

# Developing Discernment

Human and Spiritual Discernment

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The musicians of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra were once asked to name the most effective conductor. Arturo Toscanini won, hands down. When asked why, one of the instrumentalists said, "He could anticipate when you were about to make a mistake, and keep you from making it." This man had human discernment. Discernment, like musical talent, is innate, but it is not like the gift of perfect pitch. The gift of discernment can be taught, practiced, and developed.

There have been many leaders who were not given the gift of discernment. They could not read people to save their own lives, no matter what they did. They read figures. They excelled in science, engineering, mathematics, and administration. In their leadership they depended upon management skills and organization. But when it came to discerning, they did not have a clue.

Those blessed with even a little discernment, however, could develop significant sensitivity and intuition—catching what others miss. So some of these people just seem to sense when something is amiss at times. **Discernment** is an act of wisdom or detection marked by an insight into a person's character or by an event that comes through insight that goes beyond the facts given. In Scripture, people discern matters through their own cultivated powers or in a clearly spiritual manner, and ministers are often given more discernment than lay members, especially in regard to the discerning of spirits.

Whatever the case may be, discernment is something we should always desire because it is an element of wisdom. People who have the gift of discernment are considered wise and knowledgeable, and are looked up to. The book of Proverbs teaches discernment for every day physical life. I just want to give you a quick sampling here.

**Proverbs 14:6-8** A scoffer seeks wisdom and does not find it, but knowledge is easy to him who understands. Go from the presence of a foolish man, when you do not perceive in him the lips of knowledge. The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way, but the folly of fools is deceit.

**Proverbs 15:14** The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouth of fools feeds on foolishness.

**Proverbs 16:21** The wise in heart will be called prudent, and sweetness of the lips increases learning.

**Proverbs 17:24** Wisdom is in the sight of him who has understanding, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth.

This is a sampling of the many, many scriptures in Proverbs that Solomon has recorded for us today and for every day life, to help us increase our discernment. By way of contrast, these scriptures also show that people without discernment are considered foolish. Those who do not listen to advice, and do not consider the result of their actions, lack discernment.

**Deuteronomy 32:28-29** "For they are a nation void of counsel, nor is there any understanding in them. Oh, that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!"

On the other hand, Proverbs 19:20 says:

**Proverbs 19:20** Listen to counsel and receive instruction, that you may be wise in your latter days.

Turn with me quickly to Proverbs 14, as we build a foundation here—giving a general look and background of discernment. People who are self-confident, who are quick-tempered and lawbreakers are some of the many simple-minded who lack discernment. Notice the contrast between the simple and the prudent.

**Proverbs 14:15-18** The simple believes every word, but the prudent considers well his steps. A wise man fears and departs from evil, but a fool rages and is self-confident. A quick-tempered man acts foolishly, and a man of wicked intentions is hated. The simple inherit folly, but the prudent are crowned with knowledge.

The word *simple* (mentioned here in verses 15 and 18) is from a Hebrew word that

means simple, or foolish, easily enticed and seduced, credulous, or inexperienced. These types of people tend to have **a lack of discernment**. A prime example is that of Lot, who displayed a real lack of discernment a number of times in the record that we have of him. When he and Abraham parted company to settle their flocks, Lot chose the fertile land near Sodom and Gomorrah even though the area was filled with wickedness. (You will find that in Genesis 13.) Lot chose by sight. He chose by the lust of the eyes. And it does not appear as if he used any discernment at all in his decision.

Later, when the three messengers of the Lord came to Lot in Sodom, he offered his daughters to the men of the town who wanted to rape the messengers and he hesitated before leaving his home to flee. Following these unwise and undiscerning actions, his wife was killed; he was forced to hide in a cave; and his daughters turned to sleeping with him in order to continue the family line. (You will find that in Genesis 19.) Probably none of this would have occurred had he used discernment earlier on in leading his family. Lot relied on his own human reasoning rather than wise counsel, and on his own desire rather than sacrifice and wisdom. And so Lot lacked discernment and it was very obvious in the end results.

Those who claim to know God but do not discern the urgency of the times are hypocrites, just as they were in Jesus Christ's day—by not recognizing Him. Luke records that Jesus associated hypocrisy with a lack of discernment.

**Luke 12:54-56** Then He also said to the multitudes, "Whenever you see a cloud rising out of the west, immediately you say, 'A shower is coming'; and so it is. And when you see the south wind blow, you say, 'There will be hot weather'; and there is. Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how is it you do not discern this time?"

The Greek word for *discern* (here in verse 56) means to test, to prove, to scrutinize so as to make a decision. So it is not a matter of just glancing at something. Discernment takes a very careful look and scrutinizes. We have to look into the deeper parts of it and separate it out. Just as some did not discern the times during Christ's day, so also in latter days some in the church will reject the truth to follow deceivers. By departing from God's truth, a person **loses discernment**.

**I Timothy 4:1-2** Now the Spirit expressly says that in the latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron.

A ***lack of discernment*** is common in the world today and probably has been since the beginning of man, but it should not be to God's church and to God's people—to the elect. Nevertheless, any human being can have some discernment. What I am going to do now is that I am going to separate out and distinguish between *human discernment* and *spiritual discernment*. So, let us look at human discernment for a while. We can cultivate human discernment through our own efforts, but we must choose to develop it. Like musical ability, human discernment can be taught, practiced, and developed.

Turn with me to Job 34. This is the account of Job's young friend, Elihu—whose speeches, with their strong stress on God's sovereignty, understood that we have to choose discernment (which he calls, in this context, "justice").

**Job 34:1-12** Elihu further answered and said: "Hear my words, you wise men; give ear to me, you who have knowledge. For the ear tests words as the palate tastes food. [So there is an indication of one way to improve our discernment.] Let us choose justice for ourselves; let us know among ourselves what is good. For Job has said, 'I am righteous, but God has taken away my justice. Should I lie concerning my right? My wound is incurable, though I am without transgression.' What man is like Job, who drinks scorn like water, who goes in company with the workers of iniquity, and walks with wicked men? For he has said, 'It profits a man nothing that he should delight in God.' Therefore listen to me, you men of understanding: Far be it from God to do wickedness, and from the Almighty to commit iniquity. For He repays man according to his work, and makes man to find a reward according to his way. Surely God will never do wickedly, nor will the Almighty pervert justice.

We can see here that we are rewarded for our efforts to improve our understanding and discernment. Solomon wrote, in the book of Ecclesiastes, how he searched to study and explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven—looking for the meaning of life. He was looking for discernment as well. God gave him wisdom; and with wisdom comes some discernment, but we have to develop it.

**Ecclesiastes 1:13** And I [Solomon] set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task [So it does take hard work.] God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised [or, practiced].

So, to acquire wisdom and to acquire discernment takes work. It is a burdensome task. But keep in mind that this is speaking of human wisdom. We will see later that it also takes hard work to develop the gift of spiritual discernment as well.

Solomon cultivated discernment on a human level as a result of the wisdom that God gave him. His wisdom was so great that he kept peace between Israel and the surrounding nations, making him the only Old Testament ruler whose reign was filled with peace and prosperity. Much of that had to do with the discernment that he was able to develop on a human level.

Now, let us look at **discernment through communication**—the way we interact with each other. Using our human discernment requires much more than only hearing words. Most of the time we get a general concept of what people are saying, just enough to maintain conversation. But it is *productive listening* that is required—active and intense listening. (Keep in mind that this is developing human discernment. We will get to spiritual discernment later.)

**John 8:43-47** "Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? [That is, why do you not discern the truth? That is the question that is being asked there.] He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God."

So, we can see that it does take productive listening. In the case of **spiritual discernment**, it takes *revelation from God*; and it takes *being of God*; and it takes *being obedient to God*. But in II Thessalonians 2, we see stated the problem with discerning truth. Man would rather tell lies than speak the truth, and he would rather hear lies than the truth.

**II Thessalonians 2:9-12** The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason

God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

This lie—this working of error—will be supernatural in character so as to prove irresistible to rebellious humanity. *Strong delusion* is another way of referring to *the lie* and *deceit*. Because they have refused to love the truth, they will be completely defenseless against the false claims of the lawless one and his perversion of God's truth. This believing of the lie is, basically, believing Satan's counterfeit of God's truth. This happens daily on a lesser scale than when the lawless one will arrive on the scene; but nevertheless it happens, and it happens often. Satan's lies cause many rebellious human beings to live their lives as a lie. These people are discernable, even by some in the world. The solution to the evil is also understood by some people in the world, because they are capable of certain levels of human discernment.

Dr. M. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled*, wrote another book entitled, *People of the Lie*. On page 65, he explains the feeling that one gets in the presence of evil. It is amazing, the insight that he has.

The feeling a healthy person often experiences in a relationship with an evil one is revulsion. The feeling of revulsion may be almost instant if the evil encountered is blatant. If the evil is more subtle, the revulsion may develop only gradually as the relationship with the evil one slowly deepens.

But what would make revulsion a healthy response? Revulsion is a powerful emotion that causes us to immediately want to avoid, to escape, the revolting presence. And that is exactly the most appropriate thing for a healthy person to do under ordinary circumstances when confronted with an evil presence—to get away from it.

Evil is revolting because it is dangerous. It will contaminate and otherwise destroy a person who remains too long in its presence. The revulsion counter-transference is an instinctive or, if you will, God-given and saving early-warning radar system.

Jumping over to page 66, he explains another reaction to evil. What I am doing here is that I am showing you that even worldly people can discern evil, and can discern certain aspects of Satan's way. On page 66, Dr. Peck explains:

There is another reaction that the evil frequently engender in us—confusion. Describing an encounter with an evil person, one woman wrote, 'It was as if I'd suddenly lost my ability to think.'

Once again, this reaction is quite appropriate. The lies confuse. The evil are the people of the lie—deceiving others as they also build layer upon layer of self-deception.

The revulsion and confusion we sense in the presence of an evil person is one that is communicated to us by way of speech, by body language, and also by a person's actions. Every time we feel revulsion or confusion around someone does not mean that person is evil. There are many other factors that could be reasons for that. For example, it could be that there is a personality clash. It could be physical illness, on their part or ours. It could be different cultural backgrounds, and so on. So it requires *discernment* to tell the difference. It requires close, careful analysis—and not jumping to conclusions—to determine this.

There is much that we can humanly discern—even in an average person—as we observe a person's speech, and body language, and actions. To develop human discernment we have to make sure that we understand the meanings of words. We have to listen to the selection of words that a person uses. Word choice discloses several things, including a person's reasoning ability, his prejudices (That is, the use of derogatory words. Maybe the person is foul mouthed.), and a desire to impress. (For example, inappropriate use of large words.) Words give clues as to whether a person is primarily intellectual or emotional. Individuals with precise minds use precise language and individuals with emotional minds use more poetic language. Of course, these are generalities. They are not the same in every case.

We can often determine whether individuals think in principles or techniques. For example, asking the questions: "Can they explain things several ways?" "How broadly do they illustrate?" Those are some of the questions that we might ask as far as determining whether someone is intellectual or more emotional. If a person illustrates from many different areas, we can see a similar principle running through the different experiences.

The use of words and accents also gives us a glimpse into someone's background. Even though Colossians 4:14 tells us that Luke was a physician, we can discern from many medical terms that he used in the third Gospel that he was associated with the medical profession of the day. For example, in Luke 9:39 and 42, Luke uses the Greek

medical term for convulsions.

**Luke 9:37-42** Now it happened on the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, that a great multitude met Him. Suddenly a man from the multitude cried out, saying, "Teacher, I implore You, look on my son, for he is my only child. And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out; it convulses him [That word "convulses" is a medical term in the Greek.] so that he foams at the mouth; and it departs from him with great difficulty, bruising him. So I implored Your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Then Jesus answered and said, "O faithless and perverse generation. How long shall I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." And as he was still coming, the demon threw him down and convulsed him. Then Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the child, and gave him back to his father.

In verse 42, that word "convulsed" is also a Greek medical term. In Luke 18, Luke uses the Greek medical term *belone* for a surgeon's needle.

**Luke 18:25** For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a [surgeon's needle, is what it is in the original Greek] than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

People who have a public vocabulary different from their private ones sometimes let a private word slip into the public expression, and that opens a window into a person's thought processes. Human discernment requires that we notice the manipulation of words as well. Does a person put a spin on descriptions of people or events? For instance, those who use diplomatic language ordinarily want to avoid offending anyone—which, to a discerning person, means that we are probably not getting the whole story. Any time that you see a politician on TV, you know that you are not getting the whole story because he is so obviously guarded. When you see that, you are using human discernment.

We see the manipulation of words in a flagrant way when watching the very liberal newscasts or when reading the very biased newspapers of this country. It just hits us like a ton of bricks; and that is part of having discernment, because if you look at the liberals in general they do not notice anything being "liberal" about the newspaper and media. So they, obviously, lack discernment. And the Republicans lack discernment on the other end—so let me give them equal time here. All politicians and all of politics lack a great deal of discernment, because they are living a lie.



Discernment also requires hearing what they do not say. We try to learn, by listening, why the person says what he says and why he says it at this particular time, in this particular way. Listen for two things. Listen for *tone* and *pace*. **Tone** is generally driven by underlying emotions. If the tone is judgmental, you generally suspect self-righteousness or cynicism. And you do not have to have God's Holy Spirit to recognize or discern this type of attitude. A negative tone denotes a negative feeling about the subject. Anyone can discern this type of tone in a person's speech, but someone with God's Holy Spirit has a much deeper understanding and discernment.

On the other hand, interpreting laughter is interesting and instructive. Where everyone is honest, open, and free—so is the laughter. If it is just polite, derisive, or carrying innuendo—there is discord (speaking in general terms). Abraham's wife, Sarah, is a prime example of this.

**Genesis 18:11-15** Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" And the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. And He said, "No, but you did laugh!"

Sarah's relationship with God lacked honesty, trust, and faith at that time—which is revealed in her response to God's promise. Those who clearly speak in controlled tones also raise a question as to why. For example, on a witness stand often you see people trying to control their voices. Is it because they are right? Or because they are afraid of being found out? Well, it could be either; and that is up to us to discern at the moment. The tone of the witness's reply can make them seem truthful or lying.

**Pace** is also affected by emotion. We just spoke of tone, but pace is also affected. Generally, an excited or nervous person speaks more quickly and the pitch rises. I can affirm this because, when I am nervous and I am speaking, I sometimes get so rapid that I can barely keep up with myself. So, there is an obvious example from right now.

Talking excessively is also questionable and generally is borne of a desire to impress, intimidate, or ingratiate. Talking too loudly can be a control factor. That is, if you are in conversation but you are not being heard and you want control of the conversation, then you might raise your voice. And it may be that every last one of us has done that, at one

time or another. It does not mean that you are raising your voice in anger, but raising your voice to be heard.

**Ecclesiastes 10:12-14** The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious, but the lips of a fool shall swallow him up. The words of his mouth begin with foolishness, and the end of his talk is raving madness. [Or just talking loudly, and quickly, and without much sense.] A fool also multiplies words. No man knows what is to be. Who can tell him what will be after him?

One of my favorite verses in Proverbs is paraphrased this way: *Even a fool is accounted wise if he holds his tongue*. Also, sometimes it is important to *interpret interruptions*. These vary from discourteous to respectful. We normally think that a person interrupting is indicating that what he wants to say is more important than what is being said. But, on the other hand, it could be a subtle attempt to change the subject to protect someone or to add a different line of thought to the original one. Occasionally, it just shows enthusiastic agreement that cannot be withheld. So we could discern any number of things in a person's interruption. It does not mean that they are being evil, or vain, or trying to overshadow us. Sometimes it just means that they are very interested in the conversation.

What is the rest of the body saying? We have all heard that people not only talk with their mouths, but they speak with their bodies. Reading *body language* has been oversimplified by charlatans. Many books have been written. Seminars and books on the subject have probably made millions. They define specific body movements generically and apply them universally. Any time that is done, it is just quackery; because you can never generally apply things in a blanket sense that have to do with psychology, and body language, and that type of thing.

For example, I have read that when a person crosses his arms he is being defensive; but that is not necessarily true. The room may be cold. Maybe this is his stance when thinking or interested in the subject. It is funny that this should be a point in the sermon, because right before services I was standing and talking to someone. I had my arms crossed, and he took offense to it in a chiding way—that I was not open to what he was saying. But that was not true at all. I tend to cross my arms when I am thinking about what somebody is saying. So do not take offense when I do that—even though some of these books say that it is offensive or that I am not interested.

Still, body language is important and should be carefully observed, investigated, and verified in each specific instance to properly discern what a person is implying.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego saw this first hand in Nebuchadnezzar. You are very familiar with this event, but maybe you have not thought of it in this light before.

**Daniel 3:16-20** Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up." [Now, here is the verse that I want you particularly to take note of.] Then Nebuchadnezzar was full of fury, and the expression on his face changed toward Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. [Was there any doubt in their minds what he was thinking, when they were looking at his face? It did not take much in the way of discernment to be able to tell.] He spoke and commanded that they heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated. And he commanded certain mighty men of valor who were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, and cast them into the burning fiery furnace.

We all know the result. Expressions and mannerisms should match with words. When they are in conflict, there is a reason. A psychiatrist, named Fred Smith, gave this example of discernment through examination. (Keep in mind that we are still talking about human discernment.)

Once I was invited by a friend to sit in on a conversation between a father and son who were having a problem. I wasn't part of the conversation, so I concentrated on the boy's face to see if I could read any changing expressions.

When one matter came up, he developed a tick. Later the subject came up again, and his face again twitched. I joined the conversation and raised the subject once more. Again, his face showed the tick. The tick and the general feel of confrontation gave me the impression that he was lying. When I challenged him, he confessed.

[This is humorous.] His father later told me that his son said, 'I'm afraid of that guy. He can read your mind.' No, I simply was observing his face and discerning.

This explanation of human discernment is in no way meant to be a comprehensive explanation of how to discern. It is intended to get you to think about things going on around you, and to show you that we can cultivate human discernment. I am using the term "human discernment" out of lack of a better term. Psychologists have other medical terms for it. And please do not ever mistake discernment for the clever antics of many psychologists and psychiatrists today. Much of what they do is deceptive; and you have to be very, very careful.

As human beings, we are capable of developing a certain amount of discernment on our own; but true spiritual discernment is another matter all together. What is spiritual discernment? What is its foundation? How does God give it? ***Spiritual discernment is comparing things in life, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to God's standard of righteousness—to see if it matches His will, so that we can rightly apply the knowledge that we acquire during our lifetimes in a righteously wise way.***

That is just a general definition of spiritual discernment. Spiritual discernment is much deeper than that, of course—being an element of wisdom. God's Word is the foundation of spiritual discernment. His statutes and His judgments are the foundation for our wisdom and understanding.

**Deuteronomy 4:1-10** "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you. You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal Peor; for the LORD your God has destroyed from among you all the men who followed Baal of Peor. But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you. Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful [or, discern] to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' [Or, you could say "a discerning people."] For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day? Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and

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your grandchildren, [We should be teaching discernment and wisdom to our children, and grandchildren as well.] especially concerning the day you stood before the LOORD your God in Horeb, when the LOORD said to me, 'Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.'"

We increase discernment in our children by teaching them God's statutes, judgments, and laws so that our children can live righteously. If we do not teach them, they have a greater probability of being "discernment-less."

**Proverbs 15:21** Folly is joy to him who is destitute of discernment, but a man of understanding walks uprightly.

**Proverbs 28:7** Whoever keeps the law is a discerning son, but a companion of gluttons shames his father.

By sticking to God's Word, we stay much closer to *wisdom* and *discernment*. The Word of God contains the wisdom needed to rightly **discern** the thoughts and intents of the mind.

**Hebrews 4:11-13** Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

In verse 12, the Greek word for "discerner" is *kritikos*. It means that which relates to judging; fit for, or skilled, in judging. It is interesting that this original Greek word is where our English word "critical" came from. For example, if you are going to closely investigate and examine something (whether it be a book, or a person, or an actor or a movie), you do a critical analysis of it. This is the sense that we are looking at here. **Discernment** has an aspect of *critical analysis*. Here in verse 12, it is literally "*critical of the thoughts and intents of the heart*." It could be also be stated as "*discriminating and*

*passing judgment on the thoughts and feelings."*

The thirst for guidance or discernment is universal. The righteous and unrighteous alike have perceived the need for insight; but it is only truly available through God. It is God who gives true spiritual discernment.

**Proverbs 2:1-7** My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you, so that you incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding; yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding, if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom [and He gives discernment]; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding; He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk uprightly.

In contrast, people of paganism use magic and divination to gain insight into different areas that are hidden from them—as seen in the case of King Saul's evil example in I Samuel 28. Every true Christian should be able to discern between occult-related lies and God's truth. In Dr. Peck's book, "People of the Lie," on page 190 he writes:

It seems clear from literature on possession that the majority of cases have had involvement with the occult, frequently far greater than might be expected in the general population. It is difficult to discern which comes first—the occult involvement or the possession. I do not mean to imply that most people who involve themselves with occult will become possessed, but they do seem to increase their chances. The traditional Church has spoken of the danger of the occult as far back as its literature goes.

Dr. Peck is a "mainstream Christian," and also a psychologist or psychiatrist. (I am not sure which, as I always get those terms confused.) Continuing the quote. . .

From the beginning, the traditional church has recognized the reality that certain human beings could have supernatural powers, such as ESP or prophetic ability. It labeled such powers charismas or gifts. By this word 'gift' the church implies that such powers should be given to humans by God at a time and for a purpose of God's own choosing.

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When one involves oneself in the occult, wittingly or unwittingly one is attempting to obtain, maintain, or enhance such powers for one's own purposes. This the church calls 'magic.'

Practitioners of the occult often also refer to it as magic, but they distinguish between white magic and black magic. White magicians decry black magicians for practicing their art for malevolent motives but feel comfortable with their own practices, because they are convinced of their loving motives. But it is very easy to be self-deceived about one's motives.

So, as far as the church is concerned, magic is magic; and all of it is black—or potentially so.

Today, worldly people turn to friends, therapists, consultants, and mediums; but God's people must look to Him and ask for discernment.

**Psalms 119:123-125** My eyes fail from seeking Your salvation and Your righteous word. Deal with Your servant according to Your mercy and teach me Your statutes. I am Your servant; give me understanding, that I may know Your testimonies.

We could also add here: *Give me discernment*. We could also add there: *Seek discernment*. Discernment is very important. One of the clearest examples of discernment is Solomon. Rather than grabbing for riches or fame or power, Solomon asked God for a discerning heart. And everyone within the range of my voice is very familiar with Solomon's requesting of God for wisdom.

**1 Kings 3:4-9** Now the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the great high place: Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask! What shall I give you?" And Solomon said: "You have shown great mercy to Your servant David my father, because he walked before You in truth, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with You. You have continued this great kindness for him, and You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. And Your servant is in the midst of Your people

Developing Discernment by Martin G. Collins (<http://www.cgg.org>)

whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?"

Solomon's request was granted, and he quickly became renowned throughout many countries for his great wisdom. In fact, he became renowned throughout the entire world for his great wisdom. As the epitome of a wise, discerning person, the bulk of the book of Proverbs is assigned to him and dedicated to his son—for obtaining wisdom and discipline, for understanding words of insight.

**Proverbs 1:1-7** The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding, to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, judgment, and equity [You could add to that "discernment."]; to give prudence to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion—a wise man will hear and increase learning, and a man of understanding will attain wise counsel, to understand a proverb and an enigma, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Verse 7 tells us the core of the issue of true discernment is the fear, reverence, and obedience of God. Solomon saw the true conclusion of the whole duty of man.

**Ecclesiastes 12:13-14** Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

So by fearing God and keeping His commandments, we can develop God-given *spiritual discernment*. Anyone with God's Holy Spirit is going to have a certain amount of spiritual discernment as a gift. But, as with human discernment, it must be developed. Only God gives true spiritual discernment—through the Holy Spirit. No one else can [give it]; and no one else can have it, unless a person has the Holy Spirit.

According to Barnes' Notes on I Corinthians 2:

The Corinthians entertained an excessive fondness for human learning and wisdom. They loved philosophical disquisition and oratorical display, and



may therefore have been impatient of the unenticing words of Paul. To correct their mistaken tastes, the apostle asserts and approves the utter insufficiency of human wisdom—either to discover spiritual things or to appreciate them when discovered.

**I Corinthians 2:10-16** But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges [or, discerns] all things, yet he himself is rightly judged [or, discerned] by no one. For "who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

The English word "discern" in verse 14 is the Greek word *anakrino*, and it means a variety of things. It means to distinguish or separate out as to investigate by looking through objects or facts. It means to examine, to scrutinize, or to question. It means to hold a preliminary judicial examination preceding a trial proper. The first examination implies more to follow, and is often present in the non-legal uses of the word. The word is also used with regard to determining the excellence or defects of a person or thing. So that word has a wide variety of meanings.

Paul shows that individuals who are addicted to the gross indulgences of the senses are incapable of discerning and appreciating spiritual things. But it is more inclusive than that. All natural human beings—no matter how free from sin they may be, or well educated intellectually—are incapable of **spiritual discernment** without true repentance, water baptism, and the laying on of hands to receive the Holy Spirit. The simplicity of God's truth has met with more bitter opposition and pointed contempt from people of worldly wisdom than from people who are less educated in secular knowledge. All you have to do is look at the college professors, scientists, the leaders, and the college graduates of today to see extreme spiritual ignorance and a total lack of discernment spiritually.

Of the people of worldly wisdom it is especially true that they have counted the gospel foolishness and contemptuously rejected its message. This natural man cannot know the things of the Spirit of God. He can know them speculatively, and may elaborate on them with great accuracy and eloquence; but he cannot know them so as to approve and receive them. The Bible commentators are in this category—Barnes, Adam Clarke, Matthew Henry, Expositor's, Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, and on and on and on. It is amazing—the human wisdom that they can come up with having to do with the Scriptures and some of the understanding; but they do not have **spiritual discernment**. They truly do not understand Scripture as it is meant to be. They can certainly spark ideas in our minds, but they cannot be trusted.

In verse 15, the same Greek word is translated "judges" that is translated "discern" in verse 14. It means that *the spiritual man* has a discernment of those truths to which *the natural man* is blind and ignorant. The spiritual man's feelings, principles, views, hopes, fears, and joys cannot be fully understood and appreciated by any natural man. The natural man does not comprehend the principles that actuate him. He does not have the same joys. He does not sympathize with him in his feelings. The reason is stated in the next verse. Verse 16 says that a Christian is influenced by God; and, since the natural man does not recognize God, so then he cannot recognize the spiritual man who is influenced by God.

No one can completely understand God! No one can fully comprehend His plans, His feelings, His views, or His designs. No one by nature, under the influence of their natural desires, is either willing to investigate His truths or love them when they are revealed. But the true Christian is influence by God. He has His Spirit. He has the mind of Christ, who has the mind of God. He sympathizes with Christ. He has His feelings, desires, His purposes, and His plans. And since no one can fully understand God by nature, so neither can he understand him who is influenced by God and is like Him. The world does not understand us, and never will. They will never agree with us, and will never be willing to put up with us. So why be surprised that the natural man regards God's church as folly, and the elect of God as fools?

Let us take a look at the aspect of discerning of spirits. The **discerning of spirits** is a gift of the Holy Spirit that enables a person to judge whether one who speaks in tongues or performs miracles does so by the power of the Holy Spirit or by a false spirit. It refers to the spiritual power of searching into the secrets of the heart and knowing what are man's purposes, views, and feelings. It also relates to the power of determining by what spirit a man speaks, who pretends to be inspired—whether he is an imposter or not. It also refers to the power of seeing whether a man is sincere or not in his claim to being a Christian. The apostles had this power; and it became apparent from the case of

Ananias and Sapphira, which is recorded in Acts 5:1-10. Another example of discernment through the Holy Spirit is that of Paul with Elymas.

**Acts 13:9-12** Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him [Elymas] and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time." And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Now, obviously, wherever a Christian had the gift of prophecy and inspiration and wherever people saw advantages in it, there would be many pretenders to it. The gift of discerning of spirits has been very important in the church down through the ages in that it has prevented the deception of false ministers against true members of the true church of God.

**I Corinthians 12:1-11** Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all [And that is very critical to know, why those gifts are given—for the profit of all.]: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.

The phrase "discerning of spirits" is translated from a Greek phrase meaning judicial estimation through judgment, or separation. The Greek term which is rendered "discerning" means a distinguishing or discriminating between things that are under consideration. One who possessed *the gift of discerning spirits* was able to make

distinction between the one who spoke by the Spirit of God and the one who was moved by a false spirit. The apostle Paul said that a person lead by the Holy Spirit would be concerned for those things that strengthen the church.

**I Corinthians 14:12** Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel.

**I Corinthians 14:26** How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

So, what it is also saying there is that if you have a pet subject that you just cannot let go of, and it is all that you speak about when you come together with God's people, then you are unbalanced. And you are out for your own edification, not for the edification of the church. To do nothing but study one subject and to continue on in your discussion about it time and time and time again, over and over again, is for personal edification only. This discerning of spirits is the discriminating between the operating of God's Spirit and that of the evil spirit, or unaided human spirit claiming to utter the dictates of God's Spirit.

**I John 4:1-6** Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you will know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

A greater portion of this gift of discernment seems to have been given to those who perform the role of teachers in God's church. It was especially important when John wrote this because there were so many false teachers trying to receive gain from the seemingly new popular religion of Christianity. We see the same greed and deception in mainstream Christianity today; and, occasionally in God's church, we see individuals

coming in with this same condition of wanting personal edification and personal elevation.

There is an overwhelming immaturity in the world today. The idea of *maturity* with regard to discernment is linked with *perfection* (although certainly not identified with it—except in the case of Jesus Christ.) Maturity is seen in Hebrews 5 as the desirable development from spiritual childhood. The experienced Christian knows that he needs strong meat to obtain to this kind of maturity. *Spiritual maturity* requires a certain amount of *spiritual discernment*.

**Hebrew 5:12-14** For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first 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 unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

The Greek word for "discern" in verse 14 is *diakrisis* (the word that we mentioned earlier). It means a distinguishing, a clear discrimination, discerning, judging. Literally it means, "towards a discerning." This indicates that there is **a process** of learning prior to discerning. Discernment does not just come all of a sudden. It is an entire process.

The mature are defined as those who have their faculties trained by practice. There is a reference to *habit* in the Greek here. In fact, the words "by reason" could be translated from the original Greek as "by habit," which would bring out perhaps more clearly the building up of experience through a continual process in the past. That means that the process has been a continuation of learning prior to the receipt of discernment. The Greek term translated "by reason" occurs only here in the New Testament.

Spiritual maturity comes neither from isolated events nor from a great spiritual burst. It comes from *steady application* of spiritual discipline.

Another word without parallels in the New Testament is the Greek word for "senses," used here in verse 14. It refers to those special faculties of the mind that are used for understanding, discernment, and judgment. Of all people, the Christian has insight into spiritual things because his mind is trained in the art of understanding. The power to distinguish between good and evil has been sought ever since the time of Adam and Eve. But the faculty to do so—that is, to spiritually discern—does not come easily, even for those with some knowledge of Christ.

The gift and skill of spiritual discernment immediately shows the difference between the mature and the immature. With human reasoning, it distinguishes between the mature and the immature physically or mentally (at that level). And with spiritual discernment, it distinguishes between maturity within the church—spiritual maturity. But that is not the only factor. Remember that discernment is part of wisdom. So spiritual wisdom is the major factor.

I want to give you a definition of spiritual discernment. Spiritual discernment is the gift given by God through the Holy Spirit that enables us to rightly judge between good and evil. It is the comparing of things in life to God's standard of righteousness to see if it matches or contradicts His requirements, so that we can rightly apply the knowledge we acquire during our lifetime in a wise and righteous way.

Let us end this sermon by reading the apostle Paul's heartfelt comments to the Philippians.

**Philippians 1:9-11** And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.