

# Discerning God's Will

---

A Guide for Using Spiritual Discernment in Decision-Making\*  
Dr. Keith Cowart

## Biblical Foundations

Relevant scriptures:

- Amos 3:3
- Daniel 2:13-23
- Romans 12:1-2
- James 1:5-6
- John 14:23-26; 16:13-15
- Acts 15:1-21

## The Case for Discernment

- It is essential that we are about God's business and not our own.
- We recognize our own frailty and acknowledge our susceptibility to self-will and personal biases.
- Decision-making that is rooted in confession, the setting aside of personal agendas/biases, and prayerful listening to God greatly increases the likelihood of moving in the wisdom of God rather than the wisdom of man.
- We understand that both visionary leaders and people groups are capable of making good or bad decisions. The process of spiritual discernment is meant to provide a prayerful environment in which the gift of visionary leadership, the contributions of other spiritual gifts, and the goal of broad ownership are held in tension.
- Consensus arrived at through spiritual discernment is more powerful and less divisive than a majority-rule process. Once consensus is reached, we walk in agreement, equally celebrating success and taking responsibility for failures.

## General Guidance

- This guide was designed for use in a church board setting, but has many beneficial applications.
- Not every decision requires the full discernment process. The process is most beneficial when addressing a major issue or one over which the group is divided.
- God does not always have a specific will on every issue. In the words of Augustine, sometimes we are free to "love God and do as we please." The process of spiritual discernment can become paralyzing if based on the assumption that God will always give specific guidance.

- Don't be bound by the process. The following is a highly detailed outline meant to guide a group in the early stages of using spiritual discernment in the decision-making process. As the group becomes more familiar with it, the process can be engaged in a more natural and organic way.
- Spiritual discernment is not always an efficient way of making decisions. But what would happen in our churches if leaders truly believed that discerning the will of God is more important than making decisions for the sake of expediency?
- Spiritual discernment can be used proactively as well as reactively. Most decision-making is reactionary in nature. An issue comes before us and we must decide how to respond. But what if church leaders spent as much time asking where God is leading as we do responding to needs that are already before us?
- What would happen in our churches if board or leadership meetings began to look more like prayer meetings than business meetings? What if prayer was the primary work of the board or leadership team rather than a perfunctory item on the agenda?

## **The Process of Discernment**

1. Clearly articulate the issue(s) to be discerned.
2. Identify any guiding principles (for an example, see Acts 1:21-22).
  - a) What biblical principle(s) is involved?
  - b) How might it impact our mission?
  - c) What core values are relevant?
  - d) What boundaries must be considered (requirements, policies, etc)?
3. Present the various options allowed by the guiding principles.
4. Allow for an examination of conscience (in preparation for the next step).
  - a) Am I living with unconfessed sin?
  - b) Am I indifferent on this issue?
    - i) Definition of indifference: to have no interest in anything but the will of God.
    - ii) If anyone has a personal bias, the appropriate response is to verbalize it openly and honestly before the group. Bringing a bias into the light has a way of diffusing it and opening the heart to the will of God.
5. Engage in a season of listening prayer.
  - a) The Spirit may lead you to other biblical texts.
  - b) The Spirit may give you divine insight (word of knowledge) or spiritual discernment (is it from God, Satan or the flesh?) into the issue.
  - c) The Spirit may confront and change a personal bias.
  - d) The Spirit may give you peace or cause unrest in your spirit.
6. Report back to one another.
  - a) What was your experience as you listened?

- b) What new insights did you gain?
- 7. Weigh all the options. May be guided by:
  - a) Pros and cons.
  - b) Anticipated fruit.
  - c) Consolation (peace) or desolation (no peace).
- 8. Clearly state the option that prevails.
- 9. Assess the group's readiness to decide.
  - a) Ready to move forward.
  - b) Need more time for prayer/discussion.
  - c) Unable to proceed under the current conditions.
- 10. If the group is ready, test for consensus:
  - a) I am in full agreement with the stated option (consensus).
  - b) I have concerns, but support the stated option (consensus).
  - c) I have concerns, but do not believe I should oppose the stated option (consensus).
  - d) I cannot support the stated option (non-consensus).
- 11. If the group is divided, choose a course of action:
  - a) Repeat the whole process.
  - b) Take time for further prayer and reflection before reconsideration.
  - c) Drop the issue indefinitely.
- 12. Once a decision is reached, enter a period of resting during which time each member is asked to prayerfully put the matter to the test of the heart:
  - a) Consolation (peace).
  - b) Desolation (no peace).
- 13. If consolation is the result, the decision is sealed.

\*The book, *Discerning God's Will Together* (Morris and Olsen) was very helpful in the development of this guide. It is a great resource for anyone seeking a more thorough understanding of how spiritual discernment can be used in the decision-making process.