

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Discerning between the spirits

In I John 4:1-3 God's Word clearly instructs the Church, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already" (ESV).

The issue of teaching that is contrary to God is not new. Paul's correspondence with the Christians in Corinth centers around the reality that the spirit of the world had infiltrated the church. In the opening sentences of his first letter to Timothy, Paul instructs his protégé to remain in Ephesus to combat the false doctrine being proclaimed there. Beginning in the sixth verse of the opening chapter of Galatians, Paul confronts the reality that a perversion of the Gospel is being advanced in that region.

The reality of false prophets and false teachers is attested to throughout the Scriptures and persists in the life of the Church today. Jesus warns us that there will be false shepherds who will ultimately kill and destroy. He alone is the Good Shepherd and His sheep must discern His voice from among all others. The Church then, does not listen to a myriad of voices but to the solo clarion call of Christ, the Lord.

The challenge then, is to discern between the spirits each of which seeks to capture hearts and minds today. For Christians, guidance for the process of spiritual discernment comes from the Word of God, alone. There we are instructed to hold every thought captive to Christ, to seek to have the mind of Christ, to submit to the Spirit of Truth and to hone our ability to identify error and call it out.

Rule #1: Know the Word of God and if something is contrary to the Word of God identify it as a lie. Read I Thessalonians 2:13 and ask yourself, "Do I receive the Word of God as the word of men, or as it actually is, the Word of God, which is at work in those who believe?" God is holy, perfect, trustworthy, faithful and true; Jesus is the way and the truth and the life; the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth. Conversely, Satan is the father of lies and

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his nickname is the deceiver. Know the truth and the truth will set you free. Follow the liar and you will end up a captive in his snare of darkness, despair, destruction and death.

Paul confronts this concern directly in II Corinthians 11:3-4 which reads, "I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led

astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough." Later he instructs them to "test themselves" in relationship to right belief that produces righteous action. Read II Corinthians 13:5-10.

Paul also addresses the issue of spiritual discernment in Galatians. He establishes the issue in 1:6-7, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the Gospel of Christ." Paul goes on to establish the difference between the true Gospel which is received by divine revelation and those false teachings made up to satisfy the itchy ears of a given generation. Similar discernment is necessary today. In Galatians 5, we learn that obedience to the truth and the production of godly spiritual fruit is the evidence that our lives are aligned with the Spirit of the living God. Other fruit is evidence to the contrary.

The concern is raised again in Colossians 2:4, "I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments;" and 2:8, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." Colossians 2:2-3:17 is a worthy study of how to focus on right things in order to protect against error.

For further study:

Read and discuss Ephesians 4-6; II Timothy 3; Titus 1:11-15; James 3:13-4:10; II Peter 1:12-2:22; Jude.

"Those who, rejecting Scripture, imagine that they have some peculiar way of penetrating to God, are to be deemed not so much under the influence of error as madness. For certain giddy men have lately appeared, who, while they make a great display of the superiority of the Spirit, reject all reading of the Scriptures themselves, and deride the simplicity of those who only delight in what they call the dead and deadly letter."

Institutes of the Christian Religion, I, 9