

## **DISCERNMENT: LISTENING FOR THE VOICE OF GOD!**

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“WHATEVER FAITH MAY BE, AND WHAT EVER ANSWERS IT MAY GIVE, AND TO WHOMSOEVER IT GIVES THEM, EVERY SUCH ANSWER GIVES TO THE FINITE EXISTENCE OF MAN AN INFINITE MEANING, A MEANING NOT DESTROYED BY SUFFERINGS, DEPRIVATIONS, OR DEATH.”

LEO TOLSTOY

Discernment or the listening for the voice of God is found to be a very subjective topic both within Christian circles and in worldly philosophical discussion. What does the voice of God sound like? Do we hear him as a booming roar or a quite whisper? Or, do we hear him at all and assume it is simply self-conscious awareness that drives our personal decisions and beliefs?

That is what I hope this paper will answer. Not what does the voice of God sound like but, what does the voice of God sound like to you?! To do this I will look at and compare three peoples understanding of discernment, what it means, and how they see it play out in their lives.

In a little book by Francis Frangipane called ‘The Discerning of Spirits’, Francis defines discernment as “the grace to see into the unseen.”<sup>1</sup> A spiritual gift to look through a rift which divides physical reality from the spiritual plain where we are to recognize a real battle ground for Christian warfare. For Frangipane, discernment seems more about visual interpretation and understanding of things outside of ones existence then the actual hearing of God’s voice into ones own life.

Like Francis, Kenneth Hagin also agrees that discernment is an individual’s gifted ability to look into the spiritual existence around them. However, he explores differently in that instead of defining discernment in his own belief, he attempts to conclude what discernment is not to be interpreted as. He writes in his book *The Holy Spirit and his Gifts* that, “Many times what people call the gift of

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<sup>1</sup> Frangipane, Francis; *Discernment Series: Discerning of Spirits*; (Cedar Rapids, IA.: Arrow Publications; 1991), Pg. 8.

discernment is really the gift of the word of knowledge in operation.”<sup>2</sup> It is an interesting conclusion as this interpretation can only lead someone to the understanding that knowledge cannot come from outside sources and as such no outside forces can have any transformational affect on an individual.

In personal confession this exclusion of an understanding of discernment does not make sense as the gospel clearly articulates the perspicacity of the gospel is what allows the Holy Spirit (an outside entity) to bring transformation to our lives (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10).<sup>3</sup>

Hagin finally concludes that, “Actually, there is no such thing mentioned in the bible as the gift of discernment. It is the discerning of Spirits.”<sup>4</sup> It is a conclusion which leads away from the scriptural definition and seems ignorant of the word of God. In Proverbs 8:12 scripture says, “I, Wisdom, live together with good judgment. I know where to discover knowledge and discernment.” We can also see its understanding being exercised in other passages (Prov. 2:1-6, 9:10; Psalm 119:34, 125; Phil. 1:9-10).

A third definition by Gordon Smith in “The Voice of Jesus” articulates that, “Listening to God is a matter of being attentive to the affective orientation of ones inner consciousness.”<sup>5</sup> A definition which later he points out as being largely carried out by a persons emotions. Granted, some part of personal awareness needs to define the orientation of discernment however, at some level discernment needs to be recognized as being an outside element not apart of our existence and recognized as being the voice of God. Hence Christ asks for an answer not of his will but of God’s!

It seems in defining discernment that God’s voice cannot be interpreted simply through set definitions but perhaps through the experience of discernment itself and how it is practiced.

Looking back at Francis Frangipane’s book, he outlines four principles which lead us into discernment. He illustrates these principles prior to their divulgement by stressing the importance of the absence of human philosophic and intellectual reasoning by saying “The scriptures tell us that

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<sup>2</sup> Hagin, Kenneth E. Hagin; *The Holy Spirit and His Gifts*; (Tulsa, OK.: Faith Library Publications; 1991); Pg. 109.

<sup>3</sup> All scripture quotations come from iLumina Bible and Encyclopedia, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Hagin, Kenneth E. Hagin; *The Holy Spirit and His Gifts*; (Tulsa, OK.: Faith Library Publications; 1991); Pg. 109.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, Gordon T.; *The Voice of Jesus*; (Downers Grove, ILL.: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

Jesus preserved the thoughts of men “in the spirit”. So also with us if we are to move in divine discernment, are view of life must be purged of human thoughts and reactions.”<sup>6</sup>

This is a point which makes clear that we are to seek a will that is not of ourselves, a point which makes sense. If it is the voice of God that we are seeking then we need to seek it with the absence of our own voice. Many times it seems as though in seeking God’s guidance we become confused by our own ramblings and rather than waiting upon the words of the Lord (Psalm 27:14, 40:1; Lam. 3:24-26), we rush to our own conclusions.

Francis’s first point is our need to be non-judgmental (Matt. 7:1-5). He emphasizes this point less we end up “seeing through the veil of a critical spirit.”<sup>7</sup> It seems that non-judgmentalism is meant to reflect in our view of discernment in other peoples lives. We cannot discern for others and nor can we judge the discernment to which they receive themselves.

A second position Frangipane takes is that we are to be quite at heart, unstriving and listening for God. In illustration he points to scriptures such as Psalm 46:10 “Be silent, and know that I am God.” And John 5:30, “But I do nothing without consulting the Father. I judge as I am told. And my judgment is absolutely just, because it is according to the will of God who sent me; it is not merely my own.”

To be patient and wait for God is sometimes difficult. In some practices impatience in prayer can sometimes lead to anxiety, through which we begin to spiritually panic and create such a ruckus that we miss what God is actually trying to tell us. In an example from 1 Kings 19:10-13 Elijah seeked to hear God’s voice and did not find it in the windstorm, earthquake, or fire but instead found him in a gentle whisper which only came after the “noise” had died down.

Thirdly Francis points to the need for discernment to be based in love. He illustrates it as “a love that leaps out toward others. It is motivated by long term commitment; it is anointed by sacrificial charity.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Frangipane, Francis; Discernment Series: Discerning of Spirits; (Cedar Rapids, IA.: Arrow Publications; 1991), Pg. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Frangipane, Francis; Discernment Series: Discerning of Spirits; (Cedar Rapids, IA.: Arrow Publications; 1991), Pg. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Frangipane, Francis; Discernment Series: Discerning of Spirits; (Cedar Rapids, IA.: Arrow Publications; 1991), Pg. 14-15.

It seems of no surprise that love would be a key element in discernment as Christ points out our relationship with God begins in love (Mark 12:30; John 3:16, 15:9-10). In seeking God's voice we must be open in our desire to be in his presence and aware of our personal relationship with him. Discernment cannot come through the desire of our own hearts but through the desire to know and understand the will of God.

Frangipane's principles all point to his forth conclusion that in order for discernment to take place, it must be sought after with peace in the center of our hearts (Matt. 5:8, 12:34). He writes, "This is vital because the gifts of the spirit must pass through our hearts before they are presented to the world around us, and if our hearts are not right, the gifts will not be right either."

Francis uses the words gifts to describe what we receive out of discernment where as wisdom and understanding can also be gifts. However, it is true as Kathleen Norris illustrates "One so often hears people say, "I just can't handle it," when they reject a biblical image of God as Father, as Mother, as Lord or Judge; God as lover. As angry or jealous, God on a cross. I find this choice of words revealing, however real the pain they reflect: if we seek a God we can "handle," that will be exactly what we get. A God we can manipulate, suspiciously like ourselves, the wideness of whose mercy we've cut down to size."<sup>9</sup>

In his conclusion, Francis states his belief that discernment does not need personal contact but just an awareness of a spirit's character. In application he writes that, "Once you know its nature, however, you do not need to know its name."<sup>10</sup> The application of course is connected to his belief that discernment is meant for seeing into the spiritual realm where you can engage in spiritual warfare and practice exorcism.

This seems to stray away from the understanding that discernment was meant to seek transformation in relation to our connection with God. If we are looking to hear God's voice then

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<sup>9</sup> Yancey, Philip; *Reaching for the invisible God*; (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishing House; 2000); Pg. 112.

<sup>10</sup> Frangipane, Francis; *Discernment Series: Discerning of Spirits*; (Cedar Rapids, IA.: Arrow Publications; 1991), Pg. 19.

personal contact is needed and simple character recognition would not be in proper focus to hear his voice in our lives.

If we look at Gordon Smith's writings we will find some other very different principles in discernment. As we had mentioned before, Gordon finds discernment rooted heavily in the response of human emotion. He writes in "The Voice of Jesus" that, "emotion is central to God's purposes in our lives."<sup>11</sup>

It is true that God gave humanity the ability to act with emotion and often it is this individual nature which can drive us to seek God's guidance out. However, is emotion the soul key to understanding and hearing the voice of God?<sup>12</sup>

Like Francis Frangipane, Gordon Smith also agrees that critical thought and judgmental attitudes can be detrimental to our discernment of God's voice. He writes, "Our feelings might not correspond to our understanding of our world and may not enable us to act in truth."<sup>13</sup>

It seems agreeable that judgment is an attitude which can limit our understandings both of ourselves and others but, how does discernment then reflect in comparison with prophesy? As prophesy is also an expression of guidance from God it seems difficult to balance a voice of non-judgmentalism and prophetic words of judgment.<sup>14</sup>

Based on these two principles (that discernment is rooted in emotion and exercised in non-judgmentalism), Gordon Smith gives four characteristics of discernment.

The first of which is that discernment is "The assurance of God's love"<sup>15</sup>. Connected with the love which Frangipane also illustrated, Smith's idea that emotion is key in discernment points out first that love is central to the expressions God has for us.

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<sup>11</sup> Smith, Gordon T.; *The Voice of Jesus*; (Downers Grove, ILL.: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Pg. 58.

<sup>12</sup> What is your "feelings"?

<sup>13</sup> Smith, Gordon T.; *The Voice of Jesus*; (Downers Grove, ILL.: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Pg. 61-62.

<sup>14</sup> Although a question to which I would like to explore, this topic goes off the course in which time a space will allow for this paper. For this reason I will explore this topic at another time.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, Gordon T.; *The Voice of Jesus*; (Downers Grove, ILL.: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Pg. 74.

As the gospel is the first step in discernment (John 3:16), love is the first thing we look to receive from God in personal relationship. With an emotion to which offers support, a Christian can find the desire to seek greater relationship and transformational growth.

Smith's second characteristic of discernment is its ability to "Convict us of sin" (John 16:7-11).<sup>16</sup> As attributed to our emotional awareness, Smith argues that guilt is a discernment of our conviction and need to seek out repentance and forgiveness.

Perhaps in greater quantity Smith points out that "the Spirit illumines our mind"<sup>17</sup> through the work of discernment (John 16:12-14). In expanding this nature of the Spirit he writes that, "Central to the Spirit's ministry is the reality that the spirit transforms us into the image of Christ, specifically through the truth."<sup>18</sup>

The final characteristic which Smith develops comes out of his third point that through the illumination of our mind we can allow the Holy Spirit to give us guidance in deciding how or what the choices in our lives will be. He writes, "We choose, but in our choosing we are not alone. We have with us the presence of the Holy Spirit, who guides us in our decision making."<sup>19</sup> It is important to God that our decisions are made of our own free will but, by acting in love he wants us to be able to listen for his guidance.

In exploration it seems as though discernment can be found in both Frangipane's desire to see the unseen and Smith's grasp of emotion. In order to hear the voice of God we have to be willing to pay attention not only to the inner response of ourselves but also to the events that occur and happen outside of ourselves. Like we learned earlier with Elijah in 1 Kings 19:10-13, God can speak in whispers but, he can also speak in roaring winds and tongues of fire as he did with the Apostles in Acts 2:1-4.

John V. Taylor once said that:

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, Gordon T.; *The Voice of Jesus*; (Downers Grove, ILL.: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Pg. 89.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, Gordon T.; *The Voice of Jesus*; (Downers Grove, ILL.: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Pg. 109.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, Gordon T.; *The Voice of Jesus*; (Downers Grove, ILL.: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Pg. 109.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, Gordon T.; *The Voice of Jesus*; (Downers Grove, ILL.: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Pg. 128.

“Every good teacher knows the futility of rapping on his desk and calling: Pay attention please! True attention is an involuntary self-surrender to the object of attention. The child who is absorbed is utterly relaxed. The adult mind, also, must be unstriving, receptive, expectant, before there can be any creative insight.

Again and again this is the state of mind in which new truth dawns. We do not work it out or think it out; rather, we have the sense of waiting for the discloser of something that is already there. Attention means being in attendance... To be “in the Spirit” is to be vividly aware of everything the moment contains, the twigs of the thorn-bush as well as the presence of God.”<sup>20</sup>

The principles and characteristics which Francis Frangipane and Gordon Smith give us, can offer direction and preparation in which to hear the voice of God. However, direction and preparation is only half of the answer. The only way to hear the voice of God is through the grace of being in a relationship with him where we are willing to not only seek out our voice but also to listen and wait for his.

As Taylor points out, to pay attention is to be in attendance. To be in communion with God is to recognize his presence and therefore grace in speaking to us. We need to recognize that presence not just in times of prayer but in all the mundane and exciting moments of our daily lives as Paul says it is “in him [that] we live and move and exist.” (Acts 17:28). Through this focus we can then open ourselves up to allow the voice of God to speak to us.

That then returns us to the original question and goal of this paper. What does the voice of God sound like to you? Perhaps though, we have moved beyond that and instead of asking this question we should be asking, what is God saying to you?

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<sup>20</sup> Yancey, Philip; *Reaching for the invisible God*; (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan Publishing House; 2000); Pg. 168.

“MY CHILD, LISTEN TO ME AND TREASURE MY INSTRUCTIONS. TUNE YOUR EARS TO WISDOM, AND CONCENTRATE ON UNDERSTANDING. CRY OUT FOR INSIGHT AND UNDERSTANDING. SEARCH FOR THEM AS YOU WOULD FOR LOST MONEY OR HIDDEN TREASURE. THEN YOU WILL UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS TO FEAR THE LORD, AND YOU WILL GAIN KNOWLEDGE OF GOD. FOR THE LORD GRANTS WISDOM! FROM HIS MOUTH COMES KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING.”

PROVERBS 2:1-6

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