

# Decision Making Through Discernment

## Recognizing God's Leading – Personally & With Others

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### Overview:

Discernment is paying attention to God's personal and immediate direction regarding who we are and what we are to do, understanding that direction and following it.

Discernment comes from a heart's desire that longs to know the will of God and is committed to do it. The discernment process is an opportunity to grow in our sensitivity to God's way of speaking to our hearts, drawing us more deeply into participation with God in His work in the world as well as in learning to hear, value and trust others. It is the process that glorifies God and builds His Body which is the higher goal. A right decision made in the wrong way may actually be as destructive as the wrong decision. In the discernment process, we seek to listen to God directly ourselves and together with others, to discern God's heart on a matter with the intention of faithful obedience. This process takes place in the heart, more than the head. Discernment is intended to take place in community where various spiritual gifts, life experiences, and personalities are given space to function, be heard, and lead to experiencing the "unity in the bonds of peace," as is described in Ephesians 4:3.

### Biblical Foundations:

- Inquiring of the Lord – Joshua 9:14; Judges 18:5, 20:18,23,27; 1 Sam. 14:36; 23:1-6,10-14; 30:1-9; 2 Sam 2:1-2, 5:17-25, 21:1; 1 King 22:1-8; 2 Kings 3:11, 22:11-20; 1 Chron 10:13-14, 14:8-17, 15:13; 2 Chron 1:1-6, 18:1-7, 20:3; Ps 34:4-17, Ezk 20:3,31; Zep 1:6.
- Listen to Me – Genesis 18-19; Judges 6:10; 2 Kings 17:12-15, 2 Chron 15:2, 24:19, Isaiah 48-51, Jer. 6:10, 7:1-16, 27; 17:23, 25:5-7, 29:19, Matt 13:15, Heb 5:11.
- Learning to recognize God's leading – 1 Sam. 3:1-21, Luke 24:36-49; Acts 10
- Following Jesus – John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 7:16-18; 8:28; 10:1-6;12:49; 14:31.
- The role of the Spirit to lead and guide us on Christ's behalf – John 16:7-15; 1 Cor 2:11-12
- Unity – John 17-23; Ephesians 4; Phil 2:1-5; Ps 133; Mark 3:23-35.
- One Mind – Philippians 1:27; Acts 1:14; Acts 15:1-29; Rom 15:5.

### Common Approaches and Obstacles:

Often our decision-making methods are learned through the practices in our culture and our families and particularly that are displayed in our government systems. Some examples are majority rules (democracy), dictatorship/ultimate authority (autocracy), following norms set in the past, reasoning of pros and cons, consent/cooperative with some compromising and even by consensus when everyone agrees. There are downsides to each approach largely because we are human and have a tendency to like our own ideas or like others so we can be liked. Power, pride, fears, expediency, expectations, deeply desired outcomes and even our strength as leaders can become a barrier to godly decision making. And then seeking to gain guidance from God can add all sorts of other problems and complexities from manipulation, misrepresentations, distrust, playing the God trump card and more.

## Foundational Principles and Concepts:

Discernment presupposes a few things for individuals:

1. A person is truly open with a longing or desire to be taught by and led by the Lord.
2. A person is willing to surrender to God's desires and leadership to accomplish God purposes.
3. A belief that God's will is the best thing that can happen to us in every circumstance.
4. A willingness to trust God with what we care most about, value, want and need.
5. A willingness to trust God's goodness will be carried out in our lives as we trust Him.

A few more things in order to participate in corporate discernment:

1. A person should be marked by a healthy self-doubt (an awareness that he/she does not know or see all things fully and makes mistakes) and by a humble openness to be guided by the Lord through others.
2. A person is willing to be very slow to judge others harshly particularly when others see things differently understanding his/her own limitations and capacity for sinfulness and self-deception.

Concepts and definitions:

- **Attachments** Those things that are often gifts from God but have become more valued than God and often hinder us from knowing God's heart and will.
- **Indifference or Detaching** The surrender of our attachments and desired outcomes. In confessing, letting go, laying down and releasing them, we become indifferent to all things apart from God's will.
- **Consolation** Those things that cause us to move toward the Lord; things that bring life, joy, freedom, peace, compassion to our soul. True consolation comes from God.
- **Desolation** Those things that cause us to pull away from God and produce a "troubled heart"; ways we protect ourselves, withdraw, take control, and seek to meet life's demands apart from God. Desolation never comes from God but from our flesh or Satan.

## Practices that build a Discerning Culture

- Create some ground rules that create a respectful environment that builds trust. For example, we don't talk over people. We give each person a set time period to share without interruption. We take a few minutes to prayerfully reflect on each response before another person shares.
- Establish common language to use in the process. For example, we say things like "I'm sensing God." or "I noticed" or "I wonder" instead of "The Lord told me..."
- If someone is feeling desolate, resistant, withdrawn or offended, take time to listen and hear what they are experiencing. Allow genuine but respectful expression of disagreement. We all are in a process and the discernment process is meant to help us grow.

## A Proven Discernment Process:

1. Preparation – This may take the longest. It is necessary for individuals to develop self-awareness and for groups to cultivate a culture of discernment. This may mean reading a book, doing some training to gain a shared knowledge of the basics of discernment as well as putting them into practice in our own lives.

Once that foundation is laid, prior to engaging in a time of discernment with others, make time to prayerfully prepare your own heart before the Lord. Quiet your thinking, allow God to search your

heart for any unforgiven sin so that we are fully reconciled to the Lord as far as we are aware. This process brings freedom, joy and excitement anticipating participation with the Lord.

2. Establish Clarity of the Question – It may sound easy to identify a topic to seek God’s wisdom on, but often our uniquenesses causes us to have very different understanding even if we are using the same words. It is helpful to create & consider one clear, close-ended question at a time rather than multiple alternatives. Phrase the question in a way that it can be answered, “yes” or “no” especially when learning the process of discernment. It may be necessary to adjust or create a whole new question if in the discernment process the group finds no consolation consensus. And the group may want to discern some further details and need another question for reflection and discernment.
3. Gather Relevant Information – Make time for relevant information to the question to be researched and presented. Identify people to do the work and to present to the group. Allow for discussion on the pros and cons to analyze the consequence and impact with the understanding that it is clear from scripture that God often leads in ways that seem to go away from the most rational, logical conclusion from human reasoning. This is preliminary work to ensure that all are satisfied that the context has been adequately analyzed and understood.
4. Yield Our Preferences – Many times after we finish sharing the relevant research and information, we find that we are leaning toward a conclusion. In this step, we acknowledge that our reasoning may not be God’s will or good plan, so without denying or even rejecting our preference, we surrender it to the Lord and ask for Him to bring wisdom, clarity and even confirmation through the remaining process. We express to the Lord that we want His will and His way and are willing to allow His Spirit to direct and shape our thinking.
5. Listen to the Lord – Each person will withdraw for personal time to seek the Lord’s leading and His heart on the matter. Determine an appropriate timeframe – minutes to days. Depending on the importance, the urgency and the time available. The point is to not allow the world’s pressure to rush the timeframe but to give adequate time to gain a sense on the Lord’s leading.

Imagining Exercise:

- a. Prayerfully imagine a “yes” answer to the question. Consider the research, implications, outcomes and imagine putting that into practice. Allow your heart and mind to sit quietly with this alternative and listen to your heart and to God. Do you feel joy, life, frustration, anxiety, anger? Discern consolation and desolation and ask God to give you insight.
- b. Then do the same with a “no” answer.

It is often in this phase that we become more aware of attachments which we must surrender to God to be open to God’s leading. Record your insights to be able to share them with others.

6. Discern unanimity – Return and discern together until God’s leading is clear to all. Each person is asked to share what they sensed from the Lord. It may be that some feel desolation about both alternatives and some may feel consolation about one alternative and desolation about the other or some may not be able to discern a clear leading. After the group shares, allow people to ask questions, make conclusions on what is being heard. If the group is able to identify a clear leading but there is not consensus, then identify a clarifying question to discern and return to individual prayer until “unity in the bonds of peace” is reached.