



“Is It From the Lord?” –

On Discerning the Source of Immanuel Approach Experiences

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Learning to recognize the Lord’s presence, “voice,” and guidance are essential to the life of Christian discipleship. It is also an essential part of being either a facilitator or a recipient with the Immanuel approach, in which so much depends on experiencing His presence, on “hearing”/perceiving His guidance, and on following His leadership. As described above, part of the challenge in Immanuel approach sessions is to help the person perceive the meaning and importance of subtle experiences that are actually from the Lord, but initially not recognized as such. For example, the Lord often sends insights into the person’s mind in ways that are subtle, and she doesn’t feel their importance or recognize their meaning, but rather initially mistakes them for unimportant, distracting thoughts from her own mind. In these situations, the challenge is to coax the person to describe whatever is coming into her awareness, and then help her recognize that the content is actually from the Lord.

Another important challenge with the Immanuel approach is to help the person correctly understand experiences that are initially thought to be from the Lord, but are actually coming from some other source. For example, the person might experience visual images (“I can see Jesus, standing right in front of me”), sensations of touch (“I can feel His arms around me”), emotions (“I feel an intense sense of affirmation and encouragement”), the perception of hearing words (“I hear the Lord saying, ‘I will always be with you...’”), the subjective sense of a presence with her (“I don’t see any visual image, but I have the impression that Jesus is with me – I can feel His presence – I don’t feel alone any more”), or the subjective sense that she has received thoughts/insights from someone or something other than herself (“I feel like the Lord just sent the thought, ‘I love you just the way you are – you don’t need to earn my love’”). These kinds of experiences are common during Immanuel approach sessions, and often they are from the Lord. However, occasionally the person will experience something that she initially assumes to be from the Lord, but then later we discern some other source.

This is not a comprehensive discussion of discernment, but hopefully these thoughts will be helpful when the source of an Immanuel approach experience is unclear.

- I. **Possible sources:** A good place to begin discerning is to identify the possible sources of the experiences that a person can have during an Immanuel approach session.
 - A. **God.** The source could be the Lord. Perceiving Jesus’ living presence, experiencing an interactive connection with Him, “hearing”/perceiving His guidance, and receiving His help/encouragement/blessings are the core of the Immanuel approach (to emotional healing and to life).
 - B. **Demonic spirits.** Some messages may be demonic in origin. Wounds, lies, and defenses that include looking away from the truth (denial, repression, and dissociation) give the enemy a place to hide and authority to work. It shouldn’t surprise us that he desperately opposes any healing process that dismantles these defenses, resolves wounds, and replaces lies with the Lord’s healing truth. Our observation is that demonic spirits try to confuse and

disrupt the Immanuel process by producing experiences that resemble (at least superficially) authentic experiences from the Lord.

Some of the demonic counterfeits cause direct confusion and disruption by including toxic contaminants. For example, the person might perceive an image of Jesus, and have the sense that He is challenging her to make better choices; however, instead of being a totally clean, life-giving, joy-based exhortation/encouragement, the message from the counterfeit Jesus is subtly judgmental, non-relational, and communicates “If you want me to love you, you need to work harder to be good.”¹ If we recognize what’s happening, and keep working to expose and remove blockages, the person eventually receives an experience (a word, image, thought, etc) that truly is from the Lord, and this authentic Immanuel encounter always brings powerful lasting benefit. However, if the person erroneously concludes that the counterfeit experience was really Immanuel, and that the distorted/poisoned content is what she can expect to get from Jesus, she will quickly lose interest in the Immanuel approach.

Other demonic counterfeits hinder the process simply by getting in the way/taking the place of authentic experiences. For example, the person has the clear subjective perception that she has received a thought from outside herself, and assumes it’s from the Lord. And the thought seems helpful, with no obvious distortions, such as, “It’s okay – you did the best you could.” But the key is that the encouraging thought has no lasting healing power. It sounds good, but nothing changes. If we recognize what’s happening, and keep working to expose and remove blockages, the person eventually receives an experience (a word, image, thought, etc) that truly is from the Lord, and this authentic Immanuel encounter always brings lasting, healing change. However, if the person erroneously concludes that the counterfeit experience was really Immanuel, and that the *powerless* encouragements and/or insights are the best Jesus can do, she will become increasingly discouraged, and eventually conclude that the Immanuel approach is a big disappointment that’s not worth pursuing.

- C. Our own thoughts, guessing/trying to help:** Especially initially, thoughts from the person’s own mind will come into her awareness and she will mistakenly perceive that they are coming from the Lord. Some people get anxious if they do not quickly experience some kind of Immanuel encounter, and this anxiety can be particularly intense and uncomfortable if it is coming from painful memories that are being triggered by waiting for Jesus. For example, waiting for an experience with the Lord might trigger pain from memories of waiting (and waiting, and waiting) for Dad to show at a special event he had promised to attend. In these situations, the person’s own mind will try to “help” by guessing what the Lord might say, and then presenting this thought into her awareness as if

¹ Counterfeit Immanuel encounters are sometimes much more dramatically poisoned. For example, the person might perceive a presence she believes to be Jesus, but then “Jesus” becomes sexually inappropriate, or becomes angry and openly condemns her. You might think that the recipient would immediately recognize that this can’t really be Jesus. Tragically, some abuse survivors have such distorted expectations regarding what to expect from people who supposedly love them that they are not surprised when “Jesus” becomes sexually inappropriate or starts to yell at them. Their openness to the Immanuel approach vaporizes instantly, but it doesn’t occur to them that this isn’t really Jesus. Also, they often don’t report the details that would immediately alert the facilitator. They might initially report only that something disturbing happened, and that they don’t want to continue, or maybe they will simply state that they want to stop. Gentle coaxing is then required to discover the confusing, toxic counterfeit Immanuel encounters.

it is coming from the Lord. Other people have learned to manage troublesome thoughts and emotions by speaking truth to themselves, and Christians who have developed this coping tool will usually include Biblical principles and/or direct quotes from scripture as part of this plan. There is a lot of good in this approach to coping with troublesome thoughts and emotions, but this internal response of speaking truth to themselves has often become so ingrained and automatic that, in the context of Immanuel sessions, they speak for Jesus without even thinking about it. That is, at any point in the session where the person should be waiting for an Immanuel encounter, she immediately fills the space with truths from her own mind.

However, just as with any other sources speaking for Jesus, words from our own minds will not have the power to release lasting transformation. They may be good truths, and may even provide moderate temporary benefits, but they will not have the life-giving power that comes with true Immanuel encounters. If the facilitator and recipient recognize what’s happening, and then continue to wait (along with exposing and removing any other blockages), the person will eventually receive an experience (a word, image, thought, etc) that truly is from the Lord, and this authentic Immanuel encounter will always bring profound, lasting benefit. Unfortunately, if the person erroneously concludes that the thoughts from her own mind are the Immanuel encounter she’s been waiting for, and that these less powerful encouragements and/or insights are the best Jesus can do, she will become increasingly discouraged, and eventually conclude that the Immanuel approach is a big disappointment that’s not worth pursuing.

D. Internal parts from our own minds. It is extremely important to recognize the way in which an aspect of our own thinking and feeling may sometimes feel like a separate entity – like a voice or thought coming from someone other than oneself. It is not necessary to have severe dissociation to experience this sensation, although the subjective experience of a separate entity is increasingly intense with increasing dissociation. Just as with our adult minds, internal parts can try to “help” by acting/speaking for Jesus, and if the facilitator and recipient mistake the internal parts for Jesus, they will end the session prematurely and the person will thereby miss true transformative healing. And, once again, if the person erroneously concludes that the counterfeit experience is really Immanuel, and that the *powerless* encounter is the best Jesus can do, she will become increasingly discouraged, and eventually conclude that the Immanuel approach is a big disappointment that is not worth pursuing further.

II. Testing. None of the following “tests” are sufficient unto themselves. The minister/therapist should keep all of them in mind.

A. Scripture. Any encounter with the Lord, whether in the form of an image, physical sensations, the sense of a presence, a thought, or some other subjective experience, will not contradict the character or perspective of God as revealed in Scripture. The key here is consistency with Scripture rather than quotation of it. Remember that demonic spirits can quote scripture even as they attempt to oppose the Lord’s healing work, and that internal parts can quote scripture as they attempt to avoid pain. A counterfeit message coming during an Immanuel session may be a quotation of Scripture, but it will be misapplied in the context in question, yielding confusion and/or misdirection rather than the Lord’s will.

Note: Any experience that fails this test is definitely disqualified; however, passing this test does not guarantee that the experience in question is truly from Jesus. As described above,

our observation is that the person and/or internal parts often get anxious if the Lord delays in speaking the truth for any reason². The person and/or internal parts try to “help” the healing process by speaking truth in Jesus’ place, and they often quote scripture when doing so. In this situation, the scripture may be quoted appropriately and the meaning of the “word” be consistent with the character and perspective of God, but it does not bring about a transformative healing moment. Other tests of discernment must be applied.

B. The Effects (“fruit”). One of the most practical and useful ways to test any apparent Immanuel encounters that a person experiences is to carefully observe the effects, or “fruit.” This is especially easy to do if the person has an apparent Immanuel encounter while she is immersed in a painful memory. Does the person still feel alone in the memory of the painful experience, or does she now feel that there is someone *with* her in the memory? Does she continue to feel the negative emotions previously associated with the memory, or does she report and display dramatic relief (dramatic reduction, or total resolution of the negative emotions)? Do the lies previously associated with the traumatic memory still feel true, or did the thoughts/insights effectively replace them with truth? Does the word seem to reinforce denial or avoidance of pain, rather than truth? A true healing word from the Lord will not avoid the trauma in any way *and* will bring peace and calm, at least to the particular part of the trauma that was worked through. It will not leave a person feeling numb or disconnected.³ Especially when one is just beginning to do emotional healing work, it can be tempting to validate any experience that seems to reduce a person’s immediate pain, (and reduces our own anxiety!) without checking to see whether the person was healed or whether they just disconnected.

It is also useful to ask the person how she feels as she thinks about the experience. Does it leave her feeling scared, ashamed, guilty? Does any part of the experience smack of judgment, condemnation, bitterness or revenge? A “yes” answer to either of these questions would prompt me to pursue further investigation.

Part of what works so well for me is that I have seen thousands of true Immanuel interventions, and I have profound faith that when the true, living Jesus shows up (and all the blockages are out of the way), something good always happens. If I don’t see and feel the kind of tangible, *satisfying* results that I have become accustomed to, I assume that the person has not yet encountered Immanuel and/or there is still something hindering her from fully experiencing His presence and receiving His help. And then I continue troubleshooting until the person does experience a tangible, life-giving, satisfying encounter with Immanuel. At the very least (if we are not able to find and resolve all the hindering blockages within the time available), I assure the person that she has not yet experienced a true Immanuel encounter. “Please don’t stop – It get’s a lot better than this.”

C. 1st John 4:1-3. Dr. Smith taught us a simple test based on I John 4:1-3 that has been very helpful in exposing demonic counterfeit “words.” The short summary is that demonic

² For example, the Lord might know that something else still needs to happen before healing truth can be received, and is therefore deliberately waiting to bring truth. See “Theophostic®, What is Unique?” section #4, for further discussion of this topic.

³ If there was a lot of painful emotion before the person received the word, and then less afterward, check for healing resolution vs. disengagement: ask the person whether she feels a true peace and calm throughout the areas where there previously was pain, or whether she feels numb, disconnected, distracted, or resigned.

spirits seem incapable of saying “Jesus Christ is the Son of God and came in the flesh.” Checking to see if any internal voice can make that statement is a useful way of distinguishing between demonic spirits and internal parts or the Holy Spirit.⁴

D. Recognize the counterfeit by knowing the genuine: Most of us have heard the story about how the government trains federal agents to recognize counterfeit money: they don’t spend time studying the many ways counterfeit money can look, but rather spend hours and hours looking at genuine money. The idea is that they will embed every detail of genuine money so deeply in their nonconscious implicit memory systems that they will have an immediate, “something just isn’t right” response when they encounter counterfeit money; and once they have been warned by their intuitive implicit memory systems they can confirm their assessment by analyzing with the information in their cognitive explicit memory systems. A similar approach with respect to emotional healing ministry has increasingly become my primary method of detecting any other source presenting as Jesus. As I have become increasingly familiar with the Lord’s character and heart, the ways He works, the kinds of things He says and does, and the results that usually follow from certain interventions on His part I usually notice that “something just doesn’t feel right” when one of my clients is working with a counterfeit Jesus.

This approach is obviously less valuable for those who don’t feel confident regarding their ability to recognize the genuine (for example, new believers who have just begun to study the Word and who have not yet had much experience with the Lord’s living presence, or Christians who still have many unresolved wounds that get transferred onto the Lord and impair their perception of His heart and character). However, I strongly encourage focusing on this approach as the best long term plan. Over time, studying the Word, spending time with Immanuel in your personal devotions, experiencing the Lord’s healing presence in your own healing sessions, watching the Lord work in sessions you facilitate, watching the Lord work in other sessions,⁵ and specifically resolving traumatic content that gets transferred onto the Lord will result in an increasingly strong and accurate “knowing” with respect to *who the Lord is* and *how He works*.

A few additional thoughts regarding Immanuel approach sessions as a context for growing with respect to knowing the Lord: With respect to Immanuel sessions, there are deliberate steps we can take to help us in learning to discern the Lord’s presence, voice, character, and heart. With respect to our own sessions, we can observe apparent Immanuel encounters as carefully as possible, test them (see Testing above), act on them, and then observe over time to see if circumstances confirm that the experiences were truly from the Lord. When observation over time confirms the validity of an experience, we take note of what it looks and feels like when we encounter the true living Jesus, and what it looks like and feels like when we accurately discern the Lord’s voice. When observation over time indicates we were mistaken, we should seek to understand how we were misled so that we can find and

⁴ See “Distinguishing Between Demonic Spirits and Internal Parts” in the Practical Ministry Tools section of www.kclehman.com for a more detailed discussion of this discernment tool.

⁵ One application for our live session DVDs is to provide an easily accessible “this is what it looks like/feels like when a person is perceiving the Lord’s presence and working with Him.” If you know effective Immanuel approach facilitators who will let you observe their work, this is another good way to grow in your knowledge of who the Lord is and how He works.

eliminate the underlying problems that made us vulnerable to deception and confusion.⁶ When we facilitate for someone else, we can observe apparent Immanuel encounters as carefully as possible (and encourage her to do the same), test them, encourage the person to act on them, and then observe over time to see if circumstances confirm that the experiences were truly from the Lord. When observation over time confirms the validity of an experience, we take note of what it looks like and feels like when the recipient encounters the true living Jesus, and what it looks like and feels like when she accurately discerns the Lord’s voice. When observation over time indicates she was mistaken, help her discover how she was misled, so that she can find and eliminate the underlying problems that made her vulnerable to deception and confusion.

I have gotten to know the Lord in a whole new way as I have encountered His presence in hundreds of my own Immanuel sessions, and as I have watched others encounter His presence in thousands of sessions that I facilitated. I have experienced and observed Jesus working with so many different problems; I have experienced and observed Jesus responding to so many different situations; I have experienced and observed the gentle, wise, creative, beautiful, surprising, elegant, amazing interventions He comes up with; and I have come to know His presence, voice, character, and heart in a whole new way.

For additional discussion regarding how to recognize counterfeits by building an increasingly strong and accurate “knowing” with respect to the Lord’s character and heart, see the essay “Internal Dissociated Parts Presenting as Jesus” (available as a free download from www.kclehman.com)

III. Other thoughts:

- A. **Avoid all-or-nothing thinking.** A given experience may include some truth from the Lord and also some distortion, misinterpretation, and/or addition from the human recipient. Our discernment is sometimes right and sometimes wrong. All or none thinking – “If some is right it must all be right, if some is wrong it must all be wrong” – is poor logic and hinders our ability to discern the wheat from the chaff.
- B. **Immanuel session experiences are not the same as Scripture.** Words, images, symbolic pictures, or other experiences which convey truth from the Lord in an Immanuel approach session are not the same as Scripture. We want to affirm the wonderful truth that we can experience the living presence of Jesus, and that He will reveal truth to us in these experiences, but we also want to be humble with respect to the authority of these experiences. The specific healing message the Lord has given should be treated as a personal encounter with Jesus, an answer to prayer. But while such words will be consistent with Scripture (see #2a above), they do not carry the timeless, apostolic authority for the Church as a whole that Scripture does.
- C. **Remain in community, listen to those around you, and be humble.** One of the best

⁶ The essay, “Deceiving Spirits and Counterfeit Manifestations: How Wounds, Lies, Internal Parts, Repression, and Denial Can Give Them a Place,” describing my experience with certain charismatic phenomena, provides an excellent example of observing over time, and when this careful observation indicated I was mistaken, seeking to understand how I was misled so that we could find and eliminate the underlying problems that made me vulnerable to deception and confusion. (This essay is available as a free download from www.kclehman.com.)

protections against harm to yourself or others coming from mistakenly attributing an experience as from the Lord is the accountability of the Christian community. Are you close enough to a few other believers that you can enlist their prayerful help in discerning experiences that may or may not be from God? Pray for the humility to really listen to others when they disagree with you. Ask the Lord to expose the true motivations of your heart: Are you more interested in knowing the truth, or in being “right”? Are you willing to see where your own wounds and/or sins may be distorting your discernment? Logically, we all know we’re not perfect, but have we really put ourselves in a place of letting some trusted others speak into our lives, to help reveal our blind spots?

D. Do your own healing work! Will wounds, lies, demonic infection, internal dissociated parts, other psychological defenses, sinful vows, curses, etc. impair one’s discernment? Certainly⁷. We have experienced steady improvement in our discernment as we have continued to press into our own healing work.

⁷ “Deceiving Spirits and Counterfeit Manifestations: How Wounds, Lies, Internal Parts, Repression, and Denial Can Give Them a Place” on the Articles and FAQ’s page of our website provides a sobering example of how wounds, lies, internal parts, demonic spirits, and psychological defenses impaired Karl’s discernment.