

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

THE GIFT OF DISCERNMENT

Which of the gifts of the Spirit as Paul lists them in 1 Corinthians 12, do you think is the most important? You probably think that this is a loaded question, since today we'll be looking at the gift of discernment. You are probably thinking that must be the answer! Well, I'm not sure you could say any gift is the most important. We need all the gifts if we are to be a healthy, vibrant community into which God speaks. But...but maybe today we especially need the gift of discernment in church.

The NIV translates this gift as "distinguishing between spirits," the New American Standard Bible translates it as the gift of "distinguishing of spirits." The literal meaning of the word 'discernings' (again Paul uses the plural here) is "through judgement!" So discernings of spirits means to judge, evaluate and perceive something in the spiritual realm. Now stay with me for a moment lets explore that a bit further! The word Paul uses as spirit here is used throughout the New Testament in a number of ways. I will very briefly summarise: it sometimes refers to the spirit within human beings; it sometimes refers to the Holy Spirit and it sometimes refers to supernatural beings – either angels or sometimes unholy spirits! So when Paul refers to the gift of discerning between spirits, it is a gift with a particular focus. It is the divine ability to discern whether the human spirit, the Holy Spirit or a supernatural spirit (good or bad) is at work behind a particular phenomenon. Perhaps a simple way of saying the same thing is to say that this gift is the ability to "see through" something to what is at work behind it.

Do you think we need that gift today? Let me give you an example. We have said that some of these gifts go together: obviously tongues and the interpretation of tongues do; wisdom and knowledge seem to.

Last time we talked about the gift of prophecy. If someone gives a prophecy Paul encourages us to test it – actually he says weigh it! He means, figure out whether or not that is really what God is saying! What gift is that at work? Yes – discerning of spirits. Just because someone stands up in church and says: "this is what God is saying", doesn't mean it is – whoever says it!

More generally there are so many phenomena around today for which we need discernment! Perhaps the question could be: What is behind this? There are a number of examples of the gift of discernment in the Bible. Jesus was particularly good at being able to discern what was going on inside the people he met. In John chapter 1 v 47, Jesus sees Nathaniel and says of him: "There is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false" or "in whom there is no deceit." How did Jesus know this? John 2 v 25 says: "Jesus knew what was in people," and that follows John 2 v 24 which says Jesus did not trust himself to the people. And that follows the fact that many people had believed in him because he had performed miraculous signs. Why did Jesus not trust himself to the people? Because he knew what was really

going on in their hearts – despite what it looked like from the outside. How’s your heart? Like Nathaniel’s?

I hope you realise that when Paul is writing to the Corinthians about gifts of the spirit, it is in the context of worship – the gathered community. Therefore, the primary application of these gifts is to the community gathered for worship. When we gather together, like we are now, we come in a huge variety of different ways and what is going on within us is probably different for all of us. So some of us come with a heavy spirit; some an anxious spirit; some a weak or proud spirit; some perhaps a jealous spirit or a bitter spirit. Truth is, we may, or may not be aware ourselves as to what is going on in us, let alone the person sitting next to us. If God is to speak to us as a community, we need the gift of discernment for God to reveal what is going on under the surface. I’ve mentioned the importance of discernment in regard to prophecy already, and when we bear in mind the way we come to worship – sometimes not being aware ourselves of what is really going on for us – we see again how important the gift of discerning between spirits is. Is this really what God is saying, or is it, however honest they are trying to be, someone’s human point of view, or something they want to say!

It can take courage to discern that a prophecy is not from God! Here’s a humorous example:

“Not long ago, a man went to the front of the church and said the following words, ‘I have a picture. It is of a fish, a nail, a plate and a hammer.’ The man then sat down. There were a few minutes of silence before an elder of the church stepped forward. ‘This is the interpretation of the picture,’ he said. ‘Stick the nail through the fish, smash the plate on the floor, and use the hammer to hit the silly man who just gave that word.’¹

Sometimes we desperately want God to speak – so we do it for him! So the gift of discerning between spirits is vital to our health and protection.

Sometimes the bible speaks of the discernment of angelic or demonic beings. In 2 Kings 6 Elisha is in a city surrounded by the army of the King of Syria who are trying to capture him. His servant panics because he can see the Kings’ army. Elisha tells his servant not to worry because those who are with them far outnumber the Kings’ army. Elisha then prays that his servant will be able to see the angelic host – horses and chariots filled with fire – on the surrounding hills.

Hebrews 12 v 22 says: “But you have come to Mount Zion to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.” I have been in worship in this church when others have seen angels posted around the building – some to protect and some to encourage worship.

Sometimes discernment sees demonic spirits at work. At the last Joint Service Simon gave a great talk on Jesus confronting demons. He did it from Mark 3 v 11: “Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, ‘You are the Son of God.’”

His main point was this: Jesus is more powerful, and the evil spirits know who he is and who has the real power, but that we can so easily get pulled away by things that are not from God!

There are many examples of Jesus discerning the work of evil spirits. There are examples in Acts too of the apostles doing the same. Peter (Acts 5) discerns that Ananais and Sapphira have not been truthful, and despite being given opportunities to be honest about what they had done with their money, had continued to lie and deceive. In Acts 16, Paul discerns that a slave girl who could predict the future was doing so by an evil spirit. Now this is not an invitation to see evil spirits behind everything, but it reminds us that we need the gift of discerning between spirits so that we are not led away from Christ and the gospel.

A brief word about how we exercise this gift. First, we must remember this is a gift – a divine gift. In Acts 16 when Paul confronts the slave girl who can predict the future, the text says: “Finally Paul became so troubled ...” Discernings between spirits seems to begin with an inner sense, which is an insight given by the Holy Spirit. It might come in the form of “resonance” i.e. as a prophecy is given – there is a ‘ring of truth’ about what is being said. When something is not of God there would be an inner unease with what is happening. This – ‘being troubled’ - seems to be something Jesus experienced: “After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, ‘I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me.’ (John 13 v 21)

We’ve already noted that in community any kind of prophecy must be weighed – and sometimes that takes time!

Another important part of discernment is asking: is it consistent with Jesus’ life and teaching, the whole of scripture and the way God has clearly worked in the past? Anything that is truly of God will always have the effect of drawing people’s hearts toward the cross and teaching of Christ. We have noted too that Paul’s teaching on the gifts of the spirit surrounds his teaching on love. A key to discerning between spirits is: does it promote love? There was lots of criticism and division in the Corinthian Church – the opposite of love! When the gifts are in operation they will promote love, rather than judgmentalism or elitism! Paul says that all the gifts are given for the common good – for building up the church. True prophecy edifies, comforts and strengthens the body of Christ. Anything that is truly motivated by the Holy Spirit will produce good fruit in the church. We will sometimes have to wait to see what fruit comes from some things.

I do think that today this gift – the discerning between spirits is one we should desire. There is so much stuff out there which may or may not be from God – we need to be discerning. In fact this is a priceless gift to us – especially in this day and age.

Friends, let us seek the gift of discerning between spirits that we may truly follow Christ and be his true disciples to the glory of his name. Amen.

1. Stibbe page 137