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TRAINING DISCIPLES FOR DISCERNMENT IN THE WORLD

Denis D. Haack

Essential to Christian discipleship in a fallen world is the need to be discerning—the ability as God’s people to faithfully apply the truth of His Word to the issues, challenges, truth-claims, and values that we meet in an increasingly pluralistic culture. “I want you to be wise in what is good,” Paul wrote in Romans 16:19, “and innocent in what is evil.” Earlier in the same epistle the apostle warned his readers of the danger of being squeezed into the world’s mold; if they were to live transformed lives which please God, their minds must be renewed (Rom. 12:1-2). The church is to be a discerning community within the pluralistic postmodern culture at the end of the twentieth century. Christian leaders have a responsibility to train the believers under their care to be discerning. In both church and home, discernment—like so many other spiritual disciplines—is a skill which can be modeled, taught, learned, and encouraged.

Jay Adams defines discernment as “the ability to distinguish God’s thoughts and ways from all others,”¹ and in our pluralistic world there are myriad “others” vying for acceptance. Discernment is important not simply because it identifies nontruth, though that is vital for the health of God’s people; discernment is important because Jesus Christ is Lord. Since He is King, and since the Scriptures speak to all of created reality, we must live

intentionally under His authority, bringing every aspect of our life and culture into submission to Him. Our faithfulness to His Word witnesses to the reality of His reign as King.

Sometimes discernment is relatively easy. There is no need, for example, to pray about whether to rob a bank. Stealing is forbidden, and the commands are easily found in any concordance. The process seems so easy and the answer so immediate that we usually do not even think of this in terms of “exercising discernment,” but it is: We have applied the truth of God’s Word to an issue of life in a fallen world.

Sometimes, however, discernment is less easy. The issues involved are more difficult to sort out, and the concordance seems to be of less immediate help. Consider, for example, Christians whose vocation is in sales. They will likely receive training in sales techniques by which they can increase their effectiveness. Sales techniques, however, like every other part of life, are never neutral, and the training will be related to what the trainers believe about who people are, what life is about, and how success is measured. Such assumptions can be subtle, unspoken, and unacknowledged, and that is precisely the challenge. Techniques may be taught which may be effective, but which may also be based on consumerist values which turn out to be repugnant to the Christian worldview, blurring, perhaps, the line between sales and manipulation. The use of this illustration is not to single out those who are in sales—which can be a legitimate and honorable vocation—for every vocation in a fallen world poses similar challenges for believers. The point, rather, is that the issues to be discerned can be difficult, and require more skill than simply the ability to use a concordance.

As difficult as this might be at times, however, discernment is not an esoteric skill which can be mastered only by an elite few. It is, rather, an issue of stewardship. The goal is to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of our lives and calling before God.



As difficult as this might be at times, however, discernment is not an esoteric skill which can be mastered only by an elite few. It is, rather, an issue of stewardship. The goal is to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of our lives and calling before God. We do not have to sort out the medical ethics of genetic therapy, for example, unless—and this is the point—our calling is in medicine, or our lives somehow intersect this sphere of medical science. Though Christian discernment is the responsibility of each believer, it is a task which must be pursued in the midst of and as a community. Not only can we help sharpen one another’s thinking and identify blindspots, we can learn from one another. As each believer seeks to weave together belief and behavior, the community of God’s people is thinking and living Christianly together across a wide range of callings and issues. Further, the need to be discerning is not restricted to the more obvious and public issues such as abortion, physician-assisted suicide, or homosexual rights. In fact, these issues do not represent the real challenge since

they are so obvious and so often addressed. The real challenge, rather, is to be discerning so that we can be faithful in the fulfillment of our calling, in the ordinary details of our lives that often seem so obvious we rarely reflect upon them. And finally, though the skill of discernment needs to be honed over a lifetime so we can be faithful even in the midst of complex issues, it is also, in its simplest form, a skill we can pass on to our children.

In a subjective and pluralistic culture, Christians who have not developed skill in discernment may become reactionary. Desiring to be holy but lacking the facility to think creatively in biblical categories, they often respond with little more than gut reactions to the challenges that confront them in an amoral society. Rather than anticipating and thinking Christianly about ideas, values, and scenarios which they are likely to confront, they are blindsided by the challenge of the moment, and feel pressured to give an instant response. They may not have good and sufficient reasons for their opinion, and they may be unable to relate their conclusions thoughtfully to the Scriptures, but often none of this makes them hesitate in asserting their opinion is "something they have peace about," and is thus "God's will." Such subjectivity is an inadequate basis upon which to define Christian faithfulness. Their hearts are in the right place, but they need to be taught how to love God with their minds as well.

TEACHING CHRISTIANS TO BE DISCERNING

One way to teach believers to be discerning is to help them learn to ask four simple but probing questions. These questions are simple enough to be used with young children, yet probing enough to tackle any issue, no matter how complex. The questions are easy to understand and remember, because they conform to

how we naturally tend to learn and to think. Though simple, they involve skills which are not automatic, and so must be modeled, practiced, and learned. They can be asked in any setting: while reading a news magazine, watching a movie, sorting out a challenge to our faith raised by a colleague at work, listening to a lecture, noticing a billboard on the highway. As they are repeated and mastered, the four questions soon become habits of the heart, and act like signposts, a map, a guide to follow to be a discerning disciple. The four discernment questions are these: (1) What is being said? (What are the foundational issues? The secondary issues?) (2) What is a Christian response? (3) Why do we believe the Christian position? (4) How can we live and speak the truth winsomely in our pluralistic society?

Question #1: What is being said? Like the first step in inductive Bible study, the place to begin in Christian discernment is with careful observation. What is being communicated? What values are being assumed or expressed? What questions, ideas, or issues are at stake? What is the message of the movie? What view of sexuality is expressed in the editorial? What is my coworker asking me to affirm? Until we identify what is being said or communicated, we will not be in a position to respond biblically. And like that first skill in Bible study, just because it sounds simple does not mean we are good at it, nor that we cannot improve with practice. It is easy, for example, to go beyond the data at hand, assuming we know far more of the world and life view of the author, or film director, or whatever, than we actually do. Charity, however, demands we stick to the truth, to what ideas, assumptions, or values we actually observe are being communicated. If we need to know more, we can ask questions.

When we ask what is being said, we need to learn to

distinguish between foundational and secondary issues. What are the vital ideas or values here, and what is of less importance? This is what Paul did in Athens.² Though he was careful, for example, to distinguish between what he meant by “God” and the “images” of the Athenians (a foundational issue), he was willing to quote a Greek poet and agree with him, even though the poet was speaking of Zeus, not the God of Scripture (a secondary issue). Likewise, Christians must learn to differentiate, when responding to an editorial, for example, between the assertion that human beings are products of chance (foundational), and an argument to expand the welfare state (secondary)—and the fact that they feel equally strongly about both issues is quite beside the point. If we fail to distinguish between foundational and secondary issues, not only can we be needlessly sidetracked by all sorts of tangents, we may give the impression the gospel teaches things that it, in fact, does not.

Question #2: What is a Christian response? Once we have identified what is being said or communicated, we can begin to respond Christianly. Here we move beyond observation to the question of truth. This involves, naturally enough, two further questions: *Where do we agree?* and *Where do we disagree?* Given the tendency to be reactionary, it seems wise to take them in this order. First, identify where there is agreement and only then begin to identify the points of disagreement. I always insist on this order when leading discussions, and participants often remark that doing so taught them not only a great deal about themselves but also reminded them that non-Christian worldviews contain elements of truth. After all, even if they do not acknowledge it, non-Christians are made in God’s image and live in God’s world.

What we are seeking is a Christian response, not nec-

essarily *the* Christian response. On creedal or worldview issues of the first order (Is there a God? Who is Jesus? What is the nature of mankind’s dilemma? etc.) we can express *the* Christian position. On secondary policy issues, however (How should welfare be reformed? etc.), we are seeking to think Christianly about issues not specifically commanded in Scripture. There is room for honest disagreement, and a need for humility and charity. Just because we have been given truth in Scripture does not mean all our opinions are equally true, though hopefully all our opinions will flow from a mind and imagination steeped in the Scriptures.

It is often the case that as believers ask this second question they begin to realize they are not sure what a Christian response actually consists of. They may not be sure, or may disagree over what the Bible teaches or how the Christian worldview applies, or what the implications of God’s law are for the issue at hand. Bible study should then be scheduled. The thing to say when we do not know is, “Good question. I don’t know, but let’s find out.” Discernment, unlike gut reactions, is a process.

Question #3: Why do we believe the Christian position? If the Scriptures give us truth about life and reality, it will be possible to delineate reasons to believe it. The same God who spoke the universe into existence also speaks in the Bible. Since all truth is God’s truth, we should be able to identify good and sufficient reasons to believe it. Here discernment blends into apologetics, and both the glory and the practicality of truth become evident.

In raising three children, we found that this third question was often foremost in their minds. They often raised doubts, not primarily because they were doubting what they had been taught, but because they wanted reasons to believe—reasons which they could give when

challenged. At stake, in other words, was not simply the question of *truth* (the basic issue in question #2) but of *plausibility*, both of which are essential to belief and increasingly under attack in a pluralistic culture.

Each person, regardless of his vocation, will have issues confront him about which he needs to reflect biblically. The community of God's people should be the place where such challenges can be brought so that through prayer, Bible study, and discussion some resolution can be sought.



*Question #4: How can we live and speak the truth win-
somerly in our pluralistic society?* It is not enough to think Christianly, we must also live Christianly. Here we have come full circle, since we began with some issue or value or question in a fallen world, and now, at the end, we are talking about living out and witnessing to the truth in a fallen world. Dealing with this question is crucial for several reasons. First, the culture is undergoing change from modernity to "postmodernity," and believers need to be challenged to think creatively about reaching their neighbors and colleagues in a postmodern culture. Second, it is easy to live simply as middle-class Americans, assuming that middle-class values,

behaviors, and ideas partake of godliness, when our true standard must be God's Word. Sometimes in the discernment process we discover we have been living or speaking less than faithfully. And third, the answer to this question is not always immediately obvious. It is relatively easy to discuss the Christian perspective on homosexual behavior in a Sunday school class, for example; it is far more difficult to discuss it over lunch at work. Helping one another bridge that gap, so we can speak without compromise, yet in a way that is carefully phrased so as to be thoughtful, winsome, and understood—whether agreed with or not—is a vital way to serve one another.

DEVELOPING DISCERNING DISCIPLES

Since discernment involves applying the truth of God's Word to daily life, we do not have to look far to find opportunities to teach and practice the skill. Each person, regardless of his vocation, will have issues confront him about which he needs to reflect biblically. The community of God's people should be the place where such challenges can be brought so that through prayer, Bible study, and discussion some resolution can be sought.

Pastors, teachers, and parents should be sure that modeling discernment is a regular part of their discipling ministry. By raising such issues, and helping your people see how you are working through the four discernment questions—or why you will have to do more study before completing the process—is an exhibition of practical godliness that will both encourage believers to be faithful even as it illustrates how to work through difficult questions with integrity.

Opportunities can also be provided where Christians in community can practice developing skill in dis-

cernment by working through the four questions together. Using ordinary issues that are common to life in our pluralistic society, we can foster Bible study, prayer, and discussion which are centered on the application of the Scriptures to life. Such exercises can be especially helpful for training purposes when they are interactive in small group settings, so that people are involved in the process instead of simply passively watching others work through the four questions. If such settings are safe, where members can explore a wide variety of ideas and options—including ones that turn out to be mistaken—not only will the discussions be lively, but community will deepen as they seek to identify the truth and apply it. In such settings, when the group discovers it is unsure of what the Bible teaches that is applicable, the Bible study which results is often pursued with a refreshing level of energy and eagerness.

A few “ordinary issues from everyday life” that can provide exercises in discernment include:

Popular films. Many movies raise issues worth discussing, giving us a window of insight into the world and life view of those who do not share our deepest convictions. Though the choice of the film will depend on the group, the movies in this category could include *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, *Dead Man Walking*, *Phenomenon*, *Quiz Show*, *A Man for All Seasons*, *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, *Howard’s End*, *Contact*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *Amistad*, *Reality Bites*, and *Good Will Hunting*.

Popular Music. Popular culture is of immense importance in our postmodern world, wielding enormous impact, especially on the younger generation. Listening to their music and asking them questions not only assures them we are taking them seriously, it helps us provide training in discernment in an area that is central to their world.³

Common scenarios. We can also provide case studies in discernment that arise from everyday life. As I have raised such scenarios over the past several years, the common response has been interest in working through such exercises, with numerous believers saying they have faced similar (or identical) situations in the past but are unhappy at the response they made at the time. Whether the source is the media, listening to the struggles of our people, or simply imagining situations which are likely to arise, the pluralism of the surrounding culture promises an unceasing supply.

Two simple but provocative examples would include: (1) An acquaintance from work requests your help in moving into a new apartment. After checking your calendar, you agree, pleased at the opportunity to build a closer relationship with an unbeliever. You then learn he is moving in with his girlfriend. What do you do?

(2) Mike Warnke, a popular “Christian comedian,” has told the story of his spiritual pilgrimage at youth rallies and on tape. Hundreds of young people claim to have come to faith as a result of his witness. Now it has been revealed that Warnke’s story is a hoax, an elaborate story of drugs and witchcraft which, though compelling, is simply a lie. Should Christians who own Warnke’s tapes be encouraged to destroy them? Since people continue to claim to be helped by the tape recordings of Warnke’s story, are there any conditions under which Warnke’s tapes can be used? What about the tapes which involve Warnke’s comedy routines, but do not include his now discredited story?⁴

Discernment is essential to Christian faithfulness in a fallen world, a skill to be modeled, taught, learned and practiced within the community of God’s people. Even if we think the Christian response should be obvious in

some particular instance, helping our people work through the four discernment questions will allow us to, by God's grace, develop discerning disciples.

Author

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Notes

1. *A Call to Discernment: Distinguishing Truth from Error in Today's Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1987), 46.
2. Acts 17.
3. For a study of discernment specifically applied to pop music, including contemporary Christian music—an area desperately in need of discernment—see the author's article "Having Ears to Hear: A Practical Guide to Discernment in Contemporary Music" in *Reformation & Revival Journal* (4:4, Fall 1995), 91-104.
4. Case studies in discernment appear regularly in *Critique*, a newsletter I edit which is designed to help Christians develop skill discernment. A free sample can be requested from Ransom Fellowship, 1150 West Center Street, Rochester, Minnesota 55902.