

Learn to Discern – How to Understand the World

The Internet often catalogues the weird and the bizarre calling itself Christian. A few years ago, one of the exhibits was a new fad called Christian pole-dancing. Since pole-dancing is associated with strip-clubs and things obscene, you might well wonder how the two could be put together. Well, someone, somewhere was able to defend the practice, saying it is a time of Christian fellowship and edification for women as they learn pole-dancing together. In fact, should anyone criticise that, they'll quickly be called intolerant, unkind, legalists, fundamentalists, under the law, without grace, pharisees and so forth.

What it really comes down to is a debate about discerning the meaning of things and activities and objects in the world. What is the meaning of pole-dancing? Not the meaning you want it to have, the meaning you now stipulate it must have, but what does it mean? What is it associated with? What is it used for? What does the body communicate? And there seems to have been a wholesale collapse of discernment about the meaning of the world in Christian circles.

But there is a book in the New Testament that deals with this kind of dearth of discernment. When Paul wrote to this church in Corinth, he was writing to address and unravel several problems in Corinth. There were divisions, there was immorality, there was compromise with paganism, there was an abuse of the Lord's Supper, an abuse of spiritual gifts, even heresy regarding the resurrection.

Corinth was a church that lacked discernment. Ironically, and one still finds this today, that's the last thing they would have said about themselves. The Corinthians were very impressed with their own knowledge, and sense of learning. They almost certainly thought of themselves as very wise people. But Paul tells them that they are actually in love with worldly philosophy, and the kind of knowledge they are in pursuit of only puffs up. They were, in many respects, a very immature and undiscerning church.

Much of their lack of discernment is not so much a lack of doctrinal discernment, but a lack of discernment about the world around them. The Corinthians are those people who could not connect the Word to the world. If you walk through the book, you will see that they couldn't see the meaning and the morality of the things they did in Corinth, and how it related to the Word of God. In chapters 1 and 2, we learn they were swept up with the celebrityism of their day, and had brought it into the church, not understanding the meaning of worldly philosophy. In chapter 5 we read they could not connect the sexual practices of one of their members to the word of God. In chapter 6, they could not understand the meaning of suing each other, and going to the law courts. In chapter 7, we learn they didn't understand the meaning of divorce and remarriage, and in chapters 8 through 10, we find out that they could not understand how to deal with the whole question of food, and how food was used in the city by pagans, when to buy it, when to eat it. We learn in chapter 11 that they could not discern the meaning of dress and how men and women need to look distinct.

Now all of this speaks of a lack of discernment about the world. Maybe the Corinthians did understand many doctrinal truths, but there was a broken link when it came to the city they lived in.

But that is the Christianity we live in. We have never had more biblical knowledge, more Bible study tools, more commentaries, more theology books, more Christian books, more online resources. We have more knowledge at our fingertips than any generation in history. But we may be the least discerning generation of Christians to walk the earth. Because somehow that Bible knowledge never seems to touch life, it is like the potential difference of a battery that is never connected to a circuit. Christians have one box for Bible, church and doctrine, and another box for life at school, work, college, family and recreation, and their rule seems to be, make sure those two

boxes don't touch.

So when you begin to talk to Christians about discerning the meaning of the music they listen to, the clothes they wear, the narcotics they take, the career they choose, the education they choose, their use of social media or food or movies or birth control, the way they drive, the way they speak, the way they parent, the way they spend, their approach to retirement and debt, some Christians will at first look at you with bemusement. You really think God cares about those things? When they see you do, the bemusement turns to bewilderment: shock that you actually think there is meaning and therefore morality behind those things. And finally the bewilderment turns to anger and defensiveness: “who are you to judge me? I don't see a Bible verse condemning what I'm doing! Who said you've got it right?”

And so you find that for many Christians, probably the vast majority of their lives remains untouched by Scripture.

To become discerning Christians we are to grow in the skill of understanding the Word and the world so as to love what God loves. We cannot simply understand the meaning of the Bible. If the Bible's principles are ever to touch our lives, we have to understand the meaning of the world: its objects, events, technologies, practices, customs, recreations and so on. This is why Paul prayed that the spiritual wisdom and understanding of the Colossians would turn into deeds in real life: and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; 10 that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; (Col. 1:9-10)

When Paul closed his letter to the Thessalonians, he gave this simple verse which summarises discernment in the world: Test all things, hold fast what is good (5:21).

The book of 1 Corinthians is one of the best places to learn how to discern the world. Now, the New Testament is not like the Talmud, 39 volumes which try to cover every detail of sixth century life. No, the Bible gives use principles, which you can then apply to any situation in the world. No matter how new the technology, the art, the medical procedure, the trend, the fashion, 1 Corinthians gives you timeless principles to evaluate the meaning of the world you are in, so as to connect the Word to the world. Once you understand the meaning, you can understand the morality, whether it is good or evil, wise or foolish, appropriate or inappropriate.

As we walk through Corinthians, Paul gives us several principles to help us to discern the world.

I. The Principle of Edification

12 All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. (1 Cor. 6:12)

23 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. (1 Cor. 10:23)

In both of these Scriptures, Paul tells his readers that there are many things in the world that are not outrightly sinful or evil. They are lawful. But, he says, many of these lawful, allowed things are not helpful, spiritually profitable, beneficial. Many things exist in the world which are not forbidden to the Christian, but Paul says many of those permissible things don't edify, they don't build up or cause spiritual growth and development. Some even threaten your freedom and can become addictive.

The fact that an activity, or an object, or a technology, or a place or a custom is not forbidden or prohibited by Scripture is not the standard for a Christian. Paul raises the bar from lawful to helpful. It is not enough to ask, “what's wrong with this?” The Christian question is “What's right with this?”

In Corinth, like in many cities of the time, Christians faced an ethical question that affected a lot of life in the city. Religion and commerce and social life were all intertwined. So, the pagan temples would have sacrifices for the various gods. Of course, the non-existent gods did not eat the food, and even the priests and priestesses couldn't eat all the food being offered, so it would then be sold in the market. The Corinthians needed discernment as to whether they should buy and eat the food or not.

It's not as simple as a binary the food is bad/ the food is good. It's not a question of “what's wrong with this food?” One of the ways they were to make this decision is with the principle of edification.

12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. 13 No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God *is* faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear *it*. 14 Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. 15 I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say.

16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? 17 For we, *though* many, are one bread *and* one body; for we all partake of that one bread. 18 Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? 19 What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? 20 Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons. 22 Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He? 23 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. (1 Cor. 10:12-23)

Now Paul tells them that there is nothing right or wrong about the food itself. Nor does he think there is a reality in these false gods, though demons in fact hide behind these pagan gods. But he tells them that this food is mixed up in idolatry and they have to think carefully about how or when they use it. He says, this food can build, or this food can destroy.

Take heed, lest you fall, Paul says. How? If by buying this food, or even eating this food, seems to tempt the Corinthian Christians to return to idolatry with all its filthy practices, then it wouldn't be edifying. If it brought back enticing memories of sin, if it re-ignited friendships with pagans calling on them to join them in their sin, if even the location drew them back in, then it would not be edifying to them.

The Corinthians needed to know that while it was entirely lawful to eat this food, they had to be asking themselves all the time, am I fleeing from temptation (v14) when I do this, or am I toying with it? Am I taking God's way of escape from temptation, or am I staying where I'll be tempted? Put simply, can I keep growing and building my Christian life as I do this, or am I breaking it down?

And Paul wanted them to apply the test of edification not only to themselves, but to others.

9 But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? 11 And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 12 But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Cor. 8:9-13)

Paul says, what about the younger Christian who is newly saved? His conscience hasn't settled yet, he is wobbling between total abstinence from all meat because of his previous life in paganism, and falling right back into it. Paul says, if you just recklessly, publicly go about eating this, your young and unsettled Christian brother might see you and conclude it's okay. He isn't ready to go anywhere near that whole pagan setup, but your partaking gives him boldness and permission, and he goes ahead and tumbles headlong back into immorality and evil. Paul says, that's failing the test of edification. Is this going to build others?

The principle of edification asks is this thing I'm about to watch, this place I'm going to go to, this drink I'm about to consume, this skirt I'm about to wear, this picture I'm about to post, will it build me up spiritually? Am I fleeing temptation by doing this, or following it? Does it, as Romans 13:14 warns us against, make provision for the flesh? In other words, does this thing feed the flesh, and make allowance for sin? Will you, and those who participate with you, be built up, spiritually strengthened?

Do you find yourself spiritually numbed after doing this, or using it, or partaking in it? Are you, after using it or partaking in it, a little more distant from the things of God? If this thing or action in the world makes sin seem more normal, and makes righteousness seem strange, it's not edifying you. If you are less inclined to thank God, pray, seek Him, it is not edifying you. Paul even says whatever is not of faith is sin, so that if you cannot do this in faith, for God's glory, it's probably not edifying.

All things are lawful, but not all things edify. The skill of discernment is to continually ask, does this edify me and others?

Paul has a second principle for the Corinthians and for us.

II. The Principle of Reputation

25 Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake; 26 for "the earth *is* the LORD'S, and all its fullness." 27 If any of those who do not believe invites you *to dinner*, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake. 28 But if anyone says to you, "This was offered to idols," do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake; for "the earth *is* the LORD'S, and all its fullness2." 29 "Conscience, " I say, not your own, but that of the other. For why is my liberty judged by another *man's* conscience? 30 But if I partake with thanks, why am I evil spoken of for *the food* over which I give thanks?

31 Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 32 Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, 33 just as I also please all *men* in all *things*, not seeking my own profit, but the *profit* of many, that they may be saved (1 Cor. 10:25-33)

Now, Paul has warned them about edification when it comes to food, but now he moves on to a second issue: God's reputation. He says in verse 25 that the believers are free to buy and eat whatever food they want, in private. But say you get invited to a meal, and you don't know where the unbeliever bought the food? Paul says, don't complicate your life. Just eat.

But, Paul says, if the unbeliever introduces the religious issue, it's a different story. If the unbeliever is not simply having you over for a meal, but is testing your Christian convictions by saying, "do you know this was offered to idols?", now it changes everything. The unbeliever has just made the meal into a contest between gods, into a test of Christianity's exclusive claims. He has brought in the association of idolatry. From his perspective, if you knowingly partake with him, you are doing a pagan equivalent of the Lord's Supper. Paul says, now you don't partake. Why? Because God's reputation is now at stake. The truth of the Gospel is at stake. That unbeliever's conscience, his knowledge of who God is and who idols are, will be affected by whether or not he sees a Christian partaking. And for the sake of that man's conscience, and for the glory of God, you don't partake.

You give no offence, (v32), you eat and drink for God's reputation, not for self (v31). Paul says, it's not just about me and my stomach. Now that I am a Christian, I carry the name of Jesus Christ around with me. And if what I do reflects badly on Christ, I don't want to do it. If a believer or an unbeliever could easily and naturally misunderstand what I'm doing, misconstrue what I'm doing, misinterpret what I'm doing, then I will always err on the side of caution.

Why? Because we are not our own, anymore. Our lives are not about my rights, my freedoms, my life. Paul takes a whole chapter, chapter 9, to show the Corinthians that he gives up his rights for the sake of others. He gives up the right to be paid, he gives up the right to not keep certain Jewish customs when wanting to reach Jews, he gives up the right to partake of those rituals when he wants to reach Gentiles. Paul's life is one of unselfish service of others. He wants God's reputation uppermost, as well another's edification.

The principle of reputation asks, does this reflect rightly upon God? Or does it, as 1 Thessalonians 5:22, even have the appearance of evil? Does it, as Paul says in Titus 2:10, adorn the doctrine of God? Does it beautify the testimony of Christ, of His church, and of you as His ambassador?

You ask, “does this uphold God's reputation?”, before you buy that magazine, or use those profane words, or begin dating or courting the unsaved, or write some angry rant on Facebook. What will it do to my testimony as a Christian if it is known that I spend most of my leisure hours playing games, and sometimes even the hours I should be asleep, or in dodgy online chat rooms? How will God's reputation be affected if I drink this or smoke this or take this? What will be understood about God if I buy lottery tickets, or spend money I don't have, or trawl porn sites in my free time? What does my temperament, my marriage, my parenting, my decision making say about my God?

One misplaced objection to this is to say, “Well, we mustn't be men-pleasers! We can't live in the fear of man!” That's true. But there is a real difference between the fear of man and seeking to be blameless. The fear of man is always shifting based upon what people will like or dislike, because it's them you are seeking to please. But seeking to be blameless is trying to represent God faithfully before men, so that a reasonable person would not cast blame upon God. When you are seeking to uphold God's reputation, there will still be times when you are misunderstood, but God will vindicate you.

No, it doesn't really matter what people think of us. But it does matter that we don't add to the confusion about God, or give fuel to fiery criticism that Christians are hypocrites and have no reality behind their profession. It matters that we seek the glory of another, not simply our own pleasure.

But Paul now comes to a third principle.

III. The Principle of Intention

29 But this I say, brethren, the time *is* short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, 30 those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, 31 and those who use this world as not misusing *it*. For the form of this world is passing away. (1 Cor. 7:29-31)

As Paul discusses marriage, divorce and remarriage, he says that Christians should understand that this world is not permanent, that it is passing away. And so in verse 31 he says that Christians must use this world, not misuse it.

The word misuse means to overuse, to use it up, to use it as if it is the only thing you have. Who

would do that? People who do not have the eternal perspective on the world. They are treating it like it is all there is. So without seeing that it is passing away, and there is a new world coming, they misuse the world. They misunderstand its intention, so they misuse it.

The principle of intention is simple: what did God intend with this thing? Everything God made has a purpose, and has the meaning God invested in it. When you think and reflect on why God made it and for what purpose, you are thinking through the principle of intention. For example, immorality was rife in Corinth. So Paul wants them to think about the intention of the body.

15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make *them* members of a harlot? Certainly not! 16 Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body *with her*? For "the two," He says, "shall become one flesh." 17 But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit *with Him*. 18 Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Cor. 6:15-20)

What did God intend for the body? It is a temple for the Holy Spirit. The Corinthians are meant to think about whether their actions reflect people who submit to that intention.

A few chapters later, Paul is dealing with how believers are coming dressed to church. In that culture, as the mosaics of the period show us, all married women wore head-coverings. But some were misinterpreting the freedom of the Gospel, and arriving dressed in ways that suggested they were not in submission to their husbands. They not only misunderstood the edification principle, and the reputation principle, but they misunderstood the intentions of God regarding male and female.

3 But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman *is* man, and the head of Christ *is* God. (1 Cor. 11:3)

7 For a man indeed ought not to cover *his* head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man is not from woman, but woman from man. 9 Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. 10 For this reason the woman ought to have *a symbol of* authority on *her* head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, neither *is* man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. (1 Cor. 11:7-11)

Now my purpose here is not to unpack the question of headcoverings. It is to bring out the spirit of this passage: God wants men and women to look different, to have different roles, because He made them different. So God even wants that understood in outward appearance, that men look like men, and women look like women, and that the order in marriage and in the home is loved, cherished and visible. Paul forces the Corinthians to ask about intention: why did God make men and women? Why are they different? What is God's intention with the sexes?

If you are to be a discerning Christian, you need to often ask the question of intention. What does God want from parents? What is God's intention for human government? What is God's intention for your business, your vocation? Why did God make music, and what should it be used for? What did God intend with giving us animals? What is God's intention for this food or drink?

And we ask the same question when the object or activity has been made by man, God's image-bearer. What do people intend with this technology, or this entertainment, or this bio-medical innovation? What do people intend with this law, or this institution, or this fashion? Does what they intend with it conform to God's intentions for His glory and for man's good?

If the Corinthians had been trying to connect the Word to the world, they would have been asking,

does this edify? Is it edifying to have a man sleeping with his mother in law? Is it edifying to sue each other? Is it edifying to confuse younger believers? Is it edifying to gorge ourselves at the Lord's Supper? Is it edifying to have out of control church services with no order and decency? Is it edifying to hang around idol temples? Is it edifying to Christians newly saved out of paganism to hang around idol temples?

They would have been asking about reputation. Does it represent Christ well when our church is divided? Does it uphold God's name when we appear in court together? Does it uphold God's name when we have an scandalous adulterer in our membership? Does it uphold God's name when we recklessly eat food from idol temples in front of others?

They would have been asking about intention. What did God intend the church to be? Certainly not a place of rival personalities, but a holy temple, a stewardship from God. What did God intend the body to be? Not a thing to be abused in immorality. What did God intend marriage to be? Not something broken with divorce and adultery. What did God intend food to be? A source of joy and sustenance, not a form of worship of false gods, or a means to cause young Christian to tumble. What did God intend man and women to be? Equal but different image-bearers of God.

Edification. Reputation. Intention.

Don't be an agnostic about meaning. Some people do that to excuse their lives and actions, pretending the world has no meaning. But just because you can't or don't understand what someone is saying, doesn't mean it is without meaning. The world proclaims itself as the handiwork of God. Live your life asking. One, does this edify? Will it build me and others up in our faith?

Two, will this glorify God? Will it uphold His reputation?

Three, can I sanctify this for God's purposes, use it for the purposes God set out for it? Will it meet God's intentions.

Edify. Glorify. Sanctify. Edification, reputation, and intention.