

*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world.* [1 John 4:1](#).

Many, as I said before, are so troubled by the discords and wranglings in the church that, in their dismay, they run away from the gospel. But the Spirit prescribes an altogether different way: that believers be watchful not to accept any doctrine lightly and without judgment. We should be careful not to be offended by the variety of opinion in the church; we should rather discriminate between teachers, with the Word of God as our only norm. It is enough to make it our rule not to listen indiscriminately to everyone that comes along.

I take the word *spirit* as a metaphor, as meaning a man who claims the gift of the Spirit, so that he may assume the office of a prophet. Since nobody ought to speak in his own name, we must not trust those who do not speak as instruments of the Spirit. The prophets spoke with authority because God himself honored them with this title, and in so doing, set them apart from all other men. These men were called spirit because they gave utterance to the oracles of the Spirit, and by their ministry represented God's own person. They offered nothing out of their own heads, neither did they come forth among the people in their own names. They were given this high title, in order that their own insignificance might not take away from the reverence that is due to the Word of God. God has willed it that we always receive his Word from the lips of men, as though he himself had appeared from heaven.

But now Satan interferes. He not only places false teachers among the people, so as to corrupt the Word of God, but he also calls them prophets, so that the people fall [into error] all the more easily. These arrogant pseudoprophetic

windbags are in the habit of snatching an honor which God bestowed upon his own servants. The apostle uses the word *spirits* purposely, to keep us from being deceived by those who pretend falsely to speak in God's name; for in our own day we see many who are stupid enough to be so overcome by the mere title of "the church," that they take sides with the pope, and would be damned forever rather than raise a finger against his authority.

It should be noticed that the apostle did not deny outright the claim of these men to be prophets. He might have said simply that they ought not to be believed. When these false teachers lyingly claimed that they had the Spirit, he let them have their way; only he warned that their claim was both fictitious and foolish unless they could come forth with the reality of prophecy. It is silly to be so taken in by a high-sounding title that one does not even dare to see if there be anything behind it.

*Try the spirits.* Since not everyone who calls himself a prophet is one, the apostle says here that he should be put to a test; not only by the church at large, but also by individual believers. But the question arises, Where do we get our discernment? When some say that we should judge men's words by the Word of God, they are right so far; but that does not settle the matter. I admit readily that men's teachings should be tested by the Word of God. But the truth is that without the good sense we receive from the Spirit, it helps us little or nothing to have the Word of God in our hands; for its meaning is bound to escape us. For instance, gold is tested with fire or touchstone; but only by those who know how to do it. What use is fire or touchstone to the ignorant? In the same way, we are fit to judge only when we receive discretion from the Spirit and are guided by him. Since we could not follow the apostle's precept, unless the

power of judging were added to it, certainly the godly shall not be left without the Spirit of sound judgment, provided they seek him from the Lord. But it is also true that the Spirit will lead us to true discretion only when we bring all our thoughts under subjection to the Word of God; for, as we said above, it is, so to speak, our touchstone, which should be most precious to us, since it is the only source of sound teaching.

But here comes a difficult question. If everyone has a right to be a judge and arbiter in this matter, nothing can be set down as certain; and our whole religion will be full of uncertainty. I reply that we must test doctrines in a twofold way: private and public. By private testing, each one establishes his own faith, and accepts only the teaching which he knows to be from God. For our conscience cannot find security and peace except in God. Public testing of doctrine has to do with the common consent and polity of the church. Since there is a danger that fanatical men may rise up and boast rashly that they have the Spirit of God, believers should seek a remedy by coming together and reasoning their way to an honest and godly agreement. The old proverb is right when it says, “So many heads, so many minds.” Therefore, it is a marvelous work of God that, overcoming all our perversity, he makes us of one mind, and unites us together in a pure unity of faith.

*Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation. [2 Peter 1:20](#).*

Here Peter begins to teach how our minds must be prepared if we would make proper progress in Scripture. There is in this verse a word which may mean one of two things. If you read it ἐπηλύσεως, as some do, it means an impulsion. But if you read it ἐπιλύσεως, as I do, it means interpretation.

In either case, almost all agree that we should not rush at reading Scripture rashly, trusting our own wits; because the Spirit who has spoken by the prophets is his own interpreter.

This explanation contains a true, godly, and useful doctrine. The only way to read the prophets to advantage is to set aside the mind of the flesh and to submit to the authority of the Holy Spirit. It is godless profanity to set up our own acumen as capable of understanding Scripture, which contains mysteries of God hidden to our flesh and sublime treasures of life which are far beyond our powers. This is why we say that the light which shines in it comes only to the lowly.

But the papists are foolish when they conclude that no private interpretation by an individual is valid. They abuse Peter's testimony, in order to give their councils alone the right to interpret Scripture. But this is childish. When Peter speaks of private interpretation, he does not refer to individuals; neither does he forbid them to interpret Scripture. He means that it is not godly for them to come out with something out of their own heads. Even if all men in the world were to agree and be of one mind, the outcome would still be *private*, of their own. The word *private* is here set against divine revelation; for the believers, illumined inwardly by the Holy Spirit, know as truth only what God says by his Word.

However, I think the simpler meaning of Peter's statement is that Scripture is not of men, or by the initiative of men. You will never come to it well prepared to read it, unless you bring reverence, obedience, and teachableness with you. But reverence comes from the knowledge that it is God who speaks to us and not mortal men. Therefore, Peter in the first place urges us to believe without doubting that

the prophecies are God's oracles; which means that they were not set in motion by men's own action.

What comes next means the same thing. The holy men spoke as they were moved by the Spirit of God; that is, they did not babble out fables, moved by their own impulse and as they willed. In short, the first step in right understanding is that we believe the holy prophets of God as we do him. The apostle calls them *holy men of God* because they performed faithfully the task which was laid upon them; and in this service, they were surrogates for the person of God. Peter says they were *moved*, not because they were bereft of their own minds (as the Gentiles imagined their prophets to have been during their "enthusiasm"), but because they did not dare to say anything of their own. They followed the Spirit as their guide and obeyed him to such an extent that their mouths became his temple, and he ruled in them.

*The Jews answered him, We have a law, and by our law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God. [John 19:7](#).*

The Jews explain that they are pursuing Christ out of regard for the law, and not from passion or hatred. For they realize that they are being indirectly held in check by Pilate. Knowing that Pilate is ignorant of the law, they as much as say to him: "We have a right to live according to our customs. Our religion does not suffer a man to give himself airs as the Son of God." Besides, this accusation was not groundless; but they were altogether wrong in the deduction they made [from the law]. The general thesis was, of course, correct. It was not right for any man to assume divine honor; and anyone who took for himself what is God's alone, was worthy of death. Their error was that they applied the law to Christ; for they did not consider with what praise Scripture itself had predicted the Messiah. If they had done so,

they would have inferred readily that he was the Son of God. Thus it is evident that having started with a true principle, they were led by bad reasoning to a false conclusion.

Let us be warned by this example to distinguish carefully between general doctrine and the particular inferences we make from it. This we should do for the sake of inexperienced and simple people who, when deceived by some pretended truth, reject even the fundamental doctrines of Scripture; and there is too much of this kind of thing going on in our world today. Let us, therefore, be careful to shun fallacies, so that truth may remain inviolate and faith in Scripture may be not overthrown.

*If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? [John 3:12](#).*

Christ concludes that if Nicodemus and his like do not make progress in the knowledge of the gospel, it is their fault. He shows that since he has come down to earth itself, he is not to be blamed if not everybody learns his doctrine properly. It is too common a vice among men that they want to be taught in a subtle and ingenious way: hence most of them are very happy with deep and abstruse speculations; for the same reason, many do not think much of the gospel: in it they do not find the kind of pompous discourse with which they like to fill their ears. They do not care to sink so low as to waste their time with the rude and lowly teaching of the gospel. But, it is most stupid not to honor the Word of God, because he has lowered himself to the level of our ignorance. When we find God prattling to us in the Bible in an uncultivated and vulgar style, let us remember that he does it for our sake. Anyone who presumes or pretends to be offended by the condescension of God so that he will not submit to God's Word, is a liar. Anyone who

cannot bear to lay hold of God as he comes down to him will still less soar up to him beyond the clouds.

Some explain *earthly* things as the ABC of spiritual truth, and speak of self-denial as the first step in godliness. But I prefer the view of those who think this phrase has to do with Christ's way of teaching. For even though Christ's discourse as a whole was heavenly, he spoke plainly, as it were in an *earthly* way. Furthermore, this is not true of one discourse only. In this verse, Christ's habitually simple and popular way of teaching is contrasted with ambitious men's addiction to speech that is full of pomp and splendor.

*And thou, Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda; for out of thee shall come a governor, that shall rule my people Israel.* [Matt 2:6](#).

There is no doubt that the scribes quoted the words of this passage ([Micah 5:2](#)) in their own tongue, faithfully, as found in the prophet. But Matthew was satisfied to refer to it. Because he wrote in Greek, he followed the commonly accepted reading of it. From this place and others like it, we can readily gather that Matthew did not compose his Gospel in Hebrew. Moreover, one must always notice that when the apostles quote a Scriptural testimony, they do not give it word for word, and sometimes depart quite far from its language; they nevertheless accommodate it (*accommodare*) in a fitting and proper way to their own purpose. Let the readers always keep in mind the purpose of the Evangelists in bringing forward passages of Scripture, so that they will not insist upon dwelling upon mere words, but will be content with the fact that the Evangelists never torture Scripture into a false meaning, and apply (*aptare*) it properly to a genuine use. Since the latter intended to feed infants and novices in the faith with milk, because these

were as yet incapable of taking solid food, there is no reason why the children of God should have scruples against a diligent and exact inquiry into the contents of Scripture, so that the taste offered them by the apostles may lead them to the fountain [of God's Word].