

LEARN TO DISCERN

It is possible that the title above this editorial may sound familiar to some of our readers. It is in fact the title of a book written by Robert G. DeMoss, Jr. (a) He wrote this book to help us to "learn to discern." The word "discern" means: 1) "to separate (a thing) mentally from another or others; recognize as separate or different." 2) "To perceive or recognize; make out clearly." It is reasonable to assume that a book which was written with the specific purpose of helping us to develop an aptitude for discernment, or the natural ability to "perceive or recognize; make out clearly" those things that need to be discerned, is a book that should be of some interest to us. "Learn to discern" is an intriguing title. Learning to be more discerning is a noble and worthwhile objective. So how can we possibly go wrong with a book like "Learn to Discern"? Yet, also in the books we choose and peruse, or the literature we read and heed, there is a distinct need for discernment. We must truly "learn to discern" when we select our reading material.

In a recent article Rev. E. Kampen wrote that "in our churches we are extremely particular about whom we will admit to the pulpit to preach God's Word. This is understandable for from the pulpit we want to hear the Word of God faithfully explained." He further states that "we should realize that whenever we open a book we in essence put ourselves under the author's pulpit as we allow him to explain part of God's Word to us" Rev Kampen is of course speaking here especially about "religious" literature. He recommends that we "take care then to check the dust jacket (of the book, RD) of the man under whose pulpit you are about to place yourself. Then you know a little about the direction of your 'preacher.' And when in your background check you find that the author stands outside the Reformed camp, read critically. Ask questions in the light of your Reformed confession of Scripture."(b) Good advice indeed!

However, the recommendation that we "take care to check the dust jacket" of the book was impossible to implement. My "limited" edition of "Learn to Discern" doesn't have a dust jacket. Yet, once we take a closer look at this book it is obvious that we are indeed placing ourselves under the pulpit of an author "outside the Reformed camp" and out of tune with our Reformed line of thinking. The book "Learn to Discern" by Robert G. DeMoss came to our attention when we were in the midst of our discussion or debate about "Music for the Christian." DeMoss was frequently quoted by those who sought support for their position in favour of so called "contemporary Christian music" (CCM), and/or "Christian" rock, or Pop rock. When we read with discernment how DeMoss treats this particular subject, then we definitely need to ask whether it is even wise to place ourselves under this author's pulpit, in order to "learn to discern." We need to question whether DeMoss actually practices what he preaches.

DeMoss wants us to know that "even though I have deep convictions about the positive role of contemporary Christian music, I sincerely invited the Lord's guidance to show me if my beliefs on the subject were off base... Was it possible that I was wrong all these years?... I was willing to consider that they (others, RD) may just be right. But were they? The answer came the next morning while I was shaving. The window in my bathroom was open. As I shaved, I heard a most unusual sound - the sound of several birds exchanging their morning song in my backyard. And then it struck me - didn't these poor birds (whippoorwills, to be exact) realize that the special melody God placed in their little bodies violated the principles of appropriate music structure as defined by the booklet I just read? I had to smile with joy that the Creator isn't limited to our particular taste in music." (p.124)

On the basis of his (DeMoss') assumption that the special melody of the whippoorwills "violated the principals of appropriate music structure" he somehow concludes that "God isn't limited to our particular taste in music." Therefore the matter of so called "contemporary Christian music" and "Christian" rock has been once and for all settled. So CCM is OK, and "Christian" rock is not a problem! And to ensure that there can be no doubt about the correctness of his rather questionable assumptions and conclusions, we are reminded that he "sincerely invited the Lord's guidance" to show him if his beliefs on the subject were off base." The Lord showed him through the episode with the whippoorwills that he was right. Who then would dare to argue with DeMoss' stated position? (c)

DeMoss is of the opinion that since God can use people as evil as we were before we knew Him, before we were redeemed, God can use something as bankrupt as rock music and use it to bring praise to His name. (p.127) Quoting from an article in Reformed Perspective in which similar sentiments are expressed: "It's all God's music; and it's up to us to use what he has given us to glorify His holy name." That, according to the author of that particular article, also includes "jazz, swing, be-bop, motown, rock, pop, funk, rap, and who knows what's to come." (d) In other words: It's not what you use, but how you use it. This faulty line of reasoning ignores the fact that "what we use" (what is available to us) is not exempt from the consequences of man's fall into sin, and that therefore "how we use it" may not even be a consideration. This erroneous kind of thinking also fails to deal with the matter of suitability or appropriateness. Not everything that is available and also usable is by that very fact suitable and appropriate for every conceivable situation or occasion. DeMoss' lamentable lack of discernment in these matters leads him to make some more rather questionable observations and conclusions.

In his attempt at helping his readers to "learn to discern" DeMoss tackles the subject of "dancing in the Spirit." He uses Psalms 149 and 150 as examples of encouragement for the believer "to do three things as he praises the Lord: shout, make a joyful noise, and, yes, dance." He states that "objectively speaking, rock music offers a bountiful supply of possibilities for shouting, noise, and dancing. To dance implies the use of rhythm - a beat, in other words. To make noise requires fullness of sound and plenty of volume. As for shouting, well, that's a tough requirement to satisfy in most church environments these days." About dancing he confesses that "I've never been a good dancer..., but don't let me stand in the way of a child who wants to dance as King David danced - as unto the Lord.

All this is presented to us in the context of DeMoss' endeavor to teach us to "test the spirits" and to help us to "become a discerning person." And he assures us that "the process of learning to discern which we've studied through this book, when applied to Christian entertainment, empowers us to confidently make the best choices." At the same time he denounces those who disagree with him for their "grave academic errors" and "extremely dangerous and faulty assumptions."

DeMoss wrote his book "for those readers who have a genuine thirst for biblical direction on the question of alternative Christian musical forms." He correctly states that "we must test the spirits," and "we must be a discerning person." He indeed writes many things that we can readily endorse and agree with. Yet, when we critically examine DeMoss' aforementioned attempts at helping us to "learn to discern," we must conclude that the very attribute of discernment which he so fervently espouses, is sadly lacking in what he writes. The aim of DeMoss' book is to help us with "the process of learning to discern." Unfortunately this process, and its ultimate goal, an aptitude for spiritual discernment, has remained for the author and also his avid readers more of an aspiration than a reality.

DeMoss is a typical example of the blind leading the blind. And the fact that many who lay claim to being Reformed also blindly place themselves under this author's pulpit indicates that we are also in need of some spiritual discernment. We definitely need to "learn to discern." John F. MacArthur, in his book "Reckless Faith," writes that "one more factor in the abysmal lack of discernment today is a growing deterioration of the overall level of spiritual maturity in today's church. As knowledge of God's truth ebbs, people follow more popular views, seeking feelings and experiences... They grope for easy and instant solutions... Spiritual ignorance and biblical illiteracy are commonplace... That kind of spiritual shallowness is a direct result of shallow teaching... Churches are therefore filled with baby Christians - people who are spiritual infants." (e) MacArthur calls this phenomenon "arrested infancy." He writes: "Arrested infancy means that people do not discern. Just as a baby crawls along the floor, putting anything it finds in its mouth, spiritual babies don't know what is good for them and what isn't. Immaturity and lack of discernment go together; they are virtually the same thing."

MacArthur points out that the apostle Paul also had to address "the tendency to stall in a state of immaturity" (arrested infancy). Paul repeatedly appealed to Christians to grow up spiritually (Ephesians 4: 14-15)... "We might say accurately that the process of spiritual growth is a process of training for discernment. (Hebrews 5: 12-6:1) Those who 'because of practice have their senses trained to discern' are the wise, the understanding, people who thrive on the solid food of the Word of God... Discernment results from a carefully disciplined mind. Discernment will come only as we train our minds to be understanding in the truth of God's Word and learn to apply that truth skillfully to our

lives." (e). Paul sums up this process in 1 Thess. 5:21-22: "But test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil." Such are the requirements of a discerning mind.

"Discernment is not a matter of feelings, nor is it a mystical gift. We cannot gain discernment overnight, or through mystical experience... The path to discernment is the way of spiritual maturity. And the only means to spiritual maturity is the mastery of the Word of God." (e) May the Lord grant that we willingly place ourselves under the pulpit of the Author of the Book of Books, the Word of God. "Teach me good discernment (judgment) and knowledge for I believe in Thy commandments." (Ps.119: 66) May the Lord give us the guidance of His Spirit so that we may truly "learn to discern." "The wise of heart is called a man of discernment..." (Proverbs 16:21).

Ron Dykstra

- a) Learn to Discern, Robert G. DeMoss, Jr.
- b) Of Pulpits and Dust Jackets, Rev. E. Kampen, Information, Sept. 20/97.
- c) Many composers have been intrigued by the songs of birds, and have written musical compositions by skillfully making use of the "principals of appropriate music structure" to imitate the songs of the birds. Think for example of G.F. Handel's well-known Allegro: "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale" from the organ concerto No 13 in F major.
- d) Hot Pink Refrigerators, Brad Davis, Reformed Perspective, April /94.
- e) Reckless Faith- When The Church Loses Its Will To Discern, John F. MacArthur.

What about the Lord's Supper?

All kinds of questions are often asked about the Lord's Supper. What does it actually mean? Why do we celebrate it? Can visitors come, or is it some kind of club members only affair? What are we actually doing there?

1) I hope in this short comment to outline some of the basic teachings of Scripture with respect to the Lord's Supper, especially as the apostle Paul shows them to us in his first letter to the Corinthians. This letter addresses the matter of the Lord's Supper time and again in various different contexts. Why? Apparently the church at Corinth did not properly understand what the Supper was really all about (cf. I Cor.11:17-22). The church at Corinth had many other problems which Paul also addresses (e.g. prostitution, toleration of incest, participation at idol feasts, etc.), but it is interesting to see that the apostle chose at many points to relate his teaching on these other matters to the Supper of our Lord. That is why references to the Supper are scattered throughout the letter. By taking a tour through these references I hope we shall be able to put together a Scriptural picture of the meaning and use of this sacrament. It would be advisable to read through each passage of Scripture as we come to it.

The first place Paul introduces the Supper in I Corinthians is in chapter 5. In this chapter the apostle reprimands the congregation for tolerating a case of incest in their midst (v.1). They have not mourned this terrible sin, nor disciplined the man who had committed it. The apostle Paul instructs the congregation that such a person must be cast out of the congregation, and handed over to Satan (v.5). Tough words! But it was a very serious matter (as is any unconfessed sin before God! cf. Ps.32:1-5). This disciplinary action was to be officially declared during their worship service (v.4). Note that this disciplinary procedure was not only to be done for the sake of the congregation, but also for the person concerned, that he might realize his sin, repent, and be saved (v.5b). That this eventually happened, we learn from II Cor.2:-11. There the man concerned is restored to fellowship with the body of Christ, having become sorrowful for his sin before God.

What concerns us here in all this, however, is what Paul says in I Cor.5:6ff. Paul is outlining some of the implications of casting this person out of the congregation. In vs 6-8 he brings up the image of the Passover; that famous Old Testament feast celebrating Israel's deliverance out of Egypt when the destroying angel went around killing all the first born children (Ex.12). Only Israel was spared, and that only because of the blood of lambs smeared upon their doorposts. As part of the celebration of the Passover, the Israelites were not to eat any leavened bread. Paul uses this image of unleavened bread to suggest that just as the Israelites clean out the leaven from the bread when they

celebrate Passover, so also the church of Jesus Christ should clean out unrepentant sinners from their midst when they "celebrate the feast" (v.8).

Wait a minute. Does the Christian church celebrate Passover? Yes it does! But not with the blood of a lamb, rather, with the blood of Christ! Christ Jesus is our Passover lamb. We "celebrate the feast" every time we celebrate Lord's Supper! That is our Passover meal! Remember that the Lord Jesus Christ instituted the Lord's Supper at the celebration of the Jewish Passover. The Gospels relate how Jesus instructed his disciples to remember this last meal with their Lord. Why? Primarily as a celebration of his death. Jesus himself made this connection. Note how in Matt.26:2 he connects the coming Passover with his coming crucifixion. Then at the Passover meal itself he institutes the supper by saying "this is my blood of the covenant, which is to be shed on behalf of many for forgiveness of sins" (Matt.2:28). You see the apostle Paul was quite correct when he referred in his letter to the Corinthians celebrating the (Christian) Passover.

What do we learn from this passage?

- i) In the first place, that the Lord's Supper is a celebration and remembrance of the death of Jesus Christ for our sins.
- ii) In the second place, that the congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ must be careful to exclude anybody who is living in unconfessed sin, from the table. The table is NOT open! The congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ has the duty to remove all the old leaven from the celebration, that is, the leaven of unconfessed sin. No member of the congregation may eat or drink of the Supper if he has not confessed his sin. Discipline MUST be exercised! Wickedness cannot be tolerated at the Supper.
- iii) In the third place, notice too, that it is not up to someone's conscience whether he goes to the Supper or not. The man who had committed incest obviously still thought it was quite all right to go. But the apostle says that he must actually be REMOVED! That means that people in the church have to make a judgment. It is interesting to note that Paul continues in chapter 6 by speaking about this matter of making judgments in church. He argues that the church should be able to appoint wise men as judges among themselves, rather than having to go to a secular court (vs.5-6)! The church does this of course by appointing elders through whom the Lord governs his church. That is why it is the (Biblical) practice in Reformed churches that the elders oversee who may and who may not attend Lord's Supper. It is not a free for all.

2) The apostle returns to the Lord's Supper in chapter 10:15-22, this time in the context of dealing with the matter of eating food sacrificed to idols. May a Christian eat food that has been dedicated to heathen gods? Nearly all meat sold in Corinth at the time had been so dedicated!

Were Christians then to be vegetarians? Or could they eat such meat, even if they were invited to a feast where the meat was eaten in honour of various heathen gods? This was a matter that had caused quite a bit of confusion in Corinth, and so Paul addresses it at length, beginning in chapter 8. In chapter 10 however he again relates the matter to the Lord's Supper. This is helpful for us, for at the same time we learn some more about the character of the Supper itself.

i) In the first place, we learn that the wine which we drink is symbolic of the blood of Christ, and likewise the bread is symbolic of Christ's body. When we eat and drink the bread and wine, we share in the body and blood of Christ. Paul goes on to liken the Lord's Supper to a sacrificial meal, like those common in the Old Testament (i.e. at peace offerings, cf. Passover). A lamb would be sacrificed on the altar and then portions of the meat would be given out to be eaten. Those that ate took part in the benefits of the sacrifice, i.e. they received the forgiveness of sins symbolized by the sacrifice. Paul uses this point to show why taking part in idol feasts was wrong. But we learn at the same time that the Lord's Supper is like this too. When we eat and drink at the Lord's Supper we testify to the fact that we are receiving the benefits of Christ's death on the cross for our sins. Incidentally that is why it is so important to make sure that no one is present who has not believed in Jesus Christ, nor confessed all his sins to God.

ii) But there is one other important point that the apostle makes here. In v.17 he argues that the Lord's Supper also symbolizes the unity of the body of the congregation. The one loaf of bread at the Supper symbolizes the unity of the one body of Christ which is eating it. Paul picks up this image of the congregation as a body again in chapter 12:12ff. He is by the way referring to the Corinthian congregation as the "body of Christ" cf. 12:27. It is important to note that the image of the "body of Christ" MOST (if not all) the time refers to a local congregation in Scripture. Each local church is a complete body of Christ, a complete church, with its own ruling session of elders. We learn here from v.16 that the Lord's Supper symbolizes the unity that the members of a particular local church (the body) have in their Lord and Saviour. That is then why EACH local church has its own celebration of the sacrament. We do not all gather together once a year as churches to celebrate Lord's Supper in one huge gathering, as the Jews used to gather for the

Passover. No. Our Lord has instituted that the Lord's Supper be celebrated as the symbol of unity for each individual church. Our celebration of the sacrament then, is in the first place a celebration for our own church, our body of Christ. This body consists of those who have committed themselves to the Lord AND committed themselves to the Lord's church as it is instituted in a local place, under the supervision of the Lord's servants, the elders. That is the body. Thus the celebration of the Lord's Supper can NEVER be divorced from a local church setting. It is always the celebration of the Supper of a particular church. That is why even the Westminster Confession of Faith states that the Supper is to be given "to none who are not then present in the congregation" (WCF 29:3).

What does that imply for visitors? Well, it does not necessarily mean that no visitors may ever be admitted. But it does mean that the Supper is in the first place not really celebrated for their sake. It is celebrated for the sake of the congregation itself. Now we saw from chapter 5 that Paul demanded that each congregation judge and oversee who goes to the Lord's Supper. The elders of a particular congregation are of course well able to do that with respect to their own members (for whom the Supper is served). They should know the flock which they shepherd, and will therefore be able to know who should take part and who should not. It is more difficult for them when they must deal with visitors. Remember that they are responsible to God for overseeing the celebration. That is why traditionally in Reformed circles the elders only admitted those visitors who came from other sister churches and provided an attestation, i.e. proof that they were members of another true church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that they were not under discipline. The elders could then in good conscience admit such people to their church's celebration of the sacrament. If people came without such an attestation, and there were no witnesses to their church faithfulness (cf. II Cor.13:1), or if they came from some church of which the elders had no knowledge, they could not take part. **THIS WAS NOT TO JUDGE THE HEARTS OF THE VISITORS CONCERNED.** But it was a frank confession that, i) the celebration of the Supper was in the first place for that particular congregation, and ii) that the elders could not be expected to take responsibility for those people whom they did not know, nor knew of their churches. If they admitted such visitors, they would only be making a mockery of the oversight that God had charged them with (cf. Acts 20:28ff).

3) In chapter 11:17-34 Paul takes up the issue of the Lord's Supper for its own sake, to correct the abuses taking place in Corinth. The Corinthians were apparently in the habit of turning it into a drunken party! Paul certainly reprimands them for this! In doing so he goes over the words of institution of our Lord, showing that the meaning of the Supper is rooted in Christ's death, as we have seen. He tells the Corinthians that they need to examine their own hearts before they eat the Supper. They have been sinning against it. This is serious. In fact it is so serious that God has punished some of them with sickness and even death (v.30)! Although the apostle does not again bring up the matter of oversight over who attends the Supper here, yet we see why it is so important. When elders bar someone from taking part (for example the man who committed incest), then they are sparing him from the possible disastrous consequences that result when it is taken improperly. Those who eat and drink unworthily are guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord (v.27). It is a serious business, and we ourselves should learn never to take the Supper lightly.

In summary we should see that the celebration of the Lord's Supper is a very important and serious part of the worship of each particular church of Christ. It is not something to be taken lightly. God does not take it lightly. He is willing even to kill those who abuse it. We must therefore approach this subject with due reverence and caution, and seek to examine even ourselves before we attend, to see that we too really understand and confess from the heart that Jesus has died once for all, for all of our sins.

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CHURCH NEWS

Delegated to Regional Synod - Lynden, Dec 1997: Elders VanAssen(Carmen), T. Termeer, T. Venendaal, and H. Baker; Ministers: Revs. Slomp, Tiggelaar, Aasman and Eikelboom.