

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you
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Starting With the Fear of God

The first thing needed for discernment is the **fear of God**. The Scripture says, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10)*. It is one thing to know that something is true, it is another to care. This is illustrated by the response of the soldiers who guarded the tomb of Jesus. **Matthew 28:11-15** tells us that they took a *“large sum of money”* to say that the disciples had stolen the body. They knew from witnessing the angel (**Matthew 28:2-4**) that the supernatural power of God was at work, but rather than seek the resurrected Lord like Mary and the other disciples, they took money to lie. They did not fear God.

Likewise, **Romans 1:18-20** teaches that the truth of God is evident to the pagans who *“suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”* The creation itself is enough evidence to hold us accountable to the Creator. Yet preposterous theories that lack any evidence, such as naturalistic evolution out of nothing, are held and taught by those who know that such things cannot be true, but prefer to avert their gaze from the evidence that points to God whom they refuse to fear.

We expect the pagans to act this way; but Christians are also susceptible to the temptations of the pagan culture. Truth is not a popular concept these days. Ten years ago when the false teachings of many popular Christian teachers were exposed for correction, I encountered many pastors who refused to even make an attempt at discernment. All that was necessary for someone to be accepted and promoted as a great man of God was that he was popular. When given solid evidence that God's sheep were being misled by the wolves, some kept silent for fear of offending anyone by sounding an alarm. One said to me, “why do you always have to ask where things come from and if they are true?” I answered, “Would you eat something out of a garbage can just because it looked like food?”

God is Holy. We ought to care that our teachings, actions, and attitudes are being brought into conformity with His

Why the Church Lacks Discernment - Part 1

Written by Bob DeWaay

“And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ” (Philippians 1:9,10).

Paul's concern for first century Christians was that they would have the discernment to distinguish good from evil. Our need now is as critical as theirs. Because of the information revolution we are bombarded with religious and philosophical ideas at a pace unknown to previous generations - and this at a time when traditional sources of authority that once gave stability and guidance have been laid aside or considered irrelevant.

We need discernment. We must be able to differentiate truth from error, righteousness from wickedness, the holy from the profane, and the will of God from the enticements of the world. Recent evangelical history is not very encouraging about the ability of most Christians to make these distinctions.

Where is Discernment?

False teachers with doctrines so aberrant as to be blatant denials of the historic Christian faith have been roundly received as great people of faith. I have a video tape of a popular preacher and author preaching at a large Christian church. This man taught that the Holy Spirit has a body that looks just like us, that when Satan faced Jesus in the underworld they were on equal terms (both being merely Adamic), that the Holy Spirit had left Jesus in the underworld so that He was on His own as a man, and that if the Holy Spirit had not come back

Jesus would still be in the grave. I was shocked enough that such blatant denials of the perpetual deity of Christ could be preached in a Christian church. The reaction of the congregation of thousands was even more disturbing. They stood to their feet and shouted praises to God immediately after hearing that Jesus' deity was dependent on the Holy Spirit and had been removed from Him while He was in the grave.

Clearly they lacked the discernment that Paul prayed would be a part of the early church. Another TV preacher bilked thousands of people of hundreds of millions of dollars (all the while teaching false doctrines) until a secular TV news program finally exposed him. More alarming still, after having been exposed as a wolf in sheep's clothing, he continued his TV preaching for many months and people kept sending him their money. The numbers of fraudulent or heretical teachers that have misled the masses over the last thirty years, later to be exposed for their error or sin clearly demonstrates how easily modern Christians can be misled. Far from *“approving the things that are blameless,”* many have approved and applauded the fleecing of God's flock and the distorting of the Gospel of Christ.

It is time that we seek and find the discernment that God has for His people. Gullibility and naivety are not gifts of the Spirit! **Ephesians 4:14** tells what the result of godly ministry gifts ought to be: *“As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.”* The tricksters and false teachers are not the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers they claim to be; on the contrary, they are creating the winds of doctrines they are supposed to be teaching us to resist. Despite this, these false teachers find huge popular acceptance in evangelical, pentecostal, and charismatic churches. Where is discernment?

purposes. We ought to care! Many ask: What does it matter if one teaching is true or another false, seeing that none of us has “all the truth” anyway? What does it matter if my motivations are imperfect, are not everyone's? What does it matter if my fund raising techniques are ethically questionable as long it is for a good cause? These rhetorical questions show a lack of concern for the holiness of God. If God is true and has revealed Himself through the person of Jesus who claimed to be “The Truth” (**John 14:6**), then how can we be satisfied with known falsehood? How can we lack a hunger for God and His truth, even if such a hunger to know Him means a lifelong consciousness that we still somehow fall short and need so much more?

The fear of God (without which we do not even begin to have wisdom and knowledge) means that we **care** because we know that one day everything will be exposed in the light of His judgment. Mary Magdalene cared and the guards at the tomb did not - that is what led them down two paths with entirely different destinies. If we do not **care** what the truth is eventually we will not **know** what the truth is. This is the judgment of hardening that is so graphically described in **Romans 1:18-32**. Paul predicts that in the last days, this judgement of hardening will fall on those who “*do not receive the love of the truth*” (**2Thessalonians 2:9-11**).

The Need For Objectivity

Truth is not a state of mind. The Biblical doctrine of creation shows that God made the universe from nothing, that this universe is real, and that man who bears the image of God has an important place in it. God did not begin as an idea in the mind of man, but man began through a creative act that was the will and purpose of God. The creation stands as objective evidence of God's handiwork. Eve, the animals, the garden, and God Himself with whom Adam communed were all known and interacted with by Adam outside himself. God's choice to make Himself known to man, and the reality of His creative activity make objectivity possible. God gave humans the ability to distinguish between objects that are really there.

This ought to seem mundane and obvious; but sadly it is increasingly challenged and doubted in our pagan culture. If we live, as some say, in an illusory world that exists only in our minds, or in a real world the perception of which is distorted by the processes and structures of our own minds so that it cannot be meaningfully perceived, then the idea of making distinctions and categories is hopeless. “Reality” then is private and it is questionable whether valid communication is possible.

Subjectivism says that reality and truth are relative and personal. Stated simplistically it says, “you have your truth and I have mine.” Many people in our society accept this statement as simple common sense. It is no wonder we lack discernment. If this is the case, then for the Roman soldiers the “truth” was that the disciples stole the body and for Mary Magdalene the truth was that He was raised from the dead. In **1Corinthians 15:13-19** Paul argues that if Christ is not really raised from the dead, our faith is worthless! He saw no benefit in thinking and preaching that Christ was raised if in fact He was not. Paul believed in objective truth. The truly resurrected Christ is the Creator and Judge to whom all humans are accountable whether or not they believe there is a resurrection from the dead.

Many modern Americans, even Christians, cling to subjectivism as if it were a dear friend. They assume that because our constitution grants the right to believe and speak what we want, that it is simply un-American to discern truth from error and cling to one and reject the other. Everybody gets to be right. Truth, they think, is something that is found deep within each human's psyche, and having been so discovered, it is personal and private. These ideas destroy any hope of having Biblical discernment. Discerning truth from error means knowing the Bible objectively and being able to apply it to real situations and teachings. Just because someone thinks that Jesus only “seemed” to have a real body (docetism, an early gnostic heresy) does not make it true for them or anyone else. **1John 4:1-4** gives objective means of testing “spirits” based on the truth of Jesus' Incarnation.

If a teaching that claims a spiritual

source denies the Biblical doctrine of the Incarnation (the divine and human nature of Christ) it is not from God. About fourteen years ago I received a telephone call in which someone claimed to have a message for me from God and began prophesying. The voice on the phone began saying that I was a great and powerful man of God and other flattering things that made me suspicious. I decided to use 1John 4 quite literally and asked, “did Jesus Christ come in the flesh?” The answer was, “**She** believes that.” I said, “wrong answer” and hung up. Whatever spirit was inspiring that prophecy referred to the lady prophesying in the third person and failed to articulate the truth about Jesus Christ.

Subjectivism and the

We need objective evidence to judge spirits because we are not as equipped to “see” into the spirit world minus our physical senses, our doctrinal bearings, and our rational minds as some would like us to believe. Many are deceived by people peddling processes by which they think they can accomplish soul travel, contact with the dead, the manipulation of angelic beings for their own purposes, or gain secret information from spiritual sources.

In a video tape from the John Ankerberg Show, Jose Silva, the founder of Silva Mind Control, debates with Christian teachers who dispute the validity of his techniques.¹ By 1987, six million students had taken the Silva Mind Control course. In it, they are taught how to attain an altered state of consciousness called the “alpha level” and contact two psychic guides (one male and one female) who will be their “counselors.” He claims that Jesus came to teach these things so that we can enter the kingdom of God that is “within” us. When chal

lenged as to how his students could know if the information from these “paranormal” sources is reliable, Silva answered, “if it solves problems.” He claims that we need to function from our right brain hemisphere (supposedly less logical and more intuitive and subjective) if we are to get answers to our problems.

The “counselors” Silva’s students learn to contact are often famous, deceased people such as Abraham Lincoln. If they are really lucky, some students get “Jesus and Mary” as their male and female spiritual counselors. In such cases, they are in contact with a mystical, spiritual “Jesus” who is encountered in an altered state of consciousness and gives them access to secret information. The problem is, every spirit being calling himself “Jesus” is not the resurrected Messiah who bodily ascended into heaven. **2Corinthians 11:4** warns about another “Jesus” who was not the one Paul preached. Necromancy (seeking to contact the dead) and divination (using various occult techniques to predict the future) are forbidden in Scripture:

There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For whoever does these things is detestable to the Lord; and because of these detestable things the Lord your God will drive them out before you. (Deuteronomy 18:10-12)

These techniques are forbidden because they are not merely “neutral” means of obtaining important or useful information, but they are attempts to know secret information that God has not chosen to reveal (see **Deuteronomy 29:29**).

The information may work to “solve problems” as Silva asserts but create a bigger problem in the future like the loss of one’s eternal soul. Not only that, the forbidden sources of this secret information, if they are real at all, are demonic. That is what John Weldon, one of John

Ankerberg’s guests who debated Jose Silva, kept warning him about. Weldon stated, “When you enter the psychic realm it is like trying to play tennis with your side of the court under water. It is impossible - you are at a disadvantage because man was not made to function in that realm - it is subject to entities that has his best **disinterest** at heart.”²² The demons that are all too glad to grant information are the enemies of God and seek to destroy as many humans as possible since we bear the image of God.

I do not reference Silva Mind Control because there is a great problem with evangelical Christians taking the course. I reference it because I have met so many who use and promote ideas about discernment that are so parallel to Silva’s. Christians have promoted the right brain hemisphere theory, subjectivism and pragmatism that are central to Silva’s process. They assume that because they are sincere Christians that whatever they get in touch with is from God. Paul did not assume this nor did the Apostle John.

They warned Christians to use discernment and test the spirits based on revealed truth.

Those who assume that they can use some process to invoke contact with the subjective realm of psychic experience do not realize

how ill equipped they are to discern the information thus derived.

I have counseled people who have had hundreds of dreams, messages, visions, and inner voices. Some they knew to be not from God. They thought that if they could sort through this spiritually derived extra-biblical information they could find some profound word from God. These were often people nearly Biblically illiterate and often quite confused. They were trying to use the subjective to judge the subjective with little hope of making any sense of it all. I often ask such individuals, “Do you think God would purposely send veiled, hard to understand messages to your inner self that He knows will be mixed with your own confused thoughts and possible Satanic influences and then expect you to sort it all out?” I counseled them to ignore all these “voices,” and start learning the

Bible and living according to revealed Biblical truth.

What About Biblical Visions?

Many have pointed to Biblical visions and the prophecy of Joel quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost (**Acts 2:16-20**) as evidence that visualization and other modern techniques to seek spiritual information are legitimate. They argue that what Jose Silva and others are promoting are merely “counterfeits” of legitimate things God wants us to have. Does the Bible allow us to develop and use techniques to enable us to get more consciously in touch with the spiritual realm?

I believe there is a difference between Biblical visions and modern subjectivism and even ancient mysticism. The key difference is the sovereignty of God. Consider Peter’s famous vision of the sheet with unclean animals.

And he became hungry, and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; and he beheld the sky opened up, and a certain object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat!" But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." And again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." (Acts 10:10-15)

Peter did not purposely enter an altered state of consciousness to provoke this experience. He went to pray and became hungry and was thinking about eating. The vision came from God as an object lesson, the meaning of which would soon be made clear.

If we consider the supernatural events that surrounded this experience, we can clearly see the hand of God. Cornelius, the God fearing Gentile, had an angel appear to him and tell him to send messengers to Joppa for a man named Simon Peter whom he did not know. Peter’s vision came at just the right time to pre-

pare him for these messengers, though he still did not understand the purpose. The Lord spoke to Peter to listen to these men and accompany them. In **Acts 10:28** we see that Peter now understood the meaning of the vision, “. . . *God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean.*”

What Peter then preached to these Gentiles was something clearly Biblical, but culturally difficult for him to accept: “*Peter said: ‘I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him’*” (**Acts 10:34,35**). It took this experience to show him that he should preach the gospel to these people. When God saved them it opened a new chapter in church history.

However, that God wanted to do this was not new to Peter. Jesus commanded Peter and the others to make disciples of the *ethnē* (**Matthew 28:19**). The Old Testament often showed God’s plan to reach all the families of the earth, including the call of Abraham: “. . . *And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” (**Genesis 12:3b**).

Much more than a nebulous, subjective experience took place. God had brought together many factors to bring the church of the first century to the realization that from Jew and Gentile he was creating “*one new man,*” (**Ephesians 2:15**). Biblical visions were not subjective, uninterpreted experiences - they revealed God’s word and will to people objectively.

I see five differences between Peter’s vision (and other Biblical visions) and the subjective, often self-induced type of modern and ancient mystics. **First**, Peter’s vision was a sovereign, supernatural act of God, not the result of religious technique. **Second**, God supplied the meaning of the experience - objectively. **Third**, the meaning was compatible with clear, Biblical teaching. **Fourth**, Luke wrote about Peter’s experience in the Book of Acts so that thereafter all Christians would know that God includes Gentiles in His plan of salvation. We do not each have to experience Peter’s vision first hand to receive the benefit of it. **Fifth**, Peter never interpreted his experience subjectively nor claimed to have secret information that was not accessible to others.

In **2Peter 1** where he discussed another unique, spiritual experience - the mount of transfiguration (see **1Peter 1:17,18**), Peter directed his readers to a “more sure” source of objective truth - Biblical proph-

ecy (see **2Peter 1:19-21**). God’s acts come to us with His explanation of their meaning. Biblical truth is objective. David Wells discusses the meaning of God’s acts:

In these acts, he tied the objectivity of his truth to the flow of our history in such a way that the meaning of the acts, which he himself supernaturally provided, could never be any less objective than the event of which they were a part. . . The pagans listened intently to discern the meaning of the gods’ and goddesses’ intentions; now moderns listen just as intently to inner voices with the help of psychology. The modern self has simply replaced ancient divinities as the presumed source of mystery and meaning.³

There is no “*sure word of prophecy*” to be found in the vagaries of the human psyche.

“Approving the Things

In the passage with which we began, (**Philippians 1:9,10**), Paul said that the result of “*real knowledge and all discernment*” would be the ability to “approve” that which is excellent. This implies a process of making distinctions. The Greek word translated “approve” is “*dokimazō*” and has to do with putting something to the test to see what it is made of. A lack of discernment will impede one’s progress in sanctification. We will not be “*sincere and blameless*” in this world of sin and confusion if we naively go about our Christian walk without discernment.

Those Christians I referenced earlier who stood and applauded when they heard a teaching that claimed Jesus’ divinity was contingent and lost for a time would not have done so had they been trained Biblically. They did not know they had just heard heretical teaching so they were swayed by the mass response of the group and the speaker’s ability to work up their emotions.

When Jesus explained Himself to the disciples on the road to Emmaus He did not appeal to subjective emotions, inner secrets, or mystical experiences: “*And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures*” (**Luke 24:27**). The result impacted their inner beings: “*And they said to one another, ‘Were not our hearts burning*

within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?’” (**Luke 24:32**). Though we cannot now have Jesus bodily present to do the teaching, we can have our hearts burn with the joy and conviction of the same truth.

We have the same Scriptures and each of us should become such lifetime students of them that we could explain Messiah from the Old and New Testaments with the result that the Holy Spirit would burn the conviction of the truth into the hearts of many. Sadly, many would rather have bizarre “spiritual” manifestations and amazing experiences in a subjective atmosphere that lacks in depth Bible exposition. Our hearts “burn” over the wrong things and the charlatan preachers have their way with the sheep far too often. That is why the church lacks discernment.

Next month we will continue this study on the need for discernment by discussing pragmatism as an American way of life and belief that is damaging the modern church.

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End Notes

1. The John Ankerberg Show, video tape “Silva Mind Control,” (P.O. Box 8977; Chattanooga, TN 37414) 1987.
2. *ibid.*
3. David F. Wells, God In The Was-
teland, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: 1994) 116.

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