

Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Divisiveness vs. Discernment

Scripture: Acts 15:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:21–22

Code: B140407

This post was first published during April 2014. –ed.

Do discernment and divisiveness go hand in hand? Is it true that the term *discernment* is often employed as a cover for a contentious or critical spirit?

Let's acknowledge that there *are* unscrupulous people who, under the guise of "biblical discernment," engage in unbrotherly criticism. Their tactics often include innuendo, character assassination, guilt by association, and other dishonest methods. They weave conspiracy theories, sensationalize their attacks against others, and favor personal slurs over substantive doctrinal analysis. Militant fundamentalism has made this type of criticism its specialty. As a consequence, that movement has steadily lost its influence, forfeited its credibility, and fragmented into tiny, warring factions. My appeal for discernment is *not* a call to that sort of factious attitude.

Undoubtedly the prevalence of hypercritical attitudes among some fundamentalists has caused a backlash that has only accelerated the decline of discernment in the church. We rightfully deplore a pugnacious spirit. No true Christian wants to be contentious. No one who has the mind of Christ *enjoys* conflict. Obviously, harmony is preferable to discord. But when some crucial truth is at stake, how do we display the mind of Christ? Certainly not by allowing the error to go unchallenged. If we truly are to be like our Savior, we must both proclaim truth *and* condemn error in unambiguous language (see Matthew 23).

That means we must learn to discriminate. In modern usage, the word *discrimination* carries powerful negative connotations. But the word itself is not negative. *Discriminate* simply means "to make a clear distinction." We used to call someone "a discriminating person" if he exercised keen judgment. "Discrimination" signified a positive ability to draw the line between good and evil, true and false, right and wrong. In the heyday of the American civil-rights movement, the word was widely applied to racial bigotry. And, indeed, people who make unfair distinctions between races are guilty of an evil form of discrimination.

Unfortunately, the word itself took on that negative connotation, and the sinister implication is often transferred to anyone who tries to discriminate in any way. To view homosexuality as immoral (1 Corinthians 6:9–10; 1 Timothy 1:9–10) is condemned now by the politically correct as an unacceptable form of discrimination. To suggest that wives ought to submit to their own husbands (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18) is now classified as unfair discrimination. To suggest that children ought to obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1) is also labeled unjust discrimination by some. We see more and more that anyone who "discriminates" these days risks becoming a target of boycotts, protests, and lawsuits. We are not supposed to draw lines. That is the spirit of this age, and unfortunately, it has crept into the church.

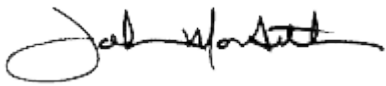
If we are going to be discerning people, we must develop the skill of discriminating between truth and

error, good and bad. The original languages of Scripture convey this very idea. The main Hebrew word for “discernment” is *bin*. That word and its variants are used hundreds of times in the Old Testament. It is often translated “discernment,” “understanding,” “skill,” or “carefulness.” But in the original language it conveys the same idea as our word *discrimination*. It entails the idea of making distinctions. Jay Adams points out that the word *bin* “is related to the noun *bayin*, which means ‘interval’ or ‘space between,’ and the preposition *ben*, ‘between.’ In essence it means to separate things from one another at their points of difference in order to distinguish them.” *Discernment*, then, is a synonym for *discrimination*. In fact, the Greek verb translated “discern” in the New Testament is *diakrinō*. It means “to make a distinction” and is translated that way in Acts 15:9.

So discernment is the process of making careful distinctions in our thinking about truth. The discerning person is the one who draws a clear contrast between truth and error. Discernment is black-and-white thinking—the conscious refusal to color every issue in shades of gray. No one can be truly discerning without developing skill in separating divine truth from error.

Does Scripture tell us *how* to be discerning? It certainly does. Paul sums up the process in 1 Thessalonians 5:21–22: “Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.” There, in three straightforward commands, he spells out the requirements of a discerning mind.

And that’s where we’ll pick it up next time.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jay Adams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a stylized "A".

(Adapted from *Reckless Faith*.)

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2024 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).