

On Discernment for Christian Educators

By Dr. Phillip A. Towndrow

"Discernment is not simply a matter of telling the difference between what is right and wrong; rather it is the difference between right and almost right". C. H. Spurgeon, British preacher (1834-1892)

Long-suffering Job said, "With God are wisdom and might; he has counsel and understanding". (Job 12:13 ESV)

In 1919, Hans Wilsdorf and Alfred Davis founded the company that today produces Rolex wristwatches, commonly considered status symbols for the rich and aspiring. Interestingly, Rolex invented the first watch with an automatically changing date dial, and a water resistant case to a depth of 100 meters. It is also true that Rolex watches are often counterfeited and sold for a fraction of the original cost by disreputable back street shops and online vendors. Question is: can you tell the difference between an authentic and a fake Rolex? Experts can do so in a matter of seconds but others are easily fooled.*

More broadly, how do we know or how can we tell what is good, true or right? Is it a gut feeling or something else? For example, what does it take for a teacher to say from the bottom of his or her heart, "All learners—despite their weaknesses, mistakes and failings (even that little boy in the back corner who's always obnoxious and demanding)—are inherently valuable because they are God's creations?"

Commonly understood, discernment is the faculty (or mental power) of discrimination, or acuteness of judgement and understanding. It is also the activity of determining the value and quality of a certain subject or event.

We know a discerning person when we see one, don't we? That person possesses wisdom, insight, understanding and keen perception; living in the light and being a beacon for others is plainly noticeable. Unfortunately, the opposite is also highly evident and true: indiscriminate people lack care and selectivity. They're also characteristically haphazard, thoughtless and act out of ignorance. They can't easily separate or distinguish. We might wonder, then, how anyone can be discerning. There has to be something else, and thankfully there is a better and surer way.

As Christian educators we need to make countless decisions every day, but how do we know if our thinking and actions are wise and true? In this article, I want to show how discernment is a matter for both big and small matters and something we must be constantly aware of wherever we go and whatever we do.

Bring Me a Sword

A lack of discernment is a barrier or hindrance to progress, belief or understanding and can cause problems for us in the future. Scripture says, "The wisdom of the prudent is to discern his way, but the folly of fools is deceiving" (Proverbs 14:8 ESV), and just a few verses earlier, "By the mouth of a fool comes a rod for his back, but the lips of the wise will preserve them" (Proverbs 14:3 ESV). One man in the Bible knew these things particularly well.

When young Solomon began his reign as king, he loved God and continued to live in the God-honouring ways of his father, David. But, he also worshipped at the local shrines, offering sacrifices and burning incense. These were sinful practices as it was the designated and exclusive job of priests to offer sacrifices.

Then, one night, God appeared to Solomon in a dream and said, "Ask what I shall give you" (1 Kings 3:4 ESV). Realising he was a novice and out of his depth, Solomon replied, "Here's what I want: Give me a God-listening heart so I can lead your people well, discerning the difference between good and evil. For who on their own is capable of leading your glorious people?" (1 Kings 3:9, The Message). Impressed by his selflessness, God obliged and gave Solomon "a wise and mature heart".

Soon after, in Jerusalem, two women came before Solomon in the famous case of the true mother of a disputed infant and the sparing of the life of her child (1 Kings 3:16-28). After hearing the claims and counterclaims, Solomon declared: "Cut the living baby in two, give half to one and half to the other." At this, the real mother of the living baby broke down and said: "Oh no, master! Give her the whole baby alive; don't kill him!" Unsatisfied (and most inattentively) the other woman said, "If I can't have him, you can't have him, cut away!" Solomon had heard enough and then gave his verdict: "Give the living baby to the first woman. Nobody is going to kill this baby. She is the real mother" (Verses 25-27, The Message).

Amazing and wonderful! Word quickly circulated around Israel about the king's judgement. The Bible states, "They were all in awe of the king, realizing that it was God's wisdom that enabled him to judge truly" (Verse 28, The Message). What exactly had happened?

Solomon's wisdom in distinguishing between a mother's true love for her child and the spite of a person who can't get her way is a decisive and effective case of discernment *in action*. Certainly, even Solomon made mistakes and errors of judgement, but we can easily appreciate how his godly-inspired words and actions were a blessing to the authentic mother and a rebuke to the imposter. Indeed, the Bible says:

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprovener to a listening ear. Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest is a faithful messenger to those who send him; he refreshes the soul of his masters. Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give.
(Proverbs 25:11-14 ESV)

There is a lot to be said for wise judgement and we shouldn't necessarily stop others criticising us because they might just be doing us some good. But there is more.

We know the great British preacher and writer Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) for saying among many other things, "Discernment is not simply a matter of telling the difference between what is right and wrong; rather it is the difference between right and almost right." What he meant is that it's one thing to see major differences between what is and what is not God's truth, but true discernment in action also involves sorting through and sifting out minor discrepancies. This is because God's truth must be maintained and upheld in all circumstances and at all levels of detail. We cannot let anything slip or avoid our attention. Like a true Rolex, there may be some differences not visible to the naked eye.

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions!

How can we as Christian educators be discerning in all matters both great, small and minute? Let's take the case of teachers in school and in the Church. We are in positions of trust, leadership and visibility, and so, we must act with great awareness and care lest we stumble against unbiblical thinking. This applies particularly when making decisions. It's estimated that teachers make between 800 and 1,500 decisions in a working day and so there is a great deal of scope for things to go wrong, or for us to be tested and/or unpopular. Fortunately, there are also tremendous opportunities for us to come forward and be proactive in serving God and His purposes. It makes sense, then, to be sure about where God wants us to act and what He wants us to be and do.

Our Vision and Mission as Christian Educators

Jesus has some very timely and sagely advice for those he sends out to do his work. Let's consider the case recounted in Luke's Gospel:

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go. And he said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road.
(Luke 10: 1-4 ESV)

Jesus chose the 72 for a special mission with a specific purpose. He wanted them to go into every town and place where He Himself planned to go. Their task was to seek out and enter towns where they were welcome, to heal the sick and proclaim the proximity of God's kingdom (see Luke 10:8-9). The 72 went ahead of Jesus; they were, in essence, His ground workers or missionaries. This type of activity requires moving outside of our comfort zones.

As Christian teachers we bear the responsibility to model Christ to our students and provide an excellent learning environment as we mentor and guide them in the ways they should learn and live. We should be firm yet gentle at the correct times. It's important for us to exemplify God's righteousness and love simultaneously. Many have the idea that everything must be done in gentleness and love but they fail to see the need to discipline (e.g., ensure school policies are followed). A teacher who closes her eyes when something is wrong will not earn the trust of students. They need to feel secure.

Jesus sent out the 72 in pairs. This is because missions work is tough and it's discouraging to be alone. As Christian educators we need to actively seek out our Brothers- and Sisters-in-Christ irrespective of denominational differences. Let's not fear asking for advice. Let's make it a part of our daily lives to encourage others, especially through constant prayer.

Jesus sent the 72 out as lambs in the midst of wolves. This is a warning. We will face difficult times. Aside from the workload of teaching and other co-curricular activities, we will be judged and criticised. Yet, Jesus knows this and He wants us to stay close to Him by seeking His protection and strength. We shouldn't think we can successfully complete everything on your own. Again, let's seek God's counsel and wisdom through prayer. Christian education is (I boldly suggest) the way for us to build up our relationship with God and the method of finding our unique places in the body of Christ, the Church.

Finally, there's the part in verse 4, "Carry no money bag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road". As I understand it, Jesus is instructing his disciples to go forth simply and with urgency (not engaging in pleasantries and customs). This might seem to be rather odd practical advice in today's teaching and learning contexts. But Jesus is not advocating rudeness or antisocial behaviour. Rather, it seems that once we have a job to do we are to keep focused and not get distracted. For example, we should not be ashamed of our faith or deny or abandon Jesus when circumstances are tough or rough (see Mark 14:66-72). We should read the Bible daily. God's word is a source of solace and strength in times of busyness and stress. And, we should learn closely from Jesus the Master Teacher. Especially, His humility, His sense of what is right and wrong (no grey areas or even shades of grey), His love and justice shown together, and His compassion for those who are lost and harassed as sheep without a shepherd.

To discern the will of God, we have to read the Bible first to find out about His perfect will. Otherwise how will we know what to do? We must be careful about making decisions and taking action based on our own opinions and points of view.

In addition, discernment is not an option in God's view and it requires that we live an uncompromising life. And while it's important to judge things properly, *mission drift* (losing our vision and going off-track) is a concern and we must work diligently to avoid it through our actions in and through God.

But we're not naive. We know there is a cost in following Jesus but it is a good one to pay. God calls us to sacrifice ourselves but He also essentially provides. In this article, I've drawn a close parallel between being a missionary and being a Christian educator, which might surprise you, but I believe it's highly instructive and correct to consider things in this way.

God has chosen us to be educators and we should serve him in obedience and in accordance with His will. We should also know that He has placed us strategically in His service and we should be thankful and bless Him for that for: "What is impossible with men is possible with God" (Luke 18:27) and "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). I believe God wants us to be discerning in our work because He is discerning in His work, too. He does not allow any fakes and nor should we. This is one important way we can make differences in others that matter. And there's a bonus. As we show discernment in our lives, we draw closer to God in the process.

*Rolex watches are precision timepieces made from the highest quality materials. Depending on the authentic model and the quality of an illegal reproduction, we can usually tell the difference between the two by looking very closely, for example, at the letters and numbers on the dial and glass engraving.