"Testing the Spirits: The Early Church on Judging the Prophets"
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The task of discerning whether or not a teaching faithfully articulates Christian doctrine and practice is not new to the church but rather has been a feature of her corporate life since Pentecost. For the early church, judging prophets and their prophecies was one of the ways this was accomplished. Accepting a false prophet entailed accepting into the church's life both a false teacher—a wolf in sheep's clothing[1]—and a false teaching that could lead many astray. Jesus himself warned of the dangers of false prophets and gave a rule by which they might be identified when he said: "You will recognize them by their fruits."[2] This article will explore the various practical tests or general rules of practice the early church used to recognize the fruits of the prophets in order to determine true prophets from false ones by examining passages in the New Testament where this testing is in view along with the Didache to see how the testing continued into the first half of the 2nd century. By so doing, it will provide guidelines that could be applied analogously to contemporary teachings to determine if they are faithful articulations of Christian doctrine and practice. I begin by engaging in conversation with David Aune whose book, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*,[3] remains the standard work in the field in order to provide the necessary presuppositions to understand my argument. While Aune reads the church's *praxis* of judging the prophets against a background of political conflict within the Christian community, I read it against a background of pastoral concern for the life of the flock in the face of a cosmic battle between spiritual powers of good and evil where adopting errant teaching can have eternal significance. Given this background of spiritual conflict in the first century, I contend that theology, not politics, is the driving concern for the early church, and theological considerations that drive testing the prophets are not restricted to only what the prophet says or the propositions he explicitly teaches but also extend to how he acts and what behavior his prophecy recommends on behalf of the church; that is to say, doctrine, the prophet's behavior, and the effect on the ecclesial life of the community were all in view for the early church's testing of the prophets. I will close by offering some reflections on how this *praxis* may be of relevance today in discerning faithful articulations of Christian doctrine and practice, particularly in its focus on testing the practical fruits of the teachings for the life of the church.

The texts I have chosen to treat are the principal passages discussed by Aune and focus upon the church's practice of judging the prophets and their prophecies. These include 1 Thess. 5; 1 Cor. 12-14; 1 John 4; and Did. 11. Matthew 7 is only used to frame the discussion, while Hermas *Mand*.xi, and the Acts of Thomas 79 are not treated here for the sake of space even though Aune discusses them. I will largely focus upon literary approaches on the assumption that the texts in the form we have them (or have best reconstructed them) were put together for a purpose, are expressive of a coherent worldview, and therefore can be legitimately read as literary wholes. While historical reconstructions will not be completely eschewed, their

[1] Cf. Matt. 7:15.
[2] Matt. 7:16 (ESV).
[3] David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

importance will be bracketed in favor of reading the texts as we now possess them.[4] By doing this, I find at least two things: 1) a large degree of agreement in details and the discrete claims made by Aune and others regarding the criteria the early church used to judge prophets and their prophecies; and 2) a different narratival framework[5] within which these common details and claims fit such that this framework that operates at the level of presuppositions entails a different set of implications for the life of the church. Though I will be discussing most of the same texts that Aune does and interacting with his readings from time to time, I do so only instrumentally as a way to highlight the picture I desire to draw through a reading of the primary texts which can be stated as follows: given that the early Christian community viewed themselves as players in a cosmic spiritual struggle and believed it necessary to be aligned with one side or the other (whether wittingly or unwittingly), they judged the veracity of the spirit motivating the prophets and their prophecies by comparing what they said to what they were taught, by evaluating the behavior of the prophet, and by looking to the fruits of the prophecy in the corporate life of the church.

Judging Prophets: A Political Game or Taking Sides in a Cosmic Struggle?

In his aforementioned book, David Aune sets up the problem of dealing with conflicting political and prophetic authorities by contrasting the means available to Greco-Roman prophets in mediating conflicting oracular utterances with those associated with inspired prophets such as those within the Jewish tradition. Unlike the Greco-Roman prophets where an utterance may be rejected due to a technical error (divinatory technique was improperly performed, signs were misread, etc), erroneous prophecies associated with inspired prophets are more difficult to discern because it has to do with spirits—entities that are almost by definition not open to direct observation. In the case of false inspired prophets, one is obligated to determine whether "the spirit speaking through the prophet is a lying spirit or an evil spirit, or the prophet himself is deceitful."[6] Because of this inherent difficulty of identifying the spirit behind the prophet, Aune argues that prophets are usually tested only when it is politically necessary for the leadership to do so because their authority has been challenged:

> The procedure of testing prophets is usually invoked only when strong conflict exists

[4] I also do this because I consider the texts from the New Testament to be Scripture, and as such the inspired Word of God. However, my argument throughout the paper does not depend on this faith commitment; it does depend on an assumption of the literary integrity of the texts in question (including the non-biblical *Didache*), and this is why I state it here. It is also true that this assertion of literary coherence is itself very much in line with treating the texts as God's inspired Word. That said, in its methodology, this article is a work whose primary "home" is in the field of "religious studies" and not, in the first place, "theology" *per se* insofar as it takes the voice of an outsider and not an insider. Even so, my hope in offering it in a place like *Concordia Theological Journal* is that it will be amenable for use by theologians (such as myself) to make theological arguments that speak to and directly affect the life of the church as we point people to the Lord of the church. My closing reflections begin to do this and so initiate theological reflection on the conclusions found herein, but much more in this vein can and should be said.

[5] I use the phrase "narratival framework" to denote an ordering of causally-related concepts. In order to understand the framework, it is necessary to be able to situate each concept in terms of its logical location (e.g., ground, consequence, implication, etc) and its function **in relation to** the other concepts that are nested within that particular locus of thought. I use the term "narratival" as a descriptor in order to bring out the causal nature of the relations between the concepts and to emphasize the irreplaceability of any given concept for understanding the whole. Characterizing the plot needs to be able to take into account all the plot points.

[6] Aune, *Prophecy*, 217.

> between particular prophetic spokesmen and other types of political or religious leadership. It will become apparent below that when the topics of testing or evaluating prophets and their messages arises in early Christian literature, a conflict between the authority of Christian leaders and the authority of prophets lurks in the background.[7]

It is against this background of political conflict that Aune proceeds to give an interpretation of texts dealing with testing the prophets.[8]

At the end of his discussion, Aune issues two sets of conclusions. First, he finds his supposition regarding the principally political nature of the conflict to be vindicated. He writes,

> In all the passages in early Christian literature where tests for unmasking false prophets are discussed (with the notable exception of Did. 11–12), the primary purpose of these criteria was to denounce a particular false prophet (or group of false prophets) whom the author regarded as particularly threatening. Conflict among various prophets or between prophets and other types of Christian leaders in which prophetic *legitimacy* is questioned is a way of solving the problem of conflicting authority as perceived in what appear to be conflicting norms and values.[9]

This indicates that the true problem for Aune is not the effects that true or false prophecy might have on the theology of the church *per se* (he describes this as an *apparent* conflict between norms and values) but rather of preserving political power for an entrenched leadership. Aune's second conclusion trades upon the first and necessarily presupposes political conflict either between prophets or, more likely, between prophets and established communal authority. He writes:

> Unlike false teachers, false prophets were particularly difficult to deal with since they appealed to the divine authority which stood behind their pronouncements. Two basic types of charges, often combined, were used to discredit prophets regarded as a threat: they were deceivers or they were possessed by evil spirits. The charge that false prophets were mediums through which evil spirits spoke accounted for the fact that both true and false prophets claimed inspiration for their utterances. Prophets who were illegitimate were shown to be such through their *behavior*, their *teaching*, and their *prophetic protocol*.[10]

Though Aune is likely correct in his estimation regarding the specific means by which prophets were judged (i.e., by their behavior, teaching, and observance of prophetic protocol—more on this later), the overall tenor of the picture he paints is dominated by the idea of competing human agents struggling for control over the early Christian community. When the established authority is challenged, the challengers had to be "dealt with" by means of "charges" whose intention was to "discredit" the prophets. That is, the narratival framework within which he situates his

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[7] Ibid., 217.
[8] Particularly 1 Thess. 5; 1 Cor. 12–14; 1 John 4; and Did. 11–12, though Matt. 7, Hermas *Mand*.xi, and the Acts of Thomas 79 are also in view
[9] Aune, *Prophecy*, 229.
[10] Ibid., 229.

interpretations is one where theological statements are in service to political concerns in that the human desire to achieve political control necessitates theological statements regarding the supernatural / divine realm as a means to achieve that end. Theology is principally a political tool and only secondarily (or perhaps even incidentally) says something about divine realities. In the structure of Aune's thought, then, leaders of human communities laid down an irremediably vague methodology,[11] replete with theological warrants, which they could then use to assert their own authority over prophets who would upset the *status quo*. The method propounded entailed charging disruptive prophets with being possessed by evil spirits or with being deceivers interested only in their bellies. If my reading of Aune is at all reflective of his thought, then the narratival framework he presupposes is one where political realities form a theology which is then intended to be used instrumentally to protect established authority and **not** one where theological statements regarding ultimate reality resonate in the political realm thereby issuing in a changed political reality. In a word, politics over theology.[12]

However, is that what is going on in *these* texts? Is the principal concern exemplified in the texts best read as that of safeguarding the political leadership of the community? Is this the correct presupposition to bring with respect to these particular texts? I do not think so. These texts are about determining the character of the spirit inspiring the prophet in order to see if the fruit of the act of prophecy will be beneficial to the church or bitter indeed. Rather than approaching the texts presupposing that theology is a tool used to strengthen the hand of political control, I contend that the texts are better read when understood as representing leaders who are concerned to get the theology right, not so that they can control the community, but so that they themselves, along with the community, might be aligned on the right side of a cosmic conflict between good and evil spirits, the spirit of truth and spirits of error, God and Satan together with his demons, where the consequences of an erroneous alignment have both temporal and eternal implications. This theological concern then resonates in the political sphere necessitating the labeling of some prophets (or teachers) as false prophets (or false teachers) and some prophecies (and teachings) as false prophecies (or false teachings). Because much was at stake theologically, much came to be at stake politically. False prophets were to be avoided and false teachings rejected, sometimes even without comment. Expulsion from the Christian community

[11] The term "irremediable vagueness" was coined by Peter Ochs and is based upon the work of Charles Sanders Peirce in the field of logic. Cf. Peter Ochs, *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 180–1. I use it here to denote an important characteristic of narratival frameworks: they overflow with meaning. Because they are fundamentally stories, they are held together by a plot with various twists and turns that occur simply because "that's how the story goes." How they can be applied is extraordinarily malleable because well-constructed stories speak to a wide range of human experience – and this is a strength, not a weakness. But precisely how they are applied in any given context is not clear until the actual event of their application; it cannot be predicted beforehand. In that way, applying narratival frameworks is a vague process, and irremediably so. This fits in well with Aune's construal because such a vague process could easily be manipulated by those in positions of power to maintain their control over the community.

[12] It should be noted that presuppositions are not something to be avoided (even if they could be). Rather, the question is which presuppositions best enable interpretation. Aune may be correct in his estimation that political conflict might be the best assumption to use in order to comprehend the situation and theological claims that the texts present. One cannot simply rule out beforehand (on the basis of divine inspiration for example) Aune's estimation that political conflict might be the best assumption to use in order to comprehend early Christian texts. Christian history has plenty of examples where Christian leaders have used the text for political purposes exactly as Aune understands them. Perhaps the most glaring instance of theology funding political realities would be the attitude of the medieval papacy embodied in the so-called "Donation of Constantine" (Cf. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. [revised], s.v. "Donation of Constantine") and the investiture controversy.

was a temporal, political consequence of divine realities expressed by means of theological statements, statements regarding the existence of cosmic conflict, lying spirits, deceitful prophets, etc. and the effects of such on life now and eternally. Within this narratival framework, the equation described in my reading of Aune is reversed where theology now takes primacy over politics in the worldview of the texts. In a word, theology over politics. If the existence of cosmic conflict is not understood to be the background of why prophets need to be judged, then the stakes of such judging will remain unclear. These presuppositions will be tested by seeing if they help to explain the texts in question.

Paul on Testing the Spirits

First Thessalonians

In what is perhaps his earliest letter, Paul is already stating his concern for testing prophecies. He writes in 1 Thess. 5:19–22: "Do not quench (σβέννυτε[13]) the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil." While it is quite likely that this is a series of standardized instructions in an easily memorized form,[14] what Paul has to say here must be understood within the context of the entirety of his epistle. By placing it in this context, Paul's focus on the role of the Spirit in prophecy and his concern regarding the behavior of the prophets along with the practical fruits of prophecies come to the fore.

After greeting the Thessalonians, Paul describes how the gospel he preached came to them by emphasizing the role of the Spirit: "our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and [with] full conviction." (1:5) It should be noted that the "with" (translating "ἐν") in brackets is likely not original to the text.[15] If this is true, Paul coordinates the latter two phrases as part of a single concept—that of the gospel being proclaimed to the Thessalonians not in mere words but in power and in the Holy Spirit and great fullness of assurance *that comes from the presence of the Spirit*. In the next verse, Paul continues his crediting the Holy Spirit with a real, indeed, a determinative role in his preaching and its results in the community when he says: "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit." (1:6) Though receiving the Spirit-empowered word of the gospel brought affliction in imitation of Paul, his companions, and the Lord, it also brought with it joy precisely because the Spirit is active in it. Yet the affliction is real as well. Why? Because receiving the word that comes by the Holy Spirit entails a turning from idols (cf. 1:9–10), and doing so places one in a conflictual situation where the

[13] Note that Paul uses the same term in Eph. 6:16 when referring to how the "shield of faith" is able to "extinguish" the "flaming darts" of the "evil one". In that context, it is a specifically spiritual struggle that Paul describes where it is entirely possible that the darts that must be confronted by a strong faith are those of the doubts raised by false teaching or even oracular utterances. If that is the case, then we have another context in which false teachings or false prophecies are forwarded by evil spirits, spirits whose utterances must be "extinguished" or "quenched."
[14]Cf. F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, vol. 45, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2002), 122; and E.P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle's Life, Letters, and Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 184.
[15] Neither ℵ nor B (along with a fragment, an old Latin text and the Vulgate) contains the "ἐν". Arrayed against this evidence is an impressive assortment of texts that do, but it is easier to account for a scribe desiring to coordinate the three phrases and so adding in the "ἐν" than coming up with a rationale for scribal deletion.

messengers of the Holy Spirit are "shamefully" treated (cf. 2:2). Paul should therefore be understood as encouraging the Thessalonians by assuring them, even in the midst of suffering, that the message they hold to is divinely authorized by the Holy Spirit and is itself the activity of that Spirit. The effect Paul envisions is twofold: first, that they would continue to serve the "living and true God" and continue to "expect his Son from heaven;" and second, that by so fortifying the Thessalonians in their faith and expectation, he would also tacitly commend himself to them as the proclaimer of the Spirit's message. Both of these effects have to do with the fruits of his work among them.

Paul makes this second claim explicit when he transitions from praising the Thessalonians to a defense of the divine nature of his own ministry and his own words. Not enough attention has been paid to understanding the nature of evaluating the prophets by means of Paul's defense of his own ministry. While Paul may not fit the mold of a mantic prophet but rather that of an apostle who teaches, the fact that he appeals to many of the same criteria for evaluating the prophets (such as those outlined by Aune) suggests that he sees his role as being close enough to that of a prophet to apply a similar standard.[16] Further, since in the end true teaching or true prophecy is understood as that authorized by and originating from God, the problem is the same in both cases—determining if God is the source of Paul's teaching.[17] Paul's defense, then, gives us insight into the standards by which he saw himself being evaluated and what types of arguments he would himself entertain in determining the authenticity of a prophet or teacher.

With this in mind, the primary datum to which Paul appears to appeal is his behavior. He indicates his willingness to endure suffering for the sake of the message (2:2); he did not flatter nor did he appeal for money (2:5); he did not seek glory by making demands (2:6); he was gentle and sought to build them up (2:7-8); he worked hard to make sure that he would not financially burden them (2:9-10); and finally he dealt with them by meting out discipline as well as exhortation that they might "walk worthy of God" (2:11-12). In each of these cases, Paul is expecting that the witness he has provided by his behavior will resonate with the Thessalonians in a wholesome way so that they will recognize that his words were in fact God's words (2:13). This is important because he claims that it was the word of God that is active in the "believers" who became "imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus" thereby undergoing the same persecution from the Jews that they are undergoing. In this way, the behavior of the Thessalonians becomes a further testimony to the divine authentication and origination of Paul's message and ministry. In short, Paul points to his behavior as eliciting the "great fullness of assurance"—an assurance that comes by the Holy Spirit—in his message which has already changed the lives of those he is addressing making them imitators of Paul, imitators of the churches of God, and even imitators of Christ. The criterion of behavior should

[16] Others have noted this as well. Cf. Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 130–73.

[17] The idea that the Word of God dwells on the lips of one engaging in Torah study was common in the world of Palestinian Judaism in Paul's day. A tradition regarding the great Torah knowledge of Akiva ben Yosef (50–135 AD) and his *Bayt Midrash* found in the *Bavli* details how his (apparently novel) *halakha* is understood as being delivered to Moses on Sinai, even when Moses himself did not know that it was. (*b.Menaḥ.29b*) For more on this phenomenon, see: Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE – 400 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

therefore be understood as logically circular but not viciously so.[18] Paul's good behavior testifies to the authenticity of his message and ministry which has already produced converts whose changed lives already predispose them to accepting his defense of the divine authentication and origin of his words.

After Paul makes his defense, he then goes into a description of the work of the other side of the situation—the role of Satan in his ministry. He says that Satan "hindered us" (2:18) from meeting with the Thessalonians. This caused Paul great concern to the point that he sent someone to check on them because he was afraid that "the tempter" might have made "empty" "our labor" (3:5). The perlocutionary effect of this history (told from Paul's perspective) is to increase Paul's stature in the eyes of the Thessalonians as one who is truly sent by God and a participant in God's action of overcoming of the forces of evil. More than that, the effect of Paul's ministry is so challenging to the spiritual powers opposing God that "the tempter" would try to make it "empty." When Timothy sends his encouraging report back to Paul, he says that the Thessalonians are "standing firm in the Lord" (3:8) presumably over against the efforts of "the tempter." By making this rhetorical move, Paul has firmly positioned himself as the spokesman of the Holy Spirit whose words are God's own words and whose ministry is beset by evil powers seeking to derail his ministry thereby emptying it of its fruits.

Chapter four begins with instructions on how the Thessalonians might live in such a way that they please God (4:1). After describing this life, Paul says, "For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore (τοιγαροῦν) whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you." (4:7–8) Paul connects as closely as possible (by means of the emphatic inferential conjunction "τοιγαροῦν") the God who calls His people to holiness with the rejection by disregarding such holiness not being an offence against a human being (or one could add, a human political structure) but against God Himself—perhaps more importantly in the context of this article, the God who gives His Holy Spirit. Paul raises the stakes considerably in this statement thereby shedding new light upon his defense of his own ministry. If his words or actions were shown to not be meeting the standard of holiness he lays out here, he would be betraying not a human authority but a divine authority. As he said earlier (2:4), pleasing human beings (or maintaining a human political community) is not what is at issue in Paul's rhetoric; rather, pleasing God is what is crucial.

The stakes are high for Paul in 1 Thessalonians. It is the dead who are "in Christ" that will rise up first to meet the Lord in the air to always (πάντοτε) be with him (4:16–17). He emphasizes the distinction between the sudden destruction that characterizes those who live in darkness as opposed to those who are "children of light, children of the day" (5:3–5). The reality of the impending return of the Lord is so dominant that it affects everything that Christians do so that they might always be prepared for the "day of the Lord," maintaining their position by means of the military imagery of the "breastplate of faith" and wearing "the hope of salvation" as a helmet (5:8). Those on the wrong side of the divide between light and darkness are threatened by wrath—something for which God has not destined "us" (5:9), presumably those who believe

[18] Vicious circularity occurs when the arguments conclusions are found in the premises, and there is no way to interrupt this chain of reasoning. What I am describing here is more akin to the well-known "hermeneutic circle." Cf. Anthony Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 157–9.

in Christ and have the Holy Spirit.[19] In this way, being "children of light" who have the Holy Spirit has implications now and eternally in that Jesus is: "[the one] who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him." (5:10)

It is into this context where spiritual realities predominate over earthly ones, where affliction can be endured with the joy of the Holy Spirit, that we finally find Paul's admonitions concerning prophesying in 5:19–22. For him, the Spirit should not be quenched because it is the same Spirit that authorizes and originates Paul's gospel as being the gospel of God (1:5; 2:9, 13), the words that the Spirit used to turn the Thessalonians from idols to the living God (1:9), the words by which the Gentiles might be saved (2:16). True prophecies are not to be despised because they are the speaking of this Spirit, but they need to be tested (δοκιμάζω), just as Paul considers himself to have been tested and approved by God, the tester of hearts (2:4). The means of that testing can be discerned by the standard Paul applies to himself—that of behavior that is in accordance with the character of the Spirit he proclaims and so is also fruitful in the lives of those he teaches, effecting in them a change of life in the same character as Paul's changed life. The good fruit of the prophet's activity[20] should be maintained while even all appearances of evil (παντὸς εἴδους πονηροῦ—5:22) are to be avoided, because to disregard the holiness that comes from God is not to disregard a humanly-contrived injunction but to disregard God. The consequences of "getting it wrong" in the context of the spiritual struggle Paul outlines (where Satan / "the tempter" is an active entity) are dire (5:3, 9), while those of having the Spirit are the joys of living together with Jesus, whether alive or dead (5:10).[21]

Nowhere in this reading are we compelled to think that Paul has any particular group of prophets in mind that he raises up for castigation, nor must we understand that Paul says what he says only to maintain his control over the community for the sake of such control. He has already left and has no financial stake nor any direct authority over the community. While it is certainly the case that the community's recognition of the divine character of Paul's words determines, for Paul, whether or not they are aligned with the Holy Spirit, it is first and foremost that Paul is convinced that what he says is in fact—with full assurance—the words of the Holy Spirit that he is so insistent upon it. Understanding that Paul conceives of a situation where the living God speaks to His people through His Holy Spirit by means of human words in the context of a spiritual conflict is crucial to see what is at stake in testing the prophets / prophecies. What's at stake is not the existence of a particular communal polity or the political career of the leaders but rather the existence of the community as the "children of light" in a beneficial relationship with God over against the darkness.

First Corinthians

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[19] This distinction between light and darkness makes it hard to agree with Aune's claim that in 1 Thessalonians: "there is no indication that any other supernatural power than that of the Spirit of God was thought to be at work in prophets whose oracles the Thessalonians had come to despise." (Aune, *Prophecy*, 220) This distinction is certainly such an indication.

[20] I am taking this as a reference to the outcome of the prophetic testing earlier in the same verse. Cf. the discussion of the issues involved in: Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 126.

[21] Gordon Fee reads this passage in light of 2 Thessalonians 2. Through that lens, he also finds a doctrinal test operative in addition to a test of purpose similar to the test of behavior that I outline above. Cf. Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 158–62.

A second important set of Pauline texts that deal with judging the prophets is found in 1 Corinthians. Unlike 1 Thessalonians where Paul treated few subjects all in the context of the impending "day of the Lord" which necessitated an analysis of the entire epistle, 1 Corinthians treats many different subjects in order to establish a regulated church life that expects to continue for some time. Of principal interest for understanding Paul's attitude towards "discerning the spirits" is 1 Cor. 12–14. Here, I adopt James Dunn's reading of these chapters where he sees three primary criteria for "discerning the spirits" being forwarded by Paul: 1) "the test of the gospel;" 2) "the test of love;" and 3) "the test of community benefit."[22]

Dunn finds the "test of the gospel" in 1 Cor. 12:1–3 where "ecstatic inspiration"[23] was likely in view due to Paul's comment, "You know that when you were pagans you were led astray (ἀπαγόμενοι) to mute idols, however you were led (ἤγεσθε)." (12:2). The passive "ἤγεσθε" indicating that they were "being led" combined with the compound participle "ἀπαγόμενοι" (based upon the same root) showing that they were those who were "led astray" strongly suggests that the powers associated with the "mute idols" were responsible for their leading. These powers were surely conceived of in spiritual terms as Paul makes clear in describing pagan sacrifices as being offered to "demons" (δαιμονίοις), a designation he uses for the spiritual powers associated with idols throughout 1 Cor. 10:19–22. So after making the connection to idols in 12:2, Paul then gives the short creed "Jesus is Lord" (Κύριος Ἰησοῦς)[24] as the test of the ecstatic utterance inspired by the Holy Spirit in contrast to an ecstatic utterance of "Jesus be cursed" (Ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς) by what must be taken as the powers associated with the idols. It is difficult to think that Paul had anything else in mind but an evil spirit, a demonic power like those of the idols giving rise to an ecstatic utterance contrary to the gospel.

The second criterion, "the test of love," is to be found in 1 Cor. 13. Dunn contends that the placement of ch. 13 between 12 and 14 which treat of similar topics should not be a cause for puzzlement. Rather, "it was written in recognition that charismatic ministry and other important expressions of the Christian life and congregation could often be exercised in a selfish and uncaring manner."[25] Even more, love is lauded as something that is "a mark of greater maturity" with "effects more enduring than any charism."[26] If Dunn is right, then it is interesting to connect Paul's instruction of love with the purpose he expressed earlier to impart a wisdom to the "mature" (τελείοις) in 2:6, a wisdom corresponding to the "more excellent way" (ὑπερβολὴν ὁδὸν) (12:31) by which he describes ch. 13. This comparison seems to be apropos given that ch. 2 is also a discussion of the role of the Spirit in revealing the "secret and hidden wisdom of God" (2:7). Since Paul connects the revelation of this wisdom directly to the operation of the Spirit in this chapter, it is not too difficult to imagine that he has in mind either inspired teaching (such as Paul himself gives) or even prophetic utterances. Such a "spiritual person" (πνευματικὸς) who gives the teaching, in contrast to the "natural person" (ψυχικὸς ἄνθρωπος), is not to be judged (2:15). Yet this presupposes that such a one truly is a "spiritual person" and not a "natural person." This can be seen in the next verse where Paul cites Is. 40:13, "For who has understood

[22] Cf. James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 594–8.
[23] Ibid., 595.
[24] That Paul sees this as a creedal statement confessing the heart of the gospel can be intimated from Rom. 10:9; 2 Cor. 4:5; and Col. 2:6 – passages that Dunn points out (ibid.).
[25] Ibid., 596.
[26] Ibid.

the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" with the editorial comment that, in fact, "But we have the mind of Christ" (2:16). This presupposition thereby leaves open the discussion of chs. 12–14 where making precisely this distinction is in view. If these connections between ch.2 and ch. 13 (or chs. 12–14 more generally) are found to be persuasive, then it is possible to envision the discourse on love as the content of the wisdom mentioned in ch. 2 even as it is the proof of the true "spiritual person." That would further mean that the chapter on love describes a wisdom which finds its antithesis in the "wisdom of this age and of the rulers of this age who are being rendered powerless" (2:6). This is an earthly wisdom, a "σοφίᾳ ἀνθρώπων" (2:5; cf. 2:13), one that "fleshly" ("σαρκίνοις," 3:1), *but also one that has a source*—"the spirit of the world" (2:12). Therefore, Paul is contrasting the wisdom of God that comes through the Spirit of God and is exemplified in love with the human wisdom that comes through the spirit of the world and is exemplified in such things as jealousy and strife.[27]

With Dunn, I agree that ch. 13 outlines a particular criterion for "discerning the spirits," but this insight needs to be expanded. Given the larger context of Paul's letter outlined above, I suggest that Paul also has a negative side in view. That is, if prophets might be adjudged to be acting in accordance with the love that comes from the Holy Spirit, they might also be adjudged to be acting in accordance with the jealousy and the strife that comes from the spirit of the world. If this is the case, then we do not leave the context of cosmic struggle with this second criterion but are still in the midst of it.

Dunn's third criterion, "the test of community benefit," comes from ch. 14 and is, for him, the clearest of the three criteria. He seizes upon Paul's use of concepts relating to "building up" seven times in this chapter as a way to demonstrate the importance Paul places upon it.[28] Dunn says: "In all this the important point of principle which emerges is that the individual's prerogative (inspiration or status) is always subordinate to the good of the whole."[29] How this communal good should be conceived Dunn does not say outside of pointing to "the yardstick of God's love in Christ, love of neighbour."[30] While this is quite likely the case, it seems that the idea of "the good of the whole" should be conceived of not only horizontally between human beings but also vertically between God and humanity. The communal good, then, would be for the community to be in a relationship to God, receiving the gifts God gives through His Holy Spirit (which includes prophecies among others), essentially being not just the *people* of God, but the people *of God*. This relationship from which all the spiritual gifts flow is basic to the creation and preservation of the community and so must be conceived of as its most important "good." Being in relation to God by His Spirit through Christ then gives hope of resurrection from the dead and ultimately victory over death (ch. 15). Of course, not being in a relationship with God by His Spirit but rather being in one to a worldly spirit brings no such benefits and cannot be understood to be in any way a communal "good" that Paul would recognize. So for Paul, much would be at stake in building up the community in its relationship to God—even

[27] That Paul is moving on to describe the effects of this human, fleshly wisdom in ch. 3 forms the connection between the two chapters. The jealousy and strife mentioned in 3:3 should be understood as products of this human wisdom.
[28] The two words Dunn notes are the noun "οἰκοδομή" (14:3, 5, 12, 26) and the verb "οἰκοδομέω" (twice in 14:4 and in 14:7). He also points to their use in 1 Cor. 3:9; 8:1; 10:23 as well as in Rom. 14:19; 15:2; 2 Cor. 10:8; 12:19; 13:10; Gal. 2:18; 1 Thess. 5:11. Cf. Dunn, *Paul*, 597.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

everlasting life.

Given this analysis, we finally come to the crucial phrase that I have been putting in quotation marks all along: "discerning the spirits" (ἄλλῳ διακρίσεις πνευμάτων – 12:10). While Aune is probably correct in saying that the Corinthians likely had not heard this phrase before and it is "the product of Paul's penchant for categorizing charismatic phenomena,"[31] his reading of the plural "spirits" as referring to oracular utterances of a prophet is unconvincing. We have seen that Paul has no problem with understanding that various spirits are at work in the world, from naming one Satan or "the tempter" to calling them outright "demons" to mentioning the "spirit of the cosmos." It would certainly not be foreign to Paul's thought if we see here a simple and direct reference to various spirits (the Holy one or others) that are at work in the world. Certainly, the plural form "spirits" points in this direction. Likewise, Thiselton's preference for Dunn's thesis that "Paul may be using πνευμάτων (spirits) 'in the sense of πνευματικῶν' (spiritual gifts, or those things which pertain to the Spirit),"[32] seems unnecessary as well. A virtual substitution of one word for another resulting in what appears to be a spiritual gift of cataloging (a gift only a librarian could love) has less to commend it than reading it as "spirits" referring to animate (and animating) spiritual powers which flows well from Paul's conception of spirits outlined above.

There has been much discussion over the meaning of "discerning" (διακρίσεις) as well. Thiselton is most helpful in this connection when he says that: "the gifts of **discernment** or *discrimination* include (a) a *critical capacity to discern the genuine transcendent activity of the Spirit* from merely human attempts to replace it; and (b) a *pastoral discernment of the varied ways in which the Spirit of God is working*, in such a way as to distinguish various consequences and patterns."[33] While this twofold definition has much to commend it, the first part could be further sharpened by interrogating what "human attempts to replace it" might entail. As mentioned above, in 1 Corinthians "human wisdom" has an origin in the "spirit of the cosmos." Further, in Ephesians Paul directly attributes human misbehavior to spiritual powers when he describes their previous walk as idolaters as: "following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, *the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience*" (Eph 2:2). So while there is certainly a distinction to be made between ecstatic prophetic utterances wherein what is said is, for all intents and purposes, the speech of an evil spirit and feigned prophetic utterances geared to benefit the "prophet," the work of an evil spirit cannot be completely separated from either. "Human attempts to replace" the "transcendent activity of the Spirit" are still actions of another spirit—either the direct speech of that spirit or that of a deceived (and deceiving) human being who is following a spirit that is not the Spirit of God. In short, when Paul writes "discerning the spirits," he is speaking of the twofold activity of arriving at the origin of an utterance as being from the Holy Spirit or from another spiritual power as well as determining what the consequences may be on the life of the community of such an utterance once it has been agreed that it is from the Spirit of God.[34]

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[31] Aune, *Prophecy*, 221.
[32] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 968. For an excellent discussion of the various translational options, see 965–70.
[33] Ibid., 967. Emphasis in original.
[34] Fee, in substantial agreement with Thiselton and the approach outlined here, also takes the course of joining together in the concept of "διακρίσεις" that of identifying the activity of the Holy Spirit in a prophetic utterance with judging the implications of the content of the prophecy. However, he goes on to agree with Aune in seeing the

Summary: Paul and Discerning the Spirits

To summarize Paul's approach to discerning the spirits in prophecy, I propose the following four conclusions. First, the content of the prophecy must be consonant with the gospel as Paul preaches it. A spirit that does not teach God's salvific activity in Jesus contained in the short proto-creed "Jesus is Lord" cannot be the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead thereby vindicating his Lordship. Second, the behavior of the prophet must exhibit the activity of the Holy Spirit in the prophet's life.[35] Third (and connected to the second point), there is no discreet, propositional, disembodied method or procedure, rational or otherwise, by which this recognition of the Holy Spirit in the prophet's behavior may be made. Rather, it is expected that the community formed by the activity of the Spirit will *recognize* the activity of that same Spirit in another. The concept of recognition points to a narratival embodiment of a Spirit-filled mode of living that militates against linear, syllogistic reasoning; the church recognizes that the same Christ-centered plot is operative in the life and words of the prophet as it is throughout the Christian community. A breakdown in this recognition on either side of the equation (the prophet's or the community's) brings into question whether the prophet is really inspired by the Spirit or whether the community itself is still the charismatic community formed by the Spirit. Fourth and finally, the prophecy must build the community not only in the horizontal relationships among its members or even those outside the community, but also in its relationship with the God who called the community into being through His Spirit. Being correctly aligned with God, as opposed to possible alignments with other spirits, is of crucial importance for the community and its members as the hope of a resurrection to salvation, of living with Jesus eternally, is at stake.

First John: Confessing the Truth in Word and Deed

Perhaps more than any of the other texts we will examine, 1 John best exemplifies a worldview dominated by a conflict between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (4:6) which is the root conflict envisioned by the presupposition I outlined in my introduction. Given that there is less controversy about 1 John exhibiting a dualism between good and evil powers, my treatment of this aspect of the letter will be relatively brief.

Throughout this short epistle, one of the most dominant concepts is that of "abiding" (μένω). A full study of the way John uses the word is beyond the scope of this investigation, but a number of instances are directly relevant. The first instance is programmatic for the remaining uses. In 2:5b-6, John writes: "By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides

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reference to "spirits" as referring "to the prophetic utterances that need to be 'differentiated' by the others in the community who also have the Spirit and can so discern what is truly of the Spirit." Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NITCNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 597, cf. also 596–7. But is determining which prophetic utterance "is truly of the Spirit" any different than discerning between different spirits that may be at work? It seems to me that there is no distinction to be made here. If so, then nothing is gained by identifying the "spirits" with the prophetic utterances themselves; what is still really being spoken of is figuring out which spirit is active in the act of prophesying.

[35] Lockwood's observation is on point here: "Another characteristic of false prophecy is a loss of self-control, resulting in disorderly worship." Gregory Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 433.

in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." For John, the concept he is about to develop regarding "abiding" is purposive. One does not merely abide in such a way that one's life is unchanged. Rather, the consequence claiming to "abide in him" (i.e., Jesus) is that one needs to do what he did—to refrain from sin and engage in christic behavior, walking as Jesus walked.

For those whose behavior is negative, a different sort of abiding is described. The one who does not love abides in death (3:14). All murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them (3:15). God's love does not abide in the one who closes his heart to the brother in need (3:17).[36] Even more, "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." (3:8). So continuing to sin means that the sinner is "from the devil," which is really bad news for the sinner given that the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil—works which could at least conceivably include those who participate with the devil and so are "from" him.

Most of ch. 3 plays off the antithesis between those who are of God and those who are of the devil. In the middle of this discussion, John states a general rule to discriminate between who is who, or perhaps more accurately stated, who is of whom, by looking at their behavior when he writes: "By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother." (3:10) So for John the one who does not practice righteousness or does not love her brother is not "from" God; more than this, such a person is a child of the devil.

It must be emphasized that the performative purpose of this rhetoric is not to damn the reader but to point him toward the importance of his behavior—his fruits—being appropriate to the one in whom he abides and to form him into such a person. This leads us to three very important "reciprocal" (my term) statements. The first is 3:24a where John writes: "Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him." This is reciprocal in the sense that not only is the abiding in God of the keeper of the commandments (which are defined previously as believing in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another), but also that God is said to abide in him thereby signifying a type of mutuality within the relationship. This reciprocity could also be seen as intentionally highlighting the importance of the condition stated, i.e. the keeping of these two commandments. The second and third instances of such "reciprocal" markers are found in 4:15–16 where John essentially repeats the twofold content of the commandments to be kept—confessing that Jesus is the Son of God and abiding in love—as being determinative of when one abides in God and God abides in him. If this is the case, then 4:15–16 is a restatement of the claim made in 3:24 and further commentary upon it.

If these two sets of reciprocal statements regarding the abiding of God are seen as modifying each other and both have their epistemological basis in the activity of the Spirit, then the intervening material of 4:1–6 should also be seen as commentary upon the twofold commandment left by God (to believe in the name of Jesus and love one another) and originated

[36] Though the word "abide" does not appear in 2:15, the idea is quite similar—that God's love is not in the one who loves the world in that a worldly outlook, which includes the desire of the flesh and of the eyes along with pride in possessions, is not from the Father and is passing away. This is opposed to one who keeps God's commandments who abides forever (2:15–17).

in the human mind by the work of the Holy Spirit. Add to this the previous insights regarding how continuing to practice sin and not loving the neighbor earns the label "children of the devil" or being described as those "from the devil," and the spiritual struggle of different spirits at least attempting to abide in a human host[37] is not just implicitly but explicitly indicated. So the test of prophets indicated in 4:2 is really understood as a test of spirits in the sense of spiritual powers. The Spirit that confesses Jesus Christ came in the flesh is from God, and the spirit that does not is the spirit of the antichrist (4:2–3). It is a spiritual struggle—one between the "the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (4:6)—but the ones who are "from God" will listen to "us" (and so the Spirit of truth) while those who are "from the world" will listen to the world (and so the spirit of error).

In summary, John envisions a situation wherein the believer abides in God in an intimate, reciprocal relationship, the knowledge of which is mediated by the work of the Holy Spirit. The actual accomplishment of this abiding is conceived of circularly. While an individual's abiding in God (and vice-versa) is explicitly predicated upon belief in the name of Jesus and the practice of loving the neighbor which entails an absence of sin, such an absence of sin and so the confession of Jesus and practice of righteousness is possible because of the existence of this abiding relationship. In parallel to this "abiding" in God, the existence of the possibility of a lesser "abiding" (only improperly so-called) with an evil spirit is posited in a similarly circular manner. One who continues in sin and not loving the neighbor is "from" the devil and is a child of the devil, yet this is because they do not abide in God; if they did, it would be impossible for them to continue in sin. Therefore, in discerning whether or not a prophet is speaking from the Spirit of truth or the spirit of error, the outcome is already given. That is, if one agrees with what the Spirit of truth is already known to have said—that one should believe in Jesus and practice love of neighbor—then that one is of the Holy Spirit and will be recognized as such.[38] Note that this "test" (δοκιμάζω) is not a procedure *per se*. Rather, it is principally a matter of an expected recognition of an already given reality, where the Spirit that is in the believer will almost automatically recognize the Spirit that is in the prophet as the same Spirit, or they will "naturally" (for lack of a better term) not see their Spirit reflected and so can attribute the prophetic utterance to the spirit of error. So it is appropriate to speak of a twofold criterion being established (belief / confession of Jesus and love of neighbor) which is similar to Paul's first two criteria above.[39] Only the Pauline criterion regarding the up-building of the community does not

[37] I say "at least attempting to abide" because nowhere does John give the indication that the spirit of error or the spirit of the antichrist is actually powerful enough or on an equal plane with God so that it could actually "abide" in a human host or that the human could "abide" in it. Demonic possession is not to be equated with the divine abiding.

[38] What keeps this logic from being viciously circular is that it presupposes the existence of actual willing entities—God working through His Spirit as well as the spirit of error—whose exercise of will influences (in the case of the evil spirit) or determines (in the case of the Spirit of truth) the alignment of the human subject.

[39] While Smalley is correct to note the doctrinal test John offers, he fails to recognize the importance of behavior in testing the prophets in 1 John. Even so, the logic of John's argument drives him to connect doctrine with ethics when he writes: "However, John does not make an idol of tradition by itself, or of correct belief on its own. First, as always in this document, doctrine and ethics are closely related; so that teaching about non-worldly faith (4:1–6) is followed by instruction concerning practical love (4:7–5:4). Second, the tone of the present section is consistently (if not always directly) hortatory. John's readers are encouraged here, above all, to reject "worldliness," and so to live as true children of God; and they are exhorted to do this by discerning where the truth lies (vv 1–3), and by making it their own (vv 4–6)." Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, vol. 51, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1989), 232.

find explicit affirmation, though it is implicit throughout given that the purpose of the letter was to do just that.

Finally, John also sees much at stake in getting the identification of the spirits right. For if a person finds herself in agreement with the wrong spirit, it is because she is already "from the world" and is "from the devil" and is a "child of the devil."[40] John, more directly than Paul, is clear about what is at stake in a wrong alignment in the vertical realm—whether that person will be identified with those things that the Son of God came to destroy (3.8), that God has overcome (4.4), and that are passing away (2:17) with the result that she is abiding in death (3:14); or if she will be identified with God Himself and abide in Him unto eternal life.[41]

The Didache: Wandering Prophets

The Didache is important to this discussion because it is a witness to the early church's practice of judging the prophets in the early 2nd century and is very practical in its outlook. It is unlike the previous three texts we have examined in a number of ways, only two of which I mention here. First, there is a change of genre from the Pauline texts that are epistles written to particular churches and the Johannine epistle which appears to be written by a well-known church leader for general circulation among churches who know him to a document that appears to be a church order mixed together with a paranetic section derived from an already existing document. Second, the Pauline and Johannine texts exhibited strong coherence of thought where the thoughts and personalities of the authors come to the fore. The hand of the didachist, however, has not left as much of an imprint on the materials he has used and is, at times, almost invisible.[42] The Didache has the tone of a person transcribing the customs of a group of congregations in a particular region. In consequence of the genre of the Didache as a mixed church order and its lack of a strong authorial presence, reading it as a tightly argued document where verbal correspondences are crucial to understanding the whole (as I read the previous texts) becomes a much more speculative affair. Therefore, I will be largely treating the Didache piecemeal, rarely looking to the flow of the whole document since the existences of such a flow is open to serious dispute.

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[40] I find myself in agreement with David Hill when he writes with regard to false prophets: "It is necessary to be in a communion of trust and love with those whom Christ chose as his witnesses in order to enter into communion with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ (1.3). The false prophets have separated themselves from the former and therefore cannot participate in the latter: they have gone out into the world because they did not abide in orthodox doctrine (cf. 2 John 9) which the apostolic tradition, witnessed to by the Spirit, alone conserved." David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979), 152.

[41] Though Aune agrees here that "the term 'spirits' refers to one spirit of error (1 John 4:6), who speaks through many 'false prophets' (1 John 4:1)," (Aune, *Prophecy*, 224) he still reads the text as primarily dealing with political conflict within the community: "The position which we take… is that the polemic in 1 John 4:1–3, 6 is leveled against those prophets *who lend support to the deviant form of teaching opposed by the Elder through prophetic utterances*… In a word, these prophets too appear to have a basic antistructural and antimaterial stance which expresses itself in the ideology of a corresponding Christology." (ibid., 225; emphasis in original) Further, like Smalley, Aune does not take into account the larger context of the epistle and the relation of the twofold commandment to 4:1-6 when he writes: "The sole test which the Elder proposes is doctrinal, and though 1 John does deal with Christian behavior to a considerable extent, no specific criterion of behavior is proposed as a test for discriminating true from false prophets." (ibid.)

[42] This is not to say that neither Paul nor John used previously existing materials. Both did. But the manner in which they adopted them shows that they were fully integrated into their epistles and serve a specific argument that the author was developing. Not so with the didachist.

In 11:1–2, the didachist opens his section on the reception given to itinerant churchmen with the general category of "teacher" which he then subdivides into that of apostle and prophet. These two categories have some overlap because an apostle whose behavior does not accord with what is expected of him can be called a "false prophet." Teachers and prophets also appear to exercise distinctive yet overlapping roles in the congregation in later chapters (13:1–2), even as bishops and deacons are said to do the ministry of prophets and teachers (15:1–2). This suggests that understanding "teacher" as a general office or position in 11:1–2 is not appropriate. Instead, it is likely that the reference to teachers in 11:1–2 should not be understood as referring to a particular defined role but rather a general reference to the activity of teaching itself as it is exercised by itinerants—something that apostles and prophets do.[43] Therefore, it is appropriate to think of some overlap between the prophet and the "teacher" (διδάσκαλος) in that both "teach" (διδάσκω), even though the redactor later makes a distinction between the two roles in the church.

A second consequence of this observation is that according to 11:1–2, it can be assumed that if a prophet were teaching but not "in the spirit," then he would be subject to a testing of his teaching by a comparison of its content with the two ways material[44] of 1–6 and, interestingly, the liturgical practices of 7–10. If the prophet's teaching (not "in the spirit") undermines or dissolves (καταλυσαι) "all the things said above," then he is not to be heard. On the other hand, if what he says gives or adds (προστίθειναι) "righteousness and knowledge of the Lord"[45] then he is to be welcomed. What is important to note here is that the didachist raises the possibility of new information being imparted that does not "dismantle" (καταλυσαι) what is previously held but rather serves to "benefit" or "increases" (προστίθειναι) the community in its Christian praxis and knowledge. Novelty is not necessarily a bar to the community receiving a teaching; rather, it should be evaluated on the effect—the fruits—of the new teaching upon what has been taught before (so as not to undermine or dissolve it) and the possibility of future benefits for up-building the Christian life of the community.[46]

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[43] This supposition is supported by the difference in words used. In 11:1-2, "the teacher" is a participle of the verb "to teach" (διδάσκω) placing emphasis upon the activity of teaching, while in 13:2 and 15:1-2 (where an office is in view) we find the nominal form "teacher" (διδάσκαλος) focusing attention on the person. Sandt and Flusser agree with this view indicating that "διδάσκαλος" is likely a "*terminus technicus* designating a distinct class of teachers." Huub van de Sandt and David Flusser, *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 342.

[44] A genre that compares the path of darkness to the path of light. For more on the two ways material in the Didache, see: *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Didache."

[45] Niederwimmer is likely correct when he observes that these two terms should be taken as a hendiadys describing a single concept modified by the genitive "of the Lord." Cf. Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 171–2.

[46] With a brief introductory formula for the next section (11:3), the didachist begins a discussion of how to evaluate two different classes of itinerants—apostles and prophets. Beginning with the apostles, the didachist is first concerned with the length of his stay. One day is best, two is acceptable, but three draws condemnation as a "false prophet." Similarly, an apostle as a radical itinerant can only ask for enough bread until he finds his next night's lodging, and if he asks for money, he is again condemned as a "false prophet" (ψευδοπροφήτης). Niederwimmer may be correct when he says that the word "false prophet" is used instead of "false apostle" simply because the latter is more obscure (ibid., 176). Niederwimmer surveys Greek literature for the word "ψευδοαπόστολος" and finds it attested originally in what he considers an "ad hoc construction by Paul" in 2 Cor. 11:13. He then goes on to indicate that it does not appear again until Hegesippus, Justin, and Tertullian (cf. Niederwimmer for references) and points to Rev. 2:2 as an example of where the word could have been used but was not. (Cf. also Sandt and Flusser,

Turning to prophets in 11:7ff, the didachist urges care upon the reader. A prophet "speaking in the spirit" is not to be tested or discerned (διακρίνω) because "this sin will not be forgiven," the sin apparently being putting the Holy Spirit to the test. It should be noted that the phrase begins with a present participle (λαλοῦντα) which, in this context, likely indicates an action that is occurring in the time of the main verb thereby suggesting the translation: "You will not test or judge every prophet *while* (they are) speaking in the spirit." If this is the case, then the idea would be that *at the time of their prophesying*, they are not to be tested or discerned. This seems to fit the context because prophets are to be judged both by their conduct (11:8–11) and even by the content of what they say while "in the spirit" (11:12). But for present purposes, what is important to note is that this injunction is explicitly inspired by concern over the safety (if this sin is not forgivable, then much is at stake for she who sins in this way) of the one who might choose to test or discern the spirit speaking through the prophet.[47] If it is indeed the active voice of the Holy Spirit, then it is not the prophet who has been offended but the Spirit Himself, the consequences of which are serious—the withholding of forgiveness and so, assumedly, salvation.

In 11:8, the didachist outlines the way by which a prophet or a false prophet might be "known" by focusing upon his conduct or manner of life (τρόπος), specifically if he has the "conduct of the Lord." This indicates that it is really the conduct of Jesus himself that the prophet is to emulate, and suggests that the cases mentioned in 11:9–12 are just that—a casuistic application of this general principle. Further, given that the two ways material of chs. 1–6 is likely seen as an authoritative interpretation of the manner of life embodied by Jesus, it would be against this material that the conduct of the prophet is to be compared. This would fit with the words that opened ch. 11 where the teaching that an itinerant brings must support both the two ways material and the liturgical injunctions that have been outlined in the first ten chapters. It would be an odd thing if the didachist understood the "conduct of the Lord" to be something radically different than what he had already outlined or restricted it to the cases he subsequently marshals.

A second case is cited as a means to identify a false prophet as one who *teaches* "the truth" (no mention is made of speaking "in the spirit") but does not do it. It is not enough to just say what is true; one's life must also reflect that truth. Hypocrisy in this matter labeled one as a false prophet. Additionally, this indicates that prophets were not only given to oracular

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Didache, 343). Yet in light of the connection between behavior and the label of "ψευδοπροφήτης" in 11:7–12 where a "false prophet" is exactly what is in mind, it may be enlightening to entertain the suggestion that the didachist does mean "false prophet" and not "false apostle." The consequence of this line of thought would be to pronounce a judgment against the spirit the community finds at work within the life of the apostle—a spirit that issues in behavior that does not up-build the community but rather serves to tear it down by taking advantage of hospitality freely given. Such a spirit could not be the Spirit of God which, as we have seen in other early Christian literature and will be seen in the tests regarding prophets in the Didache, issues forth in behavior consonant with the character of God as seen in Jesus. Yet even if the didachist is simply seizing upon a word which he does not really mean, the fact that he thought the word "ψευδοπροφήτης" adequate to describe a false apostle indicates the closeness of the two roles in his mind. This suggests that what applies to prophets also applies to teaching more generally, so the contemporary church would have some support in applying the practice found in the Didache to contemporary teachers, even if they do not exhibit prophetic characteristics *per se*.

[47] Sandt and Flusser agree with this point in that they see prophecy as "a gift of divine origin and, therefore, principally beyond man's examination… Evaluation of a prophecy would involve a judgment on the spirit at work in the prophet and might be a sin against the spirit." Sandt & Flusser, *Didache*, 344–5.

utterances but also to what can be described as "teaching" (διδάσκω), something I noted with regard to 11:1–2. The truth value of what they said was likely evaluated on the same premises in 11:1–2—i.e., its agreement with what the didachist said in chs. 1–10. Once the teaching is established as "true," the behavior of the prophet must match or he is a "false prophet." As with the case of the apostle cited above, it may be possible to see this as a judgment against the spirit of the prophet. Further, a necessary connection between behavior and the presence of the Holy Spirit must be presupposed for a judgment based upon the behavior of a prophet to falsify his prophetic activity as a whole, including his ecstatic utterances.

In sum, we see the continuation of a pattern that started with Paul. The test of the truth of a teaching, including teaching given by a prophet, is whether or not it agrees with what is taught by the community. Doctrinal agreement is an important element.[48] A second test is behavioral where the conduct of a prophet is to be the "conduct of the Lord." The criterion of communal up-building is active in the Didache as well in that many of the tests focus on the abuse of the hospitality of the community. It is not difficult to imagine a situation where a naïve but well-meaning member of the community may entertain a "prophet" who is only interested in food or money over the objections of other members of the community leading to arguments and schism that tear down the community.[49] On the other hand, new teachings are to be welcomed if they do not "dissolve" what has come before and if they function to "increase" Christian behavior in the community. Even strange or idiosyncratic behavior done "for the worldly mystery of the church" (11:11) is accepted as long as that behavior is not urged upon the community.

Conclusions and Reflections

In the course of this study, we have observed that the early Christian community applied specific criteria (though not necessarily propositionally rationalistic criteria) to the prophets in order to adjudicate the true prophet from the false. Running throughout the texts we have studied, we see a similarity of concerns. First, there was a concern for doctrine. The teaching of the prophet was to be weighed to see if it harmonized with what the community had believed and taught. Doctrine matters in judging the prophets and their prophecies for the early church, but it was not the sole criterion for accepting the prophet or his utterance. This category of testing is well-known and non-controversial.

Second, the behavior of the individual prophet was of great importance in determining whether or not he spoke from the Spirit of God or from another spirit. This serves to add another layer beyond the doctrinal test in that it demonstrates an overall concern for the "fruits" of the prophet, which includes but goes beyond doctrinal accuracy. This second criterion is hardly one that can be fully encapsulated in a series of rules. It depends upon the concept of "recognition" rather than that of logical coherence as with the doctrinal test. Recognizing the behavior of a true prophet was more a matter of seeing if the prophet conducted himself in ways that resonated with the community as being honest and forthright, according to the spirit of the community which is, assumedly, the Holy Spirit. This is essentially like determining whether the narrative of the prophet's life fits into the story of what the Holy Spirit is doing or would do in those situations such that the prophet's story is consonant with the Spirit's story. So here, recognition

[48] It is of note that the Didache appears to add liturgical agreement to this test as well.
[49] Sandt and Flusser also emphasize the effects on communal hospitality. Cf. Sandt and Flusser, *Didache*, 340-2.

and discernment say much the same thing.

The third concern is ecclesial in that the effect of the prophet's ministry in up-building the community was ascertained. If the prophet's words led to an increase in Christian life and faith for the church, then the prophet is accepted. Again, as with an evaluation of behavior, this is a highly contingent criterion and not easily discerned. It takes time for the fruits of prophetic practice to come to full bloom. But it is also here that the concern for the practical effects on the Christian community is of great importance. Does what the prophet says build up the body of Christ in its love for God and neighbor or not? Perhaps here *in nuce* is Augustine's dictum that: "Whoever, therefore, thinks he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and our neighbor does not understand it at all."[50] Judging the fruitfulness of a prophet is not confined solely to his propositional statements nor to the exemplary character of his life but also to the effects his words and actions have on the community.[51] This is part and parcel of determining whether he should be accepted or rejected for the early church.

Among the implications of adopting this set of interpretive presuppositions for the life of the contemporary Christian community are the following. First, it enables an understanding of the life of the Christian community being conducted in the presence of a living God who is actively engaged in the life of His community. Acknowledging the living presence of the Spirit in the teaching and preaching of contemporary teachers and preachers in a manner analogous to the ancient prophets is entirely appropriate. One's teaching and preaching aligns oneself with the activity of the Spirit behind that teaching and preaching, and this has great implications for the recipient community.

Second, understanding that not only the Spirit of God but other spirits may be active in teaching and preaching is a salutary caution to both the contemporary Christian community and to any particular teacher or preacher. It encourages self-reflection on the part of the teachers of the Christian community and also enables the possibility of communal repentance for having followed the guidance of a wrong spirit in the past.[52] The importance of this observation can then be carried over to the political life of the community where a similar set of criteria can be applied to determine the authorization and origination of a particular teaching or teacher.

Third, *how* one says something and *why* it is said are crucially important questions; not only *what* is said. Teaching and preaching is not a matter of simply saying propositionally true

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[50] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 30 [*De.Doc.* 1:XXXVI:40].

[51] Seeing these effects entails the formation of a peculiarly Christian "mind." N.T. Wright well characterizes Paul's goal in forming such a person: "...the development of a Christian 'mind', not simply in the sense of a calculating-machine that deduces norms from first principles, but in the sense of developing the freedom to think wisely and carefully about particular vocational and innovatory tasks, is at the heart of Paul's vision of Christian character... [it is] about teaching people to think as day-dwellers in a still darkened world." N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 2:1124.

[52] Instances of such repentance could include many churches' support for slavery in the United States, eliminating theological disagreement through violent means like in the Inquisition, seeking political expansion through the Crusades, etc. All of these things could be seen as an instance of following a spirit other than the Spirit of God. For more along these lines, see: Theodore J Hopkins and Mark A Koschmann, "Faithful Witness in Wounded Cities: Congregations and Race in America," *Lutheran Mission Matters* 24, no. 2 (May 2016): 247–63.

things in a vacuum; it is a matter of saying the right thing at the right time and in the right way. It is not enough to simply state what is true in the abstract; a biblical view of truth will also encompass what should be said here and now, at this point in time, in order to build up the life of the community. Defending truth is never an abstract exercise; it is always fully embodied. The holistic practice of the early church bears witness to this in determining the "fruit" of a prophet.

Finally, the reading offered emphasizes upon the importance of the doctrine of the Christian community as ultimately being a reflection of and a response to the living Lord of the community and so a matter of critical importance for the community. Rather than encouraging the Christian community to be unreflective regarding its statements of belief, knowing that such teaching is a means by which the community aligns itself with the Spirit of God or other spirits is a goad for the community to achieve greater depth in its theological reflection as well as greater faithfulness to the Christian tradition in the spirit (pun intended) of Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum*. Anti-intellectualism has no part in the heritage of Christianity. Viewing judging prophets and prophecies primarily through a political lens where the goal is to place one's allies in positions of influence or unseat others for political goals degrades the entire process and becomes an exercise of the will-to-power where those who currently are in charge are able to lord it over those who are not. Recognizing, instead, that different spiritual powers are at work the truth of which is displayed not just in what is said but by whom and how and for what purpose should help to free the church from its allegiance to purely political concerns of power in favor of upbuilding the entire community in its life of faith in service to God and neighbor.

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