



DISCERNING GOD'S WILL

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:1-2)

In discernment, we rest on the promise of God that *"where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I with them."* Spiritual discernment (or "Listening Prayer") is a prayerful, informed, and intentional effort to distinguish God's voice from other voices that influence us. It is seeking the deepest yearnings of God's heart for us and for our group or congregation.

In their book, Discerning God's will Together, Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen (Upper Room Books, 1998, p. 12) say, *"Reasoned discourse or discussion all too often becomes a process in which people pool their ignorance, value expediency, enter into political tradeoffs, engage in power plays, and rush to judgment; often the group divides into winners and losers with residual feelings of joy and pain. The process of spiritual discernment draws us beyond our own limited reason to seek divine presence and insight."*

How did the early church make decisions and discern God's will?

- They allowed the Holy Spirit to be their guide.
- They *"devoted themselves"* to prayer, teaching the Word, fellowship, and the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42)
- They were of *"one in heart and mind."* (Acts 4:32)

A DISCERNMENT PROCESS

Preparation For Discernment

- **Define** the issue, decision, or question that is before you. Everyone should be clear on the issue or decision you are placing before God.
- Gather good data and basic factual **information**, identifying alternatives and possibilities. This might include a sharing of pros and cons without debate or judgment. This is not a time to "figure out" the answer or "convince others" what is right.
- Ask **clarifying** questions and seek the information you might need.
- **Trust:** Maintain a *"holy indifference"* to the outcome, laying aside all personal agendas, biases, and prejudices. Be willing to leave the outcome to God's direction and to be obedient to the results.



- Consider some **Scriptures** that seem to speak to this issue. Choose one or two passages to meditate upon as you ask the Holy Spirit to guide your reflections. (e.g. James 1:5-8; I Kings 3:5, 9-14; Romans 12:2; Ephesians 5:17) God's Word is essential to discernment.

Prayer of Discernment

- **Quiet yourself** of any distractions and open yourself to the Spirit's leading. "Breathing Prayer" can be helpful.
- Spend quiet time in **personal** reflection and **prayer**, listening to God's "tugging" and hints of His direction. (no less than 15 minutes) After this time of prayerful silence, each person **writes** down the option, direction or guidance that came to him or her.
- **Share** with the group what you have heard and felt in your reflection time. Dialogue about it. Don't debate contributions, but instead listen for how the Spirit may be speaking through them. At this stage there is no right or wrong, but rather a desire to hear God. Frequently, insight and wisdom come in the dialogue. Spend more time listening than sharing.
- Identify the **unifying themes** that have emerged out of this process. A lack of group clarity may indicate that further information and prayer is needed.
- **Wait** for God's timing. Often there is silence during the wait. Continue to ask God for direction as you wait.
- Prayerfully name the **resolution** that seems to be appearing before you. Consider whether or not you have heard the Spirit clearly enough to act at this time.
- Remember to keep a holy indifference to the outcome, willing to receive new ideas and consider them.
- When **consensus** begins to form, continue to offer all decisions and plans to God for reshaping.
- Watch for and expect further **confirmation** of what you have discerned.
- Conclude with a prayer of **thanksgiving** and a reaffirmation of the group's commitment to carrying out the decision.
- Feel free to stop and take time to silently reflect throughout this process. The experience of discernment takes time. We **surrender** to the work of the Holy Spirit who we trust is in control. By the Spirit we come to rest and peace.
- Sometimes the answer may remain unclear. I can be helpful to spend a week or two in individual prayer, before coming together again to see where God is leading.
- Remember, there is no "right way" to do discernment. God is pleased with our desire to seek His will and will bless our efforts.

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