

Proving the Spirits

Proving the spirits can often be a difficult task. One of the hardest moments of my life was when I failed to properly discern a spirit. I was a trial minister at the time and certain the voice in my head was God, but it turned out to just be my own emotions and desires. Sometimes, we want so badly for God to speak to us directly and let us know His will, that we confuse our emotions for leadings of the Holy Ghost. Yet, when we do get it right, when we are in the center of God's Will and know it, this is one of life's most blessed experiences.

This article is an attempt to put into essay format ideas from a treatise on proving the spirits that a senior elder presented at an elder conference. The main points of the treatise were that there is a war going on between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan, that the "test" of a spirit is the whole of scripture, and that evangelism is a commandment and not an option.

At first glance it would not seem particularly relevant to a discussion on proving the spirits that there is a war going on between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan. However, this reality is essential to our understanding of proving the spirits.

Thankfully, the Bible reveals recognizable traits of Satan and his ministers:

- He is deceptive. (2 Corinthians 11:14)
- He has ministers engaged in his work. (2 Corinthians 11:15)
- He is a liar. (John 8:44)
- **True believers are the primary target of the Kingdom of Darkness.** (Matthew 24:24)

Satan's ministers are actively trying to deceive us and lead us astray. They come as voices in our heads, feelings in our hearts, images in our televisions, ideas in our podcasts, spins in our newspapers and worldviews in our classrooms. They deceive our politicians, our teachers, our lawmakers and yes, even our believing brethren. The surprising truth of all this sustained effort on Satan's part is that there are many opinions in our head that we are quite comfortable with, but are not God's at all. At times, what our objective opinion is on a subject, i.e. the answer we would give on record, is entirely different from the way we live our lives. Someone might objectively say that all they have is the Lord's, but in practice give very little to further His kingdom; choosing instead to spend that money on carnal things. So which spirit did the person in our example heed in terms of actions? The Holy Spirit who in the Bible exhorts us to "sow bountifully and give cheerfully" (2 Co 9:6,7) acknowledging God as the source of all our money, or Satan's spirit of materialism that appeals to the lust of our eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life (1 John 2:16)? Often, Satan does not care if we agree with Him, just that we listen to him without even realizing it.

Satan is fighting hard to make it difficult to discern "*that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*" The voice of the Holy Spirit is often shouted down by spirits appealing to lust, or pride, or more recently to "Reason" (think secular humanism) or "Science" (think evolution), making it difficult for the servants of God to be discerning. Consider this: God in His Word keeps on repeating that we are at war and need to be ever vigilant (Luke 21:34-36). Satan through every source at his disposal tells us that he does not even exist and that we should eat, drink and be merry – and pushes what it means to be merry ever further and further into depravity.

I remember the first time that my fellowship with the Holy Spirit was truly "sweet." I had been baptized for some years and had been led by God into a period of sustained prayer. God was really working on my character and understanding during this time and each night I would spend at least an hour or two in prayer. I never thought that such lengthy prayer time was possible before this; yet each night it became easier and easier to come into God's presence and commune with the Holy Ghost.

So how do we tell the difference between the Holy Spirit and a spirit of Satan that is trying to deceive us? How do we properly "test" a spirit? When God's children are unsure if the direction to be taken is of God, the following questions are helpful to discern who the messenger is:

1. Does the message he brings flow naturally from the scriptures?
2. Is it exempt from any awkward or private interpretations?
3. Does the message embrace *the whole counsel of God*?
4. Does the message encourage a closer walk with God?

If the answer is yes to all four questions, the Holy Spirit is the probable messenger. We should still naturally wait on the Lord until he opens the doors of opportunity and make sure that we carry out God's will in love.

The Elder stressed that that the **entire Bible** is the **complete message** that should be propagated to the lost world till Jesus returns and that the Bible in its entirety is the "test" of a spirit. As we have discussed above, the Bible quoting Devil is a deceiver. He will disguise himself in light, skillfully quote some scripture - just slightly in a twisted fashion - and pretend to be the Holy Ghost while pulling on our lusts and other emotions which make us want his voice to be the voice of God. If the message does not embrace the whole counsel of God, if it is in conflict with areas of scripture or the love and example of Christ, then the message is problematic; for, the scriptures and the Holy Ghost cannot be at odds with each other (1 John 5:7).

In light of this, when we hear the question raised, "Does this scripture apply to us today, or was it only for those people at that time?" our answer is emphatically yes, the scriptures apply. In some cases circumstances might have changed and so what it means to properly apply a principle from the Bible may be different now than in the past, but the principle is no less true.

The senior elder concluded his treatise with an exhortation to evangelize. He asked the elders collectively to lead a renewed effort to awaken the churches and encourage the gifted. The senior elder's focus here was twofold. One, he was discerning the spirits of our time and was convicted that evangelism was an area where we could reap more blessings. Two, he was deeply concerned that those with a desire to evangelize for God's kingdom were not being given enough guidance and opportunity. His suggestions included more ministries like the Mansfield radio program, large sing weekends where friends and neighbors are invited, and the support of ministers with the gift of preaching – asking these ministers to travel from church to church as evangelists.

In reading the elder's exhortation to evangelize I was reminded of a story that has to me become a modern day parable. A middle-aged believer is sitting down for one of our family lunches at church next to an elder and proceeds to proudly tell the elder that he has matured so much since his conversion that he rarely feels tempted or tried of Satan. He proclaims that he is now much more at "peace." The elder, with a look of tender care, says that this is terrible news. That it means the brother is no longer effectively working in the vineyard and that Satan no longer sees him as a threat and so no longer opposes him.

In our circles it can be all too easy and acceptable to fall into the rhythm of regular attendance and conforming behavior and be lulled right into spiritual sleep because the metric we judge our lives by is not what God thinks or wants of us but the expectations of the people in our local church. There is so much more available to us as Children of God! There is abundant life and sweet fellowship with the Holy Ghost, if we learn to listen to Him to the exclusion of other spirits. There is also the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5) that we can enjoy in our lives. And yes, there is the blessed feeling of being in the center of God's will and knowing it.

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