

# Discerning the Spirit in the Church Today

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Christians throughout history have always recognized the need to evaluate the sources of their spiritual experience if they are to make spiritual progress. Not all experiences come from the Holy Spirit. There are two other possible sources: the devil and ourselves. Confusing these sources could have disastrous consequences. In more recent times, the charismatic renewal has brought the matter of spiritual operations to the forefront of the church's life and consciousness. All kinds of conflicting claims are made in the name of the Holy Spirit. We need to discern these spiritual operations.

In the course of our daily living, different perplexing situations force us to ask ourselves: Is this from God, or is it just my imagination? Sometimes a complex situation may arise causing us to ask, is this from God or the devil? The following story is an instance that might prompt such a query. A woman walked into church one Sunday morning. She went through the motions of worship with the rest of the congregation, standing when they stood, sitting when they sat, raising her hands when they raised theirs. Then she prayed, "Jesus, if you are real, give me a lottery number!" When she opened her eyes she saw four digits projected on the screen. She left the church, betted on the number and won. The next week she returned to testify that Jesus was indeed real!<sup>1</sup> Was it Jesus who gave her the winning number?

Within the Asian context where religiosity is often expressed in primitive animism, the question of distinguishing the work of the Holy Spirit from other spirits is quite crucial. There is a tendency for some Christians to be overawed by any display of "supernatural" phenomena, and to accept any miraculous claim of fellow-Christians uncritically. On the other hand, there are other Christians whose first reaction to anything "charismatic" is to reject it outright because it does not conform to their preconceived ideas. These

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<sup>1</sup> As told to me by a colleague from that church.

and many other situations make the need for discernment all too obvious. There are many ways of treating the subject but I would like to focus on a few essentials so that any Christian who is struggling with this problem will have a simple road map to guide him or her through the confusion. To do this, I will be looking at some teachings from Scripture and Christian history and suggest some guidelines on practicing discernment.

## **Biblical Teaching on Discernment**

The Scripture is quite clear about the need for Christians to be discerning. In 1 Cor 12:10 Paul urges the body of believers to judge a prophecy. All prophetic utterances must come under scrutiny; we cannot assume that just because an acknowledged leader of the church says that he or she has “a word from the Lord” we must accept it at face value. Only a proud person will refuse to allow his or her “prophetic word” to be evaluated by other believers. And pride is one sure sign that a person is not acting in accordance with God’s will. Again, in 1 Thess 5:19-22 we are told not to quench the Spirit or treat prophecy in contempt, but to test everything, holding to what is good and rejecting what is evil. We do not reject outright any prophetic claim but subject it to the test. This is the balanced attitude that we need always to maintain if we are to discern properly.

In Scripture, the ability to discern is a sign of spiritual maturity. This is why Paul prays for the Philippian Christians “that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be *able to discern* what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (Phil 1:9-11). Growth in love must always be accompanied by knowledge and discernment.

Love without knowledge and discernment is naive; knowledge without love is mere shrewdness. A truly mature Christian must have both.

## Discernment in the Christian Tradition

In the monastic culture, discernment is seen as especially needful. This is because those who take the spiritual life very seriously are more in need of discerning their spiritual experiences because delusion can easily set in.

The more one is engaged in spiritual exercises (like prayer, fasting, etc.) the more easily one can be tempted by the devil. The teaching of a 4<sup>th</sup> Century monk, Evagrius, on prayer contains many counsels on demonic delusions: the devil can cast wrong thoughts and imagination into our minds *especially* when we are at prayer.<sup>2</sup>

This point is also recognized in John Cassian's (d. 435) famous *Conferences*. Cassian devotes a whole conference to a discussion on discernment. Discernment is the "eye and lamp of the body" (cf. Matt 6:22, 23) without which the whole body is plunged into total darkness (2:3). Cassian is all too aware of the subtle danger that people who are engaged in spiritual matters are exposed to. He recalls the warning of St Anthony who told of how a monk was so engrossed in prayer that he refused to join others for communal meals even on an important festival like Easter. The result: Convinced of the merit of his own virtues, he was deluded by the devil to jump into a deep well and died two days later (2:5). Cassian cited several examples of monks who were deluded by the devil who came as an angel of light (2:6-8). It is noteworthy that it is precisely at the point when the monks felt most secure in their acts of piety that they were in greatest danger of self- and demonic delusion. This is a point that many modern Christians would do well to take note. Often they are mesmerized by preachers who claim to be God's spokesmen, because they had spent so many days in fasting and prayer. Many simple Christians are easily persuaded when preachers begin their magisterial pronouncements with "As I was fasting and praying over the last ten days, the Lord told me..."

Cassian also notes that humility is one sure way to beat the devil. Humility manifests itself in two ways.

A. *Not making unilateral decisions or private judgments* without recourse to the advice of older Christians (2:10). Humility shows itself in a teachable spirit. At the same time, we should not defer to people solely by virtue of their age.

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<sup>2</sup> Evagrius, "On Prayer: One Hundred and Fifty-Three Texts", *Philokalia*, I (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), nos. 47, 68, 90, 91, etc.

Cassian warns, "Our enemy, who is very cunning, uses the white hair of age to fool the young" (2:13). This warning is particularly significant in a society that tends to give unquestioning deference to the elderly. Cassian lived at a time when respect for the elderly was also taken as a matter of course, yet for the sake of the truth, he counseled caution. There might be occasions when one had to defy respected convention.

B. *Open confession of faults.* The famed Abbot Serapion experienced this as a young monk under the tutelage of Abbot Theo. His open confession of his habitual theft of bread to satisfy his hunger led to a release from demonic bondage (2:11). One must beware of the super-spiritual person who gives the impression that he or she is incapable of making a mistake: If his prophecy that you will be healed does not come true, it's because *you* lack faith, not because he was mistaken.

Cassian sees discernment as foundational to the cultivation of virtues. Without discernment there is no real spiritual progress.

The virtuous activities . . . flourished among them [the monks]. But the lack of discernment prevented them from reaching the end. No other cause can be found for their downfall. Lacking the training provided by older men they could in no way acquire this virtue of discernment, which, avoiding extremes, teaches the monk to walk always on the royal road. It keeps him from veering to the right, that is, it keeps him from going with stupid presumption and excessive fervor beyond the boundary of reasonable restraint. It keeps him from going to the left of carelessness and sin, to sluggishness of spirit, and all this on the pretext of actually keeping the body under control (2:2).

With discernment it is possible to reach the utmost heights with the minimum of exhaustion. Without it there are many who despite the intensity of their struggle have been quite unable to arrive at the summit of perfection. For discernment is the mother, the guardian, and the guide of all the virtues (2:5)

Here, discernment is seen as a kind of discretion or spiritual poise which keeps one from falling into the error of extremes. Whether it is extreme asceticism or indulgence, both are a sign of a lack of discernment. Neither

leads to true godliness (2:16). It is surprising that in spite of such clear teaching on moderation, monasticism is often caricatured as a movement preoccupied with extreme asceticism! Is this not an indication of our own modern preoccupation with self-indulgence, so that moderation in food and other necessities is seen as extreme? Consider the following advice:

The general rule to be followed in the case of abstinence is this. One should take cognizance of the state of one's strength and body and age and allow oneself as much food as will sustain the flesh but not satisfy its longings. There will be the greatest danger for anyone who either restrains his appetite by excessive fasting or who opens up his appetite by too much eating. The spirit, brought low by lack of food, loses the vigor of its prayerfulness. Too much weariness weighs it down into unlooked-for sleep. Or again, if it is caught in the grip of too much eating, it will not be able to utter pure and winged prayers to God (2:23).

Another important lesson we can learn from the Christian tradition is the need for *corporate discernment*. Here, we can learn something very valuable from the Quakers. Quakers practice silence before God until consensus is reached. One sign of confirmation is “a peaceful conviction permeating the entire community”.<sup>3</sup> For communal discernment to work, however, there must be genuine participation by all present. Each person in the group must learn to pray. There must be mutual respect and no imposition of a stronger will on the weaker. Many church splits could be prevented if people learn to practice corporate discernment rather than depend on one or two people to make all the decisions.

## Signs of the Spirit's Work

Many Christians struggling with all kinds of conflicting claims will find some objective guidelines useful. But a few caveats must be registered about the use of objective signs. First, they are not indubitable signs of a true spiritual operation. They function better at disconfirming by their absence than at confirming by their presence. That is to say, the presence of any one sign

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<sup>3</sup>Frank Rogers, “Discernment”, *Practicing our Faith: A Way for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p. 113.

does not of itself prove that something is from God, whereas if any of them is *not* present, it is a good indication that the work is not of God. Take, for instance, the sign of humility mentioned above. Having a humble attitude alone does not prove conclusively that what a person is doing is of God. (After all, one could put up a good act without being one. Or, a humble person could be credulous at the same time.) But if we discern a lack of humility, we could safely conclude that the person is not acting out of divine prompting. Secondly, these signs when taken separately cannot show decisively if a work is of God, but taken together they help us to check the validity of religious experience. Together they create a “truth profile” against which individual experiences could be tested. Some of these signs are:

A. *Truth*. A person moved by God's Spirit will comport with God's revealed truth in his or her word and deed. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth who leads us to Christ the Truth (cf. John 16:13).

B. *Gravity*. God does not generally cause things that are useless, frivolous, and futile to happen. There is always a seriousness in the divine work. Thus we have good reason to be suspicious when claims are made that God showers people with gold dust and angel's feathers.

C. *Obedience*. A spirit of submission and obedience is an indicator (though not an absolute one) that the source is divine. Pride and rebellion is contrary to the spirit of Christ.

D. *Peace*. There is an assured peace when God's Spirit moves upon the soul (Phi. 4:9). Corporately, peace among the people of God is a good (though not certain) indicator of divine approval, whereas an agitated and cantankerous spirit in the community is an indication that people are not acting according to God's will.

E. *Christ-centredness*. If there is no sustained desire to follow Christ and imitate his example, we have good reason to doubt the validity of the experience.

## The Problem of Extraordinary Phenomena

One of the greatest challenges of living in a highly “charismatized” environment is how to make sense of extraordinary phenomena. Christianity is a supernatural religion; its central belief involves the person of Jesus of Nazareth who lived, died and was miraculously raised to life for the salvation of the world. For some people, the extraordinary constitutes the strongest validation of Christianity. But in trying to prove the truth of Christianity through “signs and wonders” many have become quite credulous. There is a deep reticence to assess supernatural claims for fear that this would “quench the Spirit”. Sometimes even the most outlandish claims are accepted at face value. The danger, however, does not end here. The one who demonstrates the ability to exercise some so-called “supernatural” gift is also bestowed virtual infallibility. If a preacher is divinely endowed with extraordinary powers, he or she must also be divinely licensed to proclaim extraordinary truths! It is a theology with a clean and simple logic—the kind that many modern churchgoers all too readily accept. But as the following story shows, its consequence is tragic. Some years ago an evangelist known for his extraordinary spiritual gifts was asked to pray for a terminally ill person. In their first encounter, he gave the sick man much hope by describing accurately the nature of the illness through what appeared to be an exercise of the “gift of knowledge”. The sick man’s faith soared when the evangelist “prophesied” that he would be healed. Nothing could be more certain: after all, if the evangelist obviously *had* the “gift of knowledge”, how could his gift of prophecy be ever in doubt? But as the sick man’s condition deteriorated his faith in God began to fall apart. Either God had failed to make good his promise or his faith was not strong enough. His close friend reported that he continued to vacillate between deep doubt and self-condemnation right to the end.<sup>4</sup>

It is crucial, therefore, that we understand the nature of extraordinary phenomena. First, in the above case, we need to realize that being right the first time (when the evangelist supposedly exercised the “gift of knowledge”) does not guarantee being right the second time (when he “prophesied”). The gifts of the Spirit that Christians have now are only received “in part” (cf. 1 Cor 13:9). Further, as Ignatius Loyola, one of the great teachers of discernment, warns, we must beware of the danger of hanging on to the

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<sup>4</sup> As told to me by this friend of the deceased.

“afterglow” of a spiritual experience.<sup>5</sup> Just because one begins with an action that is clearly prompted by the Spirit does not mean that subsequent actions are equally the work of the Spirit. Perhaps the evangelist had an initial gift of knowledge, but he might have been basking in the “afterglow” of the first experience when he prophesied. The first act might have been inspired by the Spirit; the second was not. Second, we need to recognize that a lot of unexplainable experiences may not have a supernatural origin. For instance, there are such things as paranormal phenomena, which may be perfectly “natural” even though we do not have a satisfactory scientific explanation for them. Sometimes strange experiences tend to occur more in certain temperament-types than others. Melancholics are more prone to depression. People with a lively imagination are more prone to hallucinations and seeing “visions”. Sometimes the imagination can induce certain psychological experiences that appear quite “spiritual”. Sometimes illness can produce what appears to be extraordinary experiences.

One of the extraordinary experiences that would almost always secure a hearing from certain segments of the Christian community today is the claim to having received some “revelation” from God. What are we to make of such claims? If there are such revelations (and there is no *prima facie* reason that they should be dismissed), they have to be regarded as belonging to the realm of *private* revelations. There is no reason to suppose that God will not give special revelations to individuals for special needs and circumstances. St Paul's experience of being caught up in the third heaven appears to be strictly a private revelation (2 Cor 12:1-7). It was not meant for the whole church. If not for the problem in the Corinthian church that he was trying to deal with, we would not have known anything about it. In fact, he admitted that in talking about his sufferings and revelations, he was acting like a fool (cf. 2 Cor 11:17)—and he had to do it since the Corinthians would “gladly put up with fools” (v. 19). He referred to it with great reluctance and made no mention about its content. This is very unlike many self-proclaimed prophets today who are quick to publish their “revelations”.

In Christian history we have stories of saints who had extraordinary experiences such as the stigmata of St Francis of Assisi and the flames of love of Philip Neri. The stigmata are the mysterious appearance of Christ's wounds on Francis' body. The flames of love so warmed Philip's body that in the middle of winter he was seen wearing only light summer clothing.

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<sup>5</sup> Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 336.

These experiences should not be ruled out *a priori* just because they are not found in the Bible. Sometimes Protestants are too quick to reject an experience because it is not found in the Bible and too quick to accept another just because it there (e.g., anointed handkerchiefs, Acts 19:11,12). We must judge the phenomena in terms of the total life of the individual who experiences them. Is the person a godly, balanced, mature person, one not given to extremes, or is the person an attention-seeker? The notable thing about these saints who had such experiences is that they never publicized their experiences; others who saw reported them. Their lives were marked by a humble self-forgetfulness. This brings us back to a point I made at the beginning: learning discernment is a process of growing in greater maturity in Christ, and we are likely to become more discerning if we move among the saints, study their lives and imitate their virtues. The problem in our modern church is that we have too few saints and too many showmen.

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