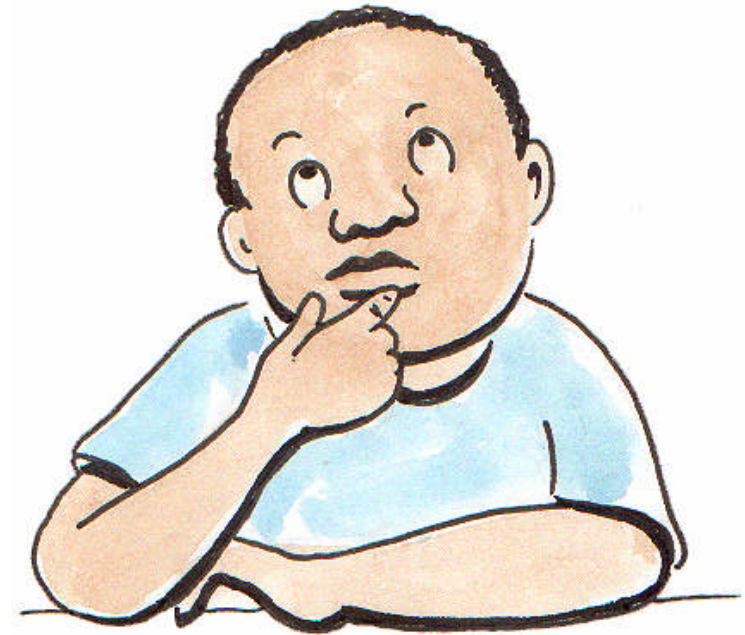


Discernment



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*Do you exercise
spiritual discernment?*

by Pastor David Legge

“Discernment”

We’re looking at a subject which I feel is so important in our world today, particularly in the church: ‘Discernment’. These are our two verses, 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22, Paul says: *‘Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil’*. Let’s read that again: *‘Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil’*.

Introduction

Several years ago it was recorded in an article in the magazine *‘Christianity Today’* how the town of Richardson in Texas, in the United States, was talking about the worldly ways of the First Unitarian Church of Richardson, Texas. The reason being, one Sunday morning Pastor William Nicholls invited Diana King - who was a Unitarian from Fort Worth, Texas - to take part in the service. As she did so, Miss King - who happened to have the profession of being an exotic erotic dancer at a Dallas night club - by the end of her contribution to the morning service was completely and absolutely naked. The congregation of 200 adults and children watched in fascinated silence, as she shed her clothes in time to the recorded music. The Pastor, William Nicholls said: *‘The dance fit very well into our service and no-one complained’*. He went on to say that he *‘...didn’t think anyone was aroused, but I don’t consider the erotic aspect of the dance wrong, after all that’s the way we were conceived’*. Miss King herself said it was something that she’d wanted to do for a long, long time; and that she would like to conduct classes for the women church members. *‘I would like’*, she said, *‘to do a sermon using the exotic dance and members of the congregation could join me if they liked’*.

Now that might seem astounding to most of you - I hope, at least, it does - and I would like to think that most of you are saying: ‘Well, it’s easy to discern that that type of stuff is wrong in the church of Jesus Christ’. Perhaps you’re even saying: ‘All bad things come from America, that would never ever happen here. I could never conceive of such a thing taking place in our land’. Well can I warn you, before we go on any further in this message on discernment, that big journeys begin with small steps, big journeys begin with small steps - and *‘Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall’*, because anything is possible. We know that anything is possible in the world, but anything is possible in the church - and we do well to remind ourselves that the church is only made up of depraved sinners, some of whom may well be saved by grace, but we’re sinners nevertheless.

found in Acts 17 - you don’t need to turn to it - but it’s about when the great apostle Paul came to Berea. Boy, it’s hard to get good speakers sometimes nowadays - but imagine if you got the apostle Paul! We’d all be sitting at his feet, we’d all be drinking in what he says. Imagine him, writing 13, 14 epistles in the New Testament - here he is speaking to us, what does it say about the Bereans? It says: *‘They searched diligently the Scriptures to see if the things that Paul was telling them were so’*. The only word that mattered to the Bereans was the word of God.

Second Timothy tells us to study to show ourselves approved under God, to be diligent. I have written in one of my Bibles this little saying, it goes like this: *‘Test all things by the word of God. Weigh all ministers, all doctrines, or colleges, all churches, all books, all theories, weigh them by the weight of the word of God’*. That is the only way to learn discernment, and I warn you in this modern age: abstain from worldly attitudes as a whole, but particularly to the interpretation of God’s word; and abstain from worldly methods in our evangelism and in our worship. Only then, when we study to show ourselves approved unto God, a workman and workwoman that rightly divides the word of truth - only then will we not be like Belshazzar, weighed and found wanting beside the word of God.

Conclusion

One of the basic fundamental truths of the word of God is that there are only two types of people in this world: truth and error regarding salvation can be summed up in those that are saved and those who are lost. You could be sitting there, and you’ve been reading everything I’ve said, and maybe a lot of it has been Double-Dutch to you - but here’s something that you can lay hold of: if you’re not saved you’re in error. If you’ve never been converted, you’re lost - and if you died this morning you be lost forever in hell. The only way to be saved is to accept God’s truth, the Son of God, the Lord Jesus. You can’t get more simple than that, children are learning that, and some of them - praise God - are even grasping it! Have you grasped it? Jesus is the truth, He is the way and the life, no man comes to the Father but by Him. You either have it or you don’t, there’s no middle ground, there’s no grey area, there’s no bit of both: saved or lost, truth or error. It’s all in the Bible, and I challenge you to read it, and find that in this book you will have words of life and truth, because this book testifies of Jesus.

Five Ways To Discern

I want to leave you with five ways to learn to discern, and they're found in a book by John MacArthur - I know I've mentioned him several times, but I would have to say that he's about the only man in the popular Christian element who is writing on this subject today, which says a lot even of itself. Five ways that we can learn to discern.

1) You Need To Desire It

Here's the first: you need to desire it, you need to want it. Some Christians don't want to discern, they think it's negative, they think it's unimportant, they think you just have to love everybody and that's enough. But do you, even as a Christian, have a desire to discern that which is truth and that which is error?

2) You Need To Ask For It

Here's the second thing: you need to ask for it. You need to ask the Lord to show you, through the Holy Spirit, in His word, what is right and what is wrong. Solomon came to the Lord and said: *'Give, therefore, Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people, that I may discern between good and bad. For who is able to judge this so great a people?'* He needed help, and I'll tell you: it's not knowledge of God's word that causes you to discern, it is a spiritual knowledge where the pages of this book are illuminated to you both practically and spiritually by the Holy Spirit. You need to pray for that.

3) You Need To Observe It

Thirdly you need to observe it. Not only desire it, not only ask for it, but you need to observe it. That is a challenge to us all: people should be able to learn how to discern through your discernment. The elders of the church, the deacons, the members, you should be a help to all of us who are trying to learn to discern by the stance that you take for truth. But if the fact is told, some of you are stumbling blocks when it comes to this matter of discernment.

4) You Need To Follow The Holy Spirit

Fourthly, you need to follow the Holy Spirit. I've already mentioned that through the Word. You need to follow His inclinations, His leadings, His wooings, His winnings. You need to be totally surrendered to Him, and filled by Him.

5) You Need To Know The Word Of God

Fifthly, you need to know the word of God. You can't discern if you don't know God's word. There's a passage of Scripture that never fails to astound me, and it's

You only need to pan around the ecclesiastical scene very very quickly and casually in the 21st-century to see the situation that the nominal church finds itself in in this modern age. Look at the Anglican Communion regarding their dilemma over homosexuality, and you can see very very clearly how low the so-called church can go when it loses the skill of discernment. Why is there a dilemma? Are the Scriptures not clear on the subject of homosexuality? Of course the Scriptures are, so why has the church departed? They have lost the skill, if they ever had it, of discernment. If ever there was a need for discernment among Christians, I believe it is today - because the church is not only threatened from without by a plethora of doctrinal variations from world religions and confusing cults, but in more recent years the church, as it has always been, has been threatened very forcibly from within its own ranks. A new phenomena have raised their head to challenge the doctrine and the practice, historically speaking and biblically speaking, of the church.

Dangerous Trends To Discern

Let me give you a resumé of some of them. One is called 'ECT', which is an abbreviation for 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together', which has been headed up in the United States by reputable evangelicals like Chuck Colson and J. I. Packer - who have done many great works for the Lord and written many good books, especially J. I. Packer, but they presently have been found in ECT to encourage evangelicals to engage in ecumenism to seek to win Roman Catholic souls. Whilst we commend them for their sincerity and their motivation, they are in error, because light cannot come out of darkness - what fellowship hath light with darkness, hath God with Belial? Not only has there been this move in ecumenism, but there has come 'God TV' or the 'God Channel', which has introduced into our homes the hyper-charismatic movement, and such preachers and teachers like Benny Hinn and Kenneth Copeland, and with them has come their 'health and wealth' doctrines - that if you're blessed of God you'll be rich and you'll be healthy.

There is 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together', there is 'God TV' and the charismatic movement, then there's the 'Church Growth Movement' from America. Through their teaching and preaching and writings, men like Bill Hybels and Rick Warren - who are not all bad, I don't want to make you think that that's what I'm saying about these gentleman - but they have confronted us with a marketing approach to the church of Jesus Christ; that the way to succeed

and build up your church, get bigger numbers, be more successful, is to have 'seeker-sensitive' services. In other words, cater for the market, evolve your services into such a format that will appeal to the desires and to the tastes of those who are unregenerate. In other words, they are catering for the needs of those who are lost, and some evangelical churches in the Greater Belfast area are adopting unashamedly these marketing principles to the evangelical outreach.

I'll give you some examples: what used to be a Gospel campaign of maybe one or two or three weeks just preaching the word of God, giving testimony and singing gospel songs, is now taking the format of the convening of a fashion show - at the end God's word is given in some shape or form. Or perhaps it's a collar and tie dinner, where everybody is gathered together for a big slap-up meal, and then the Gospel is given. Maybe it's in the format where they transmit a football match, the World Cup final, or a European Cup match, and then they give an epilogue in the middle at half-time just in case everybody runs away at the end. Or even to the extent that on a Sunday evening, a church can be turned into a cinema, popcorn can be served on the Lord's Day evening as they watch Disney films. All with a view to pander to the whims and foibles of the unregenerate - and, wait for it, why do they do it? To win them to Christ! One church I was involved in in the past even made the suggestion that we conduct a questionnaire around the district asking people what they wanted in their church. It fell flat on its face after I hastened to point out that we are meant to be telling people what they need, not asking people what they want.

We have within the church a consumerist Christianity, or the 'McDonald-isation' of the church, where we're giving the world what they want in the church rather than giving them what the Bible says they need. Many in the church are confused, and this is the question that faces all of us: how do you know, in this day and age, what is of God, what is not of God, what is right, what is wrong, what is spiritual, what is carnal? Especially, I would have to add, when you consider that some of the people who espouse these new ideas have good motives and are good people. The answer is very simple, and it is the subject of this study: we need, more than ever, discernment. We need to be able to discern what is right and wrong, and the word of God speaks of discernment as the skill of being able to separate divine truth from false error. Paul spoke of it in 1 Thessalonians 5, our reading: *'Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil'*.

weak doctrine is one primary reason for the lack of discernment in the church today. I warn you: abstain from the worldly attitude regarding scriptural interpretation. As the old quip once said: 'If God says it, I believe it, and that settles it'.

Abstain From Worldly Methods

The second pointer for you is: abstain from worldly methods. Abstain from worldly attitudes, but also abstain from worldly methods. John MacArthur, preacher and teacher, said this: *'The church has spawned a preoccupation with image and influence as the key to its evangelisation'*. Let me repeat that: *'The church has spawned a preoccupation with image and influence as the key to evangelisation'*. He goes on: *'Churches today believe they must win the lost by winning their favour. It is no longer teaching the biblical doctrines of sin, hell, repentance and the cross - why? Because those would offend the lost and make them feel uncomfortable. Instead it markets itself as a benevolent non-threatening agency, whose primary goal is to achieve prestige, popularity and intellectual acceptance among the lost. Its premise is: if they like us, they'll like our Jesus'*. If they like us, they'll like our Jesus - but what we need to realise, if we would only know God's word, is that God does not need us to commend His Son to the world. If we would just present His Son uncompromisingly with zeal and purity, in truth and power, the good aspects of His message along with the bad, people would be drawn savingly to the Saviour.

Corinth was a church that desired intellectual recognition in its day. Corinth was a church that applied worldly thinking and values to the things of God. Corinth was a church in its age that craved respectability. Paul had to tell them that they were carnal and not spiritual, and he asked them: *'Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching', or by the foolishness of that which was preached, 'to save them that believe'*. As John MacArthur concludes, and I think he's right, that we have a church filled with baby Christians. Do you know what baby Christians are? If you ever know what a toddler is like, you'll know as they're learning to crawl, and going everywhere, that anything and everything on the floor is lifted and shoved into its mouth. Christians indiscriminately and undiscerningly are taking and assimilating and digesting everything in this world that comes with the name 'Christian' on it, without asking a question. Paul told the Corinthians, who were the same, *'Oh, that I could feed you with meat, but I have to feed you with milk because you're a babe'*.

Yet today the prevailing attitude among many evangelicals is: doctrine divides. 'Let's not get bogged down in doctrine, don't be so negative, we want to unite the church of Jesus Christ'. But can I tell you something that may be a revelation to a lot of people today? Our greatest enemy in the church is not drugs, it is not drink, it is not pornography, it is not idolatry, it is not Romanism, it is not the charismatic movement - all these things in themselves are deeply harmful, but the greatest enemy to the church is false doctrine. Maybe even the greatest enemy to us is weak doctrine. R. C. Lensky, a pastor and a theologian and commentator, said: *'The worst forms of wickedness consist of perversions of the truth, spiritual lies, although today many look upon these forms with indifference and regard them as harmless'*. What is he saying? He's saying the worst type of wickedness that you could ever find could be dressed up in a collar and a cassock! The worst wickedness on the face of this earth could be called by the name 'Pastor', or could be found in a paperback.

This is what God's word is saying: we must beware of having the truth and twisting the truth to suit the fashions and the fads, the trends and the tastes of the age. This is what the church is doing today. They're applying relativistic thinking and evaluation upon the word of God. They're saying: 'This is cultural, that is cultural, this applies today, that doesn't apply today', they are cherry-picking the word of God. Even so-called evangelical conservative churches are subconsciously bowing to what the majority does in the church, rather than what the Scriptures teach. If ever there was a clarion call that needs to be heard by the church, it is that of Jude: *'Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ'*.

We are to contend, defend, fight for the faith - yet many today are indifferent about separating divine truth from error, because they lack a practical use of the word of God in order to exercise true discernment. That's why Timothy says, 2 Timothy 3: *'All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works'* - in order that you would not be ashamed, that you should know the truth, and stand up for the truth in boldness. I believe

What Is Discernment?

Joseph Stowell of Moody Bible Institute defined discernment like this: *'Discernment in scripture is the skill that enables us to differentiate, it is the ability to see issues clearly. We desperately need to cultivate this spiritual skill that will enable us to know right from wrong. We must be prepared to distinguish light from darkness, truth from error, best from better, righteousness from unrighteousness, purity from defilement, and principles from pragmatics'*. My question to all of us, and to the church at large in particular is: do we need to again learn to discern? Have we lost, as a church, have we lost as individual Christians, the gift of discernment?

The musicians of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra were once asked the question to name the most effective conductor of all time, and the answer came back to a man: 'Arturo Toscanini'. He won hands down, and when one instrumentalist was asked the reason why he should be the greatest of all, the instrumentalist said: *'Well, he could anticipate when you were about to make a mistake, and keep you from making it'*. He didn't correct you after you made the mistake, he anticipated them and corrected it before - in other words, he had the gift of discernment. Now, you might have a musical talent, or even the gift of perfect pitch, but discernment does not have to be like that. Some people might be born again with a certain amount of discernment more than others, but the fact of the matter is that discernment, according to the word of God, can be taught. It can be learned, it can be practised and developed. So I hope you're all sitting at the edge of your seats in this world of confusion, especially in the church, and you're just waiting to find out: 'How can I learn this gift of discernment? I want to know, out of all these things that you've mentioned and many more, how to know what's right, how to know what's wrong, how can I learn to discern?'

Well, if you take Paul's verse, if we're going to try and prove all things, you have to prove all things by measuring those things against a standard. There must be a standard of measurement, or a standard of judgment, if you're going to prove something. There must be a place where we can find the answers to put an 'X' or to put a tick beside all these grey areas, so-called. The answer is very simple - I hope you've got it, you've probably answered your own question! Where do we learn to discern? We learn to discern in the word of God. The old Latin name for the word of God is 'canon', the canon of Scripture. You may not know this, but the word 'canon' means 'measuring stick' - and that's simply what the word of God is to be for us, a measuring standard whereby we weigh up everything not only in the world, but the things that enter into the church.

So right away, look at what we're saying: these things that I have mentioned, and many many other things that face us in our modern Christian environment, ought not to be left up to personal taste to judge whether they are right or wrong. Neither ought they to be left up to the mindset of the age, which is a relativistic mindset and attitude that says: 'Well, you do your thing and I'll do mine. I mean, if that works for you, it doesn't work for me' - and you put it down to being old-fashioned, sometimes we are, or you put it down to taste, but it's not a matter of right or wrong - that is the spirit of the age, the spirit of relativism, that you cannot know what is true or what is error, that you cannot know what is right and what is wrong. 'You have a right, I have a right; you have a wrong, I have a wrong' - but God's word is clear that there is a rule of truth, that there is a standard of doctrine, that there is a measurement of all practice, and that is the word of God. Jesus said: 'Thy word is truth'. He spoke to His disciples and He told them: 'Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free'. The sad reason that discernment is lacking in the church today is because there is a famine of the word of God in the church.

I don't know whether you've noticed this, but I certainly have: Christians don't seem to talk about the Bible at least as much as they did in the past bygone era. When you go for supper, or when you go out for tea, or when you meet a believer on the street, very rarely now do you get a conversation about the Bible, let alone a mention of the name of the Lord Jesus. A pastor was lamenting with me a couple of years ago, how young men in Bible College no longer sit down and flick through the pages of Scripture and argue over doctrine. Now you might think that at times an argument is more heat than light, and that's correct - but we've got to the stage where people just don't even care what's right doctrine and what's wrong, never mind getting to the stage of getting all hot about it and arguing. 'Take it or leave it' is the attitude. Someone once came to a pastor at the end of a meeting in which he disagreed about absolutely everything that the pastor said, and he said: 'Look, I don't believe what you believe, but at least you believe something!'. The old saying is true, isn't it? 'If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for everything'. The church, modern, today is falling for everything that comes along its path - and individual Christians are doing the same.

Now we don't want to be painted as purely negative, but you can hardly get a Christian today to say something negative about anything in the church. Jesus says: 'Woe to you when all men speak well of you'. Paul says: 'Prove all things, judge all things; hold fast to that which is good, and abstain from all that is evil'.

Abstain From Worldly Attitudes

Now I'm going to leave you with two things that are general points that we should abstain from in discernment in this modern age, and it will help you to learn to discern in the future. The first is this: we must abstain from all worldly attitudes. We must abstain from all worldly attitudes. Relativism is one that we've mentioned already, and there are others. Materialism is a worldly attitude that we should shun. But what I want to bring to your attention out of the many possibilities that we consider under the title of 'worldly attitudes' is the worldly attitude to biblical interpretation. We must abstain from worldly interpretation of the Scriptures.

What am I talking about? Well, a poll on Protestant clergy several years ago, which was taken by McCall's magazine, reported on 300 Protestant clergymen. It read like this, I quote: 'A considerable number of them rejected altogether the idea of a personal God'. I quote them: 'God', they said, 'was the ground of being. He is the force of life. God is the principle of love, He is ultimate reality...', and so forth. The article continues: 'The majority of the youngest group of clergy could not say to have believed in the virgin birth of Christ, or even to regard the traditional view of the Lord Jesus as divine, as most Protestants were brought up to believe'. We have got to a stage in the church that, whether audibly or secretly, people are not believing in the tenets of the word of God - and all under the title of intellectualism. 'We have advanced, we have evolved, we have got to the stage where we just can't believe the fairytales of the Bible any more'.

Martin Luther, who was a great scholar, I add - and I'm not being anti-intellectual in what I have to say, far from it - but Martin Luther had many fears, even at the very beginning of the Reformation, but one of his fears was this, I quote him: 'I am much afraid that the universities will prove to be the great gates of hell unless they diligently labour to explain the holy scriptures and to engrave them upon the hearts of youth. I advise no-one to place his or her child where the scriptures do not reign paramount. Every institution' - and I believe Martin Luther includes the church of Jesus Christ of his day and today under the title 'institution' - 'Every institution where men are not unceasingly occupied with the word of God must become corrupt'. It is inevitable! When we stop in our intellectual grappling with philosophy and issues and theology, when we stop labouring to explain the Holy Scriptures, Luther says, and to engrave them upon the hearts of our youth, we're on the road to nowhere and to extinction!