

Discerning the Spirits: Making Wise Choices in an Era of Liturgical Change

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Virtue of Discernment

Near the opening of the book of Philippians, Paul records his prayer for the Philippian Christians:

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you *to determine* what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9-11)

At the heart of this prayer is Paul's desire that his readers will exercise the classical virtue of discernment. He wants them to be able to make good choices, to "determine what is best." In doing so, Paul gives us the anatomy of this virtue. He points to three necessary building blocks for discernment: love, knowledge, and insight. And he describes the desired result of exercising this gift: holiness and righteousness that will contribute to the glory and praise of God. In this way, the virtue of discernment energizes and empowers the thoughtful, mature Christian life.

Current Needs

In matters of worship, this is exactly the virtue that Christians need today. We already have passion on the subject of worship. The charged rhetoric of worship wars shows no signs of abating. In most congregations, there is no lack of opinions about worship matters and no lack of willingness to share them.

Part of this is the result of the sheer number of the competing calls for renewal a change. Here are simply a few of the recent movements:

1. Charismatic movement
2. Church growth movement
3. The post-Vatican II liturgical movement (among Protestants)
4. An "arts" movement
5. Post-modern perspectivalism
6. Neo-confessionalism

Never before has Christian worship been changing in so many directions at the same time.

We also have voluminous liturgical resources at our fingertips. Our bookstores, magazines, and web sites provide us with more songs, prayer texts, and worship service outlines than have been available at any period in church history. Worship conferences have increased ten-fold in the past ten years. And even evangelical seminaries are finally offering courses on this central activity of church life.

But for all of this energy and all of these resources, we often lack the discernment to make good use of them. In fact, what we may need most is a healthy prayer of confession to admit our lack of discernment.

To help make such a prayer concrete, let me provide some examples of the lack of this virtue, drawn mostly from experiences described by my students at Calvin Theological Seminary, Tyndale Seminary, and Northern Baptist Seminary.

1. In one congregation, a group protested the use of scripture choruses because they simply repeated the same line 10 times over. The same group went on to ask their choir director to sing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." (True, the Handel might have a bit more musical nuance and force than most of Maranatha, but the naïve use of this argument is still problematic.)
2. Conversely, in another congregation, a worship leader protested the use of any written prayers, because they were so predictable. When the worship committee reviewed tapes of earlier services, they discovered that this worship leader had, however, "spontaneously" spoken the same, identical prayer in four consecutive services. The same worship leader, who had previously protested the overuse of a dozen traditional hymns, now lapsed into overuse of about a dozen choruses.

3. In another congregation, three church leaders proceeded to recommend and enforce whole-scale liturgical change on the basis of attending one conference on worship and evangelism, without so much as one month's discussion and prayer with the congregation.
4. In another, a church council refused to adopt a proposal to celebrate communion more frequently because "it would cease to be special," an argument that (curiously) is rarely applied to preaching.

What we have here are situations in which committed Christians somehow lost their theological and pastoral equilibrium. They may have been advocating important and helpful positions, but they lacked the love, knowledge, or insight to help their congregations discuss them in discerning ways.

The Anatomy of Liturgical Discernment

So what exactly is discernment? Discernment is a classical virtue, a common theme in Hebrew scriptures, New Testament, and classical philosophy. And it merits our attention beyond simply giving a dictionary definition. Discernment is what Solomon asked for when he asked for "an understanding mind . . . to discern good from evil" (I Kings 3:9). It is what Paul discusses in Romans 8 when he says that the "renewing of our minds" will help us "discern what is the will of God." Discernment or prudence, says Augustine, is "love distinguishing with [wisdom] sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it . . . prudence is love making a right distinction between what helps it towards God and what might hinder it." Joseph Pieper identified it as "a studied seriousness . . . a filter of deliberation," and "the perfected ability to make decisions in accordance with reality. . . the quintessence of ethical maturity."³ Lewis Smedes, more colloquially, says that it is "having a nose for what's going on under the surface."⁴ Discernment, then, is nearly synonym for a slightly larger category—wisdom.

Consider some specific ingredients in the recipe for discernment. For one, discernment implies being open to examine any innovation or new practice. We can't make discerning choices without knowing the options. Discerning people are always willing to give a person, a movement, or a worship style a fair hearing. Discerning church musicians, for example, might have on their shelf music from Vineyard, Maranatha, Hosanna, *as well as* Taizé, Iona, and the Hymn Society.

Yet discernment is not the same thing as a blanket endorsement. Indeed, discernment requires at least occasionally saying "no"—a difficult word to utter in our post-modern age. Discerning worship leaders know, for example, that cultivating a warm, hospitable tone in worship does not require comments that are glib or flippant. Discerning leaders will distinguish "warm" from "flippant" and then say a resounding "no" to the latter.

For this to work, as Paul suggests, discernment requires "knowledge and full insight." Worship leadership requires spiritual maturity and a desire to grow in the knowledge and love of the Lord. The New Testament prerequisites for office bearers likely assumed that the function of office bearers was that of liturgical leadership as much as it was to attend church council meetings. Indeed, worship leadership requires more than good intentions. Like any other ministry or vocation within the church, it is a calling. The Spirit gifts some for this ministry. It is our challenge to cultivate those gifts, and refine them for the building up of the church.

The growth of lay worship leaders has arguably been one of the most sweeping liturgical changes of the past century. This can be very good—a way for congregations to take ownership of worship, a way to express the "priesthood of all believers." This works best when lay leaders are committed students of scripture, when they are the kind of people who are eager to attend a worship conference, or read a new book on worship. It doesn't work so well when leaders lack a taste for such things. In fact, many worship leaders can't name a single book on the theology of worship. Most denominations (admirably) require preachers to pursue rigorous seminary studies before preaching. Yet we require of worship leaders only that they be willing to attend a single rehearsal or committee meeting. We would do well to lovingly challenge our worship leaders to grow in the knowledge and love of God.

Further, as Paul reminds us, discernment requires love—even in matters of worship. John Calvin agreed. When discussing whether Christians should kneel in worship, for example, Calvin observed that some worship practices will inevitably change to accommodate to the culture of the age, warned against rash, sudden, and poorly reasoned change, and then concluded: "But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe."⁵ Here Calvin portrays love in service of discernment.

Not that we need sentimental love in today's discussions. Today's discussions must begin with tough love that will seek worship practices that lead to the long-term health of the church. They require tender, empathic love that will take seriously the testimonies of fellow Christians about their own experiences of worship. For example, we must protest all simplistic caricatures of those who promote more frequent celebrations of the Lord's Supper as irrelevant, and those who discuss worship's relevance as irreverent.

Finally, discernment happens best in community. Paul prayed that "you (all) may determine what is best." Paul loved the second person plural. He prayed for a *community* that would determine what is best.

Faithful lay Christians are the backbone of church life. Most churches are blessed with wise people who, often quietly, have the kind of spiritual discernment that could help churches make decisions based on something more than personal tastes. These are the voices that must be heard in our worship discussions.

But often they are not. Behind some of our recent liturgical skirmishes lie innovations driven by those who have ignored the community aspect of discernment. Occasionally, church leaders see these wise and discerning lay people as simply hindrances to future growth. Some church growth experts encourage church leaders to see these people that way.

True enough, these voices may be expressed without love and without knowledge, that is--without the necessary ingredients in the recipe of discernment. But, when love and knowledge are expressed in community, then the church lives up to its identity as nothing less than the body of Christ.

Now it may surprise you that I would begin this article on worship without writing about worship per se, but about love, knowledge, and community. I chose this strategy because of my growing conviction that many of today's discussions about worship are less about worship than about power, politics, and personal taste. The antidote to this is a loving, community-oriented search for wisdom. The antidote is praying for, cultivating, and exercising the gift of discernment.

The Theologically Discerning Mind: A Case Study

There are many aspects of worship today require a discerning spirit. But few are as theologically significant as are our discussions of the role of the Holy Spirit in worship. Consider this as one case study for applying the gift of discernment. How should a discerning Christian community seek to receive and embrace the gift of the Spirit in worship?

The emphasis on the Holy Spirit's work in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles is well-known. But you might be surprised to hear that the Reformed tradition is famous for its emphasis on the Holy Spirit in worship. Yet Hughes Oliphant Old, Reformed theologian, historian, and pastor contends: "If there is one doctrine which is at the heart of Reformed worship it is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit."⁶ And a number of Calvin scholars, including B. B. Warfield, have called John Calvin nothing less than "a theologian of the Holy Spirit."⁷ An emphasis on the work of the Spirit is common across Christian traditions.

Indeed, if you read the sections of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* on worship-related topics, you will discover that the Holy Spirit is the grammatical subject of many of the key sentences about worship. The Spirit lifts us up into the presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper. The Spirit illumines our hearts as we hear God's Word proclaimed. The Spirit inspires our praise and prayers. In Calvin's words: "that the Word may not beat your ears in vain, and that the sacraments may not strike your eyes in vain, the Spirit shows us that in them it is God speaking to us, softening the stubbornness of our heart, and composing it to that obedience which it owes the Word of God."⁸ In sum, the Spirit makes possible each broad movement in worship: both the human-Godward movement of praise and prayer, and the God-humanward movement of proclamation and spiritual nourishment. In the drama of worship, the Spirit has the leading role. Worship is charged with divine activity.

Exactly how this happens is, of course, difficult to explain. Any attempt to explicate this fully is likely to be hopelessly inadequate. And perhaps we ought to shrink from trying to state too precisely how the Spirit works. Yet, with scripture's help, we can determine when our way of thinking about the Spirit's role in worship has become distorted. Consider three common problems.

A first problem occurs when we ignore or downplay the Spirit's role in worship. Not long ago, a worship conference attendee remarked that she was quite content not to hear any talk of "all that Holy Spirit-stuff." This remarkable comment gives the impression of showing distaste for none less than the third person of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit is Jesus' gift to the church. Should we not embrace this gift?

A second problem is limiting our view of the Spirit's role to only the spontaneous or ecstatic elements of worship. We confess that the Spirit worked through the authors of scripture to produce the highly refined poetry of the Psalms as well as the spontaneous sermons of Peter and Paul. While the Spirit led early Christians to speak in tongues, the Spirit of God also brought order out of chaos at creation. If the Spirit works through both order and spontaneity, why do we sometimes limit our language of the Spirit to refer only to the spontaneous (as when we casually say, "Well, we didn't have time to plan worship this week, I guess we will have to have the Spirit lead today" or "Let's get away from our planned service, so the Spirit can lead")?

As *Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture*, a synodical study report of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, makes clear, "we shouldn't link the Holy Spirit with less planning or less formality. The Holy Spirit can be powerfully present in a very highly structured service and can be absent in a service with little structure. Beyond questions of style and formality, the question always before us is this: does this act of worship bring praise to God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit?"⁹ Indeed, the Spirit may well work through *both* the careful preparations of a preacher *and* through a gesture or sentence that the preacher hadn't planned on saying. The Spirit may work through *both* the diligent planning of a worship committee *and* through the spontaneous prayer request or testimony of a worshiper.

A third problem is the temptation of thinking that we can bring about an experience of the Spirit, that we can somehow engineer the Spirit's work. This would be no different from magic, thinking we can manipulate divine action by "pulling the right lever" with certain words or sounds or movements. (Acts 8:18ff has a thing or two to say about that.) This leads into the age-old trap of thinking that *we* are the primary agents who make worship what it is. Then we can begin to think that powerful pulpit rhetoric or musical excellence can, by themselves, make worship into an encounter with God. Scripture is clear: the Spirit's presence is always a gift. It can never be engineered or produced.

When we fall into one of these three temptations, we alternate between quenching the Spirit (I Thess. 5:19) and grieving the Spirit (Eph. 4:30). In contrast, we need to both welcome and honor the Spirit.

The theological insistence that the Spirit makes worship what it is—like most key theological points—has direct liturgical implications. One of them has to do with how we pray for the Spirit. Throughout the history of the church, prayers for the Spirit's active presence in worship have been a fundamental element of Christian worship. These prayers are sometimes called "invocations" or "epicleses" (from epi-cleo, "to call upon").

This type of prayer is beautifully preserved in nearly every classic form or liturgy for baptism and the Lord's Supper at least as far back as the fourth century. The classic example of this type of prayer in the Reformed tradition is the prayer of illumination before the reading of scripture and the sermon. An invocation or epiclesis prayer is essentially saying, "Lord God, the power of what we are about to experience is not the result of our creativity, imagination or insight. It is purely a gift. May your Spirit work powerfully through this reading of scripture, this sermon, this celebration of the sacrament. And because of the Spirit's work, may we be given the grace to see Jesus Christ more clearly through what we are about to do."

In recent years, some—occasionally in the name of making sacramental celebrations more "spirited"—have abandoned the use of classical liturgical prayer forms and subsequently failed in our improvisations to include prayer for the Spirit's action. Others rely exclusively on classical forms, but have no idea of the power, beauty, genius, and gospel-proclaiming truth of such "epiclesis" prayer. Each approach can miss one of worship's main ingredients.

Here is an example of why we need to think theologically about how and why we do what we do in worship. Thoughtful prayers for the Spirit's active presence place us in a posture of expectation and hope. They invite us both to expect the Spirit's work in our midst and to comfort us with a reminder that worship's divine encounter—like faith, and salvation itself—is more like a gift we receive than an accomplishment we achieve.

How do we know if the Spirit has been active in worship? Ecstasy or solemnity, by itself, doesn't tell us. The Spirit can use both.

One hint may be our response to a service. Consider the difference between the following post-service comments: "My, what impressive music today" vs. "thank you, musician, for helping me pray more deeply today." And again, "Wasn't that a brilliant sermon," vs. "in this service, I encountered the risen Lord." One of the Spirit's main character traits is that of always pointing toward Christ. The Spirit is a witness and advocate for the person of

Jesus. If we leave a worship service comforted and challenged by our faith-filled encounter with Jesus Christ, then we can be grateful for the Spirit's work in our hearts. Such is the insight of those who "discern the spirits."

Discernment at Work: Examples from Congregational Life

But what about other examples of discernment at work? Consider the following examples of recent developments in several congregations. None of the following paragraphs can do justice to the complexity of these situations. But I hope that they can suggest the importance of going deeper than simply our normal default positions on these topics.

1. One discerning leader openly studied the growth of seeker services, and concluded that these public, evangelistic events have much to teach us about evangelism, but also that they are poor substitutes for services of Word and Sacrament. The result was a church with weekly services of Word and Sacrament, and regular evangelistic events that parishioners view not simply as a lighter version of a service, but a powerful and deeply committed attempt to present the gospel to those who do not know the joy of the Christian faith.
2. One worship leader, fresh from a seminary course on worship, wanted to reinstate the observance of the Christian Year in her congregation. Rather than starting by introducing the more obscure elements of the Christian Year, such as Epiphany, she presented the calendar, in the language of her people, as a "year-long spiritual journey with Jesus," and thereby focused on the theological significance of the Christian calendar.
3. One discerning church musician bought three volumes of recently-published praise choruses as a sign of openness to this growing movement, and then carefully studied them to find the best 10% of them, in much the same way as a hymnal committee carefully selects only the best 10% of extant hymns for inclusion in a hymnal.
4. Another congregation wanted to celebrate the Lord's Supper more frequently, and decided to add celebrations of the Lord's Supper on all the main Christ-centered celebrations of the year (Christmas, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost), rather than on days suggested by the calendar (as in the 2nd Sunday evening of every month). This led the congregation to see this change not primarily as the advancing of some sacramental agenda, but rather as an attempt to provide for the most fitting, deeply biblical response to these key events in salvation history.
5. One congregation sent representatives to two different conferences on church growth and worship. When they came back with a list of dozens of proposed changes, the congregation—rather than simply adopting all of the proposed innovations wholesale—began a process of prayer and discussion that led the whole congregation to become excited about some of the ideas and set others aside.
6. One congregation wanted to expand its musical repertoire—and its awareness of the holy, catholic church— by incorporating songs from Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America. Rather than singing these songs as musical adornments in a special worship service, they incorporated one or two of these songs in nearly every service as liturgical responses.
7. One congregation wanted to more fully incorporate youth in worship. Rather than add a youth service once a year, they made a commitment to involve at least one youth as an usher, worship team member, or scripture reader each Sunday, and to provide regular training for youth to take up those roles.
8. One congregation wanted to add lay worship leaders, but decided to start not by adding a potentially divisive (in their context) worship team, but by forming a group of lay scripture readers, who met each week to rehearse the scripture readings for the following Sunday. The result was thoughtful, appropriately dramatic rendering of the scripture readings in ways that led everyone in the congregation to look forward to that moment in the service.
9. One congregation added three teams of worship leaders, but wisely provided opportunities for training on the theology and practice of worship.

Here, then, are several congregations blessed with wise, pastoral leaders who are cultivating the gift of discernment. Here are people pursuing the love, knowledge, and community that will create an environment for making good decisions about worship.

These examples, and this article, might be accused of trying to please everyone by choosing a benign middle ground on all sorts of thorny issues. This is not my point at all. My point is to hint at ways of seeing what is really at stake in these discussions, focusing on the major points, and modeling the virtue at the heart of Paul's prayer.

These examples teach one other important lesson. In each, the gift of discernment prevented congregations from confusing liturgical agendas with worship itself.

One danger in all of our discussions about worship style is that we will become so focused on talking about worship that we will fail to actually do it. Worship is about the joyful and open listening to the proclamation of God's word. It is our hungry feeding on the spiritual nourishment we receive from God in the Lord's Supper. It is about offering honest and exuberant praise to a holy, righteous, and loving God. It is about honest confession and—often—lament. When our discussions of worship leave us with something less--when they leave us preoccupied with questions about worship style-- we need discerning leaders to call us back to the heartfelt worship of a holy God.

In the end, the activity of discernment is a tool, a means to a higher end, a way of helping us become, through the Spirit's power, "pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." May we yearn for and cultivate this gift, and then see it bear fruit in worship that is God-honoring, Christ-centered, and Spirit-inspired. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

NOTES

¹ This essay is adapted from some material presented in "The Virtue of Liturgical Discernment," *Christian Courier* (May 31, 1999), and "Spirit-Charged Worship," *Calvin Seminary Forum* (Spring 1999).

² *Against the Manichaens*, 15, par. 25.

³ Pieper, *Prudence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 36.

⁴ Smedes, *Choices: Making Right Decisions in a Complex World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 97.

⁵ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.X.30.

⁶ Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1975), 341.

⁷ See Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co, 1956), 484-485, and also I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 177-187.

⁸ *Institutes*, IV.XIV.10.

⁹ *Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture* (CRC Publications, 1997).