

DOCTRINE OF DISCERNMENT

I. Vocabulary.

A. Hebrew vocabulary.

1. בִּיַן (biyn), 169X, verb, to discern, to become separated, to be distinct; to consider, perceive, or understand. IKings 3:9
2. שָׁמַע (shama), verb, lit. means to hear; in some contexts it has the nuance of hearing properly, making proper assessment of the facts based on listening. IISam. 14:17
3. נָכַר (nakhar), verb, 49X, to treat something as strange or different, to recognize something by carefully examining it or inspecting it carefully. Gen. 31:32
4. יָדָע (yadha'), verb, lit. to know; to become acquainted with, to distinguish so as to understand. Pro. 14:7
5. שָׁכַל (sakhal), 61X, verb, to consider or reflect, to comprehend something by gaining insight into it. Dan. 9:25
6. טָעַם (ta'am), noun, 13X, lit. the sense of taste, the faculty of making a distinction between things by means of good judgment. Ex. 16:31; Prov. 11:22

B. Greek vocabulary.

1. διακρίνω (diakrino), 19X, verb, lit. to judge through, to differentiate things by separating one from another, to make a conclusion as to the differences or distinctions between two or more items. ICor. 14:29; James 2:4
2. The root verb κρίνω (krino—to judge) can be used in the sense of making a judgment based on discernment. Lk. 7:43, 12:57; Jn. 7:24
3. διακρισις (diakrisis), 3X, noun, the ability to distinguish and make good evaluations, the ability to separate to differing views. Heb. 5:14
4. αἴσθησις (aisthesis), 1X, noun, the capability of being affected by external means or sensations; the capacity to understand, discernment. Phil. 1:9

II. Definition.

- A. Webster defines discernment as the ability to discern; our English term is derived from terms that mean to separate or distinguish.
- B. For believers, discernment begins with the senses, what the eye sees, what the ear hears, what the inner man of Bible doctrine senses with regard to an issue.
- C. From the point of the reception of information, the mind is designed to reason between conflicting thoughts or ideas to arrive at the distinction between which idea is good or bad, right or wrong, good, better, or best, etc.
- D. Therefore in order to effectively and righteously compare and contrast between differing concepts or ideas, one should have a sound set of norms and standards, which he uses to evaluate issues that come to him.
- E. Discernment implies the faculty of keen and discriminating accuracy with respect to the issue(s) at hand.
- F. Related terms and their significance.
 1. Perception refers to the immediate exercise of the faculties such as tasting, hearing, seeing, or thinking.

2. Penetration denotes the depth of understanding and, like insight, emphasizes acuteness or subtlety; the ability to discern the nuances of a matter.
3. Acumen relates to the acuteness of the intellect (sharpened by practice and use) and the ability to discern the subtle distinctions between matters.

III. Biblical discernment.

- A. In addition to the physical senses that provide perception to all members of the human race, the believer has the added benefits of the ministry of God the Holy Spirit and whatever resident doctrine he might possess.
- B. According to the Scriptures, the unbeliever must deal with life based solely on what he can discern through the physical senses; he has no spiritual abilities of any kind since he rejects matters of a spiritual nature. ICor. 2:14
- C. However, the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit was promised by Jesus Christ as a ministry that would provide additional information and insight to believers in His absence. Jn. 14:17, 16:13; ICor. 2:12
- D. However, learning from the Holy Spirit demands that one be rightly related to His ministry by being in fellowship; the Holy Spirit does not teach believers that are out of fellowship. ICor. 2:15
- E. Therefore, the believer must maintain his **abiding** status, which began at the point of salvation and continues only through avoidance of sin or exercising the principle of rebound, if he is to profit from the insight of the Holy Spirit. Jn. 6:56, 15:4; Rom. 6:12; IJn. 1:9
- F. The human spirit, which was regenerated at the point of salvation, becomes the receptacle of Bible doctrine; this causes the spiritual growth of the new or inner man. Tit. 3:5; IPet. 2:2; IIPet. 3:18
- G. The goal of building the inner man (human spirit) through the intake of Bible doctrine is spiritual growth that will allow us to reflect the life of Christ in our mortal bodies. Eph. 4:15; IICor. 4:11
- H. This reservoir of truth in the inner man also serves as an additional frame of reference by which we can more accurately evaluate things that confront us; this forms a critical reason for making certain that the beliefs you hold are actually the truth. Matt. 6:23
- I. Therefore, these spiritual resources, coupled with the physical capabilities for perception, provide the ability for the believer to exercise his mind with respect to biblical discernment.
- J. In short, biblical discernment forms the basis by which we are able to forsake or reject that which is wrong, evil, or spurious in the human viewpoint, and adhere to the Divine viewpoint. Isa. 55:7-9

IV. The need for discernment.

- A. Very simply, the primary reason one needs discernment is to found in the nature of the angelic conflict.
- B. When Satan rebelled against God, he introduced sin and darkness into the universe; this began a conflict of two very differing views.
 1. This conflict is acknowledged and defined by the formation of physical light to counteract the physical darkness. Gen. 1:3-4
 2. However, after the fall and the introduction of the OSN, mankind is predisposed to accept the darkness of satanic thinking, which places it under the judgment of God. Jn. 3:19
 3. Jesus Christ offered all mankind the light of God's righteous plan if they would simply humble themselves and follow Him. Jn. 8:12, 12:46

4. The fact that these physical realities of light and darkness continue to exist is designed to mirror the fact that the spiritual realities of the angelic conflict continue to exist. Eph. 6:12; IJn. 1:5
 - C. Secondly, those angels that fell from their original status of holiness by virtue of embracing the satanic viewpoint, now use their volition to actively campaign against the light of the truth. ITim. 4:1-3; Rev. 16:14
 - D. As the spiritual forces of darkness attempt to indoctrinate humans with their views, they succeed at various levels by using certain men that will embrace and expound their views to other members of the human race. ITim. 4:1-2
 - E. It is certainly evident that unbelievers can be possessed by demons and articulate their viewpoint to other members of the human race. Acts 16:16-17
 - F. However, the prophecy of I Timothy indicates that demons can infiltrate the minds of believers and cause them to embrace certain demonic doctrines, which they in turn will espouse to others.
 - G. All these factors mandate that the believer be exceedingly careful about that to which they expose themselves; there are many liars and antichrists in the world today. ITim. 4:2; Tit. 1:12; IJn 2:18
- V. Discernment is a learned virtue.
- A. All believers should recognize that if one refuses to accurately evaluate himself and discern his actual status, he will be unable to effectively evaluate others. Matt. 7:3-4
 - B. Human nature has an amazing propensity to overlook its own flaws; this is due to the presence of the evil of the indwelling sin nature, which may easily delude us at any time. Ps. 19:12; Rom. 7:21; Heb. 12:1
 - C. Many believers have deluded themselves into thinking that they know what is right for other believers in a given situation; at the same time, they often clearly do not evaluate and/or recognize their own situation correctly. Rom. 2:1, 21-23
 - D. Therefore, one must be intellectually honest with himself with respect to his actual status before God; otherwise, he will never be able to accurately evaluate others and will likely come under Divine discipline. ICor. 11:29
 - E. Based on these realities, continual and consistent exposure to the Word of God is absolutely necessary for every believer. Heb. 4:12
 - F. The Word of God is described as a mirror, into which we can look, evaluate what we perceive, and discern our true status before God. James 1:23-25
 - G. Therefore, true biblical discernment comes from the source of the Word of God (true wisdom) and is available to all that will subject themselves to its dictates. Prov. 1:1-4
 - H. However, this is not something automatic that occurs apart from other factors; there are several key elements that aid in the acquisition of biblical discernment.
 1. The believer must be willing to listen to and follow the teachings of his spiritual elders. Prov. 2:1a
 2. He must be very careful to not allow strange teachings to infiltrate; he must guard that which is being entrusted to him. Prov. 2:1b
 3. The believer must cultivate an attitude of humility that makes him hold fast to the words of his teachers. Prov. 2:2
 4. The believer must desire it above all else and make it a matter of prayer. Prov. 2:3; IKings 3:9
 5. He must be willing to make this priority number one, applying all necessary diligence to his pursuit of the truth. Prov. 2:4

6. If one does these things, he is promised success in his quest for discernment and wisdom. Prov. 2:5
7. Beyond the blessing of discernment, the adjusting believer is promised blessings in other key elements of life. Prov. 2:9
8. He must be very careful in the pursuit of, or acceptance of outside teaching, since that which is strange is very often strange for a reason. 1Tim. 1:3; Heb. 13:9
9. Lastly, one cannot overemphasize the necessity of humility in the pursuit of discernment; this all begins with the recognition that one spiritually lacking, is naïve and foolish, and needs instruction. Ps. 25:8-9; Prov. 8:5, 15:33; James 1:19-21

VI. Benefits of biblical discernment.

- A. The Word of God indicates that if one does not use proper discernment that he may fall prey to any number of dangerous and destructive pursuits. Ps. 2:10; Prov. 7:4ff
- B. Lack of discernment is specifically cited as a basis for the judgment against the unnamed city in Isaiah. Isa. 27:11
- C. One reason for consistent doctrinal teaching is to provide believers with the discernment to make value judgments that are critical to the Christian way of life. Ezek. 44:23
- D. A key blessing that is derived from having discernment is the ability to know how and when to apply the doctrine of separation toward those that would hinder your spiritual advance. Prov. 13:20, 14:7, 28:7
- E. Those that do not avail themselves of biblical discernment will very likely reap the discipline of their chosen path. Prov. 10:13; Hos. 14:9
- F. Discretion, which also relates to discerning, discriminating, judging, or separating things, is an added blessing that comes to those that pursue the truth. Prov. 1:4
- G. This is the quality that relates to prudence, the idea of being circumspect, wary, cautious in speech or action. Prov. 2:11-16, 8:12, 11:22, 19:11
- H. These related qualities are both valuable and indispensable; they must be present in those that God would promote to positions of leadership. Deut. 1:13; 1Kings 3:7-12
- I. Joseph and Daniel are examples of the fact that God delights in these qualities; He demonstrated this by promoting them in the physical realm. Gen. 41:33,39; Dan. 1:4, 2:14
- J. The wisdom and discernment of Abigail protected King David from a rash course of action that would have resulted in a number of deaths. 1Sam. 25:23-35
- K. Another great benefit of discernment is that one can make a distinction between those that give lip-service to God's plan and those that are truly attempting to advance the plan of God. 1Cor. 11:1; 1Thess. 1:6; Heb. 6:12
- L. In that regard, there are categories of doctrine that are not apprehended fully by those that do not exercise sufficient discernment and keep moving toward maturity. Heb. 5:11-14
- M. Those that exercise proper discernment will not be swayed by the plausible rationales of those that espouse some alternate doctrine. Rom. 16:17-18
- N. Biblical discernment will also provide the benefit of distinguishing between a good course of action, a better course of action, and the best course of action. Gen. 29:19; Prov. 12:9, 15:16-17, 16:19; 1Cor. 7:9; 1Thess. 3:1

VII. Hindrances to discernment.

- A. In order to enjoy the full benefits of discernment, a believer must continually practice the act of discernment by disciplining himself to do so. Heb. 5:14
- B. This means that he cannot allow various factors to cloud his judgment and must deal with each situation as it is and not as he might wish it to be. Rom. 9:1-3

- C. In that regard, the doctrine of separation is a critical component of discernment; failure to separate when it becomes necessary is a two-edged sword with potentially catastrophic repercussions.
1. The first side of the sword is that people may not separate from that which they should because they are not willing to exercise the appropriate measure of discernment. Matt. 10:37
 2. The other side of the sword is that once they have refused to separate from that which they should, their discernment may suffer further degradation. Pro. 14:7
- D. Another important issue that must be understood is that a believer must keep his emotions under control; emotional people are not discerning people, and will often make bad decisions based simply on an emotional response. Matt. 17:4, 26:35
- E. Evidences that one is allowing the emotions to affect his discernment include:
1. Rejection of authority. Ex. 15:24, 16:2-3; Num. 12:1-5
 2. Blaming God or others. Ex. 16:7-8; Job 1:22
 3. Lack of faith-rest. Ex. 14:10ff; Num 14:10ff
 4. Maladjusting to your niche, characterized by complaining. Ex. 16:3; Num. 11:1-3,10-15
 5. Continual yearning for the past or future. Ex. 14:12, 16:3; Num. 14:2
 6. Mania or depression, which can produce erratic behavior. Num. 14:1,39,40
 7. Inappropriate loyalty to family or friends over doctrine. Deut. 13:6-9;
 8. Rash actions, without taking the time to think through the action or its potential consequences. Pro. 21:15, 29:20; Eccles. 5:2