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Distinguishings Of Spirits

by Dan Trygg

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of servings, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of in-workings, but the same God, the One in-working all things in all persons. But to each one is given the disclosure of the Spirit for the common good ("carrying together"). For, on the one hand, to one is given a word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another a word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to a different person a faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healings by the one Spirit, and to another in-workings of powerful-acts, and to another a prophetic-utterance, and to another distinguishings of spirits, to a different person kinds of tongues, and to another an interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit in-works all these things, distributing to each one individually according as He intends."

I Cor. 12:4-11

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God..."

I Cor. 14:29

"But solid food is for the mature, the ones by means of practice having their faculties having-been-trained-through-exercise toward a discernment of good and evil."

Heb. 5:14

It is important to remember the remarks which begin this entire section on spiritual gifts: "Now concerning spiritual things, brothers and sisters, I would not have you ignorant. You know that when you were Gentiles, you were being led toward unspeaking idols, however you were being led away. Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus is accursed!'; and no one is able to say, 'Lord Jesus!', if not by the Holy Spirit." **The introduction acknowledges the danger, even the probability, that evil, misguiding spirits may, at times, influence some who attend the Body-life meetings of the people of God.** They may be able to counterfeit some of the legitimate gifts of the Holy Spirit, in order to impress the undiscerning with the obvious presence of the supernatural, and attempt to lead them astray. This is one of the fears commonly expressed by those who object to allowing the free expression of spiritual gifts in a group setting, "It is too dangerous. It opens the door for the enemy to come in and lead people astray." "How do we know if these gifts are from God, or not?" **These are legitimate concerns**, recognized and acknowledged by Paul himself, way back in the first century. As we read on, however, we must conclude that, **in spite of any danger or threat, the value of the legitimate use of gifts and abilities energized by the Holy Spirit far outweighs the liabilities of allowing for free expression in group gatherings.** How can I say that? Because Paul, who acknowledged the danger, is by far the strongest advocate for such interactive Body-life. **God has provided sufficient checks and balances** so that the enemy's influences and infiltrations can be exposed and brought to futility, *if* we will walk obediently and humbly with God, and will make use of all the tools He has made available to us. In fact, God's word indicates that **our maturity can only develop if we are exposed to such tests and attempts to mislead us, for it is by working through these challenges that we learn** to be more circumspect and wise in dealing with such situations.

For something that would seem to be as crucial as being able to discern the presence, or even the nature, of spirits, you would think we would have more explicit direction given to us. As with other spiritual gifts, however, there is little more revealed as to what this kind of gifting may be capable of, or how it works, than is the case with the other gifts. Again, we are pretty much limited to what we can glean from the name, and what we can discern from our observations from experience. In fact, God has not chosen to offer us much at all, by way of a checklist, or a formula, or a manual, to help us in dealing with such matters, ...probably partially because we would be pouring over our checklist instead of drawing near to Him with our questions and concerns. The gift, "distinguishings of spirits", is only mentioned in the NT in this one place, I Cor. 12:10. What can we learn from the description given by Paul?

The word "distinguishings" is from the Greek word, diakrisis. This word only occurs two other times in the NT (Rom. 14:1; Heb. 5:14). The verbal form, diakrinō, occurs some 19 times, which helps us gain a little more understanding of the word. Diakrinō is a compound word, formed from the most common word for "to sort out, separate, or judge" (krinō), and the preposition dia, which can mean "through, throughout, by means of, or on account of". Basically, diakrinō means to "thoroughly judge, to sort through", or possibly "to judge on account of" something. In the common usage of the day, **it had four basic meanings: (1.) to separate, make a distinction, determine, or discern** (Mt. 16:3; I Cor. 6:5; 11:29,31;14:29; [cf. I Cor. 12:10;

Heb 5:14 -- note that this seems to be the fruit of a lengthy experimental, experiential process)); **(2.) to discriminate, or set oneself apart from another** (Acts 15:9; I Cor. 4:7; Jas. 2:4); **(3.) to separate oneself in a hostile attitude, to oppose, to dispute, quarrel, or contend** (Acts 11:2; Jude 1:9; [cf. Rom. 14:1]); and, **(4.) to be at variance within oneself, to hesitate, question or doubt** (Mt. 21:21; Mk. 11:23; Acts 10:20; 11:12; Rom. 4:20; 14:23; Jas. 1:6 [twice]; Jude 1:22).

How does this help to understand how the gifting may operate? The basic meaning is to be able to sort out something about a person, or to make us aware of a spiritual presence. **It could be a mental/spiritual perceptiveness; or it could be a strong revulsion**, a hostile feeling of opposition to something the person is doing; **or it could manifest itself as a questioning**, hesitating or *doubting* of the person's motives. These would all be options which the word "discernings" would allow. It is important to remember that this is in the context of those temporary "disclosures" of the Holy Spirit given at a moment in time "for the common good" (I Cor. 12:4-10). Any one of us could receive such a warning, insight, hesitancy, or questioning. There are some individuals who seem to experience this kind of thing on a regular basis, but the context we are looking at here is in regard to an incident-based prompting of the Holy Spirit, which can come to any one of us. We must be open to this possibility. **The way in which He communicates this to us can vary widely.** Some people just seem to intuitively know, others have a strong emotional response, others may see something that they recognize as wrong or phony, still others may even see demonic spirits (or angels cf. II Kg. 6:17), or may hear a word in their head about it. **The point is that it is God who is revealing something to us.** It is not about our natural human suspicions, or a personal tendency to question. It is a *disclosure* from the Spirit.

Another point, reinforcing what I just was describing, is that the word is in plural form, "discernings". This indicates that there are **different kinds of discernings, coming in a variety of forms, and dealing with different things.** The word "spirits" is also plural. The most obvious need for discernment in the context is concerning **whether something being said or done is from the Holy Spirit, or whether it is demonically induced, or simply humanly generated.** This might be to act as a "check" to something being said in a meeting, or it may be a much stronger prompting, inciting you to confront a demon, or to initiate praying for someone (Lk. 13:10-13). This gift is invaluable when exorcising a demon. **Some seem to receive a discerning of the human spirit, the attitude, orientation and nature of one's inner life.** This can give great insight into how to approach a person, what they may need, and what methods or approach may be fitting or helpful (Mk. 2:8; 5:6-8; Lk. 7:36-50; Acts 8:14-23; 13:6-12). Again, the label, "discerning of spirits", in the context of these other "revelatory gifts" or promptings of the Holy Spirit, is not meant to lock us into a specific thing. It is purposely left open-ended and undefined to open us up to possibilities that God make us aware of.

OK, so what do I do, if I think I may be receiving some discernment about someone? That depends upon the nature of the revelation, and on the situation, as well. Know this, however, **the disclosure of the Spirit is generally given to be acted upon, not just to be filed away in your head.** Like a word of wisdom or a word of knowledge, a discernment of spirits is *given to guide us* in ministering to one another. If the Holy Spirit is showing us something, generally it also means that *He intends for us to do something about it.* If Jesus did "what He saw the Father doing" and spoke "what the Father taught" Him, then should we not expect that God is showing us something because He wants to do something about it? Remember, however, that the purpose of our gathering is to build one another up. We must **be respectful and sensitive to the person** when we do this, so as to not needlessly embarrass someone, or go around blasting people with our suspicions. This is not a license to attack people. Sometimes what God shows us may be for the person alone, or it may be wise to take one or two others to confirm the communication. The use of this gift is a "test-out-by-trial-to-discover" process, as well. We will learn to be more effective as we try things, and learn from what takes place. **If you are not sure, ask for confirmation, or word things in a way that will glean more information from the person.** You may have one piece that will make sense when compared with the insights someone else may have. By speaking up, you may embolden someone else to step out. On the other hand, if the revelation is clear enough to warrant decisive action, speak out or do what the Holy Spirit is directing you to do. If you are correct, it will be obvious by the response. Again, however, *if you do not say or do something, you may never know if God was speaking to you, or not.* We must respond to the timing, initiative, and direction of the Lord.