

## Trying the Spirits

*"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" ([I John 4:1](#)).*

The subject that we consider is a matter of critical importance. The fact that the call to discernment is issued throughout the Bible, in Old and New Testaments, the fact that repeated warning is given concerning the rise of false teachers and the increase of attacks upon the church in the last hour, the fact that [I John 4:1](#) calls us to specific action, namely, that of trying the spirits, demonstrates that discernment is a matter of critical importance for the church today.

Constantly we are being confronted with "new" teachings, "new" religious movements, different ways of doing things. What shall we say? Shall we condemn things simply because they are different? Shall we cast off anything that threatens change? Or, on the other hand, shall we accept things simply because they are taught and take place within the confines of Christianity and more particularly the Reformed faith?

Critically important it is that we be **discerning** Christians, **discerning** church leaders. Critically important it is that we not merely criticize, but that we carefully evaluate and pass judgment and be careful that our rejection **or acceptance** of any particular matter has foundation in God's Word of truth.

It is a common conception in our day that men may simply believe what they wish. After all, "We're all on the same road to heaven; just headed there in different ways."

But [I John 4:1](#), as does all Scripture, teaches quite the opposite.

The Apostle Peter, in reflecting back upon the Old Testament, said in [II Peter 2](#), *"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not" ([II Peter 2:1-3](#))*. That hardly speaks of those on the same road to heaven.

Repeatedly Scripture warns us that there is a standard that must be applied to every teaching and every way. It is the command of God that we do **not** believe every spirit, but that we try the spirits whether they are of God. And the standard that must be applied to every teaching and every movement is the standard of God's Holy Word, the truth of Holy Scripture. That, in very brief sum, is what we are taught in [I John 4:1](#).

But we want to consider in a little more depth the importance of trying the spirits. And in this article there are four sub-points that I would have you consider with me in this connection. We will consider, first, the necessity of trying the spirits; secondly, what are these "spirits" that we

are to try; thirdly, how we are to try them; and finally, to whom this calling is addressed.

## The Necessity

Spiritual discernment, trying the spirits, must be a vital concern for us as officebearers, and for our Protestant Reformed churches and people. Certainly one of the chief concerns that we have as pastors and elders is that God's people be discerning Christians. That is and must be our concern, because all too often the people of God show themselves sorely lacking in this virtue. That has always been the case. The examples and the many admonitions of Scripture pertaining to this subject show that the people of God are inclined toward spiritual laziness. And officebearers in the church are not immune to such a lack of virtue in this area.

If we begin simply by focusing on ourselves and our people, some of that spiritual laziness arises out of an intense loyalty to our churches--a loyalty which on the one hand is a commendable thing, when it is rooted in a desire to stand steadfast in the truth.

But it is easy in such a case to take the attitude that, "Well, all our ministers preach the same thing, we all believe the same, we have the truth; therefore we are invincible. There is no danger that **we** be misled by any false teacher."

It is a kind of "the enemy is all out there" attitude.

The problem is that such an attitude tends to neglect the calling set before us in the example of the Bereans, who searched the Scriptures daily to see whether the things that the Apostle Paul preached were true. Such an attitude actually breeds spiritual lethargy, a lethargy rooted in spiritual pride.

That is a grave danger to us. And it is a grave danger, because the devil not only attacks the church with spirits of false doctrine. But he attacks the church just as vigorously with spirits of worldliness and carnality, spirits of disobedience to God's truth, spirits of a lifestyle that does not conform with the spirit of Christianity.

So the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy in [II Timothy 3:1-5](#): *"This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despises of those that are good, Traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away."* The devil will do whatever it takes to lead astray the members of the church.

That there is a tremendous and appalling indifference today to sound doctrine is clearly evident. The vast majority in the nominal Christian church of our day are unconcerned with doctrine. Their one interest is to have a church where they can function in a social community, feeling good about themselves and improving those good self-feelings by their cloak of religiosity. "**Doing**" is the name of the game. Social action is where it's at!

And so it is not uncommon that we who love the truth are charged with rationalism, with holding to a dead religion, with legalism, with sectarianism, separatism, and many other less than favorable terms.

Of course we **must** be critical of any dead orthodoxy in our midst. We must **war against** any pharisaical attitudes. We must preach that there must be more to our religion than mere head knowledge. But at the same time, we must hold forth the importance of God's truth!

The necessity of trying the spirits is clear, especially throughout the New Testament Scriptures, but also in our own experience. The church is constantly confronted with false teachings and practices that are contrary to the standard of God's Holy Word. Almost all the epistles call attention to that in one way or another.

The Apostle Paul wrote frequently of the churches being troubled by certain teachers who had followed after him, imitating his preaching and his gospel in many respects, but adding to it their own particular teachings. The result was often confusion in the churches, and even more, departure from the faith. The Apostle did not hesitate to expose these things as the works of the devil, the father of lies.

He warns us of false teachers with these words ([II Cor. 11:13-15](#)): *"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works."*

Satan attacks the church, and us who are members of the church, always attempting to rob us of the gospel, and to wreck our Christian testimony and the witness of the truth, our peace and our joy. The history of the church has always seen the same thing.

And if we look at John's warning in the broader context of his epistle, we see the danger of false prophets and the importance of trying the spirits. Error in either doctrine or life is destructive of **fellowship with God**. And fellowship is the Apostle's primary concern.

To put it in terms of that truth which we as churches hold so dear: John's fervent desire is that those to whom he writes know the **covenant**, not only doctrinally, but as a matter of their own experience. They must know the fellowship of God's love, that blessed relationship with the Triune God, which relationship is ours in Christ Jesus, and which is reflected in the fellowship we have one with another.

So John writes in [I John 1:3](#): *"That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ."*

But while the great blessedness of the Christian life is that covenant fellowship with God through Jesus Christ and, as members of His body, one with another, there is something most destructive to that covenant fellowship. That is the lie. As John refers to it in verse 6 of chapter 4, *"the spirit of error,"* in all its different forms, militates against our enjoyment of that fellowship.

For that reason we must be vigilant in our watchfulness and our defense of the truth. For the truth shall make us free. So we are called to "try the spirits."

## What Are These "Spirits"?

It is a common interpretation of [1 John 4:1](#) that the term *spirits* is a figure of speech, a metonymy, for teachers. That was John Calvin's interpretation, and it has been the interpretation of many others since. The basis for that interpretation is the immediate reference to *false prophets*. The *spirits*, then, may either be true prophets of God, who faithfully proclaim His Word; or they may be false prophets.

And although that interpretation certainly lays hold of the idea of the text, I look at the figure not giving reference so much to the teachers as such, but to their teachings. The idea then is this: The *spirits* are those influences which would move us in one way or another.

The idea is the same as what we read in [Ephesians 4:16](#) with its reference to being tossed about by every wind of doctrine. Many of our readers will remember that the term *spirit* is essentially *breath* or *wind*. That is **not** the term, however, in [Ephesians 4:16](#). There the reference to *winds* of doctrine is a word, *anemos*, which refers to a strong, tempestuous wind, that which brings great upheaval. The term *spirit*, in [1 John 4:1](#), doesn't speak of a fierce or violent wind, but an operation which is measured.

The difference, it seems to me, is this: [Ephesians 4:16](#) warns us against being like children, who in a violent storm may be tossed about. It speaks of the tremendous, destructive effects of false doctrine, the **results** of error.

The idea of these **spirits**, and particularly the *spirit of error* as John speaks of it in verse 6, is that these influences are very measured, oftentimes seemingly minor and insignificant. They often involve matters that perhaps would not be of major concern to us. Rather than the tempestuous wind of a full-blown storm, these are the measured breaths of certain teachings or perspectives that we hear, certain perspectives that would influence us and our loved ones and church members. These influences may belong to *the spirit of truth*, again, as John refers to it in verse 6. But they may also belong to the *spirit of error*.

And exactly because of the danger of those spirits of error, the dangers of all the influences of the many false prophets that are gone out into the world, you and I must try the spirits, and teach our children and our people to be discerning Christians.

## The Forms of These Spirits of Error

Such false teaching can appear in many different forms. But generally speaking we can divide error into two main divisions.

Sometimes it takes the form of a blatant denial of the truth, a rejection of the Scriptures and the cardinal principles of the faith. So you have those who deny the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God, who reject such cardinal truths as the Trinity, the virgin birth, the resurrection of our Lord, the creation, the fall into sin, and so on. Not only is that blatant denial of biblical

truth found in the cults and the various sects and pagan religions. But there are those who call themselves Christian, but who in fact deny the fundamental teachings of Christianity. That number is certainly growing world wide in our day in the nominal Christian church.

But false teaching does not always take that form.

There is another form of error that in many ways is even more dangerous than that of a blatant rejection of Scripture and denial of the principles of the faith. I refer to the teachings, of various sorts, which **corrupt** the Scriptures. It is these teachings to which our young people are subjected every day in their schools and in their colleges. I speak of every place where we do not have our own high schools.

But those teachings which **corrupt** the truth of Scripture are again distinguished by two general errors. There is either an insistence that something else is required **in addition to** that revealed in Scripture, or there are teachings which **omit** certain things revealed in Scripture. There is the error of adding to, and there is the error of watering down the truth of the Scriptures.

Let me give just a few examples of those spirits of false doctrine which would **add** to the truth.

In Galatia it was the insistence that circumcision was necessary. Certain teachers said, "Yes, we believe the gospel and we agree with Paul's preaching. But he didn't go far enough. He left out something that is vital to your salvation, and that is circumcision. If you want to be a true Christian, you must be circumcised."

So there are those who insist that they build upon the foundation of the Scriptures, but **add** to it their own works and their own conceptions.

That error is inherent in the whole Roman Catholic system of so-called authoritative teaching by the church **apart from** the Scriptures.

The same error is seen in the charismatic movement, which insists that we must have the special gifts--tongues speaking, healing, prophecy, and in some instances even holy laughter. Or, we must have special revelation, God speaking in a still small voice within us.

There is the insistence today in the Reconstructionist movement and among theonomists that true Christianity necessitates a return to the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. Rather than believing that the ceremonies and figures of the law remain with us **in Jesus Christ**, in Whom they have their **completion**, as the Belgic Confession states in Article 25, there are those who would subject us once again to the beggarly elements of the law, adding to that which has been fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

Those are just a handful of examples.

But there are also spirits of falsehood that would water down the Scriptures. Many Christians today are misled by teachers who are guilty of leaving out certain truths taught by God.

That spirit of falsehood which would water down the Scriptures may take such a form as denying the truths of sovereign election and sovereign reprobation.

It may involve denying at some point the work of Christ. It may deny the truth that God made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. Instead of teaching Christ's death as an atonement for the sins of His people, it may speak of his death as nothing more than an example of love. It may deny the effectiveness of Christ's death and satisfaction for sin, by teaching that He died for everybody.

Such are but a few examples of watering down the truth, leaving out certain truths revealed by God in His Word.

But the same error can also be a problem when it comes to the Christian life and practice. Some who claim to be Christian want to overlook the truth that faith without works is **dead, is no faith**. They shrug off the rebukes and exhortations and admonitions of the Scriptures. They show little regard for the application of biblical truth to their daily lives. That is the terrible error of antinomianism. And examples could be multiplied when it comes to this error of watering down the truth of Scripture, either doctrinally or as that truth applies to our daily walk as Christians.

It is necessary, therefore, to try the spirits. To try the spirits means to test them. There is a certain standard alongside of which they must be placed. They must either fall within the parameters of that standard, or they must be rejected. That standard is the Bible, God's Word of truth.

## How Are We to Try the Spirits?

We may not reject something simply because "we've never done it that way before." I refer, for example, to such things as mid-week prayer meetings, or group prayer, such as been a long-standing practice in our sister churches in Singapore. Just because such activities have not belonged to our custom does not make them wrong!

We may not reject practices either, because those connected with a certain teaching or practice are "too religious, too zealous, too excited." The work of the Spirit of Christ often causes open change in a person's life and in the life of the church. Let us not forget that people said of the apostles ([Acts 17:6](#)) that they turned the world upside down. As Protestant Reformed officebearers we could often desire that some of our members show more of a zeal for God's truth and for the Christian life.

At the same time, we must warn that a spirit of truth can never be confirmed simply by outward show. It would be a tragic mistake to measure a teaching or practice that way. The Pharisees, after all, were noted for their religious appearance.

So appearances may not in themselves be the ground of rejecting a certain teaching or practice. And appearances certainly may not be the ground of **accepting** a certain teaching or practice.

False teaching can make people very happy. Make no mistake about that. The rapid growth of the Mormons in the State of Wisconsin and elsewhere, would not be happening, if their teachings made people unhappy. The masses that are going to the Promise Keepers conventions will come back with reports of great excitement and happiness. If we are going

to try the spirits by what makes us "feel good," we will be able to justify virtually every cult and heresy the world has ever seen.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in one of his books, wrote of a woman who came to him in much distress over the teaching that certain unbelieving people who live very good lives **are not Christian**. She said to him: "I cannot see how you can say that they are not Christians; look at their lives." Dr. Lloyd-Jones said to her: Wait a minute. Don't you see what you are saying? You are really saying that those people are so good and their works so honorable, that they don't need Christ, that the coming of the Son of God from heaven was unnecessary for them. He didn't need to die on the cross; they can reconcile themselves to God by their good living. Can't you see that such an argument is to deny the faith?<sup>1</sup>

She did not realize the implications of her argument. But Martyn Lloyd-Jones led her to the truth by exposing the implications of her argument.

So these perplexities and problems that we face, the spirits that we observe, to use the words of the text, are not to be judged by results of feelings or experience. But we must return to the one authoritative and sufficient standard of trying the spirits, and that is Holy Scripture.

### **Holy Scripture, the Standard of Truth**

The rejection of objective revelation, the forfeiture of the Bible as the standard of truth, has made the Christianity of our day little more than a plastic imitation of the Christianity which marked the church to whom John wrote. Truth is the supreme asset of the Christian faith.

Without truth, we are headed for a sham gospel. And the possibilities of such an imitation gospel are endless, as seen in today's church world. One doesn't have to look far to find all kinds of mixtures of Christianity and paganism. The church has gone far beyond even the mixture that is seen in Roman Catholicism. Today we find Christianity blended with Hinduism, Christianity blended with Buddhism, Christianity and New Age philosophy, which is little more than the revival of ancient gnosticism. It is the rejection of truth that gives rise to all the aberrations of Pentecostalism, which seems to get more bizarre with each passing decade. It is the rejection of the objective standard of God, and the elevation of a "feel-good" religion, that gives rise to movements such as Promise Keepers, where sound doctrine is found to interfere with the purposes of men.

**We must be those who live out of the Scriptures!** I don't mean simply that we must know the five points of Calvinism and a few proof texts. That is a **beginning**. But we must know the **truth** of the Scriptures as an organism.

I would remind you: Heretics also will often go to the Bible to support their teachings. If we and our people are not familiar with the **truth**, with the systematic teaching of the Scriptures on the essentials of the faith, from Genesis to Revelation, we will be prey to many a clever communicator which will isolate verses from their context and force those texts to fit their own heresies.<sup>2</sup> The Apostle Peter ([II Peter 3:16](#)) warns us of those who twist the Scriptures to their own destruction.

We must be those, therefore, who do more than lip service to the truth of Scripture's authority and sufficiency. What the Apostle wrote in [II Timothy 3:16,17](#) must be maintained in all its force and significance: *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."*

It is a simple fact of church history that since the canon of Scripture was closed, virtually every self-anointed prophet who claimed to hear God speak apart from the Scriptures has been proven wrong and has departed vastly from the truth of Scripture. And since the apostolic era every *movement* that has looked for and claimed to receive extra-biblical prophecy has departed from the faith into all forms of corruption and heresy. This just serves to emphasize the importance of that reformational truth *Sola Scriptura*.

By Scripture alone we put the spirits to the test. And that test alone is sufficient.

Sometimes when we are afflicted with an illness and we go to the doctor, he puts us to the test. He draws blood, for example, thinking that the blood test will be sufficient to prove his theoretical diagnosis correct. But he finds that he has to do more tests. Not so with us. When it comes to trying the spirits, the test of Scripture is sufficient. We don't look at how it feels. We don't look at the experience of others. We try the spirits by Scripture alone.

This is what we ought to teach every single Catechism student, especially when they reach the age where they are better able to discern things. We ought to stress to them that it isn't a fault to question what they are taught. But what they **must** do is to place every teaching to the test of the Scriptures.

We who teach the Reformed faith have nothing to fear when those whom we teach try our teachings by the Scriptures. That is exactly the proper approach. John writes in verse 6 of [L John 4](#), *"We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error."*

The first thing to ask about any teaching or any movement is this: Does this conform to the teaching of Scripture? Is this what the apostles taught? Is this movement or this teacher willing to submit to the test of the Scriptures? That is the great trial.

A readiness to submit to biblical teaching is always a characteristic of a true prophet.

You will find that the false prophet quickly attempts to dismiss the Scriptures. "Oh," he says, "but the culture of our day is completely different from the culture when Paul wrote that. That doesn't apply to us in our culture." Or, he says, "But science shows us something different. We have **learned** something since the Bible was written." Or the false teacher will dismiss Scripture by saying, "Oh, but you are too legalistic; you put far too much thought into doctrine. I have **experienced**, I have **felt**, I have **observed** these workings of the Spirit."

Those who go astray and would lead others astray almost invariably will come to show a contempt for the teachings of Scripture. They will quickly reject those passages that expose their error.

The Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of truth, will always move us toward a higher regard for the Scriptures. The exhortation of [Isaiah 8:20](#), "to the law and to the testimony," is never the cry of the spirit of error. Jonathan Edwards reportedly emphasized this truth by asking the rhetorical question: Would the prince of darkness, in order to promote his kingdom of darkness, lead men to the sun?<sup>3</sup> The devil has always shown himself as standing in sharp opposition to the Scriptures. He has done everything in his power to extinguish that light. He brazenly promotes a religion of **feelings**, of football stadium excitement, **apart from** the Bible. The only thing he will have to do with the Word of God is to twist it, in the attempt to turn the light into darkness.

But we may say more. For there are several distinguishing marks according to Scripture which reveal the work of the Spirit of Christ.

In the first place, the work of the Spirit is always to exalt the Christ. Jesus told His disciples, when He promised to send them the Comforter, the Spirit of truth: "*he shall testify of me.*" And the Spirit testifies of Christ, not apart from, but always **through the Scriptures**. So our Lord used the very same expression in [John 5:39](#): "*Search the Scriptures...they are they which testify of me.*" The Spirit of truth always testifies of Christ, exalts Christ. That is what John also says in [1 John 4:2,3](#).

But even here we must understand that while anyone who claims a portion of Christianity will lay claim to the **name** of Christ, and will even confess the basic truth of Christ's incarnation, not all confess Christ **as He reveals Himself in Holy Scripture**. So, again, we are turned back to the Bible for our evaluation. But if the Spirit at work among a people leads them to Christ, **as He reveals Himself in the Word**, we have evidence that the Spirit at work is from God.

Still more, the spirit of truth works holiness. We must be sure that the Spirit that we believe and follow is the Spirit of Christ, Who marks us a holy people unto the Lord. Without holiness no man shall see God, as we are told in [Hebrews 12:14](#). False spirits do not promote true holiness, devotion and dedication to God and His truth.

In verses 4 and 5 of [1 John 4](#), John compares the influence of two spirits, the true and the false. The difference is plain: one is of God, and overcomes the spirit of the world; the other is of the world, and is obsessed, therefore, with the things of this world. Whatever in harmony with biblical truth makes us more and more conscious of sin, more spiritually sensitive; whatever increases our desire to serve God and to walk in His ways, is of the Spirit of God. Satan will not convict men of sin, nor move them to honor God in holiness. The spirit of the devil would deceive men, would blind us and move us to indifference toward the truth of God.

Finally, in this connection, the spirit of truth is seen in a very practical way, as Scripture makes clear. John writes: "*If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.*" The contrast is this: "*He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.*"

Oh, indeed, there is a counterfeit love. We don't speak here of a love that stands alone. It stands in connection with all that we have mentioned before--with the love of God and His Word at the foundation. There is a counterfeit love that is not established upon the truth, that has no

regard for God's holiness, a love that is rooted in self, guided by a spirit of delusion. It has no relationship to the Christian love of which John writes.

True love places God and His honor and His truth first. It is the love of one who knows the love of God, that amazing love wherewith He loved us in Christ Jesus when we were yet sinners. But such are some of the ways, all rising out of the standard of biblical truth, by which we are to try the spirits, to see whether they are of God.

## To Whom Comes this Calling to Try the Spirits?

This calling is addressed to every believer.

On a personal note, when my wife and I came to the Protestant Reformed Churches some 17 years ago, we left a Bible study group in the church where we were members. In our last meeting with that small group, we broke the news that we had decided to leave that church for another. We wanted them to understand that it had nothing to do with persons. It had everything to do with God's truth, and the necessity that we as a couple and a family walk in obedience to God, walk in **truth**. Understandably there was some tension, as by implication we were pointing to their departure from the truth. But when asked to explain more specifically what the issues were that compelled us to leave, I explained a couple of the more serious doctrinal issues. The reaction was exactly this--and sadly it came primarily from two men who were officebearers themselves: Why concern yourself with those **doctrinal** issues? Why not leave that to the ministers and theologians, the professors at the seminary? You see, they had no consciousness of their own spiritual calling. They simply were not living out of the Scriptures. They were not aware of their scriptural calling. Paul speaks of that calling in Colossians, chapter 2. To the church at Colosse--not simply her officebearers, but to the saints and faithful brethren, he wrote ([Col. 2:6,7](#)): "*As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.*" But then he follows immediately with this charge: "*Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.*" That is the calling of every Christian.

John does not simply address the theologians. He doesn't address a Timothy or Titus, ministers of the gospel. **Beloved**, He says. The inspired Apostle addresses the whole church! All those loved of God have **this** calling: "*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God.*"

Yes, the calling is ours as officebearers. But one of the most important aspects of our calling as preachers and teachers, elders in the church, is exactly to teach God's people, **every one**, to be discerning Christians, who live out of the Scriptures. May God be gracious unto us in that calling.

1 Lloyd-Jones, Spiritual Depression, p. 185.

2 As an aside, we may be thankful for the continued practice in our churches of preaching systematically through the Heidelberg Catechism. My appreciation for that practice grows

as every year goes by. Probably that is at least partially because for years, in the Reformed Church of America and in the Christian Reformed Church, I did not have that instruction. But that systematic preaching from the Catechism is one measure which compels us preachers to treat the whole counsel of God. We are compelled to come face to face with certain truths that otherwise we might rarely treat.

3 John F. MacArthur writes of *Jonathan Edwards's Theology of Discernment* as an Appendix in his book *Reckless Faith*.