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West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



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Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

Divisiveness vs. Discernment

Do discernment and divisiveness go hand in hand? Is it true that the term discernment is often employed as a cover for a contentious or critical spirit?

Let's acknowledge that there are unscrupulous people who, under the guise of "*biblical discernment*," engage in unbrotherly criticism. Their tactics often include innuendo, character assassination, guilt by association, and other dishonest methods. They weave conspiracy theories, sensationalize their attacks against others, and favor personal slurs over substantive doctrinal analysis. Militant fundamentalism has made this type of criticism its specialty. As a consequence, that movement has steadily lost its influence, forfeited its credibility, and fragmented into tiny, warring factions. My appeal for discernment is not a call to that sort of factious attitude.

Undoubtedly the prevalence of hypercritical attitudes among some fundamentalists has caused a backlash that has only accelerated the decline of discernment in the church. We rightfully deplore a pugnacious spirit. No true Christian wants to be contentious. No one who has the mind of Christ enjoys conflict. Obviously, harmony is preferable to discord. But when some crucial truth is at stake, how do we display the mind of Christ? Certainly not by allowing the error to go unchallenged. If we truly are to be like our Savior, we must both proclaim truth and condemn error in unambiguous language (see Matthew 23).

That means we must learn to discriminate. In modern usage, the word discrimination carries powerful negative connotations. But the word itself is not negative. Discriminate simply means "to make a clear distinction." We used to call someone "a discriminating person" if he exercised keen judgment. "*Discrimination*" signified a positive ability to draw the line between good and evil, true and false, right and wrong. In the heyday of the American civil-rights movement, the word was widely applied to racial bigotry. And, indeed, people who make unfair distinctions between races are guilty of an evil form of discrimination.

Unfortunately, the word itself took on that negative connotation, and the sinister implication is often transferred to anyone who tries to discriminate in any way. To view homosexuality as immoral (1 Corinthians 6:9–10; 1 Timothy 1:9–10) is condemned now by the politically correct as an unacceptable form of discrimination. To suggest that wives ought to submit to their own husbands (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18) is now classified as unfair discrimination. To suggest that children ought to obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1) is also labeled unjust discrimination by some. We see more and more that anyone who "discriminates" these days risks becoming a target of boycotts, protests, and lawsuits. We are not supposed to draw lines. That is the spirit of this age, and unfortunately, it has crept into the church.

If we are going to be discerning people, we must develop the skill of discriminating between truth and error, good and bad. The original languages of Scripture convey this very idea. The main Hebrew word for "*discernment*" is *bin*. That word and its variants are used hundreds of times in the Old Testament. It is often translated "discernment," "understanding," "skill," or "carefulness." But in the original language it conveys the same idea as our word discrimination. It entails the idea of making distinctions.



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Jay Adams points out that the word *bin* “is related to the noun *bayin*, which means ‘interval’ or ‘space between,’ and the preposition *ben*, ‘between.’ In essence it means to separate things from one another at their points of difference in order to distinguish them.” Discernment, then, is a synonym for discrimination. In fact, the Greek verb translated “discern” in the New Testament is *diakrinō*. It means “to make a distinction” and is translated that way in Acts 15:9.

So discernment is the process of making careful distinctions in our thinking about truth. The discerning person is the one who draws a clear contrast between truth and error. Discernment is black-and-white thinking—the conscious refusal to color every issue in shades of gray. No one can be truly discerning without developing skill in separating divine truth from error.

Does Scripture tell us how to be discerning? It certainly does. Paul sums up the process in 1 Thessalonians 5:21–22: “*Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.*” There, in three straightforward commands, he spells out the requirements of a discerning mind. ~ **Dr. John MacArthur**

How to Develop your Spiritual Discernment

We carry the world in our pocket. From international news agencies to social media platforms, we’re endlessly besieged with bytes of stories, political commentary, cultural opinion, conspiracies, blogs, and the ever-maddening notification ping of breaking news. A staggering 3.5 billion people on our planet have been identified as users and consumers of this assortment of media. In fact, most of us will spend an average of three hours every day engaging with this unrelenting barrage of information.

Over the past several months, we’ve seen how quickly news and social media can elicit fear, provoke anger, and fuel movements. This information overload is sometimes more than we can bear and has sent believers and unbelievers alike spiraling into despair and hopelessness as we’re simply trying to discern what to believe.

Throughout Scripture, believers are repeatedly cautioned to maintain a sharpened awareness of the difference between truth and error. Paul implored the Thessalonian church: “*Test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil*” (1 Thessalonians 5:21–22). Similarly, Paul encouraged the Ephesians to “*try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them*” (Ephesians 5:10–11). Therefore, spiritual discernment is not optional for the believer but is a clearly commanded necessity for proper Christian living. However, many believers have never been adequately instructed regarding how to develop truly biblical spiritual discernment. Such instruction is vital in the information surplus of our day.

Desire Wisdom

Our desire for spiritual discernment is directly related, at a deeper level, to our desire for wisdom. This type of wisdom is to be searched for, longed for, and pursued by every believer. In the opening sentence of his Institutes of the Christian Religion, John Calvin said, “*Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.*”



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Calvin reminds us that to receive true wisdom, and therefore the spiritual ability to discern, begins with a right knowledge of our Creator. No doubt he would have had Proverbs 9:10 in mind: *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”*. The current inability to determine truth from error finds its origin in a fundamental lack of understanding of the holiness and glory of the triune God and the sinful depravity of man.

Like a father speaking to his son, the writer of Proverbs implores, *“If you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God”* (Proverbs 2:3–5). Wisdom is more important than finding buried treasure and should be sought after with greater vehemence than all the fine jewels in the earth (Matthew 13:44–45). For at its heart is the treasure of God Himself and without Him we fail miserably at discerning the *“the god of this world”* (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Know Truth

In an age of scrutinizing everything as *“fake news,”* truth seems a rare commodity. A second characteristic for one who desires proper spiritual discernment is to know the truth. In other words, everything we analyze must be viewed through the lens of truth—God’s Word. Paul instructed young Timothy to *“guard the deposit entrusted to you”* (1 Timothy 6:20) and *“follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you”* (2 Timothy 1:13–14). Paul uses military language here to heighten the importance of what has been given to our charge. Every believer is called to know the truth of God’s Word to such a degree that we maintain a defensive position against everything that undermines His truth or seeks to violate it in any way.

Any survey of believers makes it devastatingly obvious that many do not know the truth and therefore are defenseless against the increasing onslaught of error. One way to correct this deficiency is to examine our daily intake of Scripture. Are you filling your mind and heart with God’s Word to such a degree that it begins to spring to remembrance as you scroll through social media or turn on the news? Is your first reaction fear, dread, and hopelessness, or is your first reaction the calm reassurance of our Lord: *“Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid”* (John 14:27)? Knowing the truth sets us free from the shackles of worldly virtues and unburdens us to enjoy the glorious guarantee that God is sovereign and controls all things. The truth that has been *“entrusted”* to us must be known, both in mind and heart, in order to be spiritually discerning in an age of error.

Test Everything

A third component in growing our spiritual discernment is to learn to test everything. Combating issues of falsehood and error within the church, John gives clear instruction to his readers in 1 John 4:1: *“Test the spirits.”* The word test is a fascinating word in the New Testament and comes from the word that means *“the testing of the strength of metal.”* In other words, this type of discernable testing requires fire—the fire of our knowledge of God and the knowledge of His Word. If we’re driven by a yearning for cultural acceptance or a comfortable go-along-to-get-along attitude, we will never be discerning people. Never subjugate your minds to the media of this age and blindly be led in paths laid for us by the enemy of our souls.



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How to Develop your Spiritual Discernment *Continued from Page 3*

Dr. John MacArthur aptly said, “*Unless we are willing to examine all things carefully, we cannot hope to have any defense against reckless faith.*” Only in careful scrutiny will we be able to discern light from darkness.

Our growth in spiritual discernment depends on our desire for wisdom, knowledge of the truth, and a willingness to test absolutely everything through the lens of that wisdom and truth. So, the next time you begin to scroll through myriads of bits of information, your growth in discernment will determine if your hope is anchored in the solid rock of Christ or the shifting sand of this world. ~ *Dr. Dustin W. Bengé/Provost and professor at Union School of Theology in Bridgend, Wales*

What Is the Patriarchal Blessing?

Christians sometimes struggle to discern whether some aspect of an Old Testament narrative is merely descriptive of a historical event in the life of the biblical character or whether it has theological meaning for us today. Such has been the case with the patriarchal blessings in Genesis 27:26–29 and 48:1–49:28. Some religious groups have perverted the meaning of these unique redemptive-historical events. For instance, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints adheres to a ritual of patriarchal blessing that is equivalent to fortune telling. Each Mormon receives a blessing from his or her bishop that “contains personal revelation and instructions from Heavenly Father.” Mormon “patriarchal blessings” are deeply legalistic and superstitious. Sadly, many Mormons have lamented making major life decisions based on the personal “blessing” they received. Unlike such self-referential and superstitious incantations, the patriarchal blessings in the book of Genesis are covenant blessings in redemptive history; therefore, they anticipate the fulfillment of the spiritual blessings in the coming of the promised Redeemer, Jesus Christ. A consideration of the New Testament’s teaching about them will help us understand their place in redemptive history.

As Isaac and Jacob came to the end of their lives, they pronounced blessings over their children. In Genesis 27:27–29, Isaac pronounced a divine blessing on Jacob with language reminiscent of the language of the blessing God proclaimed to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3). Jacob, in turn, pronounced divine blessings on each of his grandsons (Genesis 48) and sons (Genesis 49:1–28). The dying blessings of Isaac and Jacob find their way into the pages of the New Testament, when the writer of Hebrews explains: “By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff” (Hebrews 11:20–21). The writer of Hebrews sees in the patriarchal blessings an act of faith.

Every act of faith is built on the previous word and promises of God. Isaac and Jacob were pronouncing covenant blessings in light of the previous promises God made to Abraham. Jacob’s blessing his sons and the sons of Joseph “by faith” is particularly instructive. Here, at the end of a difficult and challenging life, Jacob continues to cling to the covenant promises of God. As John Owen explained, “Notwithstanding all the trials and conflicts which he had met withal, with the weaknesses and disconsolations of old age, he abode firm in faith.” What enabled Jacob to hold on to the promises despite the trials and tribulations he experienced throughout his life was his expectation of God’s fulfillment of the promises He gave to Abraham.



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What Is the Patriarchal Blessing?

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The gospel is the foundation of the patriarchal blessings. Isaac and Jacob believed the promises of God regarding the coming Redeemer and His redemptive blessings when they pronounced their blessings on their children. There would be no way to make sense of these patriarchal blessings if we detached them from the person and saving work of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, Jesus pronounced the ultimate patriarchal blessing on His disciples as He went to lay down His life for His people. In his Notes on Scripture, Jonathan Edwards tied the dying blessings of Isaac and Jacob to Christ's promise to send the Holy Spirit to His people as He also approached His death. Edwards wrote:

Isaac's and Jacob's blessing their children before their death, and, as it were, making over to them their future inheritance, may probably be typical of our receiving the blessings of the Covenant of Grace from Christ, as by His last will and testament, the final [administration of the] Covenant of Grace represented as His testament. Christ in the 14th, 15th and 16th chapters of John, does as it were make His will, and conveys to His people their inheritance before His death, [in] particular the Comforter, or the Holy Spirit, which is the sum of the purchased inheritance.

Scripture teaches that Jesus has fulfilled all the covenant promises by His death and resurrection (2 Corinthians 1:20). He has secured the everlasting inheritance promised to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3; Matthew 5:5; Romans 4:13). The Apostle Paul makes clear that believers are co-heirs with Abraham on account of the finished work of Christ (Galatians 3:8, 9, 14, 29). Jesus secured the new heavens and new earth for those who would believe in Him (Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:5). Christ purchased the Holy Spirit for His people when He hung on the cross. The Spirit is everywhere called "the promise" in the Bible (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4; 2:33, 39; Galatians 3:14; Ephesians 1:13; 3:6), since Christ promised to send Him to His people as the guarantee of their inheritance (Ephesians 1:11–14). Accordingly, each and every true believer has been blessed "with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). There is no greater or more personally meaningful blessing than that which Christ has already bestowed on His people. May God give us the grace to meditate on that blessing continually and live joyfully in light of it all the days of our lives. ~ *Reverend Nicholas T. Batzig - Senior pastor of Church Creek PCA in Charleston, S.C., and an associate editor for Ligonier Ministries.*

What Does "Give Us this Day Our Daily Bread" Mean?

Jesus teaches us to pray that God would give us daily bread (Matthew 6:11). Obviously Jesus was not telling His disciples to pray only for bread. But bread was a staple in the diet of the Jews, and had been so for many years. Furthermore, bread was a powerful symbol of God's provision for His people in the Old Testament. We remember how God cared for the Israelites when they were in the wilderness after their exodus from Egypt. Life in the wilderness was hard, and soon the people began to complain that it would be better to be back in Egypt, where they had wonderful food to eat. In response to these complaints, God promised to "rain bread from heaven" (Exodus 16:4). The next morning, when the dew lifted, there remained behind on the ground "a small round substance, as fine as frost. . . . It was like white coriander seed, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey" (vv. 14, 31). When God miraculously fed His people from heaven, he did so by giving them bread.



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What Does "Give Us this Day Our Daily Bread" Mean?

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It's interesting to me that in the language of Western culture, we sometimes speak of one partner in a marriage (it used to be almost exclusively the husband, but not so much these days) as the wage earner of the home. But more colloquially, we call that partner "the breadwinner." Even in our slang, we use the word bread as a synonym for "money." Bread remains, at least in our language, as a powerful symbol of the rudimentary basis of provision for our needs.

After the Korean War ended, South Korea was left with a large number of children who had been orphaned by the war. We've seen the same thing in the Vietnam conflict, in Bosnia, and in other places. In the case of Korea, relief agencies came in to deal with all the problems that arose in connection with having so many orphan children. One of the people involved in this relief effort told me about a problem they encountered with the children who were in the orphanages. Even though the children had three meals a day provided for them, they were restless and anxious at night and had difficulty sleeping. As they talked to the children, they soon discovered that the children had great anxiety about whether they would have food the next day. To help resolve this problem, the relief workers in one particular orphanage decided that each night when the children were put to bed, the nurses there would place a single piece of bread in each child's hand. The bread wasn't intended to be eaten; it was simply intended to be held by the children as they went to sleep. It was a "security blanket" for them, reminding them that there would be provision for their daily needs. Sure enough, the bread calmed the children's anxieties and helped them sleep. Likewise, we take comfort in knowing that our physical needs are met, that we have food, or "bread," for our needs.

This petition of the Lord's Prayer, then, teaches us to come to God in a spirit of humble dependence, asking Him to provide what we need and to sustain us from day to day. We are not given license to ask for great riches, but we are encouraged to make our needs known to Him, trusting that He will provide.

If we find that God's hand seems to be invisible to us and that we cannot discern His providential intrusion into our lives, that may be due partly to the way we pray. We have a tendency to pray in general. When we pray in general, the only way we will see the hand of God's providence is in general. As we enter into prayer, this conversation and communion with God, and put our petitions before Him, pouring out our souls and our needs specifically, we see specific answers to our prayers. Our Father has invited us to go to Him and ask Him for our daily bread. He will not fail to provide it.

When a Christian prays, does it make any difference? Does it change anything? Though our prayers do not change God's mind, He ordains prayer as a means to accomplish His will. We can be confident that prayer does change things—including our own hearts. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



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If you have an November birthday or anniversary that is not posted here or is listed in error, please e-mail Walt at gwlcf10415@gmail.com.

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner November 2021

Birthdays

*Brenda A. (1)
Conley L. (1)
Diana K. (3)
Abigail W. (7)
LeAnn M. (10)
Audrey D. (11)*

*Luke P. (15)
Malcolm H. (19)
Walt L. (20)
Althea Marie F. (21)
Jesse W. (29)*

Anniversaries

*Gene and Brenda A. (22)
Marlin and Sadie H. (22)*

Saving faith is not just believing that Jesus lived and died. Faith that saves is the confident, continuous confession of total dependence on, and trust in Jesus Christ to meet the requirements on your behalf to give you entrance into God's Eternal Kingdom. It's the surrender of your life in complete trust to Him to do what you cannot do.



*West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership*

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Please submit information to the editor by the second Sunday of each month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.

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