

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, April 10, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

1 JOHN 4:1 and 1 CORINTHIANS 12:7, 10

“Dear friends, 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.”

“Each person is given his gift by the Spirit, that he may use it for the common good...to one...is given the ability to distinguish true spirits from false.”

THE GIFT OF DISCERNMENT

Almost every time I go over the 14th Street bridge into Washington, I see tourists lined up to get into the U.S. Mint, where our paper currency is printed. It is one of the most interesting places to visit in the nation’s capital. And as you watch those great presses rolling out the \$100 bills by the thousand, you fairly drool, don’t you?!

And yet, across this country, every day, thousands of storekeepers sell good merchandise for worthless currency. The money looks real, to them it feels like legal tender, but in reality, it’s counterfeit; it’s phony—not worth a penny.

I read somewhere recently about a bank president who was being interviewed on TV, and he was asked, “Does your bank receive much counterfeit money?” And he replied, “Almost none”; and then he went on to explain that when tellers are employed in his bank, they spend their first two months just counting rolls of bills. Now counterfeiters can print bills that look perfect, but it is virtually impossible for them to obtain paper of the exact texture of genuine currency. So, these apprentice tellers, as thousands of bills pass through their hands, soon learn what the real paper feels like; and before long they get to the point where, if they have a roll of two hundred \$20 bills, even if they are not looking at the bills, if they come to one that feels slightly different, immediately they stop, inspect it, and discover that it is a counterfeit. “So,” said the president, “when our tellers go on duty, and deal with customers over the counter, there is very little chance of their being duped into accepting a phony bill.” You see, those bank tellers had developed the gift of discernment.

It is always sad when people leave our congregation to go to live and work in some distant place. And often they have written to me to say, “Dr. Smith, we simply can’t find a Bible-believing fellowship here such as we enjoyed with you all in Alexandria.” And they worry about their own spiritual growth, and especially that of their children.

One family attended a large church for the first time on an Easter day, and heard a sermon which dealt with the risen Christ and His presence with people today. They visited a few more

Sundays and heard references to the divine Christ and the inspired Bible. A month later they joined.

However, about three months later, a feeling of uneasiness enveloped the parents when their children brought home the news from Sunday School that the way Jesus fed the 5,000 was by getting the boy with the loaves and fishes to bring out his lunch and share it with others, thus encouraging all the others to take out their lunches and share them with those who had not brought any food! The parents began to listen more intently to the sermons, but the language seemed orthodox enough. It took them another nine months to discover that when the preacher spoke of “the risen Christ,” he meant that only His influence had emerged from the tomb, not His body. When he spoke of an “inspired Bible,” he meant only that the Bible was inspired like the plays of Shakespeare or the poetry of Milton or Wordsworth.

In the mercy of God, they had discovered another small group of believers who held uncompromisingly to the historic faith, but that family lost one whole year of spiritual growth because they lacked discernment.

St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 speaks about “false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness.”

I’m afraid it is neither untrue nor uncharitable to say that there are pastors of large congregations who are Satan’s servants, masquerading as servants of righteousness, false shepherds, who teach false doctrine, and thus lead the sheep astray. There are theological seminaries in this country that reek with infidelity to the Word of God, and which are graduating men and women who will be nothing but blind leaders of the blind. And believers must constantly be on their guard against this kind of satanic activity; and to develop the gift of discernment is the finest way to guard against the enemy’s onslaught. Remember, Satan targets every Christian as a prime object of his attack, and in order to distinguish the genuine from the spurious, we need discernment.

Look at 1 John 4:1: “Dear friends, 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.” In the early Church, there were three distinct ministries:

1. Unique and above all others stood **the apostles**, those who had fellow-shipped with our Lord, and who had been witnesses of His resurrection. They were the undisputed leaders of the Church whom Christ had appointed to speak in His name and with His authority, and whom He had chosen and equipped to write the New Testament Scriptures, which would be comparable in authority to those of the Old Testament. The authority of the apostles extended to the whole Church.

2. And then there were **the prophets**. They were wandering preachers going where the Spirit moved them and giving to people the message which the Spirit of God gave to them; and they had right of entry to any and every congregation.

3. And finally there were **the elders**, and they were ordained officials within each assembly of believers, and their responsibility was that of leadership in their own congregation.

Now the prophets, those wandering preachers, did present a problem. As Dr. William Barclay says, “They had an enormous prestige, and it was possible for the most undesirable characters to enter into a way of life in which they moved from place to place, living in considerable comfort at the expense of the local congregations. A clever rogue could make a very comfortable living as an itinerant prophet.”

So, Christians were exhorted to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” In his second Letter John is even more specific and says that “if anyone comes to teach you, and he doesn’t believe what Christ taught, don’t even invite him into your home. Don’t encourage him in any way. If you do, you will be a partner with him in his wickedness” (2 John 10-11).

The plain fact is that Satan is alive and well on Planet Earth, and discernment is an absolutely indispensable gift of the Spirit within the Body of Christ if a congregation is to remain strong and healthy. We might define this gift as the special ability God gives to certain members of the Body of Christ that enables them to know with assurance whether certain behavior or teaching that claims to be of God is, in reality, divine, human, or satanic.

In every Christian congregation there are those who, by God’s grace, are wiser and more insightful than others. People with the gift of discernment can sift the wheat from the chaff; they have the ability to unmask Satan’s trickery and to expose false teaching. They can read a religious book and almost immediately detect any subtle error. They can hear a sermon and put a finger on any deficiency of truth. They can listen to Jehovah’s Witnesses or the Mormons, or any other cultic teaching with its mixture of truth and error, and not be deluded by it.

Our Lord, of course, demonstrated this gift so perfectly! There was that day at Caesarea Philippi when Peter confessed Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And the Master discerned the divine source of that wonderful declaration, and He exclaimed, “This was not revealed to you by man, but by My Father in Heaven” (Matthew 16:17). However, a moment later, when Peter rebuked Jesus for talking about His coming death on the cross, our Lord immediately discerned the satanic source of Peter’s words, and He rebuked Peter by saying, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me.” And on occasion, when you, as a Christian, discern that it is Satan who is motivating you to do or say something that is wrong, don’t hesitate to say to him, “Get behind me, Satan, and don’t push!!”

Peter himself also demonstrated this gift of discernment. You remember, in Acts 5:1-10, the story of Ananias and Sapphira, the husband and wife who pretended to bring the entire proceeds from the sale of their land and hand it over to the apostles for the benefit of all their fellow believers. But, in fact, they faked their return; they secretly kept back part of what they received for their own private use. But Peter’s gift of discernment enabled him to see right through their deception; and he said, “Ananias, Satan has filled your heart. When you claimed this was the full price, you were lying to the Holy Spirit. How could you do a thing like this? You weren’t lying to us but to God.” And Ananias and his wife were stricken dead. It’s well to

remember Ananias and Sapphira especially this week when on Friday your federal income tax return is due!

And the Apostle Paul demonstrated the gift of discernment too. In the city of Philippi a slave girl who was a fortune-teller and earned much money for her masters followed Paul and his friends, exclaiming, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who have come to tell you the way to be saved!” (Acts 16:17). Now many preachers would be delighted to have a public relations staff person like that! But the girl kept shouting this every day and disturbing Paul’s meetings. And the apostle soon discerned that this was not a testimony to the glory of God. He discerned an evil spirit that was attempting to disrupt the preaching of God’s Word; and once Paul realized the source of the problem, he turned to the spirit within the girl, and shouted, “I command you in the Name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And instantly it left her” (Acts 16:18).

Now a preacher may be termed a false prophet if he can be found guilty on one or both of two counts:

1. **heretical teaching** or
2. **immoral conduct.**

I would cite Oral Roberts as guilty on the first count—heretical teaching. He has always taught that a Christian is not filled with the Holy Spirit if he does not speak in tongues; and that is heresy. He has also taught that if one has enough faith, he can be healed of disease, and that is a cruel lie. A year ago, he made the bizarre statement that if his TV audience did not come through with eight million dollars, the Lord would take poor Oral home! I wonder which home he meant—the one in Tulsa, or Palm Springs, or Beverly Hills, the three of which have a total value of more than two million dollars! Thirty-five years ago, when I heard him shout, after claiming to heal a sick person, “Let’s give the Lord a big hand for this one!” I suspected that we were face-to-face with a phony.

I would also cite the Bakkers and Jimmy Swaggart as guilty on the second count—that of immoral conduct. Before the Bakkers’ indiscretions blew up in their face, I believe I saw them only once or twice on TV, and that was quite enough. When I heard his smarmy speech and his pious platitudes, and saw his plastic smile, I discerned something. And when I saw poor Tammy, with her flaky, flamboyant style, and her face all painted up like a circus clown, I knew they were phonies. But millions of Christians who sent in their \$15 a month to build the Bakker empire entirely lacked the gift of discernment.

And as for Jimmy Swaggart, who just two days ago was defrocked by his denomination for refusing to submit to their discipline or receive rehabilitative therapy, I would remind you that to defy and disobey the discipline of a godly ecclesiastical authority which has found a person guilty of wrongdoing is as great a sin as that of lewd behavior in a motel room. And it will be interesting to see how many people will continue to support his empire. If they do, they will be entirely lacking in discernment.

The major test to apply to any teaching to prove whether it is true or false is this: Does it affirm Christ's incarnate Godhead, His atoning sacrifice on the Cross, and His triumphant bodily resurrection, and does it lead to godly behavior? In a word, does the teaching in question maintain the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ as God Almighty and Savior of sinners, and does it lead to holy living? Yes or no? The most casual application of this biblical test to many of the modern, so-called "Gospel" plays and movies would reveal immediately the inferiority of their "Jesus." For example, *Jesus Christ Superstar* featured a Jesus Who wavered as to His own identity and Who was left dead in the tomb. According to an Associated Press comment on the movie version of *Godspell*, the script portrayed Jesus as a teacher and a friend rather than a divine person.

You remember the Old Testament story recorded in 1 Samuel 4:19-22 of the poor woman who died in childbirth. Israel had just suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Philistines, and her own husband had been killed in battle. With her dying breath she named her little son "Ichabod," which means "the glory has departed" (from Israel).

On Monday morning, April 25, 1907, people going to work in London, England, were shocked to see painted on the front of the famous old church, the City Temple, this same word "ICHABOD." The newspapers, in their afternoon editions, carried pictures of the dreadful desecration. A week or two later a house painter came forward voluntarily to admit that he had painted the word early that Monday morning. Asked in court why he had done such a sacrilegious thing, the house painter replied, "Dr. Parker told me to do it!" Dr. Joseph Parker, the former minister of the City Temple, had been one of the greatest evangelical preachers in England in the 19th century. He had died some time before this event. When the puzzled judge asked for an explanation, the painter explained that he was a Christian and a member of the City Temple. He told how Dr. Parker had said that if ever the false "gospel" of the higher critics were to be preached in his pulpit, then "ICHABOD" ("the glory has departed") should be written over the front of the building. "I did what Dr. Parker asked me to do, Sir."

The painter, perhaps rash in his action, was right in his discernment, for Dr. Parker's successor turned out to be an extreme theological liberal who described cherished fundamental truths of the evangelical faith as childish things to be discarded, and he even derided forgiveness by the blood of Jesus as slaughterhouse religion.

Not everything that comes forth from pulpits today should be accepted as Christian and biblical. To distinguish the spurious from the genuine we need discernment, and we should be especially thankful for those who possess this precious gift.

I believe that many of you have it, even though you may not know it. In your case the gift may simply need to be recognized, developed, and used. And the New Testament gives us the basic ingredients to enable us to discern between truth and error.

The Holy Spirit and

The Word of God

unite to enable us to develop the gift of discernment.

The Greek verb translated “to discern” means “to see through to the truth,” “to truly evaluate something”; and the Holy Spirit enables you to do that. Make Him your Teacher, for Jesus promised that the Spirit would guide us into all truth (John 16:13) and that the truth would set us free from error (John 8:32). If you have been cleansed from sin by the blood of Jesus and are living in obedience to the will of the Lord, then you can rest assured that you are infilled by the Holy Spirit; and that means that He will give you wisdom to discern what is true and what is false.

And the Word of God as the Psalmist says is “a lamp to our feet and a light for our path” (Psalm 119:105); and in Proverbs 1:5-6 the writer says, “I want those already wise to become the wiser...by exploring the depths of meaning in these nuggets of truth.” In Hebrews 5:14 the Word of God is referred to as “solid food,” and the writer says, “Solid food is for the mature who, by constant use, have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” So, if you want to grow in discernment, study the Bible every day of your life. Compare Scripture with Scripture. Soak yourself in books like the Psalms, Proverbs, the Gospels, and the New Testament letters. In this way you will become like those Christians in Berea, of whom it is said in Acts 17:11, “They received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”

Brothers and sisters, the Church needs more discerning Christians, and you should be one of them!

AMEN.