

Seeking God's Will: A Plan for Discernment in Community

By Sean Nemecek

Are you feeling stuck about an important decision? It's common for pastors and other leaders to have trouble deciding their way forward from time to time. You may be stuck between good options or may not see any options at all. You may be trapped in overthinking or risk aversion and need help to shake loose. Perhaps you are just having trouble noticing God's leading in your life or figuring out his will for you. A discernment community can help.

A discernment community is a small group of wise, godly people who are gathered to listen to both you and the Holy Spirit to help you find your way forward. They are not there to give advice, tell you what to do, or control you in any way. Instead, they are present with you to support you as you seek the Lord's direction.

Ruth Haley Barton's book *Pursuing God's Will Together*, is an excellent resource for established leadership teams who are seeking to follow God in their organization. I've taken many principles from that book and other resources to develop a discernment community plan for individuals. This article will lay out the elements of a good discernment community and how to facilitate a discernment meeting.

What is Discernment?

Discernment is the ability to wisely distinguish between competing options to determine the best way forward. There are three levels of Discernment: First, discernment asks, "What is of God and what is not of God?" This is a question of good versus evil. However, most Christians don't get stuck at this level. The second level of discernment asks, "What options does God allow or encourage?" At this level we are concerned with discovering and exploring all the good options. Many Christians get stuck at this level because either they can't choose between good options or they do not feel like they have uncovered all the options. This leads us to the third level of discernment, "What is the best option for you?" This question is concerned with making sure the good options don't get in the way of God's best for you. The work of discernment is to land on a single way forward. This can be hard and intense work. That's why we seek the help of the community of faith.

Why Discernment in Community?

The bible is filled with examples of the importance of seeking the wisdom of others. In Proverbs 15:22 we read "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." Discernment in community is the process of using the collective wisdom of a community of faith. In the book of Acts, we see the early church make many decisions through corporate prayer. This plan for discerning in community incorporates both these approaches — we seek the wisdom of God through the prayers of his people.

We discern in community because a small but diverse group of people will see more options and have more collective wisdom than a single person ever could. However, if we have too many people involved, the nature of group dynamics will allow the most vocal people to control the whole group. So, we try to keep the group to no more than 12-15 people. This provides enough voices without the group turning

into a “mob.” All but the most reserved introverts will feel comfortable speaking up in a group this size. And a good facilitator will be able to draw out the wisdom of the quiet people in the group. This group should also be at least 6-8 people or there won't be enough people for the group to be truly diverse. However, 2 or 3 people are better than just one. What is most important is the kind of people you choose.

Who to invite to a Discernment Gathering

A good discernment community will consist of both men and women across various economic and ethnic groups. It's very important to make this group as diverse as possible. However, they also need to be people who know the person seeking help well enough to understand them. These people may be respected friends, family, or church members. They should not be casual acquaintances or strangers. The most important quality of members of the discernment community is that they are skilled at listening to God in prayer. They should have a quality of wisdom and understanding about them that goes beyond their peers. They should also be people who are excellent listeners and who are curious — people who will ask questions to seek understanding but who are not overly attached to their own opinions. They should be open to the leading of God, even if he chooses to lead through other people. In other words, they should be wise, humble, compassionate followers of Jesus.

How to prepare for Discernment

The gathering of a discernment community should not be entered into lightly. We should prepare ourselves in much the same way as we would for entering any holy assembly. First, we must spend time in prayerful preparation: confessing our sins, remembering the sacrifice of Christ, and seeking the wisdom of God. We should enter the gathering with an awareness of God's presence with his people and with the expectation that the Holy Spirit may speak through anyone he chooses. Enter the gathering prepared to listen to the person seeking discernment *and* to the Holy Spirit. We should be slow to talk but free to seek clarity and understanding. We should bring our bibles should the Spirit remind us of relevant scripture passages that would be useful for all to hear. The discernment community should not be there to give advice, preach, teach, or otherwise control the outcome. Instead, they must come with the attitude of a servant who is open to the leading of their master.

The Discernment Facilitator

It's important to have someone in the group who can ensure that the process stays on track. This person is the Discernment Facilitator. It's their job to make sure that the person seeking help feels safe enough to risk vulnerability. This person will also need to lay out the rules for the community and enforce those rules. So, they will listen for people who are trying to control the outcome and gently but firmly remind the group that they are not to control but to humbly seek the Lord's direction. They will also watch the clock so that each element of the process has enough time but does not drag on in an unhelpful way. To do this, they will have to understand the process well and oversee it as a shepherd of the whole group. It's their job to guide the process but not control the outcome — a tension that they must constantly maintain. This person must be able to speak up when necessary and cannot be afraid of conflict. However, they must also be a peaceable person; not a bully or rude. Choose this person carefully, because the community will follow their lead.

Rules for the Discernment Community

1. Come spiritual and mentally prepared to seek God together.
2. Listen well before speaking. Do not formulate an answer while another person is speaking but pause to hear and then think of your response.
3. Be sure everyone participates. Do not let someone dominate the discussion. Likewise, draw out the wisdom of those who are quiet (but don't force anyone to speak).
4. Do not offer advice unless specifically asked.
5. Do not preach, teach, or control.
6. Hold your own opinions loosely and do not get defensive if they are rejected.
7. Feel free to disagree but only if you can do it in a way that doesn't create division.
8. Remember this is not your decision to make, you are only there to offer aid.
9. Respect silence. Awkward silences can be good and beneficial. Do not fill the void unless you feel like God is directing you to speak.
10. Seek wisdom through the scriptures not just your own experience or understanding.

Led by the Spirit

As I mentioned earlier, the purpose of a discernment community is to listen to what the Holy Spirit might be saying to the person seeking help. There are several ways to ensure that the group is focused on the Holy Spirit and not on their own ideas and opinions. There are three types of prayer that are particularly helpful and two ways of reading scripture that can help guide the group.

First, let's talk about prayer. Perhaps the most important form of prayer that the group can do comes from the teaching Ignatius of Loyola called *the prayer of holy indifference*. The idea behind this prayer is that we want God's will and only God's will. We are asking the Holy Spirit to make us indifferent toward everything that doesn't come from God. We cannot generate this within ourselves, it has to be a gift granted by the Spirit. In this prayer we are asking God to help us release any thoughts, opinions, attitudes, relationships, or possessions that would hinder us from hearing, accepting, and living out God's will. As we pray this prayer, we are following Mary who said, "let it be done to me according to your will," and Jesus who said, "not my will but yours be done." It is a prayer of such surrender to God that everything else becomes insignificant.

The second type of helpful prayer is *listening prayer*. As the name suggests, in this type of prayer we are intentionally listening for God's still, small voice should he choose to speak. We are not forcing God to do anything but sitting in a posture of quiet readiness to hear him. Sometimes, what we hear is does not take the form of words but feelings, impressions, or experiences of relationship with God that go beyond what words can convey. The Spirit may, however, choose to give words of encouragement, raise questions within us, or offer us scripture passages to share with the group. This will only happen if we are paying attention to God alone.

The final form of prayer, *silence*, goes hand in hand with listening prayer. In silence we sit still before the Lord. We may notice things stirring within us that we need to confess to God or to the group. For example, someone might say, "I'm experiencing resistance to this process. Please, pray that God would grant me submission to him." In silence, the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts may be revealed to us. We need to distinguish if they are from God or if they come from within us before we speak. Silence helps us do just that.

As the discernment community seeks the Lord in prayer, someone may say, “I feel like we need to read this passage of scripture together.” It may be a psalm, a teaching, or a relevant story. If the facilitator sees value in this, he or she may lead the group in the practice of *Lectio Divina*. Alternatively, someone may say, “I have some wisdom from scripture I want to share.” Then they will simply read the verse or short passage with little or no commentary — letting the passage speak for itself.

It's not uncommon for a discernment community to be drawn into reading their bibles quietly as they search for wisdom from God. As they do this, they may or may not share what they are reading. Again, what is shared should be prompted by the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes we are unclear if what we are thinking or hearing is from the Spirit. In this case each person must decide for themselves whether to share. We must never assume that just because someone feels led by the Spirit to say something that it is from God. Instead, remember that we are seeking God together on behalf of the person seeking help. Therefore, it is up to that person to determine what God is or is not saying through the group.

A Sample Discernment Process

Here is an example of how the discernment process can work. The times listed in parentheses are simply a general guide. Be sure to follow the leading of the Spirit not the clock but also be respectful of the time commitment people have made.

1. Open with prayer acknowledging God's presence and seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit to know God's will. (Up to 5 minutes)
2. The person seeking discernment shares their thoughts, questions, or doubts. (15-20 minutes)
3. Pause for Silence to let what was said sink in. (2-5 minutes)
4. Questions from the listeners to the person seeking discernment. (5-20 minutes)
5. Pause for separate prayer seeking Holy Indifference and guidance from the Spirit. Holy indifference = being indifferent to all but God's will. (30 minutes)
6. Everyone shares what they hear the Spirit saying, relevant Scriptures, or personal thoughts. (10-20 minutes)
7. The person seeking discernment asks any questions. (5-15 minutes)
8. All lay hands on the person seeking discernment and pray for them. (5 minutes)
9. If the person seeking discernment has clarity, they share with the group. Otherwise, all commit to continue praying. (5-15 minutes)
10. Final prayer (1-2 minutes)

Total time: Approximately 2-3 hours

Scriptures for Discernment

Psalms 119:125 I am your servant; give me discernment that I may understand your statutes.

Proverbs 3:5–6

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

Proverbs 15:14 The discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly.

Proverbs 18:15 The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge, for the ears of the wise seek it out.

Matthew 6:33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 10:16 “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”

Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

1 Corinthians 2:14 The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 4:3-5 I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

Ephesians 5:6–10 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

Philippians 1:9–10 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Hebrews 5:14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

James 3:13–18 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

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