

Learn to Discern – Discerning Authorities

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct. (Heb. 13:7)

When it comes to the skill of discernment, one of the biggest mistakes we can make is to imagine it is something we can do on our own. Our pride would like to imagine that all our thoughts are our own, and all our judgement is our own. In reality, none of us can discern the Word and the world completely independently. A huge amount of personal trust is part of the process of discernment. We trust others, and absorb their discernment as our own.

Think about it. How did you end up at any church you have attended in the past? It probably wasn't because you created a Excel spreadsheet of theological positions, compared ours to others, and then began researching the biblical, historical, and theological correctness.

After the trusted recommendation, we extend tentative trust, and we try the teacher or the church out. And if we then choose to trust, it's again often based on very personal qualities. It might be the teacher's boldness, or clarity, or gentleness, or fidelity to the Bible, or forthrightness, or humour, or warmth, or some combination of these.

The level of trust grows with time and with observation. Eventually, trust turns into loyalty. And now, the teachers we have chosen to trust become part of our discernment. Further, we now tend to restrict ourselves to books, speakers, conferences, blogs, seminaries and other resources that are recommended by the trusted person or group. This has a self-reinforcing effect: the people we trust point us to resources that confirm the positions of the people we trust. Unless something rather dramatic happens, the vast majority of people will simply remain within the group where their loyalty belongs.

In principle, this matter of personal trust not a bad thing. In fact, it is a necessary thing. The reason is, the Word is too complex, and the world is too complex for any one person to know and judge everything perfectly on his or her own. We all have to rely on someone, somewhere, to help us in areas where we simply don't have the time, or the expertise, to become experts. One of my professors said that in any area of life where you are not an expert, you cannot be a voice, you can only be an echo of someone who is a voice. We have to echo someone, whether it comes to knowledge about the world, or knowledge about the Word.

And there is no shame in this, because God limits our time and our lifespans so that we must lean on others, learn from others, trust others. The person who does not do this has a pride problem. A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; He rages against all wise judgment. (Prov. 18:1)

Whom we trust, and why, are the real questions. Proverbs tells us the great danger of trusting the wrong person. Confidence in an unfaithful *man* in time of trouble *is like* a bad tooth and a foot out of joint. (Prov. 25:19). Placing your trust in some kind of teaching authority who is not to be trusted is like chewing on a rotten tooth, or leaning on a dislocated foot. Pain will certainly result.

The pain is this: that person's bad or faulty use of Scripture becomes yours. That person's faulty understanding of the world becomes yours. If you are leaning on someone to help you judge the Word and the world rightly, and they do it badly, it is warping your own judgement.

We need to discern who to trust to help us to understand the Word, and the world.

Now the previous two sermons have given you some tools to see if the teacher handles the Word well, and if he judges the world well.

But here's the dilemma. We all have to trust someone. But usually the people we have to trust know

more than we do in that area. So how can we discern if they are trustworthy and competent in that area of knowledge, when they already are ahead of us? It's an unbalanced situation. The students have to decide on the competence of the teacher. They can always argue and persuade in ways that seem biblical, or highly knowledgeable. Indeed, every popular false teacher seems to make sense, seems intelligent, humorous, seems to use the Bible.

Gladly, the Bible does give us methods to discern if we should place our trust in certain authorities who teach the Bible. And in God's wisdom, we do not need to have the knowledge of the experts to be able to make these judgements. The book which helps us with discerning which authorities to trust is the book of 2 Corinthians.

Second Corinthians has Paul writing to that rather undiscerning church again, the church at Corinth. In between the writing of his first and second letter, the Corinthians had been swept up and charmed by some teachers who were leading them astray. False apostles set themselves up as hyper-apostles, and questioned Paul's authority. Second Corinthians is then Paul doing something that no humble authority wants to do: assert and defend his own authority. He does so by explaining what real ministry looks like in chapter 1 through 7, and then after two chapters on giving, he goes on to defend his apostleship from chapters 10 to 13.

Why this book is valuable for the pursuit of discernment is that the Corinthians were, like us, bombarded with voices, all claiming to be authorities. They must have felt a bit perplexed as they tried to sort out who was trustworthy and who was not. What Paul does is to give them tests that any thoughtful believer can apply to those who take up the office of teacher, and apply those tests.

I. The Test of Accountable Blamelessness

For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you. (2 Cor. 1:12)

Paul says, in comparison to these others that boast in their knowledge or supposed power, the mark of my authority is that we lived openly before you in a godly way. Our conscience confirms that we weren't two-faced. We lived an uncomplicated and sincere life. The words in the Greek there are really synonyms, meaning: frankness, unmixed motives, integrity. What you see is what you get.

Paul lived a life that was open, public and accessible to those he taught. They could examine him at any time, and see if his message and his life matched. He says a similar thing to the Thessalonians, when he writes, “ 10 You *are* witnesses, and God *also*, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; (1 Thess. 2:10)

Now why does God set this up as the test of trust? Because while Christians cannot always argue with the reason or learning of someone who claims to teach, they can easily judge if his life and manner matches his message. This is why the primary qualifications for a pastor or a deacon in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not his education and intelligence, but his life. You might not be able to argue with him over which view of the Trinity is correct, but you can judge if he is serious-minded, gentle with people, loyal to his wife, respectable in demeanor, hospitable, not controlled by substances or in greedy pursuit of money, whether his children submit to him, whether he is quarrelsome, or self-controlled. These passages and others are meant to get us beyond a man's winsomeness, humour, sweet children, erudite learning, or command of theology and history. *How does he live?*, is the real question. Since a bad tree cannot bring forth good fruit, a bad man cannot ultimately guide God's people to what is healthy.

The character qualities God calls us to look for are eminently public and verifiable. Conversely, God gives us similar lists of evil fruit in false teachers: 2 Peter 2:1-22, 3 John 9-11, Jude 4-19. While no man's fruit will be a harvest of perfection, the general type and taste of the fruit are God's first test to determine if trust and loyalty are warranted.

Another reason why God makes publicly verifiable moral qualities the test of trustworthiness is that, as we've seen, discernment is not primarily a matter of information, as much as it is a matter of the fear of the Lord, and obedience, and pursuit of God. If someone is not doing that, how much discernment will he have? And if someone's life is not available for you to see if that fear of the Lord is there, you have less reason to trust.

Now Paul suggests that one of the reasons to not trust someone is a life hidden from public scrutiny, a life with plenty of secretiveness, where mixed motives are almost certainly present.

For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ. (2 Cor. 2:17)

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. (2 Cor. 4:1-2)

Notice the openness, as opposed to hidden things, craftiness, deceitful handling of God's Word, peddling God's Word. Paul says, you should trust the people whose lives are on display and can be examined.

3 We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed. 4 But in all *things* we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, 5 in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; 6 by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, 7 by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, 8 by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and *yet* true; 9 as unknown, and *yet* well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and *yet* not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and *yet* possessing all things. 11 O Corinthians! We have spoken openly to you, our heart is wide open. 12 You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your *own* affections. 13 Now in return for the same (I speak as to children), you also be open. (2 Cor. 6:3-13)

A transparent, open, blameless life.

Here are some implications of this test: you have no reason to trust an anonymous writer on the Internet. However clever, creative, insightful the speaker or writer, from a biblical point of view, anonymous sources don't deserve your trust. You may choose to, but you certainly don't have to, and you have more reasons not to.

Here's another: If a teacher lives in virtual seclusion from his church, they cannot access him, he never opens his home, he is not living openly, and is less worthy of trust. If he does not have a plurality of leaders, other pastors and deacons who know him and spend time with him, his life is not open for examination. If he sets up the church so that his decisions are unassailable, his authority absolute, and his behaviour always justified, he is not living as Paul did.

Here's another: if the teacher is not a member of a church, and under the authority of someone who could call him to account, you have less reason to trust him. A board of directors of a ministry is not the same as having a pastor or pastors shepherding.

What about the teacher who is not anonymous, but is obviously thousands of miles away, and whose life is not accessible to you to scrutinise? He can have some benefit, but if his life is not available to you to peruse, you need to withhold the kind of trust you are commanded to give those close to you. Maybe that person has a church which holds him accountable. Great, that's better, but you're still not in that church. Notice what Scripture says:

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Hebrews 13:7 tells us to follow leaders by *considering the outcome of their lives*: the visible results and fruits of their ministry. You can see what sort of families, finances, character they have, and you can judge for yourself if their lives match their lips. What is the overall fruit of the ministry? Is this church/ pastor/ ministry producing healthy, cross-carrying disciples? Are stronger marriages and families developing? Are people being genuinely saved and growing in Christlikeness? While you cannot blame all the actions of a church on their leader, if the general trend is toward divisiveness, pugnaciousness, moral compromise, spiritual pride, inverting of priorities (Mat 23:23) and general waywardness, you have to ask if the diet has been healthy. If you're not close enough to evaluate the fruit, you need to moderate how much trust you're going to extend.

This is one of the dilemmas and difficulties our technologies produce. The Internet now allows us to hear thousands of teachers worldwide with the click of a button. We've all benefited from that. But we now have the abnormal situation of hearing voices abstracted from character. We have people who sound like authorities, but we are never close enough to them to do these biblical checks. Now this doesn't mean we shouldn't listen to sermons from excellent teachers overseas. But I think the biblical standard is this: the less access you have to observe the life, the less weight the person should carry in shaping your judgements. You should think of trusting biblical teachers in concentric circles. The people you trust the most should be those whose life you can observe in the flesh.

You do not merely discern the teaching, you discern the life. If you do not have enough access to discern the life, then you are not really in a position to know if this person is trustworthy enough to follow closely. The test of open blamelessness.

II. The Test of Chosen Meekness

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as *being* from ourselves, but our sufficiency *is* from God, (2 Cor. 3:5)

For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. (2 Cor. 4:5)

For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. (2 Cor. 10:12)

Paul is contrasting the kind of authority which these false teachers had, with the kind that he and his associates exhibited. Paul did not think he was self-sufficient, in his own education, or learning, or public speaking ability.

Paul didn't preach himself. That is, he didn't make his message about himself, his experiences, his learning. He didn't get into sparring matches with other teachers, defending his reputation, defending himself. He wasn't always comparing himself and contrasting himself, because that would be preaching Paul. He didn't spend precious preaching time commending himself.

In other words, Paul was self-effacing, unpretentious, modest. He was meek, and now, with some reluctance, he has to point out to the Corinthians, how often did I speak about myself in my sermons? How often did I defend myself, or make it about me?

Paul came alongside people and exhorted them. In fact, his meek approach was even ridiculed by these people. 10 "For *his* letters," they say, "*are* weighty and powerful, but *his* bodily presence *is* weak, and *his* speech contemptible." (2 Cor. 10:10)

And it's a strange perverseness in human nature. Immature believers are more willing to trust the proud, boastful, brawling false teacher who insults them every Sunday, than the meek shepherd who has borne with them and carried them with gentleness.

18 Seeing that many boast according to the flesh, I also will boast. 19 For you put up with fools gladly, since you *yourselves* are wise! 20 For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours *you*, if one takes *from you*, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face. 21 To *our* shame, I say that we were too weak for that!

You see people who spend years with a contentious, paranoid, arrogant teacher, and who are too afraid to walk away. An abused girlfriend who stays with the guy who beats her, says, "It's because he loves me that he beats me!" So people put up with brawlers in the pulpit, bullies in the pulpit, insufferable egos in the pulpit, but they want it that way! They take that kind of pride for strength or spiritual authority. I know the ministry has also been populated by milksops and pushovers, but that doesn't mean we give our allegiance to egotistical thugs, like the Corinthians did. The kind of thuggish behaviour described in verse 20 is not meekness, and not worthy of Christians' trust.

There are teachers out there who manage to subtly or overtly make everything about themselves and their ministry. Every week is drama. Every time there is some paranoia about who is for them or who is against them. Sermons become long defences of their own actions.

I adopted the view of someone I highly respect years ago: I am not going to publicly defend myself. I will defend the truth, and I will defend biblical positions, but if people say such and such about me, it is not worth wasting precious pulpit time on. The fastest way to fall into a devilish trap of disorder in the church is for the pastor to become entangled in a never-ending soap opera of defending himself and answering his critics. That makes you the focus, and whether you meant to or not, you end up preaching yourself.

But "he who glories, let him glory in the LORD." 18 For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends. (2 Cor. 10:17-18)

And then there are those who find clever ways to boast without ever actually boasting. Parading their knowledge, mentioning by-the-way dramatic stories of healings and exorcisms that went on around them, speaking casually of how they pray four hours a day, and have memorised the entire New Testament. John describes a teacher like this in 3 John. 9 I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. (3 Jn. 1:9)

Then there are those teachers who keep their followers in a place of perpetual, and sometimes total, dependence on them. If you need a certain teacher to unlock Scripture for you, and he becomes a kind of skeleton key for all questions, the trend is unhealthy. Meek teachers of the Word submit themselves to a tradition of orthodoxy older and bigger than themselves, and point their people to it (2 Thes 3:6). Meek teachers want to foster maturity in their hearers, so that those hearers become better able to discern and judge, and grow up. But the proud enjoy the flattery of having groupies hang on their every word.

In today's Christianity, we've gotten even worse. Now we have teachers who are celebrities, with veritable fans and followers, with publicists and marketers and bodyguards. Their ministries carry their names, their books carry their faces, they become a brand to be marketed and developed. When it is not the teachers themselves doing it, they seem to do very little to restrain their acolytes and groupies. Back in the first letter, Paul write: 4 For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am

of Apollos," are you not carnal? 5 Who then is Paul, and who *is* Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. 7 So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. (1 Cor. 3:4-7)

The test of meekness is this: the teacher worth trusting is one who spends the bulk of his time explaining the Word, exalting Christ, glorifying God, and equipping you to discern. They are reluctant to bring themselves into the message, because it will actually distract from God's Word. When they are attacked or criticised, they don't defend themselves, because that is a diversion from Satan. They trust God to vindicate them, and get on with the work of making disciples. The teacher to trust is the one who equips you to know and love Christ more. You notice him, you are thankful for him, but he is not the focus. Like an usher, he escorts you into the presence of God. Like a librarian, he shows you where to look in God's Word. Like a guide, he points out the way. He errs on the side of gentleness, and is happiest when you forget him and get to the truth.

Who should you trust? The one's whose life is open and blameless. The one whose approach is self-effacing and meek.

Paul gives us a third reason why the Corinthians should have trusted him.

III. The Test of Chosen Sacrifice

The acid test between the false apostles and Paul was this: the false apostles were in it for themselves. Because they were using ministry for personal benefit, loss and suffering was not what they expected or wanted in ministry. So what Paul does is to say, the one you can trust is the one who is not using ministry as a means to his own ends: more money, more popularity, more fame, more power. In fact, he is giving up those things in service of Christ and his church.

But in whatever anyone is bold-- I speak foolishly-- I am bold also. 22 Are they Hebrews? So *am* I. Are they Israelites? So *am* I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So *am* I. 23 Are they ministers of Christ?-- I speak as a fool-- I *am* more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. 24 From the Jews five times I received forty *stripes* minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26 *in* journeys often, *in* perils of waters, *in* perils of robbers, *in* perils of *my own* countrymen, *in* perils of the Gentiles, *in* perils in the city, *in* perils in the wilderness, *in* perils in the sea, *in* perils among false brethren; 27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness-- 28 besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? 30 If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. (2 Cor. 11:18-30)

The ministry has always been, unfortunately, a magnet for leeches, layabouts, and con-artists. But Jesus told us clearly that the hireling is the one who flees when the wolf comes. In other words, he protects himself at all costs. Paul had embraced torture, beatings, prison, discomfort, pain, hunger, weariness, deprivation, and plenty of danger, in stark contrast to the comforts that the false apostles in Corinth were seeking. Paul says, here are my qualifications to earn your trust: does this look like the life of a selfish, self-seeking person? My life is about loss, but I do it voluntarily.

15 And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved. (2 Cor. 12:15)

God has set ministry up so that some kind of suffering is often visible. It can be financial, or bodily, or loss, or fatigue. It can be foregoing lawful things that others do. In that suffering, there is an object lesson going on:

8 *We are* hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; *we are* perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted,

but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed-- 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11 For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (2 Cor. 4:8-11)

Sacrifice in ministry is an object lesson of the Gospel – the more death and loss, the more Christ's resurrection power and life consoles and is seen.

The test of self-sacrifice is this, the people worth trusting are those who have embraced and absorbed the cost of doing ministry. It is not a financial means to an end for them. It is not just a job. They are not mercenaries. You can tell there has been sacrifice, and their only payback for some of it will be in eternity. Sometimes, you can only see this after many years of ministry.

Those who sacrifice, who spend and are spent gladly, deserve a measure of trust. In a world of mercenaries, when a teacher demonstrates that they “went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. 8 We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth. (3 Jn. 1:7-8)

Now, false teachers may also sacrifice. Less trustworthy people may have elements of these three. But it is the combination of these three that invites trust.

False teachers protect themselves, exalt themselves, and enrich themselves. Those that deserve your trust live openly that their blamelessness might be tested, meekly keep themselves out of the primary focus so that Christ may be exalted, and embrace sacrifice, that the Word of God may go forth.

We began this series by saying discernment is the skill of understanding God's Word and God's World, so as to love what God loves. We saw that the foundation is your relationship with God. Fear, obey and pursue the Lord. We understood how to compare Scripture with Scripture so as to rightly divide the Word. We saw three principles so as to rightly judge the meaning of the world, and now we have seen three principles to carefully choose those teachers who will assist you to do so. That's how we'll judge with righteous judgement.