

Spiritual Gifts #7

DISCERNING OF SPIRITS

Read: Matthew 7:15-23; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10

Definition

Discerning of spirits is the ability to separate one spirit or doctrine or practice from another and to distinguish between the demonic, the human and the divine.

- Literally ‘discernings of spirits’
- Implies repeated use
- Kevin Conner: ‘Not trying to put the fire out: just don’t want to burn down the house!’

A scary thought

Read Matthew 7:22-23

- Using spiritual gifts is a good thing
- Jesus told his disciples to do it (Matt 10:1ff)
- But Jesus will tell some people who do so that he never knew them!
- He will call them ‘workers of lawlessness’
- This means that even people who appear to be powerful servants of God could be workers of iniquity
- Discernment is clearly needed

Deception is dangerous

Jesus said—

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves (Matt 7:15)

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. (Matthew 10:16)

For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect (Matthew 24:24)

Paul said –

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them [Acts 20:29-30]

We would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs [2 Cor. 2:11]

Do not quench the Spirit. [20] Do not despise prophecies, [21] but test everything; hold fast what is good [1 Thessalonians 5:19-21]

John said –

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. [2] By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, [3] 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 [1 John 4:1-3]

Sources of the Supernatural

There are three sources of the apparently supernatural.

Satan

What would Satan look like if he wanted to deceive you? He would appear like someone you know and trust – eg your minister or College lecturer or group leader

- * See Acts 20:28-30; 2 Corinthians 11:14
- * Antonio: ‘The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.’ (Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*)
- * Jeremiah 23:13: ‘In the prophets of Samaria I saw an unsavoury thing: they prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray.’

Take the gift of prophecy as an example. *Alleged prophecies can come from Satan*

Biblical examples – Zedekiah and Micaiah [1 Kings 22]; false prophets [Matt 7:15]

A woman gave her pastor a prophecy in writing that foretold a dreadful accident on him and his family. It played on his mind and nearly became self-fulfilling. On the other hand, if through fear he had listened to it, it could have affected his ongoing ministry. As it happened he went on to have a very successful ministry.

Human

Prophecies can come from our own minds

- * Biblical examples – prophets of Jeremiah’s day
- * Jeremiah 23:16 (ESV), ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.”’
- * Story of pastor who so badly wanted go out in tent-evangelism he prophesied that it was the will of God. His church accepted this but it finished in disaster.
- * Even though we may be well-intentioned it is dangerous to prophesy or use any spiritual gift about things that concern us personally. It is too easy to be mistaken.

God

Genuine prophecies come from the Lord

- * Biblical examples – hundreds! OT writers; Jesus; John
- * Jeremiah 23:18, 28-29 (ESV) – ‘For who among them has stood in the council of the Lord to see and to hear his word, or who has paid attention to his word and listened?’
- * Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the Lord. [29] Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? ‘
- * Prior to the founding of Tabor College, I received a prophecy from New Zealand pastor Peter Morrow in which he said he saw me ‘carving a new way’ in ministry which would be different from anything I had been engaged in before. This eventuated through the founding of Tabor College which was the first non-denominational charismatic Bible college in Australia – and still is the only one. There were other aspects as well – a curriculum which contained a wide range of options, campuses in several cities, large conventions and so on. There is no doubt now that this was a prophecy given by the Lord.

Questions to ask

There are many questions to ask to discern what is from the Lord. Here are four key questions.

1/Is it biblical?

- * Every thing must be evaluated against the Word of God
- * The 'canon' of Scripture. Greek word *kanon* = measuring rod
- * Deut. 13:1-3 (ESV) – 'If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, [2] and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, "Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them," [3] you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams.'
- * Some years ago a group of people told a young woman newly converted from an immoral life that because her body was the temple of the Spirit she should now use it for his glory. So far so good. They then told her through a 'prophecy' it was God's will for her to use her body to win a man to their group. She did as they told and made a shipwreck of her life. Clearly this was not biblical

2/Is it bona fide?

Does it come to pass? Is it genuine?

See Deut. 18:21-22 (ESV) – And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?'— [22] when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

- * See Act 4:16; 11:28 – undeniable miracle and fulfilled prophecy
- * A couple were told by a visiting 'prophet' that the wife would be pregnant by a certain time. When this did not happen they blamed themselves. But it was not their fault – the prophet was at fault.
- * When people are 'slain in the Spirit' it is important that they fall because of God's power not because of psychological inducement or being pushed!

3/Is it beneficial?

People always benefit from genuine manifestations of the Spirit

- * Biblical miracles always benefited the recipients – not just 'magic' tricks eg healing, food, safety, provision
- * 1 Cor. 12:7 (ESV) – To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.
- * A young man told how being filled with the Spirit and speaking in tongues changed his prayer life.
- * 'Slain in the Spirit'? The question is not how people fall but how they get up. Has there been benefit?

4/Is it botanical?

Does it demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit?

- * Gifts may be genuine but if we do not exercise them in love, we are nothing
- * Matt 7:16-20 – You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?... [18] A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. [19] Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.[20] Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

- * A preacher who told a young woman publicly that she had a spirit of death upon her because her mother had wanted to abort her. Her godly parents were in the meeting and were deeply distressed by this false charge.
- * 'Slain in the Spirit'? Is it to help the people or to enhance the image of the minister?

Using the gift

These are questions we should all ask. But there are times when we are still not sure. Our human senses and wisdom are just not enough. Then we need the gift of discerning of spirits. This is where this gift is so important.

Long-term

- * Walk in the Spirit (Gal 5:16)
- * Grow in maturity (Heb5:14)
- * Develop spontaneity (Act 14:8-10)
- * Develop sensitivity (Matt 9:4; 22:18)

Short-term

- * Pray (1 Cor 14:13)
- * Search the Scriptures (2 Tim 3:14ff)
- * Respond to uneasiness (Acts 16:18)
- * Ask questions (John 4:7, 16)
- * Consult the wise (Prov 11:14; 15:22)
- * Be patient (2 Kings 4:27)

Discerning the times

The men of Issachar 'understood the times' [1 Chron 12:32]. We need to be discerning of issues and trends today

- * The rise of Islam
- * The role of women
- * The environment
- * Community values
- * The nature of political power
- * The ordination of homosexuals
- * Marriage
- * Entertainment
- * Music

See Matthew 24:32-33

Areas of need

As with all gifts we should seek it eagerly, especially in –

- * Teaching
- * Leadership
- * Counselling
- * Pastoral care
- * Healing and deliverance

The danger

Read Acts 20:28-32 (ESV)

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. [29] I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them... [31] Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. [32] And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

SOMETHING TO THINK OR TALK ABOUT

Read Matthew 7:15-23

Biblical

1. What does Jesus say a false prophet is like? (15)
2. How can we identify false prophets? (16-19)
3. Which statement occurs twice in these verses? What does it mean?
4. Re-state in your own words the principle behind verses 17-18.
5. What happens to trees that bear bad fruit? (19)
6. Who are the people who enter the kingdom of heaven? (21)
7. Is the exercise of spiritual gifts proof that we are in the kingdom of God? Why or why not? (21-23)

Personal and practical

8. What name do we give to people who claim one thing and live another?
9. What would 'sheep's clothing' look like on a 'false prophet' in the church today? (15).
Give as many suggestions as you can.
10. What sort of questions should we ask to discern genuine from false gifts?
11. What kind of fruit does the Lord want to see in our lives? When you have thought about this read Galatians 5:16-23 and 1 Corinthians 12:31-14:1
12. What is the will of the Father for you? (21)
13. What do you think Jesus means by, 'I never knew you'? (23)
14. Memorise verse 20.

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