

How do we know if our experiences of God are real or not?

If we thought that we, or our congregations, were experiencing revival, or renewal, how would we discern if it was really from the Holy Spirit? What would be happening? What wouldn't be happening?

If we pray for God's work in our own hearts, and in the lives of our people, we should probably have some way of knowing when it's happening. And we should have some way of distinguishing the real from the imagined. Or more directly, we should be able to recognize the Holy Spirit while rejecting any evil spirit.

1 John 4:1, "BELOVED, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world."

The work depends on the whole chapter of 1 John 4 to discern proper rules for evaluating whether or not a spiritual movement of renewal is the work of God's Spirit.

In light of the revival careful observation and analysis of both the particular works of the Spirit in people's lives and the biblical data related to such workings. His aim in this work was to shew what are the true, certain, and distinguishing evidences of a work of the Spirit of God, by which we may proceed safely in judging of any operation we find in ourselves, or see in others. And here I would observe that we are to take the Scriptures as our guide in such cases: this is the great and standing rule which God has given to his church, to guide them in all things relating to the great concerns of their souls; and 'tis an infallible and sufficient rule. There are undoubtedly sufficient marks given to guide the church of God in this great affair of judging of spirits, without which it would lie open to woeful delusion.

In *The Distinguishing Marks of the Work of the Spirit of God*, by noting that the Apostolic age was the greatest outpouring of the Spirit in human history. It included many extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit. As such, it was countered with many false signs, which the Apostles warn believers to be aware of. Therefore, before discussing the true marks of a work of the Spirit, Edwards addresses false signs, or "negative signs", that some might think are true signs, but are not. These are not bad things, in themselves.

They might be very good things. Indeed, they may even come from the Spirit. In many cases, they are defensible, and could be genuine signs. They are not necessarily signs against a work of the Spirit. But they cannot reliably be considered a sign of the Spirit's work, for one reason or another.

They are non-signs: Things that neither prove nor disprove a work is from God. The non-signs include the following:

That the movement includes “very unusual and extraordinary” happenings.

That it produces bodily effects upon people, such as “tears, trembling, groans, loud outcries, agonies of body, or the failing of bodily strength.”

“The root and cause of things is to be looked at, and the nature of the operations and affections that persons’ minds are under, are what are to be inquired into, and examined by the rule of God’s Word, and not the motions of the blood and animal spirits.”

That it becomes the talk of the town.

That it makes “great impressions” on people’s imaginations. “Yet it appears to me that such things are evidently sometimes from the Spirit of God, though indirectly... But there is commonly something or other in them that is confused improper and false.

That it is promoted by use of examples, in attempt to prove the validity of the movement.

That it leads some to do foolish imprudent things. “We are to consider that the end for which God pours out his Spirit, is to make men holy, and not to make them politicians.”

That it includes “errors in judgment” or “delusions of Satan.”

That some affected by it later fall into error or scandal. “That there are some counterfeits, is no argument that nothing is true”

Lastly, that its preachers focus too much on the terrors of God’s wrath. To this point, “If there be really a hell of such dreadful, and never-ending torments, as is generally supposed... then why is it not proper for those that have the care of souls, to take great pains to make men sensible of it.

Not that I think that the law only should be preached: ministers may preach other things too little. The Gospel is to be preached as well as the law, and the law is to be preached only to make way for the Gospel, and in order to an effectual preaching of that; for the main work of ministers of the Gospel is to preach the Gospel: it is the end of the law; Christ is the end of the law for righteousness [Romans 10:4]. So that a minister would miss it very much if he should insist so much on the terrors of the law, as to forget his end, and neglect to preach the Gospel; but yet the law is very much to be insisted on, and the preaching of the Gospel is like to be in vain without it.

POSITIVE SIGNS: THESE ARE THE SURE SIGNS OF GOD'S SPIRIT AT WORK:

Next outlining five "positive evidences" that do clearly reveal some work to be from the Holy Spirit. The first (1) is that it raises the peoples' esteem of Jesus. He writes, "The spirit that inclines men's hearts to the seed of the woman, is not the spirit of the serpent, that has such an irreconcilable enmity against him [Genesis 3:15]." The second (2) sure mark is that it works against the lust and corruption's of the flesh, leading to repentance and to seeking righteousness.

So that we may safely determine, from what the Apostle says, that the spirit that is at work amongst a people, that is observed to work after such a manner as to lessen men's esteem of the pleasures, profits and honors of the world, and to take off their hearts from an eager pursuit after these things; and to engage them in a deep concern about a future and eternal happiness in, that invisible world, that the Gospel reveals; and puts them upon earnest seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and convinces them of the dreadfulness of sin, the guilt that it brings, and the misery that it exposes to: I say, the spirit that operates after such a manner, must needs be the Spirit of God.

And again,

The influence of the Spirit of God is yet more abundantly manifest, if persons have their hearts drawn off from the world, and weaned from the objects of their worldly lusts, and taken off from worldly pursuits, by the sense they have of the excellency of divine things, and the affection they have to those spiritual enjoyments of another world, that are promised in the Gospel.

The third (3) mark is that it will increase people's estimation of the Bible. He writes, "A spirit of delusion won't incline persons to go to seek direction at the mouth of God." And again, "Would the prince of darkness, in order to promote his kingdom of darkness, lead men to the sun?"

Relatedly, the fourth (4) mark is that it will convince people of the truths revealed in God's Word. He states,

As for instance, if we observe that the spirit that is at work, makes men more sensible than they used to be, that there is a God, and that he is a great God, and a sin-hating God; and makes them more to realize it, that they must die, and that life is short, and very uncertain; and confirms persons in it that there is another world, that they have immortal souls, and that they must give account of themselves to God; and convinces them that they are exceeding sinful by nature and practice; and that they are helpless in themselves; and confirms them in other things that are agreeable to sound doctrine: the spirit that works thus, operates as a spirit of truth: he represents things as they are indeed: he brings men to the light; for whatever makes truth manifest, is light.

Lastly, that a fifth (5) sure sign is that it produces genuine love for God and others. He argues, "Here 'tis evident that the Apostle is still comparing those two sorts of persons that are influenced by the opposite kinds of spirits; and mentions love as a mark by which we may know who has the true spirit." "Christian love, or true charity, is an humble love," "Love and humility are two things the most contrary to the spirit of the Devil, of anything in the world; for the character of that evil spirit, above all things, consists in pride and malice."

This is how we know, Our reflections on 1 John 4, that a work is genuinely from the Spirit of God, no matter what else may attend these movements. He summarizes these points helpfully at the end of this section by stating,

There are some of these things the Devil would not do if he could. Thus, he would not awaken the conscience, and make men sensible of their miserable state by nature, by reason of sin, and sensible of their great need of a Saviour: and he would not confirm men in a belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and the Saviour of sinners, or raise men's value and esteem of him: he would not beget in men's minds an opinion of the necessity, usefulness and truth of the Holy Scriptures, or incline them to hearken to them, or make much use of them; nor would he go about to shew men the truth, in things that concern their souls' interest; to undeceive 'em, and lead 'em out of darkness into light, and give 'em a view of things as they are indeed.

And there are other things that the Devil neither can nor will do: he will not give men a spirit of divine love, or Christian humility and poverty of spirit; nor could he if he would. He can't give those things which he has not himself; these things are as contrary as possible to his nature.

And therefore when there is an extraordinary influence or operation appearing on the minds of a people, if these things are found in it, we are safe in determining that 'tis the work of God, whatever other circumstances it may be attended with, whatever instruments are improved, whatever methods are taken to promote it; whatever means a sovereign God...makes use of to carry it on; and whatever motions there may be of the animal spirits, whatever effects may be wrought on men's bodies.

These marks, that the Apostle has given us, are sufficient to stand alone, and support themselves; and wherever they be, they plainly shew the finger of God, and are sufficient to outweigh a thousand such little objections, as many make from oddities, irregularities, and errors in conduct, and scandals of some professors.

Possible objection: According to 2 Corinthians 11:13–14, there may be false teachers, false prophets, who appear as true ones, much like the devil himself may appear as an angel of light. The Apostle, in 1 John 4, is addressing that very thing- the reality of false teachers. His guidelines are intended for that very situation, so that the church can discern who is true and who is false.

“We may be sure that these marks the Apostle gives, are especially adapted to distinguish between the true Spirit, and the Devil transformed into an angel of light, because they are given especially for that end; that is the Apostle's declared purpose and design, to give marks by which the true Spirit may be distinguished from that sort of counterfeits.”

After outlining the true signs, apply these “rules” to the “facts” of his situation – the current revivals in and beyond. He cautions those who are suspicious and resistant to this work. He judges it to be a genuine work of the Spirit, one that emerges true in light of his guidelines. Therefore, those who oppose it could end up resisting the Holy Spirit, and thus committing an unforgivable sin! At the same time, he cautions those who have experienced and advocate for the revivals to exercise wisdom and discretion in their lives. He encourages them to avoid extremes and unnecessary excess.

He calls for humility and genuineness in living out their faith. They must especially avoid pride at all costs. He also includes a section on the unnecessary nature of the more extreme and supernatural manifestations of the Spirit's power. He reckons that these will be unnecessary and undesirable when the church is mature, based on his reading of 1 Corinthians 13.

It's the normal operations of the Spirit, that makes believers happy in God through Christ, that are the most amazing and lasting.

God does not need to pour forth the supernatural means to accomplish his purpose. If he does, they can embrace it, but must regard it as what it is- a temporary measure aimed at maturing believers in holiness. He concludes with a caution to all not to play the role of God in judging other believers' genuineness. It's is God's prerogative to determine what is real and true in someone's heart. They should all show great humility and avoid judging the condition of another's soul.

CONCLUSION

If we were to allow being a guide for us today, what conclusions might we draw? At the least, he gives us some categories, some questions to ask, and some things to consider as we evaluate God's work in and among our people.

What sort of signs might we look for to know whether or not what is happening is from God?

And if we were to pray for renewal, how would we know God was answering that prayer?

Would it look like renewed interest in our liturgies?

Or perhaps a new love for the Prayer Book?

Would it look like many running to new monastic communities?

Would it look like a passion for theology, for politics, or community impact?

Would it mean more contemporary worship music?

Maybe more traditional music?

Would it be lots of new churches?

Would it mean larger or smaller churches?

They may be signs of God's work. But they may not. None of these come into consideration when judging between the spirits. Most importantly, they do not conform to biblical examples for how we ought to judge a genuine work of God.

Based on 1 John 4, we are on firmer ground when we see that our people are growing in their esteem of Jesus – the true Jesus revealed in all of Scripture, when they have a high view of the Bible, when they are convinced of God's truth, when they are eager to repent of sin and to seek holiness, and they have a humble love for God and other people. These are true signs of renewal.

Let us pray and look for such things in our own hearts, and in the hearts of those to whom we minister.