

Test The Spirits

Jim Jones was the founder and leader of the Peoples Temple, which is best known for the November 18, 1978 suicide of more than 900 Temple members in Jonestown, Guyana. Harley was attracted to evangelist Jim Jones in San Francisco. Harley signed over all his possessions to the cause and went with Jim Jones to found Jonestown in Guyana. If there was anyone who wanted to do right it was Harley. What went wrong? How could he have avoided being 'sucked in'?

From the first century AD until now there are people who present themselves as seemingly genuine preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In several places, the Bible warns about false prophets and says not to take everyone at face value [Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1].

We are to be discerning when assessing people claiming to speak in the name of God. 'To test the spirits' means to evaluate what people are saying 'to see whether they are from God.' But what criteria can we use to test these so called prophets/teachers/preachers?

Nearly every false religious cult begins with a heretical understanding of Jesus. 'Tests' we are to use include asking whether or not they acknowledge that Jesus Christ is God 'come in flesh.' The person denying the genuine humanity of Jesus Christ, denying Jesus is the Christ, denying that Jesus is the Son of God, is a liar, is a false prophet [1 John 2:22; 4:1-3, 15; 5:1].

Other criteria for 'testing' prophets, teachers, preachers are stated in Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and 18:20-22. False prophets may produce 'signs' to prove what they say is real, but that is no guarantee that they are from God. Miraculous powers are not necessarily proof of the genuineness of a preacher/teacher. There were magicians in Egypt who could imitate some of the miraculous signs God did through Moses [Exodus 7:22; 8:7].

It is a question of content. 'Does the message encourage God's people to worship and obey him, or does it lead them into idolatry? What the prophet says matters far more than how he says it, or whatever apparently supernatural signs he can produce to support it. The test is not whether it feels right, but whether it is true. And here the plumb-line of God's revealed truth in the Scriptures must be applied' [Jackman].

Sadly, Harley who followed Jim Jones to his death failed to 'test the spirits.' Each Christian has this responsibility.