

FR 203

Detecting The Spirit

(This essay should have preceded FR 202, but it was hiding in my dead computer.)

When I obeyed the gospel seventy years ago, I knew the promise for doing so was the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, so I believed that I had received both. I did not, however, understand exactly what the gift of the Spirit involved (as though anybody does). Do you suppose that God withheld that gift and reneged on his promise simply because I did not fully understand? Was the promise based upon, "Repent, fully understand, and be baptized .."?

How was I to know if I had received the Spirit or not? Was it by feeling? What does the Spirit of God feel like? I felt relieved and happy because I had done what I learned to do from the scriptures but that feeling was not something poured into me. Instead, it was the result of my thinking. Thinking controls emotions.

At a later stage in my learning, I accepted that the promised Spirit actually dwelt within me as a figurative temple of God. Did I suddenly have a mysterious surge of feeling that proved the entrance of the Spirit into me? Nothing of the kind. I had just accepted another fact intellectually. Maybe that gave me more confidence and more sense of relationship but it brought no ecstatic feeling. Why did I not detect the Spirit? Was the gift just too scant?

After more years went by in which I continued to try to understand the Scriptures, I came to believe that the gift, indwelling, and baptism of the Holy Spirit all coincided. I had been baptized in the Holy Spirit! How did I detect that? By some glorious feeling? By sudden revelation? By uttering strange words uncontrollably? None of the above! I believed it because of the facts which I interpreted from the Scriptures. And I could have more confidence in intellectual interpretation of facts than in my feelings or lack of them.

Suppose that I was misguided in my understanding of the promises made by God. Would that make God's promises void? If God blesses only those who fully understand, then all of us are pitifully hopeless.

If you contend that you received physical evidence of your reception of the Spirit, then you put yourself out of range of any reasoning I may put forth. Claims of feelings or experiences as evidence can easily become a method of authentication of things which cannot be proven. For instance, if you claim to have received a revelation or instant cure from drug addiction no one can disprove that, but neither can you prove it. It becomes an anecdotal evidence valid to no one but you and to any who might believe your testimony.

If you claim that the Holy Spirit cleansed your soul, you introduce another cleansing agent than the atonement of Christ. If the Spirit cleansed the evil from your heart, then

you became sinless in accomplished righteousness rather than being a sinner accounted as righteous by faith. And if that cleansing of evil was accomplished, then you can no longer sin. However, John says if we say we have no sin, we lie, and lying itself is a sin.

Does the Spirit ever mislead anyone? What of the many “revelations” concerning the date of the Lord’s coming that have made fools of those claiming them? What of the many who have claimed reception of some message that definitely contradicts scripture? Have you been confident that the Spirit opened a certain opportunity to you or sent you to a certain doctor only to be sadly disappointed later? How can you tell if what “the Spirit put on my heart” is true, a nudge, an unseen hand, imagination, or just wishful thinking? Is the Spirit capricious? Even pagans claim such communications from their gods.

In the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as recorded in the scriptures, there were instances of physical manifestations. That is another subject which we hope to deal with later.

In this setting I have asked probing, realistic questions without quoting scriptures. By no means am I denying the working of the Holy Spirit of God in our lives. I would like for us to have a more solid basis for our claims, however, while granting that God can work in any manner in which he pleases. Since there are still good and evil influences in this world, I think it wise to seek to discern what comes from the Spirit and what does not. Happily assigning all things to the working of the Spirit often reflects adversely on the Spirit.

Because religion deals with the spiritual does not mean that it is based on mysticism. Mysticism is appealing for it involves primitive concepts such as signs, omens, visions, imagined voices, icons, charms, pyramids, crystals, scapulars, voodoo, astrology, and the horoscope. Confidence in such mysticism can bring good or bad emotions due to the placebo effect on the psychological nature of man.

How can one detect the spiritual in contrast to the mystical? Not by feelings or intuition but by faith. Faith is not imagination or wishful thinking. It must find basis in the scriptures. We walk by faith, not by sight (physical proofs). The substantiation of faith is the word of God, not feelings.

More to follow. []

(Cecil Hook: March 2004)