

ACADEMIC ESSAY:
MINISTRY IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

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TOWARD THE FULFILLMENT OF
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Theological Rationale for Spiritual Discernment and Leadership in Context

Lord, catch me off guard today.
 Surprise me with some moment
 of beauty or pain
 So that at least for the moment
 I may be startled into seeing
 that You are here
 in all Your splendor,
 Always and everywhere,
 Barely hidden,
 Beneath,
 Beyond,
 Within this life I breathe.¹

—*Prayer by Frederick Buechner*

Buechner’s poetic “always and everywhere” is quite literal for the follower of Jesus. God is profoundly with us. Though our feelings are occasionally smart enough to sense God’s presence, neither our senses nor our emotions create His presence. Joy does not thicken Him. Doubt does not thin Him. Jesus is utterly unlike the animated stories of tooth fairies and Santa Claus who lose their power and substance when children stop believing.

Though we agree that belief does not create God, we still struggle to comprehend the immediacy—Buechner’s “beneath, beyond, within this life I breathe”—of His presence. In our day, churches often “pursue” God’s presence like a corporate search for a shy honeysuckle bush. Our communal gatherings seek to create favorable conditions for God’s Spirit to blow and bring to us the fragrance of God’s otherwise hidden presence. In our songs and petitions we “invite” God’s presence as if God’s presence were hesitant or in need of wooing. But Jesus is not a timid, occasional lover. His passionate presence is always prior. Jesus states, “I am with you always,

¹ Pierre Yves Emery, *Fifteen Days of Prayer with Saint Bernard*. 1st English ed. (Liguori, MO: New City Press, 2008), xiv.

even to the end of the age.”² Through His cross and resurrection, Jesus grafts believers into Himself. Smell Him or not, the honeysuckle bush of God’s sweet presence has become our true home.

The reality that God’s presence is the believer’s constant does not, however, automate that God’s thoughts and ways are easily known. Discernment is our awe-inspiring privilege of developing “God-sense.”³ Paul Anderson expressed this concept well: “If Christ is alive, he desires to lead his church. If Christ desires to lead his church, his will should be sought. If his will can be sought, it can be discerned; and if it can be discerned, it deserves to be obeyed.”⁴

In the NIV, the words *discern*, *discerned*, *discerning*, and *discernment* appear thirty-two times in the Old Testament and four times in the New Testament. Twenty-two occurrences are from בִּינָה *bîyn*. Most often translated as *understand*, the word means “to separate mentally (or distinguish).”⁵ The first two occurrences of *bîyn* refer to the discernment of an individual, Joseph.⁶ The final occurrence of *bîyn* refers to a group’s inability to “understand [God’s] plan.”⁷ The four occurrences of *discern* in the New Testament are summarized in Table 1.

² Matt. 28:20 (NIV).

³ On a personal note, *God-Sense* is my hoped-for title for one of my next books.

⁴ Paul Anderson, “The Meeting for Worship in which Business Is Conducted,” *Quaker Religious Thought* no. 106–107 (November 2006): 45.

⁵ James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), s.v. *bîyn*.

⁶ Gen. 41:33, 39.

⁷ Micah 4:12.

Table 1. Summary of Words Translated as *Discern* in the New Testament

Verse	Summary	Word/Defn. ⁸	Usage
1 Cor. 2:14	On the inability of a person without the Spirit to discern things of the Spirit.	ἀνακρίνω anakrinō <i>to judge/question</i>	Appears 16x, most often translated <i>examine</i>
1 Cor. 11:29, 31	On our responsibility to discern the Body of Christ in communion. Other NIV editions translate this word as <i>recognizing</i> and <i>judged ourselves</i> .	διακρίνω diakrinō <i>to make a distinction</i>	Appears 19x, most often translated <i>doubt</i>
Phil. 1:10	On Paul's prayer for the church to be able to "discern what is best."	δοκιμάζω dōkimazō <i>to approve, to test</i>	Appears 22x, most often translated <i>test</i>

From what is economically needful to what is morally best, from an individual's practice to a group's pursuit, from Genesis to Philippians, biblical discernment describes the ancient commitment of God-followers to align themselves with God's will.

Leadership-Defining Theological Commitments

My husband and I serve as spiritual directors to leaders in the marketplace and the Church. Discernment is our ministry focus. Our days are gloriously invested in mentoring others toward sustainable attentiveness and ever-increasing alignment with God's profound presence.

Jesus Is the Master Mentor

Four theological commitments define and shape me as a spiritual director. The first reflects mental and spiritual positioning: Jesus is the Master Mentor. By exercising the strength of submission, I position myself as Christ's follower. As a spiritual director, I establish this commitment in our first session and emphasize it throughout our journey together by beginning each meeting with silent waiting and a prayer asking Holy Spirit to lead us and lean us in His direction.

⁸ Strong, s.v. *anakrinō*, *diakrinō*, and *dōkimazō*.

Reality Is a Friend of Practicing God's Presence

My second influential theological commitment is that reality is a friend (and, conversely, that denial is an enemy) of practicing God's presence. This belief frees me in two ways. Relationally, it frees me to wear my humanity cleanly so that others can see Christ clearly. Though in context Larry S. Julian was addressing the challenge of sharing faith in the workplace, his wisdom rings true for sharing faith with believers as well when he states that “[h]iding who you are... isn't the solution.”⁹ Personally, befriending reality frees me to stay present to pain by staying present to God. Frank Laubach writes of this connection as follows: “If every annoyance can be made to remind me to turn and grip Your hand and ask You, ‘What are you saying through this vexation?’ then I can turn life's rough spots into Your vocabulary.”¹⁰

Practicing God's presence is an exercise for the present moment. In addition to squandering our limited emotional resources, denying pain, discomfort, or conflict hinders us from being present to God, to our true selves, and to others. As a leader and spiritual director, I model this commitment by teaching from real life and honestly answering all variations of the question *How are you?*—regardless of how flippantly the question is asked.

Mystery Is an Invitation to Intimacy

Third, I honor mystery as an invitation to intimacy with God. Anglican clergyman Jeremy Taylor is quoted as saying, “[a] religion without mystery must be a religion without God.”¹¹ Mystery is a given for relationship between the Infinite and the finite. The process of discernment presupposes mystery.

⁹ Larry S. Julian, *God Is My Coach: A Business Leader's Guide to Finding Clarity in an Uncertain World*, 1st ed. (New York: Center Street, 2009), loc. 998.

¹⁰ Frank C. Laubach, *Learning the Vocabulary of God: A Spiritual Diary* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2012), 17.

¹¹ Leonard I. Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), loc. 1630.

Wheatley insightfully notes that “we have created trouble for ourselves in organizations by confusing control with order.”¹² Perhaps *control*, even more than *distance*, is a fitting antonym for *intimacy*. Life’s many unanswered and unanswerable questions invite us to abandon the illusion of control and embrace the free-fall of trust. Julian refers to this honoring of mystery as *grace in the gray*: “We experience grace in the gray when we discern God’s grace at work in the midst of difficult and uncertain circumstances.”¹³ As a spiritual director, I seek to model friendship with mystery by keeping the door open into the more shadow-filled parts of my story.

Discernment Has Value Whether or not Anything Is Ever Heard

Fourth, I am theologically confident that the discernment process has value whether or not it results in a realized answer or direction. Conniry explains that “the first step of discernment is attending which arises from the reality of a relationship and a heartfelt conviction that Jesus is speaking.”¹⁴ Discernment is innately relational: “In each instance of discernment, the aim is greater intimacy with God.”¹⁵ What is heard in times of personal or corporate discernment is secondary to the disciplining of our minds to be attentive to Christ’s presence. Every investment in waiting and listening builds mental, emotional, and spiritual muscle to practice the presence of God.

Engagement-Guiding Themes

¹² Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2006), loc. 576.

¹³ Julian, loc. 779.

¹⁴ Charles J. Conniry Jr., “Discovering Christ in the Story” (lecture, George Fox Evangelical Seminary, Cannon Beach, OR, March 12, 2014).

¹⁵ Charles J. Conniry, Jr., *Soaring in the Spirit: Rediscovering Mystery in the Christian Life* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster Press, 2007), 12.

Conniry identifies discernment as “not so much a practice as it is a way of ‘being together’ ...with Christ and each other.”¹⁶ This description captures my understanding of spiritual direction as intentional and simultaneous attentiveness to Christ and others. In any form of service, our means—not just the ends we achieve—matter. Paul Anderson notes that “Christ’s work cannot be furthered by going against his Way.”¹⁷ As a spiritual director, three principles guide my engagement with others as I seek to serve in harmony with God’s ways.

Insight is not a Synonym for Invitation

One of my spiritual mothers told me a story years ago while I was wrestling with a deep relational wound:

Once upon a time there lived a man weary of his many stumblings and failures. “God,” the man requested, “Discovering new sin day after day is breaking my heart. Please reveal to me everything that You see in me. Show me all my sins so I can address them all at once.” “My son,” God replied, “if I were to show you everything that I see in you, you would die.”¹⁸

As Sister Rebekkah concluded her short story and placed her hand upon mine, my wounded soul realized that in His love, God does not tell us everything He knows about us: truth bows to mercy’s timing. In the same way, insight into someone’s weaknesses is not an invitation to reveal or confront their weaknesses. As a spiritual director, discernment always leads me to pray but only occasionally leads me to speak.

God’s Company Trumps Life’s Scenery

A second guiding principle of engagement is to consistently draw others’ attention to the Company more than the scenery of their lives. Scenery can easily become an obsession.

¹⁶ Charles J. Conniry, Jr., “Week 10 Asynchronous Chat” (online lecture, George Fox Evangelical Seminary, Portland, OR, March 18, 2014).

¹⁷ Anderson, 31.

¹⁸ Sister Rebekkah, paraphrased conversation with Alicia Chole, Phoenix, AZ, USA, August 20, 1999.

Focusing primarily upon what our eyes can see weakens our ability to attend to what only God can see. Though scenery may on occasion inspire a temporary sense of happiness, only God's faithful Company can create peace and sustain contentment. Conniry explains that "the challenge is to avoid thinking about discernment in utilitarian terms, in which *happiness* is the ultimate outcome."¹⁹ Indeed. As a director, my engagement with others has their spiritual intimacy, not their emotional happiness, as its focus. Meeting after meeting, I ask Company-emphasizing questions such as: *Where do you see God in this story? How might God be inviting you into greater intimacy through this experience? How is this journey spiritually forming you? What God-thoughts and self-thoughts do you find yourself thinking in this space?* Each question is intentionally placed as an invitation to treasure God's sure Company over this life's fragile scenery.

Pause Is a Spiritual Discipline

My third principle of engagement is to view pause as a spiritual discipline. Pause strengthens us to make peace with God's pace whether or not we comprehend God's plans. On our resistance to pausing, Erika Anderson explains that "the main reason we tend to move too quickly to solutions [is because we] don't want to think about what isn't working: we want to fix it."²⁰ Attending to "what isn't" is like excavating buried treasure—its riches are entirely missed if there is no respect for the discipline of pause. As a spiritual director, I frequently find myself echoing with similar words to the counsel offered to Julian by his mentor, Monty: "Ohhhh, this is so valuable. Don't miss out on the privilege of your problems."²¹

¹⁹ Conniry, "Week 10 Asynchronous Chat."

²⁰ Erika Anderson, *Being Strategic: Plan for Success, Out-Think Your Competitors, Stay Ahead of Change* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), loc. 278.

²¹ Julian, loc. 278.

One of the primary means by which I model pausing as a spiritual director is by mentoring others in practicing discernment before entering into intercession. Graham Cooke explains that

[w]hen we pray too soon, we usually pray in unbelief. We find ourselves praying out of the shock or trauma of the situation itself, and we pray out of our panic, worry, anxiety and concern. . . . Because we have not stilled ourselves, we pray in our own strength, and we come to God's door under the weight and panic of the circumstances facing us.²²

The spiritual discipline of pause defuses anxiety, heightens our trust in God's character, and leads us into effective intercession by making space for listening prayer. Such discernment is a form of spiritual attentiveness: a love-inspired waiting in Christ's profound presence.

Our ability to pause and wait rests greatly upon whether or not we hold the four theological commitments addressed earlier in this essay. If Jesus is the Master Mentor, then we as followers pause awaiting His leadership. If reality is a friend of practicing God's presence, then pausing to absorb reality is more beneficial than speeding up to avoid reality. If mystery is an invitation to intimacy, then pausing in the midst of mystery positions us to know greater love. And if discernment has value whether or not anything is "heard," then pausing is of benefit regardless of what awaits us on the other side of our prayerful pause.

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²² Graham Cooke, *Crafted Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 2004), 15, 20.

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