

A Recipe for Discernment

Scripture: Proverbs 2:3–6

Code: B140512

This post was first published during May 2014. —ed.

We cannot simply flow with the current of our age. We cannot elevate love while downplaying truth. We cannot promote unity by repressing sound doctrine. We cannot learn to be discerning by making an idol out of tolerance. By adopting those attitudes, the church has opened her gates to all of Satan's Trojan horses.

God gives us the truth of His Word, and He commands us to guard it and pass it on to the next generation. Frankly, the current generation is failing miserably in this task. Our failure to discern has all but erased the line between biblical Christianity and reckless faith. The church is filled with doctrinal chaos, confusion, and spiritual anarchy. Few seem to notice, because Christians have been conditioned by years of shallow teaching to be broad minded, superficial, and noncritical. Unless there is a radical change in the way we view truth, the church will continue to wane in influence, become increasingly worldly, and move further and further into all sorts of error.

How can we cultivate discernment? What needs to happen if the church is going to reverse the trends and recover a biblical perspective?

Desire Wisdom

Step one is desire. Proverbs 2:3–6 says, “Cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.”

If we have no desire to be discerning, we won't be discerning. If we are driven by a yearning to be happy, healthy, affluent, prosperous, comfortable, and self-satisfied, we will never be discerning people. If our feelings determine what we believe, we cannot be discerning. If we subjugate our minds to some earthly ecclesiastical authority and blindly believe what we are told, we undermine discernment. Unless we are willing to examine all things carefully, we cannot hope to have any defense against reckless faith.

The desire for discernment is a desire born out of humility. It is a humility that acknowledges our own potential for self-deception (“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” [Jeremiah 17:9]). It is a humility that distrusts personal feelings and casts scorn on self-sufficiency (“On my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses” [2 Corinthians 12:5]). It is a humility that turns to the Word of God as the final arbiter of all things (“... examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things [are] so” [Acts 17:11]).

No one has a monopoly on truth. I certainly do not. I don't have reliable answers *within myself*. My heart is as susceptible to self-deception as anyone's. My feelings are as undependable as everyone else's. I am not immune to Satan's deception. That is true for all of us. Our only defense against false doctrine is to be discerning, to distrust our own emotions, to hold our own senses suspect, to examine all things, to test every truth-claim with the yardstick of Scripture, and to handle the Word of God with great care.

The desire to be discerning therefore entails a high view of Scripture linked with an enthusiasm for understanding it correctly. God requires that very attitude (2 Timothy 2:15)—so the heart that truly loves Him will naturally burn with a passion for discernment.

Pray for Discernment

Step two is prayer. Prayer, of course, naturally follows desire; prayer is the expression of the heart's desire to God.

When Solomon became king after the death of David, the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Ask what you wish me to give you" (1 Kings 3:5). Solomon could have requested anything. He could have asked for material riches, power, victory over his enemies, or whatever he liked. But Solomon asked for discernment: "Give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil" (1 Kings 3:9). Scripture says, "It was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing" (1 Kings 3:10).

Moreover, the Lord told Solomon:

Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself discernment to understand justice, behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you. I have also given you what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that there will not be any among the kings like you all your days. And if you walk in My ways, keeping My statutes and commandments, as your father David walked, then I will prolong your days. (1 Kings 3:11–14)

Notice that God commended Solomon because his request was completely *unselfish*: "Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself." Selfishness is incompatible with true discernment. People who desire to be discerning must be willing to step outside themselves.

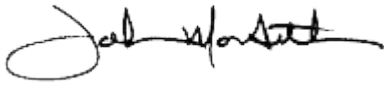
Modern evangelicalism, enamored with psychology and self-esteem, has produced a generation of believers so self-absorbed that they *cannot* be discerning. People aren't even interested in discernment. All their interest in spiritual things is focused on self. They are interested only in getting their own felt needs met.

Solomon did not do that. Although he had an opportunity to ask for long life, personal prosperity, and health and wealth, he bypassed all of that and asked for discernment instead. Therefore God also gave him riches, honor, and long life for as long as he walked in the ways of the Lord.

James 1:5 promises that God will grant the prayer for discernment generously: "If any of you lacks

wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”

Desire and prayer are the first two key ingredients in the recipe for true biblical discernment. Next time we'll look at two more.

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

(Adapted from *Reckless Faith*.)

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