

"Test the spirits" ^{in I John 4:1}
^{in Nov. 1978}

INTRODUCTION: The ~~recent~~ news of the great tragedy at Jonestown, Guyana, S.A., gripped our minds and staggered our emotions.

We all asked "How could ~~900~~ people at one place and time be convinced and moved to drink poison and commit mass suicide?"

How could religion be so perverted?"

(Review the story as found in newspaper accts.).

Also the Davidians in Waco, TX

The Bible tells us not to be so gullible as to believe every popular, charismatic, magnetic personality who comes along claiming to preach religion.

I John 4:1 says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world."

How can we test the spirits?

What is the test of true religion?

I. THE FIRST TEST IS IN THE CONTEXT OF THIS SCRIPTURE PASSAGE: THE DOCTRINAL TEST.

- A. Read verses 2 and 3.
- B. Belief about Jesus Christ is crucial.
- C. Especially the doctrine of Incarnation.
- D. Jesus Christ is very God of very God, and very man of very man according to an old creed. He is Son of God and Son of Man. He is both divine and human.

The eternally existing Son of God came in the flesh as Son of Man and took upon himself a genuinely human nature. *Philippians 2:5-8*

E. N.T. Christology must be understood in the entire N.T. context and pattern of faith and doctrine.

- F. Anyone who strays away from this N.T. standard of doctrine and faith, especially regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ, is not worthy of our following.
- G. It is said that Jim Jones claimed that he was "Christ reincarnated," thus removing himself from N.T. Christology.

3) H. Side by side with positive Christian faith is a healthy skepticism that inquires into the claims of men and movements to be inspired.

The mind of the Christian is not a soft mind, and faith is not gullibility.

II. THE HISTORICAL TEST

A. We should ask, "Does the religious group follow in the mainstream of historical Christianity from the days of the Apostles down through the centuries to the present?"

B. Or, is it a "new religion"?

C. Have they pulled out of the main body of Christ?

See I John 2:18-19, "...many antichrists have come....They went out from us, but they were not OF us; for if they had been OF us, they would have continued WITH US."

It is characteristic of many so called cults or sects or independent religious groups that they may have a loose identification with some religious body, but they have a tendency to pull out and withdraw from the larger bodies of other Christians and "go it alone."

D. There is something healthy about maintaining fellowship with other Christian bodies to be available for counseling and correction in case some local group begins to go astray from the true scriptural teachings.

E. As Christians we should carefully keep in the company or fellowship of the larger body of Christians around the nation and world.

Don't be a part of a little clique group that has become isolated from the mainstream of historical N.T. Christianity.

I like that part of the Alliance of Baptists Covenant which reads: We commit ourselves to the larger body of Jesus Christ, expressed in various Christian traditions, and to a cooperation with believers everywhere in giving full expression to the gospel."

III. THE STRUCTURAL TEST:

EXAMINE THE STRUCTURE OF THE ORGANIZATION

A. I Peter 5:2-3, "Tend (shepherd, pastor) the flock of God that is in your charge... not for shameful gain...

not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock."

B. Here we have some principles of church organization and policies.

C. It is always appropriate before you support any religious group or become a part of it to ask, "How do they handle their finances? Is there a responsible group of dedicated competent people, who are open and responsible to the entire constituency in some public way? Is there honesty and INTEGRITY?

Or is it a "one man show"? This is the way to be above reproach and avoid the fatal criticism of greed and "shameful gain."

D. Ask, too, "What is the source of authority and power in the religious group? Does one charismatic, authoritarian leader "lord it over" everyone else? Or is there shared decision making?

E. Peter warns against the use of the office of the ministry for mere material gain, for personal prestige, or for popular acclaim.

The popular religious leader is easily self-deceived. He may be doing an effective work and fail to realize that his real ambition is ^{more} to make a "success" than to make a mature Christian congregation and leave a lasting work of God.

F. Power corrupts even the religious leader. And there is no corruption so terrible as the power over the minds of trusting followers.

G. Jesus warned that this domineering spirit was to be found among the Gentiles, but it was not to be allowed among his disciples. (Mk 10:43). This power motive knows no limits, and its ambitious spirit is an ever-present threat to every church.

4) Any authority in the church must be in keeping with the nature of the Good Shepherd and his dealings with the sheep.

There is no place in the church for "bosses" who run it as a government or a business or a military organization.

Christ must shudder at the efficiently successful church that has lost its responsible democratic nature.

H. Jesus warned about "false prophets who come in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." (Mt. 7:15)

Here are some of their characteristics:

1. Excessive love of money
2. Abuse of power
3. Hypocrisy
4. Self-centeredness
5. Paranoia
6. Persecution complex
7. Delusions of grandeur
8. Marks of violence
9. Thought control
10. Lack of freedom; or intolerance.
11. Sensationalism, "showing great signs and wonders." (Mt. 24:11, 24)

IV. THE SANITY TEST

A. Luke 8:35, The healed man, from whom Jesus had cast out the demons, "sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind." Before Jesus cured him he was a poor severely disturbed person with a schizoid personality, but Jesus restored his sanity so that he was quiet and "in his right mind."

B. Religion has so often appeared as a kind of frenzy--as irrational and irresponsible fanaticism, or unrestrained emotionalism.

But frenzy is not the work of the Spirit of God, but of demons.

To sit at the feet of Jesus and to learn of him is to recover our sanity.

Through Jesus we can live secure, coherent, and creative lives.

The Christian way may seem nonsense to unbelievers, but it is never a mad frenzy or a distorting fanaticism, or an abandoning of the intellect that God gave us.

C. As an individual you are responsible to be a mature, intelligent Christian. Don't let someone else do your thinking for you.

You should know enough about the Bible and theology so that you can do your own thinking for yourself and not be misled by some unbeliever or religious fanatics or foolish heretic.

You should be able to detect it when someone is leaving the pathway of Jesus Christ and is striking out on his own.

D. 2nd Tim 1:7 says, "for God did not give us a spirit of fear or timidity, but a spirit of power and love and of a sound mind or self-control."

E. Romans 12:2 speaks of "the renewing of your mind." God expects you to renew, develop, and use your mind or intellect, not subdue it under a mass of gullibility or superficial emotionalism.

V. THE SOCIAL TEST

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A. Do they really and truly LOVE,
love one another
love all people
and love GOD with all their heart & mind,
soul and strength?

B. See I John 4:7-8, 10-12, 16-21
Notice the emphasis on LOVE.

C. Love casts out fear, punishment, and
threat of punishment, vs 18.

D. Christian love in no way can be consistent
with the MURDER of congressman Ryan and
the four people with him, including three
newsmen and a member of the cult who
wanted to get out.

Christian love in no way can be consistent
with administering poison with syringes
by squirting the liquid into the mouths of
babies and children and adults who tried
to resist. Even when they kept spitting
it out the nurses and medical team shouted
abuse at them, called them traitors, and forced
them to take it.

Christian love in no way can be consistent
with brain-washing techniques which deprive
people of the freedom to be themselves
and think for themselves, and challenge
excesses of the movement or leave it without
denunciation when they chose to do so.'

Christian love in no way can be consistent
with mental, physical, and emotional
abuse of people within the group.

Christian love in no way can be consistent
with brutality and forced donations and
retaliation against critics.

These things are anything but love.
They are evidence of a narrow-minded religious
bigotry, of mentally disturbed leadership,
and of insecure flight from reality.

E. Christian love and hatred of people are
incompatible. Christian love and violence
are incompatible. Christian love and decep-
tion are incompatible.

(over)

CONCLUSION:

The world is asking, "How could such a tragedy happen as happened at Jonestown in 1978? I am sure that I don't have the complete explanation of all that happened, but I think I can offer some suggestions that might at least partially explain how it happened.

I propose that somewhere along the way Jim Jones became a false prophet for an evil spirit which was not of God. Their theology and especially their Christology became confused. Their motivation became self-centered; Their minds became disordered and they somehow conceived of themselves as Jesus Christ. ~~He had xx persecution complex and fled to an isolated place in South America to get away from his critics.~~ They had delusions of grandeur and thought of themselves as a special leaders chosen of God to build a new colony. They became obsessed with power and could tolerate no challenges from others.

If I did not believe in a personal Devil and a supernatural force of evil, such awful tragedies would start me to consider the problem of evil all over again. The supernatural is not always divine. There is a supernatural evil force which is just as real, just as personal, and just as uncanny as the divine power of good in the universe.

And Christian people must be on guard against the spirit of evil as it uses and speaks through false prophets today. This truth is valid for our age as for every age because evil still has a dynamic, invasive power, and it is healthy to be reminded that antichristian spirits are still real and at work in our world. In every age the lie contends against the truth, evil against good, false prophets against true prophets, and the spirit of Antichrist against the real Christ.

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CONCLUSION:

This is why we are commanded to test the spirits. But we must remember that we are to test them not in order to see whether they agree with our own opinions, but "to see whether they are of GOD."

There IS A DIFFERENCE!

Think about it the next time you are tempted to support or follow some questionable character with a new religious teaching and a way of life into some far-out experience.

May God give us the dedication to follow the spirit of Jesus Christ, and the perception to detect the deceivers and false prophets who deny in word and deed Jesus as God's unique Son incarnate in the flesh as our only Lord and Savior.

You see, if we really do this, we are not only testing the spirits, but we are also testing our spiritual MATURITY as Christians.

CONCLUSION CONTINUED

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There IS a DIFFERENCE!

Think about it the next time you are tempted to support or follow some questionable character with a novel religious teaching and way of life into some far-out experience.

May God give us us the dedication to follow the spirit of Jesus Christ, God's Son come in the flesh for our redemption, and the perception to detect the deceivers and false prophets who deny in word and deed Jesus as God's unique Son incarnate in the flesh as our only Lord and Savior.

You see, if we really do this, we are not only testing the spirits, but we are also testing our spiritual maturity as Christians.

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