

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, May 31, 2009
Rev. John Tapscott

"DISCERNING THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH"

John 16:13

On Pentecost Sunday we celebrate God's gift of the Holy Spirit, poured out ten days after Jesus had been taken back to heaven. The disciples then moved into action, preaching the Gospel in Jerusalem and building the new Christian church. Three thousand people were converted to Christ on the Day of Pentecost.

Now when Jesus promised the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room he said, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf." (John 15:26) Then in 16:13 "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth..." So right here we see one of the functions of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guides the Christian Church and Christian believers into God's truth.

Now finding truth is problematic today. Governments have "truth commissions" or "inquiries" to uncover the truth about certain situations. We can't even trust the media to tell us truth, because even the media has an agenda. Some people deny that there is any ultimate truth at all. What's true for you may not be true for me. Truth is subjective, they say. So we become like Pilate who shrugged and asked Jesus, "What is truth?", without expecting an answer.

Truth is also problematic because it's so easy to be deceived. I read that for years the old Soviet Union falsified its maps of the countryside. Rivers, bridges, coastlines, even cities were shown in the wrong location. Distance scales were out of whack. Soviet theory was that errors made the maps useless to spies, invading armies, and navigators of enemy bombers. Of course, that made the maps pretty much useless to tourists and Soviet citizens, too.

And given the way images can be manipulated, we can't even believe what we see. They say that "Seeing is believing." Well not necessarily, not anymore. So we have learned to be sceptical.

Jesus says, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." Now even here we have to be on guard, not against the Holy Spirit, mind

you, for He will certainly guide us into nothing but truth. But the Holy Spirit is not the only spirit active in this world. In fact, there are other spirits which deliberately lead us into falsehood. So John says in the first letter of John 4: 1-3, "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." Now hear these same words from Eugene Peterson's *"The Message" - the New Testament in Contemporary English* - "My dear friends, don't believe everything you hear. Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God. There are a lot of lying preachers loose in the world."

Jesus said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." That is a promise we can trust. But we have to test the spirits, to make sure that the Spirit who guides us is really God's Holy Spirit. Now the Holy Spirit works through Christian preachers and teachers, books and DVD's, to guide us into God's truth. But false spirits can use these as well, to guide us into lies and put us off-track. Jesus said in John 8:32 "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free." Conversely, not knowing the truth and living by lies and deceptions binds us and keeps us in slavery. That's why discerning between truth and falsehood is so important. It's knowing and living by God's truth that makes us free. So when you listen to a preacher, including me, when you open a Christian book, when you turn on a TV evangelist, how can you discern that it's the Holy Spirit and not some other spirit at work? How do you know whether or not the Holy Spirit is guiding you into God's truth? How do we test the spirits?

First, if it is the Holy Spirit guiding us into the truth, the teaching will be glorifying Jesus Christ.

Jesus says in verse 14, "The Spirit of truth will glorify me..." And John in his 1st letter says, "By this you know the Spirit of God; every Spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist..., of which you heard that it was coming, and now is in the world already."

So this is a test. Is the teacher, the preacher, the teaching, glorifying Christ? Is Christ being lifted up, declared to be the Son of God come in the flesh? You see, it doesn't matter what the topic of the teaching is - it could be marriage, money, forgiveness, prayer, suffering, doubt, raising children. Underlying it all will be a particular view of Christ. So when you listen to a preacher or teacher or use some Christian resource, try to discern what the view of Jesus is. Ask yourself, is Christ being exalted or diminished? Is this teaching leading me closer to Christ or leading me away from Him? If the teaching and/or the teacher glorifies Christ and holds up a Biblical view of Christ, then it's likely that the Holy

Spirit is guiding you into God's truth on that particular topic. But you should be wary if the teaching or the teacher diminishes Christ or leads you away from Him. A spirit other than the Spirit of truth may be at work.

When a church interviews a prospective candidate for the pulpit, the most important question to ask is, "What is your view of Jesus?" If he or she gives an answer which glorifies and lifts up Christ, then you have a good candidate before you. If they give an answer that diminishes Christ or indicates that Christ is not who the Bible says he is, then you should move on from that candidate. At least that's what I would do. Jesus himself said, "The Spirit of Truth will glorify me..." So that's the first test for discerning if the Holy Spirit is leading you into God's truth. Is Christ being glorified by the teacher and through the teaching?

The second test is this. **If the Holy Spirit is guiding you into God's truth, the teaching will affirm Scripture.**

It's a simple test. Is this teacher or teaching affirming or denying Scripture? Jesus says in 16:13, "The Spirit of truth will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own; but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."

Sometimes you hear someone say, "The Holy Spirit said to me such and such..." "The Holy Spirit is leading the church to do this or that..." Well, perhaps. But we must test that claim, because there could be another spirit at work, a spirit leading the person or even the church into falsehood. And the standard which tests the Spirit's guidance is Holy Scripture. The Holy Spirit is not an independent contractor. He does not speak on his own. He leads us to what God has already said. Now the Spirit of truth may guide us into new applications of Biblical truth. But the Spirit does not lead us away from or contradict what God has already said in his word. Yes, we need to study the Scriptures together and we need to seek the consensus of the best scholars. Furthermore, we can't use just one verse to support a position, but take the whole counsel of God in Scripture on that topic. But with these safeguards in place, the Holy Spirit will guide us into God's truth by leading us into what God says in his word. And the Bible is surprisingly clear on most subjects that are essential to Christian faith and practice.

Now there are various interpretations possible, especially when it comes to what the Bible says about the things that are to come, the end days, the particulars of how all that will unfold. But one thing Scripture affirms is that Christ is coming again as Judge and Lord to complete God's Kingdom. So if someone were to say, "The Holy Spirit told me that Christ is not coming again," and some have taught that, then we know that is not true. For the whole New

Testament proclaims not only Christ's first coming, but his second coming, too. So that's the second way you test the spirit. Does the teaching you hear affirm Scripture? Does the teacher or preacher acknowledge and put him or herself under the authority of Scripture? If so, then you can have confidence that the Holy Spirit is guiding us into all truth.

Here's a third test of the Spirit. **If it is the Holy Spirit guiding us into truth, the teaching will speak clearly about sin and salvation.**

Jesus says in 16:8-11, "When he (the Spirit of truth) comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgement, because the ruler of this world has been condemned."

The Holy Spirit convicts the world and individuals of sin, showing us that we cannot save ourselves from sin's deadly power or make ourselves right before God. But then the Spirit brings us to Christ the Righteous One, who died for our sins, rose from the dead and ascended to the Father. And now Christ gives a righteous standing before God to all of us who trust in Him. The Spirit proclaims the judgement and the victory of Christ over the ruler of this world, a victory we share by faith. Simply put, the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, shows us that we need a Saviour, brings us to Christ, and leads us to put our trust in Him.

Now not all sermons and teachings are directly about sin and salvation, but again there is an underlying attitude about it. Does the teacher, the preacher, the resource, overlook sin? Does it say that sin isn't really isn't our deepest problem? Does it downplay our need for a Saviour and suggest that all we need is some social adjustment? Does it overlook Jesus' atoning death on the Cross? Does it present Christianity as a self-help scheme rather than a Gospel in which God offers his help to us? Listen and discern carefully, because if the Holy Spirit is at work then underlying the teaching will be the clear message of sin and salvation. And if it's not there or if it's distorted then another Spirit may be leading you, and he will be leading you not into God's truth but away from it.

Jesus said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth..." So here are three tests for testing the spirits, for discerning between the Holy Spirit which leads you into God's truth, and spirits which lead you into falsehood. Is Christ being exalted? Is Scripture being affirmed? Is there clarity about sin and salvation? If the answer is Yes to these, then we can be sure that the Holy Spirit is leading us into God's truth for your life, for the church, and for the world. And once again, here is Jesus promise to those who believe in Him. John 8:32- "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free."