

Chapter Six

The Power of Discernment

The Lord Jesus does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. (1 Samuel 16:1, 7-12)

In *The Genesee Diary*, Henri Nouwen describes a type of bird that fools people into thinking they are injured in order to draw their attention away from the eggs they have laid in open sandy places. 'Beautiful!' Nouwen exclaims, 'neurosis as a weapon! How often I have asked pity for a very unreal problem in order to pull people's attention away from what I didn't want them to see!'¹

Can we honestly say that we have never done something like this? Discerning people can see through our duplicity as easily as when children playing hide-and-seek cover their eyes and suppose they cannot be seen – despite leaving their butts sticking out!

There is such a need for discernment in the Church today! Like Jesus, we are called to a level of discernment that goes far beyond what we see or hear with our natural eyes and ears. In search of the one God wanted to anoint to be Israel's king, Samuel sensed no answering call from Heaven when he met Jesse's eminently suitable sons – and he had the determination to make the further enquiries that unearthed the youngest. David may have been outwardly less attractive and imposing, but he was the one the Lord had set His sights on.

To discern means 'to perceive or recognize clearly.' Many Christians claim to be filled with the Holy Spirit, but how really exercise such discernment? The need is so pressing that we are going to devote an extended chapter to considering ways in which we can train and develop this important gift.

Handling discernment

We are not called into action every time Goliath shouts, but when God summons us. If Goliath shouts and I come running every time, he'll laugh – and I risk getting my skull cracked. (S.J.Pigott)

When the truly discerning people meet someone, they pick up quickly not just on their hurts and oddities but also on their potential. They need to know then what to do with what they have discerned. Should they just commit this person's onward journey to the Lord? Or should they pause and take time to nurture them, and to impart fresh spiritual blessings? Or direct them to people and material that will help develop their latent gifts?

We can see how swiftly easily what begins as a personal moment of illumination may pass into a weightier obligation. Perhaps it is the subliminal awareness that listening to the Lord may entail further consequences that explains why relatively few ever develop

this precious ministry to any great extent – not least because there is a personal cost to pay when we pick up on inauthentic words and unbroken attitudes intruding where grace and holiness should flow.

As we become more familiar with the Lord's heart, and better acquainted with the dynamics of human relationships, we can hardly fail to notice the pride in *this* worship leader, or the 'religious' voice which *that* preacher puts on. Not to mention the self-centeredness or the uncleanness that positively emanates from someone else – although some of us wrap ourselves up in knots fearing we are in danger of being judgmental rather than genuinely discerning.

We must certainly never use the gift of discernment as a weapon to expose, control or belittle anyone. Seeing something clearly is not, in itself, a license from the Lord to confront unless He so commands. There is a time for lying low until the Lord shows us what to do. There is nothing unusual in the example of a Norwegian friend of mine, who, having discerned a serious controlling spirit in a church leader in Russia, waited until his third trip to his church before challenging him.

There is another reason why the gift of discernment does not exactly top the popularity polls. Well aware that their deepest-laid plans risk being exposed, the powers of darkness subject the spiritually discerning to particularly acute attacks: wave after wave of them.

Sometimes this takes the form of full frontal attacks, but since these often lead to major spiritual retaliation, the assaults are often subtly directed against the areas where we are *most* gifted. If the powers of darkness can neutralize our strengths and sensitivities, or even turn them *against* us, we will be drawn into battles we were never meant to fight, exactly as the starting quotation for this section indicates. The result of being involved in battles we were never meant to fight is always that we become weary and discouraged.

If the Lord is not calling us into action, we are wiser to pray and hold our peace – like the psychologist in the British sit-com *Fawlty Towers*, who walks straight past Basil, the hotel manager, who is behaving particularly bizarrely, and declares firmly, 'I'm off duty!'

We must be equally as ready, however, to spring into action when the Lord does summon us – allowing no fear of man to hold us back.

For Reflection

*Lord, Your Word says 'Be merciful to those who doubt;
snatch others from the fire and save them.' (Jude 1:23)
Grant us the discernment we need for each situation that we face,
and then the right opportunities to warn or encourage people
with what you have shown us.*

*Keep us from coming under the influence
of any strong or controlling spirits
that are involved in the situation.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Testing Words and Discernment

Discernment should be a corporate rather than a purely private affair.²

Back in the seventeenth century, the early Quakers greatly loved and respected the Word of God, but many, unfortunately, could not accept that the Word itself should always be considered superior to individual leading. Because they were convinced that it the Spirit Who had inspired the Scriptures was the same One that they possessed, they even suggested that their 'inner light' should test the Word instead of the other way round.

The Quakers' emphasis on being led by the Spirit produced much lasting spiritual fruit, but it unfortunately also left the gate wide open for an ever greater degree of subjectivism. In time, this led to many Quakers entertaining highly unbiblical beliefs and practices. Richard Baxter, the Puritan divine, reacted to some of these extremes by issuing the sternest of warnings:

All sober Christians should be the more cautious of being deceived by their own imaginations. Experience telleth us that most in an age that have pretended to prophesy, or to inspirations or revelations, have been melancholy, crack-brained persons, near to madness, who have proved deluded in the end.³

Baxter had an important point to make, but whilst the fact that many 'crack-brained' and downright immoral things have been undertaken in the name of the Lord should cause us to double check our utterances, and our life-direction, it should by no means hold us back from seeking to listen to the authentic Still Small Voice.

Within fifteen years or so, the Society of Friends realized that trusting the leading of the Light in every Friend was not sufficient. Words and leading were henceforth to be tested by the corporate will of the group – which hopefully included sufficient awareness of Biblical teaching to be up to the task.

For Reflection and Prayer

As we seek to listen to the Still Small Voice today, we face very much the same questions that the early Quakers grappled with. The first question to consider therefore is: 'with whom do we check and test our hearing?'

The second is, 'When we pass on to others what we sincerely hope are inspired suggestions, are we sure that we are not merely transferring onto them the things that we have found 'work' for us? Analogies are helpful, but we should never dump them

indiscriminately on others – it can lead to a ‘hardening of the oughteries!’ (ie making people feel that they ‘ought’ to be doing something, as opposed to feeling genuine led to do it).

Christian tradition – ‘what the Church has always believed’ – is by no means infallible, but neither is it something to throw away lightly. We should certainly not be so eager to embrace the new and novel that we overlook basic questions: ‘Does this word (or manifestation) bring glory to God and Jesus?’ ‘Are they people of sound mind and behavior, who are walking with the Lord?’ ‘Does it promote unity in the Body of Christ – or does it draw people into someone else’s orbit, and incline towards divisiveness?’

Peace – the Umpire

The peace that Christ gives is to guide you in the decisions you make; for it is to this peace that God has called you together in the one body. (Colossians 3:15)

We considered previously the issue of prioritizing competing calls on our time. The sheer variety of choices we face can certainly be baffling. As we toggle between myriad television channels, shop online and venture further afield than ever before to visit or to vacation, who can deny that pleasures create their own pressures? May the Still Small Voice that would lead us to God’s highest priorities not get drowned out in the process!

‘In Me you may have peace,’ promised Jesus.⁴ The whole of His life demonstrated this extraordinary ability to be at one with His Father, even in the midst of endless demands and jostling crowds. To help us evaluate the choices we face, therefore, it is important to try to sense where the peace of God is leading.

For Reflection and Prayer

*Lord of Peace,
make us quick to spot where Your peace is leading –
and rightly uneasy when we are in danger of going astray.
We give you now the ‘leads’ we believe You have given,
and that we are doing our best to follow . . .
Overrule anything we have got out of balance;
bless and anoint all that truly is of You.
In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

From Ruach to The Rock: The Shetland Saga

The names of the two houses that we lived in on Shetland – *Ruach* and *The Rock* – represent the twin poles of our spirituality. We are called to move in the power of the Spirit (*Ruach*), but in a way that is constantly undergirded by the Word of God (*The Rock*). (from our Pilgrim’s Guide, *Inspired by the Spirit*)

Towards the end of 2001, an unexpected opportunity arose for us to consider heading north for a sojourn on Shetland. It was not only an unexpected and dramatic summons, but, as it needed to be, a multi-stranded call.

Our first hint that something radical was about to happen came when a couple came to pray with us. They brought us a prophetic word that our lives had been proceeding in one direction, but that we were about to experience a complete change of course. They also warned that we would need to set our faces like flint for it to come about.

We had no idea what this meant. The Lord had gone to such great lengths to give us our present house and ministry that it had never crossed our minds to think that we might one day leave them behind. When Ros discovered that there was an immediate vacancy on Shetland for the post of Senior Clinical Midwife, however, the peace of the Lord came on us, and she felt led to apply for it.

The Lord impressed on us that this would be a sojourn rather than a permanent move, but it represented such a radical move that we felt the need to set a seemingly impossible fleece. We prayed that if the Lord really was in this change of course, He would provide at least one point of continuity by causing our friend Anna, who looked after our two-year old son, to be willing to move to Shetland too.

On the basis that there is nothing to be gained by building castles in the air, we rang Anna together to see how she would feel about such an idea. There was an audible gasp at the other end of the line. Although she had never breathed a word about this to us, it turned out that she had already received a call to Shetland herself some years previously! She had already paid several visits to the island, and was actively looking for a way to get there.⁵

As I was praying with a friend about what I would do when we got to Shetland, she began to speak in a tongue that I partially understood as a result of having studied ancient Romance languages at university. Amongst other things, the Lord spoke of His help in the venture, and of my writing illuminated manuscripts during the sojourn.

In due time we sent out a huge number of publications that blended words and photographs of the beautiful Shetland Islands. I found the word 'sojourn' particularly interesting. Apart from its primary meaning as a 'stay of unknown duration,' the Latin dictionary I consulted said that it could also mean a 'standing still,' a 'post,' a 'residency,' and a 'religious assembly or meeting.' This versatile word perfectly encapsulated the heart of my calling: to stand before the Lord in prayer, to send out teaching insights, and to organize an international prayer conference.

Other confirmations quickly flooded in. At one of our regular retreats, a friend had a picture of an island attached to the mainland of Shetland by a bridge. As if to highlight how closely linked revelations and action are meant to be, the Lord later went on to guide this man to purchase *Ruach*, a wonderful modern house for us to have the use of during

our sojourn. Ruach, of course, means ‘breath, wind of Spirit’ of God. We renamed our ministry after it.⁶

We loved Shetland, but it took time to adjust to a lifestyle that was as far removed from our previous twenty years of largely itinerant ministry as the north is from the south. Six or seven months after arriving, we heard about a word that had been given back in 1997, when God had spoken specifically during a meeting of Scandinavian intercessors about a strategic conference that would bring Scandinavian and British intercessors together to pray for Europe. The word specified that the conference was to be held on Shetland. This surprising choice actually makes a good deal of sense if you turn the map of the North Atlantic upside down. It is very clear then that Shetland is the northern gateway to Europe!

Back in 2001 we had organized two national days of prayer in the United Kingdom: *Fight for this Nation* and *Britain and Ireland United in Prayer*. We quickly realized that the Lord wanted us to take up the baton, and to bring this conference to birth. Eventually, *Fire from the North* drew together intercessors from more than twenty-five different islands and nations.

We knew nothing about all this, however, when we sailed north for Shetland in a violent February gale. As is so often the case when following the Lord’s leading, obedience precedes understanding!

One year after moving to *Ruach*, the Lord surprised us by calling us to purchase our own house. He showed us clearly the one He had in mind: a large modern building called *The Rock*, that overlooked a stunning voe (fjord). He told both of us the price we should bid for it, but warned that there were other people after the property whom He did *not* want to acquire it. Months later, we met the couple concerned. They had been planning to develop it as a New Age Centre. Amazingly, they had bid the same amount for it that we did, minus the small change in our pocket! Once again, the word of the Lord proved true.

Meanwhile, He had not forgotten *Ruach*. The Lord completed the loop when some dear friends felt called to Shetland, and moved into the house just three weeks after we vacated it – and they are making far more creative use of this beautiful house than we could ever have done.

‘The Brandle Factor’

Even in the utmost prosperity, the advice of friends is to be very greatly employed. (Cicero)
Do not speak too quickly against things you do not understand. (Anon)

Shortly before we were due to take charge of a lively six-week old collie-spaniel puppy called Brandle, people came to us from all directions warning us that we would find it too hard. After a lot of thought and prayer we decided to go ahead anyway. Fifteen lively

years with Brandle brought many hairy moments – in every sense of the word – but much love and comfort too.

It is amazing how often we find, whenever we are on the point of pushing out the boat to attempt some major new thing, that we almost invariably receive a barrage of suggestions to take the opposite course of action. We have nicknamed these well intentioned but decidedly discouraging comments ‘The Brandle Factor.’

Does the fact that we receive contradictory guidance imply that we should give up consulting others before we take important steps? By no means. Scripture is emphatic that *‘For waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers.’*⁷ It is only realistic, however, to accept the fact that not everyone will agree with us, even when we have heard truly. The way of the cross sometimes sets us on a course that others – even those we love dearly – will find it difficult to follow us on.

It is a difficult balancing act to remain open to counsel, without being unduly swayed by when the Lord really is leading us in another direction. On the assumption that it is more important to be on track with the Lord’s purposes than to be well thought of by others, may we, with great humility – and some diffidence – suggest adopting the following principle at such times: *‘If the Lord is calling you forward, focus on the Shepherd. If you look over your shoulder to see who is following you, you will get a crick in the neck!’*

It helps if we can make allowance for people’s upbringing or experience, and realize the extent to which it may incline them to reject something as being God’s leading. Most of us, after all, have learned to make mental additions or subtractions when reading certain newspapers according to their political leanings. But may we always be open to discern the authentic accents of the Lord’s leading or warnings!

The pain is much greater when our differences are with like-minded people. Paul must have faced the ‘Brandle Factor’ in spades when he felt compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, even though his fellow believers pleaded with him not to do so.⁸

Back in the 1996 the Lord showed us that the time had come for us to take possession of the large country house He had been telling us for some time that we would one day live in. After some months of searching, we realized that the only way we were going to be able to buy such a property was to do so jointly with my parents. This was when the Brandle Factor cut in, with numerous friends warning us not to go ahead on this basis.

The best and kindest way to view apparently contradictory guidance is to realize that people may be glimpsing how difficult certain aspects of a calling may prove to be. That is entirely different, however, from a project being either wrong or doomed to failure. To hold back from following the Spirit’s leading just because there will be difficulties along the way is not an option – not least because it would prevent the Lord from fulfilling many of His purposes.

As things turned out, the Lord used our six year sojourn in the house in really special ways – including the hosting of numerous precious retreats – before the call of the Lord whisked us north to Shetland and then, more recently, south again.

For Reflection and Prayer

*Lord, help us to tell the difference between Your
restraining hand, and people's negative comments –
and between Your still small voice
and fleshly counterfeits and compulsions!*

When our timing is faulty

‘Do not look so sad, Lucy. We shall meet again soon.’ Please, Aslan,’ said Lucy, ‘What do you call soon?’ ‘I call all times soon,’ said Aslan, and instantly he was vanished away.
(C.S.Lewis)⁹

If there is one issue above all others that causes us problems when it comes to listening to the Lord, it is the matter of timing. Partly this is because the words God speaks to us often have a short, medium and long term application. This is a matter of multiple fulfillments and ‘layers.’

It is important to understand that it is perfectly possible to hear something correctly, but to be quite mistaken about *when* it is going to happen, or about *what* we should do about what we have heard. There is a time and a place for a word to be given, but often an entirely different one for it to be worked out in.

This is hardly surprising when you realize that God’s call comes from the heart of eternity. It links into our timescale with perfect precision in its final outworking, but it *originates* in an altogether different time sphere. In other words, just because we have received God’s leading does not mean that we should automatically expect it to come to pass there and then, any more than we should necessarily act on it there and then.

We hinted earlier that there is often a distinction between a *call* (which gets us thinking and preparing in a particular direction) and a *commission* – that is, the actual moment when we need to take action. Understanding this distinction will cause us to double-check sudden impulses, and save us from acting prematurely. More times than I can count I have said something like, ‘I feel we should go and visit x.’ Ros has agreed, but balanced my eagerness: ‘Sure. Tomorrow!’ The word was right: the timing simply needed adjusting!

We are great advocates of applying the old military adage, ‘Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted.’ It has saved us from numerous costly mistakes. When we first moved into a new house, we needed to replace the aged kitchen units. We saw some we liked in a local store, but felt a check against buying them.

Four months later, we saw the same units somewhere else, but this time with a 50% discount. 'They're the right ones,' the Lord assured us: 'Don't buy them!' Two months later, the Lord suddenly said, 'Today's the day. Buy them.' For that day only it turned out that they were being promoted with a 60% reduction!.

When the Lord allows a prolonged delay between a call and its outworking, there is always a reason. If the call takes the form of a warning, the Lord often allows an extended period of time between announcing His sentence and actually carrying it out.

This is because He wants to give people the maximum chance possible to repent. Thus we find Jeremiah proclaiming with great urgency (and accuracy) that the Babylonians were coming, but all of forty years before they actually did so.

As we hinted in the last chapter, the Lord does not usually give us a once-and-forever set of guidance that will last us a lifetime. He may well want to fine-tune (or even supersede) the original pattern as events unfold. The principle is simple, even if the practice is challenging: 'Guidance comes as and when we need it.'

How eagerly Mary and Joseph must have received the angel's summons to return to Israel! At last their enforced status as refugees in Egypt was over! When they reached the border, however, they heard the disturbing news that Herod's equally pathological son was now reigning in Jerusalem.

Just think how things might have ended had they decided that since God had called them to return they might as well press on to Bethlehem! They were wise enough to heed the Lord's warning in the dream, and headed north instead, to Nazareth.¹⁰

For Reflection and Prayer

Just as we need maturity to handle the matter of timing, so we also require discernment in the way we appropriate the promises of God. For obvious reasons, many may not have any immediate application in our own lives – and those that do may still be conditional on our continuing right response.

*Lord, help us to welcome into our hearts
those promises that You are giving us,
and to trust You with the timing of their fulfillment,
for You often give hints today
that You intend to fulfill many years down the road.*

By many strands

A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. (Deuteronomy 19:15)

Outside Scalloway Harbour in Shetland, three harbour lights (white, green and red) guide sailors along the navigation channel between the cluster of jagged rocks and islands. Only when all three of these lights line up and appear as one white light is it safe to enter the harbour.

Bob Mumford counsels that when God is about to lead us along some major new path, He will normally confirm His word to us in several different ways. He suggests that we should look for at least two or three other strands of guidance apart from a direct word dream or vision before accepting that some direction really does represent the authentic leading of the Still Small Voice: for example, the witness of Scripture, the peace of Christ in our hearts, the confirmation of other mature Christians, as well as the specific opening or shutting of doors.¹¹

Nearly three and a half years after we moved to Shetland, three people came to us separately to tell us that the moment we had completed our assignment – the prayer conference for the northern nations – the Lord would recall us rapidly down south again.

The call had come earlier than we had expected, and the transition was a fraught one. Several seemingly promising leads failed to develop altogether. Because Ros was under intense pressure at work, the enemy did all he could to keep the uncertainties as high as possible. Friends kept praying. One saw us in a hot air balloon, heading south and landing in a remote rural region.

The picture strengthened us through several painful and perplexing months. Suddenly, it all happened. A job opened up and we rather miraculously found a house to live in. Less than three weeks after the Conference had finished, we were on the boat and heading south to start a new life in much warmer climes.

For Reflection and Prayer

Most of the mistakes I have made in matters of guidance have come as the result of allowing myself to be convinced too easily by one or two strands of guidance, instead of waiting for the Lord to confirm both the details and the timing. Even when some initial piece of guidance seems overwhelmingly strong, we should be wary of acting on one strand alone – especially if it involves major changes.

Fleeces and decision-making

‘If You will save Israel by my hand as You have promised, look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor.’ (Judges 6:35-37)

The Lord never intended decision-making to be our responsibility alone. At the same time, we should be cautious of trying to devolve *all* responsibility onto the Lord by laying arbitrary fleeces,¹² such as, ‘If such and such happens, then it must be right.’ Neither

should we try to cut deals with the Lord along the lines that ‘if You do *this*, then I will do *that*.’

Although it is arguably acceptable as a Scriptural model to lay fleeces, there is one potential danger. If circumstances *do* line up with the terms laid down in the fleece, we may assume our quest for guidance to be at an end. The fact that Gideon asked for *two* signs suggests it might be wiser to regard fleeces, like other strands, as representing just *one* part of the confirmation we are looking for.

How about those occasions when other people bring us ‘directive’ guidance? We should certainly be careful about acting on such words. We can recall a number of occasions, however, when people have brought us words that have launched us in entirely new directions – usually when something was too far outside our experience (or faith levels) for us to have thought of it for ourselves.

Tragically, insecure and under-affirmed people often end up ‘using’ prophecies and revelations as a means of boosting their ego, or even to tighten their control over others. It is as though they feel their ability to get words for other people in some way ‘proves’ their ministry. When off-beam prophecies are forcefully presented, rather than lovingly offered, people have no choice but to accept them at face value, or to discard them altogether. This can cause much hurt and confusion, and lead to many complications – not least the people who ‘see through them’ becoming disillusioned with the whole concept of listening.

Perhaps it was for reasons such as this that Paul Tillich argues in favour of keeping reason and spiritual experiences rigidly apart from each other.¹³ I do not agree with him. It is surely a far better sign of how well integrated listening to the Lord is in our lives if we are able to satisfy *both* sets of criteria along the lines of Acts 15:18: ‘It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.’

For Reflection and Prayer

*Father, help us to know which decisions are ours,
and which are only Yours to take –
and never to impose our will on others.*

Doors opening: stay inside!

When I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my bother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia. (2 Corinthians 2:12-13)

When the elevator stops, the automated voice announces: ‘Doors opening’ and we duly prepare to step out. Except that sometimes we may not be meant to get out at this particular floor. What happens, for example, if you are blessed to have a whole range of

possibilities to choose from? It is patently not enough to reduce our quest for guidance to waiting to see whether a particular door opens up, because several may already have done so for us – in which case we need to know which one is the best.

In the quote above, Paul was clearly experiencing an ‘open door’ in Troas. People were hanging onto his words and paying him well – so why not settle down and enjoy the luxury limousine? ‘Come and hear Pastor Paul’ sounds a decidedly better proposition than ‘Go and visit Prisoner Paul!’

Paul knew, however, that the Lord had called him to work with Titus. Because Titus wasn’t there, he forsook the pleasant open door and set off on an obstacle-strewn pilgrimage to Macedonia.

If the Lord has something richer in mind, may we have the courage not to settle for second best! When I first moved to the Paris region, I attended a traditional local church. It was immensely unexciting, but I felt a certain loyalty to it, simply because it was close to where I lived. The time came when I knew I had to overcome my feelings and venture further afield. The Lord began immediately to do the most remarkable things. If I had allowed a false sense of duty to limit me, many wonderful things would never have happened.

For Reflection and Prayer

Immediately before we embark on a difficult calling, a door may open that appears to offer us an easier course of action. It pays to be careful. Is this door really of God? Since the same word is used in both Greek and Hebrew for ‘tempt,’ ‘test’ and ‘try,’ there are several possibilities. When the devil is tempting us, the Lord may be testing us, and our souls are being tried. May the Lord give us the courage to choose the highest way forward rather than settling for the ‘easiest.’

Discordant voices

Solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:14)

Many of the discordant voices that echo in our minds are nothing but the distorted projections of unresolved emotional conflicts, and an immature spirituality that is either over optimistic or underdeveloped. Our unredeemed nature predisposes us to hear what we want to hear – except, of course, perversely, when it inclines us to expect the precise opposite of what it most wants to hear!

Transactional Analysis goes some way to explaining this confusion when it speaks of the immature child voice within us clamouring for attention and approval. This child voice promises great things, but because it has no substance, it shies away from testing and inspection. The delusory promises of the child voice can lead us far astray. It wants all

sorts of good things – and preferably right now! It is so deceptive that it even tries to reassure us that the sins of the flesh are perfectly acceptable in the sight of a loving God.

At the opposite end of the spectrum we find the parent voice. Speaking through our distorted conscience, this voice counterfeits the Still Small Voice, and imposes stern demands. At first sight, it may appear formidably ‘righteous.’ In reality, it owes more to a misguided idea of what religion *ought* to be, rather than to the true freedom of the Holy Spirit.

Following this voice leads to a kill-joy legalism which easily degenerates into a particularly unpleasant form of abuse.

The parent voice establishes ‘control’ in the hands of people who, deep down, relish the chance to exercise it. It is the power that lies behind totalitarian regimes and cults. Who is most likely to take this spirit on board? Those who are not truly humble, who (quite possibly to compensate for inner inadequacies) are grasping for positions of power.

People who have been used by the Lord in the past are by no means exempt from mistaking the parent voice for the authentic Still Small Voice. Some who were at the forefront of previous moves of God prove unable or unwilling to adjust when the Lord moves on, even to the point where they end up opposing what the Lord is doing.

Almost all new moves of the Spirit contain a measure of excess before swinging back into balance – but those whose spirits have been hardened by the parent voice are too self-righteous, and too judgmental, to make allowances for this.¹⁴

It is precisely these patterns of control and domination that drive many lovers (or would-be lovers) of Jesus away from Church. Ultimately, the voice of control (the parent voice) represents the way of self and Satan.

The secret formula that Satanists are taught at the highest level of their initiation is, ‘Let my will be done in everything.’ This is the direct antithesis of all we long for when we pray, ‘Lord, let *Your* will be done in everything.’

Sensitivity to the Still Small Voice checks the demands of both the child voice and the parent voice, and sets us free from making unreasonable demands on our long-suffering partners, friends and pastors. When we look to others to fulfill needs that only the Lord can meet, we are as much off-course as when we expect God to do things for which we must accept responsibility.

When people have been taken captive by dominating and controlling ‘parent’ spirits, they may well need to be set free from the abuse they have suffered. Tragically, leaders in the Christian community are often amongst those most guilty of crushing others through their strong personalities and harsh words. This is especially the case if they have fallen into the trap of assuming that the means justifies the end in order to fulfill some vision they believe the Lord has given them.

If we have been making unfair requests on our friends, colleagues and (most especially) our spouses, there are steps we need to take to put matters right. We honour the Lord best by loving each other.

For Reflection and Prayer

Here is a very short prayer, but one that may require considerable thought and repentance:

*Lord, set me free from the scars of such abuse.
Show me too where I am guilty of controlling others.
Make me one who steers people closer to You
rather than making them dependent on me.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Avoiding the trammel net¹⁵

Listening is linked to opportunity and to action. God speaks not only because He has something to *say* but because He has something to *do*. You are probably as tired as I am, however, of getting caught in a trammel net as a result of leaping to respond to the expectations that other people place on us.

When a friend of mine moved to a new region, she was beset by invitations to do this and to attend the other. She felt the Lord impressing on her that she must not allow herself to become 'trammel' into doing things just because they sounded sensible, and because she was gifted in those areas.

The Lord Jesus must have walked straight past many people who were in genuine need. It is flattering to be asked to do things (especially if they pay well!) but wisdom lies in prayerfully assessing the invitations that come our way.

It is not that we are called to be prima donnas who refuse to lend a helping hand, but neither can we afford to pay too little attention to God's highest call on our lives.

Growth in any aspect of life depends on a right structuring of priorities. If we can identify the central goals in our life, we have far more chance of allowing them to direct and govern our lives. Otherwise we will be in danger of 'aiming at nothing and hitting it every time.'

Leaders especially need to take care to follow the Spirit's prompting, rather than allowing people's demands to dominate their schedule. So much depends on their stewardship of time, and on their sensitivity in not imposing unfair expectations on those for whom they have pastoral responsibility.

It is very important for us to choose carefully who we spend our time with. To help us understand the different character-types we rub up against, Gordon MacDonald identifies the following:¹⁶

VIPs (Very Important People). Wise ones, whose wisdom sharpens our lives, and to whom we look for accountability.

VTPs (Very Trainable People). These are people who are just waiting for someone to light the blue touch paper. We should invest heavily in their lives.

VNPs (Very Nice People). These people make up the majority of church congregations. They would not dream of doing wrong, but they may still be quite some way from the cutting edge.

VDPs (Very Draining People) complete the list. These people are such past masters at draining our time and energies that we can easily end up spending huge quantities of time *almost* helping these people, instead of taking proactive steps to befriend and disciple people we really can help, and be helped by.

The Lord does not want VDPs to impose their will on us and determine our schedule. This is not to write the VDPs off. By God's grace all and any can change, but we may need to re-examine our calendar in the light of this understanding. If VDPs are 'leeching' our life away, we may need to take more time out to pursue contact with the VIPs who keep watch over us.

At all costs we must not permit the incessant demands of the VDPs to prevent us from reaching out to the strategic VTPs. These people are usually so sensitive to our time pressures that they hold back from approaching us, in case they prove a burden to us. This is a great tragedy. They might have benefited greatly had they had the courage to pursue their desire to reach out to us. If they will not come to us, it is up to us to go out of our way to nurture and encourage them.

For Reflection and Prayer

The following exercise will help you to prioritize your lifestyle in the light of the Lord's leading.

Draw three columns on a sheet of paper. In the first, write down your broad purposes – the themes that God is stressing in your life. If you can, prioritize them in terms of the importance you believe they should have.

In the second column, write down the activities you are currently involved in, as well as some of the things you have been invited to do, or one day hope you may do. It will be quite a mish-mash, but jot down as many as you can think of. Prioritize these, too, in order of the importance you accord them.

Finally, in column three, list all the activities according to how much time you are devoting to each activity.

The results are easy to collate. Notice in particular things that take up a considerable portion of your time and energies but which are not amongst your stated priorities.

Does the way you are spending your time reflect these priorities? If not, what is stopping you from accessing your calling more fully? Is it health, work or family commitments? Or are you simply insufficiently determined to overcome the obstacles?

Checking our track record

‘I shall go back to Calormen,’ said Bree, his face mournful as only a horse’s can be. ‘What?’ said Aravis, ‘back to slavery?’ ‘Yes,’ said Bree. ‘Slavery is all I’m fit for. How can I ever show my face among the free Horses of Narnia? . . . I’ve lost everything.’ ‘My good horse,’ said the Hermit, ‘You’ve lost nothing but your self-conceit!’¹⁷

The fact that we hear the Lord accurately in one area of our life is immensely encouraging. For every word we hear correctly, however, there remains a 99% iceberg of insights that we are either not privy to, or are hearing less accurately about.

If we are wise, we will check our track record as carefully and as objectively as possible – and learn from our mistakes. As we ponder the things we believe the Lord has said to us, and analyze how accurate they have proved to be, we may see patterns emerging – areas where we hear with considerable confidence, and others where we are far less reliable.

Some of these mistakes may be rather more serious than the ‘once-off blips’ we would like to dismiss them as. They may be early-warning signs that we are vulnerable to deception in that particular area. Nothing but total honesty (and openness to correction) will help us to recognize where there is some root problem that needs dealing with.

Gun crews employ spotters to mark the fall of shots. They identify when the gunner is over the tope (OTT), short of the target, wide of the mark or bang on the bull’s eye. OTT listening happens when we confuse faith and presumption. The two run much closer to each other than most people realize, but lead to diametrically opposing outcomes. Most of us stray the wrong side from time to time – but those who are wise are quick to get back on track.

We go wide of the mark when we follow some wrong leading, or fail to embark on some proper course of action. For convenience, we will call this ‘error.’

When a Christian lies, steals or lives with his heart set on someone else’s wife or husband, how can the flow of God’s Spirit not be hindered? Ultimately, there is no such thing as secret sin. What one person does always has implications for the wider Body.

Heresy also takes us wide of the mark, but it differs from error in that it often starts by taking some *true* idea and pushing it too far. Many people persist in pursuing some wrong course of action to the bitter end, hoping against hope for some never-never breakthrough that will lead to a fairytale ending.

If the Lord never sanctioned the project, however, all their very considerable efforts will come to naught, and they will merely go further and further off course.

When people are heading wide of the mark, and their error remains unchecked, there is a real danger of sailing right off the spiritual chart and into the blue yonder. Others wake up to what is going on, and make a determined effort to get back on course.

When people become aware that what they had thought was discernment is actually something quite different, everything depends on their response.

Some are so shocked at discovering how wide of the mark they have strayed that they lose confidence altogether in seeking the Still Small Voice. For fear of getting it wrong again, they frequently retrench into a supposedly 'safer' form of the faith – and thereby greatly reduce the likelihood of ever taking part in any further Spirit-led adventures.

We are no wiser if we hold back at this stage than if we vow never to get into a car again after an accident. It makes it all but inevitable that we will fall short of targets that, had we been willing to persevere, the Lord would have helped us to achieve.

Where pride holds sway, and denial cuts in, the whole process logjams. Lack of humility can jeopardize everything. Great is the rejoicing in Heaven, however, when error is acknowledged, and sin confessed. Everything is once again possible.

May we be sensitive to the warnings the Holy Spirit sends us! Most often, these will come through His Word and His people.

No wonder David prayed in Psalm 141:5, 'Let a righteous man strike me – it is a kindness; let him rebuke me – it is oil on my head My head will not refuse it.' Not every rebuke will be justified, but it may contain grains of truth that we need to face.

If we find even helpful criticism hard to accept, is this because we are too proud to admit our mistakes? Or is it because we have such a low opinion of ourselves that we regard any criticism as a threat?

Humility is good, but self-belittling is not. Since the Lord is not writing us out of the script of life, neither must we. Whatever mistakes we have made, the Lord can always pick us up one more time than we can get it wrong!

For Reflection and Prayer

*Lord, please show me when I am over the top,
short of the target, or wide of the mark.
Where I have got things wrong,
may I not be too proud
or too stubborn
to retrace my steps.
For if I hang on grimly when I am mistaken,
I will not only end up disillusioned myself
but I will spread these seeds of error to others.
So, Lord, I give You my many mistakes.
Help me to learn from them,
and to recognise when I am in danger of repeating them.
May Your grace redeem what I cannot undo,
and turn all things around for good.
I give You especially the matter of . . .*

Putting things right

‘This time he found he could look straight into the Lion’s eyes. He had forgotten his troubles and felt absolutely content.’ (C.S. Lewis)¹⁸

Someone pointed out a place to me last year in the Faroe Islands that has apparently remained resistant to the fullness of the Holy Spirit. It happened as the result of a group of over zealous believers paying a visit fifty years ago, claiming that they could walk on water between two islands. Their waterlogged feet not only made a nonsense of their boast, but created a spiritually blockage that has yet to be fully overcome.

Without falling into the pits of condemnation, we need to face the fact that whenever we claim that the Lord has spoken, when reality He has done nothing of the sort, we risk setting up a stumbling block that others may trip over.

At the same time, John and Paula Sandford remind us in *The Elijah Task* that none of us graduate in the school of listening with our pride intact. God allows even those who are seemingly very mature to fall over from time to time, if only to keep them from taking undue pride in their giftings or achievements. If our hearing were perfect, we would quickly become unbearably complacent. Others would undoubtedly start looking to us to provide instant oracles, instead of seeking the Lord for themselves.

We must humble ourselves, therefore, admit our mistakes, and, if at all possible, do our best to put matters right. It is the *enemy* who wants us to remain crushed by the memory of the times when we have got things wrong, and it is *perfectionists* who refuse to allow themselves (or others) to make any mistakes.

Perfectionism is a faulty model because it makes us strive to be or to achieve something that God never intended for us. To have high standards is entirely praiseworthy, but

perfectionism is doomed to futility – the devil keeps advancing the ‘finishing tape’ a few meters ahead of our efforts to reach it.

Trying to live up to such misguided conceptions is like saying we want to run a four-minute mile in four kilograms! It means we are using all the wrong measuring rods. We risk being forever at the mercy of endless compulsiveness until we recognize it as an enemy tactic, and the very opposite of grace.

May the Lord help us to see how and why such obsessiveness developed in our lives. May we not ‘worship in graveyards’ by looking to find inappropriate fulfillment with the wrong people and the wrong pursuits. May He recalibrate our spirits, too, away from the pitfalls of perfectionism so that we can be more open to the leadings of His Spirit.

For Reflection and Prayer

If I cherish iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not listen to me . . . Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. (Psalm 66:18, James 5:16)

If we find that we cannot rise above these tendencies and strongholds, we almost certainly need the help of someone who is less emotionally involved than we are. To quote my paraphrase of a well known advertisement: ‘The prayers of others can reach the parts our own cannot!’ The question is, will you let them close enough to help?

When God fulfills His promise by another route

Their faces had a new expression . . . All the sharpness and cunning and quarrelsomeness . . . seemed to have been washed away, and the courage and kindness which he had always had were easier to see. Perhaps it was talking with Aslan that had done it.¹⁹

Post-modernist orthodoxy would insist that chance and our own resourcefulness determine our destinies. May no hint of such attitudes stain our thinking! There is nothing random about the way God leads us. Meaning and purpose undergird every part of His dealings with us.

Shortly after I became a Christian, I made the conscious decision that I would do my best to consult the Lord before plunging in and doing my own thing. There have been times when I have got things upside down, and ended up way off the mark. On other occasions, God has clearly honoured the fact that I was trying to listen, and has made sure that when it really mattered, I heard clearly.

Returning to the ‘leak of disappointment’ that we looked at earlier, we have watched quite a few of our friends over the years apply unsuccessfully for the ordained ministry. Because each one felt had convinced that they had received a call from the Lord – and had done their best to test it – they often felt extremely confused when it didn’t worked out as they had hoped. If they didn’t openly blame God, the turmoil had to go

somewhere. Round and round the questions pound. Had they been mistaken all along? Did the powers-that-be make the wrong decision in turning them down? Or, worst thought of all, were they, perhaps, simply not up to scratch themselves?

Each situation is unique, and the pain is too intense anyway to allow for glib answers. If there has been presumption, may we recognize it and walk away from it. But where the call is genuine, then God can still fulfill what He has promised, even if He does so by an entirely different route from the one we originally envisaged.

When Israel escaped from Egypt, the Lord did not lead them along the Inter-State to the Promised Land for the simple reason that that way led straight through Philistine country. He knew His people were not yet ready to face a full-scale war, and that they would be tempted to flee back to Egypt at the first sign of conflict. He therefore led them by the longer desert road, toward the Red Sea.²⁰

Can you recognize times when the Lord has allowed ‘detours’ in your life? When you head from A to B via C, D, E (and even Z as it sometimes feels!). It takes faith then to believe that you will ever reach your destination. To the Lord, however, the journey is every bit as important as the outcome.

We can think of many occasions when we have gone all out for some initiative. We may even have gone public on it, only for it to fall into the ground and flounder. Where this has been a ‘dummy run,’ the real thing that God had in mind for us usually turns out to be not far behind.

These are the times when the verse we quoted earlier comes sharply into focus: ‘*What you sow does not come to life until it dies.*’ We, like the seed, must *often* die to our own hopes and expectations before the Lord can cause them to multiply exponentially.²¹

The Lord knows exactly where He is taking us – and He wants all the glory to go to Him. That is one of the main reasons why He allows these dummy runs. We find them painful and confusing, not least because they often *feel* like the real thing at the time. Beyond the present valley lie higher mountain-tops for those with the courage and the vision to persevere.

For Reflection and Prayer

There is hope for a tree. If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail. Its roots may grow old in the ground, and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant. (Job 14:7-9)

Can you see how seeds that have fallen into the ground in your life have surfaced again another way? When God has fulfilled His original promises to you despite the setbacks and delays?

*Lord, You love to lead and speak to us!
You are so much greater than our ability to get things wrong.*

*Even out of the soil of our failures
You weave new beginnings
and find fresh ways to accomplish Your purposes.
Let us never become despondent or disillusioned,
for You ordain strength
from the depths of our brokenness,
and cause us to grow in discernment
and bear consistent fruit for You,
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

References

¹ Henri Nouwen *The Genesee Diary* (Darton Longman & Todd Ltd) p.108

² This is something we shall be exploring in much more detail in the sequel, *Led by the Spirit*

³ Adrian Davies *The Quakers in English Society 1655-1725* (Oxford) p.6

⁴ John 16:33

⁵ As it turned out, Anna did not look after Dominic when she moved to Shetland a few months later. Nevertheless, God used her call to Shetland as the first of many signs to confirm our own.

⁶ You can share in the incredible beauty of Shetland by visiting our web site www.ruachministries.org and visiting *PhotoGalleries: The Shetland Collection, Surtout la Lumière* and *Shetland in Winter*.

⁷ Proverbs 24:6

⁸ Acts 20:22-23; 21:4. A helpful maxim to remember to help us discern the Lord's voice amidst the clamour that assails us: 'The Shepherd *leads*, but the butcher *drives*.'

⁹ C.S Lewis *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Harper Collins) pp. 178-9

¹⁰ Matthew 2:19-23. The Lord had previously warned the wise men in a dream not to return to King Herod. (Matthew 2:12)

¹¹ Bob Mumford *Take another Look at Guidance* (Lifechangers). I mention this important principle with some diffidence, because we have certainly known occasions when an 'isolated' call has come by one strand alone. The principle remains valid, however, especially when it comes to making major changes, as opposed to obeying a simple 'nudge,' for which we should not expect multiple confirmation.

¹² Acts 16:8-10 I can think of people who have passed over 'golden' opportunities in order to honour a previous call that God has placed on their lives, or which they feel has a higher priority. God certainly does call us to 'give up' things from time to time, as well as to receive – but He always finds ways to give back to us when we do so.

¹³ Paul Tillich *Systematic Theology* (University of Chicago Press) and *The Courage to be* (Yale University Press)

¹⁴ All too commonly, these tendencies manifest as 'Jezebel' spirits. See John Paul Jackson's important book *Unmasking the Jezebel Spirit* (Kingsway)

¹⁵ This three-layered net forms a pocket that traps the fish as they attempt to swim out.

¹⁶ Gordon MacDonald *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion* (Highland).

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis *The Horse and His Boy* (Harper Collins) pp. 164-5

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis *The Magician's Nephew* (Harper Collins) p.197

¹⁹ C.S. Lewis *The Magician's Nephew* (Harper Collins) p.197

²⁰ Exodus 13:17

²¹ 1 Cor. 15:36 Jesus teaches the same principle in John 12:24.