

Discernment: Theological Assumptions and Practical Prerequisites

by Kris Haig

God is present and active in our daily lives, and works with us to enable us to choose those paths that are most congruent with God's will for our lives.

Our own fulfillment and greatest joy will be found when our choices are congruent with God's will for us. God's will (also translated as God's desire, or God's yearning) is that we be able to freely choose to act in ways of faithful discipleship and self-offering love. At the deepest and truest level of our self, our will coincides with God's will.

"Discernment" uses all our capacities for knowing in order to make holy choices by cultivating habits of attentiveness to the interior movements of the spirit, recognizing and identifying the characteristics of the Holy Spirit, differentiating among various choice options, and testing a discerned decision.

The Holy Spirit guides by the principle of attraction and a drawing toward the good. Jesus beckons us to follow him. We are invited and beckoned, not bullied or coerced. It is not characteristic of the spirit to guide by inducing in us feelings of guilt, shame, or heavy obligation—the voice of the Spirit does not say "You *ought* to..." or "You *should*..." but by issuing an irresistible invitation.

Several preconditions are necessary in order for a discernment process to be possible.

1. A genuine desire to do God's will and the ability to set aside one's own preconceived agendas or attachments to particular outcomes.
2. An ongoing commitment to a life of deep and regular prayer, and particularly to prayer of listening and contemplation.
3. A well-developed and practiced skill in noticing and recognizing those things that indicate the presence and action of the Holy Spirit, or "marks" of the Spirit.
4. Solid grounding in community and willingness to invite others to participate in the discernment process.
5. Willingness and opportunity to allow as much time as necessary for the discernment to emerge with clarity.
6. Willingness and ability to live out the discerned choice, and test the results of the choice.

These prerequisites are from "Knowledge of Self and of God: The Path of Discernment," by Kris Haig, in Journeys, a newsletter of the Spirituality Program of Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia; 2003 Fall/Winter.

Discernment: The Art of Choosing God's Will

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"God is the lead dancer and the soul is the partner completely attuned to the rhythm and patterns set by the partner. She does not lead, but neither does she hang limp like a sack of potatoes."

-- Thomas Merton, quoted in *Listening to the Music of the Spirit: The Art of Discernment*, by David Lonsdale; Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1992.

DEFINITION

Discernment has been described as "a way of making Christian choices, of following the Spirit of God in the decisions we make." [David Lonsdale, *Listening to the Music of the Spirit: the Art of Discernment*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1992, p.19.] In the New Testament, the word for discernment is *diakrisis*, which means "differentiating" or "distinguishing."

In discernment, individuals and groups allow the experiences of a dynamic relationship with the Living God to give shape to their decisions, seeking to judge between choices that are obedient to God's will and those that are contrary to God's desires. It is often associated with the call of God to a particular person or group.

Discernment is an ongoing process rather than an isolated event, and is grounded in a life of prayer. It makes use of rational processes, intuition, imagination, and emotion, and always includes the testing of a discerned decision.

FOUNDATIONS

Discernment has been central to the life of faith at least since Biblical times, and is referred to in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the writings of the New Testament. As a systematic method of using spiritual tools to make concrete life choices, it is most closely associated with Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Jesuit order.

Ignatius first formulated the classical process of discernment as a method that differentiates between two opposing kinds of interior movements of the soul. Those two movements he referred to as "consolation," which is the result of choices that are in harmony with God's desires, and "desolation," which is the result of choices contrary to God's desires.

CONSOLATIONS AND DESOLATIONS: The marks of the Spirit

Characteristics of Consolations:

- courage, strength
- delight, deep joy
- satisfaction; "rightness"
- sense of freedom
- gratitude
- energy, vitality
- desires are rooted deeply ("true Self")
- choices are life-giving

Characteristics of Desolations:

- discouragement
- sadness not due to crisis or depression
- anxiety
- feeling of being trapped, imprisoned
- sense of burden
- enervation
- desires rooted shallowly ("false Self")
- choices are life-draining

"It is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul. It is characteristic of the good spirit, however, to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace." Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*. Quoted by Frank Rogers Jr., in "Discernment," in Dorothy Bass (ed.) *Practicing Our Faith*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1997. p. 109.

BIBLICAL TEXTS

Deuteronomy 30:11-14 (NRSV)

Surely, this commandment (*Heb: mitzvah*) that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Deuteronomy 30:11-18 (New Jerusalem Bible)

For this Law which I am laying down for you today is neither obscure for you nor beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you need to wonder, "Who will go up to heaven for us and bring it down to us, so that we can hear it and practice it?" Nor is it beyond the seas, so that you need to wonder, "Who will cross the seas for us and bring it back to us, so that we can hear it and practice it?" No, the word is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to put into practice.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (NRSV)

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Romans 10:8 (NRSV)

But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart."

Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect.

1 John 4:1 (NRSV)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.

Galatians 5:22-23 (NRSV)

...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Isaiah 11:2 (NRSV)

The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Colossians 3:12, 14

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

The Discernment Process

This discernment process model is based upon the work of Dr. Elizabeth Liebert, Professor of Christian Spirituality at San Francisco Theological Seminary, 2 Kensington Road, San Anselmo, CA 94960. Do not reproduce without written permission.

In a discernment process, we commit ourselves to:

- Become attentive to our experiences of God, and learn to recognize the interior movements that indicate the presence or absence of the Holy Spirit.
- Act upon choices that draw us into greater congruence with the will of God, and deeper intimacy with God.
- Reject those choices that move us away from God.

The process of discernment uses the complete range of our faculties of knowing, and moves systematically through a series of steps from framing the question to be discerned (preferably in a form that can be answered either “yes” or “no”), through the application of various forms of reflection, to actually committing to a course of action and testing the results. Although this order is not arbitrary, a possible sequence of steps is:

1. *Framing the question.*
2. *Approaching the decision using rational intellect.*
3. *Approaching the decision using comparison to the biblical witness.*
4. *Approaching the decision using intuition and imaging.*
5. *Approaching the decision using imaginative visualization.*
6. *Approaching the decision using awareness of consolations and desolations.*
7. *Testing the discerned decision.*

Framing the Question

- Collect yourself in silence and interior stillness. Cultivate an attitude of patience and openness, resting in God’s presence and trusting in the Holy Spirit. Express to God your desire simply to understand and follow God’s own desires in your decision.
- Describe for yourself the life situation that is presenting the opportunity for making a decision.
- Write down the various components of the situation as they affect any decision.
- Frame the decision with as much clarity and specificity as possible, if at all possible as a question that can be answered either “Yes” or “No.” For example, “Should I agree to chair the presbytery’s CE Committee at this time?” Recognize, however, that not all issues can be framed in this way.
- Write out the decision as you have framed it.
- Offer to God this situation and the work of the process thus far, and notice anything you sense arising within you.

Using the Rational Intellect

- Prepare yourself as previously, renewing your desire to follow God’s call and collecting yourself in stillness and trust.
- Begin to consider the decision as you have framed it, turning it over in your mind. Write down your thoughts on paper using different columns to record the “pro’s” and “con’s” associated with either choice as you have framed them (*see attached sheet*).
- Reflect on the lists in turn.
- Journal about any insights you have about the decision after having generated the lists.
- Weigh the lists against each other carefully, and see if the differences suggest a tentative decision.
- Offer the decision to God and renew your desire to follow God’s call. Notice how you feel when your tentative decision is held up to your desire to follow God.

Using Comparison to the Biblical Witness

- Prepare yourself as previously, renewing your desire to follow God’s call and collecting yourself in stillness and trust.
- Holding in mind your decision as you have framed it, be attentive to any biblical texts that come to your awareness. Ponder the relationship of the decision to the particular texts, and write down your insights.

- Particularly keep in mind the witness of Scripture to the nature of God, the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Ponder your decision in light of its accord with these understandings, and write out your reflections.

Using Intuition and Imaging

- Prepare yourself as previously, renewing your desire to follow God's call and collecting yourself in stillness and trust. Allow thoughts and distractions to slip away.
- Allow yourself to become aware of any images, metaphors, or pictures that may come to your attention. Write them down or draw them as they arise.
- Gently meditate upon the images or metaphors. Does one seem to "capture" or embody the decision you face better than the others? Does one have a sense of "rightness," energy, freshness, or creativity?
- Journal about what new options or insights this image might suggest.
- Offer to God whatever has emerged from this process.

Using Imaginative Visualization

- Prepare yourself as previously, renewing your desire to follow God's call and collecting yourself in stillness and trust.
- Enter with your imagination into one or two of the images you wrote down in the previous step, or visualize your tentative decision and its possible outcome.
- Imagine yourself choosing the options toward which your intuition points. Allow the outcome to unfold with as much concreteness and specificity as possible. Journal about what you visualize.
- Now imagine yourself taking a different path. Journal about what that path opens up.
- Comparing the two paths, ask yourself:
 - Which course flowed more freely?*
 - Which excited you most?*
 - Which seemed "right" to you?*
 - Which has the closest connection with your personal history?*
- Offer to God whatever has emerged from this process.

Using Awareness of Consolations and Desolations

- Prepare yourself as previously, renewing your desire to follow God's call and collecting yourself in stillness and trust.
- Holding your tentative decision in your mind and heart, notice whether it tends to give rise to the experiences of "consolation" — an increased sense of hope, peace, love, belonging, energy, joy, and strength.
- Notice next any experiences of "desolation" — an increase of restlessness, discouragement, heaviness, inertia, or alienation.
- Offer to God whatever has emerged from this process.

Testing a Discerned Decision

A discernment process is not complete until the decision has been acted upon and evaluated. Over time, a well-discerned decision will continue to seem like the right choice, and even become more solid. While no single "test" is infallible of itself, look for a general pattern of confirmation or disconfirmation. The following questions will help to test this:

Does the decision continue to "sit well"?

Does the consolation remain?

Does the decision result in the appearance of the "fruit of the Spirit" as set forth in Galatians 5:22? (Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.)

Do you have the energy and the courage to proceed?

Do others who know you well confirm the decision?

Does it further and strengthen personal commitments, such as to friends and family?

Examen:

Praying the Experiences of Our Everyday Lives

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God is present and active in every moment and event of our daily lives, willing and working for good c for a world in which each of us is able to give and receive more love, to see Christ in the face of the neighbor and the stranger (and in the face we see in our own mirror) c “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.” Micah 6:8

When we are living in concert with the desires of God, we will experience a greater sense of vitality and energy, of joy and delight, of gratitude and compassion. Cultivating the ability to recognize the interior movements of God’s Spirit is the heart of the prayer of *examen*, in which we reflect upon the specific experiences of our daily lives with the question, “Where is God in this?”

There are many variations on praying the *examen*. Here is a simple way to start.

- (1) Find a quiet spot where you will be undisturbed, and a comfortable place to sit (but not so comfortable that you are likely to fall asleep). Quiet yourself using a method that works for you, such as attending to the rhythm of your breathing, repeating a simple word or phrase and allowing it to bring you to your center, gazing upon a candle’s flame or other visual centering object, or listening to meditative music.
- (2) Begin to reflect upon the events of the past day, as if watching a videotape of your experience, starting with your waking in the morning and beginning the day. Don’t rush, but rather take time to fully remember your experiences c not only what “happened” and who was involved, but also the more subtle aspects of your day. What feelings did you experience? What insights did you have? What sensations were you aware of, and what did you notice? What did you enjoy, and what frustrated or disappointed you?
- (3) Ask God to bring to your heart an awareness of one or two moments or experiences for which you are particularly grateful. Savor them as fully as you can, drawing life and energy from them once more. Allow your mind to move into deeper stillness, resting in God’s presence without words or thoughts.
- (4) Ask God now to bring to your heart an awareness of one or two moments or experiences for which you are not grateful c experiences of “negative” emotions such as anger or sadness or guilt, times when you felt drained of energy and alienated from your truest self. What was it that made these experiences so difficult? Be present to these less pleasant experiences as fully as you can, yet without judging or being critical, knowing that God was with you then and is with you now. Then allow your mind to move again into deeper stillness, resting in God’s presence without words or thoughts.
- (5) Give thanks to God for whatever you have experienced.

What we can learn from the practice of *examen*

First, we can begin to realize and notice that God is present with us in all things, often without our being aware of it at the time. With practice, we can become more conscious of the presence of God in the midst of our everyday experiences.

The *examen* also is a valuable tool in the process of discernment, that is, seeking to make choices that are in accord with the desires of God. Over time, patterns of “consolation” and “desolation” emerge which are connected with particular activities or choices. Commitments we feel obligated to take on might prove to be life-draining and soul-deadening burdens that make us less able to give and receive love, making us feel alienated from self and God. Alternatively, we might discover that a hobby or pastime is a source of deep joy and energy, nourishing our spirit in profound ways and enabling us to connect more deeply with God and others. Awareness of what genuinely gives us life (and what deadens that life) will help us to make choices consistent with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

For further study

Sleeping With Bread: Holding What Gives You Life by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press; 1995. This excellent contemporary presentation of the spiritual practice of *examen* includes suggestions for using with families around the dinner table and during times of transition.

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