

Discernment: Spiritual Survival for a Church in Crisis

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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The conquering of the city of Troy is one of the famous stories of ancient history. Greek soldiers had laid siege to the city for over ten years, but were unable to conquer it. In exasperation Ulysses, a brilliant strategist, decided to have a large wooden horse built and left outside the city walls as a supposed gift to the unconquerable Trojans. The Greeks then sailed away in apparent defeat. The curious and proud Trojans brought the wooden horse inside their fortified walls. That night Greek soldiers hidden inside the horse crept out and opened the city gates to let their fellow soldiers into the city. The soldiers massacred the inhabitants, looted the city, and then burned it to the ground. Ever since, the Trojan horse has been a symbol of infiltration and deception.

Throughout its history, the church has embraced many Trojan horses. Satan has effectively used enemies disguised as gifts to lure people away from the truth of God into destructive error. Today's church is in a particularly severe state of confusion. That should be no surprise, for the apostle Paul said, "In the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power" (2 Tim. 3:1-5). The apostle Peter echoed that truth: "There will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words" (2 Pet. 2:1-3).

Today's church is like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, who could tell the difference between superficial things like pleasant and stormy weather, but not between truth and error (Matt. 16:1-3). So many churches have relinquished biblical ethics and doctrine, a deep reverence and worship of God, repentance over sin, humility toward God and fellow believers, and a profound understanding of God's character and work. All that has resulted in a low-level commitment to holy living.

In contrast, God calls all true believers to pursue perfect conformity to the absolute, holy standard of His Word. First Peter 1:14-16 says, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in

all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" If you're going to live a holy life that pleases the Lord, it's essential that you be spiritually discerning.

What Is Spiritual Discernment?

Spiritual discernment is the skill of separating divine truth from error. First Thessalonians 5:21 says we are to "examine everything carefully." That speaks of testing something to reveal its genuineness. We as believers are to evaluate everything we come in contact with to distinguish what is true and false, good and bad, or right and wrong. That can be a difficult task. Why? First, we are constantly fighting the sinful desires of our fallen flesh. Second, we face satanic deception. The devil is doing everything he can to confound and confuse us. Third, we are inundated with worldly influences that seek to overpower us.

Opposing the world, the flesh, and the devil requires us to "hold fast to that which is good" (v. 21). We are to embrace wholeheartedly what is inherently genuine and true. We are also to "abstain from every form of evil" (v. 22). That means we are to separate ourselves from every form of perversion as though we were avoiding a deadly plague or poison. One pastor correctly wrote, "The worst forms of wickedness consist of perversions of the truth, of spiritual lies, although today many look upon these forms with indifference and regard them rather harmless" (R.C. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961], p. 363). Many in today's church are indifferent about separating divine truth from error because they lack spiritual discernment.

Why Is There a Lack of Spiritual Discernment?

Weak Doctrine

One of the main causes is the church's weakening of doctrinal clarity and conviction. Many have only a shallow knowledge of God's Word because the church has yielded the trade and skill of understanding it to people who are ill-equipped to do so. In *A Call to Discernment* Christian counselor Dr. Jay Adams wrote, "Self-styled 'experts' in psychology, sociology, and education who hold Ph.D.'s in their fields and Sunday school degrees in Bible pontificate on Christian teaching and life on radio and elsewhere, setting themselves up as spokesmen for God.... Their teaching and use of the Bible (when it is used) often bear little resemblance to what the Scriptures, properly interpreted, really say.

"What is the upshot of all this? One obvious result is the modern tendency to use theological language loosely.... Not only are biblical terms used imprecisely, thereby spreading confusion throughout the church, but erroneous teachings of every kind are readily tolerated. This is because so few people have the discernment necessary to identify and refute such errors. And if they do sense that something is wrong, their powers of discernment are too weak to put their fingers precisely on the

point where the error lies. Or, if they do point out the error, other people denounce them as heresy hunters" ([Eugene, Oreg.: Harvest House, 1987], pp. 35-36).

The diluting of biblical doctrine has conditioned today's church to desire only what will make it feel comfortable and satisfied. English minister Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "Precise thinking, and definition, and dogma have been at a serious discount. The whole emphasis has been placed upon religion as a power which can do things for us and which can make us happy. The emotional and feeling side of religion has been over-emphasized at the expense of the intellectual. Far too often people have thought of the Christian religion merely as something which gives a constant series of miraculous deliverances from all sorts and kinds of ills.... The impression has often been given that we have but to ask God for whatever we may chance to need and we shall be satisfied.... We have been so intent upon ourselves and our moods and feelings and inward states, that when we are confronted by an external problem that nevertheless affects us profoundly, we do not know how to think or where to begin (cited by Ian Murray in David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith, vol. 2 [Carlisle, Penn.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990], p. 24).

Because experience and emotion have been elevated above divine revelation, many who call themselves Christians have no biblical basis for doing so. For example, during an interview on a supposedly Christian radio station, the program host asked me, "How does a person become a Christian?" I replied, "He must realize that he is a sinner and that he cannot save himself, repent from his sin, and cast himself on the mercy of God. He must believe that Jesus Christ is God's Son, whose death paid the price for his sins and whose resurrection proves his justification." The host asked, "You don't believe that everyone who is a Christian must believe that, do you?" I replied, "Yes!" The host responded, "I certainly didn't deal with any of my sins when I became a Christian." I asked, "What do you base your salvation on?" The host replied, "I was into drugs and alcohol, living with my boyfriend, and into Science of Mind for six years. One day I just got Jesus' phone number and knew where He was." Obviously not everyone who talks about Christ necessarily knows Him.

Some say that doctrine divides. That's true! If you set aside biblical truth and remain silent for fear of offending people, opposition will disappear, but so will some other things like truth, holiness, and God Himself. Jude 1:3-4 says we are to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed ... who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." Diluting doctrine only ends up making things easier for those who stealthily seek to victimize the church.

Relativistic Thinking

Much of today's church has a continuum mindset, a continuum being that which has no discernable division into parts. Rather than seeing things as black and white--as right and wrong or true and false--it prefers to see things in infinite shades of gray. In C.S. Lewis's satire *The Screwtape Letters* *Screwtape*, a senior demon, instructed an apprentice demon to keep his human victim's mind off the

plain antithesis between true and false" ([N.Y.: MacMillan, 1961], pp. 43-44). In reality, Satan uses that strategy very successfully, for today's church has failed to distinguish divine truth from error.

Believers need to develop an antithetical, not a relativistic, mindset. Dr. Jay Adams wrote, "People who study the Bible in depth develop antithetical mindsets: They think in terms of contrasts or opposites. From Genesis to Revelation God's thoughts and ways are set over against all others. The Bible does not teach that there are numerous ways to please God, each of which is as good as the next. Nor does it teach that various opinions are more or less God's ways. What it teaches--everywhere--is that any thought or way that is not wholly God's is altogether wrong and must be rejected. According to the Bible, a miss is as good as a mile. There is only one God, and there is only one way of life--His!

"People today don't like to hear such things--even people within the church. Why? Because they have a different mindset. Many of them have not known the Bible from childhood or ever made an intensive study of it later on, so their mindset is unbiblical.... With pastors and people alike growing up in an environment that stresses continuum thinking, antithesis is dulled as more and more people attempt to integrate sociology, psychology, and business management principles with Scripture" (A Call to Discernment, pp. 29, 32).

Instead of integrating worldly ideas with God's truth, the psalmist made a clear distinction between the two: "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night" (Ps. 1:1-2). Titus 1:9 says we are to refute doctrinal error by "holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching."

Worldly Methodology

Another reason for a lack of spiritual discernment is the church's preoccupation with image and influence as the key to evangelization. Since today's church believes it must win the lost to Christ by winning their favor, it no longer teaches the biblical doctrines of sin, hell, repentance, or the cross because those would offend the lost or make them feel uncomfortable. Instead it markets itself as a benevolent, non-threatening agency whose primary goal is to achieve prestige, popularity, and intellectual acceptance among the lost. Its premise is, "If they like us, they'll like our Jesus."

While the true church is to be loving and gracious in its evangelizing, it should never mitigate the teaching of God's Word. Martyn Lloyd-Jones "saw that the elements of warning and of opposition to error were essential parts of any true commitment to the Bible and, therefore, believed that the 'disapproval of polemics in the Christian Church [was] a very serious matter'. Accordingly he expected no approval from those who accepted the prevailing attitude which put 'love' first and treated arguments over doctrine as unchristian. It was that very attitude, he believed, which was responsible for the removal of the note of authority from the pulpit: the charge of 'dogmatism' and the dislike of

reproof and correction were criticisms of Scripture itself" (The Fight of Faith, p. 650).

Note the example of the apostle Paul. He gave a stinging rebuke to the church of Corinth for its preoccupation with image: "Who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and I would indeed that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you. For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.

"We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things" (1 Cor. 4:7-13).

True believers are an offense to those who reject the truth. Christ said to His disciples, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:18-20). Hebrews 10:33 says believers are "made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations."

Inaccurate Interpretation

Today's church has also failed to interpret Scripture accurately. That's because, for the most part, it is indifferent toward God's Word. Some teachers in the church are not trained to study God's Word and end up with a wrong theology. Some are trained, but opt to tell stories or mix man-made ideas with biblical truth. Others are simply too lazy to interpret God's Word accurately. Still others arrive at what they believe is truth by some mystical intuition, experience, or emotion. In addition, today's church has elevated nearly everyone to the level of an expert in interpreting Scripture.

The following letter, written to an acquaintance of mine, illustrates the wrong but prevalent attitude of indifference toward Scripture by so-called believers: "The greatest experience in love I have ever had was at the foot of the cross as the blood of Jesus Christ poured out over me. He filled me with His Spirit. He brought me across the veil into the City of Jerusalem into the Holy of Holies. There I beheld myself in Him, and He in me. I received the baptism as by fire and from this His love dwells in me. From this I have communion daily. I do not feel the need for the study of the Scriptures, for I know Jesus as He has revealed Himself to me within; and as He dwells in me, there is the Word.... Scriptures are a secondary source." Is it any wonder the church is weak and can't discern the truth?

Interpreting God's Word is an exacting science that requires skill and precision. Unless the believer has sat under good teaching, is well-read, or has learned to interpret Scripture from someone who knows how, it's unlikely he or she will be able to interpret Scripture accurately.

Lax Discipline

There's also a lack of spiritual discernment because of the failure to carry out church discipline. Here's how Christ said it's to be carried out: "If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile [an unbeliever]" (Matt. 18:15-17).

The church is to have a high standard of holiness. The apostle Paul admonished the church at Corinth for tolerating sin: "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst. For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?" (1 Cor. 5:1-6).

The absence of church discipline will kill spiritual discernment and destroy the holiness of the church. Confronting sin effectively puts a wall of division between the world and the church by separating those who obey the Lord from those who don't. It's essential that believers draw the line between right and wrong. The church should be sending a message to the lost that says, "We are a holy people."

Spiritual Immaturity

Many in the church have only a shallow knowledge of God's Word, trust in personal experiences or feelings as truth, or chase personal comfort and success as a way of life. It's what I call "Baby Christianity." As a baby crawls on the floor, he will put anything into his mouth since he doesn't know the difference between good and bad. Similarly, the spiritually immature are apt to swallow wrong teaching because they've not been taught to discern between divine truth and error. Ephesians 4:14-15 says, "We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ."

An in-depth understanding of God's Word is the key to spiritual maturity. Hebrews 5:12-14 says, "Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil."

Many of you are discerning in the everyday affairs of life. You read nutritional labels because you want to be healthy. You read the fine print of the stock market report before making financial investments. If you need surgery, you'll carefully select the right doctor. Maybe you're highly analytical about politics and can accurately assess the domestic and foreign issues. Or maybe you're an armchair quarterback who evaluates offensive and defensive strategies. All that is fine, but can you discern between divine truth and error?

How Can I Be Spiritually Discerning?

Desire It

Spiritual discernment starts with your desire for it. If you seek only to be happy, healthy, and wealthy, you will not be spiritually discerning. You must be humble enough to admit your need to develop discernment. Proverbs 2:2-5 says, "Make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding; for if you 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." Are you willing to follow the path that leads to spiritual discernment?

Pray for It

You must balance your desire for spiritual discernment by depending on the Lord for it through prayer. King Solomon prayed, "Give Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people to discern between good and evil" (1 Kings 3:9). The Lord replied, "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" (vv. 11-12). James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

Learn from Others

You can learn how to be spiritually discerning from the example of gifted, mature believers in the church. Some in the early church were specially gifted to discern between divine truth and error (1 Cor. 12:10). That gift was essential since false teachers tried to destroy the early church with their

teaching. First John 4:1 says, "Test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

Does that gift exist today? Yes, there are theologians or Bible scholars who are gifted by God to unmask false teachers. They have a special ability to think carefully, critically, and analytically. They are the church's guardians of truth. Some teach in seminaries while others do such things as write books. In whatever capacity they serve, they give clarity and insight to help us know right from wrong. You need to learn from what they teach and write.

You also need to follow the example of other mature believers. As it takes years of parental training for children to become mature, so it takes years of godly training for believers to become spiritually mature. It's not a matter of praying in the evening, "Lord, give me discernment," and then waking up the next morning and having it. Spiritual maturity is the result of being nourished by God's Word. First Peter 2:2 says, "Long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation." God also uses trials to mature believers: "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you" (1 Pet. 5:10).

Depend on the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the true Discerner who will lead you into all truth (John 16:13). He perfectly knows the mind of God: "The thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural [lost] man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:11-16).

Allow the Holy Spirit to control your life by confessing and forsaking sin and living a pure, holy life. Galatians 5:16 says, "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." As you are obedient to that, He will make you a discerning believer.

Study God's Word

Spiritual discernment flourishes in an environment of intense, faithful Bible study. You will not be spiritually discerning--even though you desire it, pray for it, learn from the gifted and mature, and depend on the Holy Spirit --unless you diligently study His Word. Only there will you find the principles and truths to discern between truth and error. In Acts 17, for example, the Jewish people of Berea received Paul's preaching eagerly, and then tested his gospel message by comparing it to the teachings of the Old Testament. As a result many became believers.

In Acts 20 Paul warned the church leaders at Ephesus about false teachers who would try to infiltrate and devastate the church. His concluding word to them was this: "I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (v. 32). Paul knew that their careful study of God's Word was essential for protecting the church from error.

Second Timothy 2:15 says, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth." The laborer who gives maximum effort to the quality of his work will not be ashamed because of any faulty workmanship. That means the believer is to present God's Word accurately to others in contrast to those "wrangle about words" or engage in "worldly and empty chatter" (vv. 14, 16). By doing so, he will receive God's approval and be counted as one worthy to stand alongside Him. The unashamed believer can say, "Lord, I studied and presented Your Word with integrity."

What about you? How do you study God's Word? In a superficial, careless way, or carefully and thoughtfully? Digging deeply into God's Word requires effort, but remember this: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Conclusion

Spiritual discernment requires desire, prayer, learning from the gifted and mature, dependence on the Holy Spirit, and a diligent study of God's Word. If you follow those steps, you will strengthen your doctrinal convictions, think antithetically, be kept from worldly approaches, be a good interpreter of God's Word, and confront sin. All that will help you mature and bring honor to God!

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