

Rules for the Discerning of Spirits

- If I am feeling moved to do something, how can I tell if this is from the Spirit of God, my own spirit, or a spirit that is evil and opposes God?
- If someone says, “I have a word for you from God,” how can I tell what in this message is from the Spirit of God, what is from the person’s own spirit, and what is from a spirit that is evil and opposes God?

There is no single criterion that will answer these questions finally, decisively and with absolute certainty.

- There are, however, some things we notice in a message or suggestion for action that might make us either more confident that this is from the Spirit of God or more suspicious that it is not.
- By taking the time to look at these things, and asking ourselves some further questions, we can build up (cumulatively) a probable case for whether the word or suggestion is from God or not.
- We should ask these questions and discern their answers together with other believers in the local church (cf. Acts 13), since it is God’s plan to supply what we need through the spiritual gifts he gives to other members of the Body of Christ.

(1) First and most importantly, **how is this thought, impulse or message related to the apostles’ teaching about the character of God as he reveals himself in Jesus Christ?**

Does the message or suggestion agree with the apostles’ teaching?

More specifically,

- **does it deny (or not acknowledge) something essential about Jesus?**
 - This question is of the highest importance. Cf. 1 Cor. 2:2: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”
- **does it deny to Jesus honor that is rightly his?**
 - 1 Jn. 4:2-3: “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.”
 - 1 Jn. 2:22: “Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ.”
 - 2 Pet. 2:1: “But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.”
 - 1 Cor. 12:3: “Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”

- **does it display the purity of intention which we see in the earthly life and ministry of Christ himself?**
 - For example, kindness and charity to others vs. envy, bitterness and contempt of others.
 - How would a counsel to take revenge be related to God's desire to forgive and benefit his enemies who had lashed out at him?
- **does it reveal the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control)?**
 - Does this thought, impulse or message concretely help one to strive for good and holy things, calmly trusting in God and having the courage to persevere patiently, no matter how difficult the challenges and obstacles are?
 - Or does this thought, impulse or message hinder one's progress by making the way forward seem either
 - too hard and difficult (so that one feels discouraged, defeated and helpless) or
 - too distasteful (since one is easily distracted by passing urges of the senses, as evidenced by a restless and constant search for experiences that are new, emotionally charged, and promise pleasures that can be easily and immediately obtained).

(2) In what direction (i.e. toward what end or goal) is this thought, impulse or message tending? In other words, if one accepted the message or suggestion for action as true, where would it take one? Where would one end up?

In some cases, the act will be clearly seen to tend toward something evil; in other cases, it may initially seem to be good and leading toward something good, but experience and the passage of time may show that it actually leads to evil or in some way cultivates, supports, or aids and abets evil.

- Cf. Henry of Langenstein quoted in Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, p. 290: "...for inspirations whose origin is in doubt, let them be tested at their end point. Many times an outcome manifests what the origin hides. He who cannot judge his impulses at their origin, therefore, should investigate their end or fulfillment."

If a thought, impulse or message is truly from the Spirit of God, it will lead toward

- **transparency and humility**
- **truthful, plain speech that helps and builds up another person.**

If a thought, impulse or message leads away from truth, it

- **will show a concern for appearances,**
- **will**
 - **urge concealment or deception,**
 - **promote fear of things being known ,**
 - **encourage the keeping of questionable secrets** (which may enable and indirectly support continued deception and wrongdoing),
 - **increase one's willingness to engage in deceptions** (eventually even ones that are personally costly or may involve some personal hardship or suffering)
 - **increase one's willingness to divide one's life into separate compartments that operate on different principles**, so that one can do some things in one part of one's personal life that one would condemn or deny in another setting or another part of one's life.
 - Thus for example, in one setting, one might claim to be a morally upright Christian who is committed to his or her family and try to give the appearance of acting in just this way. In another setting or another part of one's life, one might engage in behavior that is immodest or questionable (testing another person's boundaries, using suggestive speech, and trying to enlist the other person in an immoral relationship) or might be observed to use speech that is angry and abusive or very controlling.

Where a person is claiming to speak a word from God to us, one might also ask the following additional questions:

(1) Does the word spoken have a devout purpose or meaning that builds up the hearers and is useful or necessary for them?

- Holy Scripture (read in its entirety in its literal sense) is the archetype and model against which all supposed later revelations are to be judged.
- The word spoken must not command or counsel anything contrary to sincere faith, right living or good morals (as previously specified in Scripture).
 - Cf. Dt. 13:1-3: "If a prophet or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, 'Let us follow other gods' (gods you have not known) 'and let us worship them,' you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul."
- If the word spoken makes a claim about things that will happen in the future:
 - As Scripture itself specifies (Dt. 18), the truthfulness of a prophet may be gauged by whether any future events predicted come to pass exactly as predicted, when

the prophecy is understood in the way specified in the revelation (literal vs. mystical; conditional vs. unconditional).

Does the word supposedly received from God lead one upward to a higher love (charity=a pure and holy love) or does it fuel the fire of more carnal, unhealthy, self-interested loves?

- Unhealthy loves lead one to imagine that
 - one understands matters that in truth one does not rightly understand
 - one possesses a relationship and a love that one does not in fact possess.
- The presence of unhealthy loves may also be suspected where one resents questions concerning one's affairs and is confident in one's own ability to make judgments apart from others.

(2) What is the character of the person claiming to speak a word from God?

- Is the person claiming to have received this word cautious or even fearful in relating it or
 - are they very pleased with themselves for having receiving this word and
 - do they have a very satisfied, uncritical attitude in relating this word?
- Does the person speaking do things to draw attention to himself/herself?
 - Does the person speaking seem to believe that a certain authority and superiority attaches to them as a result of having received this word? Does the person speaking act as if others should believe this too and offer the speaker their unqualified respect?

Does the Word One Claims to Have Received Fuel One's Pride or One's Obsession with Attention/Public Honor?

"Humility provides weight" (vs. the vanity of curiosity and pride)

If the supposed revelation draws attention to the person claiming to have had it, this may be a sign of pride and sinful self-absorption. The person in question

- is eager to have unusual revelations (arrogant curiosity)
- thinks himself to be worthy of them (presumption of sanctity)
- delights in boastful telling of such matters (bragging shows a vain desire for praise of others and personal glory)
- displays impatience (since every vice is impatient)
- counts upon the prudence of his own judgments, spurning the counsel and authority of others within the Church, showing himself to be unteachable.

Here the weight of humility is lacking and the supposed revelations may instead be ascribed to a combination of pride and "an injury done to the imagination" (i.e. a strained and unhealthy mental state).

On the other hand if one

- considers oneself to be the most unworthy among all people to receive a revelation or ever be visited miraculously by God
- recognizes one's own ignorance and weakness
- upon receiving revelations, is cautious in receiving them (showing humility and modesty) and is cautious about mentioning them (doing so in private when it will work to the good of others, apart from any thought of any good to oneself)

then the weight of humility is present.

Is the Person Claiming to Have Received a Word from God Truly Open to External Input (Discernment, Evaluation and Teaching)?

- Does the person display humility and have a teachable spirit and a willingness to submit to the judgment of the church?
 - 1 Thess. 5:19-22: "Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. **Test everything.** Hold on to the good; avoid every kind of evil."
- Does the person delight in following his or her own opinion ("they have persuaded themselves they are doing something magnificent, they think they know better than anyone else what is best to do")
- Does the person disregard
 - good advice (without convincing reasons to show why they do this)
 - all counsel and regulation by others (unless what the others say is "exactly what he is contemplating in his own heart")
 - the respect he reasonably owes to others?

Does the person claiming to have received a word from God show evidence of inner instability?

- Does the speaker need to have the people present when he/she speaks this word be sympathetic and approving and praise the speaker?
- Does the speaker display a concern or absorption with his/her own issues and felt needs when he or she is speaking?
- Does the speaker display immature or unrepentant attitudes which clash noticeably with the speaker's claim to be providing a word of wisdom to the mature?
- Does the speaker display physical signs of emotional fragility? I.e.
 - moving quickly between different, even opposite, emotional states
 - being easily moved to laughter or tears
 - claiming to have had joyful or terrifying visions
 - discernible trembling or muscular contractions

- claiming to have engaged in unusual, extended, physically taxing forms of prayer and fasting or practices
 - When a person who is emotionally fragile lacks the discretion (i.e. prudent restraint and wise moderation) which belongs to the supernaturally-informed life of faith, they often adopt unbalanced and extreme practices that are likely to damage and further disorder the body and mind, making one even more vulnerable to temptation and deception by the powers of evil.