Discernment

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Rembrandt: Christ in the Storm on the Lake of Galilee
Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation provides spiritual accompaniment and honest dialogue for those who long for radical transformation in Christ. It stimulates hunger and illuminates the path by drawing on classical wisdom and practice, exploring the vital role of community, and illustrating the journey with realism and hope.

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The target audience for Conversations is purposefully broad—all thoughtful, seeking followers of Christ who long for a complete transformation of soul and full restoration of His image within. It is the intent of the editors to produce words that will inspire both those who seek help themselves and those who are helping others. The audience is also envisioned as being international, ecumenical, and inter-denominational. At present Conversations does not accept unsolicited manuscripts.
In keeping with the idea of the soul as a unique representation of unity and diversity, the format of Conversations includes five continuing themes, each representing an enduring aspect of the soul—thought, emotion, behavior, relationship, and intention.
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If God Is So Smart Why Am I Doing All the Talking?

Why is it that when we speak to God we are said to be praying but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?

—Lily Tomlin

Over the past four decades I’ve learned the same foundational truth about discernment from three very different people. One is my Uncle Otis, a semifamous faith-healing evangelist who was Charismatic long before it was cool. The other two are Dallas Willard and Ignatius of Loyola.

Uncle Otis was known as a man who lived with an ear close to the mouth of God. There were several times while growing up that I benefited from knowing someone who had this kind of inside-trader information. There were thousands of others who went to Uncle Otis for the same reason. Most had very good experiences. But occasionally things did get a little screwy.

Once, when casting out a demon, Uncle Otis said directly to the evil spirit, “What’s your name?”

“Lie,” said the fiend. “Are you telling me the truth, lying demon?” Uncle Otis shot back.

I’m not sure how that particular demon responded to such a double bind—he may have gone off shaking his head, looking for a herd of pigs to deceive.

And I’ll spare you the full story about my uncle praying into a live microphone for a man to be healed of his constipation “instantly”!

The point is that, with a few humorous exceptions, Uncle Otis seemed much better than most at hearing God’s voice. And a lot of folks trusted him to “listen” for them.

At his funeral, one of his friends said with a smile, “Otis has never been accused of preaching.” It was a clever way of referring to the fact that Otis the evangelist wasn’t effective because of cleverly crafted words artistically strung across a three-point outline. No, he never offered his audience revelation of obscure truth mined from Greek verb tenses. Instead, he offered them the words he’d heard God whisper during their unceasing conversations.

That was the secret to his success as an evangelist. That was the secret to his discernment. He spent his adult life abiding with the one he loved. Otis knew that constant companionship is what it took to hear the voice of God. That was the foundational truth about discernment he practiced. He knew you needed to sit on the front row if you wanted to hear the flutes.

I miss my uncle. He was an original.

Dallas Willard is an original too. But as far as I can discern, he has
only three things in common with my Uncle Otis—stature, both physical and spiritual; Southern roots; and the belief that it is possible to live life so close to God you can hear His voice. Dallas says it best in his wonderful book Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship With God: “People are meant to live in an ongoing conversation with God, speaking and being spoken to.”\(^1\) God’s visits with Adam and Enoch are to become routine for us. Both believe that God specifically “created us for intimate friendship with himself—both now and forever.”\(^2\)

For many people—certainly not Otis and Dallas—the “hearing God” aspect of discernment can be like an infrequently played parlor game or stopping to ask for directions after finally admitting to being lost. But hearing God’s voice, discerning God’s will, doesn’t make much sense except within the context of living life a certain kind of way, the way of constant, ongoing, interactive friendship. The way of John 17:3—“This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ.”

While Ignatius uses words that would have been completely unfamiliar to my uncle, words like “consolation,” “desolation,” and “examine,” I believe Otis would have loved the exercises. And I believe he would have found profound wisdom in those activities, a wisdom that offers that the best way to “hear” God is through knowing him—the process of being mutually indwelt, one within the other—in a passionate relationship in which listening for God’s voice is only one aspect of the deeper goal: enjoyment of a perpetual and transforming friendship in which we best know God’s will by knowing God.

\* \* \*

In this issue of Conversations you’ll find a variety of articles written to enhance understanding of discernment. The writers have given special attention to offering suggestions for experience and praxis. Thomas Green writes the lead article and defines discernment as “discovering in prayer how God wishes us to act” and presents it as “practical art and not a piece of speculative theology,” Ruth Haley Barton reminds you that “while discernment is listed as a spiritual gift, it is also a mark of Christian maturity.”

Speaking directly from their hearts, Kim Engelmann offers suggestions for discerning when suffering is part of a true (potter’s wheel) or false (hamster wheel) spirituality, and Kendra Allen discloses how the discernment process was part of her journey form grief to hope. You’ll also read about what Steve Doughty calls the call to communal discernment and how Wilkie Au presents both the process and posture of discernment as one learns to make decisions “with God.”

Helen Cepero and Jan Johnson offer you very practical suggestions for using journaling to “mine below” the surface of our fears (Cepero) and discovering discernment as part of an overall conversational life with God (Johnson). The issue continues with Paulin-Campbell’s use of dance as a metaphor for discernment as part of her skilful presentation of an Ignatian understanding of discernment, and Michael Clarensau’s Charismatic response to these Ignatian ideas about the “discerning of spirits.”

Then, in addition to the ongoing features by Michael Glerup (“Ancient Wisdom”), Kim Engelmann (“Conversation Guide”), Juliet Benner (“O Taste and See”), and Adele Ahlberg Calhoun (“Defining Our Terms”), Bill Griffin concludes the issue by allowing Thomas á Kempis to weigh in on the matter of discernment.

We hope you enjoy this installment of Conversations and that it inspires you to spend more time on the front row listening for the flutes.

**Endnotes**


2 Ibid, p. 10. Also see Exodus 29:43–46; 33:11; Psalm 23; Isaiah 41:8; John 15:14; and Hebrews 13:5,6.)

3 Scriptures marked (NRSV) are from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.