
TEST THE SPIRITS

1 John 4:1-6

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There are a variety of teachings today about God and his will. People teach that Jesus was a created god, and not the eternal God. People teach the Holy Spirit is not a person but just a force of God's activity. There are a variety of teachings about the Holy Spirit. People teach that baptism is not necessary. People come along teaching the freedom for remarriage even if the divorce was not for sexual immorality. There are hundreds of denominations and religious groups and they all teach different aspects concerning God. So how are we to know what is right? How are we to know what is the truth? The Christians in the days of the apostle John were confronted with the same problem. There are Christians who are making declarations about the nature of Jesus and about effect of sin on the soul that is causing these Christians to be shaken in their faith. In 1 John 4:1-6 shows us how to deal with these teachings and how to determine the truth.

The Command To Test (4:1)

To test every spirit is to test the legitimacy of a word that comes through the human vessel. We need to scrutinize everything we hear in the light of scripture. John's first command is to recognize that you cannot accept every person who claims to have the spirit of God; that is, we are never to assume every spiritual experience or every demonstration of spiritual power is from God. Many, when first encountering the *reality* of the spiritual world, are too impressed and amazed to ask **whether they are of God. This leads to easy deception.** But, we know from scriptures that Satan and those who serve him can deceive. Paul tells us this in **2 Corinthians 11:14-15.** We must test spiritual experiences and spiritual phenomenon to see if they are in fact from God. At that time, people would claim to have the Holy Spirit, claim to have godly wisdom, or the gift of prophecy. People were claiming the authority of God which had not been given to them. John says that you cannot accept their words at face value. John says that we must test the spirits to see whether they are from God. Even though people may claim to have the spirit of God the Christians needed to test them to see if their teaching and their authority were from God. The reason for testing is stated in verse 1. **There are many false prophets who have gone out into the world.** There are many false teachers claiming authority from God. The same disposition is

required today. We do not simply accept any teaching. Just because a person uses the scriptures, claims to be a Christians, or has a good reputation does not mean that they are bringing the truth. Many of the digressions and errors that were taught in the last 100 years came from well-respected Christians. I listen to preachers on websites and podcasts who have great notoriety but have error in their teaching. Just because a person has written many books, has a church of hundreds or thousands, has success, or has great age does not mean he possesses the truth. I have books that our brethren have historically respected and promoted that are filled with error. Some of those books have led to some of the false thinking that is in the minds of Christians today. We cannot accept teaching on the basis of who said it, wrote it, or the age of the information.

Test the spirits, whether they are of God: This is the responsibility of every Christian, but especially of congregational leadership. According **1 Thessalonians 5:21** (*Test all things; hold fast what is good*), testing the spirits is the work of the body of Christ. This job is to be done using the gifts of discernment God has given to Christians in general, especially the leadership of a congregation. So how are Christians supposed to test the spirits? How are Christians to put these teachers to the test?

The Testing Procedure (4:2-3)-Test By What The Teacher Says:

The first test is an obvious test. Listen to what they have to say. Do not accept or reject a person by appearance, charisma, or other externals. In verse 2 the apostle John says that we can know the Spirit of God if they confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. We must remember that John is fighting these Gnostic false teachers claiming that Christ did not come in the flesh. John tells the Christians that they need to listen to what a teacher has to say and see if they declare that Jesus is not the Christ who came in the flesh.

Today, some groups deny that Jesus is really God (such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Muslims). But way back in John's day, in this time closest to the actual life and ministry of Jesus on this earth, people didn't have a hard time believing Jesus was God. They had a hard time believing that he was a *real* man

John is establishing an important principle for all time about how we are to test every spirit. I will call this rule the principle of prior revelation. What was declared earlier by God and his apostles and prophets cannot be overturned by later revelation. The apostles declared that Jesus is the Christ who came in the flesh. Therefore, any teacher who comes along later declaring something contrary to the first revelation is false. We see this principle explicitly stated in **Deuteronomy 13:1-5**.

1 "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. 5 But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. (Deuteronomy 13:1–5 ESV)

One test was to see if the teacher claiming prophetic utterance had his words come to pass. If not, he was to be rejected. There are many of these false teachers today that people still listen to. The Watchtower Society, which is the teaching basis for the Jehovah's Witnesses, repeatedly predicted the end of the world and were wrong each time. Therefore, everything about their words are to be rejected. Another test God gave in Deuteronomy 13 was to test the words to see if they said things that were contrary to what was taught by God before. New revelation does not trump old revelation. For us this means that when we hear teaching, we compare that teaching to all of God's word. We ask ourselves if the teaching fits in with the scriptures or does it violate the scriptures. The Bereans were praised for doing this very thing. **"They received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."** (Acts 17:11 ESV) People whose teachings do not adhere to the revealed word of God are considered antichrists.

One of the false spirits today is the health and wealth gospel. Consumerism is another false spirit in the religious world today, giving people the idea that we can plunge ourselves into the pursuits and materialism of this world and still remain faithful to the Lord.

The protection of the child of God. (4:4)

You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

a. **You are of God, little children, and have overcome them:** The child of God need not fear the *spirit of Antichrist*, even though they should be warned of it, because they have the indwelling Spirit of God (**1 John 3:24**). That indwelling Spirit is greater than **he who is in the world** – Satan and all of his allies.

- b. **He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world:** The believer has a resource for victory, the vital presence of the indwelling Jesus, which makes victory always possible – *if* we will rely on **He who is in you** instead of relying on ourselves.
- i. This understanding gives great confidence and spiritual power. For those walking in this truth, victory is assured – they **have overcome them**. It is a positive statement, not a wishful hope.
- c. **He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world:** This means the Christian has no place for fear. We have many spiritual enemies, but not *one* of them is greater than Jesus who lives in us.

The Teaching Appeals To The World (4:5).

The second test to observe is if the message proclaimed has an appeal with the world. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians in his first letter to them and told them that the message of the gospel is foolishness to the world (1 Corinthians 1:23). If there is a teaching that appeals to the world, then we know that there must be a problem. The message of Jesus got him killed. The message the apostles proclaimed got them killed. The message of the prophets got them persecuted and killed. If we hear or proclaim a message that is popular with the world, then it is not the message from God. **When churches start caving into the political and social pressures of the world by allowing the practice of homosexuality, adultery, living together before marriage, divorce and remarriage, women functioning as preachers and elders in the church, and the like, you know these things are not from God.** Notice that John says these false teachers “are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them” (4:5). Teaching that is popular with the world is not from God.

Teacher Does Not Listen To The Apostles (4:6).

The final test John gives is that the teacher listens to the apostles. John states a truth that carries for all teachings. The apostles are from God. Therefore, whoever knows God listens to the apostles. A teacher who makes an appeal to anything else but the words of the apostles is not from God. So often teachers make an appeal to feelings or experiences rather than what God’s word teaches. The teaching will not be built upon statements that begins with, “I think,” “I feel,” or “Don’t you think.” The teaching from God is built on God’s holy word.

Further, a false teacher is a person who is not swayed by the word of God. When presented with the scriptures, that person does not consider God’s word. All of us must always listen to God’s word and reconsider our beliefs and positions on the basis of what the word of God reveals. If the reaction is, “I don’t care what the scriptures say” or the person twists the scriptures to make it work for his position, that person is a false teacher.

Conclusion

We are given an important task to test the spirits today. We cannot accept every teaching or teacher that claims to be from God. The three tests John teaches Christians to apply are these: (1) Does the message of the teacher conform or conflict with previous revelations from God? (2) Does the message appeal to the passions and desires of the world? (3) Does the teacher listen to the word of God? Does the teacher make his appeal from the word of God? With these tests we must search the scriptures frequently and regularly to continue to ensure that we are remaining with the truth of God.