see life coming forth from death, we recognize an unmistakable sign of God at work.

Each Christian is called to discern how his or her little life fits into the larger story of what God is doing or desires to do in the world. Describing this intersection, Frederick Buechner once defined vocation as "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." Though we may be tempted to work at God's agenda with our own energy and vision, such efforts eventually falter. Discernment is not about doing **more**. Even though God's vision is immense, God isn't asking any of us to bring it to fulfillment alone. When we have discerned our particular call in light of the world's need and act in obedience to that call, we discover amazing reservoirs of energy and purpose. Parker Palmer says,

When the gift I give to the other is integral to my own nature, when it comes from a place of organic reality within me, it will renew itself – and me – even as I give it away. Only when I give something that does not grow within me do I deplete myself and harm the other as well, for only harm can come from a gift that is forced, inorganic, unreal (*Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000, pp. 49-50).

What's more, we discover the wealth of the Christian community as each offers the gift that has been given. Palmer goes on to say:

Abundance does not happen automatically. It is created when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common store. Whether the scarce resource is money or love or power or words, the true law of life

is that we generate more of whatever seems scarce by trusting its supply and passing it around...

Abundance is a communal act, the joint creation of an incredibly complex ecology in which each part functions on behalf of the whole and, in return, is sustained by the whole. Community doesn't just create abundance – community *is* abundance (pp. 107-108).

Jesus' disciples learned this amazing lesson when they found themselves facing a hungry crowd without enough food to feed them. Perplexed and perhaps a trifle irritated, they asked Jesus, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" As he often did, Jesus responded with yet another question: "How many loaves do you have?" In other words, "What do you already have that can be used here?" Taking stock, they found they had seven loaves of bread, which Jesus blessed. After they distributed it to the crowd, who ate and were filled, they gathered up an incredible seven baskets full of leftovers (Mark 8:1-9).

Instead of being overwhelmed by the world's great needs, Christians are called to pay careful attention to the intersection of need and gift: when we perceive God at work in the midst of human need and when we discern our deep gladness, then the time for action has come. Someone has said that **discernment is where prayer and action meet**. As a listening life of prayer issues forth in action and as we trust God to bless what we give, God's reign is fulfilled on earth as in heaven.

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes of the abundant satisfaction that comes from being grounded in God and offering our deep gladness to the world:

May what I do flow from me like a river,
no forcing and no holding back,
the way it is with children.

Then in these swelling and ebbing currents,
these deepening tides moving out, returning,
I will sing you as no one ever has,

streaming through widening channels

into the open sea.
(*Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*. Riverhead Books, 1996, p. 58.)

4 ♦ **Grounded in God's Joy**

If discernment is a tree whose roots are love, then its fruit is joy! When Jesus called his disciples to a life of intentional abiding in God and faithful love for one another, he promised abundant fruit-bearing. He also promised joy: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15: 4-11).

An ongoing source of vitality and joy, the spiritual discipline of discernment – whether practiced by individuals or congregations or denominations – links us intimately with God's future. With a sturdy foundation of being grounded in love, joined in covenant with God and God's people, and ready to hear God's call and participate in God's vision, we can discern

new steps with confidence. Knowing who God is and what God desires, we can face the future with abundant joy springing forth from the wells of salvation.

Additional Resources

- Farnham, Suzanne G., Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward. *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*. Morehouse Publishing, 1991.
- Farnham, Suzanne G., Stephanie A. Hull, and R. Taylor McLean. *Grounded in God: Listening Hearts Discernment for Group Deliberations*. Morehouse Publishing, 1996.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*. Abingdon Press, 1996 (revised edition).
- Morris, Danny and Charles M. Olsen. *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*. Alban Publications, 1997.
- Mueller, Joan. *Faithful Listening: Discernment in Everyday Life*. Sheed & Ward, 1996.
- Palmer, Parker J. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000.

*This resource is Part I of a two-part series on spiritual discernment.
Part II focuses on key discernment processes.*



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