

Note: What follows are comments excerpted from a positional paper produced by the Christian Research Institute (CRI) concerning its evaluation of Theophostic Prayer Ministry and its relating to Dr. Ed Smith during this evaluation.

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### A Word to Our Colleagues in Discernment Ministry

When I first heard about TPM from other Christian writers and ministries I thought, "This is the worst of all possible worlds: pop psychology excesses, extrabiblical revelation, subjectivism, anti-intellectualism, Christian perfectionism, antinomianism (teaching against good works), the guided imagery and creative visualization used by many inner healing ministries, deliverance ministry and other spiritual warfare excesses, recovered memory therapy, and satanic ritual abuse hysteria." We could have interacted just enough with TPM materials to confirm that the expected buzz words (e.g., "Moving from logic to experience") were there and gone on to publish yet another scathing critique of TPM. We instead sought to evaluate TPM based on a contextual understanding of its primary sources, and as a result a significantly different picture emerged, although several of our initial concerns remained to varying degrees.

We next sent our initial evaluation to Smith for his comments and he immediately opened the doors wide for critique and dialogue, inviting us to send a representative to Alathia to observe a training seminar and TPM sessions firsthand. When I took him up on his offer in May of 2003 he also gave me many hours from his busy schedule for unrestricted questioning and discussion. Our dialogue has continued through (to date) 212 e-mails and a two-hour-long telephone conversation. He asked me to critique his revision of the basic TPM training manual (350 pages) and I responded with an extensive, entirely candid, and often blunt critique. He has shown me numerous rewritten sections of the manual that incorporate my suggestions to an extent that has far exceeded my most optimistic expectations.

With the intimate familiarity I now have with TPM I go back to the other Christian critiques to find the same errors repeated again and again: TPM believes in extrabiblical revelation; promotes mysticism; engages in directive therapy, guided visualization, and recovered memory therapy; is obsessed with delivering Christians from demons; and so forth. None of the critiques published since 2002 note Smith's changes on spiritual warfare and deliverance. (One staunch critic recently left me a message warning that Smith has never changed his position on anything!) Perhaps all of the critiques raise valid concerns, some are more carefully researched and thoughtfully written than others,<sup>85</sup> but, in our view, none of them do their subject justice.<sup>D</sup>

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85 The best theological critique of TPM we have read is *A Biblical Evaluation of Theophostic Ministry*, by the Staff of Community Evangelical Free Church Elverson, Pennsylvania, September 28, 2001, available at <http://www.cefcelverson.org/theophostic.htm>. Most of the theological criticisms the elders make are quite astute but they do not make the distinction we do between TPM's biblically consistent core theory and practice and its problematic peripheral teachings. They conclude that even if TPM "works," it should be rejected because it is not a form of ministry specifically set forth in the New Testament. We would counter that if an approach to healing emotional wounds bears good fruit in people's lives, is consistent with Scripture, and does not replace the biblically sanctioned methods of discipleship, there should be no objection to using it.

Why? Ed Smith reports that no one who has critiqued TPM has initiated direct contact and dialogue with him besides CRI. No one who believes he is an erring brother in Christ leading others astray has attempted to win him over to sound doctrine.<sup>86</sup> No one has gone to the source to make sure he or she understood him correctly. We did so and found him to be very approachable, reasonable, honest, open to correction, and reliable in following through with his commitments; in short, we found him to be a man of integrity.

As a result of our initiating contact with TPM, we understand it much more accurately, we have had an influence on it for the good, and Smith has been rewarded for not succumbing to the common fear of controversial leaders that everybody is “out to get them.” He opened up to evaluation by a discernment ministry and it did not end in disaster but rather in growth for him, his ministry, and his relationship with the larger body of Christ. This hopefully will provide an example both for other discernment ministries and other controversial leaders.

As a veteran researcher and editor of discernment and apologetics materials I understand that people involved in such ministry receive requests from their constituents and supporters for information on literally hundreds of groups and teachings. The pressure to reduce the number of steps necessary to produce those resources can be great, but if yielding to that pressure typically produces inaccuracies such as I have found in the case of TPM, then something is drastically amiss.

At CRI we are currently in dialogue with four different groups, and that dialogue has caused us to pull or withhold publication of our materials on some of those groups until the dialogue reaches a conclusion. Some people have been waiting for this very document on TPM for nearly four years. This is inconvenient, but we see no other option for responsible discernment ministry. The criticisms we publish can be very damaging to a teacher or group; we must do everything we can to make sure they are valid and necessary.

If discernment ministry is always about publishing criticisms of other ministries and never about helping those ministries follow Scripture more faithfully, then it cannot be biblically valid ministry (2 Tim. 2:24–26). Most ministries that we contact admittedly either are not open to dialogue or try to use the dialogue for mere public perception purposes and to postpone the publication of our critiques indefinitely.<sup>87</sup> If, however, even 1 ministry out of 20 responds to our initiative as Ed Smith has responded, then the effort expended on dialogue with all 20 will have been more than worthwhile.

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86 Many teachers who are publicly criticized complain that they were not first approached privately, in accordance with Matthew 18:15. In context, however, Matthew 18 is referring to how one Christian should respond when another Christian sins against him. Scripture elsewhere makes it clear that false teaching that has been made public needs to be corrected publicly (e.g., Tit. 1:9–13), which is why I have devoted space here even to correcting teachings that Smith has promised he will remove from his materials. There is no reason to think, however, that the principle stated in Matthew 18:15 of winning a brother should not be a concern when responding to the unbiblical teaching of Christian leaders. To initiate dialogue is an expression of concern both for the brother and for those who are and will be influenced by him if he continues to teach error.

87 We have gone around that block enough times that I believe we can spot the signs when it is happening; this has not been the case with Ed Smith.