

Discernment

The mission of Colonial Women's Ministry is to contribute to the spiritual growth of women by providing opportunities for learning, serving, sharing and belonging. One of the ways in which we strive to accomplish this mission is by being a resource for women as they grow in their walk with the Lord. We want to provide sound and useful tools for a woman's spiritual journey as she seeks to deepen her personal relationship with Jesus. It is our desire that women not only gain knowledge of God and His Word, but that they acquire wisdom and discernment of biblical principles so that they can apply them to their lives in ways that are practical and transformational. My hope is that this blog post will be such a resource.

A common question that comes to the Women's Ministry Council is: "What are your thoughts about (fill in the blank)?" That is, quite often women will ask the Council to evaluate a blog post, book, Bible Study, or speaker they have encountered in their personal pursuit of godliness. What a blessing it is to have a congregation of women hungry for God's Word, who are seeking to supplement their spiritual appetites beyond a Sunday morning sermon! And what a thrill it is to hear of women's desire to feed upon "good food" and avoid "empty calories" by seeking guidance.

If you have ever walked into a Christian bookstore, or even searched for anything "Christian" online, you know that there are many items "on the menu" from which to choose, and it can be difficult to select healthy options. The nature of this article is to assist the women of Colonial in their pursuit of sound resources.

Some foundational truths

Let's begin with some assumptions about our walk with God...

FIRST, *God desires for us to know Him intimately*

- Our God is an intimate God; He has chosen to reveal himself, and desires us to gain such knowledge of Him! If you are unfamiliar with this concept, I encourage you to consider Jesus' prayer to his heavenly Father, in which he describes eternal life as knowledge of the one true God (Jn 17:3). Or perhaps read the book of Ephesians, paying close attention to the prayers of the apostle Paul in chapters 1 and 3.
- Also consider that Jesus claimed the greatest commandments are to love God and love others (Mt 22:37-39). In order to do so, we must first *know* God, and know him intimately.

SECOND, *God has provided the means through which such intimate knowledge can be gained.*

Our heavenly Father has blessed us tremendously by giving us many gifts, such as:

- His Word: God has provided a written record of his revelation in the Bible. The truth words of Holy Scripture are to be considered inspired, inerrant, infallible, trustworthy and sufficient.
- His Son: God has provided us with Himself! He sent His son Jesus Christ to pave the way for a relationship with him. Christ's death, burial and resurrection provided the perfect and ultimate sacrifice for the sin of mankind, and a relationship with him based on this truth is the foundation of our ability to know our heavenly Father intimately.
- The Holy Spirit: God has chosen to permanently indwell – that is, live inside! -- every believer so that their minds may be illuminated to His truth.

WOW! We have so much at our disposal! Certainly a relationship with God himself, access to His Word and the power of His indwelling Spirit should be enough for us to grow and walk in edification. However, without diminishing the power that God has provided in Jesus, the Bible and the Holy Spirit, let us contemplate another gift God has provided.... one another!

- The Church: God has provided another unique and valuable gift to his children: the church. He has given us the local church (a body of believers who assemble regularly for worship, teaching, service and fellowship) and he has also given a vast array of faithful witnesses around the world from which we can draw upon for wisdom, guidance, encouragement and support. Let's face it, none of us have all the answers! We need teachers who will instruct us. We need people who are more mature in their faith from which to glean wisdom. We need friends who will speak truth in love when we are blind to our blindness, and who will speak words of encouragement when we are facing despair. We need folks to provide practical ways in which to communicate with our spouses, parent our children, love our neighbors, and manage our finances. We need each other during times of anxiety, discouragement, confusion and sorrow. Between the local church and the body of believers at large, we have access to preachers, teachers, counselors, mentors, historians, scholars, authors, and speakers who can help in our walk with the Lord.

But are all of these human resources helpful? As you are well aware, the human race is fallen; and although believers are redeemed, the potential for false or errant teaching still exists. Although we have an extraordinarily vast array of resources at our disposal (especially today with technology offering podcasts of every sermon imaginable, YouTube channels, daily devotional Bible apps, online magazine subscriptions and social media) , not everything that is

offered is profitable. We need to select carefully and assess wisely the resources we use to feed our souls.

Please, let me be clear... The purpose of this blog post is not to provide hard and fast rules on “what” and “what not” to read. It is not to steer you toward or away from a particular author, teacher or speaker. It is to assist you in your own process of discernment by simply offering suggestions on how to evaluate material so that you can maximize your spiritual growth. What follows are recommendations on how to discern whether or not what you are feasting upon is healthy for your mind, heart, and overall spiritual health.

Let’s break down this evaluation process into steps:

- 1) STEP ONE: Get to know a little bit about the person behind his/her material.

Who is this person?

- Does this person have a published bio? What is his/her story? What is his/her agenda?
- Does this person ascribe to a particular statement of faith?
- Does this person have an affiliation with a local church or organization (which has a published statement of faith)?
- Does this person hold academic credentials? (NOTE: Such credentials do not necessarily offer validity of a particular view, but sometimes you can ascertain a little about someone’s beliefs based upon where they have studied.)

What is this person’s personal testimony?

- Is there a clear message of salvation and reliance upon Jesus Christ? That is, did “Jesus simply come into that persons heart?”, or do they acknowledge that they are a desperate sinner in need of salvation which only the atoning blood of Jesus could provide?
- Is there a clear message of sanctification?
- Does this person even use the name of Jesus Christ?
- How does this person describe her/himself? As a redeemed sinner who is in the continual process of sanctification, or someone who has “arrived”?

- 2) STEP TWO: Take time to think about what this person believes. If he/she does not have a published bio or statement of faith, you may have to do some hard work, and read into his/her material to ascertain the specifics of their belief system. Specifically, ask the following questions:

What does this person believe about God?

- Is God described as Creator? Does this person believe that there is an intelligent designer who created the universe and everything in it?
- Is God described as eternal?
- Is God described in “trinity”?

What does this person believe about Jesus Christ?

- Was Jesus Christ fully man? Fully God?
- What was Jesus’ mission here on earth? Teaching? Miracles? Social reform? Propitiation of sin?
- Why did Jesus die?
- Was Jesus resurrected from the death and did he appear to people afterward?
- Where is Jesus now and what is he doing?

What does this person believe about the Bible?

- Is the Bible trustworthy for everything, or does this person imply that we need more than what the Bible can offer for practical living?
- Who wrote the Bible?
- Does the Bible contain errors?
- Is the Bible relevant?
- What is the purpose of the Bible today?
- Is the information in the Bible timeless, or should it be updated according to today’s cultural standards?

What does this person believe about humans?

- How are humans different from animals?
- What is the purpose of humanity?
- Are Adam and Eve real people?
- What does the story of Adam and Eve tell us?
- How does God interact with people?

What does this person believe about eternal destiny?

- Is heaven real?
- Is hell real?
- How is it decided who will spend eternity in heaven or hell?
- Can someone who is saved end up in hell?

What does this person believe about the church?

- What is the church?
- Who makes up the church?
- What is the purpose of the church?
- Who leads the church?

3) STEP THREE: Take time to evaluate what is the *purpose* for what this person is writing/saying. This isn't always obvious. (Understand the differences between a text book, a devotional and a blog post!)

- What is this person's stated objective?
- Is the person trying to instruct/teach, or argue a point?
- Is the content of the material based on the author's opinion and/or experience, or on stated biblical truths?
- Is the purpose to edify or (as is the case with many blog posts), simply to "rant"?
- Does the author/speaker put too much emphasis on making a point (and ensuring that you agree with him/her), or do they present material for you to internalize and evaluate for yourself?
- Does the tone of the message sound like the person is trying to impress you, or to point you toward something that would be edifying?

Based upon the information you gather in these first three steps, you may have enough insight in order to evaluate the validity and value of what you are reading/hearing, and you can proceed in wisdom. But if you still need assistance, proceed to steps FOUR, FIVE and/or SIX.

4) STEP FOUR: Evaluate the content in terms of your personal beliefs.

- a. Do the beliefs (implied or stated) differ from that of your local church? (If you're uncertain, check your church's statement of faith.)
- b. Do the beliefs (implied or stated) differ from the biblical truths you personally hold? If so, are they significantly problematic? Or, can you still reap benefit from some aspects of this person's material?
- c. Are the differences you identified in doctrine or application? These are two different animals. Sometimes people with very similar beliefs will disagree on some points of practical application. Does the tone of the person presenting seem to imply that their method of application is the "correct" way, and dismiss other alternatives?

5) STEP FIVE: Evaluate the content in terms of how it will enable you to become transformed into the image of Christ.

- a. After absorbing the material you've read or listened to, would you describe yourself as more (or less):
 - i. Loving
 - ii. Joyful
 - iii. Peaceful
 - iv. Patient
 - v. Kind

- vi. Good
 - vii. Faithful
 - viii. Gentle
 - ix. Self-controlled
- b. Are you encouraged to offer grace and mercy to others?
 - c. Are you humbled? Convicted? Encouraged? Spurred onto good works?
 - d. Are you more or less inclined to worship God? Trust God? Obey God?

NOTE: If STEP FIVE gave you pause, perhaps you should continue onto STEP SIX. (In fact, one could argue that STEP SIX should really be STEP ONE...)

- 6) STEP SIX: Self-reflection. Why are you seeking out this particular resource?
 - a. Is it because the author/speaker comes “highly recommended” by others?
 - b. It is because this person is “popular” in Christian circles?
 - c. Are you simply adding this resource to a “list” of accomplishments?
 - d. Are you motivated by the idea of a Christian “checklist”, or by a true desire for a transformed life?
 - e. Are you engaging with this resource for mere entertainment purposes? Be honest!
 - f. Are you reading/listening to this person because you want justification of your own opinions? (Ouch...this one can hurt.)

These are certainly time consuming steps to consider and implement. But dear sisters in Christ, I offer that the more time and effort you devote to choosing quality resources, the better opportunity for growth you will encounter.

And most certainly, if you are still confused or concerned with a particular resource, I encourage you to contact us at **email address**, and we will be happy to assist.