

What Is Spiritual Discernment?

Spiritual discernment is *calling on the Holy Spirit to lead or give direction on a matter*. It is how the Spirit shows the church or its people what God wants them to do and be.

There is discernment of:

- gifts,
- spirits,
- actions,
- intents,
- the course of the times we live in.

Discernment is more than just a skill. Discernment is a [gift from God](#) before it is anything else. Yet there are clearly skills you can put to use when using your gift, and you can become better at it through training and experience.

Discernment is more than just a process. Even for the most 'material' or 'nitty-gritty' matters, there is a Spirit at work nudging us, leading us, even pulling us by the nose ring. Then again, even for the most 'spiritual' matters, there are disciplines, methods, processes, means, and tools which the Spirit can work through to help us discern rightly. Discernment isn't usually a sudden zap from beyond, but something which emerges from hard work and close attention.

Learn to discern. *Yearn* to discern.

"It is impossible to frame a doctrine of the Holy Spirit by taking all the data indiscriminately and forcing them into the Procrustean bed of a formal system. We have to discriminate between what is true and what is false, ... between what is primary and what is [secondary](#), between what is central and what is peripheral;... between testimonies concerning the Spirit which reflect different levels of apprehension, between those which belong to different stages of the divine economy, and between those which have relation to different moments in the dialectic of spirit."
George Hendry, **The Holy Spirit In Christian Theology**, p.13

When the Spirit is on the move, it's characterized by:

- Christ-centered spirituality in every aspect of life;
- Rejection of all prejudice, class/ethnic/educational barriers, exclusiveness, and denominational warfare. When it follows the Spirit, the Body of Believers knowingly chooses to **counter-model** prejudices by living without regard to them.

- bringing attention and worship to Jesus Christ, and awareness of God's/Jesus'/Spirit's work.
- an unusual level of passion, energy, or impact.

These are the main things to look for in discerning about something:

- it is governed by love, for if it is not, it's worthless ([1 Corinthians 13:1-3](#));
- it centers us onto Jesus the Christ and Lord ([1 Cor 12:3](#)), and His good news;
- it directs us to Scripture, not away from it ([Isaiah 8:19, 20](#));
- it builds up the church and its members ([Ephesians 4:11-12](#)), giving it power, wisdom, character, boldness, and unity.
- it helps create in us a love of righteousness, a heightened sense of sin, and a turning away from known evil.

"The mystery of Pentecost is that the gift of discernment is breathed into the world, enabling us to see the presence of the divine in the midst of the human - not as an aside or an afterthought, but as the main event of our lives"
Jay Rochelle, in
 [Christian Century](#), 22
 May 1985, p. 535

'Discernment' is sometimes used as a catch-word for speaking against others (as with some 'discernment ministries'), or to defeat them in a struggle for power or influence, or just to pick at them until they quit or retreat. Discerning eyes look for whether something that's labeled 'discernment' is done from love, or whether it just is a clanging gong or a noisy cymbal. Jesus didn't call us to love ideas, he called us to love people. John put it as bluntly as he could :

"One who does not love does not know God, for God is love." (I John 4:8)

When discerning, the Christian must keep in mind *why* he/she is doing it. Ask yourself, "If I raise this issue, how am I pointing people to Christ? How am I helping them grow in the Spirit? In what way am I loving them?" If there's no answer to those questions, or if you have to stretch far and wide to come up with a complicated or weak answer, then it's best not to speak. Indeed, it's time to focus on listening, because it may be your time to learn.
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Scripture and Discernment

Christians turn to the Bible in order to get our story right. The New Testament passes along the testimony of those who knew Jesus and His mission in person. For the early church after the apostles, for the Reformers, and for us today, believers turn to Scripture because they know the Spirit speaks there. It is Scripture which shows us the Spirit's priorities, and Scripture which shares with us the vision of the coming Kingdom. The Spirit works *through Scripture*, not against it. Through the Bible, you can discover wisdom and direction. Without it, you'll fail to distinguish **God's** Purposes and Word from *your* purposes and words. This is true of what you think and do today, and it's also

true of the past, including the most treasured of traditions. If the new or the old stands against Scripture or is used to thwart its central thrusts, we must stand with Scripture, or we will fall for anything.

This 'Scripture principle' is not there to hold the Spirit in chains. It's to be used **in the light of freedom in Christ**, knowing that **Scripture does not directly address most matters**. Instead of demanding direct 'Scriptural warrant' for a practice or course of action, it's better to seek these signals:

1. that Scripture does not speak against it;
2. that the practice or teaching conveys the Gospel, and is fully in keeping with the root and heart of Christian belief found in Scripture;
3. that it turns the focus onto **Christ**, not persons, ideas, ideologies, organizations, wondrous signs, or activities;
4. that it is truthful, not rooted in a lie or distortion.

If these are all true, then no direct warrant is needed from Scripture, tradition, or for that matter, sometimes even from common sense. The Spirit has every right to lead us into new things that look like folly. The Holy Spirit is sovereign. **Discernment is about finding out** if it's the Holy Spirit and not someone else's folly.

There are some people who could stuff themselves with Scripture until it came out their noses, and they'd still refuse to let the Spirit teach them anything. They're not trying to discern at all; they're seeking support, not truth. For the rest of us, the patient, prayerful, steady study of Scripture brings many rewards. The Spirit rewards such diligent listening by developing [within us](#) an understanding of why God acted in the past. Since the same God is acting today toward the same purposes, this gives you a sense of what God is doing now and what role you may have in it.

The Scripture principle is not a substitute for the Spirit. It works only because the Spirit works through Scripture. We rely on this truth when we read the Scriptures in earnest [prayer](#). Without [the Spirit's action](#), the Bible's pages would lay still, moving your life no more than a dictionary or encyclopedia. If the Spirit is working in us, the Bible is aflame with truth and vision for every corner of our lives and for the whole world. The Spirit wants us to study, to trust, and to shape our lives according to what is in Scripture; to steep it into our souls, to live by the contours and the world vision of the Scriptures. No one can prove that the Bible is the [authentic](#) story of God's dealings with humanity. That has to be shown to each of us by the Holy Spirit.

Anyone who denies the [authority of the written Word](#) in and for the church comes real close to bypassing the Christ who *is* the living Word of God, and who *is* what the written Word is about. We cannot just nakedly 'go by the [fruit](#)' of the Spirit, because it is Scripture which tells us **what fruit** we are to look for, and **in what contexts** they are

the work of the Spirit. Without the Bible, we can't accurately recognize what is from God, or tell it from what's fake.

There is another warning to be given here. You can have God-gifted leaders, go through prayerful discernment, decision-making, and accountability processes, and even have things start to go well. But **the surest way for them to turn wrong is to start telling others that their decisions are "God's will"**. That's something known years from now, if ever. It's a pretty big boast, if you think about it: you know what the Almighty knows. Most believers and non-believers alike rightly dismiss such talk. And pride does come before a fall. Decision-making isn't a matter of the thunderous "Will Of God", and even when it is, you may not have it right. This is a reason the Spirit builds [humility](#) into people.

Scripture shapes an authentic Spirit-led experience, and sets the bounds for it. When looking for the course and purposes of what God is doing, Scripture [ranks first](#).

[more on Scripture](#)
[some things Christians say about the Bible](#)
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The Church's Role In Discernment

Discerning God's will is not just the work of an individual person. The Spirit acts within the gathered believers (the Church) so they can discern what to do and be. **Within that context**, specific persons may be given the gift for leading the church as it discerns. Such gifted people are given a 'spiritual eye' for cutting through facades and confusion, for getting to the heart of the matter. They listen closely, notice what's happening in the world around them, and instinctively know what place it has in God's plans. Someone who's gifted in discernment of spirits can find where evil lurks in good things, and where the Spirit is working when things are going wrong.

When the church was starting out, there was only one way she could learn the faith: on her feet. The church had to learn while she was **doing**. The Spirit had to teach the Christians how to love at the same time as moving them to **act** on that love, and teaching them [mercy](#) at the same time as empowering them to live merciful lives.

Christians sometimes forget that what we teach and discuss is inevitably **our own** understanding of Scripture. Other understandings, **if** drawn from Scripture and open to be judged by Scripture, are possible and even [faithful](#). We discern to learn.

That's why it's so valuable to have the input from 2000 years of churchgoing Christians (tradition) and the billion Christians of today (fellowship). Meaning springs out of life; the Spirit's way is lived and experienced. Even more: it is lived and experienced as a part of those who believe in Jesus and his good news, a Body of Followers whose members

are formed and shaped in this way, as found in Scripture. This [community](#) teaches each other, recalls history, shares their experiences, and affirms each other's value. It (sometimes) has the strength to say no and to get each of us to amend our understandings and change our ways when we're going astray, and to show a more excellent way in all things.

When you're being checked by the church, you're being checked by others who have also done patient, prayerful, steady [study of Scripture](#). The Spirit didn't give a sense of God's purposes only to you but also to others, in a slightly different way for each of them. If they *didn't* study God's ways, they *won't* have that sense, and thus are a less trustworthy part of the discernment process. (You'll never find out one way or the other unless you listen carefully, and have the guts to put away any defensive reactions you might have.)

Church actions should be set up to discern the right direction *before* it acts, to keep effective tabs on it *while* it acts, and to debrief *after* it acts, making whatever disciplinary actions or clarifying lessons are needed. Do this, **expecting** that the Spirit *will* lead, if really asked and really given a chance to lead.

One drawback of the church's role in discernment is that the church is made up of people. (It's a benefit in more ways, but here's one way it's also a drawback.) People are strange, and sometimes do wrong. They are not all-knowing, and have badly-damaged understandings. They can be fooled. People love to be sweet talked, to be showered with puffery and to get their egos stroked. They push aside what's bad news for the camp they're in. It's easy to become a yes-man or get stuck in the 'no' position. These facts must be kept in mind when discerning with the church. But remember too that these things are also true of you. Your role in discernment requires checking and re-checking and cross-checking, and so does the church's.

Neither you nor the communicated Word nor the Church local or universal are the bridge between the biblical events and our putting the Word into living effect. It is the *Holy Spirit's* doing.
[going up...](#)

Being Held Accountable

Like everything else in this world, our discernments are bound by our imperfections and thus can be false or shallow or merely mistaken. But it helps greatly to have the right attitude toward it :

- Make sure you can be **held accountable** by specific trusted people, on small things as well as large ones;
- Allow those others to actually *do* it. Don't fight back nor blindly accept, but pay attention and be a servant about it;

- Be ready to **hold others accountable**, if need be - even if that makes you uncomfortable.

This way, you become less bound by attitudes and actions which block your discernment.

Other Discernment Hints

One of the keys to discernment is [surrender](#). If you treat "I" as the emperor of all things, you won't be in the right place to find out what God wants of you. In fact, this selfish imperial view of existence lies at the heart of all sin: we act as if we're God, even though we certainly know better. The emperor 'I' has no clothes. So we need to set aside what we want and what we've been taught, and join with Jesus in His prayer in the face of His most ultimate decision : "Yet not as I will, but as You will." (Matt 26:39).

Another key to discernment is a 'sense of peace' about something. That peace must take place not by itself, but [within](#) the rest of the framework of discernment, or it's not divine. Yet the absence of such peace is, by itself, bad news. Such peace and security comes and grows with prayer. Peace is a gift God is more than happy to give. God wants us to have some sense of security about what we do. Since God is not a God of confusion, it will not do in God's purposes for God's followers to be confused, or be confusing.

"I fear that many people seek to hear God solely as a device for securing their own safety, comfort and righteousness. For those who busy themselves to know the will of God, however, it is still true that "those who want to save their life will lose it." My extreme preoccupation with knowing God's will for me may only indicate, contrary to what is often thought, that I am overconcerned with myself, not a Christlike interest in the well-being of others or in the glory of God."

Dallas Willard, *[Hearing God](#)*, p. 28

Some hints which confirm:

- **a chance encounter with just the right person;**
- **a thought or conviction that keeps growing;**
- **something from the Bible which comes to mind;**
- **something said in conversation which keeps coming to mind;**
- **an opportunity which suddenly opens up.**
- **it 'bites back', becoming harder to stop the more you or anyone else tries to hold back.**

These hints mean nothing by themselves, but can mean a lot when taken together.

A decision empowers you to act. When you don't decide, you give power to someone or something else to make the decision. So if there is not a clear sense of direction from the Spirit, it could be a hint that God didn't want you or your church to decide anything. If you find this is so, then let things happen as they will, leaving it in the hands of others whom God is calling forward. It is just as likely, though, that you're just ducking the question. The best way to discern the difference is:

1. if the search for leadings from the Spirit finds nothing or almost nothing (as against having an unclear or conflicted sense of leading);
2. if there is a specific someone who is clearly stepping forward;
3. if that specific someone is doing this out of concern or love and not a drive for power.

It may take a lot of [humility](#) to admit that you are not God's chosen one and you don't hold the reins of power. But in fact, you don't; God does, and God will work through people other than yourself or your group.