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Bruce Bishop

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DISCERNMENT—CORPORATE AND INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES

BRUCE BISHOP

We have all had the experience of being in a crowded room with the undifferentiated clamor of conversation and noise: suddenly, you hear your name called out. Immediately your body responds, perhaps with a jolt of adrenaline or a stiffening of the muscles. You become attentive to the individual sounds in the room, listening for that call to come again. You sort through the different noises as you seek to find the source of that one voice. Your eyes search the room, and you become very attentive and sensitive to what before was simply noise. And then it comes again... that voice, your name. You are ready this time, and you lock in with ears and eyes, finding the person in the crowd of strangers who knows you and wants to speak with you.

The same is true in our experiences of listening for God's voice. Sometimes in the din of our cultural surroundings we are distracted and not listening. But when we catch an inkling of God's call, we tune in and begin to search intentionally, increasing our abilities to be aware of and to recognize that stirring. We sift through the other elements that come our ways, comparing them to the tenor of that voice; finally, when we hear it again, we are ready to listen and respond. Along with young Samuel, we can firmly declare: "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3:10)

Hearing that voice is the process of spiritual discernment, and whether it be for personal growth, a personal decision, or a group decision, the process involves two movements: attentiveness and differentiation.

BUILDING ATTENTIVENESS

Learning to apprehend the voice of God in our lives opens us up to God's leadings, as well as a deeper experience of God's presence. God is continually speaking to us, even if it is simply to whisper that we are loved. Building our skills of attentiveness involves the discipline of returning our attention time and again to the reality that every breath

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we take is taken in the presence of God. Brother Lawrence, Frank Laubach, and Jean Pierre de Caussade are a few who have written eloquently about the effort and technique of building daily awareness. With each small victory, won with hard labor and seasoned with grace, we move closer to such attentiveness becoming the habit of our hearts.

Besides the discipline of regularly returning our attention to God, we build our abilities to discern God's voice by becoming aware of the patterns God uses to speak in our lives. Often we approach discernment and listening for God's direction as though it were a task that we had to force upon God. It is a mystery that often is described as adversarial, as if we had to first sneak up on Christ to catch him, and then convince him to speak. But Christ is no adversary. He wants to be heard by us and says: "Listen! I am standing and knocking at your door. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and we will eat together." (Rev. 3:20 CEV) James 4:8 encourages us that as we "draw near to God," God will come near to us, as well. Christ does not play hide-and-seek with us, speaking randomly, or switching methods of communication simply to stay out of sight. God does not throw a stone into a bush to distract us while running in the opposite direction. No, God desires to be heard. God longs to be in a partnership with us, walking hand-in-hand with us through life. "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, you will hear a voice saying, 'This is the road! Now follow it.'" (Is. 30:21 CEV)

Because of this shared desire, God communicates with us in consistent ways, creating patterns that are increasingly recognizable, as well as fitting with our distinctive temperaments. As John 10:4 states, "His sheep follow him because they know his voice." We really can become familiar with God's means of communicating with us, and this familiarity grows directly out of a living relationship with Christ.

God also uses our unique weaknesses and strengths to communicate with us. Doing a prayerful examination of the times that we have felt close to God or heard God's leading will begin to reveal patterns of how we apprehend God. Because these patterns are often consistent, they begin to feel "normal" or "natural," so that we might give them less weight than we should. Identifying the particular patterns of communication that each of us has come to know, however, will help us be more sensitive and attentive to God's voice in the future. Once the Spirit's distinctive patterns of personal communication are more familiar to us, we become able to discern God's leadings more

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quickly and with more confidence. It is like listening in the din of the crowd for that now-familiar voice.

These patterns of communication will be different for each of us, and they tend to involve one or more of the following: themes and insights from Scripture, the faith community (both past and present), circumstances, conceptual understandings and reason, emotions and intuition, the aesthetic (art, metaphors, nature, music, etc.), our intentions or wills, spiritual visitations and interventions, and even physical sensations.

DEVELOPING SKILLS OF DIFFERENTIATION

Once we become more skilled at being attentive, we need to learn how to sift and differentiate what we perceive. Is what we hear from God, or is it of our culture or our own egos? A stool cannot remain upright with just one or two legs. It requires at least three legs to maintain stability and balance. The same is true with spiritual discernment. In any experience of looking for God's leading, and especially when we are just beginning, we must always check our personal leadings with Scripture and the faith community—both historically and in the present. God's truth lies at the intersection of these three elements. If any one of the three seems not to correspond with the others, then the work of discerning truth is not yet complete. Relying on just one or two of them can lead to grave errors.

Our faith community may be our church or meeting, a small group, or individuals whom we respect spiritually. It may be a group that is brought together as a specific committee for discernment, or it may be our church's meeting for business. These are all valid components of the Body of Christ. Our faith community across the boundaries of time and space can also consist of historical writings, devotional classics, and the history and tradition of the Church. We do not stand isolated in this period of time, but we share the experience of being Christ-followers with the faithful throughout the ages. However, if we listen only to the leadings of our faith communities and do not seek confirmation from the broad truths of Scripture, theological reflection, and our personal senses of God's voice, we can fall into untruth. This is how cults often come into being.

Scripture's broad themes, carried throughout its pages, are crucial for balance. For instance, the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-24) should

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always be evident. God has spoken clearly through these themes and will not contradict them. However, looking over the history of Christianity, as well as contemporarily, it is evident that any bias can be imposed upon Scripture and “proven” by proof-texting. For example, the Ephesians 6:5 admonition for slaves to be respectful of their masters was used in previous centuries to justify the selling and keeping of people as property, while other texts supported the abolitionist cause. Because a broader reading of the themes of Scripture upholds the imperative to treat each person with dignity and not to treat anyone as an object, the larger witness of Scripture was finally compelling in the cause of putting an end to all slavery as unjust and at odds with the heart of biblical teaching.

Without these balancing factors in our lives, simply following one’s sense of a personal leading, can lead us into a relativism that knows no accountability. What we interpret as personal leadings might simply be a reflection of the culture we live in or a projection of our own desires. However, becoming familiar with how God speaks into our personal experiences is a crucial element in the larger venture of spiritual discernment. Without being involved intimately, personally, and experientially the Christ-centered relational aspect of discernment fails to develop.

Like that stool, we need to have active, healthy relationships with all three avenues of discernment. Where they agree with one another, we can move forward with confidence. When they do not, we know our processes of uncovering direction and truth is not yet complete. This process of checking with the faith community, the themes of Scripture, and our own leadings is often called “weighing.” It is a form of “testing the spirits.” (1 John 4:1)

When a group is working to discern God’s leading, or when an individual is seeking God’s voice, each time someone shares, the “leading” needs to be weighed. Quakers often struggle to balance the idea that every voice needs to be heard with the reality that the process of weighing means every voice does not contribute equally. Good communication, clear relationships, and a shared commitment to seek God’s voice above all else are all necessary for such corporate weighing to be effective.

Spiritual weight is recognized as the words are held in the light of Scripture, the faith community, and an individual’s personal leading. It is never forced upon a group nor assigned to a position or person. Someone may have the reputation of speaking with spiritual weight,

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or may be asked to shoulder positional responsibilities because of the weightiness of their words, but even words from these people must be weighed every time they are shared. The gathered community never knows when a normally Spirit-sensitive person might be having a distracted day, or be thrown off-balance by a personal issue. True spiritual weight is recognized in the moment, as the Holy Spirit confirms the truth of the words by Scripture and within the hearts of others.

INDIVIDUAL AND CORPORATE DISCERNMENT: THE CLEARNESS COMMITTEE

These two movements of spiritual discernment, attentiveness and differentiation, can be brought to the personal experience of listening for God's voice personally, as well as within corporate situations. Every follower of Christ is called into intimate relationship with God by means of the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts. Developing these skills and this awareness allows each of us to apprehend better the stirrings and callings of God. A local or regional church body may gather and employ the same skills, along with helpful approaches to group listening, seeking to hear God's call on their corporate life. And, an individual at a specific crossroads in his or her life might call together a small group to assist with hearing God's voice. Within Quaker circles, these gatherings are called "Meetings for Clearness," or "Clearness Committees."

A Clearness Committee is convened at the request of an individual desiring help in listening for God's direction regarding a particular issue or decision. It might be compared to a group spiritual-direction session, where spiritually discerning people listen for the leadings of God within the story of the person requesting the meeting. They also contribute wisdom and insights emerging from their own experiences and particular patterns of spiritual hearing, for the benefit of the other.

A clerk, selected by the focus person, usually gathers a group of 6-8 people, and provides structure for the Clearness Committee. The members should represent both genders, and it may be helpful to include a mix of people who are close to the focus person, as well those who may not know him or her so well. Someone with a vested interest, such as a spouse or parent, might not be as helpful if they threaten to impose an agenda. The clerk and focus person are look-

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ing for individuals who have spiritual wisdom and skills of discernment and will not limit the group because of an initial bias.

Before a Clearness Committee convenes, it is helpful for the focus person to write a short description of the issue to be considered prayerfully. This helps the individual do some sorting of the larger issues, zeroing in more clearly on the most pressing ones. Given time, the committee members can read this ahead of the meeting, upholding the individual in prayer.

As the group gathers, it is often helpful for the members to share a little about themselves and how they are connected to the focus person. Then clerk may introduce the format of the meeting and usher in a time of silence. The intention of this time of quiet waiting is for each individual to leave behind distractions, as he or she becomes attentive to the presence of Christ among them. The focus person is invited to share out of the silence as he or she is ready. If time was not available prior to the meeting for members to read the description, it can be given to each member upon arrival, and then read and elaborated on by the focus person out of the silence.

After this initial sharing, clarifying questions may be asked. The temptation might be to offer advice, or to mistake leading questions for clarifying ones. But the intent of the first part of the gathering is to understand more fully what the focus person's concerns and options might be. During this time, the committee members gather information that will be helpful for them in opening into a prayerful dialogue with Christ. The clerk needs to be active in protecting the focus person from rhetorical questions, or from individuals who might try to influence the issue rather than letting it unfold on its own. A gentle reminder by the clerk is usually sufficient.

Once the clerk determines committee members have all the input they need, the group returns to listening silence. This is not a time to try to process the issue and search for a solution. Rather, the group holds the focus person in prayer, and enters into a listening dialogue with Christ about what the important elements of possible ways forward might be. What stands out to each member? Where did they sense the movement of the Spirit during the sharing? What seem to be some of the central issues to be considered?

The clerk breaks the silence by first asking the focus person to share what he or she noticed in the prayerful silence. Then each member shares the piece that seemed to rise to the surface for them. It is important for all members to speak, even if they merely affirm another's.

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er member's thoughts. Sometimes the offering of one small piece, or a seemingly incongruent image, can add texture and depth to the overall picture.

As members share, the clerk keeps his or her eye on the larger picture that seems to be coming together. What are the important points? Where does there seem to be movement? What stands out as dissimilar, and what might be the value of what is offered there? A time for further questions by the members or the focus person might be helpful following this time to clarify individual leadings or to pursue new thoughts. If so, the clerk should then return the group to silence for further reflection.

Usually, after just one or two periods of sharing and silence, a sense of direction begins to emerge. The clerk is responsible to begin to form this direction into words, suggesting an initial leading for the group to consider. Members may offer correction or clarification, as the group weighs the sharing and looks for God's movement.

Following a Clearness Committee, it is often helpful to have the participants write down their inferences and leadings. This allows the focus person to have a clear reminder of how God moved during the meeting. Sometimes a Clearness Committee ends with a specific declaration of direction for the individual. Most often, it offers assistance on the next step the focus person should take, pointing out helpful signs of God's movement and activity for prayerful consideration. Either way, a Clearness Committee makes use of individual skills for discernment, corporately applying them to a person's individual journey. It is an expression of the Body of Christ.

Whether it is an individual or a group that desires to hear and respond to the voice of God, the movements of attentiveness and differentiation make it possible. Spiritual discernment is a spiritual gift given to some, and an art that can be developed by all. Whether it be in a committee of Elders, a Monthly Meeting, or a special Meeting for Clearness, we experience God's leadings to be true. Confirmed by Scripture, community, and the inward witness of our hearts, distinguishing that one voice-beyond-the-many provides the way forward. We grow to recognize the one voice of the true Shepherd, and he calls us each by name.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

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