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Meditation

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Meditation*

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Do not quench the Spirit;
Do not despise prophetic inspirations.
But test everything;
Hold fast what is good. (1 Thess. 5:19-21)

This passage speaks of two realities that seem to exclude each other: the Holy Spirit and critical testing. We ask: Is it not of the very essence of the Holy Spirit that, where He is at work, critical testing ceases? And again: Must not critical testing, if it is to be fruitful, exclude all prophetic inspirations?

In the passage above, the apostle summons the Thessalonian congregation in blunt imperatives to join both realities into a harmonious unit: Holy Spirit and critical testing. In his directives he appeals to the *entire* congregation. Depending on the peculiar function allotted to each member of the congregation, every combination of prophecy and criticism manifests itself in a special way. Therefore it would be exciting, by way of example, to draw conclusions from Paul's directives for the benefit of the leaders of the congregation, the *προϊστάμενοι* referred to by Paul in verse 12 of our chapter. To go a step farther, one would like to urge ecclesiastical authorities of all ages to take Paul's injunctions to

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heart. Often leaders of the church so limit the range of their responsibilities as to engage only in criticism and in diplomacy inspired by such criticism. They even seem to think they ought to outdo officials in secular government, with nary a concern whether because of such activity the Spirit is quenched and suffocated. Vice versa, often sectarian leaders, under the pretense that the Spirit must never be checked, fail to engage in necessary critical testing. In every assembly room where ecclesiastical authorities gather, one would like to see Paul's directives written on the wall: "Do not quench the Spirit, test everything, hold fast what is good." Alongside of these directives one might also wish to see the command of Jesus: "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

We who are gathered here are not ecclesiastical administrators, but the apostle's directives apply also to us exegetes. Yes, for the very reason that we are teachers of the church and, in particular, interpreters of the New Testament, Paul includes also us in his injunctions.

There are, indeed, in our sphere of activity areas such as the philological sciences as well as textual and literary criticism. We pursue these studies without being mindful of Christian faith and the Holy Spirit. We are grateful that these wholly secular, philological auxiliary sciences are available to us. The fact is, we cannot pursue them as thoroughly as we ought. But we know that in order to grasp the total depth of meaning of New Testament texts, which are, as we all confess, testimonies of faith, both we and all to whom we are indebted for

them are dependent on the Holy Spirit's help. He must lead all of us into all truth. Since the aforementioned auxiliary sciences, on the one hand, and their comprehension of meaning through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, fructify each other, and since, so to speak, a steady exchange takes place between both, the prayer for the Holy Spirit must dominate our *entire* exegetical enterprise, even when we are dealing with secular auxiliary sciences.

In view of what we have just said, we must be on the alert not to be led astray by a false pietistic concern, that is, by failure to test and to make critical use of the gifts of the Spirit. At the same time, however, we must not, because of unwarranted fear to employ the gifts of the Spirit, go to the other extreme and exclude the Holy Spirit from our critical investigations. On the contrary, we want to take to heart the warning of the apostles not to despise the Spirit, or, as the New Testament also says, we must not obstruct His activity: "Do not hinder Him," μή κωλύετε. This imperative is an important warning in the synoptic statement made by Jesus in His dealing with children. We find this warning also in Jesus' word regarding the person who had in His name exorcised demons though he did not belong to the company of disciples. Paul explicitly employs the same prohibition in 1 Cor. 14:39. In a wholly similar sense Paul uses the term "despise" in our text. He writes: "Do not despise prophetic inspirations."

In the process of interpreting Scriptural texts, we may not lose sight of our goal. We must at least attempt to reenact the response of faith, which was the occasion why the authors of Scriptural texts bore

the witness we have before us in New Testament texts.

With a view toward the work program in which we all participate, it is also inescapably necessary not to forget that our colleagues, who have also made it their life's calling to strive for the right understanding of the New Testament, are dependent on the same assistance of the Holy Spirit. We must be mindful of this fact even though these other colleagues do not talk about it and apparently are occupied only in a historical-neutral way with critical questions relating to the New Testament. Precisely when we think we cannot understand one another, we ought to be mutually forbearing. Only when such a posture prevails, will our cooperative efforts be fruitful.

But we need to be mindful also of a second necessary consideration. It is this: We must apply our critical acumen to the interpretations of others as well as to our own. Paul writes: "Test everything." This is the other instruction contained in the apostle's admonition, though in closest connection with the preceding: "Do not despise prophetic inspirations." It is a fact that wherever the Holy Spirit is at work, other spirits imitate Him and insinuate themselves. The spirit of error enters in, but the First Epistle of John enjoins: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1). It is interesting to note that the author of First John here uses the same Greek word δοκιμάζειν used by Paul in his admonition: "Test everything."

But what does δοκιμάζειν mean? It means to seek out the δόκιμον, that is, what has been established as true, verified,

authenticated; what is trustworthy, therefore, and approved. Paul uses the term δοκιμάζειν also in Rom. 12:2, where he declares the object of this verb to be the ascertainment of "what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

In our concern for the proper application of the verses in our text, it is necessary to note that Paul employs the verb δοκιμάζειν and not, as he might have done, the verb κρίνειν. For although κρίνειν in its basic neutral sense simply means "to differentiate," its *usus loquendi*, especially in the New Testament, suggests that κρίνειν somehow already presupposes an accusation. κρίνειν seeks out and examines at the outset the *negative* element, that is, the element that must be rejected, though it is possible in pursuing one's search that the verb κρίνειν does now and then have a *positive* meaning. For δοκιμάζειν, however, which Paul employs in our text, the opposite procedure of interpreting this verb is significant. In pursuing this opposite course, one consciously seeks out *first* of all the positive, that is, the trustworthy and approved element, and only then is the rejection, or the ἀποδοκιμάζειν, of other elements in order. The difference between κρίνειν and δοκιμάζειν seems minimal. Nevertheless, in view of what Paul wishes to inculcate in our text, that difference is of fundamental importance. The priority of the *positive* over the *negative* is by no means a matter of indifference. Thus the apostle does not say in the text: "Test all things and reject what is bad, what is not trustworthy and not approved." On the contrary, he strikes a positive note: "Test all things." Testing in the sense of δοκιμάζειν, seek out *first* whatever is right and true and then whatever is false in the

process of determining what is good and right.

Since we are exegetes, it is indeed our duty to be critical, to test. We can never be too critical. But we must strive to be critical in the sense that in whatever we read and hear we inquire first of all after that which is trustworthy and approved or is in process of becoming so. Only then should we criticize the false elements. We know that we all, being scholars, are tempted time and again, whether we will it or not, by a kind of vainglory in our scholarly achievements. This temptation besieges us when we read an article or a book or listen to an essay or lecture. We are then prone to ask at the outset: How can I, in view of my unassailable right position, take issue with what this or that author wrote or this or that essayist or lecturer said, whereas we should have inquired first of all: What positive good thing might I learn from the author or lecturer, who surely is also concerned about truth? What is the καλόν in what I read or heard, which I can and must gratefully cling to, even though I may have to revise my own opinion or even reject it? How much more fruitful would our discussions be, how much more constructive our criticism, if we would always at the outset inquire first after the καλόν we wish to hold fast, and only afterwards, and then frankly and firmly, take issue with what in our search for the καλόν appears to be wanting and inconclusive.

We are not making a plea for purely formal politeness. This would be worthless with respect to the subject matter. Nor are we making a plea for a *captatio benevolentiae*, with the intention, however, of

more effectively telling off our opponent. We are rather pleading for the observance of a basic principle demanded by the verb δοκιμάζειν.

I do not mean to suggest that we should forgo criticism. On the contrary, we must be altogether critical, but in such a way that, in spite of the etymological relation between the terms "criticism" and κρίνειν, our criticism derives less from the *negative* κρίνειν than from the *positive* δοκιμάζειν. To be able to do this is a gift of the Spirit, a charism. Here is the link connecting Spirit and criticism. Only if this link holds, can genuine cooperative study come into being. For if we are minded to reject prior to, and independent of, the positive quest for retaining what is trustworthy and approved, we are in danger of giving priority to safeguarding our reputation as scholars rather than to the truth. If we seek out first the *negative* element and the tactic how we might triumph over our opponent, we are in danger of being concerned only about demonstrating that we are right.

Only when we practice toward others the proper way of testing in the sense of δοκιμάζειν, will we take a critical posture also with respect to our own interpretations. We will not forget that also in our own case the spirit of error insinuates himself where the Spirit of truth is at work. We all know that every passage in Scripture conjures up in our minds a multiplicity of ideas. Yet also in such instances we must be guided by the principle not to believe *all* spirits *within us*, but to test them. Such experiences ought to make us grateful that the historical-critical method has been given

us to be used as a controlling device. Herein lies the dignity and blessing of this method: it lightens our task of δοκιμάζειν, the process of investigating, of putting to the test. Paul writes in Gal. 6:4 that we are to apply the process of δοκιμάζειν also to our own labors. But here, too, we ought to begin with the *positive* side, with the quest for those of our assertions which in our concern for the καλόν measure up to the test. At this point and with respect to our own theses, we must of course waive claim to whatever does not meet the test. This implies that we must waive claim to enticing thoughts, however dear they may be to us, as well as to opinions which we formerly espoused, whether orally or in writing, and which we are always tempted to regard more sacrosanct than every other interpretation. Trustworthy and approved elements abide even though they may be quantitatively minimal. They will enhance the value of our own contributions and prove to be a source of profounder exegetical enrichment.

If we will thus with reference to others and to ourselves in all our exegetical endeavors regard testing as an activity of the Holy Spirit and therefore primarily as a quest for the *positive*, the trustworthy and approved, criticism will not be an element of divisiveness among exegetes but, on the contrary, a bond of the Spirit that unites all of us. For wherever such testing in the Spirit is really pursued by all, there the Spirit of truth will bless our labors in and through fellowship. May this be the ideal of our society as well as of our sessions.