



The Discipline of Spiritual Sight

Discernment is not spiritual mind reading, but the grace to judge with humility, charity, and Christlike care.

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FAITH

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God does not leave His children to navigate mortality without help.

This idea practically screams from the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

We are given commandments. We are given the gift of the Holy Ghost. We are given scripture. We are given prophets and covenants and ordinances. We are given bishops and other leaders.

There are also the gifts of the Spirit. In particular helping with this task is the gift of discernment. Discernment can loom large in Latter-day Saint culture.

Discernment is a gift that helps us perceive reality in the light of the Spirit. Jesus demonstrated it frequently when he was able to [perceive the true thoughts](#) of those he came in contact with.

It helps those it is given to distinguish [truth from error](#), sincerity from performance, wisdom from impulse, and [spiritual influence](#) from counterfeit. It is not simply a gift for detecting danger; it can help us minister better, helping us perceive burdens, possibilities, and hidden goodness.

Spiritual Gifts Are for the Body of Christ

[Doctrine and Covenants 46](#) places discernment within a broader theology of spiritual gifts. The Lord teaches that gifts come from God “for the benefit of the children of God.” It is listed broadly among the gifts that can be given.

The same section also specifically includes that this gift is given to bishops so the Saints are not misled by false claims of spiritual gifts.

Discernment is not introduced as a private superpower. It is part of the Lord’s effort to bless, order, protect, and edify the Church.

Paul teaches a similar principle in [1 Corinthians 12](#). Spiritual gifts are distributed across the body of Christ. No single member possesses the whole body’s wisdom, and no single gift exhausts the Spirit’s work. That means discernment is best understood not as an isolated talent possessed by a few, but as one part of a larger divine economy in which God blesses His people through many members, many gifts, and many forms of inspired service.

Discernment is framed to be about service in building the kingdom of God. It is given so the body of Christ can be protected, guided, humbled, and healed.

Discernment Is Broader Than Detecting Evil

Elder David A. Bednar, of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has offered one of the most helpful modern explanations of the gift. Drawing on earlier teachings, he describes discernment as operating in [four](#)

major ways. 1) It can help us detect hidden error or evil in others. 2) More importantly, it can help us detect hidden error or evil in ourselves. 3) It can help us find concealed good in others. 4) And it can help us find concealed good in ourselves.

That four-part framework is crucial.

Many cultural conversations about discernment focus almost entirely on the first function: detecting what is wrong with someone else. But Elder Bednar's description gives us a much richer and more Christian account.

Discernment may help a parent sense that a child's anger is really fear. It may help a Relief Society president recognize that a sister's distance is not indifference but exhaustion. It may help a bishop perceive that a confession needs less interrogation and more mercy. It may help a missionary see spiritual hunger beneath defensiveness. It may help a disciple recognize that his own "righteous concern" is actually pride.

The highest form of discernment may not be the ability to expose people. It may be the ability to see them truthfully enough to call forth their better selves.

That is a profoundly Christlike gift.

Christ saw hypocrisy, but He also saw faith. He saw sin, but He also saw repentance. He saw Peter's denial, but He also saw Peter's future. He saw Zacchaeus in a tree and called him into a transformed life. He saw the woman taken in adultery as a soul to be rescued.

Discernment, in this sense, is not merely suspicion sharpened by religion. It is perception purified by charity.

Discernment and Judgment

The classic biblical image of discernment may be Solomon's prayer for "an understanding heart." Solomon did not ask to become omniscient. He asked for wisdom to judge rightly between good and bad. Discernment is tied to judgment, humility, and stewardship.



The Church's current Handbook uses similar language when speaking of bishops and stake presidents. It says that, in their role helping members repent, these leaders are blessed with the spiritual gift of discernment, which helps them "discern truth, understand a member's heart, and identify his or her needs."

That is a meaningful promise. Bishops and stake presidents are not merely administrators. They are called and set apart to serve as judges in Israel. In that role, they may receive spiritual help beyond their own natural insight.

A bishop who discerns well may be better able to answer the question "What does this child of God need to come closer to Christ?"

Discernment Can Grow

Discernment is a spiritual gift, but like most spiritual gifts, that does not mean it bypasses ordinary faithful effort.

Bednar connects discernment with being "quick to observe"—the capacity to notice and obey. In another teaching on revelation, he explains that some revelation comes suddenly, like [light filling a dark room](#), while the more common pattern is gradual, like the slow increase of light at sunrise.

In my experience, that is often how discernment works in real life.

Sometimes a bishop, parent, missionary, or friend may receive a sudden prompting. A question comes to mind. A name appears in prayer. A warning feeling interrupts an ordinary moment. These experiences of direct and sudden discernment are real, but are not universal or to be expected at every moment.

Discernment often develops more quietly. It comes through listening over time. It comes through knowing the scriptures, [asking better questions](#), noticing patterns, and learning from prior mistakes. For leaders, it can grow through studying the Handbook or honoring confidences.

A leader who listens carefully is not relying less on revelation than one who waits for an unexpected impression. A ward council that gathers information, counsels together, and

prays over real people is not replacing revelation with process. It may be creating the conditions in which revelation, or spiritual discernment, can be recognized.

Discernment Belongs to Councils

One of the most important correctives to an overly narrow view of discernment is the doctrine of councils.

In a worldwide leadership training discussion, fellow apostle Elder M. Russell Ballard taught that no one person knows all the answers to every question and that **councils allow leaders to draw on inspiration** from various members. Bednar added that it is a mistaken notion that every element of ward revelation must come through the bishop. By virtue of his keys, the bishop directs and affirms, but he does not need to receive “every jot and tittle” of revelation himself. He also observed that discernment operates more effectively when a presiding officer listens rather than dominates.

The doctrine of discernment taught by these leaders is a mature and deeply grounded one. The gift of discernment works best when joined to humility, councils, and the gifts of others.

The Myth of the Magical Bishop

In some Latter-day Saint conversations, discernment has been imagined in a way that is much narrower, more automatic, and more dramatic than the scriptures require or even imply. This expectation shows up both among some believing members and among some critics of the Church.

The assumption goes like this: if bishops and other leaders have the gift of discernment, then they should be able to detect hidden sin, deception, danger, or unworthiness with perfect reliability. Under that assumption, every missed warning sign becomes evidence that the gift is not real.

There is an assumption that the only way for the Church to be true is for no bishop to ever miss anything. This is not a straw man. It is a recognizable criticism that proliferates in spaces where people have become disillusioned with the Church, perhaps

in part because they expected something more like the magic of Wonder Woman's Lasso of Truth or Professor X's telepathy than the spiritual gifts of the New Testament.

Similar questions arise in pastoral and abuse contexts. If God can provide discernment in some cases, why doesn't he provide it every time it could help alleviate pain or prevent deception?

These concerns deserve empathy. They often come from pain. But they also reveal a misunderstanding of the gift.

A grounded Christian understanding of discernment does not require bishops to be miraculously perfect. It does not treat a calling as a guarantee of constant supernatural detection. It does not make revelation a substitute for confession, evidence, councils, law, policy, or the moral responsibility to speak and act.

The magical version says, "If God is involved, the bishop should just know."

The Christian version says, "Because God is involved, the bishop should pray, listen, counsel, study, ask, follow the Handbook, protect the vulnerable, receive correction, and seek the Spirit."

Those are very different models.

A Better Practice

A better doctrine of discernment leads to better practice.

For members, it means we should not outsource honesty to a leader's supposed ability to detect truth. A person confessing sin should tell the truth because discipleship requires truthfulness, not because the bishop might catch him. A person who needs help should not assume, "If God wanted the bishop to know, he would know." Sometimes the Spirit prompts a leader. Sometimes the Lord expects us to speak.

For bishops and stake presidents, it means spiritual impressions should be received humbly. The Handbook itself makes this clear. In matters involving serious sin, a bishop or stake president may receive promptings, but if a member denies an accusation, "a

spiritual impression alone is not sufficient” to hold a membership council. Leaders are instructed to gather appropriate information and avoid unlawful or inappropriate methods.

That is not a lack of faith in discernment. It is disciplined faith in discernment. It is realizing that when you learned in third grade that multiplication makes numbers bigger, and then learned in fifth grade that you can multiply by fractions, no one was lying to you; the full reality is just more nuanced than you learned on the first pass.

If there was an example where you wish the gift of discernment had been present, but it wasn't, that does disprove a simplistic version of the gift of discernment, but it can help you move to a more mature, fuller understanding of how gifts of the Spirit work.

Seeing as Christ Sees

The gift of discernment is one of the great gifts of the Spirit because discipleship requires more than eyesight.

We need to distinguish spiritual light from counterfeit light. We need to recognize our own self-deception. We need to see hidden goodness in people we are tempted to dismiss. We need to understand when correction is needed and when mercy is needed. We need to know when to speak, when to listen, when to wait, and when to act.

Bishops need that gift. So do parents. So do all of us. But we need discernment not because leaders are flawless, but because none of us are. Discernment is not merely the power to see what is wrong. It is the grace to see more nearly as Christ sees.

About the author



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