

# 5 Ways to Think Critically Without Quenching the Holy Spirit

The pastor invited me to preach on a Sunday morning and then alerted me that gold dust had been miraculously appearing in their services. My response was open but cautious. Open because I value manifestations of the Holy Spirit, but cautious because there is no example of such a manifestation in Scripture, and Scripture is our primary guide for testing the spirits and judging manifestations.

I preached that Sunday morning, and as I was finishing my message, I noted that the children began coming from children's church into the auditorium to be with their parents. Almost immediately there was a commotion toward the back of the auditorium. I paused and someone announced, "The gold dust has appeared."

I politely acknowledged their excitement and concluded my message.

Later, I was standing by my book table in the foyer of the church when I noticed the children's pastor coming toward me covered in gold dust. I asked, "What is that all over you?" She replied, "O we were playing with the glittery stuff in children's church today."

I immediately recalled that it was when the children came into the auditorium that the excitement erupted about the miraculous appearance of gold dust. I smiled and thought to myself, "I have discovered the source of their gold dust."

Now, that was a harmless situation. However, if we are careless about "thinking critically" in the small things of life we will be careless in the larger things that could cost

us our life.

This is what happened in 1978 when over 900 people, many of whom who had been members of evangelical and charismatic churches, followed a charismatic preacher—Jim Jones—to South America and committed mass suicide with him. There were many indicators that things were not right but they were unwilling to “think critically” about the man and his actions.

To “think critically” is not about being negative or judgmental. “Criticism,” in the academic sense, is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “exercising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation.” Therefore, to “think critically” is to question, consider and evaluate a situation or manifestation.

### **Being Open Without Being Naive**

Let me be clear in saying that I value spiritual gifts. I was catapulted into ministry 45 years ago when Aquilla Nash gave a powerful prophecy to a shy young man who could not speak in public but was carrying an intense call of God in his heart. That young man was me, and that prophecy confirmed all that was in my heart and gave me the confidence I needed to step out in obedience to God’s call.

About one year after this experience of being “launched,” I was preaching an extended revival meeting in a church in Oklahoma. One night, a visiting preacher called me aside and spoke a word of prophecy over me. Although I don’t remember what he said, I do remember the conversation with the pastor and his mother after the service as I rode with them to their home where I was staying.

They asked about the prophecy and what I thought about it. They then expressed their firm belief that God does not speak through personal prophecy. As we talked, the pastor, Jess, who was single and in his 50s, shared about a devastating experience he had with personal prophecy as a young man in his

20s.

He told about having a close friendship with a young woman who attended the same church as he and his family. Although they were not formally engaged, he loved her and thought she was probably the one he would someday marry.

She went away to spend the summer with relatives in another state. Toward the end of summer a person at church asked, "Did you hear about Lois?" Jess replied, "No, I haven't heard from her." The person replied, "She got married."

Jess was shocked and devastated. How could this be? He learned later that in the church she attended with her relatives, a person prophesied to her that God had brought her there to marry a young man in the congregation. Wanting to obey God and not having been taught to question spiritual things, she and the young man married.

The marriage was an abject failure. Jess said that several years later, they divorced, and she returned to Oklahoma with three small children, very disillusioned with life and questioning aspects of her faith in God. Jess never married and passed away in his 70s.

Things could have been very different if they had understood the need to "think critically." Instead, Lois acted naively and accepted the prophecy without questioning it. Jess then reacted in the opposite direction and rejected all prophecy as a viable means of God speaking.

### **The Biblical Admonition to "Think Critically"**

Yes, in these days, when spirituality and the supernatural are being emphasized, it is crucial that we also emphasize the importance of learning to "think critically." In fact, Scripture commands us to "think critically."

The verse concerning this is 1 Corinthians 14:29, where Paul

says, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge." The "others" in this passage would be the "others" in the Christian assembly, which in Paul's day met primarily in homes.

The word "judge" is from the Greek word *diakrino*, and although it is variously translated as "judge," "discern" and "weigh carefully," the word literally means "to separate" or "to discriminate."

In other words, we are to sit in judgment and separate truth from error. This is what it means to "think critically" and it is the responsibility of the entire body of Christ.

This then raises the question of how this is to be done? What are the criteria used to separate the true from the false?

I will here offer five criteria, or tests, for "thinking critically" about spiritual manifestations. These five tests include (1) a heart test, (2) a vision test, (3) a word test, (4) a freedom test and (5) a character test.

### **The Heart Test**

I often receive emails from people telling about a meeting they attended, and although it was Christian, they will say, "Something just didn't seem right." I always tell them, "Listen to your spirit! Listen to your heart!" The Holy Spirit—the Spirit of truth—who is on the inside of you, will alert when there is error and witness to truth.

John speaks of this "heart test" in 1 John 2:18-27. In verse 26 he makes clear that he is writing "concerning those who deceive you." In other words, discriminating between that which is true and that which is false is the context for verse 27, where he says, "But the anointing which you have received from Him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. For as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and just as it has taught

you, remain in Him.”

The Greek word for “anointing” in this passage is *chrisma* and is very similar to the Greek word for “spiritual gift” in 1 Corinthians 12:4, which is *charisma*. Only the Greek letter *alpha* is missing from the word in 1 John 2:27.

I mention this to make the point that this “anointing” in 1 John 2:27 is something possessed by every true believer and is directly related to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. In John 16:13, Jesus promised that when the Spirit of truth comes, “He will guide you into all truth.”

You have a truth detector dwelling on the inside of you. When, therefore, facing questionable spiritual activity, listen to your heart. Do you have a sense of peace inside? Or is there a troubling or upset in your spirit? This is the “heart test.” Listen to your heart.

### **The Vision Test**

This test is related to the focus, vision or goal of the person or message in question. What is their focus and passion? What is their ultimate vision or goal? Is it themselves? Is it their own ministry? Or is it Jesus Christ?

In John 16:14, Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit had come, “He will glorify Me.” The Holy Spirit does not come to glorify angels, preachers, churches or denominations. The Holy Spirit is here to lift up and honor Jesus Christ. Revelation 19:10 is very clear in saying, “For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

In his introductory statement to the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:1-3, Paul makes it clear that gifts of the Spirit, including prophecy, must occur in a context where Jesus Christ is recognized and confessed as Lord. Commenting on this passage, Dr. Gordon Fee says, “The ultimate criterion of the Spirit’s activity is the exaltation of Jesus as Lord.

Whatever takes away from that, even if they be legitimate expressions of the Spirit, begins to move away from Christ to a more pagan fascination with spiritual activity as an end in itself."

When faced with questionable words and actions, apply the "vision test." Ask yourself about the person's passion and vision. Do they exhibit a vision and passion to honor and glorify the Lord Jesus Christ? Or is their vision more about themselves? This is the "vision test."

### **The Word Test**

The "word test" asks, "Is this compatible with the overall testimony of God's Word?" God will never say something today that contradicts or is out of character with what He has said in the past through the Scriptures. To use an extreme example, God will never tell a man to divorce his wife and marry another woman, for that would contradict everything He has already said about marriage.

At the Azusa Street Revival (1906-09) where many spiritual manifestations were occurring, the leaders, including William Seymour, emphasized making the Bible the standard for judging those manifestations. In response to a question concerning whether it was necessary to study the Bible after being filled with the Holy Spirit, they answered, "Yes, if not, we become fanatical or many times will be led by deceptive spirits and begin to have revelations and dreams contrary to the Word, and begin to prophesy and think ourselves some great one, bigger than some other Christians. But by reading the Bible prayerfully, waiting before God, we become just humble little children, and we never feel that we have got more than the least of God's children."

The 66 books of the Bible comprise what is called "the canon." The reason it is called the canon is that in ancient times a "canon" was a measuring tool, usually a reed, used like a

measuring tape or a yard-stick. From earliest times, the 66 books of the Bible have been recognized as the canon, the rule or standard, by which every other teaching, revelation and doctrine must be measured. As Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

When faced with questionable doctrines or manifestations, apply the "Word test." As it says in Isaiah 8:20, "To the law and to the testimony; if they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."

### **The Freedom Test**

Galatians 5:1 says, "For freedom Christ freed us. Stand fast therefore and do not be entangled again with the yoke of bondage." Paul is not talking about freedom to be self-indulgent and to sin. Paul was warning that if a person, a church, a movement or a leader tries to put you in bondage and outwardly control your life—that's not God!

God has not called us to a religion, but to a relationship with Himself through Jesus Christ. This is what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 11:28 when He said to the people of Israel, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will rest you" (literal translation).

As a young Christian, I thought Jesus, in this passage, was calling to people burdened down with sin. I later learned that He was speaking to religious people who were burdened down with religious duty and obligation, which had been substituted for a living relationship with Himself.

The rabbis had identified 613 commands in the Torah; 365 prohibitions and 248 positive commands. Many Pharisees of Jesus day believed that if all Israel kept the law for one day then Messiah would come. They, therefore, called upon Jews to take upon themselves the "yoke of the law," by committing themselves to do their level best to keep all 613 commands.

This had resulted in many in Israel being weighed down and burdened with religious duty. Jesus called them away from all this religion into a living relationship with Himself (Matt. 11:28-30).

Beware of those who try to control you and would place you under rules and regulations that have nothing to do with nurturing a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This is the "freedom test."

### **The Character Test**

In Matthew 7:15 Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous [greedy] wolves." These false prophets project one thing on the outside but are something completely different on the inside. They have no integrity.

Jesus used the word "ravenous" to describe these false prophets and ravenous is an extreme form of greediness that will destroy others to get what it wants. Jesus went on to say in vs. 16, "You will know them by their fruit." Note that Jesus said we would know them, not by their gifts, but by their fruit, that is, their character.

A person once sent me an email with a prophecy someone had sent to them and asked me what I thought about it. When I saw who had given the prophecy my first thought was, "I wouldn't trust anything this person has said or prophesied."

This was my response because I knew enough about this person over a number of years to cause me not to trust him. This was not a matter of someone who failed and then asked for forgiveness. This was a matter of someone with a track record of not walking in truth and integrity.

Some will protest by saying, "Oh, but we shouldn't judge anybody." When Jesus said, "Judge not lest you be judged," he was talking about having a censorious, judgmental attitude. He



was not talking about exercising “critical thinking” in order to protect ourselves and our loved ones from those who would take advantage of us.

The fact that Jesus tells us in this passage to “beware” of false prophets requires that we “think critically” in order to determine that they are not legitimate. The fact that He said we would know them by their fruit requires an assessment and determination concerning their character.

It is interesting that in Paul’s list of criteria for those who will serve as overseers in the church, each requirement is related to character (1 Tim. 3:1-7). No matter how well a person may preach, no matter how well they may prophesy, no matter how well they may sing, the Bible is very clear that character counts.

When in question about a situation or person, don’t be afraid to apply the “character test.” This is not a demand for perfection, but an insistence on integrity, honesty and uprightness.

### **Concluding Thought**

When it comes to the supernatural, we should have an attitude of being open without being naïve and being critical without being judgmental. This will allow us to enjoy the fullness of God’s blessings and at the same time be protected from the many deceiving spirits at work in the world today.