

What do I (tentatively) know about discernment

- Discernment is always tentative and impacted by the fact that we are finite creatures and not God.
- There is a category of mystical/spiritual and part of discernment is understanding that the mystical/spiritual exists and that we are attempting to understand how something that is outside of our natural reality can impact us. But that is central to the whole idea of God. God is outside of our natural reality and in some sense, we can only know God by interacting with the mystical/spiritual reality. God can reach through and all of our natural reality was created by God and therefore is in his realm as well. But we are creatures who have limited access to the spiritual world.
- Discernment is not primarily a method of decision-making, but more like character building where we are being formed into Christlikeness. The ability to 'discern' what to do next is an aspect of it. But it is more about coming to see the world as God sees it and growing more into ourselves so that we can be the person God wants us to be than a particular set of tools or skills.
- Part of the tentativeness of discernment is that as finite creatures, we have different limitations than others. Our discernment of reality should be checked by others because even when we have mystical/spiritual experiences that we believe are from God, there are aspects that we may be missing. The example of Promise Keeper's Founder, Bill McCartney in Daniel Silliman's [article](#) who mystically was convinced of the need to focus on racial reconciliation in Promise Keepers. But McCartney's not listening to others on a consistent basis because he thought he had heard from God is an example of where our limitations as people may lead us to misinterpret reality while having overconfidence in God's "need" for us and our role in this world.
- Mark Love's book on discernment in Acts looked to corporate discernment and becoming the community (not just the individual) who God wanted them to be. Part of what he suggests that happened in Acts was corporate discernment, a focus on mutual care for those in the body, and regular relationships across boundaries (which included eating together). Showing no partiality was of particular importance not just in modeling a new way of being a community, but also in showing how transformation in Christ works.
- Discernment can only be done with the help of the Holy Spirit. Clark Pinnock's work on the undervaluing of the Holy Spirit and Mark Love's exploration of the role of the Holy Spirit in the Acts community are two good examples of reminding us that we are completely dependent on the Holy Spirit to be able to perceive the mystical/spiritual around us as well as being able to see God at work in the world. An over-reliance on our human tools and skills and efficiency will lead us away from dependence on the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit was what Jesus told us was to be for us and would be even greater than his presence for our good.

- Part of what leads to better discernment is regular liturgical practices of community, and communion with others in the presence of God. Bible reading, prayer, and Eucharist are all part of that, but it isn't only those three. While we can develop discernment individually and there are many examples of people who are hurt by the church and distant from a local body of Christians, the ideal goal is being a part of a deep relationship with a local body of believers. It is an aspect of discernment when someone needs to be apart for a season (or maybe permanently) but it isn't an ideal situation.

- Priscilla Shriver's book I think missed the mark in many areas, but she is right that God isn't trying to create a code that we have to crack in discernment. This isn't a test that we can either pass or fail. This is more like maturity that needs to be developed rather than knowledge or skills that need to be gained. Discernment is ultimately about knowing God more, not our own paths.

- We can see some of the realities that we are seeking to discern by knowing the character of God. God is love. God is not fundamentally wrath even though there are expressions of God's wrath in scripture. The wrath in scripture is an aspect of love. While we may need correction, and sin can and does impact our discernment, part of the way forward is to see if we are condemned without restoration it isn't from God. Correction leads us to repentance and change, not shame. There may be a role in short-term shame that leads us to repentance, but not long-term shame that alienates us from God or community. Joy, the deep abiding reality of God's goodness and love for us, should be perceivable in some sense.

- Similarly, God does not ordain evil. God allows evil in ways that are not fully explainable in human terms. God can redeem evil and help us find meaning in the rubble of the results of evil that we have done or has been done to us, but God does not ordain evil for some "greater good."

- Discernment can be used wrongly and with wrong motives. Discernment is not about self-help or gaining power for ourselves. It cannot be done with a sense of legalism. In an ongoing process, discernment should be personally and communally about seeking God, seeking liberation for others, and joy.

- Spiritual, emotional, and relational health are interrelated and part of the process of growing into Christlikeness. Grappling with the areas where we are unhealthy and working on them so that we may grow into maturity is part of growing in discernment. That is not primarily an activity of discernment, but we will be limited in our discernment if we are impacted by poor spiritual, emotional, or relational health and immaturity.

- Discernment will not produce a single universal answer for all time. Different people will come to different conclusions in the same circumstances because we are created as different people. That doesn't mean that there are no universals, there is still sin. But that the particular means of accomplishing the good will be different.

- Elizabeth Liebert says, "...decision is the occasion for seeking God, not the primary goal. Setting out with the goal of making a decision that we then ask God to bless is to confuse the goal and the means. Rather, discernment involves the goal of seeking God through the means of decision making." (p44 of The Way of Discernment) and also, "To summarize: Discernment means making a discriminating choice between two or more good options, seeking the best for this moment. These choices, while personal and conditional, are set within the community of faith and honor our previous well-made decisions. Discernment does not bring us absolute certainty, but rather operates in a climate of faith. Seeking to follow God's call moves us toward that which is better for us individually and for our world, and assures us that God will accompany us into the unknown." (p10)

- Part of discernment is grappling with our desires. We have to know ourselves. Emotions and desires are part of how God created us and part of how God communicates with us. We do need to evaluate those, but they are sources of information as we move toward understanding what God has for us.

Part of the need for crossing cultural boundaries is to help us see the limitations of our culture. This excerpt of a bookwisse post gets at what I mean in questioning cultural realities or "natural law".

One of the ways that the idea of natural law can be a problem is that it can work with the assumption that the way something is, comes from divine order. This can be seen in the way that some conceive of gender hierarchy. It goes like this: 1) Men have been in charge most often throughout history. 2) Therefore, God intended that there be a hierarchy. 3) So, working against a gender hierarchy is in opposition to God. That process is culturally bound and I reject it as an inaccurate understanding.

- Poor discernment in one area does not mean that a person will have poor discernment in another area. But I am wary of people who on the one hand advocate discernment or some area of mysticism but on the other hand seem to be obsessed with conspiracy theories or obsessive with Trump or MAGA. We all have blind spots that is part of what it means to be limited creatures. And we also have to weigh different things according to what our values are, which means we will prioritize our associations differently. **Nouwen seemed blind to Jean Vanier and Thomas Philippe's harm to women (see his book Discernment). That may just be because they were helpful to him and he wasn't in their network of sexual abusers so they could be helpful to help. Anne Graham Lotz's conspiracy theory like her ideas around the eclipse makes me question all of the rest of her discernment around her bible teaching.**

- Poor discernment is not simply a problem of blind spots. Poor discernment can lead to abuse and harm when we are unaware of the ways that harm can come to people who are not ourselves. It isn't that Nouwen himself did the harm against women by Vanier and Phillippe, but like in the examples of Simone Biles, systems that do not stop harm have a long-term negative impact. And church harm in particular can be damaging because it cuts off access to God

and/or the Christian community, which is a significant way that people seek healing from other types of harm.

- Ignatius' rules of discernment suggest that different people will have different temptations and that the same person may have different temptations at different times. Part of the implication of this insight is that we need to be aware of our temptations and biases in order to understand where our temptations may be shifting. And Richard Rohr's insight that every strength is also its shadow weakness is also relevant here. We never are only good, even developing new skills or strengths will still have a shadow side weakness.

- Hannah Anderson's All that is Good is a necessary part of discernment in that she identifies what we are working toward, not just what we are avoiding. We need beauty and goodness around us to see what it is that we are working toward, not just the avoidance of sin and temptation.

- Spiritual formation is "the process of being forming the image of Christ for the sake of others (M Robert Mulholland Jr) and discernment is one aspect of spiritual formation. The for the sake of others continues to be important in discernment. We need to know our desires and emotions and those should influence us, but not to ignore others. The long term goal is to grow and become who God wants us to be for the sake of others.

- Trauma and pain can impact our perception, including our spiritual perception. Trauma often locks our perceptions on pain avoidance and oversees danger all around us. Dealing rightly with trauma and pain will help us move back toward healthy levels of anxiety over loss of the things and people which we love. Curtis Chang, Janyne McConaughy and others are helpful to give tools toward healing in this area.

- **Protestant modernists have tended to turn faith into intellectual affirmation instead of trust. This gives an over-reliance on reason and intellect and an under-reliance on emotion, imagination, and empathy. We should not reject the intellect in moving toward a balance, but there does need to be balance or at least attention toward both.**

- The consequences of bad discernment are not abandonment by God. We may have natural consequences for bad discernment, but God will always still be there. Similarly, we do not gain more love from God by good behavior or good discernment.

- Holiness will be a byproduct of discernment but isn't the goal. The pursuit of God is the goal.

- Joseph Tetlow in his lectures "Discerning God's Will: The Jesuit Way says, that to have discernment you need to have an "interior life, reflecting and examining themselves." But, "others talk about discerning, but they live following conscious or custom or even unreflected conviction." This assumes that conscious, custom and conviction are not themselves enough to be discernment. His definition is "making choices among good things." but also it is a distinct process of turning away from sin, seeking to become like Christ and having an interior life so

that you notice the different choices before you. As part of his understanding of discernment you have to “be in condition for it”. He uses a sports metaphor for training and being in physical condition.

- [Kaitlyn Schess's podcast, curiously Kaitlyn interviews Mike Erre](#) about how we know God is speaking to us. This podcast is kid questions and trying to respond in ways kids understand, but it is a very good summary of discernment. It starts with the assumption that God is trying to speak to us. He tells the listener to learn about how God speaks in scripture, to evaluate whether words from someone else show evidence of good fruit in that person. And whether what is heard is consistent with what we know of God and what God asks of people. It is a very good summary of discernment without being reductionist.

[Link to my blog on books I have read about discernment.](#)