

HOLY SPIRIT AND CRITIQUE

OSCAR CULLMANN

Translated From the German By Ed. L. Miller and William Carroll

Quench not the Spirit,
Despise not prophesying.
But test everything
Hold fast what is right.

I. Thess. 5:19-21

These words concern the Holy Spirit and critical examination—two things which seem to exclude one another. It is not fitting to the nature of the Holy Spirit that where he is at work critical study should fall silent? And, conversely, is it not imperative to critical examination, if it is to be fruitful, that every prophetic concern be immediately suspended?

In these verses the Apostle summons the Thessalonian community to combine the two harmoniously: Holy Spirit and critical study. He directs this summons to the *whole* community. In accordance with the function which each individual serves there, the union of prophecy and critical study presents itself in a special way. It would be natural for the overseers of the community perhaps, the *proistamenoi* as they are called in this chapter (vs. 12), to appreciate in this same way the implications of this summons. And would that church authorities of all times take these verses to heart. Church leaders often confine themselves solely to the practice of critical study and to the “diplomacy” it affords; and they think that in this they must even surpass secular leaders, without troubling themselves whether the Spirit is quenched or stifled in the process. On the other hand, leaders of sects, often appealing to the free working of the Spirit, neglect the necessary critical work. We should like to see in the conference room of every church council this exhortation written on the wall: “Quench not the Spirit—Test everything—Hold fast what is right.” And next to that perhaps a saying of Jesus which contains a similar exhortation: “Be wise (or even ‘cunning’) as serpents, and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16).

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We here are not church leaders, but the Apostle's word was spoken also for us exegetes. We too, precisely as teachers of the church and especially as interpreters of the New Testament, are all addressed in this matter.

Of course there are disciplines in our field—such as linguistics, textual and literary criticism—that are carried on without regard to any Christian belief or to the Holy Spirit. We are grateful for the assistance of these purely secular and philological auxiliary sciences, and we cannot pursue them thoroughly enough. But we know that in order to grasp in its full depth the meaning of the New Testament texts, which after all are testimonies of faith, we too, like those to whom we owe those texts, also require the assistance of the Holy Spirit. His purpose is to lead us, like them, into all truth. Granted that these auxiliary sciences, on the one hand, and the grasp of meaning through the Holy Spirit, on the other, mutually enrich one another, and that a constant exchange, so to speak, takes place between the two, the appeal to the Holy Spirit must nonetheless stand behind our whole exegetical undertaking, even where auxiliary secular sciences are concerned.

Thus we will not let ourselves be misled by a pietistic or non-testing, non-critical use of the Spirit's gifts, nor from an excessive fear of this to fall into the other extreme and bar the Holy Spirit from our work. Rather, we too want to take seriously the Apostle's admonition not to "despise" the Spirit, or as the New Testament elsewhere puts it, not to "hinder": "Do not hinder him," *me koluete*. It is this demand which ultimately stands behind the Synoptic word of Jesus concerning the children (Matt. 19:14), and also behind the saying about the one who, not belonging to the disciples, cast out demons in Jesus' name (Mark 9:38-39); and in the First Epistle to the Corinthians (14:39), Paul applies the same demand directly to the workings of the Spirit, *me koluete*: "Do not hinder them." In a quite similar sense he says here in the Thessalonian Epistle: "Despise them not."

In explaining the texts we do not want to lose sight of the purpose, and we do want to try, at least to realize in our turn that act of faith which occasioned its authors to bear the witness which we have before us in those texts.

With regard to our scholarly community it is moreover absolutely necessary not to forget that our colleagues, who like us have made the correct understanding of the New Testament their life's work, enjoy the benefit of the same assistance of the Holy Spirit. We should keep this in mind even if others are silent about it and apparently go on to engage themselves only in a disinterested historical way with critical

questions of the New Testament. Just at that point where we think we cannot understand one another, we should be mutually lenient. Only on such a basis can our cooperation be fruitful.

But now the second is indeed just as necessary, that in relation both to their interpretation and to our own we apply *our critical faculties*: "Test everything." That is the other teaching contained in the Apostle's command, but in the closest connection with the preceeding. For the fact is that wherever the Holy Spirit is at work, other spirits, which imitate him, sneak in, and that where the Spirit of truth is present, the spirit of error makes himself at home. Thus the author of the First Epistle of John speaks of this too: "Test the spirits, whether they are of God" (4:1). And in fact he employs the same Greek verb for "test" as does Paul: *dokimazein*.

What does *dokimazein* mean? To seek after what is approved—what is *dokimon*. Similar to the author of the First Epistle of John, Paul in the Epistle to the Romans (12:2) gives as objective of this *dokimazein* the ascertainment of that which is "God's will."

Concerning these verses it is to be noted that Paul employs precisely this verb; that is, he says *dokimazein* and not something like *krinein*. For although *krinein* in the first instance has the simple, neutral meaning of "to decide," the tendency of linguistic usage, especially in the New Testament, is that the activity of judging signified by this verb somehow presupposes an accusation. *Krinein* first seeks out and examines the *negative*, that which is to be rejected, and in this way can arrive at a positive result as well. On the other hand, the opposite way characterizes the *dokimazein* here recommended by Paul. Here, what first becomes known is the positive, the confirmed is sought, and only in this manner do we arrive at the rejection (*apodokimazein*) of what is alien. The difference between *krinein* and *dokimazein* appears slight, and yet it is fundamental just in respect of that which Paul here wants to impress upon us. The priority of the positive over the negative is not accidental. Thus the Apostle does not say: "Test all things and reject the bad." Much more positively: "Test everything, and hold fast what is right." This means that by testing in the sense of *dokimazein* we should *first* have in view what is right and true, and then reject what is false *in* and *through* the exposure of what is right.

To be sure, it is our duty as exegetes to be critical, to put things to the test. We cannot be critical enough. But in such a way that with respect to all that we read and hear, we *first* seek after that which is confirmed and confirms itself, and then only through *that* criticize the rest. Indeed, when we read an article or book or hear a

paper or lecture, we are one and all, again and again, whether we like it or not, tempted by a certain learned vanity which threatens us all to ask, in the wrong order, "How can I from my fixed position oppose what I have read or heard?" instead of first asking, "What can I positively *learn* for myself from the other man who also is concerned to know the truth? What is the *kalon* which I can and must gratefully retain from the one I have read or heard, even if I must correct and perhaps give up my own view?" How much more fruitful would our discussions be, how much more constructive our critical work, if we would always first inquire of our adversary concerning the *kalon* which we want to hold fast, and then only from this standpoint oppose with all frankness and determination what appears to us not to stand up in the course of our search for the *kalon*.

It is not a question of a purely formal politeness. That would be essentially worthless. It is not a question of beginning with some diplomatic compliments in order better to finish off the opponent. Rather, it is a fundamental attitude that goes hand in hand with *dokimazein*.

We do not want to be uncritical, but more than ever totally critical, though in such a way that, in spite of the etymological relationship between "critique" and *krinein*, our critical study issues less from the rather negative *krinein* than from the positive *dokimazein*. This is a gift of the Spirit, a *charisma*. Here is the bond between Holy Spirit and critical study. Only in this way can a genuine community of scholars emerge. For if we put the question of condemnation *before* and *independently* of the positive desire to possess the tried and true, then we are in danger of giving our personal scholarly reputation priority over the truth. If we seek primarily the negative, seek first how to combat another, then we are in danger of keeping only one thing in view, namely that *we* turn out to be right.

Only if we exercise the right testing (in the sense of *dokimazein*) in relation to someone else will we also be critical and testing of our *own* interpretation. Then we shall not forget in our own case too where the Spirit of truth is at work the spirit of error sneaks in. Every text tends of course to awaken in us a plethora of ideas. Even there it behooves us not to believe all the spirits *in us*, but to test them. And there we should be grateful that the historical-critical method is provided to us as a check. Therein lies the nobility and the blessing of this method, that it facilitates for us the *dokimazein*, the test, the "putting to trial." Paul writes in the Epistle to the Galatians (6:4) that we should apply the *dokimazein* also to our own work. Here too we may and should begin with the *positive*, with the question con-

cerning which of our assertions stand the test, and thus with the question concerning the *kalon*. From that point on we should indeed be able to reject what does not stand up, even if it supports our own theses. There where the polemic against others must begin, where we test our own results, there should the rejection take place: rejection of corrupting ideas, even if they are ever so dear to us; rejection, if necessary, of opinions which we have championed verbally or in writing and indeed which we are always tempted to regard as more sacrosanct than any other teaching or writing. The tried and tested which remains, even if it is quantitatively small, will then in our own labors be so much the more fruitful and be a source for so much deeper an exegetical enrichment.

If, in this manner, we practise "testing" in the sense of an activity of the Holy Spirit, primarily as a search for what is in a positive way confirmed, and if we practise it both with respect to others and with respect to our own exegetical endeavors, then criticism will not be a principle of division among exegetes, but on the contrary, a bond of the Spirit which unites us. For where such testing in the Spirit is actually practised on all sides, there will the Spirit of truth advance our work in and through mutual participation. This should be the meaning of our *Societas* and also of our conferences.

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