

## ***Discerning Our Discernment***

*by David Takle, M.Div.*

**Abstract:** Christians have often struggled with difficulties in discernment, and no one is exempt from this potential problem. My purpose in this paper is to offer some thoughts on one particular aspect of discernment that is often overlooked, namely, how we ourselves are involved in our discernment, and why that matters.

**Content:**

Probably most of us here have either taken a course or read a book on how to discern the will of God in a given matter. Almost all of the materials I have seen on this subject use virtually the same criteria:

1. Does it line up with the Bible?
2. In what way do circumstances shed light on the matter?
3. What counsel do we have from friends and Christian leaders?

These are all certainly helpful avenues to pursue to aid our discernment. But suppose we stop and ask, “Why have we chosen these particular criteria? What are we trying to accomplish by using these resources?” The answer, in part, is that we are trying to minimize any blind spots we might have, as well as minimize the influence of our own subjectivity regarding whatever it is we are trying to discern. Again, these are good and noble goals.

But we must be very careful here, lest we assume too much. Because the truth is, none of those criteria provide us with the objective process we are hoping to find. As we will see, our trusted friends and leaders are all heavily influenced by the same kinds of issues we are, and so their discernment may well be as subjective as ours. Trying to use circumstances as a guide can be a very circular process without any starting or ending point, because any given problem can be either a closed door or a barrier to be overcome; and any assistance toward a given end can be either an open door or a temptation to be led astray. So any objective interpretation of circumstances is incredibly illusive by its very nature.

Finally, trying to use the Bible to either deny or justify any particular course of action often becomes an exercise in selective application of various texts; not to mention the fact that we are always in the process of discerning what the text itself means. Once again we find it hard to determine whatever level of objectivity might be involved.

In the final analysis then, there is no such thing as purely objective discernment; and I would add that there is no such thing as an infallible *gift* of discernment. So a very important question we need to ask is: *Given that discernment is a heavily subjective process, in what ways might I actually be influencing my own process of discernment?*”

As a starting point for this discussion, it is important to note that no matter how spiritual any thought or action may appear to be, our human self is always involved. Even when writing the New Testament, God used the styles and vocabularies of each author rather than override them and write the words Himself with their hand. No credible scholar today subscribes to a dictation theory of inspiration. (I realize that may be upsetting to some laypersons who thought otherwise, and it certainly may require us to ask some new questions about the nature of inspiration. You may rest assured, however, that God was intimately involved in the process and saw to it that we had a trustworthy guide back to God Himself.) But if even the Bible itself has the

unmistakable stamp of its human scribes, we can be sure that any act or thought we might have, however inspired, comes through us, at best, as a human translator of divine intentions.

Now He may minister directly to another person *in spite of* us; He may even minister *around* us in all His glory, or minister perfectly *in response to* our prayer. But in whatever way we ourselves are verbally or physically involved, we are always impacting the character and quality of whatever we do or say. From what we see in the Bible, God taking over our mind, our mouth, or our body to accomplish His ends is, at best, an extremely rare event.

So when it comes to discernment, we can be sure that all of our own personal history, healed or unhealed, all of our unresolved triggers, our emotional maturity or lack thereof, our biases, our predispositions, our theology (accurate or fuzzy), our mood, our emotional investment in the outcome, our willingness to be uncomfortable or be corrected – *all these factors will absolutely impact our discernment*. That is why we have to come to terms with the fact that all discernment is heavily subjective in nature; and why we must pay attention to how we ourselves are involved in that process.

Now in the space of a short article I cannot begin to discuss how to grow our discernment so that it becomes more and more reliable. Although I will say that a good dose of humility will go a long way toward keeping us teachable in this regard, and a commitment to our own spiritual formation will be invaluable in terms of learning better discernment. What I want to do at this point is delve into just a few of the ways in which we may unwittingly be influencing our discernment due to our own prior spiritual formation or malformation.

Perhaps the most obvious way that we can have difficulty discerning is when we have an emotional investment in whatever we are dealing with. For example, how much would you expect my judgment to be clouded by a prayer such as this: “Dear God, do you want me to marry that incredible person who takes my breath away?” To make matters worse, my best friend might be more interested in being supportive than in seeking insight; circumstances may look good because the person I want likes me, too; and according to the opening chapters of Genesis, God seems to think that people should not be alone. Unless I am willing to question how I might be involved in moderating what I “hear” from God, anyone can see I am going to have problems with my discernment.

But our difficulties can be far more subtle than this. What if that I have grown up with a fear of intimacy due to unhealed issues with broken relationships? How will that affect my listening and judgment? Suppose I have never come to terms with my parent’s divorce? Or what if I got too intimate with my partner and now I think I have no choice but to get married? From these kinds of issues it begins to make sense that our emotional ties directly impact our entire process of evaluating a situation.

Even more serious are the hidden triggers we all have due to prior experiences in our life that have never been fully resolved. Consider for a moment the possibility of an adult pastor who has never dealt with the pain he felt due to growing up with a rageful mother. When the day comes that he must deal with an angry woman in his congregation, he may not even be aware how those wounds are affecting his judgment. Yet you can be sure that his sub-cortical circuits recognize her as an extremely dangerous person; and those same

circuits are sending signals to the rest of his mind and body, clouding his discernment in the present situation because of his personal history.

Our impediments to clear discernment, of course, are not limited to our emotional states. Differences in our theological presuppositions have a tremendous impact on how we think about life and what options we believe are open to us. During my years as a prayer minister in California, some of the most wounded people I saw were struggling with various forms of spiritual abuse. After having been raised in severely legalistic homes or having received legalistic counseling from other Christian ministers, these people were often so filled with shame and self-hate that they were unable to make even the most basic life decisions because of their intense fear of being wrong. Their distorted theology actually hindered their discernment.

For example, there are many places in the Christian world that believe Christians are little more than sinners who happen to be the beneficiaries of a divine pardon for their wickedness. Other than that, very little has changed for them. When a minister truly believes that line of thought, what kind of discernment can they possibly offer to someone who is in bondage to pornography? Without some concept of an abundant life, the only things they will be able to offer are shame and various humanistic efforts to change behavior, such as attending an accountability group. Transformation from the inside out does not even come up for a vote. Our theological presuppositions have a tremendous impact on our discernment.

Charismatic circles face a few additional challenges to discernment that are unique to their practices. For example, it is not unusual for spirit-filled Christians to think that when people try to exercise a spiritual gift, they may attempt to do so either in the spirit or in the flesh. But this is a false dichotomy. Since we are embodied spiritual beings, the natural and the spiritual are inextricably intertwined; and everything we do involves both our spirit and our natural abilities. When we feel moved to function in an area of our gifting, we are not automatically at liberty to express whatever urges we have at the moment. It is our responsibility to discern how we ourselves are involved and to what extent we may be adding to or distorting what God is giving to us, due to our own weaknesses, unhealed places, or even defects of character.

But perhaps the single most overlooked area of discernment in all Christian organizations has to do with the emotional maturity of those who are engaged in ministry. Now when I talk about emotional maturity, I am referring to a collection of emotional and relational skills that allows a person to function competently in a variety of complex relational settings. If you are familiar with Peter Scazzaro's *Emotional Healthy Spirituality*, or if you know about *The Life Model* from Shepherd's House in Pasadena – this is the kind of maturity I am referring to. This is not something that can be received through prayer or as a spiritual gift. It is an earned maturity that is achieved through the development of various skills that must be learned from other people who are further along the path than we are. (This in direct contrast to many aspects of *spiritual* maturity that must be *received* from God.)

Unfortunately, with the decline of community here in the West, our culture has become progressively more immature over the last hundred years or so. We have now reached the point where a majority of adults are actually functioning at a child level or even infant level of emotional maturity. The reason this is so important to our discussion here, is that *emotional maturity is a major component of discernment*. A five-year-

old does not discern the same way a 65-year-old discerns. Yet this fact is rarely acknowledged and poorly understood.

What often happens in Christian circles is that when a person possesses a reasonably good knowledge of Scripture, has a talent for public speaking, and is credited with some spiritual gifting, people will rally around them, give them tremendous latitude in their ministry, and even promote them to positions of leadership. This often happens without any regard to the emotional maturity of the person involved. As a result, we can end up with emotional children running our Christian movements and organizations. And this may well be the single most common cause for ministry disasters.

At the risk of offending some, I would like to use a recent example as a case in point. A few years ago, a man rose to predominance in a Canadian ministry and by 2008 became a key leader in what was called the Lakeland revival. My wife and I heard him speak in Pasadena when he was invited there by a local congregation. After listening to him for about an hour I became very concerned that this was a train-wreck waiting to happen. While I am no expert on emotional maturity, my best guess was that the man on the stage was suffering from arrested development and functioning (at best) at about four or five years of age, emotionally. Among other things, his immaturity was the reason he could hit someone who came up for prayer and claim God told him to do it.

Among the many sad things we could say about this, of course, is the fact that his emotional maturity level was not entirely his fault. No doubt he was doing the best he could with whatever poor training he received growing up. Presently, the fault lay with all those who pushed him into a position of leadership and counted on him to do things he was simply not equipped to do. A person who is walking around at child-level maturity does not have the tools to do the job. In just a matter of months, news broke that this man's family life was in ruins and he was being asked to step down from ministry.

Even sadder, though, is that those around him classified his meltdown as a "moral" failure, and assumed that with repentance and counseling he could be restored to his position of leadership. But arrested development is not something a person can repent of. Nor can it be corrected in a couple of months.

My point is that it is absolutely essential, especially in today's climate of immaturity, for Christian leaders to become at least moderately acquainted with the terms of human emotional development. Paul himself alludes to this matter when he lists the qualifications of an elder. To whatever extent we ignore the issue of how a person's emotional maturity is involved in their discernment, we will continue to confuse gifting with qualifications for leadership. And we will continue to cause great damage to the Kingdom as these people crash and burn due to their limited discernment.

Discernment is truly a multi-layered process that involves a lot more than matching up our impressions with circumstances, counsel, and selective passages from the Bible. Our own spiritual and emotional health are among the most crucial factors that determine where we land on the continuum that stretches from pure fantasy on the one end, to expressing the mind and heart of God on the other. We must always take into account how we ourselves may be influencing our own process of discernment. Only then will we be able to stay teachable and humble in this regard.

My prayer for us all is that we will make it a priority to invite the Spirit of God to reveal to us where we need His help in discerning our own discernment.

**About David Takle, M.Div.**

David is an author and speaker whose ministry focuses on the spiritual formation of Christians. He received a Master of Divinity from Fuller Seminary, and is ordained. David has written several books and created a video course on Christian Formation, with the express goal of helping people move away from a performance-driven approach to the Christian life and toward an interactive relationship with God that is vibrant enough to transform them from the inside out. He now lives in North Carolina with his wife Jan. They have three grown children with families of their own.

**Other Relevant Resources**

David Takle, *Whispers of my Abba* (on how to hear and discern the voice of God)

David Takle, *Forming: Change by Grace* (DVD course in spiritual and emotional formation)

David Takle, *Forming: A Work of Grace* (a theology of spiritual development)

E. James Wilder, *The Complete Guide to Living With Men* (detailed emotional maturity)

Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (about integrating emotional and spiritual health)

Karl Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself* (how unresolved issues wreak havoc with your life)