

Discerning Leaders

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:21–22; 1 Timothy 4:6–16; Titus 1:9

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In my [previous post on discernment](#) I closed by quoting 1 Thessalonians 5:21–22, which is essentially the biblical recipe for discernment: “Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.”

“Examine everything carefully” (1 Thessalonians 5:21) is a command for all believers. In the context of the passage, Paul sets discernment alongside some of the most basic commands and instructions for the Christian life. Just like prayer and contentment, discernment is a crucial element of the effective Christian life.

That may surprise some Christians who see discernment as a uniquely pastoral responsibility. It is certainly true that pastors and elders have an even greater duty to be discerning than the average lay person. Most of the calls to discernment in the New Testament are issued to church leaders. In 1 Timothy 4:6–7, for example, Paul told Timothy:

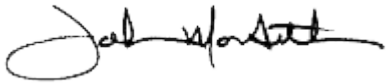
Be constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following. But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women.

“Worldly fables fit only for old women” was an epithet Paul applied to the philosophy of his day. He was urging Timothy to know the difference between the truth of God and the nonsense of the world. If Timothy couldn’t tell the difference between sound doctrine and dangerous philosophy, he would not be able to protect the flock. Just a few verses later, Paul added, “Give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13). And then, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things” (1 Timothy 4:16).

Throughout his epistles to Timothy, Paul repeatedly commanded the pastor to pay close attention to sound doctrine, preach the Word, preach and teach these things, guard the truth, and so on. Paul also charged Timothy to avoid empty talk, shun worldly wisdom, turn away from false teachers, and rebuke those who oppose the truth. Timothy needed to stay alert to the differences between the truth and lies, to separate the truth from falsehoods and half-truths. Paul was commanding him as a pastor of the flock to be discerning.

Every elder is required to be skilled in teaching truth and able to refute unsound doctrine (Titus 1:9). As a pastor, I am constantly aware of this responsibility. Everything I read, for example, goes through a grid of discrimination in my mind. If you were to look through my library, you would instantly be able to identify which books I have read. The margins are marked. Sometimes you’ll see approving remarks and heavy underlining. Other times you’ll find question marks—or even red lines through the text. I constantly strive to separate truth from error. I read that way, I think that way, and of course I preach that way. My passion is to know the truth and proclaim it with authority. That should be the

passion of every elder, because everything we teach affects the hearts and lives of those who hear us. It is an awesome responsibility. Any church leader who does not feel the burden of this duty ought to step down from leadership.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from *Reckless Faith*.)

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