

True Discernment

There was never a time where we needed more of it, and there was never a time when there has been so little of it. What is it? The critical Christian discipline of discernment.

Discernment is a seemingly lost practice in a world plagued by pluralism. Everyone is right – everyone has their own truth. The postmodern world rejects the idea that truth exists, and consequently that eliminates the need for discernment. After all, why do I need to discern something if I can make up my own truth, or decide what's right 'for me'? But if, in fact, truth is an absolute – then discernment is a critical need in the Christian church today. False teaching is abounding. The days predicted in 2 Timothy are truly upon us:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

2 Timothy 4:3-4

Every day there seems to be another aberrant doctrine, practice or church that arrives. Worse, false teachers have never had such a loud voice, very often operating multi-million-dollar ministries. Now, with the reach of the Internet, anyone and everyone can climb on board and make their particular false teaching available to people across the globe.

With the large-scale abandoning of the local church in favour of home churches, cell-groups and informal Bible studies, false doctrine does not have the filter it used to have in godly pastors stopping it at the door. Now false doctrine is considered as a viable option, as opinions ping-pong around the room in a home Bible study. Discernment is indeed a precious commodity and sadly, is in short supply today.

Instead of godly balance, we have polarised extremes. On the one end, you have people who have no desire to test the spirits, no desire to sort out truth from error, who swallow anything and everything that vaguely alludes to Jesus Christ. On the other end, you have so-called 'Discernment ministries,' who ironically, sometimes end up with very little of what they profess to be about.

Well then, what is discernment? A basic definition of discernment is **the ability to make distinctions**. True Christian discernment is the God-given ability to distinguish true doctrine from false doctrine, true teachers from false teachers, important doctrine from peripheral doctrine, love and truth. When you can do that – you have discernment. Let's look at those various topics one by one.

1. Discernment is the ability to distinguish true doctrine from false doctrine

Discernment is primarily being able to detect false doctrine. We see numerous commands telling us to do this. For example, **1 John 4:1** says, "*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*" Christians are to test the spirits – that is, not to give heed to something before they have examined it. Paul echoes this in **1 Thessalonians 5:21** when he says, "*Test all things; hold fast what is good.*"

Believers are to hold to the standard of the Word of God. The test for false and true doctrine is not answered by testing if the false teacher quoted a Scripture. Even the devil quoted Scripture when tempting Jesus. The test is whether that Scripture is *interpreted* correctly – does it fit within its context, does it accord with the teachings of other Scriptures, does it harmonise with the major and important doctrines of the Word, has the church historically understood it in a similar way?

Many people have very little discernment when reading or listening. They read or hear a teacher attach a verse to their teaching and immediately assume that it must be right. This is not much like the Bereans whom we read of in Acts: *“These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so”* (Acts 17:11).

This verse doesn't mean the Bereans looked up the verse the teacher quoted. It means they searched the Scriptures in-depth to see if the teaching harmonised with all of Scripture. As an aside, it is interesting that the Bible describes the Bereans as being fair-minded. It is supremely ironic that people claiming to be modern-day Bereans are often anything but fair-minded. Discernment helps you understand the true from the false.

2. Discernment is the ability to distinguish important doctrine from less important doctrine

This is often one on which many claiming to be discerning fall flat on. Saying pious-sounding things like, “All truth is equally important” they fail to recognize the important distinction between doctrine that is crucial and doctrine that is less crucial. Jesus understood this distinction when He said to the Pharisees:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”

Matthew 23:23-24

Jesus recognised that while tithing had its importance, the weightier or more serious, demanding aspects were justice and mercy and faith. While all truth is equally true, not all truth is equally essential. This fact is the only way Jesus could answer the question, *“Which is the first commandment of all?”* (Mark 12:28).

If all truth must take equal priority, then Jesus' answer would have been, ‘There is no such thing. All commands are equally important.’ But as we know, He went on to say that to love God with all your heart, soul and mind is the first and greatest command.

The point is this: Jesus had discernment when it came to distinguishing the important doctrines from the peripheral. But sadly, many claiming to be discernment experts get this very aspect of discernment horribly twisted. From such people, you will seldom hear messages on the glory of God, knowing Christ, the process of sanctification, loving the Lord, becoming like Christ in all of life.

No, you will instead hear bunches of messages on why Christmas ought not to be celebrated, on the finer details of eschatology, on the latest false teaching emerging out of America, why such and such a movie or cartoon is evil, or on predestination. Not that these things never have their place, but a lack of discernment almost always give them priority.

Christian doctrine is like a tree. The trunk is made up of the fundamental doctrines, the cornerstone truths, such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the personality of the Holy Spirit, salvation by grace through faith, the inspiration of the Bible, the personal return of Christ. These are core doctrines. They are absolutely essential. You cannot deny any of these and still be saved.

Branching out from the trunk are what we might call important doctrines. For example, teaching on baptism, spiritual gifts, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of election and predestination, prayer, the local

church, doctrine surrounding the kingdom of God in the future, and many others. These doctrines are very important. In fact, because they grow right out of the trunk, there is a danger that if you get them wrong, you might well even mess around with one of the fundamentals.

That is why Important doctrines are not peripheral, and are worth defining, defending and even separating over. But it is nonetheless true that you can hold a different view on an important doctrine and still be saved. We can differ on important doctrines and still recognise each other as Christians, even though we may not be able to cooperate much when it comes to ministry.

Branching off from the important doctrines will be less important doctrines, and from those, even less crucial, until we come to the twigs and leaves of peripheral doctrine. Real discernment is understanding the nature of the trunk – what are the core doctrines? What is the main message of the Bible? How does a particular doctrine grow out of – and relate back to – the trunk? What is worth dying for? What is not worth even arguing over? This is what discernment answers.

A lack of discernment will fight tooth and nail over the identity of the sons of God in **Genesis chapter 6**, and not notice when Christ's nature is under attack in another doctrine. Or a lack of discernment thinks that a different view regarding election and predestination is as serious an issue as disagreeing regarding the deity of Christ. This is nothing less than a lack of discernment.

3. Discernment is the ability to distinguish false teachers from true teachers

What is saddest to behold is when someone claiming to be especially discerning cannot tell the difference between a false teacher, and a good teacher who may sometimes teach what is false.

A false teacher is one whose whole system of theology is crooked. He denies the fundamental doctrines, and his teachings are corrupt from top to bottom. His teachings have attacked the trunk of the tree. While he will say true things in his messages, he is overall, a false teacher. Peter describes these men in **2 Peter**, as does **Jude** in his epistle. The cultists, the defenders of works-salvation, the hyper wings of various doctrinal systems – these are false teachers.

But then there are good teachers who sometimes teach what is false. A teacher who holds to the fundamentals of the faith, who consistently upholds the glory of God, the supremacy and exclusivity of Christ, the necessity of the Holy Spirit's ministry, the absolute authority and inerrancy of the Bible, the need for salvation by grace alone through faith alone – this teacher is essentially a good teacher.

However, it is not unlikely, that as jars of clay, we will at some point teach something less than true as we work our way through the doctrines of the Word. In that sense, there are good teachers who sometimes teach what is false – on less important doctrines. But sadly, discernment ministries seldom can tell the difference between them and false teachers.

In this way, godly, effective preachers of the Word are written off by such people because of some nuance of doctrine that does not accord with them. So for example, a man who is in all respects orthodox, but holds a different view on, for example, the celebration of Christmas or Easter, is as bad to them as a teacher of the prosperity Gospel. That's a lack of discernment.

Paul understood this distinction. When Peter was indulging in following a false doctrine – that of the Judaisers, he rebuked Peter publicly. But he did not regard Peter as an apostate or a false teacher. On the other hand, Paul recognised apostates and warned Timothy of them:

If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such, withdraw yourself.

1 Timothy 6:3-5

Discernment – because it can judge what constitutes dangerous error and what doesn't – is able to make the distinction between an apostate and a good teacher who has it wrong on one or another point.

4. Discernment is the ability to discern between love and truth

Now since discernment is supposed to preserve and protect the truth, you would think that a discernment focus will bring about much love. After all, truth produces love. *“Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith,”* (1 Timothy 1:5).

But sadly, people who supposedly major on discernment are the very opposite. Their misnamed fellowships (because there is very little of that going on) are rife with suspicion, gossip, backstabbing and pride. Everyone is trying to elbow their way to the top of the heap as perfectly pure in doctrine, therefore everyone else is fair game to step on to get there.

In such circles, no one wants to be known as one who listens to or supports a false teacher. Therefore almost no one is 'safe' to listen to, quote from or read (or at least tell people you do) until you hear someone else in the group, preferably the leader, endorse them. The atmosphere is cruel, harsh and unedifying.

Truth is supposed to bring added love for Christ and one another. And there could not be a bigger lack of discernment than to have cruelty and hatred present in a group, with it being described as true love. However, a lack of discernment allows even a preacher to be brash, abrasive, sarcastic, cruel, a bully, and even rude or profane from the pulpit. It is all accepted as being earnestly contending for the faith. Paul spoke of this lack of discernment when he spoke to the Corinthians:

For you put up with fools gladly, since you yourselves are wise! For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours you, if one takes from you, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face.

2 Corinthians 11:19-20

It amazes me when Christians claiming to love discernment cannot discern when they have a Diotrephes in the pulpit – a man whose nasty spirit is only too evident. As Jesus said, *“A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks,”* (Luke 6:45).

In such instances, there is a lack of discernment regarding pure and impure. The pulpit is a place to expose sin, not to commit more of it. It is a place to model Christlikeness, not be a megalomaniac. The excuse is often given, “But Jesus called the Pharisees a brood of vipers! He called Peter ‘Satan.’ If he can use strong language, so can we!”

But that won't hold water. Jesus was broken over the false teachers. His terms were strong, but not crude or offensive. He would not deny His own Word, which says:

“Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.”

Colossians 4:6

But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?

James 3:8-11

Discernment can understand the difference between a strong rebuke given in love, and a sinful act of pride. A lack of discernment just lumps all confrontation together and cannot see or tell that there is a difference.

The fact is, we are to both speak the truth in love, and we are love in the truth. The two feed of each other. Truth is like the railway tracks; love is like the steam engine. Without the tracks of truth, love is unguided and dangerous. Without the steam engine of love, truth is sterile – going nowhere and helping no one.

Here's how you *don't* get discernment:

- **By gossip.** Not many realise that this is how they get their supposed discernment, but it really is. They copy and paste from one another's websites, without doing much research of their own. If another discernment group has turned their thumbs down towards a particular author or speaker, then all others must follow suit. So strangely, the opposite of discernment is taking place – everyone is following each other, and their discernment is actually a sham.
- **By the Internet.** Now certainly there is much good on the Internet. But many people who think they are discerning have little or no idea how to be discerning on the web. With such a wide variety of views represented on the web, you are sure to find someone, somewhere, who hates and rejects a particular author, speaker or teacher. Sometimes a person lacking discernment comes across a web page written to debunk or 'expose' someone as a false teacher. As long as it contains 'quotes' of the person's teachings (usually taken out of context), along with some names, dates and places – the devotee is assured that this website is scholarly, the reports accurate, and their exegesis and interpretation of Scripture trustworthy. The report must then be swallowed as condemning of that teacher, and no further inquiry is necessary. Quick copy and paste, then they distribute the 'expose' to all their friends in their 'discernment address book.' You can almost hear the 'discernment whispering' rising in feverish intensity as a new 'rat' has been caught.

Here's how you *will* gain discernment

Many people don't have discernment because they neglect the means by which the Bible tells us we can get it. Jesus spells it out in **John 7**:

Jesus answered them and said, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. "If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.

John 7:16-17

According to Jesus, discernment comes **as a result of an obedient relationship with Himself**. Those who seek to obey what they know in dependent submissiveness, come to grow in discernment. Discernment is not something you can develop by gritting your teeth, by trawling Discernment ministry websites, by reading the discernment newsletters, or by forwarding the latest gossipy discernment emails. Discernment comes primarily from an obedient relationship with Christ.

This explains why so many who claim to have discernment have so little of it. They are in the flesh. Discernment is a gift, like every other grace in the Christian life. God gives it to the humble, not the proud. Those who seek it at His hand, find it.

This is the meaning behind **1 John 2:27**: *“But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.”* This does not mean you never need teachers – or **Ephesians 4:11** would be contradicted. It means God gives discernment to His obedient, believing children. **Hebrews 5** also tells us that walking with Christ in obedience produces discernment:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first 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 unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Hebrews 5:12-14

Notice the reason for discernment – those who *“by reason of use.”* They have used their senses to obey – and in exercising, God has given them discernment. A rudder steers a ship only when it is in motion. Only obedient Christians receive discernment. Those who just try to be tough, no-nonsense discernment experts in the eyes of others, usually lose it.

How we need discernment, not for the sake of appearing to be more ‘in the truth’ than others, but to truly guard against error. May we earnestly seek Christ in a humble walk with Him, and so distinguish true doctrine from false, essential doctrine from peripheral, true teachers from false, and the the balance between love and truth.