

Testing the Spirits

M.W. Bassford
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Introduction.

- A. In our lives, we commonly determine the nature of a thing by looking at its characteristics. We look at the parts to determine what the whole is. For example, let's say I sit down in front of the TV one Saturday and decide that I want to find a football game to watch. On one channel, I see a bunch of men playing a game of some sort. They are wearing helmets and shoulder pads, they are playing on a grass field with a lot of white stripes, and the ball they're using is brown and funny-shaped. I conclude that I have found a football game.
- B. It only makes sense to apply this same common-sense standard to the religious world as well. This same technique, of judging a thing by its characteristics, is particularly useful in our dealings with charismatics, those who believe that the miraculous spiritual gifts continue today. We typically approach charismatics by pointing out that spiritual gifts died out back in the first century, using passages like 1 Corinthians 13 and Acts 8.
- C. However, it is equally effective to deal with charismatics by comparing what they claim are spiritual gifts to the actual miraculous gifts of the first century, as recorded in the New Testament. In this comparison process, we follow 1 John 4:1, which commands us to test the spirits. It's important that we do this, both to confirm our own faith and to learn how to deal with those who are in error. Let's turn to God's word this morning, then, and spend some time examining some passages that will help us in testing the spirits.

I. Spiritual Gifts Generally.

- A. Let's start this study by looking at spiritual gifts generally. The Bible has much to say about them, but let's look at two important characteristics. The first of these is that spiritual gifts **ARE UNDER THE CONTROL OF THEIR POSSESSORS**. This is the message of 1 Corinthians 14:32, which shows that it was the prophet, not the gift, that was in control. Now, brethren, if you remember anything from this sermon, remember 1 Corinthians 14:32. It's a critical test, because it is a test that 99 percent of Pentecostals and charismatics will fail. Almost all of them will tell us that when they are speaking in tongues or whatever, their spiritual gift that is in control of them. When they say this, they establish that they do not have a genuine spiritual gift.
- B. This charismatic idea, the idea of the gift taking control of the worshiper and making him say and do things, is not an idea that comes from the New Testament. In fact, it comes from the native religions of Africa. For example, in the Yoruba religion of Nigeria, worshipers believe in godlike spirits called *orishas*. These worshipers believe that during worship, they are "mounted" by these *orishas* in the same way that a man mounts a horse—to take control of it. Hundreds of years ago, when millions of Africans were enslaved and brought to the Western Hemisphere, their religion traveled with them. It mixed with Christianity and in the process created a number of new religions. In Haiti, this new religion was called Vodun, what we typically call voodoo. In Brazil, the new religion was Candomble. In the United States, the new religion was Pentecostalism, which eventually evolved into the charismatic smorgasbord we see today.
- C. Similarly, spiritual gifts **ARE USED IN A DECENT AND ORDERLY WAY**. This is what the apostle Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 14:40, which is basically a handbook for how to use spiritual gifts. Now, it is true that Paul is telling the Corinthians what they are supposed to do with their gifts, not describing what they actually do with them. However, this is still a fair test to apply. After all, if a whole church really has spiritual gifts, isn't the Holy Spirit going to prompt at least one of them to look at 1 Corinthians 14 so that they can learn how to behave? I know the passage is there, so someone with a spiritual gift should certainly know the passage is there. Therefore, we can use obedience to 1 Corinthians 14 throughout the morning as a test for genuineness.
- D. So how does this particular test play out? Are charismatic worship services conducted in an orderly manner? Of course, it is impossible to make blanket statements about such a diverse movement, but in general, it is fair to say that they are not. They are emotional, they are noisy, they are exuberant, but they are not orderly.

II. Speaking in Tongues.

- A. Now that we've established some things that are generally true of spiritual gifts, we can turn to tongues. The first observation that we can make about the genuine spiritual gift is that speaking in tongues **INVOLVES ACTUAL LANGUAGES**. This is what we see in Acts 2:4-6. The apostles who received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost weren't babbling; they were speaking languages that Jews from all over the Mediterranean basin also spoke. Interestingly enough, when Pentecostalism first emerged, this is the kind of speaking in tongues that its adherents claimed. During the Topeka Revival of 1901, the first recorded Pentecostal gathering, the leader of the group, Charles Fox Parham, said that they spoke in actual human tongues. Of course, the problem with claiming speech in actual foreign languages is that the claim is falsifiable. As a result, most charismatics retreat to glossolalia, incomprehensible babble that they say is a "tongue" but linguistics experts say cannot be any sort of language at all. Nothing like this nonsensical "speech" appears in Scripture.

- B. In addition to involving actual languages, Scriptural speaking in tongues **IS UNDERSTOOD BY THE SPEAKER**. This is what Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:4. This is obvious once we think about it. Look at the way the speaker in tongues is described. He is speaking a foreign language that the congregation does not understand; he is edified; they are not. Now, if the speaker did not understand himself, he would be just as much in the dark as the congregation. The only way he can be edified and they not is if he understands what he is saying but they don't. Therefore, he must understand what he is saying.
- C. This passage is also a big tripwire for almost all charismatics. Typically, charismatics believe they speak in tongues, but they "speak" the incomprehensible glossolalia we discussed a moment ago. No one on the planet understands what they are saying, least of all themselves. To deal with this problem, charismatics typically teach that the speaker in tongues does not understand his own words. This is opposed to the Scriptural description of speaking in tongues, and it establishes that those so-called gifts of tongues are not genuine.
- D. Furthermore, speaking in tongues **IS NOT TO BE USED BY THE WHOLE ASSEMBLY**. Consider Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:23. Once again, Paul's reasoning is not difficult to follow. Even a roomful of people who are speaking the same language can be quite chaotic. Just imagine what a roomful of 100 different people speaking 100 different languages would be like! It would be sheer pandemonium! As Paul astutely observes, the effect of this would not be to persuade the unbeliever that God was present, but rather to convince him that everyone else in the assembly had lost their minds. Sadly, this chaos is all too evident in the assemblies of many charismatics today. At certain points in the assembly, the worship service degenerates into everyone "speaking in tongues" at once. This kind of bedlam holds no appeal to the God who is of peace rather than confusion. It only confirms the falsity of the speakers' claims to spiritual giftedness.
- E. Finally, we see from 1 Corinthians 14 that speaking in tongues **IS USED FOR TEACHING**. Paul tells us this in 1 Corinthians 14:27, where he sets up a pattern for speaking in tongues that produces precisely this effect. First, according to Paul, never should more than one person be speaking in tongues at one time. Once the first speaker has finished, another may begin, but never should more than three people speak in tongues on the same occasion. Furthermore, someone with the gift of interpretation of tongues must interpret as the speakers are still speaking. The result of this would be something very familiar to any Christian who has ever seen a bilingual service. Indeed, the only difference between our bilingual services today and the first-century services that this verse describes is that we acquire our skill with language by study, and they acquired theirs through the Holy Spirit. Both of these services stand in stark contrast to the typical charismatic assembly. During such an assembly, more than one person is often speaking in tongues at a time, and interpreters, though sometimes present, are more often absent. It proves the lack of any actual spiritual gift.

III. Healing.

- A. Second only to the charismatic interest in speaking in tongues is their interest in miraculous healing. However, Scripture also gives us a number of ways to test these supposed spirits of healing, and the first is that genuine healing **IS NOT POWERED BY THE FAITH OF THE SICK**. This is evident from a number of passages, but nowhere more so than in Luke 22:50-51. This incident takes place during the arrest of Jesus. When Peter tries to defend Jesus and cuts off the ear of the high priest's slave, Jesus reattaches the ear. Did this happen because the slave believed in Jesus? Certainly not! He was presently engaged in arresting Him and dragging Him off to be crucified. It happened because of the power of Jesus, not the faith of the slave.
- B. Now, this is commonly not something faith healers will say, and for a very good reason. They like to say that healing is powered by the faith of the sick because it gives them an out. After all, if they lay hands on some person with cancer, and it's their power that's supposed to heal, and the person dies, that death exposes them as a fraud. By contrast, if they claim that it's the faith of the sick person that provides healing, then, when the sick person dies, they can just shake their heads and say, "She just didn't have enough faith." I've heard faith healers say it. This may make them look good to some, but it shows that they have no genuine spiritual gift.
- C. Also, genuine healing **IS UNDENIABLY MIRACULOUS**. Look at what the Jewish enemies of the early Christians say about Peter's healing of a lame man in Acts 4:15-16. That man had begged by the temple gate for years, so everybody knew he had been lame, and now everybody knew he was healed. A modern comparison to this might be if, back before Christopher Reeve died, a faith healer had healed his paralysis. Even though the Jewish leaders wanted to deny the miracle, they couldn't. That's genuine healing.
- D. By contrast, there is plenty of room to dispute the miracles of modern-day faith healers. In the decades since faith healing has emerged on the scene, there has never been a documented, verifiable instance of a miracle cure. Instead, all these supposed miraculous healings occur in the shadows, where no one can pin them down. Now, if these faith healers had a genuine gift, this wouldn't make sense. After all, just think about how much God would have been glorified if Christopher Reeve had been healed! That kind of glory through clear, convincing miracle is what the apostles sought and what their successors would seek today. By contrast, when faith healers don't seek the certainty they could have, shows that their gift is fraudulent.

Conclusion. God can only be approached through the truth of His word. If you would have Him, come to Him today.