

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT
Through developing a Biblical Worldview
By George C. Stewart

Introduction

The Apostle John warned his readers about false prophets, and told them how to discern truth. He writes:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:1-6).

We could illustrate this principle of discernment like this: Take a 10-inch long stick and ask each one to write down how long he/she thinks it is. Then have them give their answers. Why so many different answers? They are all opinions and not the truth. Then use a ruler to show the exact length. What are the lessons? Opinions vary. A standard is needed. In spiritual matters, God's Word has to be our standard.

Spiritual discernment requires a worldview based on the standard of God's word. This is discussed in more detail under "Worldviews."

Discussion

A biblical worldview provides tools for proper discernment. We must decide which standard to use for discernment: pragmatism (what works best) or God's word. I primarily use the popular "Church Growth Movement" here to illustrate. (This movement is discussed in more detail in chapter 3, under "Marketing the Church.") A comprehensive knowledge of God's word is necessary (2 Timothy 2:15). As David Wells writes: "Credit cards allow us to have without having to wait; the message of the televangelists has been that we can likewise have divine results without having to wait—indeed, without even having to think."¹

Teaching our children a few stories about David and Samson will not suffice. We must have a willingness to test everything by God's word (1 John 4:1). "Without truth, relevance is meaningless and dangerous."² We must test our opinions, our behavior, our pleasures, and the organizations we belong to. George Gallup, Jr. says: "As the saying goes, the problem isn't that Americans believe in anything. It's that they believe in everything."³ Also, "people are roaring off in all directions. They're hanging on to whatever helps them feel better, including some things that are pretty nutty."⁴ Church Growth has become very popular, but one must wonder if the adherents are grounded sufficiently to discernment the many errors of our culture. Walter Puckett is correct in saying: "Church growth strategy, methodology, and the science of marketing may work,

¹ David Wells, *No Place For Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), p.174.

² Os Guinness, *Dining With the Devil* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), p.63.

³ Terry Mattingly, Quoted in *The Lookout* (January 20, 2002).

⁴ Mattingly.

but it is not clear to many that it will be the church of Jesus Christ that has thereby grown.”⁵

Awareness of cultural influences, such as science and psychology, is essential (Colossians 1:13-23; 2:8-15; 3:1-5).

He who supps with the devil had better have a long spoon. The devilry of modernity has its own magic: The (believer) who supps with it will find his spoon getting shorter and shorter—until that last supper in which he is left alone at the table, with no spoon at all and with an empty plate. The devil, one may guess, will by then have gone away to more interesting company.⁶

Many in the Church Growth Movement have attracted consumers who are looking for the most exciting “smorgasbord.” In the meantime, “This consumer mentality among church shoppers makes it difficult for loyal Bible-oriented congregations to thrive and serve.”⁷ We can learn from how Paul’s biblical worldview enabled him to exercise spiritual discernment in Athens (Acts 17). He knew about their pagan gods, philosophers and writings. He proclaimed the One God: Creator and Redeemer. He called for a change.

But while many people still appear moonstruck by the recent discovery of the sovereign audience, it is worth pondering a *New Yorker* lament about what is lost in the brave, new “audience-driven” preaching of the day:

the preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, to duplicate that, and bring his finished product into a market place in which others are trying to do the same. The public turning to our culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection. The unexamined world, meanwhile, drifts blindly into the future.⁸

There are a number of consequences of an inadequate biblical worldview. For example, there are a number of words that one could assume to mean something unintended unless properly studied. Some examples:

- 📖 Gobelin: “A tapestry of a kind woven at the Gobelin works in Paris, France.”
- 📖 Goblin: “A grotesque creature of folklore, thought to work mischief or evil.”
- 📖 Hooker: “one that hooks;” a family by this name; “a prostitute;” “a single-masted fishing smack (boat) used off the coast of Ireland.” “an old worn-out or clumsy ship.”

If one used his/her memory or imagination to define the above words, instead of looking at the definitions, he/she would probably come to the wrong conclusions. There is a lesson here: If we don’t know—and use—biblical terms for biblical ideas, we can all become very confused. For example, one preacher decided to substitute “regret” for “repent.” He did this to draw a crowd, which did not want to be “offended,” but in doing so he is likely to fail to bring the hearers into a saving relationship with Christ.

Conflicts result when Christians do not practice biblical discernment. Church and culture speak a different language, have different standards and hold different values.

⁵ Walter Puckett, *Bringing the Church off the Slippery Slope* (Columbus, GA: Brentwood Christian Press, 1992), p.103.

⁶ Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, quoted by Os Guinness in *Dining with the Devil*, inside cover.

⁷ Puckett, p. 104.

⁸ Guinness, p. 59.

Within the church, different voices are heard: pragmatism, self-fulfillment, happiness, pleasure, excitement, as well as many others.

Tom said he was attracted to Laura because of her “church language”: things like “letting yourself be vulnerable” and “investing yourself in a decision.” Given Tom’s assertion that it was *church* language which was the clue to Laura’s ethics, we might have expected Tom to say that she used terms like sin, repentance, redemption, forgiveness, spiritual rebirth, the body of Christ, the Kingdom of God, faith, hope and love. But to Tom “church language” consists of what some of us fondly call psychobabble, the language of popular psychology.⁹

Many “gods” are created when discernment is not practiced (See Acts 17). There are many idols of the marketplace in today’s culture. Consider the progression in the following sentences from church-growth publications:

- 📖 “The church is a business.”
- 📖 “Marketing is essential for a business to operate successfully.”
- 📖 “The Bible is one of the World’s great marketing texts.”
- 📖 “However, the point is indisputable: the Bible does not warn against the devils of marketing.”
- 📖 “So it behooves us not to spend time bickering about techniques and processes.”
- 📖 “Think of your church not as a religious meeting place, but as a service agency—an entity that exists to satisfy people’s needs.”
- 📖 “The marketing plan is the Bible of the marketing game: everything that happens in the life of the product occurs because the plan wills it.”¹⁰

Guinness adds:

In today’s convenient, climate-controlled spiritual world created by the managerial and therapeutic revolutions, nothing is easier than living apart from God. Idols are simply the ultimate techniques of human causation and control—without God. God’s sovereign freedom has met its match in ours. We have invented the technology to put God’s Word on hold.¹¹

Theology is abandoned for sociology and psychology. “Engineer” the man rather than redeem him. Man then becomes self-centered rather than God-centered. David Wells understandably laments:

The empty and childish stories that are served up as sermons from the pulpit week by week in too many evangelical churches, the casual choral singing that masquerades as deep worship in too many services, as if celebrating good feelings were the same thing as rendering to God his due in wonder, love, and adoration. The truth is, though, that where we have emptied ourselves of theology, we have emptied ourselves of Christian seriousness in preaching, worship, piety, thought, and service.¹²

Support groups, 12-Step programs, aerobics, and other “exercises” are the substitutes for serious worship of God. “The problem is, these psychological and

⁹ Robert C. Roberts, *Taking the Word to Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), pp. 291-292).

¹⁰ Guinness, p. 58.

¹¹ Guinness, pp. 37-38.

¹² Wells, p. 292.

sociological dynamics have nothing whatsoever to do with a relationship with Jesus Christ. The same dynamics could be applied to the meeting of a local bridge club.”¹³ Technique replaces truth. Preachers become managers. “The minister’s authority and professional status rides not on his or her character, ability to expound the Word of God, or theological skill in relating that Word to the contemporary world but on interpersonal skills, administrative talents, and ability to organize the community.”¹⁴

Programs replace proclamation. An analysis of 200 evangelical sermons showed that more than 80 percent, “were anthropocentric. It is as if God has become an awkward appendage to the practice of evangelical faith, at least as measured by the pulpit.”¹⁵

“Church Growth” replaces spiritual growth. As Guinness says, “To be always relevant, you have to say things which are eternal.”¹⁶ However, in the modern church, relevance is the latest fad to attract the crowd. In such an environment, faith is destroyed. “The church-growth movement carries two potential dangers. They can be summed up simply in the words ‘no God’ and ‘no grandchildren.’”¹⁷

Conclusion

Jesus asked: “When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth” (Luke 18:8)? A very good question with no final answer in sight.

“Far from leading to an exodus, modern church growth uses the ideology and tools of Egypt to make the life of the people of God more comfortable.”¹⁸ Instead of trying to mold the church into the world, Paul tells us what we ought to be doing: “We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

May we *always exercise* spiritual discernment.

¹³ Don Matzat, *Christ-Esteem* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1990), p.196.

¹⁴ Wells, p. 234.

¹⁵ Wells, pp. 251-252.

¹⁶ Guinness, p. 63.

¹⁷ Guinness, p. 29.

¹⁸ Guinness, p. 21.