

Bible Study Appendix

Testing the Spirits

1 Corinthians 12–14

by The Reverend Frances Taylor Gench

It is clear from a reading of the New Testament that the early Christians experienced the Spirit as a powerful presence in their lives. But it is also clear that “when someone spoke under inspiration the community did not simply listen gape-mouthed and accept it without question as a word of the exalted Christ” or a word of God.¹ On the contrary, the early churches were aware of the very real danger of false inspiration, false prophecy, false teaching. Whenever people claimed that the words they spoke were inspired by God’s Spirit, there was an accompanying recognition that the claim might be false—that it had to be tested, weighed, assessed before it could be approved as a word of God. Every word was subject to communal discernment, so we encounter in the New Testament the notion of “testing the spirits” or discernment of spirits. We see this in the earliest document in the New Testament: **Read 1 Thess. 5:19–22**. So, how did they go about “testing the spirits”? Were there any criteria or norms for that discernment?

We must turn to Paul for guidance on this matter, for as New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn observes,

Of the first generation Christians, it was Paul who . . . grasped most clearly the danger of an inspiration whose source was demonic and whose utterance could not be trusted. Whenever he is confronted with prophecy as a living force he is quick to indicate that prophetic inspiration alone is no guarantee that the inspired word is of the Spirit. So much so that *every* prophetic utterance must be subjected to careful scrutiny and evaluation.²

The most extensive discussion of Christian prophecy in the New Testament is found in 1 Cor. 12–14. **Read 1 Cor. 12:4–11 and 14:29, noting how careful Paul is to link in close conjunction “prophecy” and “discerning” of spirits.** The Greek words for “discernment” and “weighing” in these verses have the connotation of differentiating, distinguishing, judging—of recognizing a thing for what it is. Discerning spirits means knowing who is influenced by the Holy Spirit and who is not.

Paul speaks of prophecy throughout these chapters, particularly in Chapter 14. **Read the first and last verses of this chapter: 1 Cor. 14:1 and 14:39–40.** Paul clearly expected that members of the congregation other than recognized prophets could be granted a word of prophecy. Paul does not provide a precise definition of “prophecy” (he presumes that the Corinthians know what he is talking about), but he does describe prophecy’s functions in **1 Cor. 14:3 and 31**: upbuilding, encouraging, consoling, learning. It is roughly equivalent to instruction. Thus prophecy, for Paul, is not to be confused with telling the future; instead, it is a statement for the community and those in worship, given to meet needs within the Christian community for edification, encouragement, consolation, learning, guidance, and direction.³

According to 1 Cor. 12:10, discernment of spirits is itself a gift of the Spirit of God. However, Dunn helpfully identifies several norms that surface repeatedly in Paul's discussion of this matter⁴:

1. the test of the gospel, or norm of earlier revelation
2. the character and conduct of the prophet, or test of love
3. the test of community benefit

The test of the gospel, or norm of earlier revelation

Read 1 Cor. 12:3, which presents a very clear rule of thumb for evaluating spiritual utterances, a summary confession of the gospel: Jesus is Lord! It seems plausible that someone has in fact cried out "Jesus be cursed" in the midst of the church's worship in Corinth. Paul does not intend this to be the only test that arises out of the gospel. 1 Cor. 12:3 is determined by the situation in Corinth. The test is framed differently elsewhere. In Galatians, for example, the test that arises out of the gospel is the test of Christian *liberty* rather than Christology (see **Gal. 5:1**).⁵ Paul placed a great deal of stock on a church's initial experience of and response to the gospel (see **Gal. 1:6–9**, where Paul reprimands the Galatians for turning from the gospel they initially received). This norm also surfaces elsewhere in the New Testament. **Read 1 John 1:1; 2:24; 4:1–6**, for example, where the test is framed to address a major Christological conflict in the community. Again, note the emphasis in 1 John on the church's initial experience of and response to the gospel, on what was "from the beginning."

The character and conduct of the prophet, or test of love

The second test is an ethical test, and one of the most important criteria for Paul: does the prophet manifest love in the exercise of his or her gift? It is no accident that Paul's famous chapter on love (1 Cor. 13) is at the heart of his long discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor. 12–14. Here, Paul describes a more excellent way to exercise any and all gifts, for from his perspective, without love the Christian graces are dis-graced.⁶ **Read 1 Cor. 13:4–7**, noting its clearly polemical intent. This same ethical criterion is invoked in Galatians 5, where the "fruit of the spirit" plays the same role as the "hymn to love" in 1 Corinthians. **Read Gal. 5:1, 13–26**. Those who claim that the Spirit inspires them can be expected to manifest fruit consistent with the Spirit's presence in their lives. This ethical criterion is also invoked in **1 John 4:7–12, 20** and by Jesus in **Matt. 7:15–20**, where false prophets are known by their "fruits." According to this final text, if anyone claims to be prophesying or teaching the commandments of Jesus, but is not living in the manner that Jesus described, then their understanding of Jesus' words must be suspect and their prophesying or teaching cannot be respected (see also Matt. 12:33–37).⁷

The test of community benefit

The test of community benefit, the clearest of Paul's criteria, appears primarily in 1 Corinthians 14, where it is repeated seven times. It is the test of "building up" or "edification" (*oikodomē* in Greek). **Note this criterion in 14:1–5. Note also the**

missionary dimension to this norm in 14:22–25. Dunn summarizes this important criterion this way: “Whatever does not build up, whatever word or action destroys the congregation’s unity or causes hurt to its members or leaves the outsider merely bewildered, that word or action fails the test of *oikodomē*, and should be ignored or rejected, no matter how inspired, how charismatic it seems to be.”⁸ While this criterion is nowhere else so clearly articulated as in Paul, we do see a parallel communal emphasis in the Gospel of Matthew, for a test Matthew offers for determining the legitimacy of teaching is *the consensus or agreement of the community*. The teaching function may be exercised by any member of the community, but when disputes arise, the teaching function must be exercised by the church as a whole. **Read Matt. 18:15–18**, where Jesus details how this test is to be applied.

It is clear from Paul’s discussion that those who claim inspiration must be open to assessment, review, and critique. They should expect deliberation, engaged response from the community. An unwillingness to cooperate in the discernment process is itself an indication that something is wrong. But discernment remains a difficult task. Indeed, in the midst of his discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor. 12–14, Paul candidly observes that during the present age “we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12). 1 John also hints at our partial knowledge: “It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him” (1 John 3:2).

Questions for discussion and reflection

- Share your reactions to this study of “testing the spirits” in 1 Cor. 12–14.
- Which one of the texts or emphases noted strikes you most, and why?
- What connections are you discerning between any of these texts or emphases and the struggles for discernment in which Presbyterians are currently engaged?
- What new insights have emerged from your engagement with these texts and emphases and your discussion with each other? What questions linger?
- Let Paul have the last word: read his admonition in 2 Cor. 13:5 and share your reactions to it.

¹ James D. G. Dunn, “Discernment of Spirits—A Neglected Gift,” in *Witness to the Spirit: Essays on Revelation, Spirit, Redemption*, ed. Wilfrid Harrington (Dublin: Koinonia Press, 1979), p. 87.

² James D. G. Dunn, “Discernment of Spirits,” p. 82.

³ J. Paul Sampley, “The First Letter to the Corinthians,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. X (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), p. 960. The same is true of Old Testament prophets, who were not primarily in the business of predicting the future, but of exhorting believers to remain faithful to God.

⁴ See James D. G. Dunn, “Discernment of Spirits,” pp. 83–87; and Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 594–98. See also Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (London SCM/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), ch. 9.

⁵ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 293.

⁶ Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit: The Pentecostal Experience and the New Testament Witness* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1970), p. 295.

⁷ Mark Allan Powell, *God With Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), pp. 84–86.

⁸ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 296.