

Workshop Notes

Workshop Title: Discerning God's Heart Together

Presenter: Tom Ashbrook

Do we want to know and follow God's will or just have Him bless ours? How do we discern God's will and how do we do it together? In this workshop, Tom will help us unpack and practice the discernment process developed by Ignatius of Loyola and explore how we might use it to follow Jesus together.

Welcome and Introductions

Tom's Story

How do we make decisions?

Biblical Foundations for Decision Making

Ignatius and Discernment – The Real Payoff

Heart of the Discerner

Process of Discernment; Personal and Corporate

Reflections

Adjourn

Reference: Thomas Green, Weeds Among the Wheat.

Discernment:

Discovering God's Will – Personally and Together

Tom Ashbrook

I. Purpose:

The word, “discernment,” as it is used here comes from the spiritual gift described as “discerning of spirits,” in 1 Cor 12:10, and used with the constellation of all the spiritual gifts listed in 1 Cor 12 and 13.

Discernment is paying attention to God’s personal and immediate direction regarding who we are and what we are to do, understanding that direction, and following it.

Discernment is the process in which we seek the all-consuming goal of love and service of God. The discernment situation is an opportunity to grow in our sensitivity to God’s way of speaking to our hearts, drawing us more deeply into participative love of the Trinity. Discernment is primarily about the process that glorifies God and builds His Body rather than the outcome decision. The right decision made in the wrong way can be just as destructive as the wrong decision. **Discernment, then, is a process of listening to God directly, in ourselves, and in one another, to discern His heart on a matter with the intention of faithful obedience.** Discernment happens in the heart more than in the head. It is in the heart where we recognize the “still small voice of God” in consolation and/or the harassment of the enemy in desolation. Finally, discernment happens in community where the multiplicity of spiritual gifts can function and confirmation can be experienced in “unity in the bonds of peace,” described in Ephesians 4:3.

II. **Biblical Foundations:** Following Jesus - John 10:1-6; Unity - Jn 17-23; One Mind - Philippians 1:27f; Peace - Phil 4:4f; Unity Ephesians 4:3; One Mind - Acts 1:14; Acts 15:1-29

III. Presuppositions:¹

- a. “Discernment presupposes a person who truly desires to accomplish God’s work in the concrete, confused situations of life. That is, it matters to such a person what the Lord wants” (63)
- b. “Discernment further presupposes a person who is truly open to be taught by, and led by, the Lord” (63).
- c. “Finally ...the discerner must “know” the Lord in the biblical sense of an experiential knowledge born of love” (63).
- d. Humble: “the genuinely discerning soul should always be marked by a healthy self-doubt and by an openness to be guided by the Lord through others” (66).
- e. Charitable: “such a person knows well his or her own weakness and sinfulness and capacity for self-deception. Thus, he or she will be very slow to judge others harshly because they happen to see things differently” (67).

¹ Numbers refer to pages in Thomas Green’s book, *Weeds Among the Wheat*.

- f. Courageous: “I feel sure, after prayer and openness to direction, that I should act in this way here and now, and I am convinced that such action is the only honest, loving thing for me to do” (67, see pp. 96 on faith and mistakes).

IV. Definitions

- a. **Examen:** A practice of prayer where one examines the recent past, making note of occasions of God’s blessings, times of faithful response to God, and times of sin, rebellion, and failure to follow Jesus faithfully, followed by appropriate prayers of gratitude and repentance, and meditation on lessons learned and the corresponding strength and transformation needed.
- b. **Attachments:** Attachments are those things, beliefs, conditions, and people in which we have invested personal needs that should rather be met in God. Attachments, often good gifts from God in the first place, become alternatives to reliance upon God and hindrances to knowing His heart and doing His will.
- c. **Consolation:** “Consolation is when we are caused to love God more. When we shed tears of love for our Lord, whether out of sorrow for our sins, or for the Passion of Christ, or because of other things directly connected with his service and praise, we are in consolation. Consolation is every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy which calls us to heavenly things, giving us peace in our Creator and Lord.” (Rule 1.3 below) Consolation is the “peace that passes understanding,” mentioned in Philippians 4:4-7, and the “peace that I [Jesus] give,” in John 14:27. True consolation comes from God.
- d. **Desolation:** “Desolation is all the contrary of the Consolation, such as prevailing love for things low and earthly, the unquiet of different temptations, lack of confidence in God, when we love not God, when we find ourselves all lazy, tepid, sad, and as if separated from our Creator and Lord.” (Rule 1.4 below) Desolation reflects the “troubled heart” described by Jesus in John 14:27. Desolation never comes from God, but from our own sinful nature and the influences of Satan.
 - i. **Note:** Consolation and Desolation are conditions of our heart in a given circumstance, not feelings or emotion. However, like many other conditions, there will be accompanying feelings and emotions. The feelings may be indicators of what is going on at a deeper level. For example, we may be startled by a sudden loud noise behind us, and we may experience fear. We react, not simply because we are afraid, but our fear has made us aware that there may be danger.
- e. **Indifference/Detachment:** The release of our “needs” in the attachments we have identified. We do this through confession that we have relied upon our attachments rather than God, and receiving forgiveness, ask for the strength to depend upon God alone, using what once were attachments only in so far as they help us love and serve God. Throughout the process, as God helps us recognize attachments that might block our ability to discern His will, we seek indifference/detachment. It can be most helpful to confess these attachments with others and seek their prayers and assistance.

V. Process:

- a. **Examen:** prayerfulness preceding the discernment process, so that we are fully reconciled to our Lord and that there be no un-repentant sin, as far as we are aware.

- b. **Clear Formation of the Question:** It is helpful to consider one question or action at a time, rather than multiple alternatives. The Question should be stated in a simple way that represents the crux of the matter to be discerned. The Question should be stated in such a way that it can be answered, “yes” or “no.”
- c. **Reasoning Together:** Gather relevant information pertinent to the question. Identify pros and cons for each yes and no alternative. Note: Pros and cons often are used as the basis for decision making – to maximize the pros and minimize the cons. However, it is clear from Scripture that God often leads in ways that seem to violate what we would consider a rational choice. This step is best accomplished in the group that will discern together, so that all are satisfied that the question has been analyzed adequately.
- d. **Surrender of Predispositions:** Many times, by the time we have completed step “c”, we find that we have already come to a tentative choice. Our inclination may or may not be God’s will; so without denying or rejecting our tentative choice, we surrender it to the Lord, asking for confirmation through the remaining process, if the choice is in fact His will.
- e. **Individual Prayer:** Each person participating in the discernment process withdraws for personal prayer to seek a sense, through recognizing consolation and desolation, God’s heart on the matter.
 - i. **Imaginative Exercise:**
 - 1. Prayerfully use your imagination to picture a “yes” answer to the question. Consider the pros and cons for that alternative and imagine yourself following that path. Spend silent time listening to your heart and to God. Discern consolation and desolation for that alternative.
 - 2. Prayerfully use your imagination to picture a “no” answer to the question. Consider the pros and cons for that alternative and imagine yourself following that path. Spend silent time listening to your heart and to God. Discern consolation and desolation for that alternative.
 - ii. **Discern Consolation and Desolation:** Review your awareness of consolation and desolation for each alternative, asking God for insight. Remember that it is the strategy of the enemy to attempt to worry us with fear and the belief that God will not care for us if we make the wrong decision. In the same way, the enemy can attempt to create a false consolation by tempting us to hold on to our attachments for security. It is often in this phase that we become aware of attachments which we must surrender to God and then return to the discernment process.
- f. **Return and Discern Unanimity:** The discerning group comes together and shares the result of individual prayer. This is not a “vote,” but a sharing of results to date. It may be that some felt desolation about both alternatives. It may be that some felt consolation about one alternative

and desolation about the other. It may be that some could not discern consolation or desolation. Sharing together in the group will give a feel for the progress. If a majority of the group feels desolation about both questions, then it may be that the question needs to be restated or another question identified. It may also be that some of the participants come to realize that it is not possible for them to engage the process or to adequately relinquish predispositions or attachments and will therefore want to withdraw from the active process and pray for the group from the outside. If the group is able to identify consolation in one of the alternatives, but there does not yet seem to be a significant consensus, then the group should return to the Individual Prayer again, repeating steps e and f, until “unity in the bonds of peace” (Cf. Eph 4:3) is reached. The group can decide the level of unity or consensus in which they can be in peace with a given decision. For example, while one may not have been able to sense personal consolation with a clearly majority direction, that person may feel consolation in trusting the majority decision. The “final” decision making process will vary depending on the polity and procedures of the group or organization.

VI. An Example:

Resources:

Thomas Green, Weeds Among the Wheat

Ruth Haley Barton, Pursuing God’s Will Together

Discernment Process Flowchart

