

## Episode 52: Discernment, Part 2

This is Part 2 of a special series on Discernment.

**QUESTION: What is discernment? How can I develop the gift and ability? What can be done to correctly discern true and false spirits? And how can I discern my own thoughts from those from God?**

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DENVER: Then there is the weakness of mind and spirit of mankind. Moroni discussed the ministering of angels, and he described in these words: *“Neither have angels ceased to minister unto the children of men. For behold, they are subject unto him, to minister according to the word of his command, showing themselves unto them of strong faith and a firm mind in every form of godliness. And the office of their ministry is to call men unto repentance, and to fulfil and to do the work of the covenants of the Father, which he hath made unto the children of men, to prepare the way among the children of men, by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord, that they may bear testimony of him”* (Moroni 7:29-31).

If you go through those verses and you look at what he’s saying, it requires a firm mind in every form of godliness. A firm mind can be descriptive of a variety of things, including someone that’s just stubborn. But it’s not stubbornness—it’s a firm grasp on the things that lead to godliness; not excesses, not foolishness—and we’ll get more into that in a bit. Their purpose in ministering is to equip the person who has an audience and those who hear the message to be called to repentance; not a lot of flowery, fancy things but repentance, because essentially, without repentance—that is turning to face God in all you do—none of us are going to make it.

He goes on to say that the purpose of calling people to repentance is to *“fulfil and do the works of the covenants”* (Moroni 7:31). There is sort of a pattern here in what is happening. Angelic ministrants comes to people of a firm mind and every form of godliness, calls repentance in order to fulfil and in order to do the work of the covenants. *“To fulfil and to do the work of the covenants of the Father,”* that requires that people bear testimony of Him. These are the essential things that are needed. It doesn’t require a fanciful or a flowery imagination. It does not require that we bear testimony of ourselves. It doesn’t require us to do something other than to fulfil and do the work of the covenants. Therefore, I would suggest this is a pretty good guide to consider when you’re evaluating all of the competing claims that are now being made by people (to having inspiration or revelation or the word

of God to them).

We are vulnerable to being misled, even as we claim to be inspired. I'm going to read from a recent study from the National Academy of Science. I read from it because it's a really interesting study result:

Religion appears to serve as a moral compass for the vast majority of people around the world. It informs whether same-sex marriage is love or sin, whether war is an act of security or of terror, [and] whether abortion rights represent personal liberty or permission to murder. Many religions are centered on a god (or gods) that has beliefs and intentions, with adherents encouraged to follow "God's will" on everything from martyrdom to career planning to voting.

Within these religious systems, how do people know what their god wills? When people try to infer other people's attitudes and beliefs, they often do so egocentrically by using their own beliefs as an inductive guide. This research examines the extent to which people might also reason egocentrically about God's beliefs. We predicted that people would be consistently more egocentric when reasoning about God's beliefs than when reasoning about other people's beliefs. Intuiting God's beliefs on important issues may not produce an independent guide, but may instead serve as an echo chamber that reverberates one's own beliefs. "The Jewish and Christian traditions state explicitly that God created man in his own image, but believers and nonbelievers alike have long argued that people seem to create God in their own image as well."

That's a problem that you find everywhere. "God wills this to be so, well, because God agrees with me that it ought to be so, and therefore, I'm comfortably in tune with God!" The greatest help given to us to solve the contradiction between praying to God and the answer being exactly what we wanted, exactly what we expected, and exactly what makes us right and everyone else wrong—the greatest guide is the scriptures. They provide us a lifeline for measuring any inspiration we think we obtain from God. But that's not enough if it's not coupled together with prayerful, ponderous thought and time and experience. I want to compare these statements from Joseph Smith about this topic: "A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas, so that by noticing it, you may find it fulfilled the same day or soon; (i.e.) those things that were presented unto your minds by the Spirit of God, will come to pass; and thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it, you may grow into the principle of revelation, until you become

perfect in Christ Jesus” (*DHC* 3:381, June 1839).

That seems to suggest that answers can come suddenly, quickly, perhaps even easily. But Joseph also said this: “A fanciful and flowery and heated imagination beware of; because the things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God” (*TPJS*, p. 137, March 1839).

That second quote is taken from a letter that Joseph Smith composed while he was in Liberty Jail, in which he had plenty of time to fashion the language. The first quote, sadly, is taken from a source which may not be reliable or accurate. The source for that first quote is *Willard Richard's Pocket Companion*, in which he quoted something which, **if** Joseph Smith said it, Joseph said it while Willard Richards was in England on a mission, and he could not possibly have heard it. He doesn't even attribute it to Joseph Smith. But when the documentary history was being compiled, they used the *Willard Richard's [Pocket] Companion* to take that language and attribute it to a talk given by Joseph in 1839 because most of the stuff in the *Pocket Companion* can be tracked to Joseph, and therefore they conclude this one likewise fit that same category. The second one is clearly, unambiguously from Joseph Smith and describes the process. Now, while Joseph was in the Liberty Jail on occasion he would have a friendly face show up, or he would have a letter arrive. On one of the occasions he got letters from other people and his wife, Emma. Joseph, who had been brooding at the time and longing for the companionship of some friends, describes what his mind was going through at the time of the letter and his response to it. He says his mind was frenzied, and any man's mind can be when contemplating the many difficult issues we are called upon to confront.

Just like Joseph, we have perpetual conundrums and contradictions. We all face them. Some are of our own making but others are just inherent in living in this existence. When we thoughtfully consider the challenges, just like Joseph, it seizes the mind, and like Joseph in Liberty Jail, makes us reflect upon so many things with the “avidity of lightning.” That was Joseph's word. The mind is in this frenzied state, and with the avidity of lightning he's jumping from subject to subject, a fence to a fence, from things that console to things that outrage you. From things you know to be true to things that offend you. Back and forth, and back and forth until, as Joseph puts it, “...finally all enmity, malice and hatred, and past differences, misunderstandings and mismanagements are slain victorious at the feet of hope; and when the heart is sufficiently contrite, then the voice of inspiration steals along and whispers....” It's almost poetry, the way Joseph describes what he went through there.

But it is poetry describing the actual bona fides of Joseph receiving answers from God.

God's most important inspiration for the most challenging subjects is often not hasty, quick, and without effort at our end. Consider the advice to Oliver Cowdery that he must "study it out in his own mind first" before asking God to tell him the answer. Many people want a quick, perfunctory response from God with no forethought. What they receive in turn is a quick, perfunctory answer. God is almost always, for the most difficult challenges, not a "short order cook," although there are certainly false spirits who are willing to be just that.

I asked God in October what the term "mutual agreement" (as used in the Answer) meant. Before I asked, I hesitated and pondered the issue for two months. I discussed it with my wife and several others, and then discussed again the views of others with my wife. I read emails from people involved in an active discussion about the meaning of the term. It requires humility to approach God and ask Him for His answer and yet more humility to know it is from Him and not my own ego, presumptions, hopes, desires, wants, and conceit. It is for me, as it was for Joseph, only "when the heart is sufficiently contrite, then the voice of inspiration steals along and whispers" the truth that comes from a purer source, higher than myself, and more filled with light than any man. Certainly, greater light than I have. When the definition was given, it was accompanied by the realization the Lord could have disputed every day of His life with someone. He deliberately chose to not contend. He was not an argumentative personality.

The more we contend with others, the more we are taken captive by the spirit of contention. We become subject to the spirit we submit to follow. Those who are prone to contention become more contentious as they listen to that spirit. Eventually they are overcome by that spirit, and it is a great work involving great effort to subdue and dismiss that spirit from the heart and mind of the victim.

Let me give you a description of the *Prayer for the Covenant*: It took months of pondering, testing, questioning beforehand before I even dared to ask. The idea that presented itself to my mind was that Joseph's prayer at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple was a pattern to be followed when some great event involving God was to take place. The House of the Lord was one such event in Kirtland, but having a new volume of scripture was at least equally important to that. Therefore, a prayer to God asking for His acceptance was an idea that continued to press upon my mind.

But it concerned me that the idea of my offering that prayer may be based on my own will and not heaven's. Before proceeding, I questioned my motive, my desire, and why I would even ask. I was haunted by the continuing impression that it needed to be done and was

required of me. Finally, when the idea could not be shaken from my mind, I determined it was not my own thought but God's beckoning voice telling me this was an obligation I needed to act upon and not suppress. I want you to think of Joseph's description that says, "Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of [my] heart. I reflected on it again and again...."

Joseph did not act hastily when the impression came to him. He couldn't shake it. It persisted. He reflected upon it again and again. I don't know whether that's days, weeks, or months, but I can tell you before the *Prayer for the Covenant* was offered, for me it was months, because if it isn't of God, I have no right to step forward and do something. I ought not be volunteering for things of that nature. At length I determined that I should act on the impulse, and therefore, I ought to offer a prayer for the acceptance of the scripture. When I began to compose the prayer, the content was provided by inspiration from Heaven and not my own words. It took me nearly 200,000 words to write a history of the Restoration from the time of Joseph to the present in a book that's fairly lengthy. The *Prayer for the Covenant*, coming by inspiration, only took a few pages and stated in more concise terms, more correctly, the history of the Restoration from the beginning until now. The *Prayer for the Covenant*—the prayer for the Scriptures—is not me being clever and insightful and succinct. The words were given, and the words are God's view of what has happened.

There are those who have claimed inspiration on very important matters who make decisions quickly. Almost as soon as they finish a prayer asking for something, they assume the first thing that pops into their mind is God's infallible answer. I do not doubt that may happen. It has happened to me, but for the most important things I have found that careful, ponderous, and solemn thought and meditation over time produces God's will and word with clarity that does not happen in haste.

Plural marriage history is a very convoluted and difficult topic. It's easy to reach a decision without the labor of careful, solemn, ponderous, and searching thought to determine the truth. When the policy was announced publicly in 1852, the focus of the announcement that was made by Orson Pratt was on the Constitution of the United States. In fact, when he got up to deliver the announcement, one of the things that's stressed in the talk—and you can read it, it's in the Journal of Discourses; the talk is preserved—one of the things he stressed was that the Constitution protected religious practices and that if it is a bona fide part of your religion, then it is protected. In fact, there is more emphasis in that talk placed on the Constitutionality of the practice than there is on scriptural support or divine pattern of the practice. This is the first public announcement.

So one of the questions that presents to my mind—and should present to your mind—is why, if this is an eternal principle, why, when the first public explanation of it is given, was the focus upon the Constitutionality of the practice. It seems incongruent. The Constitution of the United States, at that time, was less than 75 years old, but this is a practice that often goes back—depending upon whether you accept what Brigham Young says or not—all the way to the Creation, but certainly by those who advocated it, back to the early patriarchal fathers. So why the focus on the Constitutionality of the practice? It was one of the dilemmas and one of the questions that occurred to me when I first encountered the subject. If it begins with Adam bringing “one of his wives,” why isn’t that much more important to relate? The practice, if it is of Divine origin, should have a great body of scripture and truth to back it. Why focus on something as comparatively trivial as the then 75-year-old U.S. Constitution? It took me several decades of searching before I felt qualified to reach a conclusion on the topic. 27 years of preparation and pursuit was involved before I found God, which then brings this point:

If a group of prayerful people spend months focused on a challenge; and then many hours together and individually discussing, searching, praying, and looking to heaven for guidance; and then reach a conclusion they can all individually and collectively testify came from heaven, how can I adequately test their outcome without giving it careful, solemn, ponderous thought and take the time to test and retest the answer they get? People who can make truly inspired snap decisions are far better at obtaining God’s voice than am I. For gravely important matters, it takes me a great deal of wrestling with heaven before I can trust that I am humble enough before God to accept what He has to offer and to exclude all of what I want, all of what I hope, and all of what I expect. Those who have a “short order cook” for their God can do what I cannot.

There are many who dispute the inspiration others have received. I have two concerns with the decision a good person makes to dispute with others. First, the Lord’s example is to refrain from disputing, as He did. When confronted, He would respond, but He did not go about picking a fight with others. He responded. The only exception was when He went up to Jerusalem to be slain. Then He went into the seat of Jewish power and authority to throw it down and provoke their decision to finally judge, reject and crucify Him. He, and not they, controlled that timing. His provocation at that time was a deliberate act on His part because His *“time had come,”* and His sacrifice needed to be made.

Second, there are the Lord’s teachings. We have time and time again focused on the Doctrine of Christ. We have the doctrine of Christ on numerous websites, enshrined in numerous talks, and as a theme that has been adopted for conferences. Just before the doctrine of Christ He tells you what His doctrine is NOT. This is what Christ says

immediately preceding His doctrine: *“neither shall there be disputations among you concerning the points of my doctrine, as there have hitherto been. For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away”* (3 Nephi 11:28-30). And then He proceeds to declare His doctrine of Christ.

The more we contend and dispute with one another, the better we become at contention. We polish the rhetorical skills to oppose others. That spirit of contention can take possession of us, and when it does, we are hard-pressed to be a peacemaker with others. Christ said: *“Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God”* (Matthew 5:7-9). But peace should not be made at the cost of truth. Truth must be the only goal. Truth, however, belongs to God. Our desires, appetites, and passions are prone to make us stray well beyond the bounds set by God.

- Therefore, when our pride is gratified, we should question if what we are advancing is truth.
- When our ambition is served, we should question if we are in the Lord’s employ or our own.
- When we insist upon control, we should question if we are like our Lord or instead like His adversary.
- When we use any means for compelling others, we should wonder if we are mocking the God who makes the sun to shine and rain to fall on all His fallen children without compulsion.
- When we display unrighteous dominion, we should question whether we are worthy of any dominion at all.

Our tools must be limited to persuasion, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, pure knowledge—all of them mustered *“without compulsory means”* to persuade others to accept the truth. And if we fail to make the persuasive case, then the problem is not others; the problem is that we’ve yet to figure out how to be sufficiently knowledgeable so as to bring them aboard.

I believe every person we encounter down here, no matter who they are, wants to follow Christ. That’s why we’re here. The only reason they got here was because they want to follow Christ. Therefore, since they are predisposed to following Christ, the reason they are not doing so at present is because no one has taken the time, no one has taken the trouble

of giving sufficient cause to them to change, to turn, to repent, and to follow Christ. And by the way, at this point, none of us know enough in order to be able to truly follow Christ, because we are all riddled with half truths, part understanding, and the need for constant repentance—all of us. But if you're further along and you accept Christ, and you understand His will better than your brother or sister, then you have the obligation to present—persuasively—to them the same reasons that touched their heart before they ever entered this world, when they elected to follow Christ into this dark abyss in the first place. They're here trying to find Him. If you can point to it and give them reason to believe, my view is that every single individual on earth has a native free disposition to turn and face Christ. We just have to figure out how to present that sufficiently persuasively so that it touches their heart, and it resonates with that truth—that light that they came down here in the first instance possessing.

The light of Christ illuminates every single being that is in this world. Therefore, Christ is in them already. You just have to animate that so that they realize the truth that you express, the testimony that you bear. The one whom you worship is God, indeed, and worthy of their worship, worthy of their acceptance, as well.

There is so much left to be done. I know that we can't jump hastily from point to point along the way and that we have to carefully proceed with every step. But it's astonishing to me the steps that people decide to get hung up on and to spend a great deal of time, when time could better be spent moving further along on the path. I don't know what it will take to get people to enthusiastically welcome and to move along with alacrity on the pathway that the prophecies foretell someone is going to achieve in the last days. Because it seems like all that murmuring that we read about in the Book of Exodus going on in the camp of Israel, when we scratch our heads and say, Why are they complaining about missing the fleshpots of Egypt when God is leading them with a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night? One would think that you'd be happy eating manna in the wilderness, if you knew God was with you.

I also think that in our current state of technological development, it's possible for the discontent to magnify the voice electronically over the Internet and to make any level of discontent seem to be much greater than it really is. But if one person is discontent and 500 people are arguing with the one who is discontent, it appears that the argument includes at least half a thousand, maybe more. As between one another—that is, every one of us, because every one of us is involved in a relationship with one another—you choose. Mind you, Christ could have disputed, He could have corrected, he could have challenged every one of the ongoing religious and social conventions of His day. "You are doing that wrong. Oh, you should stop doing that. Would you quit it! And by the way, you're so dark in your mind that I don't know where it begins, except for him, he's worse...and then her." Oh!



How much of the gospel of Christ would not have been possible for Him to preach if He'd gone about contending? He chose not to. In that respect, perhaps His most godly example was the patience with which He dealt with those around Him; kindly, patiently correcting them when they, largely, came to Him with questions trying to trap Him, but affirmatively stating in the Sermon on the Mount how you could take any group of people and turn them into Zion itself, if we would live the Sermon on the Mount.

I figure that I'm not that good a teacher because it appears to me that there are a lot of mistakes being made that are perfectly avoidable. I don't take King Benjamin's statement that the number of errors that people can make— The number of sins that people can commit are endless; there is no way to possibly number them as— I don't take that as consoling words. I take that as a challenge to say, Okay, but your people did find peace among one another. And even Enoch's people found peace among one another. Melchizedek was called the Prince of Peace because he preached, but what he preached was repentance. The office of the ministering of angels is to spread the message of repentance. So then all of us have an obligation there to join in the same thing—repenting, turning to face God. The more we face Him, the more light we take in, the more differently we behave, individually and in connection with each other.

I am certain we will see Zion, because it's been promised, and it's been prophesied from the beginning of time. When father Adam prophesied, being overcome by the Spirit in the valley of Adam-ondi-Ahman, and foretold what would happen to his posterity down to the latest generations, Zion was pointed to. Therefore, from the days of Adam on, all the holy prophets have looked forward to that as the essential moment in the history of the world, because Christ will come and will redeem the world. It will be the end of the wicked; it will be the beginning of something far better. That's been the hope, that's been the promise, that's been what they've looked forward to. I wonder how many of us share that same longing, that same hope, that same desire that originated in the beginning, because if we don't subdue our desires, appetites, and passions enough to try and deal peaceably one with another, choosing deliberately to not contend, even when we know people are wrong— When Christ was confronted and He corrected the error, He corrected only that error; He didn't go on with a list of other weaknesses, failings, and challenges, He only addressed the one that was put to him.

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The foregoing excerpts were taken from Denver's fireside talk entitled "That We Might Become One," given in Clinton, UT on January 14, 2018.

In addition to the foregoing, Denver has addressed this topic extensively in several blog posts that may be worthwhile to review, including:

[“False Spirits” posted January 19, 2012](#)

[“Gifts Come from God” posted June 2, 2010](#)

[“The Battle” posted January 13, 2011; and](#)

[“Faith Requires Correct Acts” posted August 7, 2016.](#)