

## INTRODUCTION

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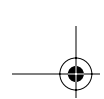
Every Christian should be able to answer two questions. First, what do you think Jesus is saying to you at this point in your life, in the context of the challenges and opportunities you are facing? Second (and just as critical), what indicators give you some measure of confidence that it is indeed Jesus speaking to you rather than someone or something else? This book addresses these questions through an examination of the inner witness of the Spirit, with the conviction that the Spirit is present to each person and that each of us has the capacity to respond intentionally to this witness.

The inner witness has definition. It is not so imprecise that it is reduced to ill-defined impulses about which we can only make vague references. Rather, the Christian tradition on this subject gives us something definite about which we can speak and to which we can hold one another accountable. We do not need to be silent when others say that Jesus told them something. We can discuss their experience in a manner that is both wise and discerning. By time-proven standards of authentication, we can test whether their experience is truly of the Spirit of Christ.

This is a book, then, about discernment. We need to take as a given the possibility of a false witness that may be confused with the voice of Jesus. Thus we must be discerning.

The word *discernment* implies (at least in English) three different con-





cepts simultaneously. First, it includes the idea of *insight*, which speaks of the capacity to see something clearly—the acumen to recognize that which is. Second, discernment includes the idea of *discretion*, the capacity to distinguish between good and evil as well as between the good and the better. A wine taster, for example, has the particular capacity to distinguish between good wine and even better wine. And third, discernment includes the idea of *judgment*. To be a discerning person is to be a wise woman or man capable of making a good assessment, a judgment that is informed by knowledge and understanding. Through the regular practice of discernment, a person grows in wisdom—a wisdom evident in the quality of one’s choices.

The ability to discern the voice of Jesus is a critical spiritual skill, basic to our capacity to make vocational and moral choices. What we long for are the insight, discretion and judgment that would enable us to respond with integrity in the face of emotional turmoil and perplexing alternatives. As we yearn to know the voice of Jesus at the critical moments of our lives, we have a wonderful Christian heritage that can inform and guide this longing and help us make sense of the voices in our heads. We can learn how to discern, how to listen for the voice of Jesus and how to speak of this voice within the community of faith.

God speaks to his people in various ways; this book addresses one aspect of this speaking: the inner witness. The inner witness is known only when we recognize each way in which God speaks to us, whether it be through Scripture, through a prophetic word that comes within the community of faith or through the structures of the living church. But my concern in this volume is to consider how we recognize the voice of Jesus through the inner witness of his Spirit to our hearts.

