Sister Bednar and I are acquainted with a returned missionary who had been dating a special young woman. He cared for her very much and was considering and hoping for engagement and marriage. Their relationship was developing during the time that President Hinckley counseled the women of the Church to wear only one earring in each ear.

The young man waited for the young woman to remove her extra earring, but she did not take them out. The young man felt unsettled about her unresponsiveness to a prophet’s pleading. He ultimately stopped dating the young woman because he was looking for an eternal companion who had the courage to promptly and quietly obey the counsel of the prophet in all things and at all times. The young man was quick to observe that the young woman was not quick to observe.

Some might have difficulty with my last example. You may believe the young man was too judgmental or that basing an eternally important decision on such a supposedly minor issue is silly or fanatical.

I simply invite you to consider what was actually observed in the case I just described. The issue was not earrings!

President George Q. Cannon, who served as counselor to four presidents of the Church, taught powerfully about the gift of discernment:

The gift of discerning of spirits not only gives men and women who have it the power to discern the spirit with which others may be possessed or influenced, but it gives them the power to discern the spirit which influences themselves. They are able to detect a false spirit and also to know when the Spirit of God reigns within them. In private life this gift is of great importance to the Latter-day Saints. Possessing and exercising this gift they will not allow any evil influence to enter into their hearts or to prompt them in their thoughts, their words or their acts.

They will repel it; and if perchance such a spirit should get possession of them, as soon as they witness its effects they will expel it or, in other words, refuse to be led or prompted by it. [Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon, comp. Jerreld L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 1:198–99]

President Stephen L. Richards, who served as a counselor to President David O. McKay, has provided additional instruction about discernment:

The gift of discernment [embodies] the power to discriminate ... between right and wrong. I believe that this gift when highly developed arises largely out of an acute sensitivity to impressions — spiritual impressions, if you will — to read under the surface as it were, to detect hidden evil, and more importantly to find the good that may be concealed. The highest type of discernment is that which perceives in others and uncovers for them their better natures, the good inherent within them....

… Every member in the restored Church of Christ could have this gift if he willed to do so. He could not be deceived with the sophistries of the world. {Diversities of operations, D&C 46:16; 1 Cor 12:6. — RLM} ... Even the inexperienced would recognize false teachings.... We ought to be grateful every day of our lives for this sense which keeps alive a conscience which constantly alerts us to the dangers inherent in wrong-doers and sin. [Conference Report, April 1950, pp. 162–63; emphasis added.]

As we integrate these teachings, we learn that the gift of discernment operates basically in four major ways.

First, as we “read under the surface,” discernment helps us detect hidden error and evil in others. Second, and more important, it helps us detect hidden error and evil in ourselves. Third, it helps us find and bring forth the good that may be concealed in others. And fourth, it helps us find and bring forth the good that may be concealed in us....

Discernment is so much more than recognizing right from wrong. It helps us to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, the important from the unimportant, and the necessary from that which is merely nice. The gift of discernment opens to us vistas that stretch far beyond what can be seen with natural eyes or heard with natural ears. Discernment is seeing with spiritual eyes and feeling with the heart — seeing and feeling the falsehood of an idea or the goodness in another person. Discerning is hearing with spiritual ears and feeling with the heart — hearing and feeling the unspoken concern in a statement or the truthfulness of a testimony or doctrine.

I frequently have heard President Boyd K. Packer counsel members and priesthood leaders: “If all you know is what you see with your natural eyes and hear with your natural ears, then you will not know very much.”