

Discernment in the Church

by Vance Havner

The Church today lacks discernment, which is necessary for understanding spiritual truth and making wise decisions.

Duration: 25:18

Scripture: Isaiah 29:13, John 3:3, Romans 8:8, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 1 Corinthians 2:14, Ephesians 5:8, Colossians 3:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, Hebrews 5:14, James 1:5

Topics: "Spiritual Discernment", "True Worship"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of spiritual discernment in a time of confusion and uncertainty within the Church. It contrasts the clear, unwavering beliefs of past leaders like Spurgeon with the current trend of ambiguity and compromise. The speaker highlights the need for believers to have discernment to distinguish truth from falsehood, to understand the times, and to recognize the spirits at work. The sermon also addresses the shallowness of worship, the danger of idol worship, and the necessity of being spiritually reborn to truly grasp divine truth.

Transcript

In all these years I have never seen such bewilderment and confusion and uncertainty as plagues the Church today, even evangelical Christianity. I have never seen so many preachers and Christians in general shaking their heads and wringing their hands and saying, I don't know what to think about this, and I don't know what to think about that, I can't make up my mind about this or that, I can't decide what's true and what's false. We've developed a tolerance and a permissiveness and an acceptance and an acquiescence that was unthinkable only a few years ago.

England's great preacher Joseph Parker said this about another of England's great preachers, his contemporary Spurgeon. The only colors that Mr. Spurgeon knew were black and white. With Mr. Spurgeon you were either up or down, in or out, alive or dead.

As for middle zones and graded lines of light compounded with shadow, in a graceful exercise of give and take, he only looked on them as heterodoxy and the implacable enemies of the metropolitan tabernacle. Mr. Spurgeon knew what he believed. But today, in this lay of the sea and age, we are neither cold nor hot, and don't forget that the Lord said, I'd rather you be cold than warm.

I can understand why he said, I'd rather you be hot, but he said, I'd rather you be a cold Christian than a warm Christian, I'd rather you be a cold church than a warm church. We've been brainwashed into a pleasant and middle-of-the-roadism, trying to be neither nor in a day that's either or. The middle of the road is a poor place to drive, it's a poor place to walk, it's a poor place to live.

We've had two wars lately that we neither won nor lost. Paul Harvey said we were afraid to win them and ashamed to lose them. It's about the truth of it.

But Douglas MacArthur stood in Congress and said, in war there is no substitute for victory. There is no such thing as peaceful coexistence with Communism or the Devil, because Communism is moral cancer, and there is no such thing as peaceful coexistence with cancer. If you don't get the cancer, the cancer will get you.

We hear a lot today about right-wingers and left-wingers, but that great black preacher out in Los Angeles, Dr. Hill, said, I don't belong to the right-wing or the left-wing, they're both flapping on the same old bird. And my Lord said in Matthew 12, he that is not with me is against me, and he that gathereth not with me scattereth above. That just leaves two kinds of folks, as far as I can see.

We ought to know where we stand. We are not of the night nor of darkness. We have the Bible, we have the Holy Spirit, we have the testimony of the Church, we have the witness of history, and I hope we have sanctified common sense.

And if we don't know, who does? There are too many Jehoshaphats today who are lined up with Ahab on these silly expeditions to Ramoth, Gilead, and 400 prophets saying, Go up and prosper. Where is old Micah, the lone dissenter, the oddball, Joseph Parker, who said, This world always hates the 401st prophet. He was number 401, and he didn't go over so well with that crowd.

I don't see any prophet today on the horizon. I see pastors, teachers and evangelists, but no prophets. These confederates of Ahab were not quislings.

Jehoshaphat wasn't a quisling, he wasn't a bad man, he was a good man, but he was mistaken in his confederacies. The most charitable thing one can say about some of the Brethren today is, they have no vision, they can't see through the fog. And they lack a very rare ingredient that I want to talk about these five evenings or five meetings, if I can stay here, discernment.

Discernment is mentioned five times in the New Testament. The word discern is half-brother to several other words, distinguish, differentiate, discriminate, they all mean about the same thing. And we've never had so little of discernment, and I'm concerned for good and sometimes prominent people who, for lack of it, don't know where they are.

Some humble, plain soul may have it, while some prominent churchman may miss it. You remember when Paul started on his voyage to Rome, he said, We're in for trouble, but the captain of the ship said, Everything is going to be all right. They listened to the mariner instead of the minister and sailed away to shipwreck.

They listened to the skipper instead of to the seer, and that's what people are doing today. Paul said, I perceive, but it says here, they presume. There's a lot of difference between the prophet who perceives and knows what time it is, and the people.

And usually they are the majority, because it says, the moor part said, Let's get going, and they went and sailed away to shipwreck, because the south wind blew softly. And there's a soft south wind today blowing that deceives a lot of dear people. Discernment is just about the scarcest commodity in the Church today, and yet the scripture gives it high priority.

Tonight we'll think about the first one, 1 Corinthians 2.14, you know it well. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned, discerning the truth. Tomorrow night we'll talk about God willing discerning the times, and then discerning the spirits, and then discerning the Lord's body, and then discerning good and evil.

Tonight discerning the truth. And this verse means the sons of Adam just cannot lay hold of the truth of God, no matter how high his intellectual status may be and his moral qualifications, he cannot comprehend divine truth. You might as well try to describe a sunset to a blind man or play music for a deaf man, as to talk about the deep things of God to a man who never has been born again.

That was the trouble with Nicodemus, he was a religious teacher, but he was ignorant of the kingdom of God and impotent to enter into it. You might as well talk nuclear physics with a wooden Indian in front of a cigar store, as to try to discuss spiritual things with the natural man. It's throwing holy things to dogs and pearls before swine.

Being a Ph.D. doesn't improve your chances at all to comprehend the things of God. Because unless you have been touched from above, Ph.D. can only mean phenomenal dirt, as far as this is concerned. After all, what people need today is not light, they need sight.

All the light in the world won't help a blind man. A blind man doesn't need light. He needs to see the light, but he won't do that until he has sight.

Know how ignorant people are of that simple fact. It's so difficult for us pompous Americans so proud of our learning to believe that the commonest day laborer may apprehend divine truth while some of the literati may miss it altogether. Haven't you heard sometimes some humble preacher with a limited library preach nuggets of truth and gospel gems while some scholar missed it a mile? Now, if the little preacher had the scholar's library and the scholar had the little preacher's discernment, they'd really be in business.

Blessed is the preacher who has both of them. Discernment is as important in hearing the truth as it is in preaching it, because it's not only important what we hear, it's how we hear it. I can't understand why some dear people can listen for 25 years to sound preaching and the next preacher who comes along may be a liberal, and they listen with equal satisfaction.

I don't know what they've been doing with their ears. They don't have ears to hear, most assuredly. As long as the minister makes some nice reference to Jesus, they know no difference.

It's lack of discernment. There's a preparation for the sermon as well as of the sermon. Wherefore, lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word which is able to save your souls.

Everybody expects the preacher to be ready to preach. How many people ever think of the congregation's responsibility to be ready to hear the preaching? And that devours upon us. And then think how little discernment we have in our singing.

I've shuddered sometimes watching a congregation of comfortable Americans on Sunday morning singing to the old rugged cross. I'll ever be true, it's shame and reproach gladly bear. Some of them haven't borne it any kind of way, let alone gladly.

And I've heard them sing, faith of our fathers, on Sunday morning, we will be true to thee till death, most of them are not true enough to get back to the evening service. My Jesus, I love thee, I know thou art mine, for thee all the follies of sin I resign. They haven't resigned any of them, don't intend to.

I thought a while ago when you were singing, we're marching to Zion. I heard that one for years before I ever woke up to one of the verses, we're usually unconscious when we sing. Do you know that a while ago you were, or did you sing it, I don't know whether you sang all the verses or not, but that blessed one, the hill of Zion, yields a thousand sacred sweets before we reach the heavenly fields or walk the golden streets.

You know what you were saying? I can taste heaven before I get there. I can have a little foretaste of it now. That's what Fanny Crosby meant when she said, Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine.

Oh, what a foretaste! That's tasting the powers of the age to come, as Hebrews says. You know what Watchman Nee says about that. That jumped out of the page and grabbed me several years ago.

Tasting the powers of the age to come, I can do it now. And yet I wonder how many ever realize when they sing that precious verse what they are saying. If we discern the meaning of what we sing in Rolanos, some of us couldn't make it through the 2nd verse, and some of us would choke before we got to the chorus.

I will sing with the Spirit, I will sing with the understanding also. And oh, the superficiality of our dedication. I tell my crowd, I'm a Southern Baptist, and I tell them I think we Southern Baptists have rededicated ourselves to death.

We've gone down more church aisles and made God more promises and done less about it, and your crowd has done the same thing. We've never had more members of the old Adam Improvement Society than we have today. Having begun in the Spirit, we would make ourselves perfect in the flesh.

And people who have never died to sin or risen to walk in newness of life march down church aisles, old Adam rededicating himself, and God couldn't use old Adam if he did it ten thousand times. They that are in the flesh cannot please God. That verse ought to be hung up in every church of America.

You simply can't please God in the flesh. And why does the Bible say that God has not chosen many wise, mighty and noble? That no flesh should glory in his presence. The Bible says there are four kinds of people who just aren't going to heaven in big numbers, the rich, the wise, the mighty and the noble.

Jesus said not many rich people would make it, because money is dangerous. Money is the most dangerous thing on earth. I think it's more dangerous than liquor or sex or anything else.

The love of money is the root of all evil. You say, well, that says the love of money. Yes, but if you didn't have the money, you wouldn't have the love of money.

It's a dangerous thing, and it's pretty hard for a rich man to get to heaven. And then the wise, the intellectuals, they're trying to get their head first and you get their heart first. And the only thing I know of

that's got its head and heart in the same place is cabbage, and you're no cabbage.

You've got the heart first. Then I read that not many mighty. How many Presidents of the United States can you think of that you believe were born again, spirit-filled, New Testament Christians? It's pretty discouraging.

And not many noble. That's the blue-bloods, the aristocrats, always bragging about their ancestry. You know, the best thing about this ancestry business could be like sweet potatoes, the best part is usually under the ground.

That won't take you there, either. God doesn't accept old Adam, though he dedicated himself a thousand times. Old Adam was crucified, we died, and our lives are hid with Christ in God, and we're to put on the new man.

Neither the natural nor the carnal man can glorify God. You remember Ezekiel, the vision of that valley of dry bones. Sometimes on Sunday morning, menu service, the first thing I can think of is, I look over the crowd, I hear that old verse, Can these dry bones live? Did you ever go to a dry bones convention, where they had the newest methods for reorganizing dry bones, old dead Church members, pretty little designs for rearranging.

They have specialists, jawbone specialists, collarbone specialists, kneebone specialists, rearranging all these old dry bones. But there's no meat in them, there's no breath in them. And then over there in Exodus 30, there were three restrictions on the anointing oil for the high priest.

Upon man's flesh it shall not be poured. You cannot anoint old Adam for the service of God. In the second place, there was to be no imitation, because you cannot compound the anointing oil of God in any apothecary shop of this world.

You can't function without unction. They used to call it unction, I don't hear that word much anymore. But the preacher who tries to function without unction will spend all his time taxiing down to the runway and never take off, never get anywhere.

And then you don't put any of it on a stranger, somebody who doesn't belong to the fellowship of the believers. Paul says that spiritual truth is foolishness to the natural man, and the Word is the one from which we get more on. It's moronic to the old Adam, for he doesn't have any discernment.

He may be able to discuss good poetry and he may understand chemical solutions and the answers to the problems in big business, and he may know how to locate bugs in engineering, but such ability is of no value in comprehending the things of God. We're suffering from an awful ignorance of divine truth, because there's another kind of discernment. You don't get it in the university.

You pray it down. James said that if you lack wisdom, not knowledge, if you want knowledge, go to school, but if you lack wisdom, get on your knees and let him ask of God. You don't get wisdom in school, you get knowledge.

Wisdom is the proper use of knowledge, yes. If you need wisdom, it comes down like everything else that God ever sends. The Savior came down, the Holy Spirit came down, every good and perfect gift comes down, and a new Jerusalem comes down.

God deals from above. And if you need wisdom, get on your knees. Let him ask in faith, nothing wavering, and you'll get it.

And oh, the shallowness of our worship! In vain do they worship me, Jesus said to the Pharisees. I was brought up on that old song, all is vain. Brethren, we have met to worship and adore the Lord our God.

Won't you pray while we preach the word, all is vain, unless the Spirit of the Holy One come down. I don't believe that idol worship in Africa is any worse than I.D.L.E., idol worship in America. Isaiah thundered against it in the 1st chapter, made fun of their religious observances, their vain oblations where they put their money on the plate but never gave God themselves.

And Amos went up to Bethel, that country preacher, and in satire and scorn, said, Come to Bethel and transgress, and at Gilgal multiply transgression. Bring your tithes and your offerings, this you like to do. Many a Sunday morning sermon is an exercise in futility, because he is preaching to natural and carnal people who hear and hear not.

You can hear and not hear both at the same time. It says so. Hearing they hear not.

They hear vocal sounds emanating from the pulpit, but they don't have ears to hear because they don't have discernment. You might as well try to catch sunbeams with a fishhook, as to try to lay hold of the truth of God with the faculties of the old Adam. Have you ever noticed that in Colossians, when you get to the 3rd chapter, it starts with If, and all the rest of Colossians is for folks who can pass that first If, if ye then be risen with Christ.

Now, listen to what I'm going to say, if I will say it. There is no use to a sinner reading from Colossians 3 on, because it's for folks who are risen with Christ. You can't be born again but by the Holy Spirit, you can't confess Jesus as Lord but by the Holy Spirit, you can't understand the Bible but by the Holy Spirit, you can't worship but by the Spirit, you can't serve God but by the Spirit.

The old-time religion is not a do-it-yourself religion. It's message is spiritually discerned, and it's still foolishness and nonsense to this world. They tell us preachers today that we ought to get with it and we ought to change our terminology and use the lingo of today.

So we're trying to be relevant and contemporary, and we are dialoguing now. And we're studying the spectrum and communicating in the lingo of all these modern Areopagites. What difference does it make what you call it? It used to be itch and now it's allergy, but you scratch just the same.

Then there's the notion that we must make the gospel acceptable to the wisdom of this world. You can't do that. The Bible plainly says it's nonsense to this world.

It's moronic to this world. And it was a long time ago that a great old Saint said, get it, if the preaching of the cross is to this world foolishness, that of necessity makes the preachers of the cross to this world fools. Think that one over.

If you're preaching something that's foolishness to them, that makes you a fool to them. There aren't but two kinds of fools anyhow. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and fools, for Christ's sake, take your pick.

I think about that half-wit that had more sense than some whole-wits going down the street with a sign in front of him, I'm a fool for Jesus. When he got by, he had another sign on his back, Whose fool are you? That's a good question. When Billy Graham was at Princeton some years ago, somebody criticized him and said that he did not sufficiently relate the ambiguities of the New Testament to the complexities of modern life.

I found it very smart that Peter Marshall, a young Peter Marshall, the son of the famous Washington preacher, said they could have said that about Peter and John. They could have said, What do those fishermen know about the problems of the Roman Empire? What would they know about Greek philosophy? Paul was educated, but he counted it all but refuse. He thought out his message in Arabia, set it down in Romans, and it contradicts the wisdom of man in every verse.

He never went back to Athens, he didn't have any time to waste on those folks who grinned at him and said, Well, that was very nice, maybe we'll hear you again sometime. All they wanted was to hear the latest new thing. They called him a seed-picker.

That's what the word means. He wasn't a cotton-picking preacher, he was a seed-picking preacher. They said, Oh, this seed-picker.

He never went back. But he went back to Lystra, where they dragged another town dead. He didn't have time to waste on Athens, but he went back to Lystra.

If you've ever ridden along the road from Athens to Corinth, down by the Aegean, lined with the oleanders and the vineyards and the orchards, you must have wondered how Paul made that trip. He didn't make it like you made it in an air-conditioned coach, most likely. But it was more than a journey between two points on a map.

Whatever you think about the speech he made in Athens, I know one thing. When he got to Corinth, he was committed to only one message, and that was Christ and him crucified, the foolishness of God. Some preachers have never made that trip from Athens to Corinth.

They are still trying to please the intellectuals of Athens, blowing a fuse, trying to be high-brows, trying to dress up the foolishness of God in the wisdom of man, and trying to fortify the weakness of God with the power of man, trying to modernize religion and give Jesus a new look. We're trying to dress up something that doesn't need dressing up today. You don't have to dress up the old-time faith, it will take care of itself.

No matter how you say it, a natural man as such cannot receive it, for spiritual truth is spiritually discerned, but everyone that believes in him, it is the power of God and the salvation. I don't believe you can get this many people together without somebody in the crowd who may still be trying to apprehend spiritual truth of the faculties that you were born with, and you can't do it. You may have trained those faculties very well at school and have a high I.Q. and all the rest of it, but you are absolutely helpless to discern the things of God with that equipment.

Now, don't come up and argue about it, because what you need is not more light, you need sight. When you are born again by faith in Jesus Christ, that's the eye-opener. You see what you never could have seen before because you have been blind, and you begin to live what you never lived before because you were dead.

The natural man can't take it in, so don't bother trying. There's no use arguing with the fellow beyond getting to the new birth, because anything beyond that, he doesn't know what he's talking about anyhow. It could be here tonight that there is somebody who has just that trouble, and you are trying to figure out all these things from the standpoint of old Adam, and old Adam can't figure it out.

Whenever you find out that old Adam died and was buried with Jesus Christ, and when Jesus came up he started a new race and he is the Adam of that new race, and when you join that new race, as many as received him, to them gave ye power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe in his name ye will understand him. It's quite possible that you could come to Ben Lippin and be in that predicament. And if so, I pray that you may humble yourself as a little child and let God open your eyes and by regeneration give you the faculty of perceiving what you never could lay hold of otherwise.

Our Father, we thank thee that we have not been left in this world without the necessary equipment for laying hold of divine truth, but we get it from thee, for thou take what we have tried to say tonight and show us that the natural man can't take it in. And if there is anybody here still in the old Adam trying to take it in, trying to apprehend, trying to comprehend, bring them to the point where they, by the miracle of the new birth, are given the faculty, the ability to lay hold of the things of God.

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