

A PLEA FOR DISCERNMENT

Dennis McBride - January, 1995

Note: Click on the Navigation Plane icon in the tool bar above, then click on a bookmark to proceed to the corresponding section of this study.

INTRODUCTION

I. THE DEFINITION OF DISCERNMENT

- A. Primary Greek terms
- B. Practical working definitions

II. THE CALL TO DISCERNMENT

- A. Proverbs 2:1-6
- B. Philippians 1:9-11
- C. Hebrews 5:11-14
- D. 1 John 4:1-3

III. THE PATH TO DISCERNMENT

- A. Know the Lord
- B. Know the Word
- C. Apply the Word
- D. Test all things

IV. THE NEED FOR DISCERNMENT

Factors contributing to a deficient discernment:

- A. Tares within the church
- B. Ignorance of biblical principles
- C. Spiritual pride
- D. A "simple faith"
- E. Personal experience
- F. Mysticism
- G. Avoiding controversy
- H. False unity
- I. Fear of grieving the Holy Spirit

A PLEA FOR DISCERNMENT

Dennis McBride - January, 1995

The mission of the church is to preach the gospel and make disciples. Additionally it is to be “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). That’s why Paul says that Elders must “hold fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that [they] may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9).

That requires discernment, which enables us to progress in righteousness and protects us from sin and error (Phil. 1:9-11). If discernment is lacking, we can fall prey to the kinds of errors, confusion, and spiritual excesses that plague so many churches today (some of which we will address in this study). We will address some of them in this study.

I fear that in many quarters of modern Christianity we are losing sight not only of our *distinctives* as a Christian community, but also our *essentials*. Rather than taking a strong, united stand on orthodox doctrine, we are being pressured to pare back to the lowest common denominator for the sake of “harmony and unity within the Body of Christ.” Therefore I pray this series will motivate us to seek greater discernment and to appreciate and guard it for the precious gift it is.

Our study will focus on four key elements of discernment:

- The definition of discernment
- The call to discernment
- The path to discernment
- The need for discernment

I. THE DEFINITION OF DISCERNMENT

A. PRIMARY GREEK TERMS

1. **Anakrino** - Means “to distinguish, or separate out so as to investigate; to examine, scrutinize, question; to hold a preliminary judicial examination preceding the trial proper” (*Vine’s*, p. 171).

Illustration: Acts 17:11 - “Now these [the Bereans] were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so.”

2. **Diakrino** - Means “to separate, discriminate; to learn by discriminating; to determine, decide.”

Illustration: 1 Cor. 11:29-30 - “He who eats and drinks [the Lord’s Table], eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.”

3. **Diakrasis** - Means “a distinguishing, a clear discrimination, discerning, judging.”

Examples: 1 Cor. 12:10; Heb. 5:14

4. ***Kritikos*** - Translated “judge.” Means “fit for, or skilled in, judging (from which we get our English word “critical”); “discriminating and passing judgment on the thoughts and feelings.”

Illustration: Heb. 4:12 - God’s Word is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

5. ***Summary:***

Each of these Greek words speak of exercising one’s critical faculties as directed by the Holy Spirit and instructed by God’s Word.

B. PRACTICAL, WORKING DEFINITIONS

1. ***Jay Adams***

Discernment is “the ability to distinguish God’s thoughts and God’s ways from all others.”

- 2 ***John MacArthur***

It is “the ability to understand, interpret, and apply truth skillfully. . . . Authentic spiritual discernment must begin with Scripture--revealed truth” (*Reckless Faith*, p. xv).

3. ***Summary definition***

Discernment is the ability to distinguish truth from error, righteousness from unrighteousness, through the skillful application of biblical principles.

This kind of discernment differs from the Spiritual Gift of the distinguishing of spirits (1 Cor. 12:8, 10). Distinguishing of spirits is a particular gift given to some in the early church for the purpose of identifying the source of prophetic utterances (e.g., Peter with Ananias and Sapphira), whereas discernment is something *every believer* is to develop.

II. THE CALL TO DISCERNMENT

A. PROVERBS 2:1-6

“My son, if you will receive my sayings, and treasure my commandments within you, make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding; for if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the Lord, and discover the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.”

B. PHILIPPIANS 1:9-11

“This I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

1. *The level of our discernment will determine the level of our ability to approve what is excellent, which in turn determines our:*

- Sincerity in the faith
- Blamelessness in Christian living
- Fruit of righteousness
- The glory and praise we bring to God

2. *This is no casual or optional matter; it is Christianity at its core.*

C. **HEBREWS 5:11-14**

“We have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

“For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food [deep truths of God’s Word] is for the mature, who *because of practice* have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”

D. **1 JOHN 4:1-3**

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but *test the spirits* to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the anti-Christ, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.”

III. **THE PATH TO DISCERNMENT**

The path to greater discernment is fourfold:

- *Know the Lord*
- *Know the Word*
- *Apply the Word*
- *Test all things*

A. **KNOW THE LORD**

1 Corinthians 2:14-16 - “A natural man [someone without Christ and the Holy Spirit to teach them spiritual truth] does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised “discerned”. But he who is spiritual [discerns] all things, yet he himself is [discerned] by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.”

Paul is saying that the Spirit-led and indwelt believer understands spiritual things, but he himself is not understood by unbelievers.

B. KNOW THE WORD

1. **Heb. 4:12** - “The Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge [discern] the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”
2. **“Judge” = Kritikos**, which means “fit for, or skilled in, judging (from which we get our English word “critical”); “discriminating and passing judgment on the thoughts and feelings.”
3. **The Word is the MODEL AND BASIS for proper discernment.**
4. **Incidentally, to know the Word, you must put time into it.**

- a. Illustration: “The One-Minute Bible”

I received an ad in the mail this week for “The One-Minute Bible.” Here’s how the ad read:

“Remember your New Year’s resolution to read your Bible every day--Oops! In just 60 seconds a day for a year, you’ll get an overall knowledge of what the Bible is all about. Daily NIV selections (each complete on one page) are taken from every book of the Bible and cover every primary topic, theme, doctrine, event, and character. Four detailed maps, two indices, and a listing of additional Bible readings for each topic round out this easy-does-it Bible.

“Great for new Christians and hurried Christians--don’t put it off any longer, just read it!”

- b. That’s quite a contrast to “O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97).

Or, “These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up” (Deut. 6:6-7)--that’s tough to do in just one minute a day!

- c. But the sad truth is that one minute per day is more than some Christians give to Bible reading and study, so even that would be an improvement.
- d. That may be an easy way to gain a brief overview of Scripture, but it is no way to build biblical discernment.

C. APPLY THE WORD

1 John 2:12-14 - “I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.”

“I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.”

Those who are strong in the Word have the doctrinal fortitude and discernment to overcome Satan, because Satan’s primary assaults are in the area of doctrine.

D. TEST ALL THINGS

1. *That doesn’t mean to constantly be suspicious, but don’t accept something as from God unless it passes the test of Scripture.*

2. *Examples*

a. *1 John 4:1-3* - “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the anti-Christ, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.”

- How were they to test the spirits? By evaluating every teaching and situation against what they had already “heard from the beginning” (i.e., apostolic teaching, cf. 2:24).

b. *1 Thess. 5:20-21* - “Do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good.”

- *Note:* “Examine” here is the same Greek word translated “test” in 1 John 4:1, but not the same word translated “distinguishing” in 1 Cor. 12:10.
- One is a spiritual gift given to *some*, the other is a mandate for *all* believers to test any supposed revelation or Bible teaching by that which God has already revealed.
- The Bereans in Acts 17:11 are a classic example of that kind of discernment:

“Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, *examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so.*”

IV. THE NEED FOR DISCERNMENT

Factors contributing to a deficient discernment:

A. TARES IN THE CHURCH

1. *Tares are unbelievers (Parable of the Wheat and Tares - Matthew 13:24-30).*
2. *Unbelievers cannot discern spiritual truth.*
3. *When unbelievers are present in the church, the corporate ability of the church to discern God's will and ways can suffer, especially if unbelievers are in positions of influence (through relationships, finances, or positions of spiritual authority).*
4. *That's one reason we must maintain a high standard for leaders.*

B. IGNORANCE

1. Ignorance of sound doctrine

By ignorance I don't mean stupidity, but lack of knowledge of biblical doctrines due to immaturity in the Word or neglect of the Word.

a. Immaturity in the Word

Perhaps you're a new believer. You aren't neglecting the Word; you simply haven't had time to grow in your understanding of biblical principles.

b. Neglect of the Word

1) This is willful ignorance as opposed to immaturity.

2) This may involve the erroneous idea that we are not responsible for biblical principles we don't know, even though we've had opportunity to learn them.

- *1 Corinthians 3:1-3* - "I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly."
- *Romans 10:1ff* - The Jews had a zeal without knowledge, which led to false righteousness and damnation.
- *Hebrews 5:11-14* - "We have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary

principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

“For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food [deep truths of God’s Word] is for the mature, ***who BECAUSE OF PRACTICE have their senses trained to discern good and evil.***”

- Those are strong rebukes to people who should have known better, but were spiritually and doctrinally inattentive.
- And their failure to grow in the Word brought serious consequences.

2. *Ignorance of what others believe*

a. Sometimes we simply don’t know what others teach, or we refuse to believe they actually believe what they teach.

- Therefore we might unwittingly think they are Christians.
- Or support them financially, or even pray for their efforts.
- John addressed that mistake in 2 John 5-11

“Not I ask you, lady, not as writing to you a new commandment, but the one which we have had from the beginning, that we love one another.

“This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it.

“For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist.

“Watch yourselves, that you might not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.

“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.”

It’s a serious thing to support or otherwise encourage the activities of non-Christian religious teachers. In doing so we:

- Violate Christian love
- Participate in their sin
- Lose a full reward

- Lose ground on what the gospel has accomplished.

b. Example:

- I hear many Christians speak fondly of the Roman Catholic Church as if the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism were merely matters of worship format or incidental doctrines.
- I am speaking here of Catholicism as a doctrinal system, not of individual Catholics, most of whom, I'm quite sure, are fine, gracious, sincere people with devout motives.
- I am addressing their *theology*: what they believe about salvation, the Bible, and other doctrines that so many people believe we hold in common.
- Someone may object: "Dennis, why even pursue this? They believe in Jesus don't they? Isn't that what really matters?" Let's take a closer look.

c. The Roman View of Salvation

1) Salvation is not by faith alone

The Reformation resulted from Martin Luther's discovery that the just shall live by faith, not by good works or paid indulgences. Salvation by faith alone was the hallmark of the Protestant Reformation, and remains to this day the watershed issue that distinguishes Protestantism from Catholicism.

The Council of Trent, was Rome's official response to the Protestant Reformation, and among other things it affirmed that:

"If anyone says that by faith alone the sinner is justified, so as to mean that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification . . . let him be anathema" (*Trent*, sess. 6, canon 9).

Anathema means to be under the divine curse. It is pronouncing someone damned.

- ***Matt. 25:41*** - At the Great White Throne Judgment, God will say to some, "Depart from Me, ***accursed ones***, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels."
- ***1 Cor. 12:3*** - "No one speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus is ***accursed***'; and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit."
- ***1 Cor. 16:22*** - "If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be ***accursed***."

- **Gal. 1:8-9** - “Even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be ***accursed***. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be ***accursed***.”

The Catholic Church maintains that if you believe that salvation is by faith alone, ***you are damned!***

- 2) Salvation requires good works

“If anyone says that the righteousness received is not preserved and also not increased before God ***by good works***, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not a ***cause*** of its increase, let him be anathema” (*Trent*, sess. 6, canon 24).

- 3) Salvation requires personal punishment for sins

“If anyone says that the guilt is remitted to every penitent sinner after the grace of justification has been received, and that the debt of eternal punishment is so blotted out that there remains no debt of temporal punishment to be discharged either in this world or in the next in Purgatory, before the entrance to the kingdom of heaven can be opened--let him be anathema” (*Trent*, sess. 6, canon 30).

- 4) Salvation requires the sacrament of baptism

- In Catholic theology a sacrament is a means by which someone receives sanctifying grace.
- That’s why we call baptism an *ordnance* rather than a *sacrament*.
- The Council of Trent also declared that the *instrumental* cause of justification (the means by which it is obtained) is not faith, but “the sacrament of baptism” (*Trent*, sess. 6, chap. 7).

The Roman Sacrament of Baptism

- Some Christians may say, “Oh, they believe a little differently than we do in that area, but that’s nothing to fracture fellowship over, as long as they believe in Jesus.”
- ***“Baptism takes away original sin.*** A soul is brought into life lacking that good which it ought to have, sanctifying grace. The first infusion of sanctifying grace comes through baptism and removes this defect of original sin.
- ***“By baptism we are given a new birth.*** As we were once born into physical life which will end, by baptism we are born into a life which will never end

(unless sanctifying grace is willfully rejected), the supernatural life as a child of God with the consequent right to inherit heaven. . . .

- “Baptism is necessary because *it is the requirement for salvation* and no other sacrament can be received until one is baptized. It is the most important sacrament in the order of necessity” (*The What and Why of Catholicism*, Charles W. Paris, p. 169 [official Catholic Church publication], emphasis added).

5) Salvation is through union with the Catholic Church

Quoting from *The What and Why of Catholicism*, Charles W. Paris (Joseph F. Wagner, Inc., pp. 153-54).

“The tenant of the Catholic Church [is] that outside of this Church there is no salvation. This is based on the teaching of St. Paul who points out that there is one body of which Christ is the head and we are the members, that there is one Savior and one baptism unto salvation; and the teaching of St. Peter who teaches in his epistle of one Name under heaven by which we are saved. These references, of course, are to Christ.

“Because the Catholic Church is the projection of Christ into the world for all time, it follows that there can be no salvation except through Christ; no salvation, therefore, except through His Church. If there can be no salvation except in the way which Christ decreed, then rightly does the Catholic Church teach that outside of it there is no salvation.

[*Note:* He argues that because the Catholic Church is “the projection” of Christ in the world (whatever that means), there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church, just as there is no salvation outside of Christ Himself.]

“Understand, we do not say that all Catholics are automatically saved by virtue of their membership in the Church. Besides Catholics, there are many other Christians who are living exemplary lives in accordance with the wishes of Christ as they understand those teachings. They are members of some religious sect of whom we say they are in ‘good faith,’ that is, they truly believe the sect to which they belong is the true way of salvation and in it they try to do the very best they can to serve God and reach heaven.

“The Catholic Church holds and teaches that such souls are joined to the true Church by desire, that is, were they to know of the true nature of the Catholic Church, they would actually join its visible membership. While not actually members of the Catholic Church, these Christians are ‘within it’ by desire.

[*Note:* He teaches that if you are sincere in your desire and intent, even though part of a “sect” that is outside the

Catholic Church, you are in union with the Catholic Church in desire.]

“When these good persons do ultimately reach heaven, they will find they are admitted because of their union with the Catholic Church, though they were not members of it.”

[*Note:* He teaches that access to heaven is through the Catholic Church, not simply through union with Christ.]

d. The Roman view of Scripture

“The documents of the Second Vatican Council affirm that ‘it is not from sacred Scripture alone that the [Catholic] Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed,’ but ‘sacred tradition [transmits] in its full purity God’s word which was entrusted to the apostles.’”

“Therefore both sacred tradition and sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence” (MacArthur, *Reckless Faith*, p. 136, quoting from Vatican II documents).

- 1) How do we harmonize that with our belief that Scripture itself is the sole binding rule of faith and practice for all Christians? The answer is obvious: we can’t!
- 2) On what basis then do we establish common ground for ministry? It can’t be on the basis of the gospel or of the source of spiritual authority.

e. Someone may object:

“Oh, but I grew up in the Catholic Church and I don’t believe that. And I know lots of Catholics who don’t believe that.”

- 1) But the point is, Catholicism teaches it!
- 2) Salvation = faith in Christ *plus* baptism.
- 3) Gal. 1 - That strikes at the very heart of evangelical Christianity.

f. What’s the point?

- a. We have a religious movement that claims to be Christian yet has a gospel of faith plus works, which is exactly what Romans, Galatians and Colossians were written to refute.
- b. We have a religious movement that attacks the sufficiency of Scripture by adding church tradition and special revelations through the Pope.

When the Mormons do that with the Book of Mormon, we cry “cult” and take all precautions to avoid them.

When the Jehovah's Witnesses do that with their New World Translation and supposed revelations of the end of the world, we cry "cult" and take all precautions to avoid them.

- c. Why is it when the Catholics do it, many Christians embrace them as true brothers and sisters in Christ, and unite with them in various ecumenical efforts?
- d. These are Christian essentials that are at stake, not merely denominational distinctives.
- e. One current example of the move toward greater unity between Protestants and Catholics is the recent Evangelical/Catholic Accord.

1) On March 29, 1994 a group of prominent Catholic and Protestant leaders drafted a twenty-five-page document titled "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium"

2) It is popularly known as the Evangelical/ Catholic Accord.

3) The purpose of the accord is to promote evangelism by uniting Protestant and Catholic efforts throughout the world (Protestants tend to speak against Catholics and vice versa).

It says, in effect, "Let's not let our theological differences hinder the Great Commission."

4) One of its more controversial statements is:

"In view of the large number of non-Christians in the world and the enormous challenge of our common evangelistic task, it is neither theologically legitimate nor a prudent use of resources for one Christian community to proselytize among active adherents of another Christian community" (22-23).

In other words, Protestants should not evangelize Catholics and vice versa.

5) The fatal flaw of the document can be seen in this statement:

"There are, then, differences between us that cannot be resolved here. But on this we are resolved: All authentic witness must be aimed at conversion to God in Christ by the power of the Spirit.

"Those converted--whether understood as having received the new birth for the first time or as *having experienced the reawakening of the new birth originally bestowed in the sacrament of baptism*--must be given full freedom and respect as they

discern and decide the community in which they will live their new life in Christ (24, emphasis added).

Salvation by grace through faith alone has apparently been relegated to a subordinate position beneath “Christian unity for the sake of evangelism.”

- 6) Signers of the document include men of such stature as Pat Robertson, J. I. Packer, Os Guinness, Bill Bright, and Charles Colson. I admire and have learned from most of these men, but this situation puzzles me.

PRINCIPLES OF NON-ALIGNMENT

1. The question of when we can align with people of other faiths to accomplish a common goal is a sensitive one. How do we apply discernment in such situations?
2. For example, when is it permissible to join with:
 - People of other denominations (e.g., “We may not agree on the Charismatic issue, but we do agree on the gospel, therefore we can present Christ together.”)
 - People of differing faiths (e.g., “We don’t agree on Christ, but we do agree that we have a common enemy in pornography, abortion, child-abuse, therefore we can fight that battle together.”)
 - Or people of no religious faith at all?
3. This is what the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer called “co-belligerence”, which is joint action for agreed objectives by people who disagree on other things.
4. We should evaluate all such situations carefully and proceed with caution even when no compromise is evident.
5. The clearest biblical principle of non-alignment is found in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1.
 - a. Don’t be unequally yoked

“Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?

Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

“‘Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me,’ Says the Lord Almighty.

“Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”
 - b. In that passage Paul probably is referring to the prohibitions found in Deuteronomy 22:9-10 (see also Leviticus 19:19).

“You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed, lest all the produce of the seed which you have sown, and the increase of the vineyard become defiled.

“You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together” (because the step and pull of the two beasts is unequal--they would be unequally yoked, and the task you wish to accomplish would be hindered or left undone).

- c. Rienecker and Rogers comment: “The concept of the yoke was used in relation to marriage and in relation to teachers who agreed in their doctrine. A mixed marriage or cooperation with one who had a different doctrine was considered to be ‘unequally yoked’” (*Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, p. 474).
 - d. That doesn’t mean we are to have no contact at all with unbelievers (1 Cor. 5:10), but it does mean that we are not to align or be bound with them in any way that will compromise our Christian walk or testimony.
 - e. Dr. Ryre’s note: “This injunction applies to marriage, business, and to ecclesiastical and intimate personal relationships.”
6. Practical principle: Don’t align with unbelievers in such a way as to hinder the gospel or place you in a compromising position.
 7. Where the issue becomes more sensitive is when those with whom we align are professing believers whose doctrine and/or practices differ significantly from our own. In such cases, at what point does cooperation become compromise?
 8. Here’s how I deal with it:

- I always lean toward the more conservative position because I am responsible for the church, not simply for my own opinions.
- I’m aware that some who disagree with my position speak of it as isolationistic, standoffish, unrealistic, divisive, and even sinful.
- But my responsibility is to deal with the text of Scripture, then to make decisions accordingly to the best of my ability.
- That is every believer’s responsibility also.

- a. I believe that God has called us to be faithful servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1).
- b. Paul said of himself and Timothy, “We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20).
- c. Nothing is more important than the gospel--nothing!
 - No social concern
 - No political concern
 - No moral concern
- d. I believe that as Christians, we can and should work for moral, social, and even political reform, and those can be righteous and noble efforts if executed within biblical parameters.
- e. But let us never forget that the greatest impact we have for righteous change in our families, localities, state, nation, and world, is to:

- 1) Live a distinctively Christian life (“Adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect” - Titus 2:10).
 - 2) Train our own children in the ways of the Lord (thereby transforming this generation and the next).
 - 3) And introduce lost souls to Christ, who will place the law of God within them and produce righteousness from the heart, not through a judicial or political system only.
- f. It’s a matter of priorities. Both efforts have their place, but the priority must always be to propagate the gospel.
- g. Therefore, when we join with people of other faiths to achieve a common social, moral, or political goal, we must be sure that such a cooperative effort does not in any way diminish or confuse the gospel, or hinder our testimony.
- h. For example:
- 1) I wouldn’t hesitate to attend an anti-abortion rally if it were conducted within biblical and legal parameters.
 - 2) However, I would not stand hand in hand with leaders from false religions to offer a prayer for the safe deliverance of the babies unless I could first explain
 - why I was praying,
 - to whom I was praying,
 - why life is precious to God,
 - that Jesus died to prevent the very thing we are rallying against,
 - that regeneration, not legislation, must be our highest goal.

otherwise we accomplish only a temporary, relative, external standard that is only as good as the popular consensus or moral consciousness of the day.
 - 3) There are good moral reasons for preserving the life of an unborn child, but beyond that, there are theological reasons, and I believe it is our privilege and responsibility to proclaim those reasons above all else.
 - 4) Human life is sacred to God, and therefore must be sacred to us, but eternal life is the far greater issue.

Therefore, we should never allow the gospel to take a back seat to any social, moral, or political issue, or to be corrupted or confused by misrepresentation.
 - 5) It is horribly out of balance to try to save the lives of infants and not even address the greater issue of eternal life.

In the case of those who proclaim a false gospel, what a convoluted effort it is to save infants while at the same time influencing others toward the path of eternal destruction.
 - 6) Where there is no clear compromise at stake, I take each situation on its own merit, keeping in mind that abortion (for example), like every other sinful act, is a symptom and consequence of a root problem.

I believe that as Christians, we are called primarily to address the root problem, which will then eliminate the symptoms.

- 7) We have just so much time, energy, and resources. We must be wise and focused in how we expend them.
- 8) Many people fear that if all professing Christians (and even people of other faiths) don't unite against the evils of our day, sin will run rampant and ground will be lost to the Kingdom of God.
- 9) But God isn't suddenly impotent because our nation's sins have escalated.
 - Prayer isn't suddenly useless because our nation has turned a deaf ear to God's voice.
 - The God who created all things, and who raises up and brings down nations, hasn't surrendered His sovereignty.
 - The God who loved the world so much that He sent His only Son to die for our sins isn't suddenly unconcerned about the elect who are still lost.
- 10) We must not be passive, but we must maintain our spiritual priorities.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

If I feel that the risk to the gospel is too great

- by stepping into an unequally yoked situation,
- by doing something that smacks of compromise or might bring confusion to those who see me,
- by not being able to qualify what is being said,

I choose to remain uninvolved.

If none of those things apply, then I evaluate each situation on its own merits and decide accordingly.

C. SPIRITUAL PRIDE

- 1. *By spiritual pride I mean an unwillingness to learn from those with greater knowledge and discernment than ourselves.*
- 2. *This is an important point because those with the least discernment often are the most vocal about issues in the church.*

- a. But their positions, if not grounded in discerning application of God's Word, must be based on something less (i.e., emotions, experience, prejudice, preference, ignorance, pride).
- b. This is usually where the most serious problems arise in an otherwise solid congregation.

D. *SETTLING FOR A "SIMPLE FAITH"*

1. *What I don't mean*

- a. By "Simple Faith" I do not mean a new or immature faith that is in the process of growing.
- b. I believe in the brand of simple faith that says "God said it, I believe it, that settles it!" But not the kind that attempts to mask spiritual neglect or laziness. That is unbiblical and detrimental to discernment and spiritual maturity.

2. *What I do mean*

I mean a spiritual laziness or unwillingness to increase one's biblical knowledge or depth of commitment to the things of God.

3. *An apparent attitude*

Some Christians convey the attitude that Christianity is somehow more noble or preferable when uncluttered by doctrinal depth or disciplined training in the Word, or that those who are deeper in the things of the Lord are somehow out of step with reality or in some spiritual ivory tower.

- a. That simply isn't true!

Every true believer has the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2) and is responsible for developing their capacity to discern spiritual things.

- b. ***2 Peter 3:17-18*** - After warning his readers about those who distort Scripture, Peter exhorts them: "You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."
- c. ***Deut. 6:4-9*** - God's Word is to be at the center of our lives and thinking.
- d. ***Psalms 119:97-100*** - "O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day. Thy commandments make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever mine. I have more insight than all my teachers, for Thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, because I have observed Thy precepts."

No Seminary training there! Just diligent meditation on God's Word, which He infuses with spiritual wisdom and insight.

- e. As we gather each week and devote ourselves to worship, fellowship, and Bible study, we are involved in a sacred and never-ending process:
- It's the process of renewing your mind that Paul speaks of in Romans 12:2.
 - For example, you come and perhaps the Sunday School lesson doesn't really grab you, or the sermon just doesn't seem to speak to your heart or need, but the process of building discernment, wisdom, and insight is still progressing one step at a time.
 - You are systematically increasing the reservoir of biblical knowledge that the Holy Spirit will use to instruct, encourage, and transform you step by step (2 Cor. 3:18).
 - Those who neglect the discipline of worship and instruction, or deceive themselves by thinking they have all the biblical data they need in life, are missing the point.
 - We do it because we Love the God of the Word
 - Because we are commanded to do so (2 Tim. 2:15).
 - Because we want to be fully equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
 - Because we want to overcome the evil one (1 John 2:12ff).

1 John 2:12ff - Spiritual young men have overcome him because they are strong in the Word.

The enemy is very sophisticated and comes as ***an angel of light***. We must be prepared.

Our lives are constantly bombarded by the influences of Satan's evil world system. Therefore we must be diligent to saturate ourselves with the things of God if we expect to overcome the world and progress on godliness.

4. Blind loyalty

By blind loyalty I mean the fallacy that you are not responsible for your theological errors if your leaders lead you astray.

- a. It's true that leaders bear the primary responsibility.
- b. However, that does not relieve their followers of responsibility also.
- c. ***Matt. 15:14*** - Jesus said of the Pharisees, "They are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, [the blind guide will fall into a pit, but the blind follower will be spared because he didn't know any better? No,] ***both*** will fall into a pit."
- d. ***Matt. 23:15*** - "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves [they often become more zealous than their evil religious leaders]."

5. ***“No shame” exemption?***

The idea of a simple faith can also include the fallacy that 2 Timothy 2:15 applies only to ministers, and that “regular Christians” are exempt.

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”

We’ve already seen that each Christian is personally responsible for their devotion to Christ and His Word.

E. EXPERIENCE

1. ***Many professing Christians seem to elevate personal experience over biblical doctrine, as if experience were the primary means of determining what is from God.***

2. ***This is perhaps the greatest challenge facing the contemporary church.***

3. ***More and more people are taking the position that if someone supposedly has a personal experience with God, we must never question or criticize it.***

Criticism (testing claims against Scripture) is seen as disrespectful, narrow-minded, dogmatic, and insensitive.

4. ***God never allows experience to interpret or stand in judgment on His Word.***

And for good reason. Our senses can be deceived through an experience.

5. ***Rather than relying on experience, we are to test all things, then cling tenaciously to what is good and true--not what seems true, or what we hope is true, or what might be true, or what feels true because of some experience we’ve had (1 Thess. 5:21).***

6. ***For example:***

Recently I met a lady who claimed that God speaks to people today because He spoke to her once when she faced a decision about whether or not to go into elementary education.

a. She heard a voice just as clear as mine say, “A little child shall lead them.” She took that as God’s leading into elementary-level Christian education, and it has turned out to be a fantastic career for her.

b. But that phrase comes from Isaiah 11:6 and refers to the future Millennial Kingdom when “the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”

- c. That verse has nothing whatsoever to do with elementary education!
- d. I don't know why that phrase came to her, or who delivered it, but I do know that God didn't give it to her, because He *never* takes His Word out of context or misapplies it.
- e. That is pure mysticism with no basis in biblical truth or thoughtful decision-making.

7. ***Perhaps the most powerful example of building one's theology on experience (sometimes called experiential theology) is the Charismatic Movement.***

- a. One common experience (tongues) unites professing believers from many different denominational and doctrinal perspectives.
- b. Just consider what doctrines have to be jettisoned for Catholics, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Baptists, and non-denominationalists to unite.
- c. Have you ever wondered how the one-world church of Revelation could come about given the doctrinal diversity of today's churches?
 - 1) All it takes is an experience powerful enough to cause people to set aside biblical distinctives.
 - 2) Remember that the Anti-Christ will come with signs and lying wonders.
 - He'll have some experiences for you that will shake you to the core.
 - Jesus said that if it were possible, he would deceive the very elect.
- d. That mentality--and therefore the potential--already exists.

8. ***God's opinion of the value experience as the determiner of truth is evident in the following situations:***

a. ***The Transfiguration - 2 Peter 1:16-19***

Peter's experience on the mount was profound, but through Scripture, God gives an even more sure word of testimony.

b. ***The Resurrection of Jesus - Luke 24***

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus didn't reveal himself to the two disciples until after He had affirmed their faith via Old Testament revelation. Scripture, not their personal experience with Christ, was to be the authoritative basis for their ministry.

c. *Personal evangelism - Luke 16:31*

The rich man wanted to return from torment to warn his brothers, but Abraham said, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.”

Scripture is sufficient for a powerful testimony--even more so than someone rising from the dead!

Obviously there can be great value in personal experience, but my point is:

- Personal experience must conform to Scripture, not vice versa.
- Scripture must govern our experiences.
- Personal experience alone is not to be the determiner of biblical truth.
- Discernment will drive us to the Word to evaluate every situation.

F. MYSTICISM

1. *Mysticism says that looking inside oneself is the key to finding truth, rather than looking to objective biblical revelation.*
2. *Mysticism, as it relates to deficient discernment, is elevating subjective feelings over biblical truth, or trying to determine truth through feelings.*
3. *We are to place our feelings under the authority of Scripture, not coddle or let them dictate our doctrinal positions.*
 - a. Jesus did not say, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every feeling that proceeds out of his heart.”
He said, “By every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”
 - b. He did not say, “Go and make disciples of all the nations . . . teaching them to observe all that they feel is true.”
He said, “Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.”
 - c. Paul didn’t say, “Finally, brethren, whatever seems true, whatever feels honorable, whatever feels right, whatever feels pure, whatever seems lovely, etc., think on these things.”
He said, “Whatever is true, is honorable, is right, is pure, is lovely, etc.”

4. ***Regarding the church, I've heard people say, "I love TBC. It just feels right being here."***
- a. I appreciate their intent, and we certainly want everyone to feel welcome and at home. I have nothing against feeling good. I like feeling good. It feels great to feel good!
 - b. But their words trouble me as much as someone who says, "I'm leaving TBC because it just doesn't feel right to me."
 - c. We aren't to make such decisions on feelings, but on biblical guidelines:
 - Do we have a high view of God?
 - Do we have a high view of Scripture?
 - Do we teach sound doctrine?
 - Do we strive for personal holiness?
 - Do we operate under the principle of spiritual authority?
 - Do we promote true worship and biblical fellowship?
 - d. Those are the primary issues, yet if we're not discerning we can become distracted from those essentials and begin to base our decisions on lesser things.
5. ***You cannot be a mystic and a discerning person at the same time . . .***
- because mysticism is grounded in personal, subjective feelings and intuition,
 - whereas discernment is grounded in objective, biblical truth.
6. ***You cannot reason with a mystic because mysticism is unreasonable, whereas discernment reflects the reason and wisdom of God.***

G. AVOIDING CONTROVERSY

1. ***Avoiding controversy can be good, but here I'm referring to the practice of avoiding controversy at the expense of sound doctrine.***
2. ***This often involves sacrificing Christian convictions for the sake of establishing or maintaining personal relationships.***
3. ***In our personal relationships, a common error is to believe that significant relationships (in or out of the church) must somehow exclude doctrinal convictions.***

a. ***Illustration:***

I've heard people say, "I never discuss religion or politics because they're too controversial and I'd rather not jeopardize my relationship with those who might disagree."

- b. Can you imagine Jesus saying, “I never discuss religion”? That’s all He ever did discuss!
- c. When it comes to our Christian convictions, we are to confess Christ before men if we want Christ to confess us before the Father (Matt. 10:32).
- d. In addition to confessing Christ Himself, we are to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).
- e. We must be tactful and sensitive, but we must speak the truth when the situation requires our input.
- f. Not to do so may mean that we desire the approval of man more than God.

4. *Within the church, another common way we attempt to avoid controversy is to tolerate sin rather than lovingly confronting it.*

- a. We may fear that we may alienate folks if we confront them.
- b. We may fear that our motives might be misunderstood.
- c. We may fear that we will be labeled unloving, legalistic, or judgmental--and often we are labeled as such.
- d. Sometimes situations are extremely sensitive or potentially explosive due to the individuals or issues involved. And initially the price of confrontation may be high, or the risk great. So the temptation may be strong simply to avoid conflict rather than dealing with it.

But the rewards for following through are great also, because personal relationships and the overall health of the assembly are served.

5. *I should add here that God uses even serious factions for His purposes.*

- a. It’s true that ideally there should be no controversy or divisions in the church.
- b. It’s true that we have the Holy Spirit and should be unanimous in all things.
- c. But it’s also true that we must work to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
- d. It’s also true that not every Christian is equally diligent in preserving that peace.
- e. To assume that Christians will never disagree is to assume that Christians are perfect in holiness, wisdom, and motive. And that assumes too much this side of heaven.

- f. ***1 Cor. 11:18-19*** - “When you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you.”
- Until the Lord comes there will always be tares and disobedient Christians in churches, therefore there will always of necessity be factions.
 - Factions (lit. *schismata*, from which we get our English word “schism”) give faithful people an opportunity to prove their loyalty and spiritual maturity.
 - I’ve seen that here. The depth of one’s leadership and fidelity to the Lord and to this church is best seen at such times.

H. FALSE UNITY

1. ***I refer here to uniting with others at the expense of the gospel.***
2. ***I went into some detail on this earlier when I discussed the principles of non-alignment. So I needn’t go through it again now.***
3. ***However, I do remind you that Jesus prayed in John 17:23 that all believers would be perfected in unity so that the world may know that He was sent from the Father.***

Just prior to that (v. 17) He gave the guiding principle of true unity:

“Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth.”

4. ***Anything less than unity under biblical truth is less than true Christian unity.***
5. ***What we have now in major parts of the Christian community is a strong voice declaring that the gospel is the only legitimate point of unity. Everything else is of little value or divisive.***

a. But Jesus Himself said,

“Go . . . and make disciples . . . baptizing them (that follows upon salvation--they know the gospel at that point) . . . teaching them to observe ALL that I commanded you.

b. In Acts 20:26-27 Paul told the Ephesian elders that he was innocent of the blood of all men because he did not shrink from declaring to them the whole purpose of God.

In verse 20 he says: “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house.”

6. *When we set aside legitimate biblical distinctives in the name of Christian unity, we foster a false unity and:*

- Compromise our role as the pillar and support of the truth.
- Imply that our points of agreement are more important than our points of disagreement, thereby relegating our points of disagreement to non-essentials.
- Imply that to accomplish anything of significance for Christ we must first surrender doctrinal precision.

7. *Illustration: The Promise Keepers*

The Promise Keepers is a nation-wide men's movement aimed in part at encouraging Christian men to be more godly husbands and fathers. That is a noble goal, but their agenda goes far beyond that. They relegate all denominational differences to the status of "barriers to unity" without any consideration of whether or not those differences have biblical substance.

Their brand of unity circumvents doctrinal precision. To them, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only legitimate point of unity, yet their stated purpose is to disciple Christian men. What, then, will be the content of that discipleship if doctrinal precision is set aside? And can Christian men become truly godly apart from being grounded in sound doctrine?

I. FEAR OF GRIEVING THE HOLY SPIRIT

A common accusation by those who are offering novel or extreme doctrines or experiences is that their critics are speaking against the Holy Spirit. That, of course, can be intimidating to some believers who sense that all is not right with what they're hearing, but are in fear of opposing what the Holy Spirit might be doing through these teachers.

But we are commanded to examine with great care all teachings or experiences purporting to be from God. That was the practice of the noble Bereans in Acts 17, and should be ours as well. I don't believe it's possible to be overly discerning in such matters.

SUMMARY:

I must admit that I would love for the ministry to be a simple process of proclaiming the gospel and encouraging believers in their Christian walk. But from the outset Jesus said there will be false messiahs, wolves in sheep's clothing, and false teachers of every sort who prey upon the church. Additionally, many people will turn away from the truth, wanting to hear only what pleases them.

Through Paul God commanded church leaders to hold fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that they may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers . . . who must be silenced.

He called us to know His Word and apply it in our daily lives. He commands us to be diligent and not to fall prey to error or impurity. That requires discernment, so I conclude with a series of questions that each of us must consider prayerfully.

- What is my level of discernment?

- Am I impassioned about the things that matter to my Lord, or have I been distracted by the pull of the world?
- **TARES IN THE CHURCH** - Am I a Christian?
- **IGNORANCE** - Do I have an adequate and ever-increasing grasp of biblical principles by which to make discerning decisions?
- **SPIRITUAL PRIDE** - Am I a humble learner, or am I too prideful to defer to those with greater knowledge and discernment?
- **A SIMPLE FAITH** - Do I try to hide my disinterest in things of the Lord behind a facade of “simple faith”?
- **PERSONAL EXPERIENCE** - Do I elevate personal religious experience over Scripture?
- **MYSTICISM** - Do I base my decisions on biblical principles or on subjective feelings and intuition?
- **AVOIDING CONTROVERSY** - Do I trust the Lord to honor His Word even when it leads to confrontation, or do I try to avoid controversy even when it means I have to violate God’s Word?
- **FALSE UNITY** - Do I desire true biblical unity based on love and sound doctrine, or will I settle for something less?
- **FEAR OF GRIEVING THE HOLY SPIRIT** - Am I confident in my discernment, or am I intimidated by those who might accuse me of grieving the Holy Spirit?