Doctrine of Biblical Discernment

1. It is a principle of Biblical hermeneutics that dramatic distinctions should not be made where none exist.

2. A basic Hebrew word for discern is *nakar* and means, “to scrutinize, i.e. look intently”.

3. The purpose of being able to discern a situation is in order to pass judgment.

4. The first usage of the word *nakar* is found when Laban was invited by Jacob to discern, to scrutinize, to look intently for his household idols among the belongings of Jacob.

   - *Genesis 31:32* With whomsoever thou findest thy gods, let him not live: before our brethren discern thou what is thine with me, and take it to thee. For Jacob knew not that Rachel had stolen them.

   **Special Note.**

   Ironically, Laban was not very discerning for he did not find the stolen treasures he was looking for. Had Laban been a more discerning man he would have found the idols Rachel had stolen.

5. The second time *nakar* is used in Scripture, a woman’s life was spared because she was able to establish the identity of the man who had impregnated her based upon individuals discerning the physical evidence presented and rendering a righteous judgment based on that discernment. Instead of being stoned for a pregnancy outside of marriage, Tamar gave birth to twins.

   - *Genesis 38:25* When she was brought forth, she sent to her father in law, saying, By the man, whose these are, am I with child: and she said, Discern, I pray thee, whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff.

6. When Joab wanted to reconcile David with his son Absalom, the officer of the king’s armies used a woman to tell a narrative designed to appeal to the king’s ability to discern good and bad.

   - *2 Samuel 14:17* Then thine handmaid said, The word of my lord the king shall now be comfortable: for as an angel of God, so is my lord the king to discern good and bad: therefore the Lord thy God will be with thee.
Special Note.

The word used for discern in 2 Samuel 14:17 is, *shama*, and means, “to hear intelligently.”

Biblical discernment involves an intense inquiry into a situation, an honest evaluation of the evidence presented, and an intelligent understanding of the whole matter.

7. Sometimes, a person’s inability to discern between good and evil should be recognized in the life of Barzillai who at eighty years of age declined to return to Jerusalem with David.

- 2 Samuel 19:35 I am this day fourscore years old: and can I discern between good and evil? Can thy servant taste what I eat or what I drink? Can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women? Wherefore then should thy servant be yet a burden unto my lord the king?

8. The purpose of Biblical discernment is to render a righteous judgment which is why Solomon asked for an understanding heart. Discernment leads to judgment and cannot be divorced from it.

- 1 Kings 3:9 Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?

Special Note.

The Hebrew word Solomon used for discern is *biyn* (bene) and means, “to separate mentally (or distinguish), i.e. (generally) to understand”. It is meaningless to have discernment unless discernment is used to render a righteous judgment.

9. God is pleased to grant His people discernment in administering justice.

- 1 Kings 3:11 And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; 12 Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee.

10. Sometimes the word discern is used to simply mean to, “distinguish”, or “recognize”, and does not involve a moral judgment.

- The people could not distinguish between the sound of joy and sorrow. Ezra 3:13 So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off.
• Job could not recognize an image before his eyes. *Job 4:16* It stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof: an image was before mine eyes, there was silence, and I heard a voice, saying,

• Infants and little children cannot distinguish between their right hand and their left. *Jonah 4:11* And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

11. Spiritually, the tongue of the righteous can make a distinction between what is good speech and what is perverse speech.

• *Job 6:30* Is there iniquity in my tongue? Cannot my taste discern perverse things?

12. When the people of God are righteous they are able to teach one another how to properly discern or judge between that which is unclean and that which is clean.

• *Ezekiel 44:23* And they shall teach my people the difference between the holy and profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean.

13. When the people of God are righteous they will be discerning.

• *Malachi 3:18* Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not.

14. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because they were not able to discern the signs of the times in spiritual matters, or they would have embraced Him as the Messiah.

• *Matthew 16:3* And in the morning, It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowring. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?

• *Luke 12:56* Ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky and of the earth; but how is it that ye do not discern this time?

15. When a person does not discern their own heart and stand in self-judgment, they subject themselves to a premature death.

• *1 Corinthians 11:29* For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

• *1 Corinthians 11:31* For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.

16. There is a particular spiritual gift of discernment which should be recognized. The church needs individuals with the spiritual gift of discernment in or to evaluate the spirits: the Holy Spirit, human, or demonic spirits, thus preserving the church from misleading influences.
1 Corinthians 12:10 To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues:

1 Corinthians 14:29 Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge.

1 John 4:1 Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.

17. One mark of spiritual maturity is the ability to discern both good and evil and so to render a just judgment.

Hebrews 5:14 But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.