

# Spiritual Discernment



“And it is my prayer  
that your love  
may abound more and  
more, with knowledge  
and all discernment,  
so that you may  
approve what is excellent,  
and may be pure and  
blameless for the  
day of Christ, filled with  
the fruits of righteousness  
which come through  
Jesus Christ, to the  
glory and praise of God.”  
(Phil 1:9-11)

Paul remarked that through religious training and the study of the truth, a Christian should progress in his love. Relying on the Lord, he will be able to bear the fruits of righteousness and actively practise Christian love. The growth of such a love in tandem with one’s spiritual maturity will bring glory and praise to the Lord.

In his prayer, Paul clearly delivered an important message: Love should be rooted in spiritual knowledge and discernment. We need the wisdom from the Lord to love with spiritual discernment. Love alone without discernment may turn us from the will of God and hinder the Lord’s work.

## *I. What is undiscerning love?*

“From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

And Peter took Him and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to You.' But He turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are a hindrance to Me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men' (Mt 16:21-23).

Peter was loyal to his master. His love for Jesus seemed greater than the others. Why then did Jesus rebuke, rather than praise him after he had demonstrated his love and concern?

Peter believed that his Lord was capable of preventing this affliction. Thus he, Peter, would make every effort to help, if necessary. What Peter displayed here was genuine affection and loyalty. Unfortunately, while trying to show his concern, he failed to comprehend the essence of Jesus' words and to exercise spiritual discernment. Meanwhile, Satan grasped the opportunity to exploit Peter's imprudent affection and tried to diminish Jesus' determination to head for Jerusalem. It became obvious that the more such an affection was displayed, the greater the obstructive force to hinder the plan of salvation. Without spiritual discernment, good intentions turn out to be stumbling blocks to God's plan.

Those who would be righteous in today's world are often bewildered by the constant change of social and moral values. In the matter of marriage, divorce is often justified on the grounds of love, i.e. the absence of love for one's original spouse

and often a new-found love for someone else. People question why they should be bound to a 'loveless' marriage and answer that they have a 'right' to happiness in their lives. The church must be aware of subtle shifts of morality such as this and she must never relax her beliefs to accommodate human flaws. Since creation, God has wanted man to honour the sanctity of marriage (Heb 13:4). His will remains inalterable even though the practice of repeated marriage is prevalent today. Any church that tolerates such a fickle attitude toward marriage or condones this licentious practice is accepting adulterous behaviour and perverting the truth. This is not compassion but rather an obvious example of undiscerning love.

## *II. What is undiscerning faith and zeal?*

"And after six days Jesus took with Him Peter, James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And He was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Him. And Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.' He was still speaking, when a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to

Him.' When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise, and have no fear.' And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only" (Mt 17:1-8).

Peter underwent a dramatic experience which ranged from the joy of seeing the transfiguration of Jesus to the awe of hearing the voice of God. Witnessing the glorified Jesus and the appearance of two venerable patriarchs of Israel must have exhilarated Peter. Impelled by his religious zeal, he wished to build three individual booths for them. Unfortunately, his faith and fervour were not complemented by spiritual discernment. To Peter, these three transfigured were great and admirable leaders. He probably wanted to serve all of them with equal respect; forgetting to distinguish the Lord Jesus from the other two religious leaders. God reminded Peter through the voice in the cloud to solely concentrate his faith on His beloved son, Jesus.

When faith is not rooted exclusively in Jesus, deviation from His teaching will follow. For example, in today's Christian arena, emphasis is placed on the credentials and reputation of the evangelist rather than the gospel and truth. Many Christian publications and videos go into great detail about the preacher's family life, his likes and daily activities

before conveying the actual message. So the audience may just be overwhelmed by these spiritual superstars and fail to distinguish between faith in a celebrity and faith in Jesus.

Peter's zeal on the Mount of Transfiguration was based on an undiscerning faith. The more intense such devotion, the worse the obstruction for the preaching of the gospel. Such indiscriminate eagerness will not elevate one's spirituality. Instead, it will most likely create a haze for others in search of the Lord.

Similar events of undiscerning devotion which impeded the progress of holy work can be found in the book of Acts. While Paul was preaching to the gentiles, some Jewish believers were so zealous about the traditions of Judaism that they excessively stressed the necessity of circumcision and followed Paul everywhere to affirm the practice (Acts 15:1). Such religious devotion not only hindered the progress of the gospel but also destroyed the essence of Jesus' grace.

Today, such a lack of spiritual discernment continues to exist. Take for example the banners we see on the corners of busy streets. "We are all sinners."

"Believe in Jesus and be saved, or else be condemned!" Though the messages are accurate, lack of proper explanation makes them read like threats and curses. These negative statements would unnecessarily annoy the general public. In contrast, warnings and reminders softened by kind-hearted explanations from the Bible demonstrate Christian concern for the spiritual welfare of others. Without a clear altruistic motive, stern admonition can have a negative impact on the public's perception of Christianity.

The task of visiting is an important part of tending the flock. Often, the purpose of this work is to counsel absent believers. Out of zeal, certain church members would actively participate in this task. However, without proper training, some members of the visiting team may speak inappropriately or behave impolitely. Zeal is not the only criteria when carrying out divine work. Such indiscretion may even nullify the effectiveness of other workers.

### *III. What is discerning love and zeal?*

"When the days drew near for Him (Jesus) to be received up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51).

Our Lord Jesus came to this world for one purpose. Throughout His life, He worked diligently to achieve it. And that was Jerusalem. To Jesus, Jerusalem was a dreadful place where He was to be condemned to the agony and anguish of the crucifixion in order to atone for our sins; and to consummate the task of bringing salvation to humankind. It was however also a place where He brought glory to the Father and was glorified (Jn 12:23; 13:31).

For this glorious purpose, Jesus knew that He had to experience unspeakable torment. Recognising the purpose and resolved to bear the suffering, His steps toward Jerusalem were never hesitant nor faltering. Spiritual discernment motivated Him to demonstrate a divine love that was unwavering. About 2000 years have passed and Jesus' unreserved love still deeply touches our hearts.

"Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given Me?'" (Jn 18:11)

How did Jesus manifest His divine power and love? He countered Satan's temptation with scriptures, calmed the sea, performed numerous miracles, healed the sick, cast out evil spirits, and even raised

the dead. Ultimately, He demonstrated this unyielding love by taking the bitter cup placed before Him.

With His power, Jesus could have easily avoided these dangers, including the capture in Gethesemane (Mt 26:53) and the crucifixion on Golgotha (Mt 27:38-40). But He chose not to exercise these privileges. Motivated by divine courage and discipline, He chose to accomplish the noble plan of salvation. He was spiritually filled with such sound discernment that nothing, not even the sacrifice of His own life, could alter His determination.

The author of Hebrews encourages us to "leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, with instruction about baptism, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement" (Heb 6:1-2). Constantly increasing our spiritual knowledge will help us to know and love the Lord.

Paul shared the same belief. He said, "Be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col 1:9-10). In short, if we truly know, then we will truly love and truly believe.

Our church is the body of Christ. We ought to reflect the virtues of Jesus - pure, glorious and full of love. This love should originate from the thorough understanding of the truth of salvation, rather than impulsive affection. Through the church, God is "to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things" and what "the manifold wisdom of God" (Eph 3:8-11) is. A church with spiritual discernment will not only have abundant love, but will be able to provide guidance to the correct path. Being members of such a church, we should constantly ask the Lord to grant us spiritual vision so that we can plan for the future. As individuals, we should strive to know the will of the Lord and work to achieve this will.

May the true love of God abound!

*K C Tsai  
Toronto, Canada*