

~Other Speakers S-Z: Albert Zehr:

Discernment

Desperately Needed for End Times

When false signs and miracles occur will
we be able to see below the surface and
discern or will we be deceived?

DISCERNMENT

-for End Times .

A Critical Need for These Times

Several days before New Year's day, 2002, I sensed the Lord asking me what I particularly desired for the coming year. He then took me to James 1:5, and said, "If any man lack wisdom let him ask and I will grant it." After some time in His presence I sensed that during the coming years there will be a great need for discernment. Contemplating this I prayed, "Dear Lord, I sense a personal lack in this area and sincerely ask you for an increase in discernment for the coming years."

The Lord responded, "For the days ahead discernment will be critically needed for all My people. Seek My face and prepare My people to know and exercise discernment. Only by the constant exercise of discernment will My people see clearly and be spared from being confused and misled. Times are accelerating and there is not much time for trial and error. Both in personal, church and even business life discernment is critical."

During the following weeks I was led to prepare and share several messages on discernment. Many expressed great appreciation and the conviction that this was a very timely topic and I was encouraged to present the matter as it is contained in the following pages.

Definition of DISCERNMENT:

Discernment might be described as the capacity to see through the natural or immediate outward appearances. How often have we been disappointed because something or someone turned out to be quite different than what we had first expected? We may conclude that we were deceived or taken advantage of, but more likely we were caught in making a superficial judgment. In other words we lacked the exercise of discernment. Later we come to realize that we did not perceive the real underlying facts and we begin to understand the real need for us to learn and exercise discernment.

To put it in a more spiritual dimension we could say that discernment is the ability to perceive things from the Lord's perspective or to gain the mind of the Spirit. In all aspects of living our most critical need in every situation is to know the mind of Christ.

Discernment is actually an innate characteristic of the Holy Spirit and so it is also a characteristic of the new life that indwells our spirit. Since it is a "natural" quality of the Spirit that indwells us, it becomes the fruit of living in and by the Spirit. However, we are still human and live by the momentum of the old nature until it is "put to death" by allowing the Spirit to work and take over in us.

The dictionary defines discernment as; the acuteness of judgment, to perceive differences between things or ideas. To differentiate between natural qualities may be helpful but by the Spirit we hope to move in a deeper dimension.

To discern does not mean that we see into the future but that we perceive the true reality of the present. By seeing the true reality of the present the future often becomes quite obvious.

I have been exercising in this matter; praying for a spirit of discernment, as I listen to people present their cases. I am often surprised how the Lord grants me insight beyond any natural analysis. Now I see how so often in the past I merely read the surface and entered into the confusion of debate, rather than rising above to a clear perception according to the Lord's view.

Recently a man shared his frustration and what he considered to be justified anger over a long standing situation. He listed the pros and cons, trying to be as objective as he could, asking if I would arbitrate between

him and his father. I didn't focus on the details, but asked the Lord to show me the heart and the key to the matter. Eventually, he paused to hear my verdict. As I responded in accordance with what the Lord showed me, he broke down and wept. "Oh, God, I don't need an arbitrator, I need to repent and confess my bitterness, and ask the Lord and my father to forgive me!" He declared later that he made more progress in one evening than he had in years of attempting to analyze his problem.

I. The need:

In this section we will simply enumerate some of the reasons why discernment is desperately needed in these times. Later many of these matters will be further developed.

To know the times.

1 Chronicles 12:32 tells us that, "the men of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do." In these days we all need to be "men of Issachar," to be able to understand the times we are living in.

It seems that most people, and unfortunately many believers, pass through life with little awareness of the times they are living in. In the fifteenth century many believers lived and walked close to Martin Luther but had no idea that they were in a time of reformation. Even Martin Luther harassed the Anabaptists without discerning that they were recovering truth beyond his limited vision.

Through the centuries many have also jumped onto frivolous "end-time" movements under zealous misguided leaders only to learn later that they had been duped. This tendency will increase and only those with clear discernment will be able to navigate through the rapids without detours, or even shipwrecks.

In Matthew 16:2-3 and Luke 12:56, Jesus said that the Pharisees could interpret the weather, but they were unable to interpret, or discern the signs of the times. As we move into the later days we are told that many will even perform signs and wonders, but not all will be of God. It is desperately crucial that we have discernment both to know the times, and also to determine the validity of ongoing activities.

The Lord gave me this prayer, "Lord, help me to be open, but not gullible, and help me to be discerning but not critical." In my experience He is answering this prayer. I recommend it to all who "don't want to miss out" but also "don't want to be taken for a ride."

Many who joined the celebration when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday had no idea who was before them. A week later they shouted "crucify Him" with absolutely no discernment as to the times they were living in.

Ecclesiastes 3 tells us that there is a time for everything. This does not mean that it just happens, but often we must discern the proper time, so that we will know when to keep and when to throw away v. 6, when to speak and when to keep silent v. 7.

Ecclesiastes 8: 5b -6 "the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter . . ." This certainly refers to discernment in action. Beyond knowing the times we live in we must also learn to know the proper time and procedure for anything.

To understand ourselves and our personal reactions.

I believe that the first and most critical need for clear discernment is that we come to know and understand ourselves. We cannot discern another beyond what we are able to discern ourselves. If we are self-deceived, how can we clearly see through the deception around us? For this we must come to know our spirit and be actively joined to the Holy Spirit. "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:11).

We must come to know the difference between the soul and the spirit. This is further confirmed in Heb. 4:12 "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Later we will see how critical it is to allow the Word to divide our soul from our spirit if we wish to have discernment.

As we proceed we will see again and again that in these times we must let the Lord expose every thought and motive in our being if we wish to have discernment. Our weaknesses and faults are a problem only if we cover them up or refuse to acknowledge them. As long as we cannot see or acknowledge them we will not see them in others. If we do we will simply react in judgment and condemnation. Have you noticed how often people are very upset by the very weaknesses in others that they have themselves.

Each time we acknowledge and confess our sin and weaknesses He generously forgives and His transforming grace changes us. He also imparts grace and forbearance which we can then readily extend and dispense to others.

The Holy Spirit does shine into our spirit but it must shine through our soul. If our soul is clouded with self, ambition, pride, greed, prejudice or jealousy, the resulting discernment will be tainted.

To discern the real condition of others

When we meet or minister to others do we simply see the outward facade and react with natural sympathy, or do we discern their real inward condition? Suppose you are disciplining your child by withholding dinner. At this point a well-meaning friend arrives, takes pity and feeds the child. While the friend is being naturally kind,

he is actually interfering with the father's discipline. When someone comes to me for help, can I discern whether the Lord is disciplining him or whether he is being attacked by the evil one?

When someone is crying can I recognize whether they are reveling in self pity or needing comfort for a real wound? When someone else offers to help me can I detect whether he is seeking my favor or sincerely wants to help me out of love?

When choosing co-workers in ministry or business it is critical to exercise discernment. Much frustration and many broken relationships could be avoided if we would learn to discern before we commit on the basis of apparent compatibility.

Can we distinguish between someone who is being critical or someone who is expressing a prophetic insight which the Spirit has revealed to them? Many prophetic voices have been stomped on because others could not recognize a prophetic voice. Many times only keen discernment can distinguish between rebellion and prophetic voice.

To know the strategies of the enemy.

We do not wish to give undue attention to the enemy however, in order to be discerning we must be aware of his schemes, so that he might not outwit us (2 Cor. 2:11). We must be aware that one of his main activities is, "to blind the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel" (2 Cor. 4:4).

Knowing this can save us from the counter-productive exercise of warring against our unbelieving friends. I finally learned that the problem is not my apparent stubborn, unbelieving friends, but the powers of darkness that veil their hearts and fill their minds with doubt and suspicion. Knowing this, I begin to employ the authority that God has given me in my spirit in prayer to bind the evil forces at work in my friends. In many situations they soon begin to soften and their attitudes change. Some even think that it was I who have changed! Many are now my trusting friends and some are my brothers!

Peter, who had first-hand experience in being deceived by the enemy advised us that, "the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour," so we must know, "how to resist him" (1 Peter 5: 8-9). To resist him we must be able to discern his activity and his lies and what is really truth.

A person was suffering from severe nightmares. We needed discernment to ascertain where the enemy was finding legal ground to harass him. We discerned that somehow he was giving the enemy ground, either by grieving the Lord and causing His face to turn aside or wandering into the legal territory of the enemy.

We could detect no evidence of satanic materials or strongholds in his home. He assured us that he was not living in willful sin. We did, however, find that he was very critical and spoke negatively about the church and church leaders. The Lord then showed us that this brother was depreciating the church, i.e. "the Lord's wife," and was rebelling against His delegated authority. These actions grieved the Lord, removed the brother from a proper spiritual covering and gave the enemy access to harass him. Only as these matters were addressed were the enemy's grounds for attack able to be removed and victory over this torment assured. To exercise the spiritual gift of discerning of spirits

The aged and experienced Apostle John advises us that there are many spirits, some are of God and some are not and we must differentiate between them (1 John 4:1). For this purpose we need the gift of "discerning of spirits" which Paul tells us about in 1 Cor. 12:10. This is no doubt a unique ability to distinguish between the Spirit of God, the spirit of man, and the spirit of Satan and his agents. While this is the particular gift of some, I believe we all need to be prepared to exercise it in our spiritual journey, especially as the last days' battle heats up (2 Thes. 2:2).

There is coming a dramatically increasing need for dealing with demonic activities. Some will need deliverance, others may simply need teaching and revelation to know their position in Christ. We desperately need discernment to detect the need and the proper approach for each situation..

When we pray for healing we must discern whether a sickness is the result of demonic spirits, self destructive behavior, past experiences, or health mismanagement. Many times, before effective healing can be realized, the root causes must be addressed.

We have been finding of late that persons who cannot overcome certain addictions, sicknesses and oppressions are often being harassed by evil spirits. I have begun to write a booklet on healing and spiritual deliverance and hope to release it soon. In the meantime, the Lord instructed me that while deliverance is much needed, discernment is a priority and an absolute necessity for effective deliverance.

To pray effectively

The Apostle Paul, who was given much discernment, declared that he was not running aimlessly nor beating the air (1 Cor. 9:26). He knew where the target was and the most effective way to hit it. It seems that many times our prayers are a barrage of good suggestions propelled at the Lord. However, Jesus said that effective prayer involved praying according to His will (Matt. 6:10; 18:18-20). Here again we see a need for discernment, otherwise we may exhaust ourselves and even end up praying our natural desires which may well frustrate God's purposes.

There are times when through discernment we see the factors in a problem but it may not be the acceptable time to share what we see. This is where intercession comes in. No doubt this insight was given to us so that we may be able to intercede more effectively until the time for disclosure comes. There are times when the

situation is so heavy and the answer so foreboding that even our words are inadequate. Fortunately, these are times when we can pray by the Spirit in words that even we ourselves cannot understand (Rom. 8:26).

Sometimes the Lord drops an awareness about His desire into our spirits. This is somewhat like a conception. It may then need to be carried and nurtured by prayer for an extended period of time. If we speak of it before its time it may well be aborted. Eventually, it will come due and will be birthed to become the genuine fulfillment of what He had revealed to us earlier. Here we see an initial discernment of revelation and then a further discernment relative to knowing the time of fullness for a matter.

To work or lead effectively

Anyone who has been called into leadership constantly needs discernment. When King Solomon was overwhelmed with the responsibility of leadership he pleased God by asking for discernment (1 Kings 3:9). What an assurance it is to know that in the most impossible situations He can give us His answers through the exercise of discernment. We do not need to rely on ourselves. The judges in Old Testament time were great examples of leaders who needed to exercise discernment. To some extent every leader is called to be a judge.

II. Bible examples:

Much revelation concerning discernment can be gained by studying the biblical characters. From these we will see that discernment is not just dropped on us as an answer to prayer, but results from submitting ourselves to God's work in our lives. Let us consider a few.

Jacob: Many times discernment is gained only by difficult experiences. This seems to be the case with many saints, especially Jacob. In his earlier years he went through many difficulties because he was so strong and trusted in his own abilities. However, in his later years when his natural sight was almost gone, he exercised amazing discernment. By this time he no longer trusted his natural sense, or the preference of others, but he perceived God's mind for the future of his sons. He clearly sensed God's mind concerning his grandsons and crossed his arms to lay his right hand on the younger child (Gen. 48: 17-19).

Our natural strength must be broken. As our trust shifts from our own ability and personal insight and becomes totally dependent on the Lord we will begin to pick up that still small voice that makes known His mind.

Joseph: At times revelation seems to come well in advance of wisdom. Joseph was not only a dreamer, but a very perceptive and prophetic young boy. He had, however, not yet learned discernment. He blew his brothers away and almost got himself wiped out (Gen. 37:5).

Only after much testing, only after his pride and presumption were dealt with, was he able to discern the Lord's way and time for action. Much later, when Joseph's unsuspecting brothers appeared, he was finally able to discern their hearts. He could also exercise the wisdom to wait for the appropriate time to deal with them according to God's mind (Gen. 43-45).

Joshua: Discerning a situation is not a guarantee of constant discernment. In Joshua 5:14, Joshua recognized that the man who approached him was the angel of the Lord and fell on his face. If Joshua had been blinded by pride or position he would have rebuked the man. But as a result of his proper discernment he received a clear word from the Lord and instructions for the coming event.

However, in the situation with the Gibeonites in Joshua 9, discernment was sadly lacking, and the men of Israel were deceived. The Gibeonites wore old shoes, dusty clothes, carried cracked wineskins and moldy bread to convince the Israelite leaders that they had come from a far off country. Joshua 9:14 tells us that, "the Israelite men sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the Lord." In other words, they ate up their story, but did not discern the Lord's mind. Consequently they were deceived and the results produced much frustration in the years to come.

We must learn that outward appearances can be deceptive and only discernment guided by the Holy Spirit can preserve us from being deceived. Let us learn to "inquire of the Lord," even if the outward facts appear obvious.

Eli: Little Samuel kept waking up thinking that Eli had called him. It took Eli three times before he perceived that it was the Lord who was calling Samuel (1 Sam. 3:8). Sometimes the Lord graciously gives us a number of chances to get the message.

David: There are many cases where David exercised discernment and some where he did not. One example worth noting for our study is found in 2 Sam. 14:1-19. Here a wise woman was set up by Joab with a touching story to persuade David to have sympathy for his rebellious son Absalom. However, David discerned that she was speaking for Joab and she acknowledged that no one could get away with anything in front of him!

It does seem that David's natural sympathy for his son Absalom began to cloud his discernment and eventually allowed an environment for Absalom's fatal rebellion. It is very difficult to exercise clear discernment when family or deep natural sympathy is involved.

In 2 Samuel 16, while David is fleeing from Absalom, Ziba brings him provisions and honors him. At this moment David is carried away by Ziba's graciousness and does not perceive that he is being deceived, because the provisions were actually sent by Mephibosheth (2 Sam 19: 24). It is not easy to have clear discernment when we are hurting and someone is nice to us.

In the next incident David is being cursed by Shimei. Although he is encouraged to react he perceives that Shimei is acting according to the Lord's instructions. Here we see remarkable discernment in the midst of opposition. If we are sober and discerning, we will recognize when even our opposers can teach us something!

“Let a righteous man strike me -it is a kindness; let him rebuke me -it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it (Ps. 141:5, shows us one of David's secret for learning discernment.

The Shunammite woman: This woman discerned that Elisha, who ate a meal at her house, was a holy man of God and so she prepared a special room for him. For this she received a son, and this son was brought back to life. No doubt this is a type of the coming Messiah (2 Kings 4: 9-37).

Nehemiah: When the Lord begins to move in an exciting way some people will be attracted because they like excitement without sharing the same vision. Some will want to participate with motives of ill intent. This was the situation when Nehemiah began to rebuild the wall. He needed discernment to recognize what people's real motives were and who was for and against him (Neh. 6: 12).

Jesus: We see the ultimate example of discernment in Jesus. He could always perceive people's intentions, whether good or evil. He was never deceived and spoke only what the Father was speaking (Matt. 22:18; Mk 2:8; Luke 5:22; 20:23).

Disciples: Frequently the disciples were caught short of discernment, especially in relation to Jesus's comments about His coming crucifixion. Often our natural sympathies or fore-drawn conclusions cloud our ability to discern (Luke 9:45).

Peter: Although Peter had earlier problems in discernment he matured in this area. In Acts 8: 20-23 he correctly discerned the motives of Simon the Sorcerer. He was also able to recognize God at work with Cornelius in spite of it being contrary to his past traditions (Acts 10:34).

Apostles: These men learned much through their mistakes and by being with Jesus. It was only because they were able to rise above pride, competition and seniority that they could perceive Paul's calling and anointing (Gal. 2:9). Can we discern when a person has a calling to lead or do we simply measure by natural and traditional qualifications for acceptance of the Lord's servants? Can we discern when another person has an anointing to lead in a certain situation where we usually take the lead?

Paul: He was filled with the knowledge of the Old Testament and led by the Holy Spirit. He learned to put to death the deeds of the flesh and was released to discern the will of Christ. He accurately discerned the evil spirit in Elymas (Acts 13:8). Even though he was surrounded by his peers he did not succumb to the pressure to be “politically correct” when challenged by Peter's duplicity (Gal. 2:11-14).

III. How discernment is acquired and employed:

Requires a new birth:

For real spiritual discernment the primary and absolute requirement is regeneration. Until the human spirit is indwelt by the Holy Spirit a person is still confined to the finite and natural realm. In John 3: 3 and 8:47, Jesus made it clear that unless a person is born again they cannot see the Kingdom of Heaven. Since discernment is actually a matter of seeing with spiritual eyes, being born again is the first requirement to “see” from God's view.

Furthermore, Paul tells us that without the Spirit one cannot understand spiritual things (2 Cor. 2:15). While we may have a measure of natural discernment without the Spirit indwelling us we can neither hear nor understand, let alone discern spiritual things. This is why it is impossible to explain the new birth to an unregenerated person.

In the natural realm we can say, “I will not believe it until I see it.” But in the spiritual realm, we will not see it until we believe it.

Knowing God as the source of light and true knowledge

As mentioned earlier, the Psalmist David operated with remarkable discernment. The secret for him was that he received a revelation and acknowledged that the Lord Himself is the fountain of life and light and only in Him do we see light (Psa. 36:9; 87:7).

King Solomon, acknowledged to be the wisest man, summed up this secret. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5-6).

David, Solomon and the Old Testament saints did not only think about God as light, they believed it and drew their life from it. I am learning that to speak and declare these truths to myself and into the spiritual realm allows this Word to work in me. The more I declare it and acknowledge Him as my light, even in the midst of situations, the more His discernment arises in me.

Not drawing from our own cisterns

In Jeremiah 2:13 the prophet declares that God's people have forsaken Him as the spring of living water and have dug their own cisterns.

A cistern collects water from various sources and holds it for future use. In a sense we are all merely cisterns. We collect information from various sources including: experience, books, teachings and our own natural observations. When a question or a situation arises we draw from this cistern coming to the best conclusion our cistern's content affords. This falls far short in that it draws only from our own natural

resources.

True spiritual discernment is available from only one source: the spring of living water. Only by drawing on God, the true spring, can we always be provided with fresh living water. Like the water flowing from a spring, it is not intended to be held for future use, but to be drawn fresh every instant. This allows us to draw a unique and current answer for each situation. His living water will penetrate and impart insight beyond any human capacity. Let us learn to bypass our cistern and draw from Him alone.

It is also good to note that our cisterns are broken and cannot hold the fresh water. The real water which we received yesterday cannot be held or used again. We must learn to draw afresh from His spring every day in each situation.

Constant exercise of our spirit

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that testifies that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16). We must learn not to quench the Spirit but to allow our spirit to ascertain the Lord's mind and even to test prophecies (1 Thes. 5:19-22). By the exercise of our spirit we no longer see others according to the flesh but according to the spirit (2 Cor. 5:16).

The apostle John refers to the Spirit moving in our spirit as the anointing and affirms that we can live in Him by this anointing (1 John 2:27). In fact he declares that by this anointing we can know the truth without someone else telling or teaching us. This inspires me to come to know and exercise my spirit in every situation.

Here is a riddle. Is it possible to know and not know that we know? Many times we know in our spirit, but we do not know that we know until someone else mentions it. This indicates that we have not learned to trust our spirit or are somewhat dull of hearing. It is only after we hear it from someone else that we acknowledge what our spirit has been trying to communicate to us before. We must come to the place of abiding in Him where we have no need for someone to tell us because we do have an anointing that teaches us.

Knowing others by the spirit

2 Corinthians 5:16, "Therefore from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer." This verse was a mystery to me for years. Eventually I learned that it is quite possible to know people by the spirit and actually, it does not take long to recognize them in this realm.

One day a godly man recommended me to another Christian leader who I had not previously met. I said to the first man that I appreciated his recommendation but was somewhat surprised since we had only met once or twice and had never had an in-depth conversation. The godly man replied, "I know your spirit and I don't need years or even days to know what you think about everything. The time has come to know others by the spirit." I have now known both these men for years and that initial reading has held true and constant.

This experience confirmed a deep longing in me because I longed to walk in such a realm which I had touched occasionally. But it had been deeply ingrained in me that we must have many things in common, and know a person's education, interests, theology, doctrines, and history or culture in order to really know someone. Yet I was often disappointed when I eventually discovered that even after all this I really didn't know them. I realize now that there is a deeper knowing which goes beyond soulish compatibility.

If we exercise our spirit we can very quickly gain a sense of another person's spiritual dimension. Their comparative maturity, their degree of flexibility and openness, their spiritual hunger, their degree of self-trust, and their personal transparency are just a few aspects that can be discerned in a very short time. How do we know? Our spirit knows, we must learn to hear it and trust it!

Abiding in Him and letting the Word abide in us

John 15 gives us a beautiful picture of how our spirit can be joined to the Holy Spirit. Without this union we can do nothing. In other words whatever we do apart from Him is of no consequence relative to God's purposes and is without eternal value (John 15:4, 7).

As we daily draw the Word into our spirit it enlivens and activates our spirit to commune more effectively with the Holy Spirit and to discern His mind. I used to think that I should study the Word so I will know how to act in accordance with the Word. But there is a dimension far beyond this. In John 6, Jesus declared Himself to be the bread of Life and whoever eats this bread can live by it! Today He is available to us as food in the Word and as we eat Him (i.e., the Word,) we can live by Him!

"When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight" (Jer. 15: 16). Our spirit is often starved and too weak to hear and His voice becomes inaudible. Daily eating by feeding our spirit with the Word can enliven and strengthen our spirit until it becomes strong and clear in its speaking. Worship and singing is like water which refreshes our spirit. But only the meat of the Word is solid food which gives strength.

What we feed grows and what we starve weakens. Feed your mind and soul and you will become more intellectual and psychological. Feed your spirit and you will become more spiritual and more discerning.

Praise and worship not only feeds our spirit, but it draws us into the presence of the Lord. In His presence our faith is increased and our capacity to hear and recognize His voice increases.

Taking captive every thought unto obedience to Christ

In the meantime we still live in a fallen environment and are constantly bombarded by evil influences. If our

mind is allowed to wander freely it will no doubt become polluted and lose its sensitivity to the Spirit. Being well aware of this Paul advises us to actively take captive every thought into obedience to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

Sometimes just thinking about something is not enough. It is a good practice to learn to take charge and speak to our mind. "Sorry mind, you are not going there. Those thoughts are out of bounds and I reject them. I hereby set you on the Word. Romans 8: 6 tells me that the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. I choose Life."

Sometimes I say, "Mind I'm not interested in your opinion. Be quiet and concentrate on what the Lord is saying in my spirit."

The mind seems to be attached to the self like a ball on an elastic. It must be stretched and set on the spirit. If I don't exercise to set it there and hold it, it will continually snap back to the self. The more I exercise the weaker the elastic becomes and the more the mind learns to submit to the Spirit in my spirit.

Activated by obedience

Many times we waste time anticipating some great revelation or profound experience, but Jesus' word in Luke 16:10 and 17:19 advises that we must be faithful in the little things if we wish to be entrusted with great things.

John 7:17 tells us that if anyone is willing to choose God's will then He will make it known.

Psalms 25:14, "The Lord confides in those who fear Him; He makes known His covenant to him."

Oswald Chambers said, "You cannot think your way out of a spiritual muddle. The way is to obey your way out of it and it will become clear."

The first word that a child often learns is "NO!" Until he learns this he cannot go much further. This is true spiritually; until we learn to hear and obey the Lord when He says, "NO," we will learn and hear little else.

When the Lord says, "Don't say that," or, "don't look at that picture or movie," our response will determine how much more He will say to us in the future and what we will hear in the future and also our discernment potential. If my child throws away the pennies I give him, I will not trust him with dollars.

IV. Hindrances to discernment

Discernment is a "natural" quality of the Spirit that indwells us, and becomes the fruit of living in and by the Spirit. However, we are still human and live by the momentum of the old nature until it is "put to death" by allowing the Spirit to work and take over in us.

We have tried to explain what to do to gain discernment. But this could easily set us up to try to do on our own what only the Holy Spirit can do. Discernment is not acquired just by practicing certain positive actions. Like a good plant when watered it will grow spontaneously if the weeds are eliminated. So we will now focus on hindrances to discernment. The more these hindrances, i.e. weeds are recognized and dealt with, the more the new nature in our spirit, which incorporates discernment, will be allowed to grow and operate in our daily life.

Hebrews 12:1 advises us not just to deal with sin, but also to throw off everything that hinders. In this section we will deal not so much with sin but with some common hindrances which dull our spiritual senses and limit our capacity to sense the discernment that is in the Holy Spirit who dwells in our spirit. Some of these points may seem like a repeat of the points we have already covered, but they should be considered as the other side of the same coin.

Trust in the natural man

We are born, raised, educated and surrounded by a natural environment. In this environment it is almost universally accepted that doing right things is good. Although doing good and being right may make our lives and even the world somewhat better, it is not what the Christian life is really about. Many of us have even learned to be naturally religious. Study the Bible and do what it says. We do know that this will not save us, but we assume that it will please God and accomplish things for His kingdom. Sorry, this falls far short and we must see something much deeper.

Isaiah. 64:6 " . . . all our righteous acts are like filthy rags . . ." seems quite strong. But if we really receive revelation on this matter we will never be truly happy practicing our own righteousness.

Only the indwelling Life of the Holy Spirit can please God, and only He can perceive and know the mind of God. Concerning our good natural abilities the verdict is delivered in 1 Cor. 2:14; "the natural man cannot perceive the things of God, in fact they are foolishness to him." Until we accept this verdict we will remain severely limited in our capacity to discern. For more on this please secure a copy of Experiencing Christ as Our Life, as described on the final page of this writing. That booklet has helped thousands to live by HIS LIFE rather than their own.

Unwilling to deny the self

The natural man is so wrapped up in the self, and is so self active that unless it is denied, even put to the cross, it will always assert itself. Fasting is a significant form of denying the self and greatly improves discernment. Fasting from other forms of self gratification can have similar benefits in setting us free from the constraints of the self.

In Matthew 16:24 Jesus said that unless we take up the cross and die to self we cannot follow Him. Jesus often speaks and then asks us whether we are following what He has said. If we cannot deny, ignore, and override our self we will not be able to follow what He is saying. Taking up the cross is much more than being willing to go through hard times. It is a matter of living a crucified life. It is being willing to ignore me, my, and I until I can say with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live. . . ." (Gal. 2:20). Full of our own opinions

At the Mount of Transfiguration dear Peter had a great opinion. Seeing three famous persons he reasoned that they should build three shelters. A well-meaning reaction to what he was observing. Of course, he didn't understand what was going on, but like most of us, even if we don't know what is happening, we always have a good opinion. Fortunately the Voice from heaven interrupted him and brought the mind and intention of God into the situation (Luke 9:33). If only the Lord would be so free to interrupt and correct us we might often be spared from acting on our facetious opinions.

In John 11 Jesus' heart and intention concerning Lazarus was far beyond the natural comprehension of Mary and Martha. He even explained what He was about to do. Nevertheless, they had opinions and expressed them, each time obscuring the Lord's actions (John 11: 21, 39).

In Acts 10:14, during Peter's vision of the sheet, he even tried to correct the Lord when he said, "Oh no, Lord." Fortunately, after the Lord repeated the vision three times, Peter was willing to drop his concept. If we would learn to lay down our opinions and look into His eyes and hear His voice, our discernment would be much clearer.

Fear of man

Proverbs 29:25 tells us that the fear of man is a snare. When we are afraid of a person or concerned about impressing people, we become subject to those fears. While we do need to respect and honor people, we must exercise our heart to fear only the Lord.

"What will people think of me?" holds many people in bondage. It controls what they wear, how they act and eventually even what they think. When the question of what others will think arises, learn to declare even as the apostles declared, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5: 29).

This does not mean that we show disrespect of others or that we sanction rebellion toward authority. However, whoever we fear and seek most to please will ultimately control our hearts, direct our steps and affect our discernment.

The fear of man has a reverse side -the praise of men. We must be able to handle complements but never let them distract us. Accept them but do not drink them because they can have an intoxicating effect. They can easily become more important to us than God's complements.

Holding a "person" or an "agenda" other than Christ

We are all called to certain duties and given certain gifts, often for particular projects. Sometimes we receive great help from certain gifted leaders. The danger lies in our potential for making these activities become our "thing" or our "agenda." When we have a "thing" even if it is noble, everything we do, the way we see and interpret anything becomes affected by that agenda.

A friend of mine is into spiritual warfare. He has great insight and experience in this area. However, this is all he sees, talks or thinks about. Eventually everything is interpreted as it relates to spiritual warfare and his discernment has become very subjective and lop-sided.

Notice that the Apostle Paul had much revelation and insight, but none of these became his "thing." For this reason he was able to discern the unique need of each church and speak particularly to it. While Christ was his one and only center he was able to speak about many issues with objective clarity and in each respective case discern the mind of Christ.

A certain teaching or doctrine in which we have special insight and perhaps even a calling to teach can be a blessing to the body. But when it becomes our "thing," we begin to identify ourselves and others by that thing. This is the basis of sectarianism and denominationalism.

Besides dividing the body, denominationalism tends to subjectively obligate believers to maintain a loyalty to the prescribed views. This reduces our objective ability to hear the Lord because of the foregone conclusions prescribed by the past tradition (1 Cor. 3:4,11).

We must not let our nondenominational focus become a "thing." Unwittingly some make their nondenomination more of a denomination than what they came out of!

While we need spiritual leaders, fathers and mentors it is very easy to become so subjectively loyal to a person that we obligate ourselves to their particular view. We spent some years in a movement that could not tolerate any view but that of the leader. Approval and advancement was related to one's loyalty to that person. Knowing and acting according to the mind and teaching of the leader became the goal of everyone. Gradually, knowing and hearing from the Lord personally became unnecessary and eventually impossible.

While everything and everybody else was subject to severe scrutiny and criticism, everything relative to our leader or our movement was de facto right. From experience I can say that discernment is almost impossible until we are set free from such an environment.

Greed -desire for gain

It is critical that we allow the Lord to deal with the greed and desire for money resident in our hearts. How can I have clear discernment concerning finance or investment if my heart is clinging to hopes for wealth?

Proverbs 1:19 says that, "œll-gotten gain takes away the life of those who get it." This indicates that a person, can in effect, sell himself in exchange for gain. At the beginning he likely had the fundamental qualities of life, such as friends, integrity, respect and honorable principles, but for the sake of gain he compromised, cheated, took advantage of others, and exploited friends until he lost all those qualities of life. While this may seem extreme, greed even in small ways can erode our life and discernment.

A root cause of greed is insecurity and fear of lack or insufficiency. It might seem that gaining and having more will bring security. Those who have much can testify that more is not the answer. The answer is a fresh and deep revelation of the security we have in God. Believe, confess and declare His faithfulness. "œAnd my God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4: 19).

One of the first verses I remember hearing when I was a small boy was recited by an elderly preacher; it was Psalm 37: 25. "œI was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." This has stayed with me and saved me from much anxiety and now, many decades later I can declare it is a true word. It has allowed me to forgo various opportunities for more money rather than compromise my principles.

Some years ago it appeared that I was being significantly, financially defrauded in a business deal. Several hundreds of thousands of dollars were at stake. Everyone encouraged me to take legal action. After prayer and fellowship with my wife we agreed not to press charges nor to expose the situation, but to trust the Lord for our future. This allowed the Lord to do a deep work in our hearts concerning money and dealing with offence.

In the meantime, we have been financially blessed and because of that experience, we have been able to discern and minister to many others in similar situations. Furthermore, when the Lord asks us to give substantial amounts for kingdom work we don't have to qualify our response by a fear of whether or not we will have enough for ourselves. We have proved His faithfulness.

Pride

Proverbs 3:34;11:2;16:18; 29:23 are just a few references dealing with the folly of pride. James 4: 6 tells us that, "œGod opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Pride has much to do with personal ego. It puts ourselves in the middle of the picture and exalts us in comparison to others whom we see as inferior. Pride is almost always related to a concept of natural goodness. When we connect our worth and our acceptance to God on the basis of doing good, being right or excelling in an activity, pride stands on solid ground. Then we determine the value of everything as it pertains to myself and my personal interests.

The answer to pride is not found in an exerted effort to be humble. If we could attain humility in this way, we would then have grounds to be proud of our humility! The answer lies rather in bowing before the Lord and asking Him to shine His light into our innermost being. When we truly do this we will conclude with David, "œSurely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts" (Psa. 51: 5 -6a). We will finally see what Paul meant when he said, "œI know that nothing good lives in me, that is in my sinful nature" (Rom. 7: 18).

The value of this is that eventually I come to realize that I am in constant need of forgiveness. As I draw on His great mercy and abundant forgiveness it becomes easy for me to spontaneously forgive others. Further it dawns on me that anything I have or anything of eternal value that I do is totally because of His grace and favor. So, there is nothing to be proud about, it's not about me, it's all about Him, Grace is the divine influence upon the heart and its reflection in the life.

As a proud young father and successful pastor I dared to ask the Lord for more reality. One night when I was about to go to sleep He turned on the LIGHT! I saw myself in His light -a proud egotistical know-it-all who used his wife and family, and even the church, to build his own ego. I disciplined my children not so much for love or for their sake, but so that I would look better as a dad.

I studied the Bible to impress others with my great knowledge. I fed more on the compliments of others than on the spiritual bread of the Word. Seeing this I wept like a baby, begging my wife to forgive my arrogance. She did not understand and thought I was having a breakdown and assured me that I was just fine. By morning I was a different person.

The Lord is still mercifully dealing with me through encounters like this; the work is still not done. But I have learned not to hide behind excuses and to give the Lord full permission to go deeper each time. It's the only real antidote for pride that I have found.

Partiality -favoritism

God's servants must learn to avoid partiality. Moses commanded the leaders of Israel, "œDo not show partiality in judging: hear both small and great alike" (Deut. 1:17).

When Peter came to Cornelius's house he concluded, "œI now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism" (Acts 10: 34).

Paul gave Timothy a very sobering charge, "œI charge you in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism" (1 Tim. 5:21).

There is nothing that limits our usefulness and clouds discernment more than allowing our natural preferences to operate in our hearts. There is no value in pretending they are not there, but the moment they try to rise up in us we must send them to the cross until our only preference is that the Lord would have His way. Legalism/ precedent/ culture

A key characteristic of our fallen nature is the desire to control. We want to control our lives as well as to exercise control over others as opposed to trusting in the sovereignty of God. To accommodate this tendency we need to establish what is right and then do it. We make ourselves worthy by keeping the rules, and then we have the right to demand the same of others. This legalism becomes a cover-up for control.

In the case of Christians these rules are generally assumed to be based on the Bible as it has been interpreted in our tradition or perhaps by ourselves. This in itself appears so right that it dare not be questioned. However the experts in this approach were confronted by Jesus with these words. "You diligently study the scripture that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5: 39-40).

We are now living in the days when the Lord wants to take the church into the good land. He wants to consummate the age, preparing the bride for His return. We must acknowledge, like the Israelite leaders, "We have never gone this way before" (Josh. 3: 4), This means that no precedent, agenda or great plan is adequate. We must all fix our eyes on Jesus and learn to hear and follow His voice and recognize those priests who are carrying the ark. To know the ark and who the true priests are will certainly require discernment.

Lust

Lust is the unbridled expression of the base desires of the natural man, sometimes referred to as the flesh. Giving these desires an opportunity to express themselves blinds us spiritually and discernment goes out the window.

King David, a powerful man who loved God and wrote great songs of worship, got trapped by sexual lust. Solomon, the wisest man on earth, was unable to control sexual lust and was led into confusion by his numerous wives.

Lust may also involve an obsession with any natural element: food, entertainment, sports, pleasure, or money. For the love of food Esau lost his birthright. For the love of food many people destroy their health as well as their discernment.

The above are some of the weeds that choke the growth of the good seed in the garden of our heart. May the Lord grant us diligence in weeding our garden so we can produce a harvest for His pleasure.

The Colour of Hindrances

We might consider that our soul is like a body of water which stands between our spirit and the Holy Spirit. The clarity of our discernment depends on how clear the water is. Hindrances take the form of colouring or a murkiness so our spirit can not get an accurate view of what the Holy Spirit wishes to communicate.

For example let's say greed is green in color. To the degree it is in us it leaves a greenish haze in our soul. When we relate to someone with greed we will not be able to discern that aspect in them because the green in them is obscured by the green in us. This principle has many applications.

If the colour of jealousy is brown, that colour in our soul hinders us from discerning clearly on brown matters relative to jealousy. In some cases we may not be able to detect the jealousy in others. In other cases the brown in us may accentuate the brown in others, so that we are overly frustrated and exaggerate this weakness in others. In this case we react and become very critical. Have you not noticed how often we react to the very weakness in others which we have not been able to overcome in our lives. May our souls be clear and transparent so His Light can shine through clearly. Only to that extent can we clearly discern others.

Can we be Colourless?

Through the weeks that I have been praying and meditating on discernment the Lord has done much exposing in my own heart. One day as I awoke He said, "Today, your motto is; 'Don't care about anything -today nothing matters.'" It took me some time to consider the meaning of such a word. We were traveling and about to face some complicated situations touching some difficult history. A snow storm was predicted and we might not get to meet tomorrow's obligations. "Please Lord, explain such a word for a day like today."

"Haven't you heard, 'Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you'" (1 Peter 5:7). "Or, what about, 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life. . .'"

"Yes, Lord, I'm aware of those verses, but maybe I haven't really heard them before. By Your grace show me how to take them for today."

Suddenly I became aware how much what I care about, what matters to me, affects my discernment. Whether it is money, time, schedule, my natural preferences, my past hurts, or any other cares, these all scream for their own interests. These all want to be included in my considerations and given a place in my conclusions. How can I incorporate all of these and still have objective discernment?

So, is it really possible to be colourless? Since I cannot be a vacuum, the only option is to be replaced, to move out, deny the self, to die, and let Another One live in my stead. So, this is what Paul meant when he said,

â€œI have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for meâ€• (Gal. 2:20).

By faith I declared, â€œLord, today I do not care about anything and nothing matters to me. Please show me what matters to You and what You care about. I desperately want to know You and live by You today, I count everything else waste and worthless even as Paul did in Phil 2:7-10.â€•

As the day proceeded I was able to move with a calm and peace, with no need to prove anything or to make anything happen. The way things turned out was not up to me, and the analysis of any situation would come from Him in its proper time. I was free just to worship and commune with Him as events unfolded.

I was pleasantly surprised when the people whom I had not seen for years responded with warmth and without lingering apprehensions from the past. Perhaps this was a reflection of the Lordâ€™s love in my greeting to them. Even more surprising was that I saw through them and their words, to Godâ€™s heart for them with no vestige of judgment or disdain on my part. My heart was filled with love and concern and the words given to me were filled with grace and encouragement for them.

My words were not mine. They were just confirming the words that the Holy Spirit was speaking in their hearts. When we parted there was an assurance that the Lordâ€™s heart was satisfied and there was no need to second guess what perhaps should have happened. I saw that it is only when we are fully at rest that we can discern clearly. Our anxieties, concerns and desires simply cloud our capacity to discern.

Practical tests

The Lord gives us many practical situations where we can exercise the above principles. A good test for me is when I have been asked to speak, am prepared and then there is no opening or someone else takes the time. Can I remain at rest or do I allow subjective feelings to come in, feelings of rejection or jealousy to cloud my peace and discernment? If just a few final minutes are allowed, can I still clearly reflect the mind of the Lord without any flavor of self-pity or self-vindication? The higher I wish to go in discernment, the higher the price, but the more precious are its rewards. There is no greater thrill in life than to know that the thought and the word of the Lord came through me without traces of my self.

Motive and Approach

So, why should I and how would I employ discernment of another person? Not because I want to see through people. But, I do want to see the reality as God sees and employ His tender love and healing forbearance. Not for my personal gratification or self-vindication nor, for grounds to accuse, but to activate healing and release from bondage and limitations of the given subject. Even this requires trust and proper timing which only the Lord can orchestrate.

For example, imagine you have a domesticated pet bear who has a festering sliver in his back. He is not real clear and can not personally see what his problem is, but his mobility and general health is frustrated. Meanwhile you can observe, (discern) his problem and are moved to help him, for his sake. Can you help him? Only if he trusts you and is willing to surrender his strength and even allow you to cause present pain for his future benefit.

Pure Discernment

Pure discernment is probably mostly realized when a ministering person receives a word of knowledge or a word of wisdom, or by the supernatural gift of discerning of Spirits. In these cases, in a sense, God bypasses our natural abilities to communicate His mind. A minister may at times move in these gifts far beyond the degree to which they have been incorporated into his daily life and character.

I have on occasion been afforded such an experience. While I cherish this, it is my desire to exercise to allow the Lord to change me until I, â€œbecome mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christâ€• (Eph. 4:13). As this transpires discernment will increasingly become a part of my character and daily life, just as it was His.

A Prayer

Dear Lord, I thank You that by the new birth Your life is now indwelling my spirit. Truly, You have begun a good work in me and I believe that You are and will be faithful to complete it. I hereby offer my co-operation to your working in me and in my life. So please, do a deeper work in me.

I acknowledge a need and a desire for discernment, but above all for a more intimate walk with you. I give you permission to expose the hindrances which frustrate your growth in me. I want to know You fully and realize Your love and express You in all that I do or say, for Your glory. With honor, praise and love to You, in Jesus name, Amen!