

The Gift of Discernment

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James E. Talmage

Oh, that we all had such power of discernment. That is a gift of the Spirit, to which we are entitled and we will have it as we live for it. With that gift we shall be free, to a great extent, from the deception that otherwise might lead us astray.

As the Lord gives revelations, so does Satan, each in his way. As the Lord has revelators upon the earth, so has Satan, and he is operating upon those men by his power, and they are receiving revelations, manifestations, that are just as truly of the devil as was his manifestation to Moses, to which I have referred.

We need the power of discernment. We need the inspiration of the Lord, that we may know the spirits with whom we have to deal, and recognize those who are speaking and acting under the influence of heaven, and those who are the emissaries of hell.
(Conference Report, April 1931, p.28)

Delbert L. Stapley

Possessing, as we do, the endowment of the Holy Ghost, if worthy, we are entitled to the gift of discernment to guide and help us avoid the pitfalls of scheming and designing men to trap and ensnare us into the meshes of worldly lusts, influences, and pleasures.
(Conference Report, October 1961, p.21)

The Holy Ghost is a revelator of truth and has the related power of discernment, which interprets the mind and motives of men; therefore it has the function of preventing confusion and deception to the possessor of this gift. (D&C 50:23-24.) [Conference Report, October 1966, p.112]

Stephen L. Richards

First, I mention the gift of discernment, embodying the power to discriminate, which has been spoken of in our hearing before particularly as 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. It's the gift every missionary needs when he takes the gospel to the people of the world. He must make an appraisal of every personality whom he meets. He must be able to discern the hidden spark that may be lighted for truth. The gift of discernment will save him from mistakes and

embarrassment, and it will never fail to inspire confidence in the one who is rightly appraised.

The gift of discernment is essential to the leadership of the Church. I never ordain a bishop or set apart a president of a stake without invoking upon him this divine blessing, that he may read the lives and hearts of his people and call forth the best within them. The gift and power of discernment in this world of contention between the forces of good and the power of evil is essential equipment for every son and daughter of God. There could be no such mass dissensions as endanger the security of the world, if its populations possessed this great gift in larger degree. People are generally so gullible one is sometimes led to wonder whether the great Lincoln was right, after all, in the conclusion of his memorable statement, "You can't fool all the people all the time." One does feel at times, however, a sense of pity and sympathy for some of the peoples of the world whose education, information, and exposure to higher ideals and exalted concepts have been so arbitrarily and ruthlessly restricted.

There is a class of people now grown sizable in the world who should possess this great gift in large degree. They know how the gift is attained. They have been educated in its spiritual foundations. They have been blessed with the counsels which foster it. They know how to order their lives to procure it. You know who they are, my brethren and sisters. 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. He could not be led astray by pseudo-prophets and subversive cults. Even the inexperienced would recognize false teachings, in a measure at least. With this gift they would be able to detect something of the disloyal, rebellious, and sinister influences which not infrequently prompt those who seemingly take pride in the destruction of youthful faith and loyalties. Discerning parents will do well to guard their children against such influences and such personalities and teachings before irreparable damage is done. The true gift of discernment is often premonitory. A sense of danger should be heeded to be of value. We give thanks for a set of providential circumstances which avert an accident. 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 wrongdoers and sin. (Conference Report, April 1950, pp. 162-163)

George Q. Cannon

One of the gifts of the Gospel which the Lord has promised to those who enter into covenant with Him is the gift of discerning of spirits--a gift which is not much thought of by many and probably seldom prayed for; yet it is a gift that is of exceeding value and one that should be enjoyed by every Latter-day Saint.... No Latter-day Saint should be without this gift, because there is such a variety of spirits in the world which seek to deceive and lead astray. In a revelation to the Church upon the spirits which have gone abroad in the earth the Lord says:

"Behold, verily I say unto you, that there are many spirits which are false spirits, which have gone forth in the earth, deceiving the world." [D&C 50:2]

The Lord warns the Saints and says: "Beware lest ye are deceived." [D&C 46:8] And that they may not be deceived, He commands them to seek earnestly the best gifts.

The Apostle John says:

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

This counsel of the beloved Apostle applies as much to us in these latter days as it did to the Saints of his age. All manner of spirits have gone forth to deceive, to lead astray and to obtain possession of the children of men; and many people yield to them because they are invisible and cannot, perhaps, think that they can be possessed by invisible influences. Anger, backbiting, slander, falsehood and various passions are manifested by people under the influence of false and deceptive spirits....

Now, 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.

The gift of discerning of spirits, also, is one that is of great importance to the Elders who are laboring in the ministry. We have known Elders become so filled with zeal and so desirous to do good, or what they supposed to be good, that they exposed themselves to the influence of the adversary. They would be filled with a species of what has been called "wildfire," and, carried away by zeal, they would go too far; they would say and do imprudent things and yet, being prompted by the purest and best motives, would feel entirely justified in their course. In the history of the Church there have been many illustrations of this. Elders can work themselves up beyond that which is proper and wise and be led to say and do many imprudent things and overstep the line of propriety. Now, the gift of discerning of spirits is necessary to keep these kind of feelings in check.

The gift of discerning spirits is not only necessary for this purpose, but it is necessary in the branches of the Church. Newly baptized members, anxious to obtain the gifts, are liable sometimes to be taken advantage of by the adversary and to imbibe or yield to a wrong spirit. A newly organized branch of the Church, where the gifts are manifested, especially the gift of tongues, has to be watched with great care. The Elders laboring in the branch or presiding in the conference must be in a position to discern between the Spirit of the Lord and other spirits that may seek to steal in....

In all the situations in life, therefore, in which Latter-day Saints can be placed there is great need for them to possess the gift of discerning of spirits. Fathers and mothers need

it for their own benefit. They need it in their families, in the training of their children. All Saints need it to enable them to escape from the many evil influences that are abroad. The Elders need it for their own sakes; they need it also in the government of the branches, of the conferences, of the wards, of the stakes and, indeed, the entire Church. It is a great and blessed gift, and it should be sought for by all. (*Gospel Truth*, 1:198-200)

There are now many things existing, and which our people are brought into contact with, that are calculated to deceive. Especially is this the case in the early lives of both sexes, who are apt to be deceived by appearances--by judging men by their outward appearance, expressions and sometimes by their dress and demeanor. There is a gift in the Church of God which if obtained enables us to escape deception, and detect all kinds of spirits and evil. It is the gift of discernment of spirits. The Lord has promised unto us this gift, so that we shall be able through that gift to discern the spirits of men and women who may be brought in contact with us, so as not to be deceived by them. Some persons have this gift. It is natural to them while others seem to be utterly destitute of it, and therefore easily deceived, because they have no discernment. Now we can ask God for this gift and have it bestowed upon us. If we seek for it in faith it will be given us. (*Collected Discourses*, 2:249, July 5th, 1891)

David O. McKay

From birth to death men differ. They vary as much as do flowers in a garden. In intellect, in temperament, in energy, and in training some rise to one level and some to another.

The successful teacher is one who, with a spirit of discernment, can detect to a degree at least, the mentality and capability of the members of his class. He should be able to read the facial expressions and be responsive to the mental and spiritual attitudes of those whom he is teaching. The great Teacher had this power of discernment in perfection as is well illustrated in his conversation with the woman of Samaria whose interests he not only interpreted, but whose soul he also read by virtue of her past deeds. Too few teachers have this gift, even to a limited degree, but every teacher has the responsibility of determining how best to approach the members of the class in order to make appeals that will be lasting. -- RSM, 21:722 (1934).

It is written that "he who governs well leads the blind, but he that teaches gives them eyes." -- CR, April 1914, p. 86. (*Gospel Ideals*, p.439)

Joseph Fielding Smith

To understand spiritual things, a man must have spiritual discernment, that is, guidance by the Holy Ghost. For this reason we are confirmed and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

The Lord expects us to use our faculties and has given us reason as a measuring rod to measure truth under certain conditions.Primarily in the search after gospel truth, there

must be the teaching of the Spirit -- Spirit speaking to spirit -- and this comes only through obedience to gospel law.

The man who will not "do his will" may search forever, but in vain; but cannot find it! It is not to be found in psychology, in biology, or sociology, no matter what other truth may be found therein. When we hearken to the Spirit who guides into all truth, we will see that the truth revealed is reasonable and consistent with all other truth.

Only by the aid of the Holy Ghost, and through obedience to the principles of the gospel, will a man eventually attain to the knowledge of all truth. In other words, those who will not make their lives conform in every particular to the Divine Life; who will not adjust their lives through faith and repentance and obedience to all divine law, will never be in a position to comprehend truth in its fulness. Therefore, only in the celestial kingdom will the fulness of the truth be attained.

All who will not place their lives "at-one" with the Father and the Son cannot comprehend the things of God. They are foolishness unto them. For this reason so many of the learned men in the world fail to comprehend the gospel and teach theories and philosophies at variance with revealed truth which they cannot understand. We are in that day when the people are "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." (*Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:298)

Bruce R. McConkie

In its most important aspect, discernment is used to distinguish between good and evil (Moro. 7:12-18), between the righteous and the wicked (D. & C. 101:95; Mal. 3:18; 3 Ne. 24:18), between the false or evil spirits and those spirits who truly manifest the things of God. (D. & C. 46:23; 1 Cor. 12:10.) In its fullest manifestation the gift of the discerning of spirits is poured out upon presiding officials in God's kingdom; they have it given to them to discern all gifts and all spirits, lest any come among the saints and practice deception. (D. & C. 46:27.)

There is no perfect operation of the power of discernment without revelation. Thereby even "the thoughts and intents of the heart" are made known. (D. & C. 33:1; Heb. 4:12.) Where the Saints are concerned -- since they have received the right to the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost -- the Lord expects them to discern, not only between the righteous and the wicked, but between false and true philosophies, educational theories, sciences, political concepts, and social schemes. Unfortunately, in many instances, even good men hearken to "the tradition of their fathers" (D. & C. 93:39) and rely on the learning of the world rather than the revelations of the Lord, so that they do not enjoy the full play of the spirit of discernment. (*Mormon Doctrine*, p.197)

James E. Faust

Satan has had great success with this gullible generation. As a consequence, literally hosts of people have been victimized by him and his angels. There is, however, an ample

shield against the power of Lucifer and his hosts. This protection lies in the spirit of discernment through the gift of the Holy Ghost. This gift comes undeviatingly by personal revelation to those who strive to obey the commandments of the Lord and to follow the counsel of the living prophets.

This personal revelation will surely come to all whose eyes are single to the glory of God, for it is promised that their bodies will be "filled with light, and there shall be no darkness" in them. 27 Satan's efforts can be thwarted by all who come unto Christ by obedience to the covenants and ordinances of the gospel. The humble followers of the divine Master need not be deceived by the devil. Satan does not sustain and uplift and bless. He leaves those he has grasped in shame and misery. The spirit of God is a sustaining and uplifting influence. ("Serving the Lord and Resisting the Devil," *Ensign*, Sept. 1995, p. 6-7)

Ezra Taft Benson

The Book of Mormon was written for our day. Mormon, who compiled it, saw us in vision and was directed to put into the book those things God felt we would especially need in our time. We therefore should know the Book of Mormon better than any other book. Not only should we know what history and faith-promoting stories it contains, but we should understand its teachings. If we really do our homework and approach the Book of Mormon doctrinally, we can expose the errors and find the truths to combat many of the current false theories and philosophies of men.

I have noted within the Church a difference in discernment, insight, conviction, and spirit between those who know and love the Book of Mormon and those who do not. That book is a great sifter. ("Jesus Christ--Gifts and Expectations," *Ensign*, Dec. 1988, 4)