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DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS IN THE BIBLE

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1. Can you give a short background on the expression "discernment of spirits?" What is its origin in the first place? Is it found in the Bible?

In English, "to discern" basically means "to detect something that is obscure or concealed." It also means "to perceive or recognize as being different or distinct; distinguish." Hence, in ordinary usage, "discernment" has to do with "keenness of insight and judgment."

The verb "to discern" comes directly from the Latin term *discernere* which means "to sift apart or separate." *Discernere* has the prefix *dis* (meaning "apart") and the root word *cernere* (meaning "to separate").

In the Greek New Testament, we have several terms that can serve as equivalents to the verb "to discern" and the noun "discernment." They are:

1. *anakrino* (verb): to distinguish or separate out so as to investigate (*krino*) by looking throughout (*ana* = intensive) objects or particulars; hence, it signifies to examine, scrutinize, and judge closely;
2. *diakrino* (verb): signifies to examine, separate out, and discriminate;

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3. *dokimazo* (verb): signifies to test, to prove, to scrutinize so as to decide;
4. *diakrisis* (noun): a distinguishing, a clear discrimination, discerning, judging.[1]

The actual expression "discernment of spirits" first explicitly appears in the epistles of the New Testament (1 Cor. 12:10; 1 Jn. 4:1).[2] It does not appear in the Gospels and Old Testament, though the general principle, theory, and practice of sifting different kinds of conflicting "spirits" can already be plainly seen from both these sources.

It is St. Paul, specifically, who brings up this need to discern these "spirits" when he declares that one of the many gifts of the Holy Spirit to the early Church was the "power to distinguish one spirit from another" (*diakriseis pneumaton* [1 Cor. 12:10]). The author of the First Epistle of John also speaks of these same "spirits" when he writes: "Beloved do not trust every spirit, but put the spirits to a test to see if they belong to God" (1 Jn. 4:1).

Reading both the Old and New Testaments, we find that a great part of their spirituality and theology deal with this evident conflict between these good and evil "spirits." In the Old Testament, the authors often touch on matters pertaining directly to this conflict; for example, the conflict between God and the serpent (Gen. 3:1ff), between choosing life and choosing death (Dt. 30:11–20), between serving the Lord God and serving strange gods (Jer. 5:19), and between true and false prophets (Dt. 18:21ff; Jer. 23:14). In the New Testament, the writers also deal with this major conflict; specifically, for example, between

- the works of light and the works of darkness (Eph. 5:8–14);

[1]See John R. Kohlenberger, ed., *The Expanded Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1984), 306–307.

[2]All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from *The New American Bible*, The New Catholic Translation (Washington, DC: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1970).

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- angels and devils (Rev. 12:1–12);
- the good spirits and the unclean spirits (Mk. 1:27; Mt. 4:11);
- the fruits of the spirit and the fruits of the flesh (Gal. 5:13–26);
- the spirit of truth and the spirit of deception (1 Jn. 4:1–6); and
- the standard of Christ and the standard of Satan (2 Cor. 2:11; 1 Tim. 3:7; Mt. 4:1–11; Lk. 4:1–13).

It is these "spirits" in conflict which highlight these two basic opposite realities of grace and evil so present in the Bible, and undeniably so real in our present world and personal lives that we need to examine and assess the nature of the spiritual states experienced within ourselves or others when engaged in the art of "discerning the spirits."

2. What does the Old Testament basically say about discernment?

As noted earlier, we do not find the precise expression "discernment of spirits" (or "to discern the spirits") in the Old Testament. Some scholars today offer the Hebrew term "bin" for the English verb "to discern." However, "bin" (and its derivatives) is a non-technical word used often in the OT (e.g., Dt. 32:29; 1 Kgs. 3:9–11; Ps. 19:12), and, in general usage, it simply means "to understand by evaluating." Thus, words like "discern," "distinguish," and "judgment" take on the basic meaning of "bin."[3]

No systematic presentation of discernment of spirits can be found in the OT. This does not mean, however, that the subject matter is brought up rarely by its writers. On the contrary, discernment is often taken up by them, though they do this more implicitly than explicitly. For one, Solomon is presented in the OT as a young king asking distinctly for a wise, understanding heart from the Lord in order "to judge (his) people and to distinguish right from wrong" (1 Kgs. 3:9). Elijah, too, has this episode where he seeks the Lord and is able to find him not in the strong wind, not in the earthquake and fire, but in the

[3]See Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 226.

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tiny whispering sound like a gentle breeze (1 Kgs. 19:11–12). What is more, God himself is depicted as having this or that particular will or desire in varying instances, with the Lord even making these known clearly to the different persons he calls and graces (e.g., Gen. 22:12; Ex. 3:4ff; Ez. 37:1–14).

The practice of discriminating judgment, which is vital to the more technical expression "discernment of spirits," is also seen in not a few OT characters. This includes Israel herself as God's chosen one—Moses' exhortation to the entire community "to choose life" and not death is well known to many of us (Dt. 30:11–20). In the same manner, many other OT personalities are described as facing much obscurity and going out of their way to make serious choices in the light of their faith in the Lord. Needing careful discretion, like all of us today, these OT individuals had to ask pivotal questions in their own search for greater truth and meaning in their lives. For example, there was Abraham who had to ask himself, "Should I leave my homeland or not?" (Gen. 12:4). There was Gideon who also had to ask, "Should I lead my people to this (or that) battle or not?" (Judg. 7:9–15). David as king had to consider seriously the query, "Should I build a house for the Lord or not?" (2 Sam. 7:1–29). The young Jeremiah, too, had to wrestle with the question, "Should I respond to God's call as a prophet or not?" (Jer. 1:4–10). Lastly, we mention Ruth, who had to decide, "Should I abandon Naomi or not?" (Ruth 1:14ff). Given these examples (and many more), we can insist that in the minds and hearts of these OT characters there was much awareness of the need for quality discretion when seeking the more truthful choices in their lives.

As we said above in the first question, the overall principle, theory, and practice of distinguishing different kinds of opposing "spirits" can already be seen in the Hebrew Scriptures. Initially, however, *both* good and evil spirits were believed to come from the *same single* source, namely the Lord himself. Though this was the understanding, the persons and even entire communities affected directly by these "spirits" of the Lord were led in divergent and even contradictory directions. Thus, for example, the spirit of the Lord departs from Saul at one point and later he is tormented by an evil spirit sent likewise

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by the Lord (1 Sam. 16:14). While the spirit of the Lord transforms certain individuals into outstanding leaders (Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 15:14), this same Lord also places a lying spirit in the mouths of some prophets (1 Kgs. 22:23ff). God is even once portrayed as pouring this spirit of confusion into Pharaoh and all of the Egyptians, making them blind and bringing their nation into ruin (Is. 19:14).

In all these cases, what is important to note is that such actions of these good and bad spirits are so overwhelming that it appears impossible for the persons concerned to defy them. Yet at the same time, these same individuals do not lose their core personality and are even held mainly responsible for the choices and actions they take (1 Sam. 18:10ff; 19:9ff; 24:17ff). This obvious tension—on the one hand, "being invaded by a strange power which is not properly (their) own"[4] that it is most difficult to resist its control, while on the other hand, still being held fundamentally responsible for the decisions and actions taken—has made the sifting of these spirits a not so easy theme to discuss in the OT. This becomes apparent precisely because how can one be expected to do any form of serious discreet judging and choosing if there is only one source for all these various spirits, plus the fact that the one choosing possesses no adequate freedom in the first place?

The explanation for this early belief in different spirits, including perverse ones, as coming only from the Lord and him alone could be linked to Israel's own image of God and his total transcendence. There was no problem with affirming the good spirits and their inspirations as always coming directly from the Lord. But then to have attributed the evil spirits and their harmful actions to someone other than God would have suggested a kind of moral dualism, a belief in a conflict between two independent powers.[5]

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[4]Xavier Leon-Dufour, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, English translation (London: Cassell Publishers Ltd., 1996), 570.

[5]See Jacques Guillet, et al., *Discernment of Spirits*, trans. Innocentia Richards (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 20. See also *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 522–523, 570.

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It took a while for Israel (until postexilic times, after 586 BC) to modify her theological view on God, the nature of these spirits, and their origins.[6] Undeniably, the Lord is and will always still be completely transcendent, and attributing evil to another powerful being does not at all diminish God's sense of greatness. As a result, the time came when evil spirits and their unholy influences were no longer ascribed directly to God. The belief in an independent spiritual being as the enemy of human nature that tempts people to sin slowly became more and more evident in later Judaism. Genesis speaks of this evil being only as serpent (Gen. 3:1). The Book of Wisdom names this serpent in particular; it is the "devil" (Wis. 2:24). With this later explicit identification of the Evil One, the doctrine and practice of distinguishing different spirits become a bit more refined in the OT. Now, there is *another* voice along with God's voice that needs to be recognized and understood, namely the voice of sin, the voice of the demon,[7] God's opponent (Gen. 4:7). Interestingly, this Evil One tempts and deceives people not only directly and openly but also under the guise of something good (Gen. 3:13).

In the OT, wisdom is not unrelated to the virtues of prudence and discretion. Here wisdom is described in various ways. For example, wisdom is a kindly spirit (Wis. 1:6). Like a counselor, she makes our sense of judgment keen (Wis. 8:11). Like a loving mother, she is a gift from God who leads us to so many other gifts, like understanding, learning, joy, and gladness (Wis. 8:21; Sir. 15:2–6). Or like a teacher, she too schools us in justice, fortitude, moderation, and prudence (Wis. 8:7b). As the Lord's spirit, wisdom knows and understands all things and guides us discreetly in our affairs (Wis. 9:11–17). From such descriptions of wisdom, we can see how it is a much valued virtue, most

[6]See *The New American Bible*, footnote of 1 Chron. 21:1, on this changed theological view of postexilic Israel, when evil was no longer attributed directly to God.

[7]See *The New American Bible*, footnote of 1 Chron. 21:1, for an explanation of the terms "satan" and "devil." See also footnote of Gen. 4:7 for a brief discussion on the term "demon." See also Guillet, et al., *Discernment of Spirits*, 17.

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indispensable when making discriminating judgments and seeking the "better" choices in life.

The human heart itself was another matter linked to this practice of religious discrimination in the OT. While the human heart on its own can be "wise" (Prov. 23:15) and "humble" (Ps. 51:19), it can also be "devious" and "arrogant" (Ps. 101:4, 5). Due to this, it can also be a clear source of "wickedness" (Prov. 6:18) which affects people's manner of choosing and relating (Prov. 12:10). Independent from the "spirits" and their effects, the heart of the human person can be "uncircumcised" too (i.e., not purified [Jer. 9:25–26]), and thus it often possesses little or no capacity for comprehending fully the seriousness of one's actions and the consequences that arise from them (Ex. 32:21; 2 Sam. 12:7). It is this quality of ambiguity, very much present and at work in the human heart, that perhaps made Jeremiah declare: "More tortuous than all else is the human heart, beyond remedy; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9–10).

Our final point here on "discernment" concerns prophetic interpretation.[8] In the OT, one of the most significant applications of discriminating judgment has to do with the clear identification of true and false prophets. With more and more prophets emerging, particularly during the rise of Israel's monarchy (ca. 1020 BC) and with them insisting on conflicting revelations and directives, the need to assess and tell apart the true prophet from the false one became crucial for Israel's leaders and people. Gradually, a set of criteria evolved among the Israelites for ascertaining the authenticity (or lack of it) of prophets and their messages. In time, prophets came to be judged by the following norms: 1) their sense of orthodoxy and faithfulness to Judaism's core faith; 2) the actual fulfillment of their own foretellings,

[8]See Guillet, et al., *Discernment of Spirits*, 21–26. See also Michael Buckley, "Discernment of Spirits," in Michael Downey, ed., *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 274–281. See also Martin McNamara, "Discernment Criteria in Israel: True and False Prophets," in Casiano Floristan & Christian Duquoc, eds., *Discernment of the Spirit and of Spirits* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 3–13.

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especially those involving misfortunes (since the true prophet usually was bearer of bad news); and 3) the quality of their moral life and virtue, including especially their stress on social justice. Added to these ("external" or "objective") criteria were the more "internal" (or "subjective") ones. By "internal," we mean the prophets' intentions, whether they were actually pure or more self-seeking, plus their very own personal vocation story. These two, especially the second one which involves their individual call experience, confirmed to a high degree that their being prophets of Israel did not come from them but really from God and from him alone.

3. What do the Gospels basically say about discernment?

Not unlike in the OT, "discernment" as a theme is taken up in the Gospels, but apparently (also) only in an implicit manner. As we said above in the first question, the technical expression "discernment of spirits" is never really mentioned by the Evangelists. With these authors focusing mainly on Christ, on his words and deeds, and especially on his divine sonship, they are not that concerned with clearly elaborating a doctrine on this topic. Nevertheless, these Gospel writers do tackle this subject matter of "spirits," bringing up these opposing realities of grace and sin and their evident presence and influence in our lives and in our world.

When we read the Gospels, we immediately see this open conflict between the forces of good and evil. Here, in all these four books, the Evangelists even utilize various images and symbols to underscore these different "spirits" and the need to distinguish them well. To cite some examples, the Gospels insist that we must learn to separate the following:

- the wheat from the weeds (Mt. 13:24–30);
- the sheep from the goats (Mt. 25:31–46);
- the true prophets from the false ones who come disguised as sheep but underneath are wolves (Mt. 7:15);
- the useful things from the useless ones caught in the net (Mt. 13:47–48);
- the just from the wicked (Mt. 13:49–50);

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- the angels from the devils and unclean spirits (Mt. 13:39–41; Mk. 1:23ff);
- the good tree (or fruit) from the decayed ones (Lk. 6:43);
- the Holy Spirit from Beelzebul (Mk. 3:22–30; Lk. 11:13–15);
- God from money (Mt. 6:24; Lk. 16:13); and
- the standard of Christ from the standard of Satan (Mt. 4:1–11; Lk. 4:1–13).

When discussing these "spirits," the Gospels call attention to one very important criterion for their sifting, and it is this: "By their fruits we will know them" (NKJV/Mt. 7:16, 20; Lk. 6:44). This means that it is by examining carefully the effects on us, the direction and the *terminus* of these spirits, that we will be able to tell their real source, whether they come from God or from the Evil One.

Together with these examples of opposing powers in the Gospels are the striking polarities we find in St. John. Some of these polarities in the Fourth Gospel are: spirit and flesh (Jn. 3:6), light and darkness (Jn. 3:19), those who belong to what is above and those who belong to what is below (Jn. 8:23), truth and lies (Jn. 8:44), life and death (Jn. 11:17–26), plus others. All these polarities are only manifestations of this main struggle between God and Satan, and the urgency to distinguish them and their actions in us if we are "to have life and have it to the full" (Jn. 10:10b).

In all the Gospels, Jesus is presented as one who personally engages in discernment. In short, he himself is the "discerner."[9] As beloved Son, he has this most profound and personal relationship with God as Father (Mt. 11:25–27). Gospel commentators refer to this intimacy of Jesus with the Father as our Lord's "Abba experience." Full of the Spirit, he constantly goes out of his way to seek, find, and do God's will, but always in the context of this loving affinity with his Abba (Mk. 3:35; Mt. 26:42; Jn. 4:34). Often going out to the mountain or deserted

[9]See Thomas Green, *Weeds Among the Wheat* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1984), 35–53. See also Guillet, et al., *Discernment of Spirits*, 30–39.

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places to pray, he takes time to be quiet, to listen and dialogue with the Father. He does this especially prior to making pivotal decisions in his life, like the time when he was about to begin his public ministry (Mk. 1:35ff), or when he was about to choose his twelve disciples (Lk. 6:12–16), or when he was in the Garden about to face his Passion and death (Lk. 22:39ff). Like all of us, he too is tempted by the devil. After forty days in the desert, he realizes that his mission is not to be a political Messiah, dependent on worldly wealth, glory, or power, but to be a humble Messiah, deeply devoted and obedient to the Father and his will (Mt. 4:1–11; Lk. 4:1–13).

While our Lord in the Gospels is shown as someone doing serious discernment regarding his own identity and mission, he also at the same time becomes the very object of people's attention and focus. In other words, from being the "discerner," Jesus too becomes the one being "discerned." This often takes place in view of the Messianic expectations in Israel at that time. As John the Baptizer once asked, "Are you 'He who is to come' or do we look for another?" (Mt. 11:3; Lk. 7:19).

Due to our Lord's radical way of preaching and behaving (like eating with sinners and outcasts), numerous Jews, not excluding Pharisees and scribes plus his own relatives, became hostile to him. Soon enough, they even openly rejected him as Messiah and prophet (Mk. 3:20–30; Mt. 12:1–45). All the same, even if many renounce him, there are those who choose to know him and believe in him. In some cases, those who accept him do so quite readily and without much resistance. Such were the cases of Simeon and Anna who came into contact with the Christ child for the first time in the temple and, upon encountering him, almost immediately placed their faith in him (Lk. 2:25–38). Others, like the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:4–42), or the centurion at the foot of the cross (Mk. 15:39), or the Emmaus disciples (Lk. 24:13–35), or even Thomas and the other apostles (Jn. 20:19–29) had to go through some process of clarification before they were able to judge and ascertain who Jesus truly was. "Who do you say that I am?" (Mk. 8:29; Mt. 16:15). This was the question of our Lord to Peter

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and the other disciples. Beyond doubt, this too had to be the same question (or at least a similar one) raised by all the characters in the Gospels who personally met Christ and who came to believe in him and appreciate his person and mystery.

To be familiar with Christ and his radical ways, we also need to be familiar with his teachings, in particular with his Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5–7). This primary discourse of our Lord is so radical and original in its core demand. More than anything else, it insists on love for God and for all others—yes, including our very enemies and persecutors (Mt. 5:44). With this revolutionary way of loving, a completely new paradigm of caring for and relating with others emerges. Together with this, an entirely new set of criteria for evaluating and discerning our thoughts, feelings, and actions also arises. Now, it is never enough to not just kill or murder for one not to be liable to judgment. Now, one is not even allowed to let his anger or bitterness against anyone remain and grow in his heart (Mt. 5:21–26). Also now, it is never enough just to forgive those who have repeatedly hurt us, even if we choose to forgive them up to three times, the number set down by the rabbis, the teachers of the Law. Now, one is required to also have a gentle and humble heart, ever open to forgiving people "seventy times seven times," which means that we are not to limit our forgiveness to any fixed number of times (Mt. 18:22). On top of this, whereas before one chief norm for dealing with individuals who have injured us was the precept "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," this time it is the rule of "turning the other cheek" that has to be followed with such people who have offended us (Mt. 5:38–42). Indeed, with our Lord's coming and with the Kingdom of God already in our midst (Mk. 1:15; Mt. 3:2), what really counts this time are not only our external behaviors and actions. What also really matters this time are our very *intentions* behind our external behaviors and actions. Little wonder why it is the "pure in heart," as stressed in the Beatitudes, who are given new eyes to see and new ears to hear in order to discern well and find God in their daily lives (Mt. 5:1ff; 13:16–17).

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On the matter of the Beatitudes, many Gospel commentators today hold that they in fact are a self-portrait of Christ.[10] Not a few contend that when Jesus was giving this instruction, he may have been describing and talking about himself, directly or indirectly. To be sure, it is the Lord, above all else, who is poor in spirit, who is lowly, and who hungers and thirsts for what is right. It is he, outstandingly, who is the merciful one, the one who is pure in heart, the peacemaker, including the one who is sorrowing and persecuted for holiness' sake.

Taking this interpretation of the Beatitudes, some even take a major step further. They affirm that the Lord is not only talking about himself here. Much more than this, he seems to be presenting himself as *the* new and paramount standard for all loving and relating, even over and above the Jewish Law itself. Though he insists that he came not to abolish the Law and the prophets but to fulfill them (Mt. 5:17), the core obligations he now sets forth to his disciples are obviously still much more than what the Torah demands. It is in this context of Jesus presenting himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn. 14:6) and as *the* new supreme standard for loving that we need to approach and understand his new commandment of love, namely, not only "to love one another" but also to love "just as he has loved us" (Jn. 13:34). In the end, it is this aspect of Christic-loving, so radical and so original, as we hear it in the Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount, and as we witness it in Jesus' own public life and Paschal Mystery, that should become the overall foundation and spirit for all our judging, choosing, and discerning as beloved disciples of our Lord.

4. What do the Epistles of St. Paul (and also of St. John) basically say about discernment?

We said earlier (in the first question) that it is in the NT epistles that the actual expression "discernment of spirits" first appears. It is St. Paul who tells us that one of the numerous gifts from the Holy Spirit to the early Church was "the power to distinguish one spirit from another" (*diakriseis pneumaton* [1 Cor. 12:10]). Once more, the

[10]Pope John Paul II also takes this position on the Beatitudes in his Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (#16).

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presupposition here is that there are various kinds of "spirits" at work inside and outside of us, and often they can be known in the light of their different polarities. Some of the polarities used by Paul are:

- grace and sin (Rom. 5:20);
- light and darkness (Rom. 13:12–13);
- fruits of the spirit and flesh (Gal. 5:19–26);
- God's wisdom and human wisdom (1 Cor. 2:7, 13);
- law of faith and law of works (Rom. 3:27);
- freedom and slavery (Gal. 5:1);
- the cup and table of the Lord and the cup and table of demons (1 Cor. 10:21);
- life and death (Rom. 8:12);
- natural and spiritual persons (1 Cor. 2:14–15);
- true and false gospel (Gal. 1:6–9);
- true and false apostles (2 Cor. 11:13); and
- Christ and Satan (1 Cor. 5:3–5).

To understand Paul and why the Holy Spirit's gift of discernment to the Church was so important to him, we need to look at the context from which he was preaching and writing. As one of the top leaders officially concerned with the guarding of the rich deposit of faith (Gal. 1:6–9) and the building up of Christ's Body, Paul had to deal with many questions and issues that the new Church was facing then. The Council of Jerusalem (ca. 49–50 AD/Acts 15) can give us a glimpse of how complicated the situation was at that time. Being the very first council of the Church, this council had to address questions like: "Should the new Church subject Gentile converts to the Mosaic Law or not?"; "If yes, how far should they be subjected to the Law?"; "Should circumcision be imposed on them or not?"; "Should certain forms of dietary, ritual and marital laws (also) be imposed on them or not?" Though Paul is very clear that we are saved by faith in Christ and never by the works of the Law (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16), still, surely, as a devoted shepherd to many communities, he must have grappled with these kinds of burning queries. His three missionary journeys alone (ca. 48–58 AD/Acts 13–21), including his imprisonments in Caesarea (ca. 58 AD/Acts 24) and in Rome (ca. 61 AD/Acts 28), and of course his very martyrdom (ca. 65–66 AD) can help us imagine the countless

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challenges he had to confront together with the difficult decisions and discernment he had to make as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

In the Book of Acts, we hear Paul warning the Miletus presbyters (ca. 56–57 AD). He exhorts them to "be on guard," for soon, some from their own ranks "will present themselves distorting the truth and leading astray any who follow them" (Acts 20:30–31). This alert Paul repeats in his Second Letter to the Corinthians. In this letter, he writes about "false apostles" who disguise themselves as Christ's workers and ministers of God's justice. In this way, they are just like Satan who masks himself as *an angel of light*. However, in time, their falsehoods are uncovered since their drift and *terminus* correspond always to their works of deceit (2 Cor. 11:13–14). Apparently, this kind of situation, with false prophets and apostles abounding, was not at all isolated in the numerous communities of the early Church. Therefore, there was the urgent need for believers and their true leaders to be extra prudent and wise.

It was this threat of instability faced by many communities then, with various issues arising and with many untruthful religious leaders emerging, that moved Paul to come up with some guidelines for distinguishing the spirits. In fact, early on, in his very first letter, he was already urging the believers in Thessalonica, whom he describes as children of "light" (as opposed to children of "darkness"), to "test everything" (ca. 50–51 AD/1 Th. 5:5, 21; cf. also 1 Cor. 2:15). Speaking in terms of "God's will," he stresses that it is God's desire that they enduringly seek the good of all, always taking time to rejoice, pray, and render thanks to the Lord (1 Th. 5:16–18).

This theme of God's will Paul reiterates in his epistle to the Galatians (Gal. 1:4). This time, though, he includes the opposition between the "flesh" and the "spirit" as he instructs the Christians there to "live by the spirit" and "follow the spirit's lead" (Gal. 5:25). Similar to what is noted in the Gospels (Mt. 7:16; Lk. 6:44), he suggests that spirits are recognizable eventually by their fruits. From here, Paul then presents his two separate lists of the basic fruits of the "flesh" and of the "spirit" which can be regarded as invaluable guidelines for both personal and communal discernment. From the list of the fruits

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of the "flesh," we find the following *vices*: "lewd conduct, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, bickering, jealousy, outbursts of rage, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like." In contrast, the list of the fruits of the "spirit" features the following *virtues*: "love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness, and chastity" (Gal. 5:20–23).[11]

Significantly, we can find other similar lists of vices and virtues in Paul's other epistles (e.g., Rom. 1:29–31; 12:9–21; 1 Cor. 13:1–13; 2 Cor. 6:4–7; Phil. 4:4–9) and in the other NT epistles as well (e.g., 1 Jn. 2:16; Col. 3:5–17; Eph. 4:25–32; 1 Tim. 1:9–10; Titus 1:6–8; James 3:13–18; 1 Pet. 3:8–12). These epistles (Pauline and non-Pauline), with their respective lists, can also be looked upon as excellent guidelines for both individual and communal discernment. Taking these lists, one key rule can be applied, i.e., where these *virtues* (especially *faithfulness* to apostolic witness and *love*)[12] are present and alive, the spirit of Christ (most likely) is also present and alive, and where these *vices* are present and alive, the spirit of Satan (most likely) is also present and alive.

Despite Paul's emphasis on all these virtues and vices as norms for discernment, there is still for him one other standard most primary and even indispensable for the truthful testing of the spirits. This standard has to do with our fundamental attitude in relation to Christ himself. As Paul asserts, "no one can say: 'Jesus is Lord,' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11). For this apostle, to confess Jesus' Lordship and divinity can only be the grace and fruit of the Holy Spirit and acknowledging this truth can only bring us closer to God. On this

[11]Some authors refer to these two lists in Gal. 5:20–23 simply as a list of "vices and virtues" (see Gerald F. Hawthorne, et al., eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* [Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993], 962–963). Strictly speaking, however, "joy" and "peace" are not virtues. They refer more to our *interior dispositions*. It seems Paul often includes them since they are great marks of the Spirit's presence inside and outside of us. See Rom. 14:17; 15:13; Phil. 4:4–9.

[12]*Faithfulness* to the apostolic witness and *love* are also key themes of John's epistles. See 1 Jn. 2:24; 4:6, 7–21.

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ground, the acknowledgment (or non-acknowledgment) of Jesus as the Christ and as Son of God "who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh" (Rom. 1:4/New American Standard Version) becomes the basis of all discernment and can thus be regarded as *the* norm of all other norms when distinguishing the spirits.

Later, the writer of the First Epistle of John (ca. 90 AD) will echo this Pauline teaching on Jesus' Lordship. Like Paul, he will also urge Christians that they cannot just trust every spirit. He will point out the need for all to "put the spirits to a test to see if they belong to God" (1 Jn. 4:1). He then gives the reason for this, and it is because "many false prophets have appeared in the world" (1 Jn. 4:1).[13] After giving this warning, the author then highlights this essential criterion for discernment which is very similar to Paul's, which is the confession that Jesus our Lord has "come in the flesh" (1 Jn. 4:2).

Here the formula "come in the flesh" is most important. As a "new" confession of faith, it does not refer simply to the Incarnation, with Jesus the divine Word becoming a human being or the Son of God coming to us "in human form."[14] Much more than just the issue of "the physical reality of Jesus' humanity," the whole point of this formula "come in the flesh" has to do with the actual *salvific significance* of the reality of Jesus, who he was, and what he did "in the flesh." In other words, Jesus' coming in the flesh is not just one aspect of salvation among many other aspects which God utilized in order to redeem us. On the contrary, it is a most indispensable and intrinsic component

[13]"False prophets" here refer to those who have left the Johannine Christian community. These "secessionists" have chosen to join with others in the "world." In John's Gospel, "world" is a "designation for all those who (have) rejected Jesus." See Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, The Anchor Bible Commentary Series, eds. William Albright & David Freedman (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1983), 503.

[14]See Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 505. Also here we say "new" confession because it is a "new" (modified) formulation of faith to defy directly the new error of these false prophets who deny the redemptive significance and value of Jesus' "coming in the flesh." "Jesus is the Christ" (1 Jn. 2:22) and "Jesus is the Son of God" (1 Jn. 4:15) are two other (earlier) confessions of faith.

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of salvation history without which the whole work of God redeeming us would not have been possible. Hence, there is that essential link between Jesus' being "in the flesh" and our very salvation. As one writer puts it, to confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is to "acknowledge the plan of God who has willed that the divine Son enter fully into the physical, and thus historical, dimension of humankind and work salvation *within it*."[15] And it is precisely this crucial teaching on Jesus and his incarnation that many "false prophets" were negating at that time, which in the mind of the author of the First Epistle of John was most damaging not only to the Church but particularly to the very person and mystery of Jesus himself. This explains why the term "Antichrist" comes up in the epistle (e.g., 1 Jn. 2:18, 22; 4:3), for to go against Jesus and the truths regarding his person and his work of salvation is to foster the work of the devil.[16] Thus, in the long run, for the writer of John's First Epistle, it is this "doctrinal" testing on our faith in Jesus as God's Son "come in the flesh," with its intrinsic salvific significance, that will enable us to tell which spirit belongs to God and which one belongs to the Antichrist, which one comes from the spirit of truth and which one comes from the spirit of deception (1 Jn. 4:3–6; cf. also 1 Jn. 2:22). On this account, the Spirit of God will always acknowledge this truth regarding Jesus while the spirit of the Antichrist will always deny it.[17]

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[15]Francis Martin, "1 John," in William R. Farmer, ed., *The International Bible Commentary* (Claretian Publishers, 2001), 1830.

[16]R. Brown writes that the

> author of 1 John sees his adversaries' refusal to confess "Christ come in the flesh" as annulling or negating the importance of Jesus, and thus accomplishing the work of the Antichrist which is to destroy Christ. … Since by their christology they are annulling or destroying Jesus, the secessionists are diabolically reversing the purpose of the coming of God's Son.

See Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 505.

[17]Aside from this test of right doctrine, there are for the author of the First Epistle of John (not unlike Paul) two other tests to help us discern which spirits

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As far as we can tell, Paul (without excluding the other writers of the NT epistles) had no clear intentions of offering a systematic doctrine of discernment. It appears that his real and more urgent concern was to address the more pastoral cares and problems of the various communities then. These pastoral cares and problems ranged from too much legalism to corrupt and false apostles (or prophets) presenting heresies and false gospels, different forms of immorality (including sexual immorality), idolatry, group factions and rivalries, and simple and plain jealousies. In this way, these local communities, including the Church as a whole, were in dire need of some instruction (no matter how elementary it may be) on this gift of discernment so that believers and their leaders could be helped when evaluating their particular circumstances and when making pivotal choices for the genuine building up and edification of the Body of Christ, the Church. This, it seems, was the overall purpose of Paul when he took up this theme of discernment of spirits in his epistles.

5. Can you give one or two good definitions of "discernment of spirits?"

In essence, discernment of spirits is a process whereby the believer, in *faith,* examines prayerfully his or her affective experiences (i.e., feelings and interior movements) operative from within, including especially their direction and end. Doing this enables one to know, understand, and respond more authentically to God's personal unique manner of unconditional loving here and now.

One good definition of discernment of spirits is by Edward Malatesta. He says:

> By discernment of spirits is meant the process by which we examine, in the light of faith and in the connaturality of love, the nature of the spiritual states (what we may call our "consolations" and "desolations") we experience in ourselves and in others. The purpose of such examination is to decide, as far as possible, which of the movements

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are at work. They are the tests of *faithfulness* and *obedience* to the commandments (1 Jn. 2:3–7; 3:22–24) and *love* (1 Jn. 5:2).

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> we experience lead to the Lord and to a more perfect service of him and our (neighbor), and which deflect us from this goal.[18]

Another helpful definition of discernment of spirits is provided by Philip Sheldrake. He writes:

> In the Christian tradition … discernment (involves) the wisdom to recognize the difference between courses of action that are life-directing and the [ones] that are potentially destructive because [they are] out of harmony with our true nature and our relationship with God. The wisdom of discernment of spirits is meant to form a spiritual and ethical backdrop to life as a whole and to the way life is orientated, whereby we come to recognize almost instinctively our deepest truth and respond to God's communication in daily existence. As a form of wisdom, discernment invites us to a *critical* reflection on human experience—critical because such experience is fundamentally ambiguous. Faced with choices, whether overtly moral or not, we are subject to contradictory influences from inside or outside ourselves. Some of these influences incline us to what is authentic or morally good (again our "consolations"), others to what is inauthentic or morally flawed (our "desolations"). However, it is not always easy to distinguish between the two.[19]

From our definitions above, we see the most principal elements authors today underscore when spelling out the meaning of discernment of spirits. They include:

1. our inner experiences (in consideration of our present context and situation) which are the raw materials of all discernment, including their direction and end;
2. the art of constant, repeated, prayerful examination and reflection on these inner experiences;
3. a discrimination between various experiences not from the point of view of natural causalities (psychological or otherwise) but from that of personal faith and

[18]Taken from Green, *Weeds Among the Wheat*, 41.

[19]See Philip Sheldrake, "Discernment, Social Wisdom and the Public Realm," *Milltown Studies* 68 (Winter, 2011): 1–20.

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connatural knowledge and love in the Lord which changes the whole perspective;

4. an evaluation of these interior experiences from this knowledge, love, and faith-standpoint; and finally,

5. the capacity to receive and obey those movements which are discernibly from God and to reject those which are discernibly not from him (since they move us away from him), leading one to choices that are in accordance with the Spirit's ways.

6. What practical value can we derive from our earlier discussions on discernment in the Old and New Testaments (questions 2–4)?

From our discussions above, we can tell right away that discernment cannot just remain on the level of theory. Sooner or later, we need to go beyond our theoretical knowledge of sifting the spirits and get into its (more) *practical application*. The reason is because discernment (whether it is personal, communal, in the context of daily living, formal spiritual direction, preached, or in guided retreat) is ultimately all about making "good" (or "better") choices that are in harmony with the Spirit's guidance. For that matter, what can be more "practical" (or "useful") than engaging ourselves in this gift and art of "choosing well?" In fact, just like the OT and NT characters we named earlier, we are often confronted with obscure and challenging situations that require a truthful mindset and perspective, including a wise and prudent heart so that more life-enhancing decisions can be made by us. It is this truthful mindset and perspective, together with some of the most key principles of discernment present in the OT and NT, that can provide practical helps to us believers who are serious enough in seeking God and his will in our lives.

In both the OT and NT, we immediately realize that discernment of spirits is not just limited to skills, techniques, or methods of effective decision-making strategies. First and foremost, the overall groundwork of Christian discernment is our *personal faith* and *loving relationship* with God. In the NT, this specifically refers to our very attitude in relation to Christ our Lord. To use Paul's language, he says, "My entire attention

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is on the finish line as I run toward the prize to which God calls me—life on high in Christ Jesus. All of us … must have this attitude" (Phil. 3:14–15; 1 Cor. 12:3). Do away with this attitude towards the Lord, and we simply end up with a formal decision-making process which can be most workable but certainly not consistent with what we find in Scriptures. In addition to this emphasis on our faith and loving relationship with God, both the OT and NT also reveal a God who is most accessible and available, a God who is always near and not at all distant. Ever eager to call and reach out to his beloved ones, particularly in the context of personal vocation, he is a God of the covenant and revelation who does speak and make known his will to us (Gen. 15:1–21; Mt. 11:25–27; Jn. 1:18; Heb. 1:1–4).

If God and his grace are so real and alive for the authors of the Bible, so too are the realities of evil and sin so true and operative for them. We have seen this in the varying polarities that we pointed out in the previous questions (from the first to the fourth). The difficulty with evil and sin, as we said, is that they often come under the veil of something good, and even disguise themselves as *angels of light* (Gen. 3:13; 2 Cor. 11:13–14). This is exactly where our Biblical criteria and guidelines for testing the spirits can come into play and bestow so much practical benefit to those who can utilize them.

To begin with, the excellent criterion "by their fruits we will know them" (NKJV/Mt. 7:16, 20; Lk. 6:44) will always be of tremendous value to all discerners, whether they be beginners or experienced in the art. As St. Paul suggests, sometimes all we need is just some degree of patience when doing discernment because, sooner or later, the deceptions of the Evil One will be uncovered since their *direction* and *end* will always match his deeds (2 Cor. 11:15). Thus, there is a need to "test everything" (1 Thess. 5:21) and examine always the entire experience (i.e., its beginning, middle and end) and not just certain aspects of it.

Most complementary to the Gospel rule "by their fruits we will know them" are the lists of virtues and vices offered to us by Paul and the other epistle writers. With the aid of these lists, discernment of spirits, though still a most complex process, becomes significantly simplified. As we said before, the general application of these lists

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becomes easy enough by following this plain guideline: *where these virtues are present and at work, the spirit of God is present and at work; and where these vices are present and at work, the spirit of Satan is present and at work* (fourth question above). At the top of these lists are the virtues of fidelity to apostolic tradition (Gal. 1:6–9) and Christian charity (1 Cor. 13:1–13). These two top virtues are compatible with the OT prophetic guidelines of fidelity to Israel's core faith and a prophet's moral sense and virtue. Given these lists of virtues and vices, plus the Spirit's reliable marks of true joy and peace, the discernment indicators of external signs, wonders, mighty works, and the like become only secondary and relative (2 Cor. 12:12).

Paul's accent on the role of the universal Church and her local communities when doing discernment can be another useful detail to all of us present-day discerners. From our apostle, we can learn that discernment is never just totally "personal." It is never just a "me and my God" private affair. Discernment always has to have a communal and social dimension. Such was the case with the OT prophets and Paul himself, who showed special concern not only for the community of believers but also for the poor and the weak, ever sensitive to issues related to compassionate service and social justice (Is. 1:17; Amos 2:6ff; Rom. 12:9ff; Gal. 2:10).

To summarize, the following are the most practical truths that we can gain from our discussions on discernment in both the OT and NT, and taking them up can considerably improve the quality of our testing the spirits:

1. at the center of this gift of discernment should be our loving relationship with the Lord;

2. our God is a God of the covenant and revelation who is always near, and who does speak and make his will known to us, especially in the context of our personal vocation;

3. like God and his grace, the Evil One and sin are also at work in our lives, and they often do tempt us under

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the guise of something good and affect our way of loving and choosing;

4. hence, there is a need to "test everything" by examining the start, middle, and end of our experiences (especially the more significant ones), focusing on their *terminus* since by their fruits we will know their source(s);

5. virtues (especially fidelity to official and traditional teaching and Christ-like loving, including joy and peace) and vices can be helpful pointers to the Spirit's presence or absence in us and in others; and finally,

6. doing discernment can never be a "private" affair since it always has to have a social and communal aspect.

7. You described discernment of spirits not just as a "gift" but also as an "art" (questions 1 and 6). What do you mean when you say that discernment is an "art"?

"Art" has to do with a "specific skill in adept performance, conceived as requiring the exercise of intuitive faculties that cannot be learned solely by study."[20] Applying this to discernment, this means that discernment, though first of all a *gift* from the Spirit, can be developed and facilitated not so much by reading or studying about it but by actually doing it. It is in this sense that discernment is an art. Presenting a simple analogy here may help us.

The art of discernment of spirits may be compared to the deftness and virtuosity of a concert pianist.

The skill that the pianist has acquired through the years has been perfected only through sheer constant practice and actual playing. In this regard, learning to discern the spirits is like learning to play the piano. One learns to play the piano not by attending concerts and lectures on piano playing, and not so much even by reading books on how to play the piano. One learns to play the piano by actually getting behind the keyboard and playing the piano.

[20]Taken from *s.v.* "Art", *The American Heritage Dictionary*, New College Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

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Likewise, one learns to truly discern not so much by reading books and attending seminars and talks on discernment, although these can certainly help. One learns to discern truthfully by actually discerning. One learns to pay attention and get in touch with one's feelings and inner motions by actually paying attention and getting in touch with one's feelings and inner motions. One learns to name and describe the diverse experiences and movements operative from within and understand and interpret their meaning by actual practice. One learns to sift and test the "spirits" by actually doing it. Rather than any formal study and serious reading from books and articles, in the end it will be without question more through personal experience, actual practice in sifting these spirits, and long prayerful exposure to God's Word and to the Spirit's radical ways that will enable us to bring forth and deepen this gift and art of discernment.

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