

“Discernment of Religious Teachers and Teaching”

Pastor Time

Dr. John E. Greever

First Baptist Church of Fenton, MO

What is biblical discernment, and why do we need it?

- Biblical discernment is the task and ability to take God’s clear teaching in the Scripture and evaluate religious teachers and teachings by the core teaching of the Scripture. We need this discernment, because the Scripture often warns God’s people about religious and theological deception in this life. Satan uses deceit to capture and trap people mentally and spiritually, resulting in the adoption of false teaching, which will destroy the soul.

What is the role of the Bible in discernment?

- The Bible is the believer’s one and only authority in this life. The Bible is God’s spoken word to convey His teaching and truth to our minds and hearts. We must learn to accept the Bible as our measure of all that is true and right, and we must develop a proper interpretive method to rightly interpret the Bible. The Bible becomes our tool for analysis so we can rightly discern whether or not a teacher is teaching the truth (teaching that conforms to the truth found in the Scripture).

Is there human authority in addition to the Bible?

- No, there is no human authority outside the Bible. The Bible is our only authority. Preachers and teachers are helpful to the degree that they help us understand and apply the teaching of the Scriptures. Any preacher or teacher who adds or takes away from the clear teaching of the Scripture is a vehicle of false information and understanding. Concerning this problem, we must be discerning, learning to use the Scripture to help us identify these false teachers and teachings.

Is it safe to assume correct teaching of specific denominational and evangelical teachers and teachings?

- It would be simple and easy if we could always depend upon any teacher or writing from a Christian organization and/or denomination to be biblical, but sadly, this is not the case. Religious organizations and denominations often have political dynamics (political in this reference indicates internal dynamics of the organization itself) and pragmatic motives that lead them to print, publish, and promote certain teachers and teachings, even though certain promoted teachers do not align themselves with the Scriptures. Some motives are not healthy; indeed, they might be nefarious. Christians and churches must be discerning to be sure that any book, Bible study series, and teaching is in line with the teaching of the Scripture before they use these resources. Being derelict to duty in this area can often result in promotion of false teaching and the destruction of truth and souls.

Is biblical discernment of religious teachers and teachings being judgmental?

- The Bible teaches us to not be judgmental. Judgmentalism usually means that the attitude of the one judging is wrong; it implies that the one critiquing is proud and self-exalting, assuming too much about themselves and others. Sometimes, the intent may be right, but the tone and approach may be harsh. This is inappropriate for the Christian. We must always (ALWAYS!) speak the truth in love. However, we must speak the TRUTH! Evaluating teachers and teachings with biblical truth is not judgmentalism; this is biblical discernment, and every Christian must learn to do this. Biblical discernment shared with kindness and love is a necessary task in Christian discipleship.

Why do biblical presuppositions matter in discernment?

- Presuppositions are fundamental and essential in life; this includes our beliefs. We come to believe a truth with presuppositions already established in our minds (logic based on a presupposed worldview perspective) and in our hearts (predilection or bias for wish fulfillment). When a Christian considers the teachings of a teacher, it is very important to know the presuppositions of that teacher. What does the teacher presume to be true? It is helpful to find these out before studying a writer, and it is certain that these presuppositions will be manifest in the points and arguments made in the writing. If the writer's presuppositions are unbiblical or manipulates the Bible to make a point, then this writer does not deserve a hearing, misrepresenting himself as a biblical teacher.

What are some basic core beliefs and presuppositions that must be in place for good teaching?

- The presuppositions can be understood as core beliefs. These are self-evidential without need for proof; however, these fundamental ideas form the foundation and basis upon which all teaching will rest. These presuppositions include the existence and nature of God (as taught in the Scripture), the nature of human essence and the problem of human sin (as taught in the Scripture), the nature and significance of biblical revelation (the nature and significance of the Bible), the person and saving work of Jesus Christ (as taught in the Scripture), and the meaning and application of the gospel of Jesus Christ in a believer's life (as taught in the Scripture), in human history (in relationship to God's redemptive history and revelatory teaching about the meaning of life found in the Bible), and the ultimate reconstitution of the entire material universe (as taught in the Bible). These are presuppositions that are clearly taught in the Scripture and must be embraced by any teacher or teaching of biblical truth, because these presuppositions form a resting place for all other ideas. There are specific aspects contained in the previously mentioned categories, but these general categories cover the gamut of theological presuppositions that lead the person to rightly consider the Scriptures.

How might theological teaching and biblical presuppositions be established?

- Before studying a teacher's writings, do some research on the teacher. What have they said and taught before? With whom do they associate religiously? What do others say about them? If no clear and verifiable presuppositional sources can be obtained, then read them with caution and discernment. We will consider some questions and issues to implement for discernment later in this paper.

What is the difference between core beliefs and teachings versus marginal theological and biblical issues?

- For the purpose of this paper, we are considering a distinction between core beliefs and marginal teachings. There is no universal consensus in the church of Jesus Christ on every single doctrine and teaching, and there are several different categories of doctrine and belief, as taught in the Scripture. It is as wrong to elevate a minor point to a place of exalted priority, as it is to overlook, neglect, or to interpretively mangle a major doctrine. There is a large body of religious and theological issues about which there is disagreement, discussion, and uncertainty. Christians must learn to distinguish between essential core beliefs about which some teachers sadly and tragically depart, in contrast with disagreements on marginal and secondary issues. It is essential that Christians learn to understand the different categories and focus on the main issues.

What is the difference between a false teaching on core beliefs and marginal differences of opinion?

- The orthodox and essential teaching of the Scripture forms the core of the Christian doctrinal faith. This teaching is taught by the Scripture; thus, it is found in and established by the Scripture. Human subjectivity must not come into play when determining what is true or false. What we think, what we prefer, or what makes sense to us, is all secondary to the primary concern of what the Scriptures teach.

How can a Christian apply biblical teaching in a discerning way?

Here are some questions that a Christian might use to approach the examination process of a Christian (so-called) preachers, teachers, or religious organizations and publications.

- Does the teacher focus on the clear text of the Scripture?
- Does the teacher seek to find the meaning of the biblical text, or does he add to the biblical text, take away from the biblical text, or modify the biblical text in such a way as to change its obvious and basic meaning, even if in doing so he says he wants to help the reader?
- Does the teacher seem to suggest that they themselves are the authority to determine what is true and false in the Scripture?
- Does the teacher seem to indicate that they have within their being ultimate power and authority based on self-righteousness or calling from God?
- Does the teacher claim extra-biblical revelation outside the Bible (dreams, visions)?
- Does the organization have doctrinal statements that substitutes for the text of Scripture?
- Does the teacher or teaching claim insights into the biblical text never seen or know before in church history?
- Does the teacher make extraordinary claims about his interpretation without sufficient interpretive support from the Bible?
- Does the teacher seem to be drawing from the text some therapeutic comfort, rather than the essential teaching of the text (comfort is often found in the Scripture when the truth is applied to life, but the Bible is not a book on psychological therapy)?
- Does the teacher emphasize human writing over Scripture?

Is it acceptable and helpful to study books written by humans on biblical subjects?

- The general answer to this question is, “Yes”, with a qualification. When we study books written by human authors on biblical topics and texts, we must understand that these books must never disagree with the Bible, add to the Bible, or substitute for the Bible. A book is valuable to the degree that it helps us understand what the Bible teaches. A caution must be given here – a steady diet of studying human books without good Bible study will starve the soul. We must never use books to take the place of studying the text of the Scripture.

Should the reader ever exercise patience and longsuffering with a writer?

- The simple answer is, “Yes.” There is a connection between the relationship the reader has with the author and the patience exercised with the writer. Not every effort is our best effort (including those who are some of our favorite preachers and writers), and sometimes we need to grow in our understanding of a topic. If the author is known to be a faithful and solid believer, then the reader would be wise to give marginal space (longsuffering and patience) to the preacher and teacher. However, we must remember that when we preach and teach authoritatively (that is, when we preach and teach the Bible for the binding of the human conscience concerning Christian salvation and discipleship), then we are obligated to seek to be accurate with the teaching of the Scripture, as much as possible. It is true that we should continue to grow in our understanding of truth all through out lives. To the degree that we help others understand the truth taught in the Bible, to that degree we can be helpful, even if we do not do as good an interpretive job as we might have.