

# Discernment : Some Scriptural pointers

1 Thessalonians 5:19-21

‘Do not quench the Spirit,  
do not despise prophesying,  
but test everything;  
hold fast to what is good,  
abstain from every form of evil.’

The primary test, according to Paul, is that gifts that come from the Spirit cause a person to look to Jesus as Lord: ‘No one can say “Jesus is Lord!” except by the Holy Spirit’(1Corinthians 12:3).

The Jesus Paul is talking about is the real Jesus who gave his life on the cross. Gifts that truly come from the Spirit lead to lives that are in conformity with that of Jesus. Declaring “Jesus is Lord” is not a matter of words only. Jesus himself said: ‘Not every one who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.’(Mat.7:21)

A second criterion, therefore, is obedience: a willingness to do God's will whatever the cost.

A third criterion is that gifts that truly come from the Spirit enable the one receiving them to carry on the mission of Christ effectively:

1Corinthians 12:4-7

‘Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of ways of exercising power, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit with a view to what is for the best.’

The power which comes with such gifts comes from God, and so makes their recipients instruments of God's creative, redeeming, and loving will. Notice the Trinitarian dimension of the spiritual life, and notice that Paul moves experientially: from the experience of the Spirit in the community, to Christ, and finally to God the Father. We come to know God in coming to know Christ, and we come to know the risen and exalted Christ through the experience of the Spirit.

A fourth criterion for the discernment of gifts that come from the Spirit is that they are ‘with a view to what is for the best’(1Corinthians 12:7).

Genuine gifts from the Spirit are recognised by the love that inspires them: ‘If I speak in the tongue of men and angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I have faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing’(1Corinthians 13:1-3).

A fifth criterion is consistency with tradition. God has been inspiring men and women ever since the time of Jesus. If a teaching is consistent through the centuries, taught by those whose sanctity has been proven, then God will not now inspire something that contradicts himself.

‘So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter’(2Thessalonians 2:15).

Finally, we have Jesus' own powerful words:

‘You will know them by their fruits’(Matthew 7:16-20).

## Discernment : The pastor's role

‘It is for the pastors to pass judgment on the authenticity and good use of the gifts of the faithful, not, certainly, with a view to quenching the Spirit, but to testing everything and keeping what is good’(Vatican II, AA, n. 3).

## Discernment : The pastor's role

‘While testing the spirits if they be of God, the pastors must discover with faith, recognise with joy, and foster with diligence, the many and varied charismatic gifts of the laity ... bringing about agreement among divergent outlooks in such a way that nobody may feel a stranger in the Christian community ... They are to be defenders of the common good’(Vat II PO, n.9).

## Discernment : The pastor's role

The ordained priest, as a sacrament of Christ directing the community to do God's will, should be one who is able to facilitate the cooperative building of a community of inter-dependent people. He needs to respect people and their gifts. He should be able to foster their contribution to the building of the community and to contributing towards its mission in and to the world. He will need to be sufficiently integrated to be able to focus upon others without his own agenda dominating, and have the ability to listen and to relate to people in an attractive and liberating way.