

Signs of True Revival

Contributed by Jonathan Edwards

[Jonathan Edwards was one of the premier theologians our nation ever produced. The following is a contemporary adaptation of Edward's masterful treatise on revival, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*. -- Editor]

I intend to show how we may definitely conclude that God is at work. I want to show the signs which Scripture says are clear evidence that God is at work. We will then be able to use these signs to judge any work without fear of being misled. I propose to look only at those signs given in 1 John 4. That is because this chapter deals with this question plainly and more completely than any other part of the Bible. So let us look at the signs in the order they are given in the chapter.

1. When esteem for the true Jesus is raised

If a person's esteem of the true Jesus is raised, it is a sure sign that the Spirit of God is at work. By "the true Jesus," I mean this: that Jesus was born of a virgin and crucified outside the gates of Jerusalem; that He is the Son of God and the Savior of men as the gospel declares.

This sign is given by the apostle in 1 John 4:2-3: "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God." This implies acknowledging more than that there was such a person as Jesus who appeared in Palestine and did those things that the Bible says. It implies acknowledging that He was the Christ, the Son of God, chosen to be Lord and Savior.

This word "acknowledge" is important. In the New Testament it means much more than merely "admitting." It implies knowing something and being willing to declare it in praise and love. For example, Matthew 10:32 says, "Whoever acknowledges Me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven." People may praise their own false Christ while having no respect at all for the true, historical Jesus. Indeed, they are led away from Him. But no spirit can give testimony to the true Jesus, or lead men to Him, except the Spirit of God.

Why is this the case? It is because the devil has a bitter and unchanging hatred for the real Jesus, especially as Savior. He passionately hates the story and the doctrine of redemption. Satan would never work in men to produce honorable thoughts of Jesus, nor cause them to value His commands. The Spirit that turns men's hearts to Christ is not the spirit of the serpent that has such an unchanging hatred toward Him.

When we look at anything that is happening in the religious world, and need to pass judgment, the first question we must ask is "Are these people coming to love, honor, and esteem the real Lord Jesus more than ever?" If people are being convinced of their need of Christ and led to Him; if their belief that Christ appeared in history is strengthened; if they are more convinced than ever that He is the Son of God sent to save sinners; if they acknowledge that He is the only Savior and they need Him desperately; if they appreciate Him more than they did, and love Him too, then we may be quite sure that it is the Holy Spirit who is at work!

2. When Satan's kingdom is attacked

The Spirit of God must be at work if the interests of Satan's kingdom are opposed. This is a sure sign. Satan's kingdom encourages sin and encourages men to cherish worldly lusts. The Holy Spirit does not.

This sign is given in 1 John 4:4-5: "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them." The apostle is here comparing those who are influenced by two opposite kinds of spirits. One spirit is true, and the other is false.

John shows the difference like this: one spirit is from God and so overcomes the spirit of the world. The other spirit speaks about and relishes the things of the world. Here, the spirit of the devil is called "the one who is in the world." This is the difference between Christ and the devil. Christ says, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), but Satan is called "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4).

We know what the apostle means by "the world" or "the things that are of the world" from his own words in 1 John 2:15-16: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world." Clearly, he means everything to do with sin and includes all men's corruptions and lusts--everything they look to for satisfaction.

So, from what the apostle says here, we may safely conclude that if a people:

- have their love of ordinary, worldly pleasure, profits, and honors lowered;
- are weaned from eagerly chasing such things;
- have a deep concern about eternity and the eternal happiness that comes through the gospel;
- earnestly begin to seek God's kingdom and righteousness; and
- are convicted of the ugliness and guilt of sin, as well as the misery to which it leads, then the Spirit of God must be at work.

We cannot believe that Satan would convict men of sin and awaken the conscience. The conscience is God's representative in the soul. It can do Satan no good to make its light shine brighter. It is always in his interest to keep the conscience quiet and asleep. When conscience is awake, everything that Satan wants to accomplish is hindered.

When he is out to lead men further into sin, would the devil first open their eyes to see its ugliness? Would he make them afraid of sin? Would he make them mourn over past sins? Would he show them that they need to be delivered from sin's guilt? Would he make them more careful about everything they do, to ensure there is no sin in it? Would the devil lead them to avoid future sins and make them more careful to avoid his own temptations? If a man thinks the devil acts like this, I wonder what he uses for brains!

But some may argue that the devil may even awaken a man's conscience in order to deceive him--that is, to make him think he has been saved while he is still in his sin. To argue like this is futile. It is to argue that Christ was making a mistake when He told the Pharisees that Satan would not cast out Satan (Matt. 12:25-26). Remember, the Pharisees believed that the spirit at work in Christ's ministry was the devil.

A man with an awakened conscience is the hardest man in the world to fool! The more awake a sinner's conscience is, the harder it is to quiet it down until it is really delivered from sin. The more a conscience is aware of the greatness of man's guilt, the less likely he is to be satisfied with his own righteousness. Once a man is thoroughly frightened by a sight of his own danger, he will not believe himself truly safe without good grounds. Awakening a conscience in this way is not likely to confirm a man in his sin. On the contrary, it is likely to lead to sin and Satan being driven out.

So, whenever we see people made aware of:

- the ugliness of sin;
- God's anger against sin;
- their own natural lostness because of sin;
- their own need of eternal salvation;
- their need of God's mercy and help; and
- their need to do what God has commanded in seeking salvation, we may certainly conclude that it is the Spirit of God at work!

Yes, even if their bodies are affected and they cry out or scream or faint. Yes, even if they go into fits or are affected in other dramatic ways. Those things do not count at all.

3. When people come to love the Scriptures more

When men are persuaded to love the holy Scriptures more, and to trust their truth and divine origin more, it is certainly the Spirit of God at work. This is the sign the apostle gives us in 1 John 4:6: "We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood."

When he says, "We are from God," he means, "We are the apostles God has sent to teach the world His doctrines and commands." This argument extends to all those God has appointed to deliver to His church its rules of faith and practice. That is to say, it covers all those apostles and prophets that God has inspired to write the Scriptures. The devil would never try to produce such a respect for God's Scriptures. A spirit of delusion will not persuade men to listen to God for direction. The devil does not say, as Abraham did, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them" (Luke 16:29). Nor will he say the words that came from heaven about Christ, "Listen to him" (9:35).

Would the spirit of error, wanting to deceive men, turn them to God's infallible Scriptures? Would he lead them to get to

know those Scriptures well? Would the prince of darkness lead men to the light of the Sun in order to promote his kingdom of darkness? The devil has always shown how much he hates the Bible. He has always done all he can to put out its light and lead men away from it. He knows that this is the light that will overthrow his dark kingdom.

He has had much experience of the power of Scripture to defeat his purposes and thwart his designs. It is a constant plague to him. It is the main weapon that Michael uses in his war with Satan (Jude 9). It is the sword of the Spirit that pierces him and conquers him (Eph. 6:17). It is the sharp sword that we read about that comes from the mouth of the One on the horse with which He smites His enemies (Rev. 19:15).

Every text of the Bible is a torment to the old serpent. He has felt its stinging smart thousands of times. He is therefore at war with the Bible and hates every word in it. We may be quite sure he will never try to persuade men to love it or value it.

It has often happened in history that many sects of enthusiasts have undervalued the written Word of God. They set up some other authority that is over the Scripture. That still happens today. But when men come to value the Scriptures more, not less, then the Spirit of God is certainly at work.

4. When men are led away from falsehood into truth

We may learn another way to judge between spirits from the names given to the two opposite spirits in 1 John 4:6. One is called "the Spirit of truth" and the other "the spirit of falsehood." These words point to a vital difference between the Spirit of God and other spirits that may imitate His work.

If we see a spirit at work that is leading men into the truth and convincing them of things that are true, we may be sure it is the Holy Spirit. For example, if people become more aware that there is a God, or that God is a great God who hates sin, or that their own lives are short and may end at any moment, or that there is another life and they have immortal souls, we may be sure it is the Holy Spirit at work. When men realize that they will have to give an account of themselves to God and that they are very sinful in nature and practice; when they understand that they are helpless in themselves; when, in short, they are brought to sound doctrine, then we may be sure that the Holy Spirit is at work in them.

It is the Holy Spirit who brings men into the light, not the spirit of darkness. Christ tells us that Satan is a liar and the father of lies. His kingdom is a kingdom of darkness. Satan's kingdom is upheld only by darkness and error. Scripture speaks of the reign and dominion of darkness (Luke 22:53; Col. 1:13). The demons are called the rulers of the darkness of this world. It is only God who brings us to the light of truth and removes our darkness.

5. When there is an increase in love to God and man

When people begin to love God and man with a genuine love, we may be sure that the Holy Spirit is at work. This is what the apostle says in 1 John 4:7: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." John is still speaking of two different sorts of people who are led by two opposite spirits and pointing out the contrast between them. Love is one way we may know which person has the true spirit.

This is especially clear from 1 John 4:12-13: "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." Here the apostle speaks of love and the Holy Spirit almost as if they are the same thing! If God's love dwells in us, then the Holy Spirit dwells in us. The same point is made in 1 John 3:22-23 and 4:16.

Love is the last sign the apostle gives us of the true Spirit's work, and it seems to be the most important. He pays more attention to this than to all the rest. He tells us that love for God and love for our fellow men are both important. He writes of love for our fellow men in 1 John 4:7, 11, and 12, and of love for God in 1 John 4:17-19. Then in 1 John 4:20-21, he speaks of both together because he wants us to understand that love for men springs from love to God.

So if people have great thoughts of God and His glory, the Holy Spirit must be at work. If they understand (to some degree) the greatness of Jesus Christ so that they delight in Him, the Holy Spirit must be at work. Jesus becomes very precious to them and their hearts are overwhelmed by the wonderful and free love of God, who gave His only Son to die for them. Surely this must be the Spirit of God at work! "This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. . . . And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. . . . We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:9-10, 16, 19).

If a spirit makes us love God for these reasons, it must be the Spirit of God. If we delight to think about the attributes of God that the gospel and Christ reveal and we yearn to be made like Him, living in ways that please and honor Him, that must be the Spirit of God. When a spirit calms quarrels between men, promotes peace and goodwill, and desires the salvation of souls, this must be the Spirit of God. When men delight in the company of others who are obviously God's children, and have all the love I have described, we have the highest possible evidence that it is the Holy Spirit who is at work.

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