

Have you ever come across “discernment ministries”?

Discernment ministries are all about the idea of *discerning*, or *deciding*, or *evaluating*. They ask the question, “What is good, and what is bad?” It’s a bit of a *bible-jargon-word*, but that’s the basic idea. And what ‘discernment ministries’ do is to try and prepare Jesus’ church to stay faithful to him, in a world where false spirits and false teachers and deceivers and temptation will come.¹

If I haven’t met you before, I’m Aiden. One of the pastors here at Kiama Anglican Church. Today we’re talking about *discernment* because it’s brought up in our passage, in Revelation 2.

Discernment can take different forms. There’s different approaches.

There’s “spiritual” discernment ministries. In these, people will encounter the world of the spirits in different ways, and then make an evaluation there as to whether what they encounter is good or bad; it’s almost based on: “how do I feel about this?” And in *our* tradition we tend to shy away from that, but you can kind of see the logic, right; because... if you’re a Christian and your affections are formed by the word and spirit of God (and you love what he loves), then the way that you feel about something *does* matter; and might give you some sense of its’ rightness or wrongness. This is because your feelings aren’t *just* feelings; they’re *educated* feelings—they’re based on the God you’ve come to know. I think what makes us nervous about operating that way is that we know the heart is deceitful,² and Satan masquerades as an angel of light.³ So just because something *looks* right (or even *feels* right), doesn’t mean it *is* right.

So you get the other side of the spectrum in terms of discernment ministries which might be more “word based” or ‘evangelical’ ministries. And often what they’ll do is they’ll compare the teachings of a particular preacher or movement against what the Bible says. So there are groups like *Bethel Church & Christianity* on Facebook who focus on that Bethel church from California, and evaluate it against scripture. There are groups like *The Wartburg Watch* who have a particular focus on how women are treated in evangelical preaching and ministry, and they take an interest in that.

There’s actually all different stripes of discernment ministry, but at the end of the day, that’s what they’re about: making an evaluation. This *thing* (whatever it may be) that the Christian has encountered in their life: whether it’s a spirit or a teacher; is it Godly? Or is it from someone else? Someone good, bad, or neutral? That’s what they’re geared to.

¹ See Luke 17:1, Matthew 18:7.

² Jeremiah 17:9.

³ 2 Corinthians 11:14.

Now... *if* you've come across these ministries, one thing you might have noticed is that *sometimes*, they can be pretty hard-edged in judging what's good and bad. It can be a little, maybe, less-charitable and less-loving.

It's not that discernment itself is unloving. It's actually very, very loving to point out a wolf before it eats a sheep. There's nothing wrong with saying 'this person is a false teacher, and they need not be listened to because it will take you to a bad place'. That's *loving*, and Jesus would commend that care. In our passage today, Jesus does.⁴ But, I think it is possible (and you might agree) it is possible for a discernment ministry to be less loving than Jesus would want them to be. And, as it happens, that's what we get in Revelation 2.

In this passage, Jesus is writing to churches, through John. He's writing to seven churches, and they're seven specific churches throughout Asia Minor,⁵ but; as with most things in Revelation, it's not just about those seven churches. Seven is kind of a Biblical number for "all that is of God"—like a code—so although these letters are written to specific churches, they're for every church. If you read on, you'll notice that there are a few times when Jesus writes to specific churches, but then he says: he who has ears to hear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches.⁶ So this letter is not just for Pergamum or Thyatira or Ephesus, no, it's for anyone with ears to hear.

So today's letter is written to the Ephesian church, and it talks about how they are discerning; they're actually very discerning, and they're very successful. As they exercise their ministry in their church, they get it right. Jesus says they're good at discernment. So you notice as you read, it says that they have successfully figured out who are apostles, and who are like. We agonize over this stuff; and sometimes it seems as though these are hard questions for us. Is Benny Hinn legit, or not? What about Kenneth Copeland, that man with the crazy eyes who was going to "blow away the Coronavirus?" Well, the church in Ephesus had made those evaluations and could tell you; this one is good, this one's not, this one is, this one's not. They knew. And Jesus says, *you've got it. You've done it. You've identified who's an apostle and who's not.* Jesus goes further and says that they hate what He hates: the false teachers, the Nicolaitans who (in context, probably an early heretical movement); Jesus says that the Ephesians hate their false teaching, and so does he. So you could say that they're really successful heresy hunters.

And it makes sense. They'd been well-taught. If you go back Paul's letter to them, "Ephesians" in the New Testament, it's got some of the clearest statements on salvation by grace, through faith

⁴ Revelation 2:2.

⁵ Modern-day Turkey.

⁶ Revelation 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13, 3:22,

alone. It lays out the doctrine of Christ so clearly. So it makes sense that the Ephesians knew the truth, and could tell you what was false and what was not and what was right and what was wrong and what was of God and what wasn't.

But.

In all of their zeal. In all of their desire to be faithful to Jesus and His teaching... They have a **massive** flaw. It's so massive that in verse 5, Jesus threatens to take away their lampstand. It's a threat that they wouldn't be able to meet as a church any more. The "code language" is...: lampstands are symbols of God's churches; you know, we're a light; we're a city on the hill...⁷ and Jesus says that for all of their success in discernment, they've got something *so wrong* that Jesus might even come and take away their lampstand; take away their fellowship.

What is it? Why would Jesus shut down a *church*? Well have a look at the verse. In verse 4, Jesus says: I have *this* against you: you have forsaken your first **love**. Now that's massive, right? It's massive. Jesus says: for all of your success in discernment and heresy-hunting, you have forgotten... love. And while he doesn't say what "their first love" is specifically, we can make an educated guess based on the rest of Scripture. So what is the foundational love of the Christian life? Well it's the love of God, expressed in Jesus' self-giving at the Cross, so that we might have salvation and freedom in Him.⁸ And when that love changes our heart, we will love like Jesus did. Jesus says: by *this* all men will know that you are my disciples—not that you're the perfect heresy hunters, but—that you **love** one another, *as I have loved you*.⁹ That is the foundation of the Christian life. It's **love**. The love of God expressed in Jesus, and the love that we are called to as disciples, as followers of him.

And discernment, at its best, is an outworking of love. We discern because we love God, and we want to know what is of him, so that we can follow him. We discern because we love the people around us, and we want to warn Jesus' sheep of where there are wolves.

But Jesus warns this Ephesian church that they've lost the plot. They've abandoned their first love. It's become more about discernment than love. They've put the cart before the horse. And when you do that, you damage the cart and you injure the horse.

Now—far from being just a first century concern—this is a very live and very relevant warning to Jesus' church in every age. Particularly to churches that put a lot of effort and energy into honouring God with their doctrine and discernment, as we often do in our circles. There's nothing

⁷ Matthew 5:14-16.

⁸ 1 John 4:10^{ff}.

⁹ John 13:35.

wrong with that. It's a god-honoring and glorifying thing. We should care about understanding God rightly because God cares about it. You'll notice he took the time to jot a few things down for us. But if we lose sight of love, *then* we have a massive problem. And I wonder if sometimes we run the risk of doing what the Ephesian church did?

Sometimes, do we write ourselves a pass if we are doctrinally "right", even if we are not loving God and those around us?

Friends, *the most important doctrine in the Christian life* is the doctrine of love. Paul was the biggest "doctrine head" out there, and he says: *if I can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge but have not love... I'm nothing.*¹⁰ *It's worthless.* And so suddenly you can see why it's so crucial to Jesus.

The risk is that we could emphasise being "right" so much that we turn into cold-hearted, *doctrinally-correct prigs*. Except that's not *possible*, because you can't **be** doctrinally correct if you don't love. That's Jesus' *point*.

So what do we do? Well it's mothers' day today. Mothers know a thing or two about love. It usually runs along similar lines to how Jesus expressed his love for us. He laid down his life; put his rights on hold, shed his blood, sweat and tears for our sake... And most Mums understand a bit of what that's like... and teaching, discernment; knowing what's right is important—you spend the time and the effort helping your kids know what's right... but at the end of the day, when they get it wrong, when they fall short or fail; good mums don't give you the boot or reject you, or close their hearts. Because **love** is the thing at the top over all of that. It's what makes everything else *matter*.

So Christian: will you love Jesus, and those around you? Will you discern—out of love—and place that virtue where it belongs, at the base and the top of the life of discipleship? God help us if we don't—Jesus threatened the Ephesian church for their lovelessness, and for the one who has ears to hear: let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches of God!

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10 May 2020

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:2.