

Discernment: A Select Bibliography

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by Evan B. Howard

Originally written for Mark van Steenwyk and Kate Kissling Blakely, but with additions for Center Quest's School for Spiritual Direction

What I offer here is just a drop in the bucket of all the literature (and good literature) out there on discernment (I didn't want to bury you in material). I have limited myself primarily to books. I have mostly included material relevant to personal discernment (for Center Quest), and to material helpful to the study of communal discernment and discernment of socio-political issues (for Mark and Kate). I suspect that over the years I will add sections to this site on the theology, history of discernment and so on. I will offer a few comments below referring to works by last name(s). You will find these names in the bibliography below.

The subject of Christian discernment covers a lot of ground. How do I know God's will for my life? How can we tell if that wild experience I had was from the Holy Spirit or simply a result of the spicy dinner I ate? How can a congregation or community wisely discern their next step of direction? How can we find our place in the midst of so much injustice and so many social issues regarding which we feel obliged to respond? And on and on. The particular contexts determine some of the wisdom of different kinds of discernment, but some general principles hold for all kinds. Malatesta's essay has been the standard overall introduction to the topic for decades. I have tried to update some of the material and make it a bit more practical in my own chapter on discernment in the *Brazos Introduction*. In my opinion it is especially valuable to pay careful attention to the development of how discernment is understood and practiced in the history of the Church. But I have not listed those works yet.

Scripture and Discernment

Because we evangelical Christians are interested in things being "biblical," I should offer a few comments on a few works that discuss discernment with attention to the Scriptures. There are a few very interesting books which reflect on discernment-topics from a biblical perspective. Bob Mumford's *Take Another Look at Guidance* was a standard among conservative Christians for decades. Friesen's *Decision Making and the Will of God* was very influential among many conservative Christians in the late 20th century, offering a distinct view of pursuing the will of God. Nice moderate-evangelical discussions of discernment which address the Scriptures are Gordon Smith's books, Hudnut, Willard and Huggett. Excellent discussions from Catholic scholars are found in Luke Timothy Johnson and Thomas Dubay. Finally, James L. Jacquette's dissertation on the function of *adiaphora topos* in the Pauline epistles addresses an important biblical issue in discernment studies.

Personal Discernment

There are scads of books on personal discernment. Much help for individuals learning how to “find God’s will” or the like. I usually recommend Liebert and Willard as good overviews. Benner is helpful in moving the reader from technique to transformation. Johnson, Barry, Farrington, Dougherty, and Au, have all done a nice job of blending the psychological/pastoral and the spiritual. There is a lot of material on discernment from the Jesuit community and perspective. Ignatius of Loyola could be called the patron saint of discernment. See especially Jules Toner for a careful interpretation of Ignatius himself on discernment. Other good treatments of discernment from an Ignatian perspective include Lonesdale, Conroy, Brackley, Green and Wolff.

Group Discernment

I find Sheeran on the Quaker process, Farnham and company in general, and from a Catholic perspective Mary Benet McKinney all to be helpful resources on community discernment. Jules Toner’s article on communal discernment in Ignatius and Spohn’s article on charismatic discernment are also helpful. Orsy is full of wisdom. Theologians in ecclesiology have a tendency to discuss “polity,” or forms of congregational government, rather than the concrete practice of discernment. My experience has been that when a congregation or community learns to practice discernment well, the form of government plays less significant a role in ecclesiological theory and practice in reality. I have led many groups in weekend retreats on discernment and over the long term I find that good discernment need not be linked to one ecclesiological framework. Some fascinating ecclesiological reflections could emerge from this discovery. The Alban institute has tried to assist congregations in learning to discern in a simple “practical” way. See Oswald and Friedrich, and Morris and Olsen for examples.

Discernment and Socio-Political Issues

Regarding socio-political discernment a few sources are worthy of mention. Libanio’s work is a classic, very worthy of reading. Holland/Henriot and Liebert’s “Linking Faith and Justice” summarize a development among Jesuits as well as religious Catholics in general regarding a social analysis pastoral cycle practice that developed from the Base communities and other related folks. Very helpful. Liebert’s article is the most current development of the practice. Jon Sobrino, of course is always excellent and his article on following Jesus as discernment is wonderful. Brackley is a helpful exploration of Ignatian discernment with social justice sensitivities and Wink is — well Wink is classic Wink here with a sensitivity to discernment.

Other Notes

A couple of other notes. The charismatic world has developed their own literature on discernment. As one might expect, the need is great in this environment. Ryle has often been mentioned among charismatics as a helpful guide. A personal note — I was a pastor of

the Vineyard Christian Fellowship of San Francisco during most of my doctoral studies. I was reading Jonathan Edwards, burying myself in discernment literature, and experiencing the Toronto Blessing all at the same time. I devote the last chapter of *Affirming the Touch of God* to an evaluation of the Toronto Blessing from the perspective of discernment theory.

Another theological exploration of discernment that is interesting is McIntosh's work. He has a strong sense of the aesthetic. Finally I might mention Dick Anthony and company. I discovered this book long ago when I was doing research on the "New Age" movement. Then when I chose discernment as the topic of my dissertation I realized that this work was a classic reflection on discernment from a "new age" perspective.

Hope you enjoy the exploration. My doctoral committee recommended that I choose a dissertation topic that I was very interested in. They said that I needed something that would keep me interested through the hard times of the dissertation process. I loved, and still love, the study of discernment. How can you find a more fascinating research project than to explore what it means to know God (and to know *that* it is God you are knowing)?

By God's Grace,

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