

Testing Religious Experiences

Are the “*spiritual*” experiences we see, read about or have ourselves from the Holy Spirit?

1 Timothy 4:1-2 [NIV] *“The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.”*

The “*latter times*” is an expression for the period of time from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ up to His return as “*King of kings*.”

We are all living today in the “*latter times*” so we should take notice of what is being said.

1 John 2:18-19 [NIV] *“Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.”*

A warning from the apostle John that some may leave the fellowship of faith, having been deceived by spirits other than the Holy Spirit.

1 John 4:1-3 [NIV] *“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. This is how you can recognise 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. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.”*

The false prophets are influenced by spirits who are trying to destroy the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Strange as it may seem, it is those who are “*on fire for Christ*” who are at the greatest risk of being seduced by these false prophets.

Why?

The person who is a “*seeker after God’s best things*,” is eager to hear anyone who offers them a way in which they can obtain them.

Such a person longs for some new “*spiritual experience*,” some elevated view of the truth, some operation of the Holy Spirit that will raise them above the dead level of religious mediocrity that they see all around them.

For this reason such people are eager to give heed to some new religious experience, particularly if it is presented to them by someone with an attractive personality and a reputation of superior “*godliness*.”

John 10:11-12 [NIV] *“I am the good shepherd. [Jesus Christ speaking] The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it.”*

We as Christians are part of the Good Shepherd’s flock and Jesus Christ has **not** left His flock to the mercy of these deceiving wolves.

Jesus Christ has given us the scriptures, the Christian Bible, the Holy Spirit and the powers of observation and He expects us to avail ourselves constantly of the help they can bring us.

1 Thessalonians 5:21 [NIV] *“Test everything. Hold on to the good.”*

Paul warns us of the dangers that false prophets can bring us by offering us exciting *“spiritual experiences.”*

Matthew 7:15 [NIV] *“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”*

These false prophets may look genuine but we need to test this validity.

How?

Matthew 7:16 [NIV] *“By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?”*

Being aware that there are false prophets, empowered by false spirits is the first step to identifying them.

When we learn their tricks, their power to harm our spiritual life and spiritual maturing is gone.

Proverbs 1:17 [NIV] *“How useless to spread a net in full view of all the birds!”*

We do **not** get caught by false prophets’ offer to give us wonderful *“spiritual experiences,”* when we recognise who they are and the spirit that is controlling their activities.

Following is a seven-fold test as to whether what we are hearing or experiencing is from the Holy Spirit or false spirits

1. One vital test of all religious experience is how it affects our relationship with God, our concept of God and our attitude towards Him.

God being who He is must always be the supreme arbiter of all things religious.

Isaiah 42:8 [NIV] *“I am the LORD; that is my name! I will **not** give my glory to another or my praise to idols.”*

God as our Creator is the only One who should be given the credit for what He has made and sustains.

Revelation 4:11 [King James] *“Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: **for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.**”*

When we read this scripture in conjunction with **Genesis 1:26** the King James translation is a clearer rendering of the Greek word *“thēlēma”* which means pleasure as well as an action of will. [Also read **Colossians 1:16**]

God’s great love for all humanity shows this great pleasure He desires to experience through His created children.

Psalms 145:3 [NIV] *“Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; **his greatness no-one can fathom.**”*

God acts only for His own glory and whatever comes from Him must be to His own high honour.

Any doctrine, any spiritual experience that serves to magnify God is likely to be inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Conversely, anything that veils God's glory or makes Him appear less wonderful, is sure to be of human pride or of Satan.

Religious emotions are very much the same in a human being, whoever is motivating them.

Many enjoyable feelings may be aroused within our spirit by misguided or even idolatrous worship.

The nun who kneels "*breathless with adoration*" before an image of the Virgin Mary is having a religious experience. She feels love, awe and reverence, all enjoyable emotions, as certainly as if she were adoring God.

The mystical experiences of Hindus and Sufis cannot be brushed aside as mere pretence.

Neither dare we dismiss the high religious experiences of spiritists and other occultists, as imagination.

These all may have and sometimes do have genuine encounters with something or someone beyond themselves.

In this same manner Christians are sometimes led into emotional experiences that are beyond their powers to explain or comprehend.

The big test is, what has this "*spiritual experience*" done to my relationship to the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ?

If this new view of truth, this encounter with the spirit realm, has made us love God more.

If it has magnified Him in our eyes.

If it has purified our concept of His being and cause Him to appear more wonderful than before.

Then we may conclude that we have **not** wandered astray into the pleasant but dangerous and forbidden path of error.

2. The next test is, how has this new experience affected my attitude towards my Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ?

Whatever place present-day religions may give to Jesus Christ, God the Father gives Him top place in earth and heaven.

Matthew 3:17 [NIV] "*And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*

This was a commanding statement from heaven itself.

Acts 2:36 [NIV] "*Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."*

Peter inspired by the Holy Spirit made this confident declaration, that brought many people to the point of repentance.

John 14:6 [NIV] "*Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me."*

Jesus confirmed His position as One we should worship and the only One through whom we can receive salvation.

Acts 4:8-12 [NIV] "*Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are*

asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is “the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.’ Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

Again Peter full of the Holy Spirit confirms the unique position that Jesus Christ holds.

The book of Hebrews is devoted to showing that Jesus Christ stands above all other humans and created spirit beings.

Colossians 1:13-20 [NIV] *“For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”*

Paul confirms that Jesus Christ, the only non-created Son of God, has pre-eminence over all that exists in the created universe.

All of this being true, it is clear that Jesus Christ must stand at the centre of all true doctrine and all genuine Christian experience.

Christ-less Christianity sounds contradictory but it exists as a real phenomenon today, even in so-called “*Christian*” fellowships.

Much of what is being done “*in Christ’s name*” is false to Jesus Christ.

How is this?

It is conceived by human reasoning **not** the direct influence of the Holy Spirit.

It is incorporating human inspired methods, **not** the direct commission as given by Jesus Christ Himself.

It seeks human power and authority, **not** a total submission to our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is mentioned from time to time by self-seeking politicians and leaders to provide a “*sacred front*” for carnal activities and to deceive the simple-hearted listeners.

If Jesus Christ is **not** central, He is **not** present at all.

Whatever makes Jesus Christ, as a person, dear to us is pretty sure to be from the Holy Spirit.

3. Another revealing test of the soundness of a religious experience is how does it affect our attitude towards the Holy scriptures, the Christian Bible?

We need to ask the question:-

Did this new experience, this new view of the truth, spring out of the Word of God itself?

Or was it the result of a stimulus that lay outside the Christian Bible?

Tender-hearted Christians often become victims of strong psychological pressure applied intentionally or innocently by someone's personal testimony.

Or by a colourful story told by a fervent preacher who may speak with prophetic finality, but who has **not** checked their story with the facts **nor** tested its soundness against the Christian Bible.

Whatever originates outside of scripture should, for that very reason, be suspect until it can be shown to be in accord with God's Word, the Christian Bible.

However high the emotional content, **no** new truth or spiritual experience can be proved to be genuine unless we find authority for it within God's Word, the Christian Bible.

Whatever is new truth should be treated with a lot of caution until it can furnish scriptural proof of its validity.

John 16:13 [NIV] *"But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come."*

The spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, cannot and does **not** operate apart from the letter of the Holy scriptures.

Why?

2 Timothy 3:16 [NIV] *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,"*

All of the Christian Bible was inspired by the Creator God.

2 Peter 1:20-21 [NIV] *"Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."*

Written by human beings, but they were men who were driven by the Holy Spirit to write the words.

The scriptures in the Christian Bible are in print what Jesus Christ is in person.

John 1:1-4, 14 [NIV] *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men." ... "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

This is why Jesus Christ is referred to as *"the Word."* The Christian Bible is the light that illuminates the very thoughts and character of our Creator God.

4. We can prove the quality of a religious experience by its effect on our own personal life.

Galatians 5:17-18 [NIV] *"For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law."*

Our human nature and the Holy Spirit are diametrically opposed to each other.

Romans 8:5-9 [NIV] *"Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful*

nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”

Before the Holy Spirit can work in us to create a new “*born again*” human being that is acceptable to the Holy Creator God, He must condemn and crucify the human nature within us.

The Holy Spirit must have our complete consent to displace our natural self and replace it with the very nature, character, of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

[This transformation is clearly explained in our articles on **Romans chapters 6-8** that can be downloaded from this website.]

A good rule is this:-

Has this experience served to humble me? Then it is genuine.

Has this experience made me little and unclean in my own eyes? Then it is from God.

But if this experience has given me a feeling of self-satisfaction, it is false and should be dismissed, as it is emanating from within us or from Satan, **not** from God through the Holy Spirit.

5. Our relation to and our attitude towards our fellow Christians is another accurate test of any religious experience.

Sometimes an earnest Christian will, after some remarkable “*spiritual encounter*,” withdraw themselves from their fellow believers and develop a spirit of fault-finding.

They may be personally convinced that the “*spiritual experience*” has set them apart from the rest of the congregation.

This is a dangerous state of mind, and the more dangerous because it can be justified by the facts.

This person has had a remarkable experience, they have been given some wonderful light on certain scriptures.

They have entered into a new and joyous relationship with God that was unknown to them before.

It is **not** that such a person is mistaken in their facts, this experience was from God.

It is their reaction to this genuine spiritual experience that is the problem.

Why?

This new spiritual experience has made them less loving towards their fellow Christians.

Any religious experience that fails to deepen our love for our fellow Christians and all non-believing human beings, has failed to produce the expected “*fruit*” in that person’s personal life.

1 John 3:18-19 [NIV] “*Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence*”

The apostle John makes our love for fellow Christians and all non-believers a test of our real faith.

1 John 4:7-8 [NIV] “*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*”

Without this loving response to other human beings we fail to fulfil the reason for our being “*born again*” and experiencing genuine “*spiritual*” revelations of the truth.

All true Christian experiences prompted by the Holy Spirit will deepen our love for other Christians and all other non-believers.

Therefore we can conclude that whatever tends to separate us in person or in heart from other Christians and non-believers is **not** the work of the Holy Spirit.

John 13:35 [NIV] “*By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*”

Conversely whatever spiritual experience causes us to love other human beings more, is likely to be from God, and the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

John 7:37-39 [NIV] “*On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.*”

Any “*spiritual experience*” given by the Holy Spirit will cause the love of God that it creates in us, [the fruit of this experience see **Galatians 5:22-25**] to flow out to others.

6. Another certain test of the source of a genuine spiritual experience is this:-

Note how it affects our relationship to and our attitude towards the world.

In this sense I am **not** referring to the beautiful order of nature that we see in what God has created for the enjoyment of all human beings.

Neither do I mean the world of blinded human beings that Jesus Christ came to save [see **John 3:16-17**]

1 John 2:16-17 [NIV] “*For everything in the world, the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does, comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever.*”

This is the world I am referring to.

Our reaction to this world is how we can test the spirit that has given us our “*spiritual experience*.”

We live in a world of carnal enjoyments, of godless pleasures, of the pursuit of earthly riches and reputation and sinful happiness.

This is a world that carries on without any real influence of their Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:1-5 [NIV] “*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions, it is by grace you have been saved.*”

This is Satan’s world at this time, God has allowed him to influence all humans who He has chosen, in His sovereignty **not** to call at this time.

2 Corinthians 4:4 [NIV] “*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*”

Satan has blinded the vast majority of humans to the gospel message.

Revelation 12:9-10 [NIV] *“The great dragon was hurled down, that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For **the accuser of our brothers**, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.”*

Satan has led all of this world I am referring to, astray, and he is at work on this earth every moment of time.

1 John 2:15 [NIV] *“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”*

Any genuine, God-given religious experience will draw us **out** of the influence of this godless world.

2 Corinthians 6:14 [NIV] *“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?”*

Any spirit that permits any compromise with the world is a false spirit.

Any religious group that imitates the world in any of its manifestations is false to Jesus Christ and on the side of Satan.

This is regardless of how much its leaders may talk about “accepting Christ” or “let God run and bless you and your business.”

7. The last test of the genuineness of Christian spiritual experience is:-

What does it do to our attitude towards sin?

The operation of grace and the Holy Spirit within the mind, heart and spirit of a believing human being will turn them away from sin and towards holiness.

Titus 2:11-14 [NIV] *“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”*

The same grace and spirit that saves and teaches us the way to Holy living, teaches us to deny ungodliness and to live righteously in this present world.

As Christians we have to check our own attitude towards sin, since we have received God’s grace or some spiritual experience.

Anything that weakens our hatred of sin may be immediately identified as false to Holy scripture, to our Saviour and to our own life.

Whatever makes holiness more attractive and sin more intolerable may be accepted as a genuine spiritual experience from God.

Psalms 5:4-5 [NIV] *“You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong.”*

This has always been God’s attitude towards evil and sin.

Matthew 24:24 [NIV] *“For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect, if that were possible.”*

Jesus Christ personally warned against our being deceived by miraculous signs and wonders done by false prophets who are under the influence of Satan.

I hope that all who have been called by God at this time to have their chance for salvation will be helped by this article to avoid the influence of false spirits.