

How do I discern God's voice?

This is an important question, one that has been debated by the church for as long as there has been church. Before the church was established, throughout the stories of scripture, we have people seeking to know what God was saying. Sometimes it was very clear. God spoke and there was no doubt. But that is the exception, not the rule. We are shown these cases are remarkable, not everyday. People throughout history have struggled with knowing what to do.

Throughout the millennia the Church has demonstrated a variety of ways in which they say God speaks. Various structures have been set up to support or enforce this. Some of these are very hierarchical, and have a man (usually a man) telling everyone else what God is saying. In some circles this is the Pope, or the Archbishop of Canterbury, or in the Salvation Army, it is the General (who can be a woman). It makes life simple when all you have to do is obey the instructions of the one at the top. If you know anything about these structures though, the authority of the one at the top as the sole mouthpiece of God is quietly challenged at many levels.

We Baptists though are much more clever, aren't we? We don't believe one person can speak on behalf of God and we all have to listen. We believe we all can hear God, and we all can speak what God tells us. As a consequence the meetings at which we make decisions about what we should do can get pretty noisy. Discernment is difficult task when the voices don't agree. And they rarely do!

What might surprise you is that Baptist theology does not promote democracy. We don't believe God's will is necessarily expressed by the majority vote, though you wouldn't know it to look at most church meetings. We believe God speaks not through just one person, nor through the majority, but through the combined voices of all. No one person holds the whole truth. The truth is held collectively in the community of the church, the body of Christ.

So we need to listen to all voices and seek the truth, the word that is God's word for us in this place at this time. We believe it is somewhere there in the mix and mess of our varied and differing responses. We just have to listen, and it all becomes clear... Doesn't it? If only it were that simple.

Working out what God might be saying is technically known as "discernment." Discernment is not a simple task. It is a skill that needs work if you want to develop it, whether as a community together or as individuals. I'll talk today about discernment as individuals, because that is place where it really needs to start. You can't discern or hear God's word to you as a community if you aren't working at hearing God in your lives as individuals. If you don't recognize God's voice in your own life, how will you recognize it when God speaks in your community? Next weekend you have an opportunity to look at discernment together as a congregation.

I wrote a short piece on Discernment some years ago, and I'd like to share with you some of the things I've learnt over the years.

- **Discernment is at the heart of relationship with God**

We have to choose to be in relationship. We have to decide we want to want what God wants in us, in our world, in our communities. Our discernment begins with our commitment to God. It begins in relationship. Because we are in relationship we want to do what will help that relationship grow. We want to be in-step with God, and discernment helps us recognize the signs of when we are in-step, and when we are out-of-step.

- **Discernment is the process of discovering God within our life**

Learning how God speaks to each of us is the work of our lifetime. We have to want to learn it, and we have to practice it. We are people who believe God has been at work in our lives, and we can grow in awareness of this by paying attention to the patterns of our lives.

You can start with looking at the past and look at choices you have made. Some of those choices have clearly been good and Godly choices, leading to good fruits – they bring more of God's life and love in the world. Some of those choices have been not good. They have taken you away from the fullness of God's love and life for a time. Looking prayerfully at the decisions we have made, and what we were responding to or listening to, is very helpful. Over time we can begin to recognize patterns in our lives, what builds us in love with God and others, and what diminishes or sabotages this within us.

In particular, there is a lot that can be learnt from what we might call our 'mistakes', and in reflecting upon them in this way they can become great moments of insight and growth in our relationship with God. Relationships are strengthened when the mistakes are acknowledged and the truth is found.

- **Discernment is recognising God at work in the ordinary and everyday**

Everyday you face a multitude of choices. And every choice brings a greater or lesser measure of love and grace to the world. The way you answer an annoying person will either escalate or calm a situation – your choice. Whether you slow down in traffic and let someone merge in front of you, or speed up and maintain your position – your choice. The impact of these choices flows out to others. The impact is also cumulative within us. It builds God's life in us.

We have a choice and choosing the actions in our daily life that lead to a greater measure of life and love in the world will strengthen in us our capacity to recognize God at work through these choices. Peter Kreeft says: 'Our ordinary daily experience of doing God's will, will reveal God. God becomes clearer to see when the eye of the heart is purified: "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God."'¹

- **Discernment is seeking to understand God's ways of revealing God's own self**

We are each unique. And God has a unique relationship with each of us, and unique ways of communicating with each of us. We may each say we experience God's love, but I don't know exactly what that feels like for you in your life, and won't know what it feels like for me. We can recognise sometimes when it is happening in another, like when the strings on an instrument will vibrate in response to a particular chord, the pattern of God's action is recognisable.

- **Discernment is learning more of how to read this in our own lives**

Your job is to recognize this in your own inner dynamics, in your thinking, your emotions, your body too. We are invited to learn the language of God's love in us. And like any human love, we have to take time to learn about the other, to learn to recognize their responses to us, to tune in and be attentive to them to help our love grow.

- **Discernment is not about moral choices between what is right or wrong**

God never asks us to choose evil. This is not God's will. God does not ask us to commit adultery, to steal, to gossip...

¹ <http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics/12-ways.htm>

- **Discernment is choice between two good options, seeking the one which will bring the greater good, the greater glory of God**

Which of these possibilities before me will bring more of God's life and love into the world? The question is simple. The answer often takes some work. To choose to be a policeman, or a teacher, or a pastor are all good choices. The fit will be personal depending upon my particular personality and gifts – both given by God.

- **Discernment is always concrete, grounded in the here and now of my life and the possible options that are before me**

I cannot discern anything that is not within my power to enact. I cannot discern whether you should marry Fred or Freda. It isn't up to me to make it happen. I cannot even decide really whether I will marry Fred (in my case). All I can actually discern is whether I am called to offer myself to Fred. The enactment will depend upon his decision too.

- **Discernment is a collaborative process whereby I work together with God to be able to find that option which responds most fully to God's call in me to be free**

God wants us to grow towards a greater measure of life and love and freedom. Jesus came so we might have life in its fullness. Sometimes that is painful as we grow through our vulnerabilities and woundedness and sin. But facing the truth of these brings freedom and life.

- **Discernment shows me that to be authentically myself and to be the person God wants me to be are one and the same**

God did not create me to be other than who I really am. I may not be in touch with the truth of who I am if I am seeking to live out of a false self, a self that depends on anything other than God to ultimately give me meaning and purpose.

- **Discernment is discovering that God's will is not set over against my autonomy and desires**

I have been created with desires that may or may not be in tune with God's life and love. God does not force us to choose God's ways. I have freedom of choice, always. But the only desire that will ultimately be satisfied is the desire to be in tune with God's desires for me.

- **Discernment is revealed in my deepest feelings and context**

When I begin to look at my desires I can recognise there are many layers to these. At the core of them though is a desire to be loved. And there is only one real source of love. God. When I trust the core of my self to this love I can discover that the things I most delight in are actually God's delight in me too. I can trust those feelings. They are signs of God in me.

- **Discernment is an ongoing process, not a finished action**

We never get to the end. We are always in the midst of discovering more about God and our relationship with God. The act of living is an ongoing process, and we will always be in the midst of discerning.

- **Discernment is no guarantee of freedom from illusion and uncertainty, since we can never fully know God's will or purpose**

We can't know for certain. There is no guarantee we are not deluding ourselves or imposing our will upon the situation, or just not able to read the signs right. The decisions we make are nearly always made on the basis of insufficient information.

- **Discernment is not particularly a detailed plan for our lives**

Many people think God has a plan for your life, like a roadmap you need to follow and make sure you don't take the wrong turn or the plot is lost. What if we think more of God's will for us as a landscape of possibilities? There will be many ways

through this landscape towards the horizon that beckons us on. God works with us in our choices.

Discernment is a journey into freedom, into life, into relationship, and into love. Discernment is a journey of discovery, discovery of self and of God. Discernment is coming to see how and where God calls us to action. Discernment is ultimately a language of revelation, the voice of God in me. "Speak, for your servant is listening." (1 Sam 3:10)

So back to the question I began with: "How do I discern God's voice?"

Listen to your heart – we can sense the movement of God in surprising subtle ways when we learn to tune in to what is happening in our emotions.

Use your head – you have the capacity to think and evaluate and consider. God gave you this capacity for a reason.

Listen to the wisdom of others – God can use other people to say things to us, but we have to discern whether what they say calls for action by us. Only we will know that.

Take time – time to pray and listen to God in that place, to listen with God to the patterns of your life. Take time to read the Scriptures, and become familiar with how God has spoken others through its pages. God's word is always God's word.

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