

Exercising Holy Discernment

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“Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” 1 Thessalonians 5:21

He was on the brink of forsaking his faith. For the first twenty years of his life, he had been a member of a conservative Christian family, community, school, and church, and thereby formally educated in the Reformed faith. As early as he could remember, he had been attending church services, memorizing doctrinal and scriptural passages for catechism, and adhering to the expected behavior patterns of his particular religion. But he had not been one to think too long or hard about his instruction. Why did he follow certain rules? Why did he believe certain doctrines? It was all just “what he was supposed to do.” Oh, for a time, he had asked questions, but after receiving a few rote answers joined with disdainful and suspicious glances, he fearfully felt it was better to shut up and go with the flow.

Then he met a few acquaintances at work and online. They were nice and intelligent sounding people who had the knack for challenging every aspect of his belief system and upbringing. After some time, this son of a Reformed church began to doubt everything he had been taught. He had never really understood why he believed and behaved the way he did in the first place, and now he felt like giving it all up to experience the “freedoms” that the world had to offer.

This is a true story, not of a specific person but of one who represents what has happened to many young people in conservative, Christian, and even Reformed circles. It is the story of a soul without an essential skill called discernment. He did not learn it, he did not practice it, and he hardly knew what it meant. Do you?

You need discernment. Scripture says you need this skill to understand sermons (1 Cor. 2:13–14), to partake of the Lord’s Supper properly (1 Cor. 11:28–29), and to understand the signs of the times (Matt. 16:3). More, you need it every moment of every day, for God says “Prove *all things*” (1 Thess. 5:21a). This is God’s exhortation to discern everything in your life. Especially in these last days, when errors and evils abound, when the father of lies is loose to make the truth seem false and the lie seem alluring, when the post-modern world arouses

passions blurring the difference between right and wrong, when our sinful nature is wooed unto this confusion, we need stalwart sons and daughters of holy discernment!

Parents, we must train your children in this holy skill. Teachers, pastors, and elders, we have the responsibility to educate our young people in this mental and spiritual exercise. Young men and young women, begin practicing it now. And together let us pray with young Solomon, “Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people that I may discern between good and bad” (1 Kings 3:9a).

What is discernment? It is God-given wisdom to test, to evaluate, to examine every belief or behavior, every doctrine or deed, and every idea promoted by word or example; then it is correctly to judge if such is good or bad, true or false, better or worse, wise or foolish. Discernment is the practical side of wisdom. While wisdom is a more general virtue that can include knowing what is true and having the intelligence to understand and memorize the same, discernment is a specific aspect of wisdom. A discerner does not soak in stuff like a speechless sponge. Rather, he has his mind engaged as he receives information. He thinks, he grapples with, he dissects, he filters, he wonders: “Is this really true? Is this consistent with the Bible? What are the ramifications for my life? What is the right application of this truth?” The discerner finds these answers and in doing so becomes convicted concerning what is good and evil. He tests all things and *holds fast* to that which is good (1 Thess. 5:21).

But a discerner does not only test information he receives. He tests *all things*. He does not stop thinking! Before he engages in any activity the practical powers of his mind work to ascertain if what he is about to do is in accordance with his convictions. During a weekend activity or work, while sending texts or listening to music, while engaging in a Christian liberty or an American liberty, with those of like faith or alone, the discerner is constantly thinking, testing, and examining. He begins as a young person and never ceases in this holy endeavor.

The wise discerner tests all things with the infallible scriptures. That is the standard of his faith and the rule for his life. God’s infallible word is what the young Christian must grow up using as the authority to test the fallible ideas of men and women in home, school, and even church. Although a child should have a good degree of trust in the worth and credibility of his parents’ instruction, his minister’s catechesis, and his teacher’s lessons, a child’s faith may not ultimately be founded upon man’s word! As he matures, it is not satisfactory that something is true just because Dad said so, or even because Reverend so and so said so. He refuses to behave

a certain way just because that is “the way we have always done it.” It is necessary to a young person’s spiritual development that he examine the instruction of his upbringing, holding fast only to what he has found consistent with God’s inspired word. As a young person practices such discernment according to scripture he will spiritually mature to continue this holy activity for a lifetime.

Scripture is abundant in its call to such discernment. The apostle John exhorts the church to discern the spirits which work in all kinds of teachers: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). Wise Solomon contrasts the wise and foolish: “The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looketh well to his going.” The noble Bereans of Acts 17:11 are commended for this discernment. “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”

Strikingly, the main application of the above verses is that the people in the pew (the young people too) are to test what the minister is preaching. The catechism students are to examine what their catechism instructor is teaching. We are to evaluate what our high school teacher is teaching, and yes, what our parents are saying. Before we accept it as true, we are to make certain that it *is* true! Before we engage in an accepted behavior pattern, we should evaluate the biblical principles behind it. Adults should encourage such examination. We should not allow our fear of not being able to answer, make our young people fearful of asking searching questions. We should invite their respectful challenges seeing them as opportunities for practice in such discernment. How else will our young people develop this ability?

This is not to condone an overly critical attitude toward a leader. It is not an excuse for rebellious and disrespectful challenges meant to embarrass a teacher. It is not to encourage doubt concerning everything you have been taught. Rather, it is a calling to begin cultivating this skill in the safe environments of church, school, and home in preparation for the more dangerous situations of the future.

Not only will such practice of discernment hone this skill for the future, but it will also be a means of impressing the truth upon young minds. After the Bereans of Acts 17 searched the Scriptures to ensure that what Paul preached was true, we read, “Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few” Acts 17:12.

What was the process that brought them to believe with all their heart the truth? They recognized that it was not merely Paul's word, but that it was God's word! In the way of exercising discernment now, the young person comes to a firmer conviction of the truths he is learning.

There is much to begin discerning now. Why are you a member of a specific denomination? Because your family is there? Because you fear they will shun you if you go somewhere else? Or have you discerned that the doctrines taught are founded upon scripture, and is best for your own spiritual good, your children's good, and for the glory of Christ? Why do you worship the way you do? Because it feels right? Because it is what you are used to? Or have you discerned the elements of worship in the scriptures and want to worship according to God's will rather than according to man's ever-changing preferences? Why do you keep the Sabbath day the way you do? Because man-made rules bind you? Or have you discerned from the scriptures the calling and profit to keep an entire day set apart for restful worship? Why do you (or don't you) listen to certain kinds of music? Why do you (or don't you) watch certain things on your big screen or phone screen? Why do you dress the way you do? Why do you date the way you do? Why vote for him or her this election? Because it feels right? Or have you discerned from scripture holy principles to follow even with regard to Christian liberties?

Often, discernment is difficult. Scripture does not give laws for every single situation, and so the temptation is to add laws to the scripture. This legalism is easier at first, but it is a sin that always backfires. A careful discerner avoids legalism, using the lens of scripture with much prayer to understand the will of God in each situation. He sees the extremes or ditches connected with almost every issue and finds the narrow way that avoids both. He can live in the world but not be of it. He knows how to hold to good habits and traditions not explicitly commanded in scripture, and at the same time refrains from condemning Christians not identical to him. He has tamed his tongue to be bold with the truth and yet also meekly gentle. He knows when to partake of a liberty and when to abstain for the sake of a brother's conscience. He understands when enjoyment of a good thing is becoming an idol or addiction. He honestly examines not only his outward behavior but his inward motivations. He knows how to reject common grace, live the antithesis, and yet still be a compassionate witness to the unbelieving neighbor. He carefully investigates the best ways to answer the partially slanderous accusations against his church of legalism, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness. How discerning are you?

There are many impediments to our proper exercise of discernment. One is that we are too distracted. Our minds and hearts are so caught up with the noise and sights of media, devices and work, that we do not have a moment to think, to read God's word at all, much less to test everything with this standard. One of Satan's strategies is overloading and over-stimulating our senses so that we are too distracted even to discern his craftiness. How many times did your phone divert your attention while reading this article? We need to implement concrete plans and actions to reduce the bombardment of our senses so that we can simply focus on this mental work!

A second hindrance is our feelings. This world is much like the time of the judges when "every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Whatever feels right is right, even if it contradicts the equally strong right feelings of the neighbor. Mood determines right and wrong. This is not only today's post-modern culture, but it is part of the temptation of our flesh. While feelings are not wrong of themselves, they are not dependable standards for discernment. Anger, fear, lustful passions, and sadness can often cloud clear thinking. Train yourselves to push aside feelings and objectively test all things.

A third great deterrent from discernment is laziness. It is mental, emotional, spiritual labor on the part of ministers, teachers and parents to coach in this mental work. They will have many questions to answer. They will have to search the scriptures themselves to address questions not immediately answerable. For the young person, he has to read and study the Bible at devotions, engage his mind in church, think critically when he would prefer fun. Our lazy natures would rather live life having someone else think for us (even if it is the computerized Siri). It is easier on our brains and also on our consciences.

A final obstacle is fear. Fear not only inhibits clear discernment, it also prohibits it from even beginning. Frankly, there are some of you who are scared about what you are reading, and what might happen if you begin to think for yourselves about what the Bible says. And out of fear a young person might ask, "Am I even able to discern properly?" The fearful parent might wonder that too: "Is my son or daughter able?" "Fear not!" God says repeatedly in His word. God gives to believers and their children the Holy Spirit who works in us Christ's treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3). Our minds are sanctified to read God's word and discern what is good and evil. Let us not fear but trust in God who says, "And be not conformed to this

world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:2).

May God grow our young people to become spiritually mature, able to chew on the meat of God’s word and thereby exercise discernment. “But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Heb. 5:14).

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