

# The Gift of Discernment (4)

**A gifted story:** Karen seems always to ask the most probing questions during Bible study. She looks very deeply into a passage and almost always discovers a new insight. There is always a clear desire to get at the truth or to determine what goodness can be discerned from a passage. We have come to expect special insights from her. If we are at a crossroads as to what course of action to take in the church, her input will be sought. Many in the congregation ask for her advice in their attempt to learn of God's will in particular personal circumstances. Karen has a thirst to discern God's will at all times-- she has the gift of discernment.

## **Biblical references:**

Romans 9:1— *I am speaking the truth; I belong to Christ and I do not lie. My conscience, ruled by the Holy Spirit, also assures me that I am not lying....*

1 Cor. 2:10-13,15— *...it was to us that God made known his secret by means of his Spirit. The Spirit searches everything, even the hidden depths of God's purposes. It is only a person's own spirit within him that knows all about him; in the same way, only God's Spirit knows all about God. We have not received this world's spirit; instead, we have received the Spirit sent by God, so that we may know all that God has given us. So then, **we do not speak in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, as we explain spiritual truths to those who have the Spirit.... Whoever has the Spirit, however, is able to judge the value of everything, but no one is able to judge him.***

1 Cor. 12:10— *The Spirit gives one person the power to work miracles; to another, the gift of speaking God's message; and to yet another, **the ability to tell the difference between gifts that come from the Spirit and those that do not. ....***

## **Definition and comment:**

The gift of Discernment: the special ability that God gives which enables a person to know with assurance whether certain behavior purported to be of God is in reality divine, human, or Satanic. This gift can motivate a believer to seek God's will and purpose and apply that understanding to individual and congregational situations. It provides the ability to distinguish between truth and error, to know when a person or act is of God.

Sometimes the gift of discernment is referred to as "discerning of spirits." That phraseology is certainly most descriptive of situations when the behavior or act could be of evil origin but disguised in such a way that many thought it was good. Jesus warned us to beware of false teachers and prophets, and the gift of discernment plays a critical role in helping the church stay the course of true doctrine in the face of error and untruth. Church members with the gift of discernment are responsible for keeping false teachers and teachings from influencing and possibly perverting the church.

The power of discerning good from evil is present in all mature Christians by virtue of guidance from the Holy Spirit. All Christians should seek to discern truth, and the ability to do so is there when conscience guides the mind. The supernatural ability referred to in this

spiritual gift is simply a heightened and perhaps more critical sense of the same quality. With it comes a boldness to speak out, a willingness to question apparent authority, and a quality of continual evaluation that puts the believer on guard at all times. It is hard for Satan to sneak up on a person with this gift.

Anyone who has this gift has to walk a fine line. They are compelled to expose heresy, false doctrine, and untruths, but they must do so tactfully or lose credibility as an “overzealous heresy headhunter” or simply a highly judgmental person. Care must be exercised to expose untruths with clarity and kindness.

**Affirm that you have this gift; questions to ask yourself:**

Have others in the church noted that you are able to see through phoniness or manipulative behavior before it is evident to other people?

Has your sense that a person’s teaching was from God, Satan or of human origin later been confirmed as correct?

Can you judge between the inadequate and the acceptable, or between evil and good?

Do you see a serious danger when false teachings and false practices creep into the church?

Are you usually aware of people who pretend or who wear masks?

**Areas for study and personal growth:**

Read works that help identify traits of evil and untruth. A classic is C.S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, which exposes many of the cunning methods Satan employs to wend himself into our lives. Study the life of Martin Luther to understand how he came to know he should speak out against the abuses of the church.

Become a scholar in what scripture has to say about discerning good from evil. Nelson’s *Complete Concordance* lists over 600 references to evil—it wouldn’t hurt to read all of them in an effort to hone your sense of awareness and become more alert to evil in the world.

Learn about “watchdog” organizations—those that are dedicated to righting supposed wrongs. Become aware of their tactics as examples for potential use when you need to expose error. In doing so you may uncover certain groups that you will want to support and encourage.

Read and meditate on Bible passages dealing with discernment and false teachings: Eph. 6:12; 2 Cor. 11:13-15; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; 1 John 4:1-3; 1 John 4:6; Matthew 16: 21-23; Acts 5:1-11; Acts 8:20-23; Acts 13:6-12; Acts 16:16-18; Rev. 2:2; Rev. 2:14-15,20.

**General ways to use the gift of discernment:**

Personally: warn friends and family about false teachings and the dangers of some TV programs. Detect wrong motives of deceitful persons, and help others to be aware of con artists and fraud.

Within the church: expose error, evaluate study materials, join a committee; arm others through teaching (see more specific church service opportunities in the Booklet *Channels for Using the Gifts*).

Within the wider community: discern and encounter evil in societal structures; counsel those who are in error or who have failed to recognize the evil of their actions.

**For reflection:**

Anyone with the gift of discernment will know error and evil when confronted with it. To do something about it takes courage. You will become a “whistle-blower” against Satan, and, well, he’s probably not going to like that! Whistle-blowers are never very popular with the folks that did the wrong to begin with. There will be temptations to step back, perhaps to lay low and just “let sleeping dogs lie.” The trouble with that is that the dog is not sleeping, and unless evil is halted when it starts, it has a way of spreading. God knows that, and so he passed out this particular spiritual gift.

Discernment is a pivotal ability. It is a course-changer. Things are going right along, lickity split, (of course, in the wrong direction), and then comes the guy with the gift of discernment with a word of wisdom—“It doesn’t feel right. Something’s wrong here. It smells bad. It’s wrong because...” And the train stops dead in the track. There is a certain authority that comes with this gift that makes the bearer of the gift better able than most to stop the errant train. Then others can step in and re-evaluate, back up and go a better way. This should all be done in a spirit of love and community. And when it happens this way, everyone present will feel it— the warmth of the Holy Spirit. All of a sudden, everything feels right. It is a moment to pause and offer praise.