

Discernment Study

Week 1: The Need for Discernment in the Church

Aims for this morning's class

- For the next 6 or 7 weeks, we'll be going through a series on DISCERNMENT.
- And we'll jump right in with this idea: There's a doctrine called the "PERSPICUITY OF THE SCRIPTURES", which simply means that the Scriptures can be CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD by anyone through the illumination of the Holy Spirit.
- So if you are a believer, you have the capacity to UNDERSTAND, BELIEVE, and OBEY God's Word.
- Lots of things can DERAIL our fruitfulness in those things, but I've found that ONE obstacle many Christians face in this is THEIR VIEW of the PERSPICUITY, or CLARITY, of the Scriptures.
- Some seem to think that the Scriptures are NOT AT ALL CLEAR. They struggle to understand doctrine and biblical terminology, and so they STOP WORKING HARD at understanding and just let someone else do their thinking.
- They just find a few favorite teachers, and then ADOPT their theology.
- Others think that you should be able to understand the Scriptures WITHOUT HARD WORK and study, simply because we have the Holy Spirit.
- They DISCOUNT the need for trained pastor/teachers, and so they also STOP WORKING HARD at understanding.
- The truth is that we CAN and DO understand the Scriptures through the illumination of the Holy Spirit...AND through the application of hard work and study...AND the blessing of gifted and trained men who are called to teach us the truth.
- Those truths about the clarity of the Scriptures mean TWO THINGS relative to the topic of discernment. First, we are ABLE to discern, BECAUSE WE CAN UNDERSTAND the Scriptures. Second, there is a NEED to engage in the hard work of discernment, because not

everything in the Scriptures will be immediately OBVIOUS AND CLEAR unless we do that work.

- And discernment is simply this: it's the ability to take what we learn in the Scriptures, and then use it to JUDGE the difference between the TRUE and the FALSE, and between what is GOOD and what is EVIL. The Greek verb translated as "discern" is "diakrino", which means "to make a distinction".
- So this morning we'll BUILD A FOUNDATION by reviewing general principles of spiritual discernment. What spiritual discernment IS, how it is CULTIVATED, how it is PRACTICED, and CHALLENGES we face in the exercise of discernment.
- Then for the next several weeks we will HONE our ability to discern truth from error as we REVIEW MAJOR MOVEMENTS that have swept through the Church in the last 100+ years, and compare those teachings with the Scriptures.
- And if you want a UNIFYING THEME, each of these movements in some way UNDERMINES the Church's dependence upon the Scriptures; some openly REJECTING biblical authority as a matter of PRINCIPLE, but most AFFIRMING the Scriptures in PRINCIPLE while diminishing their authority in PRACTICE. For example:
- Modernism/Liberalism- openly challenges the RELIABILITY of the Bible. It claims that it is a record of ancient religious EXPERIENCES, not a book of DOCTRINE fit for modern application.
- Fundamentalism- forces THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS on the Bible. It often begins with external concepts of righteousness, and then interprets the meaning of the Scriptures through those ideas.
- Pentecostalism- elevates PERSONAL EXPERIENCE above the Bible. It looks for truth and spiritual vitality in subjective impressions and supposed extra-biblical revelation.
- Ecumenism- values ORGANIZATION AND SUPERFICIAL unity above DOCTRINAL unity. It sets aside truth, sometimes even truths that define biblical ORTHODOXY, in the name of Christian unity.
- Pragmatism- applies WORDLY SOLUTIONS to SPIRITUAL PROBLEMS. It uses business and marketing practices to run the Church instead of the instructions of Christ, and looks to psychology for spiritual growth

instead of the Word that pierces soul and spirit.

The Purpose of this Series

- So, the first question we might have about this study is WHY? Why study spiritual discernment? What PRACTICAL BENEFITS do we get from studying these things?
- The first benefit, I would hope, is to bring GREATER CLARITY to the whole subject of spiritual discernment. Because it is a topic that I think many people find mysterious and confusing.
- We also benefit by gaining a GREATER APPRECIATION for what makes us VULNERABLE to DECEPTION. Not to oversimplify, but I believe that vulnerability comes down to two things:
 - 1) Doctrinal weakness. Failing to PURSUE the truth and WRESTLE with it so that we actually OWN the convictions we confess and can stand firm when those convictions are tested.
 - 2) Idolatry. Allowing idols to rule that leave us exposed to TEMPTATION or PRESSURES when presented with certain false ideas. The truth appeals to us when we are walking in the Spirit, because only THEN do we desire the THINGS of the Spirit.
- A third benefit is that we learn the importance of forming convictions based on BIBLICAL THINKING, NOT just BORROWING the convictions of a favorite teacher, or relying on past knowledge.
- Finally, we can gain a greater awareness of our own IMMATURITIES and IDOLS, so that we may both guard ourselves and seek growth in those areas, so we are not so easily deceived.

Some things to keep in mind

- But BEFORE we get started, I'd just like to make a few more important points about this series.
- The goal is to BUILD YOU UP IN THE TRUTH, not make you EXPERTS IN ERROR. We will learn enough about the error to REFUTE it, not teach a course in it.

- So I will get into a little bit of the HISTORY of EACH movement, so we understand the conditions that brought it together, and also what PRESSURES or TEMPTATIONS were facing those people who had to wrestle with those movements.
- In addition, I will tell you the BASIC TEACHINGS of EACH movement, so we can evaluate them and see if they stand or fall when compared with the truth of the Scriptures.
- Lastly, this is AN OVERVIEW, not an in-depth study. We will be camping on those doctrines related to biblical authority, inerrancy, inspiration, sufficiency, and perspicuity, but this is just an introduction. My hope is that it will whet your appetite for greater personal study.

What is Spiritual Discernment?

- So, what exactly is spiritual discernment?
- **Philippians 1:9-10.** “And this I pray, that your LOVE may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all DISCERNMENT, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ;”
- **1 Thessalonians 5: 19-22.** “Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But EXAMINE everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is GOOD; abstain from every form of EVIL.”
- Discernment is love for the truth and love for righteousness in ACTION. It is one of the manifestations of LOVE in your spiritual life. It is a spiritual enablement provided for you as a safeguard to help you recognize the truth and walk in it.
- Discernment is also a PROCESS of examining and evaluating truth claims, and it can be helpful to break that process down into these 4 areas:
 - 1) Constant Attentiveness- You are ALWAYS actively evaluating everything you hear, read, or see and comparing it with the Scriptures.
 - 2) Understanding-You are never ASSUMING, but always seeking to understand: a) What people MEAN by what they say, knowing that unbiblical ideas are often presented in biblical language, and b) What the WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD is on the matter at hand

- 3) Judging- You are making DEFINITIVE and CORRECT biblical judgments about these things. You examine and study until you have RESOLUTION, and can say with conviction that something is either TRUE or FALSE, or GOOD or EVIL.
- 4) Acting- You are exercising WISDOM in how you ACT on these judgments, whether that means CONFRONTING an erring brother, or choosing what teachings and practices you should CLING to, and which you should REJECT or abstain from.

Who is called to discern?

- So we've defined discernment, now let's talk about whose RESPONSIBILITY it is to discern.
- **Titus 1:9** "hold(ing) fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to EXHORT in SOUND DOCTRINE and to REFUTE those who CONTRADICT."
- ELDERS in particular are called to refute those who contradict sound doctrine. That would first require them to be adept at recognizing FALSE doctrine. That would be expected because elders are called to be both the TEACHERS and SHEPHERDS of the local church.
- However, while confronting false teachers is primarily for Church leaders, ALL Christians are called to exercise discernment with regard to what we are taught. Actually, the ability to discern truth from error is one of the MARKS OF SPIRITUAL LIFE that all Christians must possess.
- Let me show you that from 1 Corinthians 2:12-16. Verse 12 begins with Paul talking about the apostles.
- **1 Corinthians 2:12-16:** "Now WE HAVE RECEIVED, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that WE MAY KNOW the things freely given to us by God, ¹³ which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*."
- Again. that's referring to the APOSTLES. They have received God's Word through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. By the way, note that they didn't FEEL SUBJECTIVE IMPRESSIONS or inklings of God's Word. They were writing exacting and concrete propositional truths that they KNEW was God's Word. No guess work there.

- Then the rest of the passage goes on to explain that unlike unregenerate men, THOSE WHO ARE SPIRITUAL are able to accept the apostles' teaching with that same kind of certainty.
- Then starting in verse 14. "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are SPIRITUALLY APPRAISED. ¹⁵ BUT HE WHO IS SPIRITUAL APPRAISES ALL THINGS, yet he himself is appraised by no one. ¹⁶ For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But WE HAVE THE MIND OF CHRIST."
- You have the ability to APPRAISE SPIRITUAL TRUTHS because you have been born again by the Spirit of God, and you have the Word of God.
- So you have leaders teaching you and shepherding you, and certainly the responsibility of teaching and shepherding DEMANDS that leaders be discerning, so that people are not led into sin and error, and false teachers are identified and confronted.
- But receiving teaching and shepherding ALSO requires that EVERY Christian be discerning, so they keep themselves from being led into sin and error.
- It's not a responsibility that you can pass off to someone else. NO ONE CAN BE DISCERNING FOR YOU. We see that here in 1 Corinthians 2, and also in the other passages we've read so far, in Philippians 1 and 1 Thessalonians 5.
- By the way, this idea of examining everything also means you have a responsibility to EXAMINE YOUR OWN IDEAS about truth and righteousness.
- How many times have you listened to a sermon, had the PLAIN MEANING explained to you, saw it DEMONSTRATED OBVIOUSLY from the grammar, the original Greek, and the context, and suddenly you realize that you've misunderstood that passage for years?
- In that moment, immediately REJECTING IT because it doesn't square with your theological grid is FOOLISHNESS. You have a responsibility to discern the truth and come under it.
- Which means that you must evaluate what you are hearing by testing it against the Scriptures. NOT by testing it against your THEOLOGY, or

your CONSCIENCE, or your TRADITIONS, or your PREFERENCES, or your FAVORITE TEACHER.

- You can't expect to grow in knowledge and discernment, or be shaped by the truth unless you're willing to SUBJECT YOUR OWN IDEAS to that process as well.

Is Discernment a Spiritual Gift, or a Practical Skill?

- As for the nature of discernment- because it is a spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 12:10), I've heard some people express ODD IDEAS about how discernment works, and how it's cultivated.
- They treat discernment almost as if it is an ability to somehow FEEL the difference between truth and error, rather than KNOW the difference.
- For instance: Story of pastoral search committee- one man claimed to be able to simply "KNOW" the right decisions to make in ministry- that a man should become a missionary, etc.
- Would you take the counsel of a Christian financial advisor who claimed he could just FEEL the right investments for you, without giving any supporting data on the investment?
- Or sit under the teaching of a pastor who preached on IMPRESSIONS and FEELINGS rather than careful and prayerful EXEGESIS of the Scriptures?
- I'm not denying the SUPERNATURAL NATURE of spiritual discernment. Its source is the Spirit of God. We saw that in 1 Corinthians 2. But our God deals in OBJECTIVE, PROPOSITIONAL TRUTH, not subjective feelings and impressions.
- Discernment IS a spiritual gift, a spiritual ENABLEMENT to be especially insightful in identifying LYING spirits and FALSE doctrine
- It is a spiritual gift like TEACHING is a spiritual gift. Some are more fruitful and successful at teaching because they have an enablement from the Lord.
- But like teaching, discernment must be HONED with TRAINING and PRACTICE.

- **Turn to Hebrews 5:12-14** ¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and YOU HAVE COME TO NEED MILK AND NOT SOLID FOOD. ¹³ For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is NOT ACCUSTOMED to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the MATURE, who because of PRACTICE have their senses TRAINED to discern good and evil.”
- The writer says they are NOT ACCUSTOMED to the word of righteousness. They have NOT TRAINED THEIR SENSES by studying and practicing the truth, and so they are undiscerning.
- Their ability to discern is directly related to the TIME AND ENERGY spent studying and wrestling with the truth, and using that knowledge to judge spiritual things.
- And in **Ephesians 4:13-14**, Paul says that the result of being fully EQUIPPED in the truth is that we are no longer to be CHILDREN tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming
- Poor discernment is a clear mark of SPIRITUAL IMMATURITY. So to say it plainly, if you’re not growing in your ability to discern between truth and error, you are CULTIVATING spiritual immaturity. And a total INABILITY to discern between spiritual truth and error indicates a lack of spiritual life.

The Practice of Discernment

- Alright, that then brings us to HOW we cultivate and exercise discernment.
- **Ephesians 6:10-11** says, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the SCHEMES of the devil.
- We’re all familiar with this passage about the believer’s armor. It’s the prescription for how to stand firm in the face of Satan’s SCHEMES.
- The Greek word for “schemes” is “METHODEIA”, this refers to a way or method of craftiness and deceit; satanic deceptions meant to harm or destroy you, whether that’s false doctrine or a temptation to sin of some kind.

- Being strong in discernment requires that we be properly PREPARED in the Lord's strength. That's strength to RECOGNIZE and REJECT immoral ways, unwise decisions, worldly principles, and false teaching and corrupt thinking.
- First, verse 14 says that we gird our loins with TRUTH. We've already made the point that truth is discerned with the MIND, and not something that we navigate or judge by feelings.
- You gird your mind by filling it with TRUTH, meditating on truth, and allowing your thinking to be completely transformed by TRUTH, as Paul says in Romans 12:1-2.
- Same verse in Ephesians, Paul says we put on the BREASTPLATE of RIGHTEOUSNESS. That's simple obedience to the TRUTH. A life of consistent and ongoing obedience demonstrates the depth of our convictions. If our convictions are lukewarm, we will not last long in the battle.
- Then we put on the shoes of the GOSPEL OF PEACE. Because of God's saving grace to us through Christ, we are standing firm in the battle, NOT because of our strength but because we're confident in the strength that GOD SUPPLIES to us through Christ and His gospel.
- We also take up the SHIELD OF FAITH, which is TRUST in the Person, and promises, and character of God no matter what comes against us. And we have the HELMET OF SALVATION, which is our assurance of eternal life.
- All of these things protect and prepare us in the battle against Satan's SCHEMES. Our sole OFFENSIVE WEAPON, the tool we use as we actively work to DISCERN truth from error, and good from evil, is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.
- **Turn to 2 Corinthians 10:4.** "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for destruction of FORTRESSES. We are destroying SPECULATIONS and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God"
- We are not attacking PEOPLE with the Word of God, or shouting at DEMONS, but rather destroying DEMONIC LIES that are like fortresses raised up against the truth.
- So what's next? How do we put our MINDS in the position to LISTEN WITH DISCERNMENT? What are we listening for?

- **Turn to 1 John 4.**
- **1 John 4:1** says: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but TEST THE SPIRITS to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”
- **When we “test the spirits” we are testing the teaching of the people who are making some sort of claim to truth.** The rest of the passage explains how we test.
- **1 John 4:2-3** “By this you KNOW the Spirit of God: every spirit that CONFESSES THAT JESUS HAS COME IN THE FLESH is from God; and every spirit that DOES NOT confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.”
- All true teaching should EXALT CHRIST by presenting a BIBLICAL view of Him, NOT a Christ who is a CREATED BEING, a Christ who was NEVER CRUCIFIED, or a Christ who CONTRADICTS the Scriptures. It’s the Christ of the Scriptures that should be proclaimed.
- **1 John 4:4-5**- “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore THEY SPEAK AS FROM THE WORLD, and the WORLD LISTENS to them.”
- All true teaching should appeal to BIBLICAL and GODLY motivations, while false teaching is always directed at getting a response from the FLESH. That’s why prosperity preachers are so popular, they don’t exalt righteousness and truth, they exalt CARNALITY and GREED, and the people listen because these things are the desire of their heart.
- That’s what 2 Timothy 4:3-4 means when it says that people accumulate teachers for themselves in accordance with their own desires, and they will turn away from truth.
- **1 John 4:6**- “We are from God; HE WHO KNOWS GOD LISTENS TO US; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this way we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.
- All true teaching should point people back to the TESTIMONY OF THE APOSTLES. It is the authority of the SCRIPTURES that makes a message and a teacher credible, not man’s wisdom or reason, or cleverness, or science, or any of the sacred cows of the culture.

- **1 John 4:7-8**- “Beloved, let us LOVE one another, for love is from God; and therefore everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not KNOW God, for God is love.”
- All true teaching should promote and elevate BIBLICAL LOVE, NOT the love of the world. Sound doctrine should bring CONVICTION of sin and ENCOURAGEMENT in Christ, and stir up in you a LOVE FOR GOD that manifests in WORSHIP and a desire for HOLINESS, and a love for believers that manifests in sacrificial service.

Some points to remember

- A couple of POINTS I’d like to make about practicing discernment before we move on to the challenges involved in exercising discernment.
- Many Christians have to be reminded that there are times when they MUST SPEAK UP or confront when error or false teaching is being presented. Sometimes fear of man causes us to be silent when we should speak.
- But there are also those believers who are TOO QUICK TO SPEAK, or too combative right out of the box.
- Not every DIFFERENCE IN CONVICTION or DOCTRINE calls for public confrontation, and there will be plenty of times when someone teaching in a fellowship group or small Bible study will MISSPEAK, or phrase something in a way you don’t like.
- You need to EXERCISE WISDOM in how you choose to handle those occasions. Here are some basic guidelines you should keep in mind when you’re thinking about opening your mouth and saying something.
- ASSUME THE BEST and ASK FOR CLARIFICATION to see if they misspoke. If it becomes CLEAR to you that they are in error, and that it’s not simply a CONSCIENCE issue or a PREFERENCE issue, do the best you can to GRACIOUSLY handle the issue, and get guidance from one of the elders.
- If you’re dealing with a bona fide false teacher who wants to FIGHT over WORDS and SPECULATIONS, don’t get sucked into that. Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy chapter 2 to REFUSE foolish and ignorant speculations knowing that they produce QUARRELS. That’s fruitless, and you end up casting your pearls before swine.

- But if you're dealing with an ERRING BROTHER, or even an unbeliever who is willing to be teachable and hear the Scriptures, just proceed with humility, grace, and charity.
- We should work hard to have the kind of fellowship where people aren't FEARFUL of being gang-tackled just because they said the wrong word.
- But on the other hand we should all want someone to COME TO US if they believed we are in error. Both restraint and being teachable in these matters requires humility.

The Challenge of Discernment

- For our last two points this morning, I want to discuss some of the CHALLENGES we face when exercising discernment, and answer some typical OBJECTIONS people have about exercising spiritual discernment.
- Beginning with the challenges, let's start with our own hearts. It's easy to fall into PRIDE and CONTENTIOUSNESS.
- I've seen people who begin well- they have a passion for the truth, but then in time become self-appointed WATCHDOGS who want to contend and fight over every single point of doctrine, or who troll Facebook or internet blogs looking for doctrinal arguments.
- Remember, DISCERNMENT is a process of examining everything, and then clinging to what is good and rejecting what is evil. CONTENTIOUS people don't listen with the intent of clinging to what is GOOD.
- They only listen in the hope of catching someone in a MISTAKE or an ERROR so they can POUNCE. That's NOT discernment.
- To keep from going down that path, we should always keep in mind that the motivation for exercising discernment is biblical LOVE.
- In **1 Corinthians 13:1-3** Paul says that LOVE IS PRIMARY in ministry. Exercising spiritual gifts, demonstrating even the greatest faith, or the most sacrificial acts of service are NOTHING if they are done without love.
- This calls for WISDOM. Because discernment requires you to listen with a discriminating ear, and if we aren't careful, we can allow that discriminating ear to develop into a prideful and critical heart.

- So we must work hard to discern out of a LOVE FOR GOD, a desire to see Christ HONORED and God's character VINDICATED.
- We must discern out of a LOVE FOR TRUTH, a CONFIDENCE in the work of God's Word, a PASSION for seeing it accurately and fully explained, and a WILLINGNESS to submit our own ideas and feelings to the Scriptures
- And we must discern out of a LOVE FOR THE CHURCH, a LONGING to see it grow and prosper, and to see individuals spiritually MATURE, and weak believers PROTECTED FROM SIN AND ERROR as they learn to stand firm.
- A second challenge in exercising discernment is that ERROR IS SUBTLE. It's often harder to root out than you might imagine. **2 Corinthians 11:13-14** says that false teachers DISGUISE THEMSELVES as apostles of Christ.
- They don't ANNOUNCE their arrival. Jude says that they creep in UNNOTICED, and that they are HIDDEN reefs in your love feasts.
- Jesus says in Matthew 7 that they come in SHEEP'S clothing. They pretend to be or are self-deluded into believing themselves to be genuine Christians.
- They HIDE their true intentions and their true character. False teachers use the same words that we do...words like "justification", "grace", and "faith", but they mean different things by them.
- And if you've ever had to confront someone who is committed to some deep error, you know that getting them to openly admit what they actually mean by what they say is like nailing JELL-O to a wall.

Defending the Practice of Discernment

- And, actually this is NORMAL. It's normal and expected in the course of the Christian life that you will need to guard yourself against error, and even speak with others who may be falling into some spiritual lie.
- Think back to EVE in the Garden, in Genesis 3. How did Satan tempt Eve? He LIED to her, TEMPTED HER to doubt God's Word and His character. Then tempted her to act on her own DESIRES.
- Satan works in this way because he is the FATHER OF LIES (John 8:44). He was a DECEIVER and TEMPTER in the garden, we see him using the same ploy in Christ's temptation in the WILDERNESS, and we see it in

Satan's attempts to deceive in the FIRST CENTURY as well.

- In fact, the New Testament is FILLED with examples of false teachers trying to SUBVERT the work of Christ from the beginning. Paul wrote the book of GALATIANS to confront demonic LIES being spread by the Judaizers.
- These men confessed Jesus Christ as MESSIAH, but according to Acts 15:1, they said that there could be no salvation apart from being circumcised according to the law of Moses.
- The Apostle Paul called this out as a "DIFFERENT GOSPEL", and came against this teaching full force, saying that anyone who taught this different gospel was to be ACCURSED.
- In 2 Peter 2, the Apostle Peter warns against the rise of FALSE PROPHETS in the Church who would introduce destructive HERESIES.
- JUDE warned believers about MOCKERS who served their own lusts, and he appealed to Christians to CONTEND earnestly for "the faith" which was once for all handed down to the saints.
- In Acts 20, Paul warns the Ephesian elders, telling them to be on guard as savage WOLVES, false teachers, were coming, and again in 1 Timothy 1, Paul charges Timothy with the responsibility of confronting certain men who were teaching STRANGE DOCTRINES.
- And in Revelation 2, Christ Himself warns the churches against FALSE TEACHERS like the Nicolaitans and those who held to the teaching of Balaam, false prophetesses like Jezebel, or just sinful behavior.

Historical and modern examples of discerning shepherds

- And we see the need for discernment in EVERY ERA of Church history as well, as men in every generation have had to battle error with the truth, the same as we do.
- **Augustine** refuted PELAGIANISM in the 4th C, which taught that man was not born in sin and could achieve sinless perfection apart from grace
- **Luther** nailed his 95 THESES to the church door at Wittenberg in response to innumerable Roman Catholic heresies

- **Spurgeon** stood virtually alone in 19th Century England against the DOWNGRADE, which moved the Church away from biblical authority and the sovereignty of God, and finally into rank liberalism
- **J. Gresham Machan** contended for the AUTHORITY and INERRANCY of Scripture in early 20th Century America against Modernism
- **John Macarthur** in our own time has stood for biblical authority, and especially for LORDSHIP SALVATION in the face of Antinomianism, which teaches that a man can be saved and yet live utterly without Christ

Objections

- Finally, let's talk about OBJECTIONS some may have to the practice of discernment.
- Some may say **"I don't need to STUDY all about these errors, I just need to know truth"**
- I AGREE. That's why I was clear up front that we're NOT studying error. We don't need to know all of the details and nuances about some false system. We've already got guys like James White for that.
- We just need to know enough to understand how the Bible REFUTES the errors that come into our midst.
- And if you've ever shared the gospel, you probably understand this intuitively, because WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS is also an error, and I'm betting you've had to refute that error once or twice with the Scripture when you evangelize.
- **Or some might think, "This is unnecessarily complicating matters. We just need to give people the Word of God"**
- Again, I agree. All error is dealt with from the same source. The Word of God. That's what people need to hear.
- But consider something. Unbelievers are holed up in these various demonic fortresses and ideologies, and even believers can get sideways with errors that can derail their growth.
- You should meet those SPECIFIC errors with the SPECIFIC truths that undo them. If an unbeliever needs to understand that Jesus is God, that repentance is demanded, or that we're saved by grace through faith alone,

would you not take them to those specific passages?

- **Or others might think that contending for the faith is unnecessarily contentious, that debating over doctrine is divisive, and theology in itself is too esoteric and impractical a thing to debate**
- We MUST guard against contentiousness. No doubt about that, and I ALWAYS APPRECIATE that caution. But we should be clear on this: SOUND DOCTRINE DOES NOT DIVIDE. Truth saves, heals, and grows people. It may insult a fleshly mind, and it may sting a heart that's ruled by some idol, but it doesn't divide brothers. That's what sin and error do.

Conclusion

- That wraps up this first lesson, and here are the major points I wanted to leave you with:
- First, ALL Christians are called to discern truth and error.
- Second, discernment requires HARD WORK: regular STUDY, the TRAINING of good teaching, and PREPARATION by the development and application of CONVICTION that acts on the truth by FAITH. It also requires diligence in guarding yourself from IDOLS.
- Third, discernment must be motivated by LOVE. Love for CHRIST, love for the TRUTH, and love for OTHERS.
- Fourth, we all have a theological POINT OF VIEW. But your theology can either HELP YOU GROW as it is always being SHAPED by a better understanding of the truth...
- OR, your theology can SLOW your spiritual growth because YOU ALLOW IT TO DETERMINE what the Scriptures mean by what they say.

Questions

1. It's important that our doctrinal convictions are not only biblical, but that we actually "own" those convictions ourselves. What are some ways your convictions are tested?

(When you have to walk in them by faith, when you are persecuted for them, when you will lose something because of them, when you have to defend them, when you do not abandon them when tempted to lust or fear)

2. Why are godliness and humility critical to the exercise of spiritual discernment?

(If we are walking in sin, we are not going to growing in wisdom and discernment. We're NOT clinging to what is good and abstaining from what is evil. If we are becoming prideful, our motivation will not be LOVE)

3. In what ways is error subtle?

(False teachers do not announce themselves, they want to win your confidence, they present themselves as devoted to Christ, they use biblical terms)

4. If “funny feelings” or “impressions” aren’t spiritual discernment, what should you do when you get them?

(Be discerning! Examine your feelings. Determine why you are unsettled or anxious or wary. If it is in connection with objective truth, then act on the truth. If it is just subjectivity, then take a Tums and move on!)

5. How do you know if you are allowing your preconceived theological ideas, your preferences, or your convictions of conscience to tell you what the Scriptures mean, instead of allowing those things to be shaped by the Scriptures?

(When challenged, your defense is not a biblical one. You just say this is what you believe, what you were taught, or what your favorite teacher says. You counter a biblical text that challenges you with another biblical text that you believe supports your point, and you never demonstrate the meaning of the challenging text. You proclaim the meaning of a biblical text without being able to demonstrate its actual meaning from the text.)