

How to Test the Spirits: A Follow-up to [“Dreams and Doubt \(Part 2\)” from Acts 2:14-21](#)

On Sunday February 21, 2016, I attempted to answer the question, “Does God still speak to us through prophecy, visions, and dreams?” My three-part answer, based on Acts 2:14-21, were these:

- 1) God does speak to ALL Christians through the Holy Spirit, but this is primarily through the Bible in order for us to obey the clear commands laid out in Scripture (cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27; John 14:12-26; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:3-4).
- 2) God does *not* speak to Christians as some claim today. These “message-a-minute” charismaniacs¹ claim an intimacy with and line of communication from God not reflected anywhere in the Bible. So too, Scripture vehemently claims that the foundation of the Christian faith (what is now preserved in the New Testament) was confirmed through the signs and wonders of the original Apostles (cf. Acts 2:43; Hebrews 2:1-4; Ephesians 2:19-20.) The Apostles were eye-witnesses of Jesus, specifically commissioned to lay the foundation of Christianity. As these eye-witnesses died off and the gospel was entrusted to future generations, the signs and wonders of that special variety also died off. Christian history confirms this and so do nearly every orthodox theologian through the first 19 centuries of Christianity.
- 3) God *can* speak today through any means He wants (including prophecy, visions, and dreams) even if we do not understand it, but this is often rare, not guaranteed, and should be tested by Scripture and mature Christians. God can and does still heal and perform signs and wonders, but not with the same consistency and certainty of the first century Apostles. Likewise, these modern day communications do not have anything close to the authority of Holy Scripture.

In the paragraphs below, I want to outline how a Christian should test any communication from God that does not come straight from Holy Scripture. How *do* we test the spirits as we are commanded to do in 1 John 4:1?

Let me start with the fabulous promise described in Dallas Willard’s book, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (2009). Willard was a philosophy professor at the University of Southern California and a fantastic writer on spiritual formation. He taught that one of the byproducts of a living relationship with God was that we would, “*Receive communications from God.*” Willard writes:

By far most of these communications will come in conjunction with study of the Bible, and they will always be consistent with what is taught in the Bible. But in living the life people will need directions about things of which the Bible says nothing: the particular circumstances, events, and choices they are facing and particular insights into truths. They will learn to identify a characteristic kind of thought or experience that comes to them from God. They will find themselves ‘spoken to’ and taught many things, and these ‘communications’ will be testable against the realities of life and insights of others. This is a matter that must be dealt with carefully, and in utmost humility and openness. But it is a real and indispensable part of ‘the life.’ (underline added)

Willard compacts a great deal of truth in these sentences. To begin, those who walk with Jesus in His Kingdom, filled with His Spirit, will receive communication from God. Note that Bible study is key to receiving communication. If we do not have a consistent, systematic study of God’s Word in our lives, we will not hear

¹ Not to be confused by those genuine, God-fearing, Scripture-saturated, charismatics.

from God. Jesus said that His sheep listen to the Shepherd's voice (John 10:27). Sadly, I have heard people counsel Christian novices that the trick to hear God's voice is to go into a quiet room and just listen. There is a time and a place for this sort of exercise, but this is an exercise for those who have spent months, maybe years and decades, of studying their Bibles and sitting under proven teachers of God's Word. We will not know if the "voices" we hear in solitude are God's voice, if we have not accustomed ourselves to God's voice as revealed in Scripture.

But let's say, a Christian does sense they are hearing from God. Maybe they received a dream that seems drenched in power and truth. Maybe a "word from the Lord" or an impression on their spirit seems to be coming from heaven. How do we test that? Let me look at these particular communications under 3 headings:

- 1) A personal revelation for consolation;
- 2) A personal revelation to give direction; and
- 3) A personal revelation for others.

First, from time to time, a person may receive a dream, a word, or an impression from God to bring consolation. A good verse to test this is 2 Timothy 1:7: "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid (afraid), but gives us power, love and self-discipline" (NIV). If what you are hearing makes you full of fear, this is probably not from the LORD. Anxiety is given by Satan, not Christ. Likewise, God's Spirit brings love, power, and a sound mind. A friend of mine had an impression years ago when her son was in a coma after a traffic accident. This is her recounting:

His heart rate was in the 160's, his temperature was extremely high and even though he was in a drug-induced coma you could see his body straining to live. I cried out – "God I don't know how to do this! I don't know how to lose a son." Suddenly I felt a peace beyond anything I had ever felt before and almost audibly heard these words – "---, nothing can separate you from my presence, not even this." I dropped my face into my hands. My tears returned. I knew that this was true. Not just the head knowledge that nothing can separate us from the love of God but the acknowledgement of the HEART that Jesus was holding me and would not let me go. I was overwhelmed by the comfort of my Savior in that moment.²

Church history confirms that God does bring to mind words, truths, and impressions to bring solace to the souls of His people. These revelations will conform 100% to God's Holy Scripture (often flowing from previous study), and their personal nature are a precious gift in times of great distress.

Second, what should be our response when we think we have received a personal revelation to give direction to our lives? This is what Dallas Willard was referring to regarding "particular circumstances, events, and choices." This could be as simple as the Lord putting a name on your heart for which you are to pray. Alternatively, you may sense the Spirit wants you to call, preach the gospel to, or go visit someone. Sometimes you might sense the Lord telling you to change careers. Maybe you feel led to give a generous and sacrificial gift to a person or ministry. You might hear a sermon about a particular country and feel led to support a missionary there or go serve that country yourself. The revelation could come through a particularly vivid dream or some manner of a vision in a similar vein to Augustine of Hippo's (354-430AD) spiritual ears hearing a voice telling him to take a nearby Bible and "Pick up and read, pick up and read."

² <http://www.houseofhopecr.org/2016/02/15/pick-up-your-sword/>, accessed 2/22/2016.

At this point, we should simply invoke Biblical wisdom. If the Spirit's seeming direction does not involve totally transforming or reorienting your life or another's, you should probably just trust the leading. If you sense a prayer need, an encouragement need, or a call to service, just do it. I would argue that the way we learn to confirm leadings from the Lord that have a more significant impact on our lives and others is by obeying the "less-radical" leadings first. Gradually, through the study of Scriptures and the heeding of His leadings, we will learn the voice of the Shepherd. This will prepare us for the times when we are asked to do something "big."³

Now, the more this leading could cause a radical transformation in your life or others, the more you should seek the counsel of mature Christians. Do they agree that the Lord sent this? Does the leading conform to Scripture? Does it seem likely that the Lord would be leading this particular person in the way He seems to be leading? If the leading has anything related to going into Christian service or making a significant family or life alteration, you most definitely should seek the counsel of your pastors and elders who are called to keep watch over your soul (Hebrews 13:17).

The third and final revelation might be for others. You may believe the Lord wants you to say something to someone. You may feel that you have been given special discernment for your church or an individual. You may believe a dream has given clarity for another person, family, or a ministry. Similar to the other kinds of communication, the individual must first prayerfully study their Bible to make sure what they may be hearing resonates and relates to the kind of truths found in Scripture. Likewise, those who hear from God in the Bible are marked by profound humility and awareness of their own sins. If the message you hear does not make you more humble and more aware of your personal sin, it probably is not from God. To hear God speak causes trembling, not puffed up pride (this is one way you can identify a false teacher or prophet).

If after you have prayed and studied personally and still feel certain what you need to share is of the Lord, use the counsel under #2. If the message is a simple word of consolation for another person, a word of encouragement, or a form of Biblical counsel that easily conforms to Holy Scripture, you should probably act. But if your message has huge potential for causing great fallout if you are wrong or it relates to things that cannot be known without divine direction, it would be wise to share appropriately with another godly, mature Christian person or pastor before thrusting your revelation on the intended party. Humbly seeking confirmation is not testing God, it is obeying Scriptural principles (1 John 4:1; James 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:20-22).

Once you sense your message should be delivered, it would be wise to heed the counsel Wayne Grudem offers. Wayne Grudem is a former professor of our denomination's seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.⁴ Grudem warns that any modern day message from God should never be prefaced with, "Thus says the LORD." We must preserve this authoritative language for Holy Scripture alone. So, when we feel confident our revelation is to be shared with our church or another person, we should convey it this way, "I think this is what the Spirit might be saying." Or "After praying and listening to God, I believe..." After sharing whatever you feel called to share (which is all you are asked to do to be faithful), simply say, "Do you sense what I'm sharing is accurate? Could God be leading as I think?"

³ The life of Abraham both proves and disproves this point. The first thing we know that Abraham was asked to do by God was to move his family across the known world, not exactly a small request [Genesis 12:1-3]. But certainly a less radical request than years down the road, he was asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac [Genesis 22].

⁴ The Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) is a collection of autonomous churches who hold to a shared Statement of Faith. The EFCA has some churches who practice charismatic gifts; most do not. The denomination has chosen to work together despite differences of theological understanding and practice.

Though I personally have never had a vivid dream or vision directing me, I have discerned on many occasions that I need to talk to a specific person about a specific subject that seems to have only come from the Holy Spirit. Likewise, I believe in both the pulpit and in conversations with individuals, the LORD has given me a prophetic word to share. This has never been regarding the future, but rather a Spirit-infused authority and insight into a person's need that corresponds and is often flowing from the sharing of a Biblical truth.

Dallas Willard is spot-on that *God does communicate with His people*. This is primarily through His Word and always consistent with His Word. The Spirit illuminates the Scriptures, convicts us and guides us to obedience of the Scriptures. But that is not all. The Spirit does and lead His people. Some will hear better than others, but I believe we can all grow in our sensitivity to hearing and obeying Christ. I highly encourage people to read their Bible with a pen and journal. Read the Bible for your soul, your family, and your church. Meditate. Pray that the LORD would speak to you and for others. Take notes. Write prayers. Be still and listen. Share. Test what you are hearing. Ask others to weigh in on your ideas and leadings.

Let us reflect well that wise instruction from Dallas Willard: "This is a matter that must be dealt with carefully, and in utmost humility and openness." If you or someone sharing with you suggests any leading contrary to God's Word, correct them gently. If they persist, rebuke them sharply. If you or another person misuses God's Word or supposed "leadings" to act according to the flesh, we must bravely risk friendship and reputation to save them from sin, sorrow, and death (James 5:19-20).

To close, such a lengthy discourse might lead you to think your pastor is itching for you to hear some special word this week. I leave it to God and His sovereign will on when and with whom He would like to speak. What I desperately want for my people is a passionate desire to consume and obey the revealed Scriptures. In them, we have "everything we need for life and godliness" (2 Peter 3-4). Likewise, our Holy Scriptures are "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be *thoroughly equipped for every good work*" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). You are not an anemic or less spiritual Christian if you only hear God speaking through the Bible. The Apostle Paul warns often of the dangers of putting our hope in anything other than God's Word. Prophecies, visions, and dreams can lead people astray, just as often as it can lead them well. This is why Paul counsels Timothy (and now all pastors and churches) to preach the Word...

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (^{NIV} 2 Timothy 4:3-4)