



6. Test the spirits (1 John 4:1-6)

4:1 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. 4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 5 They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

We have already explored the issues in a previous week when we looked at John 2. John was not just ministering to their need to love and care for one another, but contending against those who would teach error. As we dig deeper into the letter we find that these two are not unconnected.

The people reading John's letter were being bombed with the idea that Jesus was not divine and both in his gospel and letter, John demonstrates the importance for us about Christ's deity. It is thought by some that John was contending not with the Jewish opponents Paul faced but by early representatives of a common heresy in the second, third and fourth centuries known as gnosticism. It was a strange mix of Greek ideas and Christianity, where Jesus was a lesser created being: there was no equality between the Father and the Son. Many Gnostics like the Nicolaitans which are also mentioned in John's writings in Revelation 2, believed that because the flesh was intrinsically evil, it really didn't matter how they behaved.

In this letter John establishes two things - the deity of Christ and the desire and the need to love one another. Although we accept we sin in our flesh, we also need to realise we are called to a sinless life - *now!* Yet these people started as insiders in the church - deceivers in our ranks - "Reds under the bed", Quislings". In chapter 2 we read these words:

19 They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us. 20 But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.

That is the issue and John challenges his readers not to listen to them but accept this central truth, hence the words in chapter 1:

3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

John's experience was based on being with Jesus rather than the teachers that never met Jesus and were mixing and matching second-hand religion.

The century has changed but the issue has not. The problem is in our generation we are bombed with a torrent of information - and people who claim to be preaching and teaching with the authority of God. How do we know what is truth and falsehood?

When we looked at chapter 2 we saw how the anointing that God gives us and the promises in His word, enable us to know in our hearts that we are the Lord's so that when we are told by some that what we do is wrong and can't be His, we know in our hearts to be untrue.

John goes much deeper in this part of his letter. He opens chapter 4 with a straight statement:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

He talks about false prophets but uses the words "test the spirits". What could he mean - "test the spirits"? I think he means just that - spirits.

One of the problems of our age is that in our search after knowledge and science and technology we abandoned those things we regarded as superstitious, whether they were mentioned in the Word of God or not. So when it comes to the presence of spirits, or angels or demons, we attribute them to other things. So I hear evangelicals even, starting to suggest that the demon-possessed in the Gospels were just people with mental illness. Spirits here must then mean something else - perhaps just a way of describing the false preachers some would say. But look again at verses 1 to 3 and there seems to be a comparison of such spirits and the Spirit of God.

My African friends would see it in quite a different way. When the Bible says spirits, it means just that. In a continent where animism is strong, Africans are very aware of the spirit world, and Christians see all animist spirit belief as fundamentally demonic. Therefore if there is false teaching, it has demonic origins irrespective of what miracles these people claim for themselves. If bad things happen in their lives, they see demons everywhere. That's the opposite side of the coin.

What is clearly taught in the scriptures that there is an unseen world where the people of God are contended against by spiritual forces, inevitably controlled by Satan. So when we talk of spiritual battles, they are not fought against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers. Remember Ephesians 6?

Ephesians 6:10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 13 Therefore put on the full armour of God

How can we contend against that we cannot see? Well, first of all, God has given us the armour and weapons so that if we protect ourselves with it and use the weapons, we'll be fine. It's rather like modern warfare. We have tanks and planes and missiles. We never see the enemy face of face, we may know little about him. We just have confidence in our equipment, especially when we have been given it by the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

But the fact that we contend against principalities and powers really troubles some Christians. They think that somehow they can be dragged away from their faith. Not so if we have armour on and remember this fact John gives us:

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

We are overcomers because the Holy Spirit is within us. Jesus gives us very reassuring words in John 10:

27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one.

Remember that when you hear verses like this. We are the winners. We are the overcomers.

So when faced with the spirits, John says: test them! So what were the spirits responsible for - the lies the false teachers were producing. What they thought were truths were just the deception of satan.

That's contrasted with the Spirit of God. If you remember, the only reason we understand the things of God is by His Spirit who reveals the mysteries of God to us.

A true Christian teacher speaks what has been taught and revealed to him by the Spirit. False teaching is the prompting and the "revelation" from other spirits.

The trouble is that satan, the master of lies wants to fill our minds with rubbish and uses false teachers to do it by filling their minds with his rubbish. The trouble is that he is the master of disguise. Paul puts all this clearly in 2 Corinthians 11:

13 For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. 15 It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

The trouble is that false teachers are more difficult to identify than we think. Because satan makes them more plausible. It may look that someone seems to be genuine but we are commanded to "test the spirits". When people teach, are they teaching in the Spirit, or have they been fooled by other spirits into teaching something less than true?

The trouble is that satan can so deceive Christians that we fall into the danger of accepting the lies of satan as Christian truth. Therefore, we should test what we are being taught. Which spirit inspired the words we heard or the words we read or the images we saw?

This is particularly true in a time like this when people have an interest in all sorts of belief, but it is also true in an age where people make huge claims for Christian teaching. I've already mentioned in the past one church in London which claims prosperity for all those who give generously to them, for healing if they touch certain artefacts, success in their exams if the bishop blesses the books. All of it questionable. Why? Because we are told why through John's letter.

John says 'test the spirits' - ascertain what the truth is. Sounds like a hard job doesn't it? From what John says here, it isn't. There are two elements to it:

🍎 Truth is based on the person of Christ

2 This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.

As I said last time on this subject, if you accept that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, you accept the deity and finished work of Christ. You don't just except His perfect deity but you accept His perfect humanity too. He was and is human flesh as much as He's the eternal Word of God - the Son.

Anything at variance is less than Christian. Simple as that. That's why when we come across anybody who does not preach the gospel, we recognise, not the teaching of the Spirit of God, but a false spirit. It's also true that anybody that does not follow after the example of Christ and teach such is also teaching falsely. So when we hear people say that homosexuality is OK, or gossiping is acceptable, or that being angry with one's brother or sister in Christ is OK then we know it's not.

There's another test John gives us:

🔴 Truth is based on God's word.

We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

How do I make that from these verses? By "us", John means his teaching and that of the other apostles. And what is the teaching of the apostles - the New Testament. If the teaching of others is not in line with his, it's error. Simple as that. We are called to be people with a high view of Scripture. It is the word of God. And it's true.

You notice that it's two tests and that's important. Many people can bend the word of God to their own ends but if the JWs tell us that Jesus was just a man and try to prove it from the Bible, they can bend the second test but not the first. Teaching must pass both. Similarly, those that would try to bring the church in line with the teaching of the world need to pay heed here.

This should help us as we explore working with others. The test of falsehood or truth lies around the Christ we confess and the revealed Word of God. Do they preach the gospel? Do they accept the authority of God's word? But most of all, do they listen and follow what God's word says?

I don't think I'm going to find you disagreeing with me on anything so far. But there are other issues that this throws up. You see the gnostics actually added the world to the word. They took values that they thought were important and re-interpreted the Christian faith into them. Much to John's disgust they were clearly ignoring apostolic teaching. At this stage, these were not rabid JWs, Mormons, New Agers or whatever; these were teachers operating within the orbit of Christianity but whom had been deceived by these false spirits by teaching error but were convincing enough to lead people astray. Perhaps some of their teaching was quite orthodox.

The main problem I find with truth and falsehood is that error is also buried in good quality orthodox doctrine and we often accept it on the word of the person that preached it because they were "sound" so it must be true. A good example of this comes from my Brethren days. There was much teaching on the imminent return of Christ. The world situation of the day was compared to scripture to demonstrate the imminent return of Christ. Many really senior PBs who were regarded as "sound" Bible teachers taught it and we had that expectancy. They based much on a

Pentecostal minister called Hal Lindsey. The only problem was that Christ didn't come and what was taught was simply untrue. They failed the OT test of a true prophet - what they said did not come to pass. Worse they based their teachings on a model of the Second Coming that was barely 150 years old - there was no history back to the First Century and the claim that it was because "new truth" had been discovered or revealed from the scriptures. Always beware anyone who claims that they discovered new truth. If you can't find evidence of such doctrine being held back to the first century then it's most likely untrue. That's why they teach Church History to Bible students.

How does any of this help us? I would suggest that as we look for what is truth and falsehood that the following should apply.

- Does what is taught have a high view of the Lord Jesus Christ? Is it Trinitarian? Does it involve teaching Christ-likeness?
- Is the gospel being preached?
- Ask ourselves - what does the Word of God really say and not rely on our prejudices or the past to cloud our thinking. What does the Word teach in its entirety? Did Jesus and the apostles teach it?
- Does what it taught have a history that stretches back through the centuries?
- Recognise that within our belief system we have fallen for some kind of error however small because we have sinful natures and are fallible.
- Recognise our fallibilities and those of the people that teach us and be prepared to recognise that teaching we may have attached to in the past may have been error and be prepared to repent of it.
- God always accepts us and will still work through His people despite their failings in terms of the truth that they understand or held, provided that John's test of falsehood (which are reflected elsewhere in Scripture) are understood and the truths followed. This is one of the remarkable things about our heavenly Father. We often say - how can God possibly bless this church or that church because they believe this or that or do this or that. You know, those churches say the same of us. Remember an important truth - all our righteousness is like filthy rags. God uses the most ignoble people in this world to bring glory to Himself. Let's remember that.



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Swaffham Baptist Church
16/11/03
Scripture Quotes NIV*