

# “Testing the Spirits: The Early Church on Judging the Prophets”

## By Scott E. Yakimow

The task of discerning whether or not a teaching faithfully articulates Christian doctrine and practice is not new to the church but rather has been a feature of her corporate life since Pentecost. For the early church, judging prophets and their prophecies was one of the ways this was accomplished. Accepting a false prophet entailed accepting into the church’s life both a false teacher—a wolf in sheep’s clothing<sup>1</sup>—and a false teaching that could l

v a r i o u s or general rules of practice the early church used to recognize the fruits of the prophets in order to determine true prophets from false ones by examining passages in the New Testament where this testing is in view along with the Didache to see how the testing continued into the first half of the 2

nd century. By so doing, it will provide guidelines that could be applied analogously to contemporary teachings to determine if they are faithful articulations of Christian doctrine and practice. powers of good

and evil where adopting errant teaching can have eternal significance. Given the spiritual conflict in the first century, I contend that theology, not politics, is the focus for the early church, and theological considerations that drive testing the prophets are restricted to only what the prophet says or the propositions he explicitly teaches. I will focus on how he acts and what behavior his prophecy recommends on behalf of the church. I will say, doctrine, the prophet’s behavior, and the effect on the ecclesial life of the church are all in view for the early church’s testing of the prophets. I will close by offering some thoughts on how this testing may be of relevance today in discerning faithful articulations of doctrine and practice, particularly in its focus on testing the practical fruits of the life of the church.

The texts I have chosen to treat are the principal passages discussed by scholars upon the church’s practice of judging the prophets and their prophecies. These include Matt. 7; 5; 1 Cor. 12-14; 1 John 4; and Did. 11. Matthew 7 is only used to frame the discussion. The letters of Hermas .xi, and the Acts of Thomas 79 are not treated here for the sake of brevity though Aune discusses them. I will largely focus upon literary approaches on how the texts in the form we have them (or have best reconstructed them) were used for their purpose, are expressive of a coherent worldview, and

importance will be bracketed in favor of reading the texts as we now possess them.<sup>4</sup> By doing this, I find at least two things: 1) a large degree of agreement in details and the discrete claims made by Aune and others regarding the criteria the early church used to judge prophets and their prophecies; and 2) a different narrational framework<sup>5</sup> within which these common details and claims fit such that this framework that operates at the level of presuppositions entails a different set of implications for the life of the church. Though I will be discussing most of the same texts that Aune does and interacting with his readings from time to time, I do so only instrumentally as a way to highlight the picture I desire to draw through a reading of the primary texts which can be stated as follows: given that the early Christian community viewed themselves as players in a cosmic spiritual struggle and believed it necessary to be aligned with one side or the other (whether wittingly or unwittingly), they judged the veracity of the spirit motivating the prophets and their prophecies by comparing what they said to what they were taught, by evaluating the behavior of the prophet, and by looking to the fruits of the prophecy in the corporate life of the church.

### **Judging Prophets: A Political Game or Taking Sides in a Cosmic Struggle?**

In his aforementioned book, David Aune sets up the problem of dealing with conflicting political and prophetic authorities by contrasting the means available to Greco-Roman prophets in mediating conflicting oracular utterances with those associated with inspired prophets such as those within the Jewish tradition. Unlike the Greco-

between particular prophetic spokesmen and other types of political or religious leadership. It will become apparent below that when the topics of testing or evaluating

interpretations is one where theological statements are in service to political concerns in that the human desire to achieve political control necessitates theological statements regarding the supernatural / divine realm as a means to achieve that end. Theology is principally a political tool and only secondarily (or perhaps even incidentally) says something about divine realities. In the structure of Aune's thought, then, leaders of human communities laid down an irremediably vague methodology,<sup>11</sup> replete with theological warrants, which they could then use to assert their own authority over prophets who would upset the . The method propounded entailed charging disruptivng a(( pd4uw -37.21s7 (ut)-2 (hor4[(pr(p)2 (tivn0.005 (e)-4 (d o (e))2 (p)2 (tivng a)5 (ly)2 ( a)

was a temporal, political consequence of divine realities expressed by means of theological statements, statements regarding the existence of cosmic conflict, lying spirits, deceitful prophets, etc. and the effects of such on life now and eternally. Within this narrational framework, the equation described in my reading of Aune is reversed where theology now takes primacy over politics in the worldview of the texts. In a word, theology over politics. If the existence of cosmic conflict is not understood to be the background of why prophets need to be judged, then the stakes of such judging will remain unclear. These presuppositions will be tested by seeing if they help to explain the texts in question.

## **Paul on Testing the Spirits**

In what is perhaps his earliest letter, Paul is already stating his concern for testing prophecies. He writes in 1 Thess. 5:19–22: “Do not quench (1 Thess. 5:19) the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.” While it is quite likely that this is a series of standardized instructions in an easily memorized form,<sup>14</sup> what Paul has to say here must be understood within the context of the entirety of his epistle. By placing it in this context, Paul’s focus on the role of the Spirit in prophecy and his concern regarding the behavior of the prophets along with the practical fruits of prophecies come to the fore.

After greeting the Thessalonians, Paul describes how the gospel he preached came to them by emphasizing the role of the Spirit: “our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and [with] full conviction.” (1:5) It should be noted that the “with” (translating “%”) in brackets is likely not original to the text.<sup>15</sup> If this is true, Paul coordinates the latter two phrases as part of a single concept—that of the gospel being proclaimed to the Thessalonians not in mere words but in power and in the Holy Spirit and great fullness of assurance



therefore be understood as logically circular but not viciously so.<sup>18</sup> Paul's good behavior testifies to the authenticity of his message and ministry which has already produced converts whose changed lives already predispose them to accepting his defense of the divine authentication and origin of his words.

After Paul makes his defense, he then goes into a description of the work of the other side of the situation—the role of Satan in his ministry. He says that Satan “hindered us” (2:18) from meeting with the Thessalonians. This caused Paul great concern to the point that he sent someone to check on them because he was afraid that “the tempter” might have made “empty” “our labor” (3:5). The perlocutionary effect of this history (told from Paul's perspective) is to increase Paul's stature in the eyes of the Thessalonians as one who is truly sent by God and a participant in God's action of overcoming of the forces of evil. More than that, the effect of Paul's ministry is so challenging to the spiritual powers opposing God that “the tempter” would try to make the empty.







the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” with the editorial comment that, in fact, “But we have the mind of Christ” (2:16). This presupposition thereby leaves open the discussion of chs. 12–14 where making precisely this distinction is in view. If these connections between ch. 2 and ch. 13 (or chs. 12–14 more generally) are found to be persuasive, then it is possible to envision the discourse on love as the content of the wisdom mentioned in ch. 2 even as it is the proof of the true “spiritual person.” That would further mean that the chapter on love describes a wisdom which finds its antithesis in the “wisdom of this age and of the rulers of this age who are being rendered powerless” (2:6). This is an earthly wisdom, a “*1 3<sup>o</sup> ! + CE’&2:5; cf. 2:13*), one that “fleshly” (“*1 . ! , 3:1*), —“the spirit of the world” (2:12). Therefore, Paul is contrasting the wisdom of God that comes through the Spirit of God and is exemplified in love with the human wisdom that comes through the spirit of the world and is exemplified in such things as jealousy and strife.<sup>27</sup>

With Dunn, I agree that ch. 13 outlines a particular criterion for “discerning the spirits,” but this insight needs to be expanded. Given the larger context of Paul’s letter outlined above, I suggest that Paul also has a negative side in view. That is, if prophets might be adjudged to be acting in accordance with the love that comes from the Holy Spirit, they might also be adjudged to be acting in accordance with the jealousy and the strife that comes from the spirit of the world. If this is the case, then we do not leave the context of cosmic struggle with this second criterion but are still in the midst of it.

Dunn’s third criterion, “the test of community benefit,” comes from ch. 14 and is, for him, the clearest of the three criteria. He seizes upon Paul’s use of concepts relating to “building up” seven times in this chapter as a way to demonstrate the importance Paul places upon it.<sup>28</sup> Dunn says: “In all this the important point of principle which emerges is that the individual’s prerogative (inspiration or status) is always subordinate to the good of the whole.”<sup>29</sup> How this communal good should be conceived Dunn does not say outside of pointing to “the yardstick of God’s love in Christ, love of neighbour.”<sup>30</sup> While this is quite likely the case, it seems that the idea of “the good of the whole” should be conceived of not only horizontally between human beings but also vertically between God and humanity. The communal good, then, would be for the community to be in a relationship to God, receiving the gifts God gives through His Holy Spirit (which includes prophecies among others), essentially being not just the of God, but the people . This relationship from which all the spiritual gifts flow is basic to the creation and preservation of the community and so must be conceived of as its most important “good.” Being in relation to God by His Spirit through Christ then gives hope of resurrection from the dead and ultimately victory over death (ch. 15). Of course, not being in a relationship with God by His Spirit but rather being in one to a worldly spirit brings no such benefits and cannot be understood to be in any way a communal “good” that Paul would recognize. So for Paul, much would be at stake in building up the community in its relationship to God—even

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<sup>27</sup> That Paul is moving on to describe the effects of this human, fleshly wisdom in ch. 3 forms the connection between the two chapters. The jealousy and strife mentioned in 3:3 should be understood as products of this human wisdom.

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everlasting life.

Given this analysis, we finally come to the crucial phrase that I have been putting in quotation marks all along: “discerning the spirits” (1 Cor 12:10). While Aune is probably correct in saying that the Corinthians likely had not heard this phrase before and it is “the product of Paul’s penchant for categorizing charismatic phenomena,”<sup>31</sup> his reading of the plural “spirits” as referring to oracular utterances of a prophet is unconvincing. We have seen that Paul has no problem with understanding that various spirits are at work in the world, from naming one Satan or “the tempter” to calling them outright “demons” to mentioning the “spirit of the cosmos.” It would certainly not be foreign to Paul’s thought if we see here a simple and direct reference to various spirits (the Holy one or others) that are at work in the world. Certainly, the plural form “spirits” points in this direction. Likewise, Thiselton’s preference for Dunn’s thesis that “Paul may be using *πνεύματα* ‘in the sense of *πνεύματα* (spiritual gifts, or those things which pertain to the Spirit),”<sup>32</sup> seems unnecessary as well. A virtual substitution of one word for another resulting in what appears to be a spiritual gift of cataloging (a gift only a librarian could love) has less to commend it than reading it as “spirits” referring to animate (and animating) spiritual powers which flows well from Paul’s conception of spirits outlined above.

There has been much discussion over the meaning of “discerning” (1 Cor 12:10) as well. Thiselton is most helpful in this connection when he says that: “the gifts of **discernment** or *διακρίσεις* include (a) a

from merely human attempts to replace it; and (b) a *διακρίσεις*, in such a way as to distinguish various consequences and patterns.”<sup>33</sup> While this twofold definition has much to commend it, the first part could be further sharpened by interrogating what “human attempts to replace it” might entail. As mentioned above, in 1 Corinthians “human wisdom” has an origin in the “spirit of the cosmos.” Further, in Ephesians Paul directly attributes human misbehavior to spiritual powers when he describes their previous walk as idolaters as: “following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, *τοῦ ἀρχαίου ἀεὶ ἀποστόλου τοῦ αἵματος*” (Eph 2:2). So while there is certainly a distinction to be made between ecstatic prophetic utterances wherein what is said is, for all intents and purposes, the speech of an evil spirit and feigned prophetic utterances geared to benefit the “prophet,” the work of an evil spirit cannot be completely separated from either.

To summarize Paul's approach to discerning the spirits in prophecy, I propose the following four conclusions. First, the content of the prophecy must be consonant with the gospel as Paul preaches it. A spirit that does not teach God's salvific activity in Jesus contained in the short proto-creed "Jesus is Lord" cannot be the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead thereby vindicating his Lordship. Second, the behavior of the prophet must exhibit the activity of the Holy Spirit in the prophet's life.<sup>35</sup> Third (and connected to the second point), there is no discreet, propositional, disembodied method or procedure, rational or otherwise, by which this recognition of the Holy Spirit in the prophet's behavior may be made. Rather, it is expected that the community formed by the activity of the Spirit will the activity of that same Spirit in another. The concept of recognition points to a narrational embodiment of a Spirit-f98.5 Tz2 (ol)-2 (2)i0.8935  
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in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.” For John, the concept he is about to develop regarding “abiding” is purposive. One does not merely abide in such a way that one’s life is unchanged. Rather, the consequence claiming to “abide in him” (i.e., Jesus) is that one needs to do what he did—to refrain from sin and engage in christic behavior, walking as Jesus walked.

For those whose behavior is negative, a different sort of abiding is described. The one who does not love abides in death (3:14). All murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them (3:15). God’s love does not abide in the one who closes his heart to the brother in need (3:17).<sup>36</sup> Even more, “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” (3:8). So continuing to sin means that the sinner is “from the devil,” which is really bad news for the sinner given that the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil—works which could at least conceivably

in the human mind by the work of the Holy Spirit. Add to this the previous insights regarding how continuing to practice sin and not loving the neighbor earns the label “children of the devil” or being described as those “from the devil,” and the spiritual struggle of different spirits at least attempting to abide in a human host<sup>37</sup> is not just implicitly but explicitly indicated. So the test of prophets indicated in 4:2 is really understood as a test of spirits in the sense of spiritual powers. The Spirit that confesses Jesus Christ came in the flesh is from God, and the spirit that does not is the spirit of error (1Jn 4:1-3)—but the ones who are “from God” will listen to “us” (and so will listen to the Spirit of truth) while the ones who are “from the devil” will listen to the spirit of error (1Jn 4:4-5).

In summary, John envisions a situation wherein the believer abides in God in an intimate, reciprocal relationship, the knowledge of which is mediated by the work of the Holy Spirit. The actual accomplishment of this abiding is conceived of circularly. While an individual’s abiding in God (and vice-versa) is explicitly predicated upon belief in the name of Jesus and the practice of loving the neighbor which entails an absence of sin, such an absence of sin and so the confession in 1:6 (John 1:5) is not a condition for abiding in God; if they did, it would be impossible to know whether a prophet is speaking from the Spirit or from the devil. That is, if one agrees with what the Spirit says, that one should believe in Jesus and practice loving the neighbor.



In 11:1–2, the didachist opens his section on the reception given to itinerant churchmen with the general category of “teacher” which he then subdivides into that of apostle and prophet. These two categories have some overlap because an apostle whose behavior does not accord with what is expected of him can be called a “false prophet.” Teachers and prophets also appear to exercise distinctive yet overlapping roles in the congregation in later chapters (13:1–2), even as bishops and deacons are said to do the ministry of prophets and teachers (15:1–2). This suggests that understanding “teacher” as a general office or position in 11:1–2 is not appropriate. Instead, it is likely that the reference to teachers in 11:1–2 should not be understood as referring to a particular defined role but rather a general reference to the activity of teaching itself as it is exercised by itinerants—something that apostles and prophets do.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, it is appropriate to think of some overlap between the prophet and the “teacher” (dion v 5TJ-533 (i)h -26.9e0 Td[(s)-1 (om) Twt







and discernment say much the same thing.

The third concern is ecclesial in that the effect of the prophet's ministry in up-building the community was ascertained. If the prophet's words led to an increase in Christian life and faith for the church, then the prophet is accepted. Again, as with an evaluation of behavior, this is a highly contingent criterion and not easily discerned. It takes time for the fruits of prophetic practice to come to full bloom. But it is also here that the concern for the practical effects on the Christian community is of great importance. Does what the prophet says build up the body of Christ in its love for God and neighbor or not? Perhaps here is Augustine's dictum that: "Whoever, therefore, thinks he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and our neighbor does not understand it at all."<sup>50</sup> Judging

