

“Tim Challies is one of the finest young evangelical thinkers of our day. He combines keen insight with theological maturity and spiritual depth. *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment* should help form the Christian character of a new generation of evangelicals. Indeed, we must hope so.”

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Theological Seminary

“The many fans Tim Challies has won through his highly regarded blog (Challies.com) will discover in this book the motivation that drives his incisive analysis of cultural events and trends—a keen respect for truth and a passionate commitment to biblical discernment.”

—NANCY PEARCEY, author, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity
from Its Cultural Captivity*

“If you want to be discerning, buy this book; if you read it, you will be! Tim Challies has written on a topic that is both important and rarely addressed. This book on discernment is simple, clear, well written and well illustrated, accurate, and even insightful. I read it all. I liked it all. I will recommend it often. Ten pithy chapters—read one a day for ten days, and I guess that you’ll find yourself more discerning—or at least wanting to be.”

—MARK DEVER, pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,
Washington DC

“John Murray said, ‘The difference between truth and error is not a chasm but a razor’s edge.’ Spurgeon said something like it too: ‘Discernment is not a matter of simply telling the difference between what is right and wrong; rather, it is the difference between right and almost right.’ Both these giants emphasized the vital quality (and difficulty) of discernment. Unfortunately, in our time, even among Christians, discernment is long in demand and short in supply. This is but one reason I’m so delighted to commend to you *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*. Tim reminds us that the Bible constantly commands us to cultivate discernment, but he doesn’t stop there. He tells us how.”

—LIGON DUNCAN, senior minister, First Presbyterian Church,
Jackson, Mississippi

“The path to most biblical graces is bordered with hazards on both sides of the way. With the subject of this book—discernment—one can fall into the ditch of careless naivetè on the left or wander into the dark woods of a critical spirit on the right. Tim Challies carefully guides his reader between these dangers and on toward Christlike discernment. I’ve simply never read a more thorough, practical, and biblically sound treatment of this subject. Anyone wanting to study biblical discernment should not miss this book.”

—DON WHITNEY, associate professor of biblical spirituality;
senior associate dean at The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary

FOREWORD BY JOHN MacARTHUR

the DISCIPLINE of SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT



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FOREWORD

TODAY'S EVANGELICALS ARE confronted with a multitude of new perspectives, emerging trends, and evangelical fads—all claiming to be more biblical or more effective than the ideas they seek to overthrow. With such a broad patchwork of competing ideas all clamoring for mainstream acceptance, how can the average person in the pew be expected to know what is truly sound, safe, and biblical? In a world where everything seems colored in shades of gray, how can Christians develop the discipline of discernment?

Tim Challies is uniquely qualified to write on the subject. I don't know of a more reliable or more prolific commentator on the contemporary evangelical scene. His weblog is a favorite stop for thousands of Christian readers every day. His book reviews and his comments on evangelical trends are consistently evenhanded, thorough yet succinct, and full of perceptive insights. Tim obviously values clarity and biblical accuracy—and those qualities all come through in this excellent work as well. *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment* is a truly important work—one that should be required reading not only for church leaders, but for all sober-minded laypeople as well.

—JOHN MACARTHUR, pastor-teacher,
Grace Community Church,
Sun Valley, California

INTRODUCTION

EARLY ONE MORNING, in the spring of 1945, Ida Weisenbacher, a twenty-one-year-old Austrian farm girl, was woken from her sleep by a loud banging at the door. Through tired eyes she glimpsed a Nazi officer standing outside her house. “Get up immediately,” he demanded. “Hitch up the horse and wagon; we need you.” Obediently, and now wide awake, Ida quickly hitched her horse to the wagon and waited while soldiers hurriedly loaded it with large wooden crates. Each crate was identical and unmarked, save for a label with bold-painted letters and numbers. Ida did not dare to ask what the crates contained. There were too many of these mysterious boxes to fit a single load, so when the wagon was full, the officer barked that she was to drive to the shores of nearby Lake Toplitz. She quickly realized why the German army had requisitioned her wagon: the track to the lake was too rugged for a truck to pass. Only a horse-drawn wagon could make the journey.

She made the brief trip three times. As she arrived with the final load, she saw that a group of soldiers had paddled into the midst of Toplitz and were dropping the crates into the depths of the lake. It would be fifty-five years before this German secret was uncovered.

There are few places on earth better equipped to conceal a secret. Located within a dense forest and surrounded by the tall mountains of Austria, Lake Toplitz is small—only a mile long. But what the lake lacks in size, it makes up for in depth, for the bottom is some 350 feet below the surface. Isolated, surrounded by rugged, inhospitable terrain and filled with nearly freezing waters, Toplitz may as well be the moon. And in fact, men would uncover the secrets of the moon long before they would uncover the secrets of Toplitz.

It was 1945 and the world was at war. Adolf Hitler, the man responsible for beginning the conflict, was dead, having taken his own life in his mountain fortress. A few die-hard Nazis held out some hope that Germany's new leader could somehow reverse the tide; most knew it was far too late. The armies of the United States and Great Britain were closing in from the west, and hordes of Russian soldiers were approaching from the east. It was now inevitable that as she had done only three decades earlier, Germany would be forced to surrender to her foes. Yet through her conquests, Germany had amassed an incredible wealth of treasure, much of which was stolen from men and women who had been put to death in the infamous concentration camps. As the Allied armies approached Germany, much of this treasure—gold and silver, paintings and ornaments—was hidden away in mountain caves. Those who knew of Toplitz supposed that some of Hitler's treasure was hidden away in the depths of the lake.

In 1999, a team of explorers led by the CBS news program *60 Minutes II* journeyed to Lake Toplitz to attempt to recover the crates they learned had been hidden there. *60 Minutes II* retained the services of Oceaneering, a company specializing in undersea exploration. Oceaneering, which had been responsible for recovering the wreckage of the Space Shuttle Challenger and T.W.A. Flight 800, decided to make use of The Phantom, a deep-diving robot tethered to an operator who controls it from the surface. For three weeks, and for nearly ten hours a day, the crew scoured the bottom of the lake but were unable to locate the boxes. And then at last they found something—a small piece of wood that looked as if it may have once been a portion of a crate. They knew they were near to their treasure. But as The Phantom brought this plank to the surface, it slipped from the vessel's grasp and sank out of sight.

Oceaneering refused to be discouraged and called for WASP, their high-tech, one-man submersible. A WASP operator, Ken Tyler, descended some 200 feet to the debris field and found vast quantities of paper that had been lying undisturbed for fifty-five years. "It's very, very fragile. It's falling to bits," he reported from the lake's floor. When the paper was moved, it quickly disintegrated into pulp.

Gingerly, Tyler finally secured a bundle of the paper and carefully brought it to the surface. As this paper broke the surface of the water, it brought an end to one of Hitler's greatest secrets. Printed on the paper were the words, "Bank of England." The crates that were dropped into Lake Toplitz, the crates Ida Weisenbacher had carried to the edge of the lake so many years before, had been filled with hundreds of millions of pounds in counterfeit British currency.

Adolf Burger was one of the men responsible for creating these banknotes. A printer by trade, and a Jewish native of Czechoslovakia, he was arrested by the Germans on August 10, 1942, and soon separated from his wife, whom he had married only weeks earlier. Like so many millions of Jews before and after them, Burger and his wife were packed into a livestock train and taken to Auschwitz, expecting to be quickly put to death. At the camp Burger was torn from his wife, whom he would never see again. After some time in custody he was ordered to appear before the camp commandant. When he did so, he was notified, to his amazement, that he would be leaving the next day and would be taken to Berlin where his services were urgently needed. He soon found himself in a secure camp at Sauchsenhausen in the company of dozens of other craftsmen—printers, bookbinders, engravers—who had likewise been selected from death camps and told of a secret project. Code-named Operation Bernard, this brilliant project was part of a Nazi plot to produce a vast quantity of counterfeit British currency. This cash, when released into circulation in Great Britain, would cause widespread economic panic, undermine the value of the British pound, destroy her economy, and perhaps even drive the nation to its knees.

In general counterfeiters do the least work possible in creating phony money. The majority of forgeries reflect only as much effort as is necessary to create a bill that can pass a cursory inspection. Because of this, most counterfeit currency is easily detected and confiscated before it can enter circulation. The Bernard bills, though, were to be masterpieces that could fool even a trained expert. John Keyworth of the Bank of England said that counterfeiters consistently face two problems. The first is to create a convincing forgery.

But by using some of the world's finest craftsmen and supplying these men with the most modern tools and machinery, the Germans solved this problem.

The second difficulty is in distributing the currency. Once a bill leaves the hands of its creator, the plan succeeds, for the money is then in circulation. Because most counterfeit bills are of inferior quality and are produced in small amounts, they are often passed in bars or nightclubs and other locations where they are difficult to adequately examine. But the Germans intended to release hundreds of millions of pounds, far more than could be passed discreetly in safe locations. Relying on the predictability of human nature, they made a plan to release the money from bombers flying over major British cities. They knew that many people would collect this money and hand it to the proper authorities. But they knew that far more would horde and distribute the money despite knowing it to be counterfeit. Money falling from the sky would be too great a temptation. Once the bills were in circulation, it would be difficult for even experts to know genuine from counterfeit; amateurs would have no hope.

Had the German plan succeeded, millions of citizens, banks, and shops would have been fooled into accepting this worthless money. Such a massive influx of counterfeit currency could prove fatal to a nation's economy. Shops might refuse to sell their goods, fearing that money they received for their wares would prove worthless. Banks might refuse to accept or distribute cash. Without currency, goods would not exchange hands. Panic and chaos would ensue. The economy of even a great nation could be devastated by such a devious plan.

For two years, Burger and the rest of the team labored to produce near-perfect banknotes. They were supplied with the finest craftsmen and the latest printing equipment. The operation eventually produced today's equivalent of 4.5 billion dollars in banknotes that were nearly indiscernible from the originals. When they had mastered British currency and had produced it in massive quantities, the team began to perfect a copy of the American hundred-dollar bill. They were soon prepared to produce a daily output of

one million dollars in phony bills. But then, with the Russian army only a few hundred kilometers from Berlin, the Germans were suddenly ordered to dismantle the machinery and to abandon the project. Before Burger was returned to a concentration camp, he was ordered to pack the banknotes into large wooden crates, crates that were soon being driven on the back of a wagon to the shores of Lake Toplitz.

Though some quantity of the Operation Bernard banknotes entered into circulation—most of it used to pay German spies and secret agents—the Germans never acted on their plan to inundate England with this counterfeit currency. History has failed to record a definitive answer as to why they did not do this. It may have been one of the many providences of the war, for Operation Bernard, if carried to its planned conclusion, could have changed the course of World War II. Counterfeit currency could have changed the world.¹

While this is not a book about counterfeit currency, it deals with a topic that is surprisingly similar, though with consequences far more serious. As you no doubt surmised from its title, this is a book about discernment—about the skill of thinking biblically about life. To be more precise, it is a book about a particular kind of discernment: *spiritual* discernment. In this book I hope to show that discernment is a discipline, and like other disciplines such as prayer and reading the Bible, it is one that all Christians should seek to practice and should seek to practice deliberately. If we are to be a people who show our love for the Lord by faithfully serving him, it is a discipline we *must* practice.

This book is written for the general reader who wishes to understand discernment and to understand what the Bible teaches us about discernment, and who wishes to equip himself in this discipline. It is not written primarily for people with theological training, though I trust they, too, can benefit from it. Rather, it is written for you and for me—average Christians living in a culture

¹Information was drawn from various articles, including <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/11/21/60II/main251320.shtml>; http://www.channel4.com/community/showcards/G/Great_Nazi_Cash_Swindle.html; and <http://www.unmuseum.org/nazigold.htm>. The episode of *60 Minutes II* is available for purchase from the CBS web site.

and in a church where it so often seems that anything goes. It is written for those who look at much of what is said and done in the name of Jesus and ask themselves, “How can this be right?” It is written for all those who believe that it is the duty of every Christian to *think* biblically about all areas of life so that they might *act* biblically in all areas of life.

I have premised this book on my belief that there are many Christians who wish to grow in discernment, and who are eager to receive Bible-based teaching on this topic. There are none who know all there is to know about discernment. There are none who are unable to grow in this area. And yet there is very little teaching on this topic. My research led me to only a handful of books dealing with the subject, and few of those titles remain in print.

I do not intend to do the work of discernment for you. There are many books, web sites, and ministries that claim to teach discernment but do so by simply listing all the things you must do and the things you must not do. This book approaches the subject differently and is the result of my studies in Scripture to find the tools of discernment that God provides to us in his Word. And so I will not present a list of ministries you should avoid or endorse, authors whose books you should burn or buy, and music you should not listen to or that you should immediately download to your MP3 player. Rather, I hope to teach biblical wisdom on how you and I can become more discerning. I will present to you the wisdom of the Bible as it teaches us how we can become men and women of discernment. I will present principles you can use as you walk this life distinguishing between what is truth and what is error, what is right and what is wrong.

It is my hope and prayer that this book will stir you and me and others to answer the call for discernment so that together we may learn to discern truth from error, good from bad, better from best. I trust that God will equip us to think biblically about life so that we may bring him all glory, praise, and honor.

Before we begin our study, I would like to provide a brief outline of the book to help you understand how we will progress in our understanding and application of discernment.

Chapter 1 provides a call to discernment by showing both the benefits of acquiring discernment and the cost of ignoring it. The second chapter discusses the challenge of discernment, looking at three types of influences that make discernment a particular challenge in our day and in our culture. Not until the third chapter is the term *discernment* defined. While this may seem strange, I encourage you to bear with me—you'll soon understand the logic in waiting.

Chapter 4 presents the heart of discernment and the right of the Christian to judge between what is right and wrong and what is true and false. In chapters 5 and 6 we look at the two broad areas of life that require us to exercise discernment: knowing the truth and discerning the will of God for our lives.

The seventh chapter looks at discernment as a gift of the Spirit, and chapter 8 presents the potential dangers inherent in a distorted understanding of discernment. Chapter 9 examines the commitments, context, character, and confirmation of discernment. The tenth and final chapter provides a framework for discernment, leading the reader through the process of discernment in a step-by-step format. We will then wrap things up, praying and trusting that God will equip us to be Christians who value and practice the discipline of discernment. The appendix, containing a list of valuable resources on discernment, may prove beneficial to those interested in studying this topic further.

You will no doubt note that I refer to and quote the Bible many times throughout this book. I do so, simply because I have nothing to offer but what Scripture says. I have certainly not mastered the discipline of discernment and have written this book as much for my benefit as for yours. I have approached this book with what I hope is a spirit of humility, asking God to direct my mind and to lead me to the portions of Scripture that are most relevant to this study. I believe he has been gracious in doing so, and I trust that you will benefit as much from reading this study as I have from writing it. So please do not glance fleetingly at the passages I reproduce in the text, and especially those at the beginning of chapters. Rather, read them slowly and meditatively, letting them

penetrate your soul. I have not inserted verses of Scripture simply to prove my case; rather, these verses *are* my case. If you are to remember anything from this book, let it be not my words, but the words of the Bible.

We will begin our study with a call to discernment.

a CALL to DISCERNMENT

*By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the
good deposit entrusted to you.*

2 TIMOTHY 1:14

IT MUST BE TERRIFYING to be the son of a king and to be heir to a throne. A prince always lives with the knowledge that, at some point, his father will die, and he will have to step in as successor. He will have to assume the throne of his father and rule the nation, and an entire country will depend on his wisdom and his ability. A foolish prince might imagine this to be a simple task and might relish the power and glory that will be his. A wise prince will tremble, knowing his inadequacy for the task.

Just such a man is described in the Bible. Following the great King David, whom God describes in Acts as “a man after my heart” (Acts 13:22), stood Solomon. Though he was already a grown man when he became king, Solomon was wise and considered himself as little more than a child who was still dependent on a Father’s wisdom. In the book of 1 Kings we learn that while Solomon was at Gibeon to offer sacrifices to the Lord, God appeared to him in a dream and said simply, “Ask what I shall give you” (1 Kings 3:5). We are commonly taught that Solomon

asked the Lord for wisdom, and that God, being pleased with this request, instantaneously blessed him with a great outpouring of this gift. But in Solomon's words we see that he requests more than wisdom: he requests discernment. Solomon's humble prayer is recorded for us in 1 Kings 3:6–9:

“You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you. And you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?”

I find this a deeply moving passage, for the cry of Solomon resounds in my heart. It is a cry born of deep humility and a profound sense of dependence upon God. “I am but a little child,” he cries, “I do not know how to go out or come in.” Ascending to the throne of his father, the renowned king, Solomon must have realized his frailty, his inadequacy.

Solomon's specific request is this: “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:9a). God reiterates and answers this request, saying to Solomon, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word” (1 Kings 3:11–12a). And here is what God gave Solomon: “Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you” (1 Kings 3:12b).

Commenting on verse 9, Hebrew scholars Keil and Delitzsch

point out that the “understanding mind” Solomon requested was really a “hearing heart” or a “listening heart”—“a heart giving heed to the law and right of God.”¹ Solomon was given wisdom, to be sure, but he was also given a hearing heart. He was given discernment such as no mere human has possessed before or since. We might even say that Solomon requested discernment, but because of the connectedness of wisdom and discernment, God gave him both what he requested and its important prerequisite. Solomon became both wise and discerning.

We can now read Solomon’s psalm, written after the events of that night, a psalm in which he asks God’s assistance in applying wisdom:

Give the king your justice, O God,
 and your righteousness to the royal son!
 May he judge your people with righteousness,
 and your poor with justice!
 Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
 and the hills, in righteousness!
 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
 give deliverance to the children of the needy,
 and crush the oppressor! (Ps. 72:1–4)

Unlike Solomon, I have not been called by God to govern a nation. But even in the humble ways God has called me to lead, I feel the desire of Solomon. Even when I look at my family and think of how I must lead my wife and teach my children, I feel like a little child, uncertain of what to do and how to act. So often I have called out to God for wisdom and for discernment. So often I have sought to be like Solomon. So often I have wanted to know that God is pleased with my requests.

God honored Solomon’s request because he was pleased with what Solomon had asked. This teaches us that God values discernment and honors those who seek after it. In this chapter we will see the importance the Bible places on discernment by looking at both

¹C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: 1 and 2 Kings & 1 and 2 Chronicles* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1866), 31.

the curses that accompany a *lack* of discernment and the blessings that accompany the pursuit of discernment.

We see first that a lack of discernment must point to one of three unavoidable conclusions.

1) Lack of Discernment Is Proof of Spiritual Immaturity

In the closing verses of Hebrews 5, the author of this great letter warns his readers against apostasy, against straying from the faith:

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Heb. 5:11–14)

The author of Hebrews has much he would like to tell the recipients of this letter. There is much knowledge he would like to impart to them, so many important things they need to learn. Unfortunately, what he wishes to communicate is “hard to explain” not because it is obscure or difficult to understand, but because the people have become “dull of hearing.” They are not stupid people and are not intellectually inferior, unable to grasp such truths. The reason he cannot relay these important truths is not because of what these people are by nature, but of what they have *become*.² There is much the author would like to say, but he cannot and will not because of the spiritual immaturity of the people to whom he writes. They lack understanding, and they lack discernment.

The recipients of the letter to the Hebrews are not new Christians or recent converts, for the author says that by this time they ought to be teachers. This is not to say that they all ought to be ministers or preachers, but that they should all be sufficiently mature so they are able to understand and to teach others the basics of the faith. Sadly, though, they still have not understood the basics themselves.

²Phillip Hughes, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 189.

They do not have the *childlike* faith Jesus so values but a *childish*, immature faith. In this way they are like so many Christians since them. Richard Phillips writes:

The recipients of this letter were like many Christians today who think that theology is a waste of time. What difference does it make, people ask, whether God is a Trinity or not, whether Christ's righteousness comes by imputation or infusion, and whether regeneration comes before faith or after? What is important, they say, is that we get along with each other. Then they cite passages commending a *childlike* faith, as if that were the same thing as a *childish* faith, that is, one that is indifferent to or ignorant of the Word of God.³

We live in an age where too many who profess to be Christians rarely consider their spiritual maturity—an age when many consider spiritual immaturity a mark of authenticity, and when people associate doubt with humility and assurance with pride. Far too many people consider sound theology the mark of a person who is argumentative and proud. Far too many people are just like the audience to whom Hebrews is addressed. This letter draws a clear line connecting a lack of discernment with spiritual immaturity so that those who lack discernment are those who are spiritually immature. Scripture makes it plain: if you are not a person who exhibits and exercises discernment you are not a mature Christian.

My wife and I have been blessed with three children and often marvel that they have survived through infancy, for we have seen them put the most horrible and nauseating things in their mouths (things my editor will, wisely no doubt, not let me mention in this book!). Children have no understanding of what is good for them and will sample anything. Their mouths are constantly wide open, eager to taste and to eat anything that looks good to their untrained eyes. It is only with maturity that children learn what is truly good for them and what is not. Only with maturity will children learn that what *looks* good may not truly *be* good. Children need to learn to differentiate between what will hurt them and what will make them healthy.

³Richard Phillips, *Hebrews* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 177.

Eventually they learn to discriminate; they learn to discern. In the same way, mature Christians have learned to differentiate between what is pleasing to God and what is not, between what is consistent with Scripture and what is not. The Bible places great emphasis on spiritual maturity because, like children, immature believers are prone to sample anything. They are attracted to what looks good to their untrained eyes. Only as they grow in maturity are they able to differentiate between what pleases God and what does not. Because of this there can be no growth without discernment.

My wife and I have learned something else about children: children hate to be called children. Babies hate to be called babies. They don't like to be known as immature or childish, even when they clearly are. Every little boy wants to be a big boy. Every little girl wants to be a woman. God has somehow built into us a desire to mature. Every person wants to feel mature and grown up. When the author of Hebrews describes his readers as children he is not paying them a compliment, and he knows that they will be insulted. He hopes to show them their desperate condition and to impress upon them how serious their spiritual condition is. God demands and expects maturity, and maturity is inseparable from discernment. A Christian cannot have one without the other.

2) Lack of Discernment Is Proof of Backsliding

A lack of discernment is given as proof of spiritual immaturity, but this is not all. Those who are not discerning may also be those who are backsliding, whose faith is diminishing rather than increasing. "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child" (Heb. 5:12–13). While the subjects of this letter should have been growing in their faith, progressing from milk to solid food, they were instead moving backwards, returning to baby food.

As children grow and mature, they begin to be able to eat and digest solid food. Most children are weaned quickly and encouraged

to enjoy food more substantial than mere milk. Even while they are still tiny, children long for substantial food. It is good and natural that they desire that which will sustain them more than milk. We would not consider a child healthy who, at six years of age, still drinks only milk, for that child would be weak and sickly. The same is true in the spiritual realm. A person should pass quickly from spiritual milk to solid foods, from the basics to what is more advanced. A person should hunger to quickly learn and understand what is elementary and should soon long for what is more advanced. This is a sign of maturity and the mark of one who has been truly saved. On the other hand, a person who regresses from solid food to milk is a person who is desperately unhealthy, and who will soon wither away and perish.

The recipients of the letter to the Hebrews were regressing rather than progressing in their faith. There had been a time when they were able to hear what the author was so earnest to share with them now. Sadly, they are no longer at such a place. Their lack of discernment has caused them to lose ground. They are moving backwards rather than forwards. They are backslidden.

Solid food is a long way off from these people, for “solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14). Until these people learn to practice discernment and to do so constantly, they will not be able to handle solid food. Until they practice discernment and learn to distinguish between what is good and what is evil, they will continue backsliding. Thus a lack of discernment is not only a mark of spiritual immaturity, but also a mark of those who are backsliding.

3) Lack of Discernment Is Proof of Spiritual Death

Those who have professed faith in Christ cannot backslide indefinitely. Sooner or later it will become clear that they are not believers at all and surely never were. The Bible does not tell us if the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews continued to fall away or if God graciously used this letter to draw them back to him. But Scripture tells us elsewhere what happens to those who harden their hearts

against God, rejecting his good gifts. Romans 1:28–32 is a damning indictment of the unregenerate human heart. It shows with terrifying clarity the evil of which humans are capable. These verses make plain the extent of the sinfulness of those who have rejected the true God in favor of false gods of their own making:

Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

These verses ought to strike terror in the heart of all who forsake God and ought to cause us all to pause and acknowledge the depth of the evil that inhabits the hearts of men. As men turn from God, he gives them up to do those things their hearts, filled with evil, cry out to do: envy, murder, hatred, gossip, boasting, and all manner of evil. And in the midst of this list is one word that seems almost unexpected.⁴ God gives people up to *foolishness*. Most Bible translations render this word as “without understanding.” One, the New King James Version, translates it as “undiscerning.” Regardless of how it is rendered in English, this word points to a type of moral foolishness that should not be present in the life of one who considers himself a Christian. It points not only to the sinfulness of a lack of discernment, but to the inevitable conclusion that a lack of discernment, utter foolishness, is a mark of one who is spiritually dead and bankrupt.

A complete lack of discernment or lack of concern for the discipline of discernment is a mark of spiritual death. It is categorized with sins that somehow seem far more serious. That a lack of discernment appears in this list seems shocking, but it shows just how

⁴I am indebted to pastor Phillip Way for his series of articles called “Learn to Discern” (<http://pastorway.blogspot.com/2006/06/failing-to-discern.html>).

much God values discernment. An absolute lack of discernment and a lack of concern for discernment is sure proof of spiritual death.

We see also in 1 Corinthians 2:14 the dire consequences of ignoring discernment: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” Those who are unsaved, who do not have the Spirit of God within them, are unable to be discerning. The ways of God and the truths of God are utter foolishness to such people.

To lack discernment is to sin against God. It is an inevitable result of turning from him. It is easy to look at those who have turned from God and to look at their lustful and angry hearts and affirm that this is the result of their sin. When a Christian falls into moral sin he may well examine his life to determine how he has turned his back on God, but is the same true when he exhibits a lack of discernment? A wise pastor writes, “to willingly neglect the truth and to live with our eyes closed shut while good and evil stare us in the face is to sin against God, ourselves, our families, and our church. . . . Again, this is worth stating over and over again. It is the responsibility of every Christian to learn, to be discipled in the Word, so that we can know how to be discerning. To fail to discern is to walk in darkness.”⁵

This is the bad news. Scripture portrays those who lack spiritual discernment in three ways: they are spiritually immature, they are backslidden, and they are dead. Those who lack discernment or do not care for it will fit into one of these three categories. These are the dangers of ignoring discernment.

But there is good news, too. The Bible declares that there are many benefits stored up for those who desire discernment, those who seek after it and practice it.

DISCERNMENT IS PROOF OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

We have seen that a lack of discernment is a mark of spiritual death. The Bible makes it clear that a person with no discernment is a per-

⁵Phillip Way, “Failing to Discern” (<http://pastorway.blogspot.com/2006/06/failing-to-discern.html>).

son who has not been saved. The opposite is equally true. A person who exhibits spiritual discernment shows that he has spiritual life. All those who are saved must begin to progress in their ability to discern. Proverbs 9:10 tells us, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” The word translated as “insight” is a Hebrew equivalent to “discernment.” Solomon tells us here that to know God is to possess discernment and that knowledge of God is the very starting point for discernment. Those who fear the Lord, those who know God, must be discerning, for God himself is the very source of discernment. God is also our motive for discernment, for by living lives marked by discernment we bring honor and glory to his name.

The book of Ephesians also draws a clear line between spiritual discernment and spiritual life. Paul, having told his readers how they as Christians have left the kingdom of darkness, admonishes them now to “walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (Eph. 5:8b–10). Those who know the Lord and have been brought into his kingdom of light will do their utmost to seek God’s will in discerning what is pleasing to him. Where there is discernment, there is life.

DISCERNMENT IS PROOF OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Whereas a lack of discernment leads to backsliding, those who grow in discernment will necessarily grow spiritually. Jesus continually emphasized discernment during his ministry, sometimes scolding those who did not have it and sometimes commending those who did. Jesus scolded the disciples for not understanding, or discerning, the point of his miraculous feeding of the four thousand (see Mark 8:17–21). Although Jesus had just finished feeding a multitude, the disciples were concerned that they had no bread for themselves:

And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and

having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” They said to him, “Twelve.” “And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” And they said to him, “Seven.” And he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?”

Jesus scolded the disciples for not understanding, or discerning, what this miracle pointed to. Though they watched it unfold and ate of the bread, they still did not understand just who Jesus was and what he was going to accomplish. Their lack of growth kept them from understanding. Their lack of discernment was a clear sign of spiritual immaturity.

Conversely, in Matthew 13 the disciples asked Jesus why he spoke so often in parables. Jesus explained his rationale and commended the disciples for their ability to understand the parables that are so often hidden from others: “But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (vv. 16–17). In this case he commended his disciples for exhibiting a level of spiritual maturity. Jesus declared the disciples blessed for their ability to see and perceive. He declared them blessed for their ability to discern. Their spiritual growth was marked by an increase in discernment. Their ability to discern was an unequivocal testament to their spiritual growth.

DISCERNMENT IS PROOF OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Finally, just as a lack of discernment is a mark of spiritual immaturity, the presence of discernment is a sure mark of maturity. Again, the author of Hebrews warns, “Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14). Christians who are mature are those who have exercised discernment and have learned how to distinguish good from evil. Spiritual maturity is closely tied to discernment. You cannot have one without the

other. There are no Christians who are mature but undiscerning (see *figure 1*).

Figure 1

Discernment Equals Maturity

LACK OF DISCERNMENT	DISCERNMENT
Spiritual immaturity	Spiritual maturity
Backsliding	Spiritual growth
Spiritually dead	Spiritually alive

The Bible makes it clear: God expects and demands that we pursue and exhibit spiritual discernment. Healthy Christians—those who are alive, growing, and mature—are necessarily those who seek to honor God by discerning between what is good and what is evil.

THE DEPOSIT

One of my favorite television programs is *Antiques Roadshow*. The program affords people the opportunity to present their antique possessions—whether furniture, paintings, toys, or anything else—and to have them appraised by some of the world’s foremost experts in antiquities. For every episode the producers single out ten or fifteen items and show an expert providing a detailed description and valuation of the item. Each section closes with the expert telling the owner just what the item is worth. It is always amusing to see eyes pop out or to see people jump up and down with excitement as they realize that they have in their possession an item worth tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars. During every episode the viewer has opportunity to see “junk” transformed to treasure.

There is one segment from a particular episode that stands out in my mind, because it featured the most valuable item they had appraised to that point. An elderly gentleman from Tucson, Arizona, brought in an old blanket he had inherited several years before. He knew it was old and believed it had a little bit of value, perhaps a few hundred or even a couple of thousand dollars. After inheriting this blanket he had thrown it over the back of a rocking

chair in his bedroom and had not often thought about it until presented with an opportunity to take it to the Roadshow.

With the blanket hanging on a rack behind them, the expert appraiser told the old man that his heart had stopped when he first saw it. As I watched the show, I could see the excitement written all over the expert's face and extending throughout his body. He could not stand still. He began to explain that the item was a Navajo chief's blanket that had been woven in the 1840s. In wonderful condition, it was one of the oldest, intact Navajo weaves to survive to the twenty-first century, and certainly one of only a tiny handful to exist outside of museum collections. He showed the fine detail of the weaving and even showed where it had been torn and repaired shortly after it was first made. I could see the excitement in his eyes as he looked at something he knew was extremely valuable. He knew that sitting before him was something more than a blanket—it was a rare national treasure of incredible value and historical significance.

The appraiser seemed to have trouble even beginning to convey to the audience the importance of this blanket. He left no doubt, though, when he told of its value. Because of its rarity and significance, he had no trouble assigning a value of somewhere between 350,000 and 500,000 dollars. This elderly gentleman had come to the show carrying a blanket worth almost a half-million dollars. He simply could not believe what he was hearing. Choked up and with tears pouring from his eyes he asked to hear the amount again. He looked as if he might pass out.

As the man walked out of the convention center where the show had been held, the blanket he had cavalierly carried in with him was now cradled carefully in his arms. He walked out of the building with security guards on either side of him, drove straight to a bank, and placed the blanket in a safe deposit box. What had been “junk,” a mere accent to an old rocking chair, had been instantly transformed into a precious treasure.

When God saves his people, bringing us from death to life, he opens our eyes to love and appreciate the supreme treasure that is Jesus Christ. What had once been of little interest or significance

is suddenly transformed into something of inestimable value and worth. The gospel message—the news of Jesus’ miraculous birth, perfect life, substitutionary death, and glorious resurrection—is great and joyous news, and yet, for this very reason, it is under attack by the forces of evil. The eminent nineteenth-century pastor and author J. C. Ryle wrote of just some of the ways the gospel can be spoiled to us:

You may spoil the Gospel by *substitution*. You have only to withdraw from the eyes of the sinner the grand object which the Bible proposes to faith,—Jesus Christ; and to substitute another object in His place . . . and the mischief is done. Substitute anything for Christ, and the Gospel is totally spoiled! . . .

You may spoil the Gospel by *addition*. You have only to add to Christ, the grand object of faith, some other objects as equally worthy of honour, and the mischief is done. Add anything to Christ, and the Gospel ceases to be a pure Gospel! . . .

You may spoil the Gospel by *interposition*. You have only to push something between Christ and the eye of the soul, to draw away the sinner’s attention from the Saviour, and the mischief is done. . . .

You may spoil the Gospel by *disproportion*. You have only to attach an exaggerated importance to the secondary things of Christianity, and a diminished importance to the first things, and the mischief is done. Once alter the proportion of the parts of truth, and truth soon becomes downright error! . . .

You may completely spoil the Gospel by *confused and contradictory directions*. Complicated and obscure statements about faith, baptism, Church privileges, and the benefits of the Lord’s Supper . . . are almost as bad as no statement at all!⁶

The gospel can be spoiled, though not objectively, for it is an objective reality. Yet it can be spoiled by us and to us. We can modify the gospel, either deliberately or inadvertently, stripping it of its power and its glory. We can bring to people a counterfeit gospel that is no gospel at all. It is the discipline of discernment that God has provided us to guard the purity of the gospel.

⁶J. C. Ryle, “Evangelical Religion” (http://www.tracts.ukgo.com/ryle_evangelical_religion.htm).

Discernment, then, is not an end in itself. Rather, discernment is the means to a far greater and nobler end. By practicing spiritual discernment we guard the gospel, the message of eternal life. The apostle Paul, writing to his young protégé Timothy, called him to do just this in both of the letters to Timothy recorded in Scripture. “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you,” Paul writes in 1 Timothy 6:20. In his next letter he reiterates, “By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:14). Through the power of the Spirit, Timothy was to guard the gospel.

This word *deposit* is taken from the ancient world. In the age before personal safes and safe deposit boxes, a person who was going to be away for some time might ask another to care for a treasured possession. He would entrust this possession to another, depositing it to him, and this person was bound by a sacred oath to protect it.⁷ In his letters to Timothy, Paul, who knows that he will not always be able to encourage and mentor Timothy, entrusts to him the gospel message. Timothy would be expected to guard this message and to find worthy, godly Christians to whom he could in turn entrust it. And so the gospel has been protected and has carried from one generation to the next through the long, storied history of the church. And so it has been handed in trust to you and to me and to all who believe.

John Stott, in his introduction to his commentary on 2 Timothy, says this:

The church of our day urgently needs to heed the message of this second letter of Paul to Timothy. For all around us we see Christians and churches relaxing their grasp of the gospel, fumbling it, in danger of letting it drop from their hands altogether. A new generation of young Timothys is needed, who will guard the sacred deposit of the gospel, who are determined to proclaim it and are prepared to suffer for it, and who will pass it on pure and uncorrupted to the generation which in due course will rise up to follow them.⁸

⁷William B. Barclay, *1 & 2 Timothy* (Faverdale North, UK: Evangelical Press, 2005), 210–11.

⁸John Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 22.

God has given us the gospel in trust. He has deposited it to our account and expects that we will guard this priceless, precious treasure. God has entrusted to us something of infinite worth and unsurpassed beauty. He has not left us to our own devices, but he has provided for us the Holy Spirit, that with his help we may be faithful in guarding the gospel of Jesus Christ. Spiritual discernment allows us to keep the gospel central and allows us to see and guard against error. Spiritual discernment is absolutely crucial to the one who would understand and heed the gospel. Nothing less than the gospel is at stake.

THE CALL

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, King Solomon knew the importance of discernment. The early verses of Proverbs are a call for both wisdom and discernment:

My son, if you receive my words
and treasure up my commandments with you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
yes, if you call out for insight
and raise your voice for understanding,
if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God. (Prov. 2:1–5)

We are to incline our hearts to discernment and to cry out for it. We should desire spiritual maturity, spiritual growth, and spiritual life. We can only have these wonderful benefits if we have discernment. We serve a God who stands ready and willing to bestow this gift upon those who seek after it.

Proverbs 2 is a father's call to his son to embrace and treasure discernment. There are few things that are as important, as precious, as spiritual discernment. The Bible cries for you to seek after it so you can live, so you can grow, and so you can mature in your faith. Will you answer the call?

KEY THOUGHT

The Bible teaches there is a clear relationship between spiritual discernment and spiritual maturity. For a Christian to be mature, he must also be discerning. Those who are not discerning must be immature, backsliding, or dead. Conversely, those who exhibit discernment must be alive, growing, and mature. It is clear from Scripture that all Christians are expected to pursue discernment, for the Bible cries out repeatedly for us to do so. It is the responsibility of each Christian to heed and to answer the call and so to guard the deposit God has entrusted to us.