

Discernment: What Is It and How Do I Do It?

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God did not direct His call to Isaiah—Isaiah overheard God saying, “. . . who will go for Us?” The call of God is not just for a select few but for everyone. Whether I hear God’s call or not depends on the condition of my ears, and exactly what I hear depends upon my spiritual attitude.

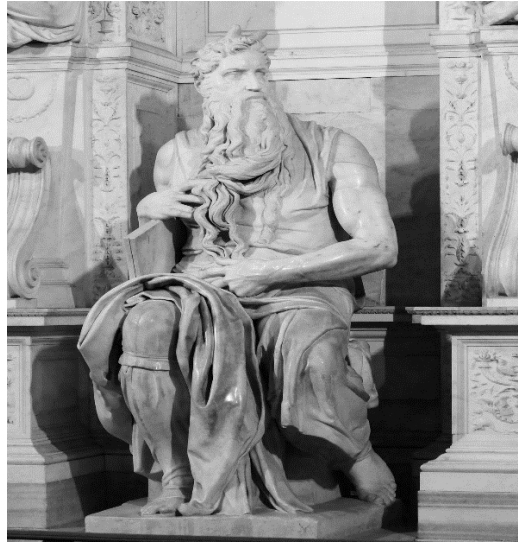
– Oswald Chambers, My Utmost
for His Highest

A Common Desire

The desire for a clear vision of meaning and purpose in life is one of humankind’s primary motivations (Chandler, 2014; Frankl, 1992; Morgan, 2013). Raised in a devout Christian family, I regularly heard the term “calling.” The term was used to denote the purpose of life as revealed by God. Despite the focus on God’s calling through my early years, I did not discern my calling until much later in life. After attending college and majoring in music, I worked in the field of human resources. I was successful in the field, earning certifications for my knowledge and awards for my performance. However, I noticed an ache in my inner being. The ache seemed to tell me that I was not living the life I was being called to live. However, I was not clear about what that calling was. I began a journey of searching for this elusive reason for my being.

After months of desperately seeking to understand my calling, I realized I was stuck. I knew I was not living my calling, but I had no idea what that calling involved. I had no idea how to find the answer to that calling. Fortunately, after over a year in this dark place, I gradually began to reflect upon how God had gifted me with particular strengths, talents, interests, and unique values. Slowly, through prayer and an intentional discernment process, I was led through this darkness to a glimmer of light. This light illuminated my special purpose in life to help other calling-seekers discern their own calling through personal coaching.

After engaging with my first few clients, I recognized that they too were stuck in this dark place of uncertainty and lack of direction. I realized that the desire for understanding one’s calling and the difficulty in discerning this calling was not a difficulty that only I had faced. It was a common desire and an equally common set of hurdles faced by many. This recognition led me to begin to explore how I could better assist those individuals I coach to discern their calling.



The Challenge

Since ancient times, people have sought Chazown (Eph 2:10 New American Standard Bible). Chazown is defined as a vision or, more specifically, communication from God in a vision (Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1994). Recent research has shown a positive relationship between one's sense of purpose and positive health outcomes, personal longevity, and organizational success (Joynt & Dreyer, 2013; Molasso, 2006; Park, Malone, Suresh, Bliss, & Rosen, 2008). Despite the desire to experience a strong sense of purpose, for some individuals, the process of discerning their life purpose is fraught with anxiety and uncertainty (Chandler, 2014; Setran & Kiesling, 2013). A source of this uncertainty is a lack of understanding of how to discern one's calling and purpose (Setran & Kiesling, 2013).

What is Discernment?

Humans possess a deep longing to know that their life matters and that what they do in life is significant (Chandler, 2014; Frankl, 1992, Morgan, 2013). For Christians, discerning calling is more than a matter of finding an appropriate vocation (Smith, 2011); it is a way of connecting their day-to-day work with the primary call to love God.

Christians largely agree that their faith is an integral part of the discernment process for making important decisions (Moberg, 1982). For some, the discernment of life calling is natural, while, for others, the process is more difficult (Chandler, 2014; Setran & Kiesling, 2013). One of the difficulties is a lack of understanding about how to discern one's calling and purpose (Setran & Kiesling, 2013). Life purpose discernment involves both the understanding of God's purpose and the specific calling of the individual to further that purpose (Setran & Kiesling, 2013). To effectively discern, it is important to overcome obstacles in experiencing God's purpose and calling (Setran & Kiesling, 2013). Two common obstacles are the individual's self-focus and compartmentalization of life. Self-focus refers to the focus of what the individual wants in life instead of God's calling. Compartmentalization refers to the individual separating their life into spheres (e.g., work, home, church), making it difficult to see how one's life calling may transcend labels and spheres (Setran & Kiesling, 2013).

How Do I Discern?

Discernment contains four key components: (1) defining the focus of discernment. For example, what are you trying to hear or understand? (2) the act of intentionally listening for God to speak about His purpose in your life, (3) making a tentative decision about what you believe God may be calling you to be or do, and (4) noticing the ‘rightness’ of this tentative decision.

First, defining the focus of discernment is a critical first step (Liebert, 2008). In order to effectively discern God’s speaking about your question, you must first define the question. This may be as simple as writing down what you are trying to figure out in the form of a statement or a question.

Second, listening for God’s calling requires unique listening skills (Thompson & Miller-Perrin, 2003). Thinking of this process as “imaginative listening” opens our mind to greater possibilities (Luevano, 2009). The use of established discernment practices may help you listen and imagine what God may be leading you to do.

Third, making a tentative decision about what God may be calling you to be or do (Liebert, 2008) helps you move out of a place of prolonged waiting and into a place of trusting God for His guidance. This component of the discernment process is the movement of the calling from a stage of listening and imagining to action (Thompson & Miller-Perrin, 2003). This step enables the testing of the calling by carrying it out. Taking action enables testing of the discerned calling. Being in tune with our heart and emotions during this listening and decision-making process is critical (Neafsey, 2004).

Finally, it is important to notice the feeling of the ‘rightness’ of this tentative decision (Liebert, 2008). Luevano (2009) noted, “The discernor distinguishes his choices by the movements of the spirit. That which brings peace is to be followed, and that which conjures desolation is to be avoided” (p. 43). While listening may refer to contemplative meditation, listening might also mean that we must be open to hearing God by hearing and understanding His story through external events and people in life (Neafsey, 2004).

Listening for God

Of the four steps of the discernment process, one of the most challenging is the second step; listening for God’s calling. As human beings, we are so accustomed to listening for audible voices and direct instructions that the process of listening to God seems an impossibly abstract process. Thankfully, a number of discernment practices have emerged throughout our history of faith.



Key to hearing and seeing God's direction in our lives are practices that bring the awareness of our unique strengths and createdness out of our heads and into a heightened and intentional use of this awareness as a lens through which we can look at the world (Davidson, 2019). We must observe the world through the lens of our gifts to enable God to point out how we have been uniquely created for a purpose.

An example of the phenomenon of seeing something new through a new lens comes to my mind. My very first car was a 1977 Chevy Vega. I was so proud of that car, even though its top speed was 25 miles per hour (and it only achieved that speed going down a steep hill). Nonetheless, it was my first car and I loved it. Prior to owning my Chevy Vega, I had never noticed any other Chevy Vegas on the road. It was not a part of my awareness; I wasn't noticing that. But once I owned a Chevy Vega, I suddenly began to notice how many of them were out there. What occurred is my awareness of Chevy Vegas – if it existed at all – was buried deep in my brain. When I became the owner of a Vega, that awareness was heightened and became a lens through which I viewed other cars on the road. Then, I suddenly noticed these cars on the road. When I was conducting my doctoral research, one of my study participants described it this way,

When you bring it out and you write it down (one of the practices of bringing it out of your head), I think it . . . gets your antenna up. It's like you're now aware. And so then when God brings answers . . . when things start to happen in your life, you're like, "Oh my gosh." I wasn't tuned into that frequency because . . . that wasn't anything I had brought out . . . to the surface (Davidson, 2019, p. 104).

Following are several popular discernment practices that Christians have used recently and over the centuries to move the knowledge of their createdness out of their brains and into their consciousness, placing themselves in a posture and attitude of listening that enabled them to hear God. You may find the desire to experiment with your own discernment practices which supplement or replace some of those listed here.

1. Write your autobiography from birth to present day, noticing the strengths, skills, abilities, gifts, and values God has given you and remembering the experiences God has brought you through to perfectly prepare you for the next chapter of your life. Pay attention to this story of your createdness as you listen and watch for God's hints about your purpose.

2. Write the next chapter of your life with God and you as co-authors. Let God guide your thinking and writing of your future.
3. Dialogue with God. We often dialogue with God in prayer. In this exercise, however, try writing out the dialogue in 'real time'. Find a quiet place with your journal and pen. Write a question to God then write God's response. Then write your response to God's response. Keep writing back and forth. Many who try this practice are amazed at how easily and quickly God's responses appear in this process.
4. Conduct a daily or weekly examen of your day or week. An examen is an intentional time of daily (or other periods of) reflection upon the day; paying attention to the Spirit's movement, speaking, and guidance in your life. You might consider first writing out three or four questions you would like to reflect on each evening, such as: "Where did the spirit give me the greatest satisfaction today?" or "In what ways did God show me direction for my life today?"
5. Lectio Divina (meaning "Divine Reading") is an exercise in which you prayerfully read a passage of scripture multiple times with a time of meditation between each reading. During each reading, the emphasis is often placed on savoring and noticing words or verses that draw your attention and that enable God to speak to you. Conducting an internet search on Lectio Divina will provide you with many resources for practicing Lectio Divina. You may also try Audio Divina (the process of prayerfully listening to and savoring music) and Visio Divina (the process of prayerfully observing works of art). All of these practices help place you in a spiritual place of listening to God's whispers and nudges.

It is Worth the Effort

The process of looking inward, noticing your unique createdness, and going through a process of discernment can take time and energy. However, it is worth it. Finding God's unique purpose in your life will change not only your life but the world.

Don't give up. Keep looking at your amazing gifts and keep listening for God's whisper and nudge.

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