

Beware of Strange Fire

We all want the genuine manifestation of the Holy Spirit's power. But we must be careful not to allow counterfeits.

Almost as soon as I heard about the revival manifestations occurring in Lakeland, Fla., people began asking me questions. "What is it all about?" "Is this really revival?" Rather than answering these questions directly, I want to provide some guidelines for weighing and testing such things in the body of Christ.

In response to previous "revival" outbreaks in North America, many respected leaders took the stand that there was a mixture: God was at work, but so were the flesh and the enemy. However, instead of exercising discernment and godly authority to deal immediately with the things that were not of God, most of the proponents of the revivals embraced an attitude of tolerance toward what was happening. Some claimed scriptural support for this approach from the parable of the wheat and the tares recounted in Matthew 13:24-43.

Jesus used the parable to teach His disciples to allow the wheat and the tares in a field to grow together until the time of harvest. But His comment was taken as support for a policy of allowing the good and the bad in revival meetings to occur simultaneously—in spite of the obvious danger that people could be deceived into thinking the Holy Spirit was behind all the manifestations, some of which were clearly not of God.

Jesus, however, explicitly stated that the field in which the two crops are growing is the world, not the church. Here, the wheat and the tares must be allowed to grow together until the final end-time harvesting. Otherwise many potential members of the body of Christ will be robbed of the opportunity to choose salvation.

Applying this parable out of context to the church implies

that the principle of letting the good and the bad grow together is equally appropriate inside the body of Christ. Nowhere in Scripture is such a view substantiated. As Derek Prince said, "The Bible gives us no liberty to tolerate the incursion of evil into the church."

If you want to know how to handle things in the church, you have to look at the Pastoral Epistles, in which discipleship and a journey toward holiness are described as the norm. Unrestricted freedom for demons to produce manifestations, which are then labeled as the work of the Holy Spirit, will always result in the possibility that even the elect will be deceived (see Matt. 24).

The fact that God may be doing good things in some people's lives is not a valid reason for allowing the bad to prosper alongside the good. The counterfeit must always be discerned, exposed and dealt with.

Here's a scriptural example. On one occasion when Jesus was on earth, Simon Peter spoke out an amazing,

God-inspired truth about the identity of the Messiah. But when, a few minutes later, the same man spoke deceptive words, Jesus did not validate the error by allowing it to stand unchecked alongside the truth. He immediately took authority over the enemy working through Peter and said: "'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men'" (Matt. 16:23, NKJV).

Jesus was quick to discern the mixture and did not mince words in addressing the problem. In doing this He was teaching us an important lesson about dealing with deception.

Mixture in the Church

If Jesus was not willing to tolerate mixture in the life of one of His disciples, why should we allow it to go unchecked

inside the church? Surely we, too, should not only bless and commend whatever God may be doing but also deal firmly with anything that is from the enemy.

Isn't that the heart of discipleship as expressed by the apostle Paul to Timothy? Paul warned Timothy that "in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Tim. 4:1).

Then he said, "Reject profane and old wives' fables" (v. 7) and "take heed to yourself and to the doctrine" (v. 16). Paul then says that this will "save both yourself and those who hear you" (v. 16, emphasis added). Paul knew that the sheep would also be affected if deception were tolerated in the shepherd of the church.

The gifts of the Spirit include the gift of discernment, and this is perhaps the most needed gift of all in the body of Christ today. Myriads of people have written and spoken on the prophetic and healing, but where are the complimentary voices teaching about how to apply Paul's guidance to Timothy and how to discern the true from the false?

Perhaps an equally important question is, where does mixture in the church come from? If we are familiar with the sources, we will more likely be able to discern what is not of God. The primary sources of mixture in the body of Christ are: the world in the church, undiscerning and unhealed leaders, false prophecies, ignorance of the enemy's devices, and lying signs and wonders (supernatural occurrences that have their source in the power of Satan and not the power of God).

The world in the church. The Lord's Prayer encourages us to pray that the kingdom of heaven will come on earth. This is not a prayer for the Second Coming but a prayer that kingdom principles will be the determining factor for followers of Jesus. But there is another ruler who reigns over the kingdom of darkness and, because of man's choice at the fall, he is

also the ruler of this world's systems (see 1 John 5:19).

Satan's principles and practices are always at variance with those of God's kingdom. Paul challenged believers not to "give place to the devil" in their lives (Eph. 4:27) and stressed that the battle we are all involved in is not against physical entities but against "the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

He also warned that tolerance of all forms of immorality, occult practices, selfishness, idolatry, drunkenness, greed and so on will disqualify people from inheriting the kingdom of God (see Gal. 5:21). When the world is given license in the church, the spiritual powers of the god of this world are also given license to operate there.

Undiscerning and unhealed leaders. All leaders have a responsibility to discern and deal with the work of the enemy both in their own lives and within the body of Christ. When people operate out of an unhealed past (caused by such things as rejection, ungodly sexual relationships, trauma, abuse, drugs, New Age experiences, witchcraft or even satanism) they are open to deception. Leaders are not exempt.

They can become an unwitting channel for the enemy's influence and may find themselves battling with secret issues such as immorality, inner compulsions or addictions. And because they are the shepherds, whatever spiritual powers may still be operating in their lives can then, also, influence the sheep.

On conversion people are forgiven, no matter what sins they have committed, but forgiveness and healing are neither the same nor are they usually simultaneous experiences. Salvation is received in a moment, but the process of discipleship, healing and deliverance has to be worked out with "fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12).

We live in a fast-paced world (and church) in which instant

results and solutions are expected. This contrasts sharply with the path of discipleship—especially of leaders. It is a costly, time-consuming but essential process.

If the discipling, healing and delivering process does not take place, untrained character and inner brokenness can remain a hidden source of demonic power in a person's life, causing everything from ungodly behavior and relationships to bizarre manifestations and off-the-page supernatural experiences. Deep damage requires deep healing as well as major deliverance, and it is unwise to allow people with a damaged but unhealed past to exercise any form of leadership until it is abundantly clear that they are mature and are operating under secure and discerning spiritual cover.

False prophecies. When a “prophet” proclaims “God said it,” his or her words are usually accepted uncritically by all. The words are rarely tested. The prophet gets affirmation, and even acclamation, from the crowds, and few people seem willing to ask the hard questions. Those who do are put down with responses such as, “If God has said it, isn't that enough?”

Unfortunately it's not enough, for there are many verses in Scripture warning about the dangers of false prophecy. And they are there for a reason. The vessel through which all prophecy is given is fallible, and both he and his words need to be tested.

Ezekiel 13 warns that when prophets say, “Hear the word of the Lord,” they may be prophesying out of their own imagination. Such words are described as lying divinations. Jeremiah 23:16 tells the people not to listen to what the prophets were saying. For those prophets were filling the people with false hopes, speaking visions out of their own minds.

God said: “‘I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied’” (). In all these cases the severest judgment of God is spoken on those

who lead the people astray through false prophetic words.

I passionately believe in prophecy, but I test prophetic words and their sources carefully to avoid being deceived. This is not doubting God, and it is being obedient to Scripture. It is in the context of prophecy that Paul commands his readers to “Test all things; hold fast to what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21).

Ignorance of the enemy’s devices. Satan is a master deceiver. He takes advantage of the sins we commit to gain power in our lives and uses the hurt and bruised soul as a generation point for demonic power. If leaders do not understand how he operates, they will not be in a position to truly care for their people by protecting them from the devices of the enemy.

For example, when people are led to believe that certain demonic manifestations are from God, they are conditioned to want those manifestations. When they receive them, they think they are receiving God’s blessing. In reality, what they receive is a spirit that causes the manifestations and that has been validated by others as a sign that God is at work.

Certainly physical signs can indicate that God is at work in a person’s life to bring healing or deliverance. But we can’t assume it’s Him when everyone (or many people) get the same sign and it is passed around the body of Christ like a commodity.

The occult world knows all about anointing, transference and impartation. In the Scriptures an anointing is for service. But the idea of mass impartation as an experience to be clamored for is foreign to Scripture.

The enemy clones his followers into “sameness” through such deceptive impartations. This is the foundation of many cults and false religions. God, on the other hand, releases His children into the uniqueness of their gifts and anoints them specifically for their individual destinies.

When something is described as a transferable anointing, or there are attempts to impart to all and sundry an anointing so that they can take it away and give it to others, you can know that this is very dangerous ground. There is no biblical foundation for transferable anointings and mass impartations. Baptism in the Holy Spirit is for all, but the impartation of an anointing from God is uniquely for the person receiving it.

Lying signs and wonders. Satan has power and uses it to great effect. And when a leader has an unhealed heart that gets its affirmation and significance through being a person with power, then the enemy can have a field day by using demonically inspired soul power to put on an impressive show.

“Minor miracles” such as gold dust and gold fillings are welcomed as being evidence of a visitation of the glory of God. Yet anyone who has researched even the basics about occult power knows there are many deceptive things the enemy can do—even healings.

No wonder Jesus warned that in the end times “false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24). We are living in those days He described.

It is no big deal for a person who is sick with a spirit of infirmity to be healed by a more powerful demon—who either dismisses the spirit of infirmity (demons casting out demons) or controls the lower spirit so that it is inactivated for a season. Such “instant healings” are often proclaimed as miracles. Though people who receive them may claim to be healed, the healing often comes at the price of more powerful demonic control in their life, which can take them into yet deeper deception.

Healing and Discipleship

Healing without the discipline of discipleship leaves people and churches vulnerable to many deceptive influences. Healing,

not Jesus, becomes their focus.

On the other hand, discipleship without healing forces leaders in the direction of heavy shepherding to control unhealed people. People then lose their capacity to exercise their own free will. Inside they become weak and have to be propped up by the rigidity of external rules. They then become vulnerable to temptation and may suddenly fall victim to pornography, drugs, an affair or many other things.

Healing with discipleship is the biblical norm for the body of Christ. When we elevate unhealed people into positions of power and authority, they become more vulnerable to the enemy's temptations, thereby increasing the possibility that further deception will be released in the church. But when the Lord truly heals broken people, whatever their backgrounds may have been, they develop a spiritual strength that gives them inner security, and they have no need to depend on the false to substantiate their lives or ministries.

Whenever we are faced with a need to test a person's ministry, a revival or a movement to determine whether it is of God, it is essential for us to heed the words of Jesus: " 'Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" ' " (Matt. 7:22-23). These words are a reminder that we must ever be on our guard, for outward manifestations may be rooted not in the power of God but in the deceptive power of the enemy.

Peter Horrobin is the president of Ellel Ministries (USA) and international director of Ellel Ministries. He is also the author of *Healing Through Deliverance* (Baker).