

# TIMELY AND TRUE SPIRITUALS

## How to Invite and Recognize God's Interventions in Daily Life

By Daniel A. Brown, PhD

### INTRODUCTION

“Concerning **spirituals**,” Paul writes, “I don’t want you to be unaware” (1 Corinthians 12:1). Because of the verses that follow, and the listing of various “gifts of the Spirit,” most of us freely translate *spirituals* as *spiritual gifts*; however, the word Paul uses simply means things that are spiritual, as opposed to natural. Such “weapons of our warfare” are “not of the flesh, but divinely powerful” (2 Corinthians 10:4), enabling us to engage fully in the realm of the unseen where most of life gets situated. These “tools of our trade” come in many forms, and they have different effects, depending on how they operate.

As we grow in understanding that our engagement is not against flesh and blood, but against invisible spiritual forces (Ephesians 6:12), we become more eager to learn about effective tools, and that earnestness acts as a great incentive for further study and growth. Since God’s ways are not like ours (Isaiah 55:8), we should expect that what God chooses as spiritual implements, might not look that spiritual to the person who appraises things naturally (see 1 Corinthians 2:14-15). Jesus told us that we will have to contradict our natural way of thinking if we want to end up following Him (Mark 8:34).

People can easily miss the dynamic of spiritual stuff because it doesn’t appear to be very spiritual or powerful; they overlook mustard seeds and dismiss cheek-turning as weakness. But among believers who are zealous for **spirituals**, a similar sort of misperception can also take place. Longing for true power in their lives, they can fall prey to an expectation that Kingdom clout is usually BIG in looks or sound. It isn’t.

In 1 Corinthians 13:13 it says, “...But the greatest [of these] is love.” Love is usually quiet, humble, gracious and becoming in its behavior. It doesn’t start and stop like a prophecy; its staying power outlasts the most exciting and notable miracle. Love is the surest sign that the Spirit is present, and when the Spirit *moves*, patience and kindness follow most closely in His wake. The point is that many truly spiritual goings-on don’t look impressive, but where those spiritual things are maintained and continued over a long period of time, their spiritual efficacy becomes apparent.

## BEWARE THE (ONLY) IMPRESSIVE

We're going to look at a couple of instances when *spirituals* didn't look spiritual—at least not the way some expected—and when the actions following a miracle offer us some very important lessons as we learn to function in the Spirit. In the story of a mighty warrior named Naaman who seeks to be healed from leprosy by Elisha the prophet (2 Kings 5), he finds it very frustrating that Elisha doesn't do more of that “wave your arms around in the air” stuff. And, Elisha's servant, Gehazi, tries to profit from what the Lord did for Naaman.

In a second story, a young prophet is sent by God to pronounce judgment against Jeroboam, the first king of Israel. Dissuaded by an “older prophet” from the clear course God set him on after the miracle, the younger prophet meets an untimely end. He was wrongly impressed by someone's “word from the Lord.”

Each of us probably leans one direction or the other when it comes to *spirituals*: either we tend to be intimidated/ignorant, so we do NOT contend for the miraculous intervention of the Lord in our life; or, we hyper-spiritualize things in a way that blinds us to simple *spirituals*, and focus our attention (mostly) on grand entrances of the Holy Spirit.

My hope for us all is that we can walk aware but balanced in our pursuit and use of *spirituals*.

## TOUCHSTONES OF TRUTH

Any meaningful discussion of spirituals must include an awareness of people's tendency toward superstition (i.e., beliefs that have no verifiable foundation—other than fear) and mysticism (i.e., *direct-from-God* beliefs that transcend the understanding of *ordinary* people, and that treat outside judgment with contempt). It gets a bit tricky because our beliefs come from the Bible, which is a compilation of *God-to-man* revelations that are not based on empirical data. People outside the Church may call our beliefs superstitious, mystical nonsense (but that's another topic).

Among believers, however, the Bible serves as the foundation of already-revealed truth by which we can distinguish God-inspired *spirituals* from spiritual-seeming counterfeits. The danger to the Church and to sincere believers who want to grow in spiritual understanding doesn't normally come from nay-saying skeptics, but from supposed believers who surreptitiously adulterate God's truth and ways with earthly, natural or demonic components (James 3:15; 2 Corinthians 4:2).

Even though we'd like to think that all believers—especially those we know personally—only share truth from God's word as revealed by His Spirit, the tragic reality is that false prophets have gone forth from the beginning of the Church, and will continue to appear until Jesus comes. Many times,

the Bible warns us to *beware* of false prophets, teachers and apostles who come—even in well-intentioned sincerity—and introduce ruinous heresies into the life of the Church (Matthew 24:24). To *beware* does not mean to be frightened by these people and their confusion; it just means to *be alert* to supposed truths that tear down, wear down or diminish the saints (see Daniel 7:25a).

Most of the people struggling with their own deception never intended to go wrong or to be false. They lacked the teaching or the yoking or the instruction or the correction, so they have fallen into error. People who get off into false teaching do not do so because they want to be a false prophet. There is no Bible College of false prophecy where people can find “what’s not in the Bible but sounds close.” Most of these people really intend good—but good intentions or traditions are not the same as good doctrine (Mark 7:13).

It’s difficult to maintain a balanced posture of truly Christian love, and yet not lose the posture of holding fast to Jesus and the word of God. We do not want to be guilty of judging anyone else, but we are told to judge prophecies and teachings people bring forth. The early church struggled with false teachings by, for example, Gnostics, Nicolaitans and “the woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess, and “leads My bond-servants astray” (Revelation 2:6, 20).

The Bible is quite clear that we must test every spirit (1 John 4:1). We can't just accept anything that comes to us in the name of God simply because it sounds spiritual, or because we know the person who shared it with us, or because they are sincerely convinced that it is from God, or because they have a spiritual air about them or, claim special insight beyond what others have. In order to ready ourselves for the many exciting and powerful *spirituals* God wants us to have at our disposal for ministry, we’ll explore several particular ways in which we are to judge/evaluate the authenticity of words and actions that people do in the Name of the Lord.

- I. Judge Prophetic Words, Dreams, Promptings and Pictures According to the Written Word of God. (Acts 17:11)
  - A. Scripture Teaches, “Straightens-Out” and Trains Us for Ministry. (2 Timothy 3:14-17)
  - B. The Word of God Judges the Thoughts/Intentions of the Heart. (Hebrews 4:12)
  - C. Scripture Isn’t Open to Mystical, Personal Interpretation. (2 Peter 1:20-21)
    1. Our human tendency is to want to hear what we want to hear, and that will turn our ears away from the truth of God’s word. (2 Timothy 4:1-4)

2. Does someone's whole teaching line up with the whole word of God?

## INTRODUCTION TO PROPHECY

As Paul continues his exhortation to the Corinthians (and, thereby, to us), he writes, "Pursue love, yet desire earnestly **spirituals**, but especially that you may prophesy" (1 Corinthians 14:1).

Throughout the entire discussion of *spirituals*, one theme emerges again and again—that they are tools of affection and agape. *Spirituals* were meant by God to bring good, blessing and advantage to others—not notoriety or accolades to us! Love. Love. Love. This is the be-all and end-all for the greatest gifts: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16).

While it is understandable that people come to appreciate "gifted" ministers, the errant course of the natural world will tend to create celebrities out of ministers who exercise their *spiritual gifts* regularly and extensively. If we're not careful to counteract natural tendencies, our understanding of *spirituals* will focus on the stage and not, as it should, on the audience—the one who ministers a *spiritual*, as opposed to the ones who receive the ministry.

Timely and true *spirituals* are all about benefiting other people. When our attention is too much on ourselves (the person ministering a prophetic word), we easily succumb to fear and doubt (i.e., give a word publicly that was meant for us personally or vice versa). We don't want to be wrong or make a big mistake. Some of that worry is a healthy concern not to lead anyone astray, but most of it comes from thinking about the potential risk to us more than the possible benefit to others.

Likewise, an inordinate focus on ourselves can produce pride and stubbornness—insisting that our word IS from God no matter what anyone says. In fact, inexperienced ministers will even try to excuse their unintentional egoism by acting the mystic/innocent messenger after they have tossed a pseudo-prophetic grenade in someone's life: "Hey, I'm just telling you what God said to me. If you don't like it, take it up with Him."

Ah, but that's the point. We have the Bible to instruct us—both for those who would deliver words, and those who will be receiving prophecies from others. Every particular word from God will align with His whole counsel to us. What is the Message, the Logos of God to humankind? Everything God wants to speak to the world is contained in Jesus for He is the Word (Logos) that was in the beginning with God, as God (John 1:1). Hebrews puts it this way:

*“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.” ~Hebrews 1:1-2*

Jesus fulfills the LAW and the PROPHETS (Matthew 5:17), and He proclaims the gospel of the kingdom of God wherein we are reconciled to God through Jesus’ sacrificial death (Luke 16:16). That is why the “testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19:10).

This is a very helpful reminder because any prophetic word we give/receive ought to sound like Jesus, and have, as its backdrop, the tone of the One who loved us enough to lay His life down on our behalf.

Unfortunately, many people think that a scolding word sounds more spiritual than an encouraging word. NT prophesies inspired by the Spirit of Jesus rarely communicate “You’re in big trouble” or “You’ve really blown it now.” Instead, true prophetic words encourage us with “edification, exhortation and consolation” (1 Corinthians 14:3), sometimes revealing deep things in our heart that make us want to declare the presence of God—because no one else could possibly have known such personal details about us.

Does prophecy sometimes correct and reprove us? Yes, it does, as we see in Jesus’ words to the seven churches (Revelation 2-3). But a good rule of thumb for us—especially as we are learning how to prophecy—would be to establish a credible history of love, sacrifice and edification with people long, long before we presume to hear the Lord giving us a corrective word for them!

### **1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-6**

1. Defines what we think of as spiritual in light of AGAPE.
2. The primary purpose of prophecy in NT times is to edify, exhort and console.
3. When spoken to a congregation, prophecy will edify the church.

### **1 THESSALONIANS 5:11-22**

***Ritual Gifts function and operate within a larger sphere of spiritual patterns and principles.  
For example:***

1. Recognizing and appreciating spiritual leaders who care for, lead and instruct us.

2. Living in peace with (forgiving) one another—and building each other up. (1 Thessalonians 5:11).
3. Seeking only what is good for others, while admonishing, encouraging and being patient with them.
4. Praying to and praising God, and understanding this is God's will for us.
5. Do not **despise** prophetic utterances.
6. **Examine** everything carefully.

## INTRODUCTION SMALL BEGINNINGS

There is, of course, a world (dimension) of difference between natural wisdom and spiritual truth, but sometimes folk-knowledge and popular truisms, actually do echo spiritual principles—and they make scriptural truth a bit easier for us to remember. As we ready ourselves for Christmas, looking forward to the gifts that will be under the tree, it's good to recall, "*Great gifts come in small packages.*" The size of the box doesn't correlate with the gift's value: diamond earrings or the keys to a new car DO NOT come in large containers. "*A small key can unlock the biggest doors.*"

This is one of the most basic realities of the spiritual dimension as it presses in on our natural world—things that do not catch the natural eye, or stand out by virtue of their size, hold the key to spiritual transformation. Jesus began His instruction about the kingdom of God with the parable of the seed falling on different types of soil. (see Matthew 13 and Mark 4). "How will you understand all the parables," Jesus asked, "if you do not understand this one?" Why was He so concerned that His disciples grasp the truth of this parable? It's because spiritual dominion almost always begins with a tiny seed.

In another of Jesus' better-known parables, He uses a mustard seed as an analogy for *spirituals* (words/truth originating in the unseen dimension) that ultimately transform and have dominion over the natural arena of life (see Matthew 13:31-32 and Mark 4:31-32). Like seeds that will eventually sprout into full-grown plants/trees, *spirituals* usually enter our world as faintly whispered promises, still and small promptings that must be *discerned* (because they are so softly articulated) and *embraced* BEFORE they loom large enough to capture other people's notice (1 Corinthians 2:14-15). And look in this scripture:

*“All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” ~Hebrews 11:13*

Actually, one of the ways to measure spiritual maturity is how eager and experienced someone is in choosing to stay focused on spirituals when they are too faint or too small to be attention-grabbers themselves. When circumstances seem to declare one thing, and spirituals speak another, which statement do we believe? This is what it means to “stand in faith” on one of God’s promises—despite how things appear in the natural arena, we choose to believe the seemingly-inconsequential, invisible word of the Lord that bespeaks a different reality.

That’s how we end up with a testimony! The process begins when we receive a word or promise or prompting (a *spiritual*). That is God’s testimony about what He is going to do. Next, we believe that what He has spoken is all the evidence we need to believe that it will happen exactly as He says, just as the very worlds themselves were formed by His word (Hebrews 11:1-3). The physical dimension originated from the spiritual dimension. *Spirituals* shape, create and change realities in the natural arena—and in the spiritual arena—because they superimpose God’s will/way on ways that are not His. Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done...” (Luke 11:2).

Notice, as well, that truly spiritual activity originates with the Lord, not us. Jesus said/did whatever He observed the Father doing/saying (John 5:19), and He made quite a point out of the fact that His teaching wasn’t His, but His Father’s (John 7:16). Ministry is an unequal partnership: the Lord prompts us with *spirituals*, then we believe and speak/do them. Like all “keys of the Kingdom,” indeed like Messiah Himself, they enter this world inconspicuously. But when met with faith (“Be it done unto me according to Thy will...”), and when given time to mature, *spirituals* are powerful seeds of change in the world around us.

*Spirituals* are tiny, easily disregarded opportunities for believers to believe that we serve a risen Savior who’s in the world today!

## HOW TO HEAR THE WHISPERS OF GOD

- I. Despise Not Small Beginnings—and Grace! (Zechariah 4:10)
  - A. God’s Voice.
  - B. Israel, the Chosen People.

- C. Bethlehem and Jesus' Birth.
  - D. "Base and Despised and Things that are not..." (1 Corinthians 1&2)
- II. Mustard Seeds Eventually Reign (Mark 4:31-32)
- A. Psalm 104:10-17—God Establishes and Makes Worlds as He Wants.
  - B. Ezekiel 17:22-24—God Can Reverse the Order of the World Whenever He Chooses.
  - C. Daniel 4:10-17—God is the Ruler over all, and He Bestows It on Whom He Wishes.
- III. Be Prepared to Be Outnumbered (Luke 14:31-32)

## INTRODUCTION; THE HELPER

God's kind and affectionate love (agape), that was most obviously expressed when He sacrificed His Son to pay the penalty for our sins (John 3:16), wants to embrace us with welcome and honor. Because He values us so highly, He wants to engage us like a proud father who wants his child in the family business. The catch is that we're totally unfamiliar with how this business functions, and our natural instincts usually lead us away from good solutions. Though God is our Father, we lack His experienced understandings, so our natural business savvy rarely gets the job done (right).

If our Brother, Jesus, was available to take us behind the scenes, walk us through things and "show us the ropes," we could learn to function reasonably well. But Jesus has ascended to sit at the right hand of God in Heaven; He no longer dwells among flesh (John 20:17; Ephesians 1:20). Knowing that He would not be staying on earth in the natural arena, Jesus told His disciples, "*I will not leave you as orphans*" (John 14:18), but "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. But **the Helper, the Holy Spirit**, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:16, 17; 26).

The Holy Spirit is called Parakletos, which can be translated "nearby Counselor, Aid-Giver, Interpreter, Revealer." He is our Advocate/Advisor who guides our decisions and informs us of many, many things we would not otherwise know. Though the biblical image isn't business-related, it isn't far off the mark to picture the Holy Spirit as an Attorney helping us navigate very complex



proceedings to start an international company. He alerts us to hundreds of regulations, stipulations and provisions buried in multitudinous volumes of multifarious tax codes. No way can we know the stuff on our own! Those alerts by our paralegal are another way to describe spirituals.

Jesus tells us that God wants us to worship “*in spirit and truth*” (John 4:24). **Truth** doesn’t refer to the sorts of facts we might learn in (business) school; rather, they are understandings that will never be revealed to us by human thought-processes or natural smarts (Matthew 11:25; 16:17). It’s not that God wants us to be mindless. After all, the Great Commandment is that we should love the Lord with all our “heart, soul, mind and strength” (Mark 12:30), but the Lord wants us to learn the difference between naturals and spirituals—things of this earthly dimension and things of the heavenly realm.

“*Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done*” isn’t just a phrase-pattern for prayer. It’s the goal for every situation we encounter, and the whole point of ministry. Timely and true **spirituals** are always Kingdom-Bringers. Biblical spirituality isn’t measured by strangeness or otherness; neither is it marked by physical gyrations, vocal affectations or arcane bits of knowledge about supposed “deeper things.” New Testament spirituality is indicated by the degree to which it ushers in the gracious workings of God. We need **spirituals** because they begin the penetration process of introducing God’s will and way into our world.

### **SPEAKING IN AN UNKNOWN LANGUAGE**

It makes sense, therefore, that an early and quite unmistakable sign of the Holy Spirit’s work enables us to speak words (in prayer and ministry) that are unknown to our natural mind. The Holy Spirit offers us a language we cannot learn on our own, words and expressions that perfectly capture—and speak to—spiritual reality in and around us (1 Corinthians 2:13 and 14:14). With this speech, we can intercede more accurately (Romans 8:27), and as we pray in our unknown tongue, our very spirit gets built up and strengthened (Jude 1:20).

In many ways, spiritual language is a beginning place to become familiar with the operation of **spirituals**—how they register in our awareness and how we actively partner with what the Spirit is saying and doing. “Speaking in tongues” is wondrous, miraculous and very, very spiritual!

## **A BRIEF BIBLE STUDY ON THE HOLY SPIRIT**

### **I. Who Is the Holy Spirit?**

- A. He Is One of the Three Equal, yet Distinct, Expressions of the One God. (Matthew 28:19; John 17:21-22)
  - 1. Since He is God's Spirit, He knows everything that God thinks and feels. (1 Corinthians 2:6-12)
  - 2. Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit has existed from the beginning with God (Genesis 1:1-2 and John 1:1-3); together, Father, Son and Spirit, they created the world. (Colossians 1:15-18)

## II. What Does the Holy Spirit Do? And Enable Us to Do?

- A. The Holy Spirit Enables Us to Acknowledge and Profess, "Jesus Christ Is Lord." (1 Corinthians 12:3)
- B. He Discloses the Truth—the Way God Says Things Are to Be. (John 14:16, 26 and 16:7-15)
- C. He Performs Miracles to Bear Witness to the Gospel. (Romans 15:19; 1 Corinthians 2:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; Hebrews 2:4)
- D. He Leads Us and Gives Us Directions so that We Can Walk Where and How the Lord Wants Us to. (Luke 4:1; John 3:6-8; Acts 8:29 and 16:6-7)
- E. The Spirit Also Gives Us Revelation, Telling Us Things We Could not Possibly Know on Our Own. (Luke 2:26-27; Acts 5:3; 10:19; Revelation 2:7)
- F. He Grants Us the Ability to Speak and Pray in Languages Not Known to Us, Languages that Communicate Things Far Beyond Our Limited Understanding. (Acts 2:4; 1 Corinthians 13:1; Ephesians 6:18)

## III. What Does It Mean to Be Baptized in the Holy Spirit?

- A. Why Should We be Baptized in the Spirit?
  - 1. Jesus strongly encourages it. (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5)

2. It is the New Testament pattern (Acts 19:1-6) as a provision promised by God. (Acts 1:4 and 2:14-21)
3. It releases a flow of life in our innermost being. (John 7:27-39)

B. What's the Difference Between Receiving and Being Baptized in the Holy Spirit?

1. The instant we confess Jesus as our Savior, we receive the Spirit as an identifying mark, a seal on our heart. (Romans 8:9, 14, 16; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 1:13-14)
2. Jesus breathed on the disciples, giving them the Holy Spirit, prior to filling them with the Spirit. (John 20:22; Acts 1:4-8)

### **SUPERNATURAL KINGDOM-BRINGERS**

Praying in the Spirit, as Paul explains, profoundly affects our personal life by building our faith (Jude 1:20) and enabling us to declare spiritual mysteries beyond our native comprehension (1 Corinthians 14:2). When we speak a message with a spiritual language (i.e., a vocabulary and syntax unknown to us naturally) it impacts others—either by focusing their attention, in words they can comprehend, on all the magnificent things God has done (Acts 2:11) or, when interpreted, by revealing God's heart to/for them (1 Corinthians 14:21, 27-30). Remember, what makes the language spiritual is NOT the inflection, the accent and the vocabulary or anything about the actual tongue itself. Rather, it is a spiritual language because:

1. It is completely unknown to us except by the power and work of the Holy Spirit, and,
2. It breaks in on the natural world order as a Kingdom-Bringer.

Similarly, prophecy—perhaps the best-known “spiritual gift”—is spiritual because it addresses things we cannot surmise or know on our own. This is where many believers become slightly confused. They mistakenly connect prophecy with just a few specific subjects like end-times, revival, the future, judgment, etc. Prophecy is spiritual because:

1. It reveals what would otherwise remain hidden to our natural perception, and,
2. It ushers God's will/way into the ordinary arena of life.

Whether it makes known the hidden particulars in someone's heart (1 Corinthians 14:25) or discloses God's secret plans to secure their future (14:3), prophecy is an activity of revelation meant to overthrow the existing "course of this world" and the way that life would otherwise go (see Ephesians 2:2).

Just as the enemy of God's purposes works through the "sons of disobedience," so the Lord works through our obedience (paying attention to and following His promptings) to "destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). That's what Jesus meant when He said, "the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence" (Matthew 11:12). The power given to even "the least in the Kingdom" is huge beyond imagining because it is the miraculous power of God. We are engaged in a revolution, attempting to wrest control of the planet out of the hands of its current prince, who will eventually be "broken without human agency" (Daniel 8:25). In other words, the natural power of humanity cannot succeed in the struggle; the "weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh," but Holy Spirit empowered *spirituals* (2 Corinthians 10:4).

### THE "GIFTS"

So, we come back full-circle to the subject of "spiritual gifts," especially the specific spirituals listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10—word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, healings, miracle-effecting, prophecy, spirit-discerning, multiple languages and interpretations. We do not know, for sure, if these gifts are distributed to believers in a manner that allows them to be kept for a lifetime, or simply given at a meeting and held but briefly by the person ministering them. In either case, it seems that we tend to operate more regularly in some of the gifts, as opposed to others, so it is safe to say that different believers have more facility with some gifts than with others. But we're encouraged to keep desiring the gifts that are most fitting and needful for each situation (1 Corinthians 12:31).

They are "gifts" because they are *spirituals*—tools inaccessible to our natural talents/abilities; implements divinely empowered to change the natural course of this world. We are only able to function in them when that power is given to us by the Holy Spirit. Just as we speak in tongues as the Spirit gives us "utterance" (Acts 2:4), so we minister "spiritual gifts" only as the Spirit gifts us with discernment, faith, wisdom, etc.

How exciting! Though it is impossible for us to function in any of the gifts by means of our inherent knowledge or skills, it is absolutely possible that the Lord will use us to minister to (i.e., serve) people with any one of the gifts, at any time. That means we will want to stay alert to the tiniest inducement of the Spirit, the least little scriptural prompting—one of those *spirituals* we've been talking about!

#### IV. "Spiritual Gifts" (Mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10)

- A. Word of Wisdom.
- B. Word of Knowledge.
- C. Faith.
- D. Gifts of Healings.
- E. Miracle-Effecting.
- F. Prophecy.
- G. Distinguishing Between Spirits.
- H. Tongues and the Interpretation of Tongue.