

UNDERSTANDING AND DISCERNING SPIRITUAL PHENOMENA

by Dave Gehrls ~ Christ For the City International ~ dave@cfci.org

I. Introduction

While the Scriptures confirm that signs and wonders will accompany the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we also need to heed the many warnings of great deception, false signs and lying wonders that will be rampant in the last days.

"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." -I John 4:1

It never hinders "The Spirit" to test the spirits! To the contrary we get in trouble when we don't. Not only does leadership need to test unusual signs and wonders but church leaders are also told to judge spiritual gifts in the body. Individuals should also use wisdom in who they allow to minister to them and test the "words" spoken over them.

"and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets;" -I Cor. 14:32

"Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thus share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin." -I Timothy 5:22

II. Spiritual Phenomena ... When the Spiritual impacts Humanity

A. Three Categories of Phenomena (Source: Francis Frangipane)

1. Biblical manifestations

- a) Include anointed preaching (resulting in conviction, repentance, or inspiration in the listener); physical or emotional healing; deliverance from demonic possession, and the inspired "word" gifts: prophecy, tongues, words of knowledge and wisdom (I Cor. 12, 14).
- b) Dreams and visions will often accompany a true outpouring of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2). Although dreams, visions, prophecy, and words of knowledge are biblical in nature, their content should be tested against Scripture and confirmed by two or three witnesses.

2. Unbiblical manifestations

- a) Include "New Age" concepts, astrology, obsession with UFOs, "channeling," witchcraft, and the like are obviously *unbiblical*.
- b) The Bible condemns these things, since the spiritual activity joined to them is demonic.

3. Extra-biblical manifestations are where the Bible does not give us a pattern... neither for, nor against.

- a) When the supernatural impacts the natural it can be like throwing a stone into a mud puddle – it causes an unpredictable splatter.
- b) When the flesh encounters the Spirit, whether it be demonic or Godly, the human "splatter" on the surface may be quite similar. Remember, there will always be a lot of flesh in a true move of God among fallen humanity.
- c) Grace should be given when extra-biblical phenomena is manifested. "While the Lord will accommodate and touch us through extra-biblical manifestations, He decidedly does not want us to ritualize that phenomenon. Should that happen, the Lord will seek to guide the church back to a more biblical focus."
"If the people persistently resist Him... they will become vulnerable to religious spirits... and another sect may be born whose activity centers around a sign rather than the fullness of Christ."

B. Discerning the "spiritual source"

1. Is our attention drawn to Jesus? – John 16:14

2. Is Jesus biblically confessed? – John 4:2-3 (Is the Gospel truthfully proclaimed?)

3. Is there lasting spiritual fruit? – Matthew 7:20

- a) Are people still healed or delivered two months later?
- b) Are followers becoming more like Jesus? –Gal. 5:22-23
- c) Are there lasting "conversions" not just "decisions?" – John 15:16

III. Insights from Jonathan Edwards

Taken from: "The Surprising Works of God" by Professor Richard Lovelace, Gordon-Conwell Seminary, in Christianity Today -1995

Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan theologian who has been called the greatest mind produced by America, was also the greatest theologian of revival. When we talk about renewal in the contemporary church, Edwards's writings provide us with the best standards available **to help us judge what is genuine, what is spurious, and what is a mixture waiting to be purified.**

1. In 1734, Edwards preached "A Divine and Supernatural Light," advancing a new theory of religious semantics. **Professing Christians who have had truth drilled into them by others can talk a good game even when they are totally out of touch with supernatural reality.** They can move pieces of theology around like markers on the map of a territory they have never visited.

2. Real Christianity requires encounter with truth, but that truth must be illuminated by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Only this can produce "a true sense of the divine excellency of the things revealed in the word of God." One of the effects of this encounter will be a delight in the glory of God. The convert "does not merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart...there is a sense of the loveliness of God's holiness." **Biblical Christianity is therefore a Spirit-illuminated orthodoxy that transforms the heart and reorients the whole life to focus on God and seek his will.**

3. Edwards evidently believed that injecting spurious and disfiguring elements into a revival is a main part of demonic strategy. He would certainly agree with J. Edwin Orr that **in any awakening, the first person to wake up is the Devil.**

4. Edwards was suddenly faced with a storm of criticism, often focused on real problems in the revival. His first response was almost purely defensive. "Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God" (1741) begins by stating that there are many elements in the revival that are neither sure signs of the Spirit nor marks of the flesh or the Devil, but that are simply indifferent--a kind of accidental package surrounding the real core of spiritual awakening.

It proves nothing that revivals emerge from protracted meetings or that they seem to cause strange bodily effects. Strong preoccupation with religion or imaginative visions prove nothing either way. If revival phenomena seem to spread by contagion or imitation, this is again inconclusive. Imprudence and irregularity, satanic delusions, and even the subsequent apostasy of some converts do not disprove the real activity of the Spirit in a revival. More positively, **Edwards finds five biblical marks of a genuine revival: it exalts Jesus Christ; it attacks the powers of darkness; it exalts the Holy Scriptures; it lifts up sound doctrine; and it promotes love to God and man.**

Edwards was convinced that there could be a lot of immaturity in a genuine revival: "In the spring innumerable flowers and young fruits appear flourishing and bid fair, that afterwards drop off and come to nothing.... So a shower causes mushrooms suddenly to spring up, as well as good plants to grow.... (In the spring of the year when the birds sing, the frogs and toads also croak.)"

5. THE DEFENDER TURNS CRITIC In subsequent writings, Edwards turns more and more from defending the revival to critiquing its defects. In "Thoughts on the Revival in New England" (1742), after opening with a strong portrayal of the revival's power, he offers a searching critique of carnal religiosity. **He is concerned that revival leaders have begun to confuse their own hunches and impulses with God's leading. Above all, he laments the prevalence of spiritual pride, "the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of religion...the main handle by which the devil has hold of religious persons...to clog and hinder a work of God." Pride is so serious an impediment because it diverts Christians from repentance and makes them censorious:**

Spiritual pride is very apt to suspect others; whereas a humble saint is most jealous of himself, he is so suspicious of nothing in the world as he is of his own heart.... The eminently humble Christian has so much to do at home...that he is not apt to be very busy with other hearts.... He is apt to esteem others better than himself, and is ready to hope that there is nobody but what has more love and thankfulness to God than he.

Spiritually proud Christians, on the other hand, are quick to censure others and quick also to separate from them if their beliefs or behaviors do not measure up. They can manifest a carnal spirituality that sets others' teeth on edge, a self-assurance and unholy boldness, and a dogmatic inflexibility that either argues continually or will not even dialogue. Spiritual pride "often disposes persons...to affect a singular way of speaking." It "takes great notice of opposition and injuries that are received." It preens itself, while it neglects others. **In the early 1740s, Edwards longed for revival leaders who were not pompous and contentious, ho were mere humble Christians:**

6. In the "Treatise on the Religious Affections" (1744), Edwards trained his critical powers almost exclusively on his own party. He was concerned that pure Christian spirituality was being drowned in counterfeits. " **'Tis by the mixture of counterfeit religion with true, not discerned and distinguished, that the devil has had his greatest advantage against the cause and kingdom of Christ.**"

As in "Distinguishing Marks," Edwards starts by listing a series of **"insufficient signs" that neither discredit nor validate a revival movement: intense religious emotions, involuntary bodily effects, talkativeness, self-oriented forms of love, a slavish fear of God, intense religiosity, praise of God that is really focused on self, assurance of salvation (or lack of this), and even pleasing other godly persons.**

7. If these are not adequate signs of spiritual renewal, then what is? Edwards answers that **the heart (the inmost center of the personality) must be touched by the Holy Spirit. This healing touch generates affections (driving motives that inform and direct the mind and will) flowing out of love for God himself, not just gratitude for his gifts.** These affections are responses to God's own beauty, not merely to his power or greatness. They do not bypass the mind, they illuminate and transform it. They make faith more certain, but they also create humility. **They change our nature, producing a meek and gentle spirit and a tender sensitivity to sin.** They do not foster self-centered emotionalism but rather a vigorous social conscience that cares for bodies as well as souls. They lead inevitably to the practice of Christian charity.

8. By the time the "Treatise on the Affections" was published in 1746, Edwards was discouraged over the revival. In 1742, he had warned against **the Devil's strategy of sowing tares among the wheat in order to discredit the whole crop:**

We may observe that it has been a common device of the devil, to upset a revival of religion; when he finds he can keep men quiet and secure no longer, then he drives them to excesses and extravagances.... Though the devil will do his diligence to stir up the open enemies of religion, yet he knows...that, in a time of revival of religion, his main strength shall be tried with the friends of it; and he will chiefly exert himself in his attempts to mislead them. **One truly zealous person...may do more...to hinder the work, than a hundred great, and strong, and open opposers.**

9. Edwards and the other revival leaders knew that in awakenings they were always in a tug of war with the Devil. Puritans said, "When the sun shines on a swamp, mist rises." Sometimes conversion effects exorcism, and the displaced agents may not go quietly. **Unable to beat the revival, they may try to join it,** like the girl at Philippi who gave the apostles free advertising but was promptly exorcised by Paul (Acts 16:16).

A revival movement that finds itself replicating compulsive laughter, spiritual drunkenness, pecking like chickens or roaring like lions as expected aspects of spiritual awakening may be playing into the Enemy's hands. It is in the Devil's interest to make Christians weird. He does not need possession to do this; he can manage by suggestion. The goal of his strategy is to create a church that is so institutionally strange that unbelievers will detour around it. The goal of revival is conformity to the image of Christ, not imitation of animals.

NOTE: A true move of God may see manifestations such as noted in the previous paragraph.

Unique manifestations occasionally become a distinguishing mark:

Quakers quaked and trembled, Pentecostals rolled –"holy rollers."

The Lord does not want us to ritualize the phenomenon, esteeming it higher than His word.

**Movements of revival usually center on recovered biblical truth,
greater Christ likeness among believers,
and a fresh harvest of souls.**

IV. Some Insights on Spiritual From 30 Years Of Ministry

A. My sheep know my voice..."

1. God does speak to us prophetically through other believers, but no prophecy should be received until it has been spiritually judged and confirmed. --I Corinthians 14:29,32; Acts 17-11; I Thessalonians 5:19-21; I John 4:1-3
2. The primary purpose of prophecy is to confirm God's voice not to have someone hear from God for you, which is what the pagans do to hear from the gods. --John 10:27
3. Some believers in seeking personal prophecy have moved into divination.

B. The Tongues Issue

C. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels..." II Cor. 4:7

1. The human factor... The maturity factor... The Grace factor...
2. Styles and Techniques:
 - Blowing, fanning, special ways of touching, healing hankies, etc
 - Helping God.... or Him helping us:
 - Because we are physical as well as spiritual beings, God gives us things that we can touch, see, feel to help us grasp things that are invisible... Water Baptism, Oil, Communion, etc.
3. When "the Spirit falls on others, but I feel nothing... -

V. Personal Preparation for Ministry

A. Wrong Motives

1. Each gift has an opposing spirit that leads to misuse.
2. "God's Anointed"
 - Be wary of someone whose primary motivation is "Doing their ministry" (performing their gifts) rather than a desire to serve people.
3. Self promotion
 - Don't present your ministry. Present your heart as a servant.

B. Right Motives

1. Agape Love (Doing what is best for another)
-I Corinthians 12:5; & chapter 13
2. A Servant Spirit -I Peter 4:10-11
3. A Humble Spirit (Broken before God, not caring who gets the human credit as long as God receives the glory.) --I Peter 5:5,6
4. A Gentle Spirit (Knowing that we are cracked, clay pots ministering to cracked clay pots.) --Galatians 6:1-2

C. Understanding why God doesn't always quickly judge and remove poor leadership.

1. They are God's judgment on rebellious groups
2. The gifts and calling of God are without repentance
3. God honors obedience to their ministry office for the sake of the people... ie Me/porn
4. Ezekiel 44

D. Hebrews 13:7- 8

1. Remember _____
2. Consider _____
3. Imitate _____