

Biblical/communal Discernment: What is it?

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And this is my prayer, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11

The apostle Paul's prayer for the Philippians is a fitting prayer for Mennonite Church USA. I pray that our love may grow in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we too may be able to discern and pursue God's best in our world today. That is also my prayer for this session of the CLC.

In a 2011 lecture to the Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference, Jack Suderman explained discernment through a study of Paul's letter to the Philippian. He concluded that:

The critical, basic point is that discernment is not whatever task; it is the vocation of discerning the good news of Christ for the present generation. Gospel is the hub of all ministry. Discerning its essence is essential to guarantee the faithfulness of the ministry.

Jack went on to emphasize that "Paul ... makes sure that the word gospel cannot be just anything; it needs to be something. And that something is the new shape of things revealed in the coming, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If gospel is not related to that, it is not gospel."

In a recent teaching session at Harrisonburg Mennonite Church, Michael King defined discernment as "*involving the community of believers gathered in Jesus' name around Scripture in the presence of the Holy Spirit to find its way through the pressing, complex, and sometimes divisive issues of a given context.*"

Discernment is a means by which people of faith come to understand God's will for a particular situation. In both the Old and New Testaments, the people of God looked up to those who were wise and discerning among them. The book of Proverbs was written to enable individuals to learn moral and practical discernment in order to make wise choices.

By the very nature of the church in the New Testament, the people of God are called to be discerning *as a group*, (Matthew 18:20). Jesus promised to be with even two or three gathered in his name for the purpose of discernment.

Discernment is one of the functions of a congregation when it gathers for worship or fellowship (cf. Rom. 12:2, 1 Cor. 6:1-9; 12:8-10, Heb. 5:14, and Phil. 1:10). God's presence in the person of the Holy Spirit enables the community of faith to pursue God's will together.

J. Lawrence Burkholder (116) contends that the hardest question a church can ask itself is how it can know the will of God in relationship to the world of today. In his mind, “discernment is the clue to New Testament ethics.” “They would look at an event in history and they would ask themselves as a community under the Holy Spirit, “What is the meaning of this? Is it good or bad? Is it for Christ or against Christ?” In contemporary language, one might call this an “exegesis of the situation.”

Discernment is a key activity of a believers church. Paul Lederach (1980, 117) asserts: “Christians are to discern because they are living under God who is also discerning. God’s discernment and Christian discernment are to coincide. Christians are to live so that they are approved now and also in the judgment.” Burkholder (1963 1072) asserts that “the challenge before the peace churches is to become discerning congregations which “test” whether the authenticating reality of the obedient life is present today, i.e., whether there is a word from the Lord.”

Calvin Redekop (1970, 133) describes discernment as three primary activities: 1) “It engages in deep and intense study of what the Scriptures and the Spirit of Christ command and demand its followers to do. 2) It analyzes the sources and meaning of God’s Word in terms of its original meanings and what they are saying today. 3) It is concerned about defining the nature of Christian life and obedience in contemporary terms.

George Schemel (1992) views discernment as the means by which we look for God’s direction, and God’s word to us. He emphasizes that in order to function effectively as a discerning group, a faith community must understand its own identity and calling. He calls it a “name of grace.” To state it negatively, without an adequate understanding of its nature and mission, a church cannot function effectively as a discerning community.

Table and plenary discussion

Michael King asked the following questions which are especially appropriate for the CLC : What is the proper “unit for discernment”? A small group? A congregation? A conference or other denominational regional body? A denomination? The church worldwide? How should pastors, elders, conference ministers, denominational leaders help shape discernment in these different settings?

To what extent do you agree that we need a new emphasis on discernment in Mennonite Church USA? Name a specific situation where you would like to see better discernment.

What reservations or concerns, if any, do you have about Mennonite Church USA producing a churchwide document or providing resources on Biblical/communal discernment?