

Jamie Pitts

## **The Theological Shape of Discernment: A Brief Guide**

In this guide I reflect on what might be called the “theo-logic” of discernment, that is, the way the order and logic of our claims about God (*theos*) give shape and form to Christian practices of moral discernment. My guiding convictions here are twofold: first, that discerning what to do or say about specific moral activities is a proper task of the Christian church and, second, that a responsible execution of this task must take into account the full breadth of the church’s faith in God-in-Christ.

Mennonite discussions of discernment are often focused primarily, and sometimes even exclusively, on decision-making procedures. In spite of the fact that we often say that Christian discernment occurs when a community of believers gathers around Scripture in the power of the Holy Spirit, many of us highlight the “gathered community” part at the expense of Scripture and, especially, the Holy Spirit.

Our focus is usually to do with the ethics of power, and specifically with questions about who has the authority to make a decision and how. Who must be consulted? What counts as genuine consultation? Who counts as a relevant stakeholder in a given issue? Who gets final say and how is it reached?

Asking these and related questions has led many Mennonites and other Anabaptists to practice communal forms of discernment that involve lengthy and broadly inclusive decision-making processes. Furthermore, many Mennonites insist that truly inclusive decision-making must give special attention to those vulnerable and marginalized persons who are often passed over when communities and institutions make decisions. This emphasis on just inclusivity has led Mennonites to make signal contributions to restorative justice and other peacebuilding efforts.

Without wishing to diminish the importance of these efforts, I do want to suggest that a stronger theological understanding of discernment may provide the nourishment our churches need to practice healthy discernment. In the remainder of this guide I sketch out what I take to be a fundamentally theological description of discernment.

The practice of discerning how to think, feel, and respond to a given moral phenomenon is, perhaps, universal. At the very least the practice is not the exclusive property of the Christian church, but is something many humans of various convictions are engaged in at any given time. Discernment is, in other words, an entirely ordinary practice. Its ordinariness has indeed been the very reason that some Mennonite theologians have spoken largely of its ethical and sociological shape and disregarded its theological shape: if anyone can do it, regardless of their faith, then faith must not have much to say about it, other than to confirm that it’s a good idea and perhaps to provide some good examples of it.

Christians believe, however, that the ordinary world is created and sustained by God. As part of the ordinary world, ordinary human beings engaged in the ordinary practice of discernment are part of creation. In fact, every human practice, no matter how ordinary, is part of the good creation that God calls into being and holds together. Our ordinary practices thus have a spiritual constitution, finding their ground and goal in the Creator God who transcends them, who is spirit (Jn 4:24). We therefore can and must think about discernment and any other ordinary practice as spiritual practices.

Moreover, because Christians believe that the meaning and purpose of creation is fully disclosed in Jesus Christ, we can assess the spirituality of practices according to their correspondence to his life, death, and resurrection. We thus rightly ask, Do a given set of habits and procedures, of structures and processes, look like Jesus? Do they bear witness to his just inclusivity and passion for righteousness? Do they or don't they provide us a glimpse into what he described as the kingdom of God?

The church is the body of Christ, becomes the body of Christ, as it asks these questions and embraces Jesus-shaped spiritual practices. To say that another way, spiritual discernment makes the church what it is. The church's own gathered life can be described as an ongoing conversation about what practices to take up and why and, further, as the taking up of those practices it collectively discerns to reflect the character of Jesus and as the letting go of other practices.

Christian discernment is focused on Jesus Christ and so emphasizes the gospel stories about him. That being said, Christians affirm that all of Scripture witnesses to Jesus. If the Jesus stories give us an interpretive lens with which to read the rest of Scripture, the rest of Scripture helps us read the Jesus stories. It is from the entire Bible, and not just the Jesus stories, that we derive our "preference" for the vulnerable and marginalized, and so include them in decision-making processes. We might add here that the past and present of the global church and its theology are additional conversation partners that should guide our discerning interpretation.

I have suggested that all human practices, including discernment, are "spiritual" because they only exist thanks to God's creative and sustaining work. We always act spiritually, because we always act in relation to and with God. I've also indicated that Christian discernment is Jesus-centered, and so relies on the Bible's testimony to shape its judgment. None of these statements, however, speaks adequately of the reality of the Holy Spirit who is present to animate the church's discerning discipleship. Christian discernment is a labor of faith, hope, and love because we trust that the Spirit directs and corrects us. This trust enables us to take holy risks so that our discernment might be justly inclusive and passionately committed to righteousness.