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Discernment. The gift of distinguishing God's work and guidance within the human heart from other motivations is called discernment. Quakers believe that all people receive a measure of this fallible, intuitive gift, and trust to receive more with the faithful exercise of what has been given.

Spiritual discernment is refined in prayer and faithful discipleship. With experience, an individual can become increasingly sensitive to the still, small voice rising within as he or she seeks to give over personal agendas, self-centeredness, and willfulness. Quaker vocabulary underscores discernment's interior, experiential nature: for example, coming under the weight of a leading, felling at peace with an outcome.

Quakers emphasize the subtle, demanding work of discerning Love and Truth, prompting each heart in the midst of people, situations, and undertakings. Recognizing human fallibility in discernment, Friends rely on a few tests of authenticity. The most widespread test seen in early Quaker journals, and still used today, is whether the source and probable outcome manifest the fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22-26, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control." Of equal weight is the injunction to "Choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). Characteristic queries are: "Is there life in it?" "Does it come from and lead to love?" "Are Friends at peace with this?"

Early Friends also articulated another test, taking up the cross. Living under the cross was consonant with the authentic striving to be free of egocentricity and willfulness. These Friends also often exhorted meetings to be united and to love one another as Jesus commanded. Thus unity of the meeting was another sign used in discernment of Truth, as was consistency with the Bible when read "in the Spirit."

For many Friends today, biblical exegesis and the message and actions of Jesus also provide numerous tests, along with an inward sense of peace. Consistency with the Quaker testimonies is another often used test. Such comparisons cannot ignore the traditional question, "Is this guidance lovingly given to these particular person, group, or meeting for this particular time?" The question focuses on dedication to life conformed to the Spirit, rather than to laws.

Spiritual discernment is part of all aspects of Quaker faith and practice. Personal prayer opens the heart to God's guidance. A person discerns whether impulses to speak in unprogrammed meeting for worship or to act in the world derive from the Holy Spirit rather than from human sources. Business meetings are exercises in corporate discernment of God's guidance for the meeting as a whole. The clerk is the servant of the meeting, articulating the meeting's discernment of God's guidance as a minute.

In the past, the progression from individual to clearness committee, monthly meeting, quarterly meeting and yearly meeting was viewed as the Quaker hierarchy of authority. By the late 20th century, however, in some places, this model had been replaced by an image of concentric circles drawing upon an ever wider pool of experience as the process reaches even beyond yearly meetings to wider gatherings of Friends. Discernment gathers spiritual authority as wider circles of Friends unite in it.

— Patricia Loring