

A Recipe for Discernment, Part 2

Scripture: Ephesians 4:14

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Discernment is not automatically built in to the lives of Christians. The ability to wisely divide truth from error is something that must be pursued and developed as a part of the sanctification process. As we saw [last time](#), the biblical recipe for discernment starts with fervent prayer and earnest desire. Both of those are foundational, but not enough on their own. A third vital ingredient in developing biblical discernment is obedience to the truth.

Obey the Truth

Someone will point out that with all his abundance of wisdom, Solomon was nevertheless a dismal failure at the end of his life (1 Kings 11:4–11). “His heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been” (1 Kings 11:4). Scripture records this sad assessment of the wisest man who ever lived:

King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, “You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods.” Solomon held fast to these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods. . . . For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom the detestable idol of the Ammonites. Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not follow the Lord fully, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable idol of Moab, on the mountain which is east of Jerusalem, and for Molech the detestable idol of the sons of Ammon. Thus also he did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods.

Now the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away from the Lord. (1 Kings 11:1–9)

But Solomon did not suddenly fail at the end of his life. The seeds of his demise were sown at the very beginning. First Kings 3, the same chapter that records Solomon’s request for discernment, also reveals that Solomon “formed a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt” (1 Kings 3:1). Verse three tells us, “Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David, except he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places.”

From the very beginning his obedience was deficient. Surely with all his wisdom he knew better, but he tolerated compromise and idolatry among the people of God (1 Kings 3:2)—and even participated in some of the idolatry himself!

Knowing the truth without obedience is worthless. What good is it to know the truth if we fail to act accordingly? That is why James wrote, “Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22). Failure to obey is self-delusion; it is not true discernment, no matter how much intellectual knowledge we may possess. Solomon is biblical proof that even true discernment can give way to a destructive self-delusion. Disobedience inevitably undermines discernment. The only way to guard against that is to be doers of the Word and not hearers only.

Follow Discerning Leaders

Another key ingredient in biblical discernment is this: Emulate those who demonstrate good discernment. *Do not* follow the leadership of people who are themselves “tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14). Find and follow leaders who display an ability to discern, to analyze and refute error, to teach the Scriptures clearly and accurately. Read from authors who prove themselves careful handlers of divine truth. Listen to preachers who rightly divide the Word of Truth. Expose yourself to the teaching of people who think critically, analytically, and carefully. Learn from people who understand where error has attacked the church historically. Place yourself under the tutelage of those who serve as watchmen of the church.

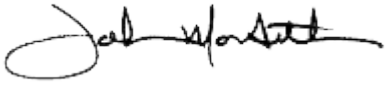
I do this myself. There are certain authors who have demonstrated skill in handling the Word and whose judgment I have come to trust. When I encounter a difficult issue—whether it is a theological problem, an area of controversy, a new teaching I have never heard before, or whatever—I turn to these authors first to see what they have to say. I wouldn’t seek help from an unreliable source or a marginal theologian. I want to know what those who are skilled in exposing error and gifted in presenting truth have to say.

There have been outstanding men of discernment in virtually every era of church history. Their writings remain as an invaluable resource for anyone who wishes to cultivate discernment. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and J. Gresham Machen are just two of many from the last hundred years who have distinguished themselves in the battle for truth. Charles Spurgeon, Charles Hodge, and scores of other writers from the nineteenth century have left a rich legacy of written material to help us discern between truth and error. In the century before that, Thomas Boston, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield battled for truth, as did many others like them. The preceding era was the Puritan age—the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which gave us what is undoubtedly the richest catalog of resources for discernment. And before that the Reformers fought valiantly for the truth of God’s Word against the traditions of men.

Virtually every era before the Reformation also had godly men of discernment who stood against error and defended the truth of God’s Word. Augustine, for example, preceded John Calvin by more than a thousand years, but he fought exactly the same theological battles and proclaimed precisely the same doctrines. Calvin and the Reformers drew heavily on Augustine’s writings as they framed their own arguments against error. In the year 325, a contemporary of Augustine, Athanasius, took a decisive stand against *Arianism*, the very same error that is perpetuated by modern-day Jehovah’s Witnesses. His writings stand today as the definitive response to that error.

Much of the written legacy these spiritual giants left behind is still available today. We can all learn from these men of discernment—and we would do well to emulate the clarity with which they spoke the truth against error.

Those who can expose and answer the errors of false teachers are set in the body of Christ to assist us all to think critically and clearly. Learn from them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John W. Hunt". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "H".

(Adapted from *Reckless Faith*.)

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