

The Need for Discernment

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Matthew 24:23–25 (NKJV) “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There!’ do not believe it. ²⁴ For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand.”

One of the greatest dangers facing Christians today is deception. The tragedy is that deceived people don't know they are deceived. Jesus warns that even the “elect” (truly saved) will be tempted to embrace a substitute in their sincere spiritual longing for His presence. Only watchful commitment to obey Christ's warning will protect us from the power and influence of the coming deception.

I speak as an insider of the Charismatic movement. I believe that the ministries, gifts and manifestations of the Holy Spirit are as valid and needed in the church today as they were in the first century church. However, I am deeply concerned about where the movement is heading. My concern as a leader is based on the growing emphasis on experience and so-called “revelation knowledge” at the expense of Scripture and orthodox Christian doctrine. Many unbiblical experiences and doctrines are being tolerated and even mainstreamed into Christian circles as a result while few seem to notice or care! In the name of unity and toleration along with avoiding controversy, we have lost our commitment to God's Word in matters of faith and practice. As leaders we have abandoned our responsibility to test the spirits. Unless leaders and churches are willing to return to the Word of God, exercise discernment, and bring correction, this trend could usher in the great apostasy.

I understand that many people are sincerely hungry for God. However, good shepherds are responsible to direct the hunger of these lambs toward genuine biblical discipleship--developing a personal relationship with God through Bible study and prayer. Unfortunately, babes often want the candy of experience rather than the meat of the Word. We must therefore be diligent to warn, teach, and protect them. If we direct their hunger toward subjective experiences and revelations rather than the Bible, we rob them of the Scriptural tools they need for discernment while opening the fold to the invasion of wolves.

The Charismatic movement is mystical by nature meaning that it allows for the present supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, if we fail to judge subjective experiences and revelations by the Word of God, we create an atmosphere where anything goes “in the name of the Lord” and we embolden those who do so making it a perfect breeding ground for deception. I admit that in my days of hunger and immaturity I too have been mesmerized by deceptive men and methods until my commitment to God's Word snapped me back to reality and rescued me from the trap of deception. Thank God for His Word! What makes deception so seductive but deadly is the claim or belief that something is from God when it is not. When strengthened by crowds of people or a television audience, the influence to believe the lie becomes stronger. However, Scripture is clear: we are *never* to embrace supernatural experiences or “words from God” that contradict the Bible and it is *always* right to test everything by the Scriptures (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 1 John 4:1-3).

Unfortunately immature Christians often despise the disciplined life of prayer, Bible study, and the expository preaching of the Scripture while demanding another Holy Ghost “experience”. This places pastors and churches in a dilemma—will they fall into the trap of introducing “strange fire” (artificially “conjuring” or “hyping” the experiences these people demand) or will they keep the church pure by preaching the pure Word of God that challenges false prophets, false teaching, and rejects the “strange fire” offered in the name of the Lord?

Can experiences be trusted? Some seem to believe so. If we adopt the logic that every spiritual experience or impression is true and of God, then we allow experience or feelings to replace the Bible. Experience-based Christianity is no different than other pagan religions whose beliefs and practices are based upon superstition, emotion, and subjective experiences. Since experiences and feelings can come from sources other than God such as an emotional frenzy, the power of suggestion, manipulation of an audience, spiritual stimulation in hyped atmospheres, or demonic influence, how do we discern the true from the false? The answer often given is that we are able to discern whether something is of God or not by a certain “feeling” in our inner being. In other words, we are left to discern an experience by another experience! The lie of Satan that goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden is that man can know good and evil apart from God’s Word.

Our attempts at navigating with human discernment through the myriads of abnormal, subjective, crazy, and heretical teachings and practices of our day has failed us. We must return to the true compass of God’s Word—our only infallible instrument for discernment. Human discernment is only as accurate as our knowledge and practice of God’s Word: *“But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”* (Hebrews 5:14 NKJV).

If we fail to love and practice the Word of God we can easily fall victim to deception: *“The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”* (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 NKJV)

Why should we entertain and defend subjective and doubtful things when there are plenty of objective things in the Word of God that we have yet to incorporate into our lives? Unfortunately, some will continue to believe they are immune. However, no one is immune from deception due to sin, pride, gullibility, and issues of rebellion. Only through humility, accountability, and dependence upon God’s Word can we remain free from deception. Please consider the following warnings from Scripture:

2 Corinthians 11:3–4 (NKJV) *“But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it!”*

Galatians 1:6-10 (NKJV) *“I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As*

we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ."

1 Timothy 4:1–3 (NKJV) *"Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth."*

2 Timothy 4:1–5 (NKJV) *"I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry."*

Seek to know God through His Word and prayer. Don't build your spiritual life on experiences. Experiences do not last leading some to become like spiritual "junkies" seeking one experience after another. Be assured that your faithful daily walk with Christ accompanied by your obedient response to His Word will bring to you all of the godly and biblical experiences that He intends—and all without deception. The true Christian life is characterized by a steady diet of grace, faith and faithfulness to God's Word. Stop striving to satisfy genuine spiritual hunger through your own efforts. Seek God in an attitude of rest. Enjoy the experiences that He gives you but don't seek them, depend upon them, or demand them. He loves you and is ready to satisfy your hunger with His truth as you seek to know Him through the Word of God and prayer.