

Godly Discernment

28 February 2024



A while ago, I had a remarkable experience in which God gave me a glimpse into the true nature of a person who would do and say many 'spiritual' things but was actually operating by a spirit other than the Holy Spirit.

It happened during a time of prayer for a person who had just been baptised. When he (I will call him 'Jack') began to pray, I immediately discerned in my spirit that he was praying by a spirit other than the Holy Spirit, and I knew that he had the potential to do harm within the body. This put me in a difficult position as an elder in the church, because I had such a sense of alarm yet I hardly knew him! I asked God what I should do about it and felt that I should just love Jack and treat him like I would any other person joining the church.

Over time, Jack joined the church and became very well known within the church family. I grew to love him and, by God's grace, was able to shepherd him as another member of the church, but I could never shake that initial feeling that there was something inauthentic about him.

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After about a year, he asked if we could discuss something over a coffee. It turned out that he had taken issue with something I had said in a sermon – when I had inferred that the earth is a planet that orbits the sun, which he believed to be profoundly unbiblical and a false teaching!

Long story short, Jack began to take issue with more and more of what we taught and became very divisive. To the point where he came to church one Sunday wearing a shirt which read, 'Luke Hulley is a false teacher'! His reason for this demonstration was that 'God had told him' to warn the church

about me.

What is 'Discerning of Spirits'?

I share this story with you because "discerning of spirits" is listed as a spiritual gift in 1 Corinthians 12:10. This form of discernment is a beautiful gift in the body, but I have realised that many people don't know too much about it. In 1 John 4:1 it says, *"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world."*

This means that all of us are required to use godly discernment to one degree or another, while some are specifically called to this gifting to help the body discern what is and is not of God. This is about recognising between when the Holy Spirit is at work and when something appears to be of God but is actually a deceiving spirit at work.

Godly discernment is the ability to judge between what is genuine and what is false.

The Scriptures say, *"For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness."* (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)

This means that much that presents itself to us as Christian will, over time, prove to be fake and even malicious. God uses people to build His kingdom, but Satan also uses people to mislead people for his purposes. Godly discernment is the ability to judge between what is genuine and what is false.

What Does It Look Like in Practice?

Because spirits do most of their work through people, discernment often takes the form of judging the fruit coming from people. Jesus said that *"by their fruit you will know them"*. Therefore, while there are various ministries (such as prophecy, teaching, leadership and more), discernment is the ability to recognise the spirit behind the ministry. Sometimes the bad fruit is obvious – greed, unbridled egotism or false teaching. At other times, the discerning of spirits is an unveiling of the true nature of things by the Holy Spirit, even when everything looks perfect from the outside.

Jesus Himself is described in Scripture as having 'eyes of blazing fire'. This is a reference to His ability to see behind any façade that people may use to hide themselves. He is able to see the true nature of things. Discerning of spirits is this same ability of Christ's given to people – an ability to perceive hidden things by the Spirit.

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Sometimes in church people will sing out, pray, prophesy or have spiritual manifestations which

initially seem to be of the Holy Spirit when there is actually another spirit at work. When this happens, a few people may feel an unease in their spirits, like something doesn't feel right. This is the discerning of spirits at work.

This happened when Peter strongly confronted Jesus about His plans to go to Jerusalem. Although Peter's motivation initially seemed to be brotherly concern, Jesus recognised another spirit at work and said, '*Get behind me, Satan!*' (Matthew 16:23)

Discernment is Not 20/20

Scripture says that we '*know in part and prophesy in part*'. This should humble us regarding how much we think we know. Discernment, as with prophecy, is not an exact science. It is not an infallible process of knowing. God's knowledge is perfect, but sometimes we hear Him incorrectly.

Discernment is often experienced as a 'gut feel' about something, but many things can make us feel uneasy about a person or a situation that may not be the Holy Spirit. For example, certain people may trigger certain fears in us that are the consequence of previous bad experiences or trauma.

This is why we need to exercise discernment within a team. Submit what you are feeling to your leaders so that they can use your insights to help guide them as they lead. The principle of every matter being established by two or three witnesses often applies to prophecy and discernment, when God will highlight the same thing to two or three people.

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When you discern something scary, like the man I mentioned who operated by another spirit, it is easy to become fearful and then to act out of that fear. But it is important to remember that Jesus is the Chief Shepherd and He is responsible for His flock. Although He may have revealed something to you by the Spirit, once you have submitted it to your leaders, you have fulfilled your responsibility before the Lord. You then need to surrender the situation to God and trust that He will do what is right by His sovereign power.

When the Spirit does show you something about someone, it is also important to refrain from immediately judging that person. In my example with Jack, I had to put my premonitions 'on the shelf' and just love and accept him. My discernment was accurate in that instance, but there have been other times when I 'misread' people, and so it is important that we do not prejudge people on the basis of what we think we know.

Ultimately, we can only judge people by the fruit of their lives. If there is another spirit at work through a person, the fruit of that spirit will become evident with time.

Discernment is Not Prophecy

It has been my experience that people who have a gift of discernment are often able to discern

what is in people's hearts. This can easily be mistaken for prophecy and can be dangerous. Let me explain. There is a difference between discerning God's desire for a person's life and discerning the person's desire for their own life.

Sometimes, while we are praying for someone, we can discern things in the Spirit, but we must first weigh up whether this is something God wants us to speak over them or not.

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As an example, before I was married, there was a woman I really liked and was praying about whether I should pursue her for marriage. Around that time, a friend of mine told me she had had a dream about me but she didn't want to share it with me because she wasn't sure if God wanted her to or not. In the end I got the info out of her – she had seen me together with the very lady I had been praying about!

I immediately took this as prophetic confirmation that God wanted me to be together with this lady and so I pursued her. By the grace of God, the relationship did not take off, and in hindsight I know that it was not God's will for me to be with her. My friend simply had a gift of discernment and had discerned the desire in my heart for this lady. But can you see how spectacularly wrong things can go if we mistake discernment for prophecy?

How Can I Grow in Discernment?

Growing in discernment is very similar to growing in prophecy. It involves learning to recognise the difference between what I am feeling just because of who I am, and what I am feeling because God is communicating something to me.

This requires getting to know more about God and getting to know more about me.

Getting to Know God

As I get to know God through His Word and by walking in relationship with Him, I learn to recognise His voice more and more. It is as I renew my mind according to God's Word that I am able to 'test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will' (Romans 12:2). And so growing in discernment is not just about practice, it is about diligently studying who God is by knowing and studying His Word.

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In this way, I also gain a better understanding of His Kingdom and the role He wants me to play in it. This is very important, because prophetic people can get very weird when they do not properly recognise their place and role in God's Kingdom! God does not give us gifts to elevate us or to make us powerful – our motive for growing in our gifts should be love for others, not self-aggrandisement.

Getting to Know Myself

But we also need to get to know ourselves.

- What are my fears and insecurities – my ‘cracks’?
- What do I struggle to trust about God?
- What insecurities do I have around people?

It is helpful to know these things about ourselves, because our insecurities can easily influence what we believe we are ‘discerning’ in others. For example, if I have insecurities with leaders because of a bad experience I have had with authorities, I might be very quick to ‘discern’ something in one of my leaders and think it is by the Spirit when in fact it is simply an insecurity rising up in me.

To Every Christian

As a closing exhortation to every Christian reading this I would say, *“Be on the alert. Stand firm in the faith. Be men of courage. Be strong.”* (1 Corinthians 16:13)

God has called all of us to exercise discernment; to grow in maturity and in our knowledge of the Lord. To be watchful and alert in the Lord. This doesn’t mean we should be paralysed by paranoia and a hyper-critical spirit, but rather that we should learn to judge rightly between what is true and false. Thankfully, God has put leaders in the church who are responsible for ‘watching over’ the flock, and if they are good shepherds, they will do this diligently, but it is everyone’s responsibility to grow in discernment and to seek out what is true.