Dynamics of Discernment—Biblical and Practical

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I. What is Discernment?

- Discernment involves understanding the divine will individually and corporately, influencing the group’s direction, priorities, and joint endeavors.
- Greek: diakrinō means to judge in truthful ways; Latin, cernere means to winnow (with dis, to divide); the goal is to understand and know the will of God in order that it might be followed faithfully.
- Discernment is a function of truth; truth is always liberating; if Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn. 14:6), truth is Christomorphic.
- Effective Christian leadership involves helping groups attend, discern, and mind the divine will.
- Regarding dynamics of discernment, skills are important, but asking “why” we’re doing what we’re doing is key.
- Claims to knowing the divine will are fraught with questions: how do we know, who claims rightly to know, how is the divine will conveyed and received?
- A suitable perspective on discernment requires both balance and centeredness: a balance of sources; centered in relationship with God.
II. Why attempt discernment?

- In the beginning, God spoke (Gen. 1 – the source of the world’s being, order, and livelihood is the dynamic Word of God); God continues to speak (Jn. 1:1-18, 14-16).
- Humans, created in the divine image, uniquely are spiritual and created for relationship with God.
- God’s Word has been given for the benefit of humanity, but humans rebelled – leading to estrangement, shame, suffering, and conflict.
- God seeks humans out (“Wherefore art thou?”), covers human’s shame, and promises delivery and restoration (Gen 2-3).
- Discernment is central to the vocation of Israel
  a) God’s promise to Abraham is to bless the world through his family (Gen. 12:1-3).
  b) Through the Law of Moses, the divine will is clarified (Ex. 20), vertically and horizontally.
  c) A prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15-22) is promised – one who will disclose God’s word.
  d) The prophets interpreted the Law and emphasized access and responsiveness (Nu. 11:29; Jer. 31:31-34; Joel 2:28-32).
- Discernment is central to the mission of Jesus and the New Covenant.
  a) The God who spoke at many times and many ways (Heb. 1:1-4) has now spoken in his Son, Jesus Christ.
  b) Jesus came teaching “The time is now; leadership of God is here! Get reoriented; get responsive!” (Mk. 1:15)
  c) Jesus emphasized the center of the Law. (Mk. 12:29-31)
  d) Jesus promised to lead through the Holy Spirit. (Jn. 14-16)
e) Prophecies are fulfilled; young and old, males and females have access to the divine will (Ac. 2); the New Covenant is inward and transforming. (Heb. 8, 10)

- The history of Christianity hinges upon discerning Christ’s leadership.
  a) The Institutional view (Catholic, Orthodox, Episcopal): Christ’s will is known and preserved by the historic church leadership.
  b) The Biblical view (Protestant, Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist): Christ’s will is determined through Scripture and fit interpretation.
  c) The Charismatic view (Quaker, Methodist, Pentecostal): Christ’s will is disclosed through the immediate work of the Holy Spirit.

- Acts 15 as a Case Study in Corporate Discernment—a Model for Later Generations
  a) Around a difficult issue, Christian leaders came together, in one place, at one time
  b) Input was gathered from all sides of the debate
  c) Having heard the input, the issues were sorted and weighed prayerfully
  d) Discernment involved distinguishing the substantive issues from the others
  e) Agreement was achieved, and the unitive conviction was conveyed to others

III. Discernment and Means of knowing the divine will – Obstacles...

- Humans are fallen and prone to error.
- Humans are self-oriented and prone to self-serving deception.
- Humans are time-bound, in need of historic wisdom.
• Humans in community do better than as isolated individuals.
• Human vision is partial and in need of a fuller perspective.
IV. Ways Forward—A Penta-lateral Approach (Howard Snyder): Aspects of Discernment

(see Quaker Religious Thought #106-107)

A. Individual and Personal Aspects of Discernment:
- Is the leading in keeping with Scripture?
- Are there examples from the past that provide direction for the present?
- Is a leading self-serving, or is it rooted in one’s love for God and others?
- Does it matter who gets the credit?
- Is the ministry of Christ continued in what we do?

B. Scriptural Aspects of Discernment
- Does the interpretation reflect best and clearest meaning of the text exegetically?
- Is the interpretation informed by the literary form and function of the passage?
- Are alternative biblical passages also considered?
- Are alternative perspectives ordered by a canon within the canon—the Christ Events?
- Are there biblical parallels that inform one’s understanding of biblical counsel?

C. Historical and Theological Aspects of Discernment
- Are there foundational and pivotal events in history that orient a movement’s mission & being?
Can we distinguish between a movement’s contextual responses and timeless values?
Have learnings from a movement’s successes and failures been noted?
How can insights from the past be applied in timely ways?
How can groups be open to what God is doing today?

D. Rational and Intellectual Aspects of Discernment:
• Do we understand why we believe something, not just that we believe it?
• How do we become analytical problem solvers, applying wisdom from the past to the present?
• How do we distinguish compelling challenges to faith and practice from lesser alternatives?
• How can we raise up the center while appreciating the boundaries?
• How can we witness in world-changing ways?

E. Corporate Aspects of Discernment
• Is this issue worthy for larger group discussion, or should it be sorted out in committee?
• Are we seeking the leading of Christ, rather than the expedient and the traditional?
• Have all shared their perspective on the truth...and also released it to the meeting?
• Are matters of conscience and conviction distinguished from preference and platform?
• Is the group “led” into unity by the present Christ?
But, what do you do when your proposal fails? Queries for discerning about failed discernment:

- Do you feel listened to and heard by the group?
- Are you satisfied with your articulation of your concerns, including why you hold them?
- Is your desire first and foremost the discerning and furthering of Christ’s leading, rather than your own perspective?
- Do you believe others are also committed first and foremost to discerning and following Christ’s will?
- Are you willing to release your concern for the good of the meeting and its progress?

**V. Group Discernment as a Spiritual Reality and Process**

**A. Personally...**

- Begin with a renewed commitment to Christ, in humble dedication and submission to his will.
- Create the space to enjoy the sacrament of the present moment.
- Attend the Present Christ and his workings.
- Listen for the Word of Christ through the other.
- Trust and obey.

**B. Corporately...**

- Regard the event as a meeting for worship in which business is conducted.
- Call for the group to be in prayer for the items of the agenda, preparing as needed.
- Describe the issues and their implications.
- Draw in input from all sides, gathering a multiplicity of perspectives—including why disagreement exists.
- Pause for prayer and listening, as needed—ultimately the gift of discernment is a grace.
- Help the group attend, discern, and mind the leadership of Christ.

As Jesus taught his disciples to pray:
“...Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”
- We seek God’s leadership, and the completion of his will as completely on earth as it is in heaven.
- When this happens, the Kingdom is advanced; when it does not, the Kingdom is diminished.
- In doing so, the Lord’s Prayer...is answered.