

Clearness Committee

This Quaker practice involves asking 3 or 4 people who know and love you to serve you over a period of weeks in your discernment. They don't make decisions or even advise you; they have to resist that temptation, which is why they need to be mature. They pray, listen, and ask probing questions, not giving suggestions or advocating a particular solution. As you consider together, clarity is expected.

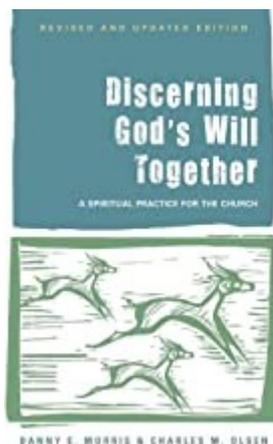
Wheat and Tares

Another metaphor for discernment is that of sowing a field of grain. The seed is selected - that means having clarity about the territory for discernment. The soil is prepared and the seed is planted - processes of establishing guiding principles, relinquishing our own pride and prejudice, and grounding in Scripture or Tradition come in to the picture. The cultivating activities include listening to self and others, exploring options, and working on each option to improve it. The parable of the wheat and tares (Matthew 13: 24ff) is helpful here; as we consider possibilities, there will be wheat and weeds growing alongside each other. They don't have to be sorted out at the beginning. Then comes the harvesting and winnowing, throwing the seed into the air so that the wind can blow away the chaff. The good seed will be sorted out and we can rest. Good things take time.

References:

1. Discerning God's Will Together: a spiritual practice for the church *Danny Morris and Charles Olsen* (Alban Institute 2012). *(Much of this booklet has come from these authors.)*
2. Danny Morris in DGWT page 9
3. Wishful Thinking *Fredrick Buechner* (Harper One, 1993)
4. Sleeping with Bread *D, SF and M Linn*, (Paulist Press 1994)

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Spiritual Practice Sixteen



Discernment

(Part One: Individual)

God has made us what we are.
In Christ Jesus, God made us to do good works,
which God planned in advance for us to live our lives doing.
Eph 2: 10 NCV

“Practice” means the repeated performance of a task or action regularly over time. A spiritual practice is exactly what the word suggests, a way to be deliberate about matters of the soul.

“A godshaped life is a flourishing tree” Prov 11: 28

Introduction

The word discernment has come back into the spiritual lexicon. Although it has an ancient Biblical and monastic history, modern life decisions are often made using business, educational or emotional paradigms. But for 300 years the Quakers have known that discovering God's will for an individual or a faith community can be a spiritual experience, a prayer practice that brings hope and joy.

To discern means:

- to separate or distinguish
- to test in crisis or distinguish good and evil
- to find the authentic and valuable and to recognise the counterfeit
- to see to the heart of the matter
- to locate the immediate and particular ways within a vision of the broad and distant landscape (*to see the trees in the forest*)
- to possess immediate and direct insight

“Spiritual discernment makes operational our faith that an ever-present guide is present to lead us in the way of truth and love as individuals and congregations. It opens our sails ... to the spirit whose winds we believe are always blowing and will always move us closer to Christ, closer to one another and closer to the world that God wills.”

(Alistair McIntyre from *After Virtue*,
cited in *Discerning God's Will Together*.¹)

Biblical Paradigms



The Bible portrays YHWH's abiding presence and concern, and cites various ways God engages the hearing, sight, speech, imagination and minds of those Hebrews who would know his will. Jesus and the apostles sought God's will and experienced the leading of the Holy Spirit into 'what seemed good.'

In the past wise Christians - monks and saints, reformers and nonconformists - developed ways of seeking God's intent. Some of their approaches were sourced in Roman Senates and English parliaments rather than from mystics and God-given imagination, but the Covenant promise is always that God is present and self-disclosing, and guides us by His Spirit.

Reluctance to ask the God questions

Remember the song - *Please don't send me to Africa!* Sometimes people are afraid of God's will. They fear that if God's will is done, it will be hard, it will hurt, they will be unhappy. They worry that God's will is about asking them to do impossible tasks. An uneasy feeling lingers - don't get too close to God - its not safe. But the God questions may be the most important questions a human can ask. Discovering God's yearning for us will take into account the uniqueness of how he has made us.

“For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.” (Ephesians 2: 10)

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” (Frederick Buechner³).

Consolation and Desolation

The Jesuit notions of Consolation and Desolation come from the spiritual practice of Examen, another ancient discipline that many today find helpful for spiritual growth. The Examen is what changed St Ignatius of Loyola (1491 - 1566) from a wild soldier to a pilgrim walking barefoot to Jerusalem. He expected that God would speak through his deepest feelings and yearnings, what he called the “consolation” and “desolation” experiences⁴. Today we might say highs and lows, but Jesuits define consolation as whatever helps us connect with ourselves, God and others. Desolation is what disconnects us. The Examen is a daily prayer of reflection intended to help us decide how and where to pursue joy, to seek life. Depending on your temperament, it could have a role in discernment.

Posture

- We need to be willing to change our hearts
- We need to be open to the gifts of the Spirit
- We need to be ready to seek again, and again; it's ongoing.



Further Thoughts

Being and Doing

The practical tools for discernment can be seen as related to both Being and Doing. Being is knowing who you are in God, trusting that God loves you and has good intentions for your future (Jer 29: 11) Doing includes processes and practices. They are meant to be used in a creative mix that is adaptable to different contexts. GK Chesterton's metaphor of a fenced playground is more appropriate than that of one straight road from which you can easily stray.

Not Withheld

God doesn't withhold grace, play silly games or tease us to test our faithfulness or worthiness to be trusted. God's will is



not static or set in stone. We do not have to sneak up on God or decode a riddle. God is a God who speaks and doing God's will is living fully in a profoundly personal and fulfilling relationship of grace. That means discerning his intention is not mechanical or even linear.

Places of Discernment

There are three places of prayer and worship mentioned in the New Testament, particularly in Acts 2: 46 and Matthew 6: 6. The 'closet' (inner room, secluded place) offers quiet space to listen for the voice of God. The 'home/house' represents a small community in which people know one another's names and stories, and where people trust one another with their spiritual journey. The 'temple/sanctuary' is where we go to act out the drama of grace and remind ourselves of God's mercy and mystery. All three can be places of discernment, though a group discernment will have a different trajectory because of the need to reach agreement, or at least a willingness to go forward in a certain direction. Part Two of this Spiritual Practice guide is aimed at discernment in a faith community.



Purpose

Why would we want to exercise discernment? Because we want to understand and obey God's will. God is revealed in Scripture and History, and in the character of Jesus the Word. But such wisdom is not always specific to our circumstance. There are times we long to know God's plans and dreams for us, personally. That is why the Spirit was sent, so we can know God's will - what some have called God's yearning² - and more closely align with his heart.

*"The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you
.....The Spirit will take what I have to say and tell it to you."*

(John 14: 26 and 16: 15)

Getting Started

Overleaf there is a graphic of a reflection pool that introduces some dimensions of discernment that people have found useful over centuries of spiritual disciplines. It was designed for use in congregations, but since it was first published in 1997, many individuals applied it in their spiritual searching and found it useful. So the 2012 edition of *Discerning Gods Will Together* took that into account. It is not the only paradigm, and the book itself introduces others from church history and contemporary writing. But this one is a useful way of scoping out the landscape of how we do discerning. You will notice that you already use some of these processes in your own prayer life, without having named them. Others will be new.

Like stepping stones, they can be done in a different order, or skipped.

General direction,
not compulsory steps

Framing:
frame the
issue in a
question

Listening:
Ask
particular
people
about their
expectations
or advice

Shedding:
Consider what
you might
have to give
up or lay
aside in
following
God's will

Grounding:
find a
guiding
principle,
such as
"Discover
God's will
and do it".

Rooting:
Look in the
Bible or
history for
something
that relates
to the situation

Improving:
Notice which
choices bring
you joy or
energy.
Can any be
shaped to
better align with
the guiding
principle?

Closing:
in prayer,
intuition,
conviction
and
reasoning
decide if it is
time to act

Exploring:
Are there
other
directions
where I can
use my
gifts?

Resting:
You have entered
holy ground.
Revel in knowing
God has led you.

Weighing:
Read aloud
what you
have
recorded and
write some
words of
wisdom