Discernment: Insight into the Mind of Christ

A friend of mine sent a clipping to me from the San Francisco Chronicle recently. It was an article by religion writer Don Lattin titled "Two Faces of the Spiritual Revival." (December 1, 1989; Section B, 6) The subtitle announced, "New Agers and Pentecostals part of the same 'Great Awakening'." Mr. Lattin chose his topic after Phillip Lucas of the University of California at Santa Barbara presented a paper on this subject at the 1989 meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Anaheim, California.

Based upon Lucas' research, Lattin reported a number of striking similarities between the two movements.

(1) "Both seek guidance from spirits and a direct experience of the sacred...."

(2) "Both see the world on the edge of a radical spiritual transformation, whether it is called the 'New Age' or the 'Millennium'."

(3) "Both stress spiritual and physical healing through the laying on of hands, prayer, crystals or other techniques outside medical science."

(4) "Both arose as movements outside the mainline churches but have grown to the extent they are now subtly changing the beliefs and worship styles of the religious establishment."

On the surface it is difficult to deny that the similarities to which Lucas pointed exist. They do. At least they do on a phenomenological level. But when probed more deeply, chances are that the differences between these two movements more than offset the similarities described in the article. Pentecostals distinguish themselves from the New Age movement by pointing to the affinities between much New Age teaching and that of certain Eastern religions, especially of Hinduism. On the other hand, many New Agers look down upon Pentecostals as nothing more than pulpit-pounding, Bible-thumping Fundamentalists with a supernatural twist.

Newspaper writer Don Lattin questioned Pentecostal pastor David Cawston about the New Age Movement and received the following comment. "Our [The Pentecostals'] one authority is the Bible, and the Bible tells us that every spirit is not of Christ." "In my view, some of it [New Age] is classic demon possession. There are many spirits in the world, and some of them are very deceptive." In short, Cawston did not recognize the New Age Movement as Christian.

When reporter Lattin talked with Michael Anast, head of the New Age's Foundation for Spiritual Freedom, Mr. Anast denied that the
New Age movement was “doing anything outside what the Bible says.” In short, if he did not argue its place as Christian he wanted it understood that it was not inconsistent with the Church’s ultimate authority. But others are more likely to claim full Christian status as increasingly New Agers form local centers.

Mr. Lattin confronts us with a classic question. How does one discern who the church is when he or she meets a movement, denomination, or even a congregation? How does one know whether or not s/he is dealing with the church or with something else? Jesus warned his own disciples that there would be those who would come into their midst as wolves in sheep’s clothing (Mt. 7:15-23), intent upon leading even the elect astray (Mt. 24:11, 24-25; Mk. 13:22-23). They might take to themselves the appearance of “church” but they would not be “church.” What makes it possible for Christians to recognize each other as Christians, and movements and denominations to recognize each other as being legitimate parts of the universal church? Is it form? Is it content? Is it words? Is it actions? Or is it something else? To what authority do Christians appeal when making such judgments? Scripture? Tradition? Reason? Experience? Or is it to some combination of these factors to which they appeal?

David Cawston, the Pentecostal pastor, saw his own tradition standing squarely in the stream of historic Biblical Christianity. Scripture is its ultimate authority. But when the Pentecostal movement first appeared on the religious landscape at the beginning of this century, it was denounced from pulpits as a “rank counterfeit” religion. It was caricatured as “a disgusting amalgamation of African voodoo superstition and Caucasian insanity.” The president of the Los Angeles Church Federation troubled by its emergence in 1906 Los Angeles described it as embodying “enthusiastic fanaticism” and warned that some of the enthusiasts “might lose their reason through over zeal and become dangerous.” Indeed, many early Pentecostals were arrested and hospitalized on charges of insanity. Pentecostals were derogatorily labeled “Holy Jumpers,” “Holy Kickers,” “Holy Rollers,” “Holy Howlers,” even “Tangled Tonguers.” Today, while Pentecostals would hardly be considered by many Christians as occupying the centrist position within the Church, they are viewed nonetheless as a legitimate and vibrant part of the church, even by many who once rejected their claims to legitimacy. How did this change come about? The answer, in part, may lie in a charism of the Holy Spirit graciously given to the Church, the ability to distinguish between spirits.

At this time in history, there is a great need for the study and exercise of this gift. Examples of issues which call for discernment are not difficult to find. Kenneth Hagan lamented in his book *How You Can Be Led By the Spirit of God* ([Tulsa: Hagan Ministries, 1979], 108) that there is a great need for discernment of so-called “words from the Lord” which are passed on within Pentecostal/Charismatic Circles.