



Chapter 3 Ministries

Ministering to women in matters of Christian marriage, apologetics, and faith

Discernment Guide

by Sharon Lareau

Discernment is so important for our spiritual well-being. It is also our biblical responsibility. (1 John 4:1) The example of the noble-minded Bereans encourages us to do as they did. (Acts 17:10-11) Paul prayed for the Philippians' discernment in Philippians 1:9-10, and the distinguishing of spirits is listed as one of the manifestations of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:10. We are not to be children who are *"tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;"* Ephesians 4:14 (NASB) Discernment is clearly a vital part of the Christian life. It is not a good idea to listen to or read any Christian material without evaluating it for biblical soundness. It is not enough to simply look for things that make us feel good or speak to our hearts. It is not enough to simply be fed emotionally. We must pursue sound teaching and avoid the dreadful pronouncement found in 2 Timothy 4:3-4.

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."

2 Timothy 4:3-4 (NASB)

The Foundation for Discernment

The foundation for discernment is the Bible. The ability to discern between good and bad teachings exists in proportion to the amount of scripture we are exposed to. We cannot possibly evaluate our teachers for biblical accuracy if we don't already know what the Bible says or remember to check things out in context. One may think they can rely solely on promptings of the Holy Spirit to identify truth and error in a message; but unless the truth of God's word is involved, there is no objective way to confirm or test those promptings. Additionally, it's important to remember that our hearts and minds are subjective. Alone, they're not a reliable test for truth.

I cannot stress enough how important it is to employ the Bible when you're listening to Bible teachers. It may seem like an obvious thing to do, but unfortunately it is neglected. I believe a big part of why false teachers prosper is because many people don't evaluate what they hear against the word. They just soak it in, dangerously accepting everything they hear without question. We can all try to help stem this tide by gently encouraging others to check things out using the Bible.

Pray for Discernment

“Teach me good discernment and knowledge, For I believe in Your commandments.”
Psalms 119:66 (NASB)

Along with reading the Bible, prayer is paramount in discernment. Through it we rightly honor the source of truth by going to God and asking for his help. It is his truth we are seeking; it is his guidance we need. We can pray that we might grow in our understanding of the Bible and that he might help us see anything that is contrary to it. We can also pray for protection against unknowingly assimilating error. We can also ask him to give us mental clarity while we listen, that we may spot anything that seems unreasonable or illogical. It may or may not be a biblical issue, but could be indicative that something is wrong. If someone needs to jump through hoops to make their point or takes leaps in logic, their conclusion is probably not sound. We can also pray to be honest and loving in our assessment and not give a speaker a pass because we are a fan or become close minded or harshly judgmental because we are already aware or suspect that there are problems.

The Nuts and Bolts of Discernment

Now it is time to break down discernment and look at how to confirm truth and detect error in a message or teaching. Discernment has two main components. It is both a supernatural and natural occurrence. We are completely reliant upon the Lord for this work, but it is also a skill that can be learned. The list below touches on both of these components. It contains things that I have found quite helpful in testing teachings both past and present. Please apply this to all you sit under. I pray it serves you well.

1. I know I mentioned prayer above, but it's worth repeating. It's important to pray before, during, and even after a message is heard. I rely greatly on the Lord to help me see truth and error. I don't want to rely on or be led by my own efforts, I want to be led and instructed by him.
2. If it is applicable and makes sense in your marriage, you may benefit by discussing your teachers with you husband. I believe it is a good idea to run our teachers by our husbands. This could be a great aid to your discernment, turning to the man who is looking out for your well-being and asking for his input. You may also benefit by talking afterwards and discussing what you heard.
3. When you sit down to listen or read, have the mindset that you need to be convinced that the teaching is biblically correct. If you start out from a place of needing to be convinced of the validity of a teaching, you will be in a much better place to confirm truth and detect error.
4. Engage your mind. Be prepared to think things through. Examine things closely, especially if something doesn't sound right. This does take effort, but is so important. Along with the Lord's help, you're going to need your brain to compare what you're hearing to the Bible. One way you can love the Lord *“with all your mind”* (Mark 12:30) is to use it to honor him by seeking the truth with it.

5. You may wish to consider taking notes. Often times a message goes by quickly. It's easy to miss something since you don't have time to check it out in the moment. Taking notes allows you to go back and really look into it later.
6. Identify the main focus. Where is it? Is it on God? Does the speaker talk about themselves or their ministry more often than God? Do they talk about you more often than God? Is the focus on receiving things from God as opposed to glorify him and exhortations to obey him?
7. Is there a right view of God? For example, is he portrayed as weaker than the Bible reveals him to be? Is he at your mercy, waiting for your word or faith to do something?
8. What is used as an authority? Is the Bible properly esteemed or is there emphasis placed on personal experience or personal revelation?
9. Does any part of the message contradict the Bible? If this is the only thing you take away from this article, I will rest easier. There may be times when you do not immediately recognize that there is a contradiction. Often times there is a mix of truth and error which can make it hard to spot the error. That is why we need to open the Bible and check everything. To be able to notice these things more easily, spend as much time as possible reading and studying the Bible every day. God works through his word to deepen our understanding of truth. The more time we spend with it, the easier it is to spot error.
10. How often is the Bible quoted? In my apologetics work, I review the material of false teachers. While many twist and misapply the scriptures, others offer little to no biblical support for their positions because there is none.
11. If and when the scriptures are quoted, are the verses taken out of context? This is a very common and serious error in groups and individuals that have teachings contrary to the Bible. This is where your notes will come in handy. If you can't check things out in the moment, you can go back later. When you check, read several verses before and after the verse(s) in question. Read the selection with what was taught in mind. Does the verse(s) actually support what was said? If not, something is wrong.
12. When the scriptures are used, is the actual meaning of the verse taught or something else? For example, is something from the verse pulled out and a story built around it that has nothing to do with the meaning of the verse?
13. What Bible version is used? Sometimes teachers will switch versions choosing one that better makes their point even if it's not a good translation. If you ever see a teacher using The Message Bible, please be aware that it is not a trustworthy translation. If you would like to know why I believe that, please see my post [A Creative But Inaccurate Message](#).
14. Is the gospel preached and preached biblically? Is there any message about sin? Is there mention of our needs of repentance, forgiveness, and salvation through Jesus?
15. Is the message preached actually worth far less than the gospel? Examples of this would be self-improvement or self-interest messages relating to a better life, life goals, or financial matters. Those things may be good things to discuss, but they are not the gospel and pale in comparison. They are better suited for a self-help seminar.

16. Is there a “new” message that has been missing or forgotten by the church or previously unknown in the church? This is another common technique in teachers that stray from the truth of the Bible. It’s a great ploy to drum up excitement and is indicative of bad doctrine.
17. Is there a claim to speak for or from God? Are you told what God revealed or said in a personal revelation? None of these should be taken lightly or dismissed. Claims of personal revelations should immediately raise red flags. When someone claims to hear from God outside of the scriptures, *anything* could be said. It should put that person under great scrutiny, not just the revelation, but their teachings. If they are leaning on an extra-biblical source to teach, they are in effect setting up an authority outside of the Bible that is not unfailingly trustworthy. That’s very serious.
18. Is there reliance on emotionalism? While it is absolutely joyful to be a Christian and to know the Lord, operating heavily from feelings is not the same as operating from the solid ground of the Bible.
19. Is an unbiblical description of love or unity or anything else given?
20. Is there a distinction made between belief systems or do many or all paths lead to God?

The items on this list are not the only things that we can do or look for when we’re aiming to be discerning. I encourage you to study discernment more and practice it always. We must remain discerning with every teacher. No teacher will get everything right all of the time. Evaluating our teachers and our own beliefs and subjecting them humbly to God’s word is a lifelong task, but one that brings the joy of deeper fellowship with him as we walk in the truth of his glorious word.

“Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.” 2 Timothy 1:13 (NASB)