

Small Group Guide

Christian Discernment: The Four Guardrails

Overview

This sermon explored how believers — especially those in charismatic and Pentecostal traditions — can develop a practical framework for discerning whether something is genuinely from the Lord. The pastor introduced the concept of the "alternate trinity" (needs, wants, and desires) and four guardrails for Christian discernment: Scripture, Tradition, Church History, and Community.

Key Takeaways

1. God Always Protects Free Will God never removes a person's ability to think, question, or choose. Genuine spiritual authority invites rather than demands. Any person or teaching that tries to bypass your ability to reason and question should be approached with caution.

2. The Alternate Trinity Every person is shaped by needs, wants, and desires. These are not inherently sinful — God placed them in us. However, they must be brought into alignment with the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) rather than allowed to drive our decisions independently.

3. The Four Guardrails of Christian Discernment

- **Scripture** — Does it align with the Word of God, or at minimum, not contradict it?
- **Tradition** — Does it connect us to the historical practices of sincere faith and produce fruit?
- **Church History** — Has something similar been recorded in 2,000 years of Christian history?
- **Community** — Does the local body bear witness to it, and does it build accountability rooted in love?

4. Discernment Takes Time Fruit is not always immediate. John Wesley's ministry produced fruit that shaped revivals for generations. We should not expect instant confirmation on everything.

5. Witness of the Spirit is Subjective — and That is Why the Guardrails Matter

The internal witness of the Spirit can be influenced by our physical and emotional state. That is precisely why Scripture, tradition, church history, and community serve as checks on purely subjective experience.

Discussion Questions

Opening

- Have you ever had a moment where something felt "off" spiritually — what the pastor called a "wacky meter" going off? Without naming anyone, what was that experience like for you?

Exploring the Alternate Trinity

- The pastor described needs, wants, and desires as an "alternate trinity" — not unholy in themselves, but potentially misaligned with God's purposes. Can you think of a time when one of your needs, wants, or desires was leading you in a direction that was out of alignment with what God was calling you to?
- Paul is described as someone who spent decades surrendering his alternate trinity to the Holy Trinity. What do you think that process looked like for him? What does that process look like for you personally?
- The pastor said that God the Father meets our needs, the Son sanctifies our wants, and the Holy Spirit empowers our desires. How does this framework change the way you think about bringing your personal struggles to God?

Exploring Free Will and Invitation

- The pastor emphasized that Jesus always invited rather than demanded obedience, and that protecting free will is an expression of God's love. How does this shape the way you think about spiritual authority in your life — whether a pastor, mentor, or a prophetic word?
- Have you ever been in a situation where someone used spiritual language in a way that pressured rather than invited? How did you respond, and what did you learn from it?

Exploring the Four Guardrails

- **Scripture:** The pastor noted that two people can read the same Scripture and arrive at different interpretations — pointing to John Wesley and George Whitefield as examples. How do you personally navigate that reality when you are trying to discern truth?

- **Tradition:** What role has the tradition of your family's faith, your church background, or a spiritual mentor played in shaping how you hear from God? Has tradition ever been a guardrail that protected you from something harmful?
- **Church History:** The pastor pointed out that phenomena like holy laughter and people falling in the Spirit are not new — they appear throughout church history. Does knowing that something has historical precedent change how you evaluate it? Why or why not?
- **Community:** The pastor described Trinity Church as a "research and development church" — a place where things are tried, some work, some do not, but people are never thrown away. How does your relationship with your local church community function as a guardrail in your own discernment process?

Personal Reflection

- Of the four guardrails — Scripture, tradition, church history, and community — which one do you rely on most naturally? Which one do you tend to neglect? What would it look like to develop that area?
 - The pastor said, "If anyone ever tells you just believe, run." What is the difference between the kind of faith that simply trusts God and the kind of blind compliance that this warning is addressing?
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Practical Applications

This Week, Try One of the Following:

- **Scripture Practice:** The next time you are facing a decision or evaluating something you heard in church or in a conversation, write down the decision or statement and then spend time searching Scripture — not just for a single verse, but for the overall biblical principle it connects to or contradicts.
- **Tradition and History Practice:** Identify one spiritual practice or belief you hold and spend 15 to 20 minutes researching its roots in church history. Use your phone or a simple online search. Ask: Has this been practiced before? What did earlier believers say about it?

- **Community Practice:** Find one person in your local church community — a pastor, elder, or trusted fellow believer — and share something you are currently discerning. Invite their honest perspective. Practice being accountable without requiring them to simply agree with you.
- **Alternate Trinity Reflection:** In your journal this week, write out one significant need, one want, and one desire you are currently carrying. For each one, pray and ask: Lord, how do you want to meet this need? How do you want to sanctify this want? How do you want to redirect or empower this desire?

Closing Prayer Focus

Close your group time by praying together over the following:

- That God would sharpen your discernment as individuals and as a community.
- That your needs, wants, and desires would be surrendered to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- That your local church community would grow in accountability and love — not authority that demands, but relationship that invites.
- That the fruit of what God is doing in your midst would be evident not just now, but for generations to come.

A Note for Group Leaders

This guide is designed to be flexible. You do not need to cover every question in a single session. Consider selecting four to six questions that feel most relevant to where your group is right now. Create space for honest conversation, and model the kind of discernment the pastor described — inviting reflection rather than demanding agreement.