

## **Discernment: Finding God in All Things**

Ruth Haley Barton

*“Discernment in its fullness takes a practiced heart, fine-tuned to hear the word of God and the single-mindedness to follow that word in love. It is truly a gift from God, but not one dropped from the skies fully formed. It is a gift cultivated by a prayerful life and the search for self-knowledge.”*

Ernest Larkin

Life is full of the need to choose.

Sometimes the choices are momentous—choosing a marriage partner, entering a vocation, having children, deciding what to do in a difficult marriage. Other choices are not quite as momentous, but they are important nonetheless because they give shape to our lives. The pursuit of further education, what church to attend, whether to move to a new geographical location, how to care for aging parents, appropriate sexual expression in a dating relationship, whether to pursue a particular friendship or not, what spiritual practices are appropriate for my life at this time...all of these decisions shape who we are and who we are becoming.

When faced with life’s choices, we become aware of one of the soul’s deepest longings: we want to know we are making our choices in God, that we are living our life according to the purposes for which God brought us to this particular time and place. We long to see our own life as part of a larger whole, contributing to some greater purpose. Within the broader Christian framework, we long to find our unique path, the one that God knew and marked out for us before the foundations of the earth (as David talks about in Psalm 139).

Particularly at the beginning of a new year, we long for a way of ordering our lives so that we will experience the presence of God more fully. We want to respond faithfully to that Presence rather than living the minutes and hours of our days disconnected from spiritual reality.

For the Christian, being able to discern the presence and activity of God in ordinary moments, at the major choice-points of our lives—even in the midst of grave difficulty—gives meaning to the human experience. This capacity to recognize and respond to the presence of God in all of life is a spiritual habit and practice that keeps us connected with God’s larger purposes for us and for our world. Then we can give ourselves wholeheartedly to a deeper meaning for our lives rather than being consumed by self-interest. We are able to align ourselves more completely with what God is doing in any given moment. *That* is when life gets really exciting!

### **The Essence of Discernment**

While discernment is listed as a spiritual gift, it is also a mark of Christian maturity. In Romans 12:1, 2 Paul is very matter-of-fact in identifying the ability to discern the will of God as a natural by-product of spiritual transformation. John instructs Christians in general (1 John 4:1) to “test the spirits” to see which ones are from God—as though this is something we are all capable of doing. Whether we feel gifted in this area or not, discernment is a gift for all of us who are seeking the fullness of life in Christ.

Discernment is first of all a habit, a way of seeing that eventually permeates our whole life. It is the journey from spiritual blindness (not seeing God anywhere or only seeing him where we expect to see him) to spiritual sight (finding God everywhere,

especially where we least expect it). Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits and best known for developing a set of spiritual exercises intended to hone people's capacity for discernment, defined the aim of discernment as "finding God *in all things* in order that we might love and serve God in all." (italics mine)

The habit of discernment is a quality of attentiveness to God that is so intimate that, over time we develop an intuitive sense of God's heart and purpose in any given moment. We become familiar with God's voice—the tone, quality, and content—just like we become familiar with the voice of someone we know well. We are able to notice: How am I experiencing God in the moment? Where is God at work continuing to unfold his work of love and redemption? What is my most authentically response to God in this moment?

Discernment is a way of approaching life that has to do with sensing the movement of God's spirit and abandoning ourselves to it just like we might give ourselves to the experience of being in water. Sometimes abandoning ourselves to the will of God is like floating down a river: we lay back and allow the current of the river to carry us along. At other times it is more like trying to run the rapids or ride a wave: we must keep our whole self alert and attuned to the dynamic of the water as it flows over rocks and around corners and over rapids so that we can ride it to its destination rather than being toppled by its force. Either way, we do not set the direction or the speed of the current; rather, we seek to read the elements so that we can move with it and find the best way to let it carry us in the direction God has for us.

## Testing the Spirits

A crucial aspect of discernment is what Scripture calls “discernment of spirits” or “testing the spirits to see whether they are from God.” (I Cor. 12:10, I John 4:1) This aspect of discernment helps us to distinguish the real from the phony, the true from the false, in the world “out there” but also in the interior world of our own thoughts and motives. As we become more attuned to these subtle spiritual dynamics, we are able to distinguish between what is good (that which moves us towards God and his calling upon our lives) and what is evil (that which draws us away from God).

Ignatius describes the experience of these inner dynamics as *consolation* and *desolation*. Consolation is the interior movement of the heart that gives us a deep sense of life-giving connection with God, others, and our authentic self in God. It is the sense that all is right with the world, that I am free to be given over to God and to love even in moments of pain and crisis. Desolation is the loss of a sense of God’s presence. We feel out of touch with God, with others and with our most authentic self. It is the experience of being off-center, full of turmoil, confusion and maybe even rebellion.

Consolation and desolation need not be particularly momentous; in fact, they might seem relatively inconsequential until we learn to pay attention and listen for what they have to tell us. For instance, I have noticed how replenishing a particular church service is for me because of the beauty of the worship space and the depth of meaning conveyed by the religious symbols. The altar devoted to the Eucharist at the center of the worship space, the lit candles, a beautifully engraved cross, and a place to kneel at my seat or behind the altar... all of this is so enlivening to me that it doesn’t always matter much whether anyone says anything or not! This is a reminder that sacred space is a very

significant element of worship for me and needs to be taken into account when I choose where to worship.

In the midst of a normal day of work and ministry, I might notice that what is most enlivening to me *by far* is a quiet conversation with a friend or colleague that somehow affirms our commitment to our work and life together in community. In contrast, there might be moments in that very same day when I sense my energy draining away due to feelings of loneliness and isolation. The deep joy that I feel in relation to my colleagues is in contrast with the desolation I feel when I am doing too much of my work in isolation. This reminds me that relationships matter to me more than anything.

God's will for us is generally for us to do more of that which gives us life (John 10: 10) and to turn away from those things that drain life from us in debilitating ways. Many of our smaller decisions and most of our significant decisions--even those decisions that require us to choose between two equally good options—involve the ability to notice that which brings a sense of life and freedom (I Corinthians 3:17) to our most authentic self in God. In Deuteronomy God addresses the whole company of Israel and says, “See I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendents may live.” He says that the wisdom that enables us to choose life is not something that we will find “out there” in heaven or across the ocean somewhere but that this knowing is very near to us—in our mouths and in our hearts for us to notice and observe. (Deuteronomy 30:19, 20) In other words, it is a visceral, in-the-body experience.

Paying attention to these hidden dynamics of consolation and desolation has given me freedom and even permission to be vigilant in choosing to move towards that which is

life-giving and to move away from that which is life-draining. Even when the noticing is a bit painful (like noticing feelings of loneliness and isolation in my work), these inner dynamics speak gently to me about my life and the importance of continuing to be more thoughtful and intentional about how I live the one and only life I have been given.

As we make it our habit to notice and respond to that which gives us life, receiving guidance becomes routine in the day-to-day decisions of life as well as in the larger questions of our lives. It keeps us in touch with that which is truest about God, ourselves, and our world so that we can make life-giving choices.

### **Practice**

God's will is generally for us to do more of that which gives us life. (Deuteronomy 30:19; John 10:10) One way to discern God's leading in our lives is to pay attention to that which gives us a sense of connection with God, an ability to be our most authentic selves in God and to bring our authentic self to others in love. We can also pay attention to that which seems to cut us off from these life-giving realities in ways that are draining or debilitating. Over time, these observations help us to become increasingly intentional about making life-giving choices moment by moment and in the larger decisions of our lives.

At the beginning of this New Year, take a few moments to ask God to bring to your heart elements of your life which are most life-giving: moments for which you have been most grateful, times when are you most able to give and receive love, people and situations that are life-giving for you.

Then ask God to bring to your heart elements of your life that drain energy from you— moments when you are least grateful, times when you have been least able to give and receive love, people and situations that create confusion, turmoil, loss of peace.

What wisdom, insight or further questions seem to arise from this awareness? As you enter into this new year, how might God be inviting you to incorporate more of that which gives you life and less of that which drains life from you?

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