

The Discerning of Spirits

The Objective, Biblical Means to Discern Spirits by Bob DeWaay

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” (1John 4:1)

Twenty years ago I received a phone call from a woman who claimed to have a word from God for me. She began prophesying, “You are a great man of God, full of power, and God is going to use you in a powerful way. You are going to be a mighty warrior for God . . .” I was very suspicious of this “word from God,” knowing that God was unlikely to call me on the phone to flatter me. Knowing what it says in 1John 4:1-3 I decided to try the test literally. I asked the voice on the phone, “Has Jesus Christ come in the flesh?” The answer on the other end of the line was, “She believes that.” I said, “Wrong answer” and hung up. The spirit that was inspiring the prophecy answered in the 2nd person.

Now that I have a better understanding of **1John 4:1-3**, I would not need to ask that question directly, because I would know from the content of the prophecy that the spirit motivating the prophecy was not from God. The Bible gives us objective guidelines for discerning spirits. We need to know these guidelines if we are going to avoid deception.

We live in an age where mysticism and spiritual experiences are prevalent. The days of materialistic, secular humanism have given way to the New Age of spirituality. Our era is often called “post-modern;” it is an age of subjectivism. This means that we no longer believe that science, reason, and rationality can solve humanity’s problems. Our culture has turned inward to subjective, spiritual, self-validating experiences. Now people rarely ask, “Is it true?” but ask instead, “Does it work for me?”

As has often been the case, the Christian church is again allowing itself to be heavily influenced by the thinking of the contemporary culture. David Wells, one of the first to warn about the dangers of subjectivism in the church, discusses the objectivity of Biblical truth as understood by early Christians:

The fact that God's truth was transmitted through events external to the individual meant that it was objective, and the fact that it was objective meant, further, that his truth was public. . . The content of this truth could not be privatized, reduced within private consciousness. Those who were trained by biblical revelation could not follow the path of the pagans, who established faith on their experience of nature and their intuitions regarding human nature. Their faith was grounded solely in the objective and public nature of God's Word. They stood alone among these ancient cultures, their faith was distinctive and unique.¹

In a footnote about the statement above, Wells remarks: *"In this post-modern context, where meaning has contracted into the self, criteria for discerning truth from falsehood become almost as numerous as the discerners."²*

Wells is absolutely right. Once discernment becomes subjective rather than objective, one does not have it! When a person's inner spiritual impressions are trusted to separate truth from error, "spirits" from the Holy Spirit, and what is of God from what is not, the person becomes the prey of forces of darkness that are very adept at appearing as angels of light.

My thesis is this: discernment is objective and the Scriptures alone give us the tools to discern spirits. In this article we shall see from the Bible that this is the case.

Prophecy Followed by Judging

To "prophecy" is to claim to speak what is from God or in keeping with God's revelation. Only the Scriptures are God's authoritative word to man. Prophecy in the church today is not adding authoritative revelation, but exhorting, encouraging, or comforting through speaking from God's word: *"But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation"* (**1Corinthians 14:3**). Prophecy should be taken in the broad sense of anyone claiming to speak for God. Thus the term "prophecy" covers legitimate and illegitimate speaking for God. Therefore prophecy needs to be judged.

Prophecy has a spiritual source. When John tells us not to believe every “spirit” (1John 4:1), it is because many false “prophets” have gone out into the world. The spiritual source speaks through a human spokesperson. Thus if someone claims to speak for God and is giving spiritual teaching, we must determine whether or not the teaching is from the Holy Spirit or a deceiving spirit. This is the essence of the discerning of spirits.

Consider this passage in 1Corinthians: *“and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues”* (1Corinthians 12:10). Many people interpret “the distinguishing of spirits” to be the subjective ability to see evil spirits and identify them - I disagree with this. One who holds this viewpoint is Neil Anderson. Let us evaluate his subjective interpretation of this passage:

In 1Corinthians 12:10, discernment is the divinely enabled ability to distinguish a good spirit from a bad spirit. It is a manifestation of the Spirit, which is to be utilized to edify the church. Spiritual discernment is not a function of the mind; it’s a function of the spirit. . . . the Spirit helps us know what cannot be objectively verified.³

According to Anderson the discerning of spirits is neither objective nor cognitive, but some type of inner impression. He misses the fact that “distinguishing” one thing from another is always an act of the mind. The mind has to decide about what is under consideration, be it types of spirits as Anderson claims or the source of a prophecy as I am going to claim. There is no such thing as non-mental discernment.

Gordon Fee points out that the order (prophecy first then literally from the Greek, *discernment of spirits*) is in keeping with other passages in the New Testament.⁴ This would mean that “discerning spirits” is the equivalent of judging prophecy. Fee ties the “distinguishing of spirits” to judging prophecy based on the similarity to Paul’s terminology in other passages. In the following paragraphs I will deal with each of the other passages that deal with this concept

and defend the proposition that the discerning of spirits is the judging of prophecy.

Another passage where prophecy is followed by judging is this one: *“Do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good”* (**1Thessalonians 5:20, 21**). It is fair to assume that the “prophetic utterances” that Paul mentions here are of the same sort that he addresses in 1Corinthians. Members of the congregation were speaking forth what they believed to be from God. To despise here means “to make absolutely nothing of” or to “hold in contempt.”⁵ Rather than automatically disregarding anything that was purported to be from God, the Thessalonians were to “examine” what was said and distinguish the good from the bad. The word “examine” here is *dokimazo*_ which has to do with putting something to the test to determine its nature. It means, “to test, examine, or scrutinize.” The same Greek word is used in this passage: *“that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ”* (**1Peter 1:7**), where it is translated “tested.” Prophecy is to be carefully put to the test to see if it is from God.

This type of testing is objective. The word *dokimazo*_ is used of assaying gold (as Peter’s usage shows). It is a means of determining the true nature of the item tested. Just as Peter tells us that we need to know that our faith is genuine (which it proves to be under severe testing), we need to know if people claiming to speak for God are indeed doing so. Nothing could be more foreign to Paul’s teaching in 1Thessalonians than uncritically accepting religious teaching for subjective reasons. But this is exactly what many today do. If a teaching makes them feel happy or uplifted, they think it must be from God. This is a subjective test and will not work. False doctrine makes many people happy. Conversely true doctrine makes many people upset.

Paul also discusses the gift of prophecy in **Romans 12:6**, *“And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith.”* There is an issue of translation from the Greek here. The passage says literally, “according to the analogy of the faith.” Though some have argued that “his faith” (in the subjective sense) is in

view, I do not think this interpretation fits the grammar or the larger Biblical context. Opinion on this matter is divided. Some scholars see a subjective understanding of “faith” (as the NASB translates it). Others see the literal translation “the faith” as being the objective content of the faith once for all delivered to the saints (**Jude 1:3**). If, however, one considers both the literal Greek⁶ and the fact that elsewhere in the New Testament prophecy is to be judged, the objective understanding makes the most sense.

Charles Hodge spends several pages in his commentary on Romans arguing for an objective understanding of this passage. He wrote:

If, however, *faith* here means, as it does in so many other places, the *object of faith, or the truths to be believed*, (see Galatians 1:23; 3:25; 6:10; Ephesians 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:5, etc.,) then *according to the proportion* signifies, *agreeably to the rule or standard*; and the apostle’s direction to the prophets is, that in all their communications they are to conform to the rule of faith, and not contradict those doctrines which had been delivered by men whose inspiration had been established by indubitable evidence. In favor of this view of the passage is the frequent use of the word *faith* in the sense thus assigned to it. The ordinary subjective sense of the word does not suit the passage.⁷

Similarly, Lenski writes, “Now ‘prophecy’ is *objective*, the contents of what one may prophesy, and it is plain that the controlling norm for this cannot be something *subjective*, the prophet’s own trust, but in the very nature of the case must also be something objective, ‘the faith (or doctrine) once delivered to the saints.’”⁸

So in **Romans 12:6**, prophecy is once again followed by an objective test: the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The member of the congregation who gives a prophecy must be willing to submit that prophecy to the standard of the faith. It must be in agreement with the objective teachings of Scripture.

In **1 Corinthians 14:29**, Paul again addresses this issue: “*And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.*” A key concept in understanding this passage is what Paul means by “prophets.” Sometimes this word is speaking

of a person with the office of a prophet (like Agabus), but often it means “one who is prophesying.” The context shows that the latter is Paul’s meaning here.⁹ For example, consider verse 31: *“For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted” (1Corinthians 14:31)*. Notice the possibility of any member of the congregation giving a prophecy. Paul is not speaking of a class of people, “prophets,” as distinguished from ordinary Christians. Notice also the proper result of prophecy: “may be exhorted.” This agrees with the key purposes of this type of prophecy: *“But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation” (1Corinthians 14:3)*.

The judgment (discerning)¹⁰ of prophecy then would involve others in the congregation discerning whether or not the exhortation was a valid implication of the faith. If a “prophesying one” were exhorting people to some belief or action that was not in keeping with the apostolic teaching that Paul had delivered to the congregation, then it was to be rejected as not coming from the Holy Spirit. This is confirmed by something Paul says a few verses later: *“If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment” (1Corinthians 14:37)*. Paul’s letter to them is objectively God’s authoritative word. Their spiritual utterance must be judged by the objective writings, not the subjective (what the “spiritual” person thinks).

So far we have seen that prophecy is always to be judged by objective standards. In a most general sense, to prophesy is to claim to speak for God. The Scriptures are God’s inspired word. Only that which agrees with scripture properly applied is authoritative and binding. Now we will examine in some detail a very important text about discerning spirits.

Spirits that Speak

Many people have not considered the fact that demons have doctrines. Here is what Paul wrote: *“But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1Timothy 4:1)*. The target of demonic deception is the church because the result is falling away from the faith. The particular doctrines Paul mentions

concern asceticism (laws that forbid marriage and govern food). This list is not meant to quantify every demonic doctrine; but is meant to provide examples. The examples that Paul cites show that demons do not necessarily teach Christians to be profligate sinners; they teach a stricter version of Christianity. Demons are just as happy with asceticism as antinomianism.¹¹ They have fooled many more Christians through the centuries with asceticism. Paul warns about such doctrines. Most people have not considered that an evil spirit might tell them to be more stringent; but such spirits will as long as such practices get people to trust man rather than God. Demons do not mind if one becomes a pious Tibetan monk, as long as it keeps people from the gospel.

A key passage about discerning spirits is **1John 4:1-3**. Because of its importance I will expound it in some detail. Here is the text:

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because 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; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world."

The first sentence shows how spirits speak: *"false prophets have gone out."* They speak through people who are claiming to speak for God! So when John says, "do not believe every spirit," he means for us to not assume that everyone claiming to speak for God really is. False prophets come dressed in Christian garb if their target is the Christian church. The spiritual source of their teaching may or may not be the Holy Spirit. They could be speaking from an evil spirit. The passage above is very explicit about this.

I have noticed that very few Christians take this warning seriously. There is a reason for this. They assume John is speaking about some obvious occult activity or a cult group like Mormonism. The fact is that most Christians are not fooled by palm readers and Mormons. John was warning first century believers about a danger that only has worsened as we come to the end of the age. Now, we need to discern the spiritual source of teachings coming through supposed

evangelical Christians. If Christians simply used the objective tools given us in the Bible the deception in the church today would find no audience. The falsely “prophesying ones” talk on Christian airwaves, speak in Christian pulpits, and write Christian books. They are not discerned to be of another spirit by their garb, their affiliations, their pedigree or the number of their followers. We have what we need: the objective tools for discerning spirits given us in the Bible. These tools will tell us if the “prophesying ones” are from God.

When God Sends an Evil Spirit

There is another possibility that we need to consider. A spirit might be “from God,” and yet it might be a bad thing. This is because of the judgment of reprobation. Consider the case of Ahab being deceived by 400 prophets. Only one prophet, Micaiah, had a different message. Here is what the Lord showed Micaiah:

And Micaiah said, “Therefore, hear the word of the Lord. I saw the Lord sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right and on His left. And the Lord said, ‘Who will entice Ahab to go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said this while another said that. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord and said, ‘I will entice him.’ And the Lord said to him, ‘How?’ And he said, ‘I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ Then He said, ‘You are to entice him and also prevail. Go and do so.’ Now therefore, behold, the Lord has put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; and the Lord has proclaimed disaster against you.”
(**1Kings 22:19-23**)

Ahab did not want the truth. He wanted to have the prophets justify his own desires by making those desires a “word from God.” Because Ahab did not have a love for the truth, God sent a deceiving spirit to judge Ahab.

The New Testament warns us about the same thing:

[A]nd with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness. (**2Thessalonians 2:10-12**)

This is in the context of antichrist's false signs and wonders. Those who do not love the truth (as shown by the fact that they have the truth available but they do not listen to it) may find themselves in a situation where God allows evil spirits to deceive them. This is a very sobering possibility. It is essential that we care deeply about the spiritual source of whatever teachings we listen to.

It is also possible that a spirit may be saying something true and not be from God. Consider the slave girl with a "spirit of divination":

And it happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a certain slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortunetelling. Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." And she continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment. (**Acts 16:16-18**).

What she said was the truth. So how do we know the spirit within her was not from God? We know by the fact that she was using a forbidden technique – fortunetelling. Techniques are not neutral.

Another way we know is that she did not confess Christ and His gospel (we shall discuss this issue next). She said in the second person that "these men" were proclaiming the way of salvation; but that is not the same as her confessing Christ.

The Nature of True Confession of Christ

The next important issue that arises from our text in 1John is this: *“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.”* Most people read this and assume that John means spirits will not utter the words, *“Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.”* There is so much more to it than that. We need to understand what “confess” or “not confess means and to understand the theological significance of Jesus Christ having come in the flesh.

The confession of Christ in the first century meant a commitment to Him through the gospel that was so profound one would literally die before denying Christ. In Luke confessing means having a saving faith: *“And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him also before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8)*. This teaching of Jesus became painfully clear to early Christians when their Roman persecutors used to torture and kill Christians who refused to give up their confession of Christ. Consider what Justin Martyr wrote in 155 AD about a dialogue that happened in 135AD:

For it is plain that, though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but the more such things happen, the more do others and in larger numbers become faithful, and worshippers of God through the name of Jesus.¹²

Not long after John wrote his epistles, Christians were being commanded to give up their confession and martyred if they did not. To John, confessing meant much more than uttering words. It meant having a faith for which one would die.

Paul also shows this understanding of the confession of the Christian: *“Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate” (1Timothy 6:12, 13)*. Here Paul links the confession of the Christian to Jesus’ confession before Pilate that led to His crucifixion. So the confession in the New Testament is the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior that is characteristic of the truly redeemed.

The term “confesses” in **1John 4:2** is in the present indicative in the Greek which means continual action. The person who is speaking from the Spirit will continually confess the person and work of Christ. Those who are born of the Spirit rejoice to confess Christ before men because He is their hope and they are concerned that others come to faith in Christ.

Having established the meaning of “confess” in this context, let us contemplate the meaning of “*Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.*” First, Jesus is not a unique name. His name was “Yeshua” or “Joshua” in English. Since the name Jesus is not unique, spirit beings use it also. Jose Silva who invented Silva Mind Control claimed to have two spirit guides, Jesus and Mary.¹³ A demonic spirit can claim to be Jesus and inspire the utterance of Jesus. What a demon will not do is motivate a prophet to make a true confession of Jesus Christ as He is revealed in Scripture. This is likely what Paul is saying in **1Corinthians 12:3** “*Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus is accursed’; and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.*” This is no mere utterance of words, but a confession of faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Second, we need to consider the implications of Jesus being the “Christ.” Christ means, “anointed one.” The “anointed One” is the promised Messiah (Messiah is a transliteration of the Hebrew word for “anointed”). So confessing Jesus Christ means confessing that Yeshua of the Gospels is the promised Jewish Messiah. He is uniquely “the Anointed One.” We will see why this is important when we discuss **1John 4:3**. For now we need to understand that Jesus Christ is the unique one, the promised Messiah. All the Messianic promises and privileges are His alone.

Third, let us consider what John means by “*has come in the flesh.*” This is John’s shorthand way to refer to what he taught in **1John 1:1-9**. That Jesus had a real body was being denied by some heretics. “Has come” is a perfect, active participle which means that he came in a real body and even now has a real, resurrected body.¹⁴ Jesus is fully human and fully God. Also, “coming” shows His pre-existence as God and with God (**John 1:1**). The significance of the person and work of Christ is in view in the phrase “*has come in the flesh.*” This is so very important because of the issues of “antichrists” that John raised in **1John 2** and

again in the section that we are considering (**1John 4:1-3**). If Jesus Christ came in the flesh, was bodily raised, and bodily ascended into heaven, then any current “anointed one” (i.e. Christ) must be an antichrist. If however Jesus is merely a spirit being, then many can claim to have the “Christ Spirit.”

Let us summarize what we have learned so far about how to judge a spirit based on **1John 4:1-3**. The person who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. This means a confession that indicates true, saving faith in God that is so profound that a person would be willing to die before denying Christ. The content of the confession is true teaching about the person and work of Christ: that He is the unique one, the promised Jewish Messiah, the One who lived a sinless life, fully human and fully God, and that He also was bodily raised from the dead and continues to exist as fully human and fully God in heaven. Only the Spirit of God at work in a person’s life will motivate them to make such a confession and hold to it at all costs. This is **not** about uttering some words or claiming to believe a statement of faith in the back of a hymnal; it **is** about a confession of Christ coming from genuine faith that will endure because it is from God.

The Failure to Preach the Gospel

The next verse in **1John 4** tells of those who are not speaking from the Spirit of God: “*[A]nd every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world*” (**1John 4:3**). This time John shortens his description but it is implied that “does not confess Jesus” includes the entire person and work of Christ referred to in the previous verse which itself was a condensed version of **1John 1:1-9**. To “not confess” is to not preach the gospel. The confession of the early church was an expression of the gospel: “[T]hat if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved” (**Romans 10:9**).

Many people fail to recognize the significance of **1John 4:3**, and failing to recognize it fail to discern as they should. What they miss is a simple fact that

changes everything. It is this: to “not confess” is not the same as to “deny.” This means that teaching that purports to be from the Spirit of God, but fails to proclaim the truth about who Jesus is, what He has done, and to call people to faith is not from God. There are people today who claim to be holding spiritual revivals who do not preach the gospel. Jesus and His apostles preached the gospel, calling people to repentance. The Holy Spirit will always motivate true Christians to confess the person and work of Christ.

Here is the challenge: apply the test that we learned from **1John 4:1-3** to the church today. The next time you receive teaching that purports to be Christian, whether it is from a “seeker” church or a “laughing revival” or anything in between, listen to what is proclaimed from the pulpit. If you never hear a clear message about the person and work of Christ and the claims of the gospel, the message being preached is not from the Spirit of God. You must discern spirits. If you passively accept what purports to be God’s message when it is not, you are setting yourself up for deception. Treating deception as if it were the gospel of Jesus Christ is sin.

The command to confess Christ is not satisfied by pointing to an orthodox statement of faith. Many churches that have long ago departed from the gospel still have orthodox doctrinal statements in their list of beliefs because they were required by their denominations when the church was founded.¹⁵ What they confess when they are speaking to people publicly today is what matters. If what is preached today is not the gospel, then they fail the test of **1John 4:1-3**. If they fail, we are told to not believe them nor listen to them. If we do not heed that command we are in danger of becoming deluded and subject to the deluding influence that is characteristic of the spirit of antichrist.

The Spirit of the Antichrist

There is one more issue to be addressed in this section of scripture: *“Every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world”* (**1John 4:3**). Failure to confess the unique person and work of Christ is evidence of the

spirit of the antichrist. The issue of antichrist and antichrists was addressed in chapter two of this epistle. Here John applies what he taught his readers earlier.

John taught that every true Christian is anointed by God and therefore needs no “anointed one” who claims to have special teachings or revelations that they lack.¹⁶ The only specially anointed one is **the** anointed One – Jesus Christ. Anyone who claims to have special anointing and thus special knowledge, John identifies with the spirit of antichrist.

The spirit (remember that “prophets” are in view, i.e. people claiming to speak for God) that does not confess the person and work of Jesus Christ is linked to antichrist. There is a reason for this. By hiding the unique status of Jesus as “the anointed one” (Christ), the door is opened to many “anointed ones.” Thus antichrist (substitute anointed one) has a door into the church.

Also, it is important to notice what is not included here or elsewhere in the New Testament as a test of spirits: the ability to do signs and wonders. The reason this is not a valid test of spirits is that substitute “anointed ones” will do signs and wonders with the intention of misleading the elect:

Then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ,' or 'There He is,' do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. (**Matthew 24:23, 24**).

Remember that “Christ” means “anointed one” and consider the implications of these verses. There will be multiple “anointed” prophets who will do signs and wonders. The signs and wonders will serve as “proof” that they have a special anointing. The target of this deception will be the church. People who think signs and wonders are the means of testing prophets will surely be deceived.

Here is more proof that works of power are not a valid test of spirits: *“Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness”*

(**Matthew 7:22, 23**). What then is a valid test? Consider the next verse: *“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock”* (**Matthew 7:24**). The valid test is conformity to the teachings of Jesus and His apostles.

Conclusion

In every case in the New Testament, we have seen that the discerning of spirits is objective, not subjective. This is necessary because spirits have a great advantage over humans in the realm of the spirit world. They have been in that realm practicing deception for thousands of years and they are good at it. They can produce whatever feeling or experience a person would normally associate with God or the Holy Spirit. The dangers of deception are greater than most people realize.

Holy Spirit inspired speech will always confess the person and work of Christ. True prophecy does not add to the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3), but expounds, exhorts, encourages, and comforts by directly applying Biblical teaching to the lives of hearers (1Corinthians 14:3). If a person claims to speak for God but the person’s message content does not agree with Scripture and is outside of the sphere of material that God has revealed in the Bible, the spiritual source of the message is not God’s Spirit.

We live in the time of great deception and apostasy. It is a time when the Biblical tools for discernment are needed more than ever. We need to take these objective tools and apply them to what we hear being taught in God’s name. Each of us might be shocked to find out that we have been listening to spirits and not the Spirit of God. We must run to the gospel and begin building our houses on the rock.

End Notes

1. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth*; (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1993) 278.
2. Ibid note 29.
3. Neil T. Anderson; *The Bondage Breaker*; (Harvest House: Eugene, 2000) 179.
4. Gordon Fee; *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; NICNT; (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987) 596.
5. Leon Morris; *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*; NICNT; (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1991) 177n66.
6. The word for “proportion” is *analogia* from which we get our English word “analogy” and means “proportion, measure, rule or standard” (so Charles Hodge). The word faith has a definite article “the faith.” Used in this way, the objective content of our beliefs is often designated. It is used this way in Galatians 1:23. Therefore the meaning would be “according to the standard of the faith.”
7. Charles Hodge, *Romans*, commentary on Romans 12:6.
8. R.C.H. Lenski, *Romans*, (Hendrickson: Peabody, 1998) 761.
9. Fee, 693-695 argues for functional terminology on the grounds that “all” may prophesy elsewhere in 1Corinthians 14.
10. The Greek word for “distinguishing spirits” in 1Corinthians 12:10 is the noun form “discernments” of the cognate verb “judge” in 1Corinthians 14:29. See Fee, 596 & 693.
11. Asceticism claims that one can be more spiritual through strict rules or severe treatment of the body. Antinomianism (lit. “against law”) teaches that moral laws do not apply to the spiritual person. Both of these doctrines are refuted in the New Testament (asceticism in Colossians 2 et. al.; antinomianism in 1John et. al.).
12. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*; chapter 110.
13. He made this claim on a video tape of the John Ankerberg show (1987) which is a debate between Silva and Dave Hunt. The possibility of another “Jesus” from another spirit is shown in this passage: “*For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.*” (**2Corinthians 11:4**)
14. Simon Kistemaker, “*James and I-III John*” in *New Testament Commentary*; (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1986) 325. Kistemaker writes, “In the Greek, John uses the perfect tense for the words *has come* to indicate that Jesus came in human nature and even now in heaven he has a human nature.”
15. This is also true of newer groups. I have encountered false teachers who deflect criticism by pointing to an orthodox statement of faith on their website or in other written material. Yet their public preaching has nothing to do with any of the published beliefs. An orthodox statement of faith can be copied and pasted from someone else’s website. What people preach and teach is what they really believe.
16. I wrote an entire CIC article on this topic:
<http://www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue63.pdf>