

PASTOR'S NOTES. Understanding the Bible, part 3.

*“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”*

(1 Thessalonians 5:19-22, NRSV)

*“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.”*

(1 John 4:1-3, NRSV)

How do we know how God is leading us today? You will hear people talking about God speaking to them through the Holy Spirit. But notice that in the two scripture passages above, the issue is not how to hear the Holy Spirit, but how to distinguish the Holy Spirit from the other voices that we hear. This has been a major issue for Christians from the beginning, especially since the Christian movement happened after Jesus ascended into heaven. Jesus anticipated this matter, and John's gospel records a lengthy talk by Jesus to His disciples on this very matter (John 14-16): what happens after He is gone. I find it helpful to consider the various places He talks there about the Holy Spirit:

*“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.”*

*“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”*

*“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, He will testify on My behalf.”*

*“Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. And when He comes, He will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in Me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see Me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.*

*“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own, but will speak whatever He hears, and He will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify Me, because He will take what is Mine and declare it to you.”*

(John 14:15-16, 25-26; 15:26; 16:7-14, NRSV)

My reading of these passages suggests that primary way we can discern the Holy Spirit from other spirits is comparing “Him” to the witness of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is sent from Jesus (and the Father), the Holy Spirit reminds us of Jesus' teachings, the Holy Spirit does not speak on His own – but

witnesses to Jesus, and the Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus. So it would seem to me that if you are wondering if the voice you hear is the voice of God, you will want to read all you can about this Jesus so that you can judge whether it is consistent with Him or not.

The very first Christians, who were Jews, primarily understood God through the Bible (at that time was probably 28 of the 39 books of the Old Testament). To this they would add the creed of Christ dying, rising, and appearing to witnesses (1 Corinthians 15:3-8); and the oral teachings and stories of Jesus that were just beginning to be written down. Notice that they saw these in a definite order:

- 1- The creed: Christ died, rose, and appeared to many. This is so important that Paul says in Romans 10:9 “...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” So if this was all you had, it would be enough. This is why Paul was so insistent that Jewish traditions should not apply to new believers who were not Jewish. And the Resurrection is why at least 26 of the 27 books of the New Testament were even written – if Jesus did not rise, no one would have bothered.
- 2- The teachings and stories of Jesus. His life, culminating in His sacrificial death, is the unique revelation to the world of the true nature of God – John 14:9 – “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father.” Eventually the letters and the Gospels of the New Testament were written down to preserve what Jesus said and did, and how the early Christians applied this to their lives.
- 3- The Old Testament. This is the witness of people over more than a millennium of how God related to their lives. For the first Christians it was incomplete because it all becomes clearer in Jesus. So for them, even though they assumed the truth of matters in the Old Testament like the sun standing still or a big fish swallowing Jonah, these points were not that important to them because even if they were not literal or even misunderstood, they don’t affect the reality of God raising Jesus from the dead. But the Old Testament provides the background for almost all that Jesus does, including healing people, feeding a multitude, “embodying” the Passover, and suffering a torturous death. So the first Christians still saw it as useful – it is the Old Testament that is called “scripture” in 2 Timothy 3:16 – “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

In the next article (I think it will be the last in this series), we’ll look at our own history – the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren traditions about the Bible, and perhaps we can put this all together.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Kam' or similar, written in a cursive style.