



Free Listening Hearts Program Materials

A Primer on Spiritual Discernment: Topic 1

What is Discernment?

The verb “to discern” means to sift through, to sort out, to distinguish. It is not a specifically religious word—people use it in many contexts. However, when the verb “discern” becomes a noun, the term “discernment” is used primarily in faith based circles. The problem is that not everyone understands it in the same way. There are at least three different types of discernment.

Listening Hearts discernment is spiritual discernment, or what St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits call discernment of spirits: distinguishing the Spirit of God from other spirits that influence us—such as the spirit of excelling, the spirit of winning, the spirit of a nation, the spirit of the times. Or, to put it in the vocabulary of call: distinguishing the voice of God from other voices that are telling us what to do—voices of our parents echoing through the years, voices of teachers and mentors who have been important to us, voices of religious leaders, voices of political leaders, voices of the media, voices of friends and colleagues. More often than not, these voices are good—God often speaks to us through them. But not everything they say is God’s word for us. And what may be God’s word for us in a given circumstance may not be God’s word for us in a similar situation at a different time or place. Spiritual discernment, discernment of spirits, and discernment of call are all essentially the same thing. The terms can be used interchangeably.

A second kind of discernment is the discernment of gifts, sometimes called gifts identification. This type of discernment is scriptural and of clear value: if we know what our gifts are we can use them more consciously, with greater confidence, and thus more effectively. But discernment of gifts is not the same as discernment of call. In the Bible, over and over, God calls people to do things for which they are not the obvious choice. They do not have what seem to be the necessary qualifications. Take Abraham and Sarah, childless and beyond childbearing age, called to become progenitors of an entire nation of people. Or consider Moses, who is described as being inarticulate and is wanted for murder in Egypt. God asks him to go to Egypt, approach the Pharaoh, and convince him to free the Hebrew people from bondage. Or think about the disciples—ordinary everyday working people with plenty of flaws, tapped by God to become spiritual leaders and

establish a new religion that came to be known as Christianity. Consider Jesus himself, a compassionate village carpenter called to be the Messiah when everyone was looking for a warrior-king. Part of our difficulty is that we often fail to grasp what qualities are in fact most useful to do a particular job. Perhaps even more important: God seems to call people who clearly lack significant assets, so that we all can see that the person did not accomplish what they did because of any innate superiority, that the fruits that came were clearly the work of God. Beyond that, it also appears that God asks us to do what we know we are incapable of accomplishing. Then, only as we respond affirmatively, ready to obey because we have confidence in God, does God provide us with whatever we need to fulfill the call. This, in turn, strengthens our relationship with God.

A third kind of discernment is rational discernment in a Christian context. This is the most common type of discernment practiced in the church. It is based on a secular model that approaches a concern by gathering information, evaluating it, developing options, weighing them, engaging in discussion, and finally adopting a position. To put secular discernment into a Christian context, the process begins with prayers, considers Christian values in the course of the deliberations, and likely ends with prayer. This is in fact part of spiritual discernment, but it is only the first step. Instead of considering the position arrived at as final, we submit it to God for the deeply spiritual part of the discernment. This involves offering the initial discernment to God, flinging heart and mind wide open to the Spirit, then entering the flow of the Spirit, ready to be carried wherever that may take us. As we view things from a new and broader perspective, we look for signs of the Spirit and follow where they lead.

Discernment can be like driving an automobile at night: the headlights cast only enough light for us to see the next small bit of road immediately in front of us.

– Farnham, Gill, McLean, and Ward, *Listening Hearts*, p. 27