

“TEST THE SPIRITS”

In the opening chapter of this letter, John said that those who claim to know Christ need to walk in God's light. [see 1:5-7] And over the past three chapters, John has explained that there are ethical and doctrinal components of walking in the light. The ethical aspects are practicing righteousness and extending ourselves to others in self-giving love. The doctrinal aspect is holding fast to the apostolic teaching. In chapter 3, John focused upon the ethical aspects of walking in the light, while here in this opening section of chapter 4 he turns his attention to the doctrinal aspect. This passage tells us that *those who belong to God will not be led astray by falsehood, because the indwelling presence of Christ through his Spirit enables them to distinguish between the gospel message and teachings that are based upon worldly principles.* Simply put, true Christians are given the ability to distinguish between the true gospel and its counterfeits.

Our passage begins with a pair of commands, one negative and one positive: “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” In this context, the term “spirit” refers to a teaching or utterance that claims to have divine authority. John is saying that while the Holy Spirit is the source of genuine divine teaching, there are other spirits at work in the world as well. Not every spirit is from Christ. There are many false prophets and false teachers in the world, people who claim to speak for God, but who are really teaching falsehood and leading people astray. This was true in the first century and it remains true today. You do not have to look very hard

to find false prophets these days. You can find them both inside and outside of the institutional church.

Because this is the case, it is of the utmost importance that we test the spirits. We need to exercise spiritual discernment. We need to make judgments about truth and falsehood. But this is something that many people in our day do not like to hear. They will tell you that it is arrogant for someone to presume to know what is true and what is false. They will accuse such people of being unloving and judgmental. Now, it is true that we need to be careful as we go about testing the spirits. It is certainly possible for a person to be arrogant and judgmental in doing so. However, we also need to realize that the Bible does not set love and the exercise of discernment in opposition to each other. This is made clear right here in 1 John. While John repeatedly instructs us to love one another, he also tells us to test the spirits. The call to test the spirits does not contradict the call to love. As one commentator puts it, love for John is “not indiscriminate affirmation but discerning devotion.” [Yarbrough, 219]

You will sometimes hear people try to argue against the necessity of making spiritual judgments by quoting the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, where he said, “Judge not, that you be not judged.” [Mt. 7:1] It is true that Jesus said that, but he also said in another place that we need to “judge with right judgment.” [Jn. 7:24] And in the passage where he makes that statement about not judging, he also says that once we have removed the log from our own eye we should try to help our brother take the speck out of his eye. You cannot do that if you are not willing to point out that there is a speck in your

brother's eye in the first place. Furthermore, this teaching is immediately followed by Jesus' instructions about not giving dogs what is holy and not throwing our pearls before pigs, a teaching that can only be obeyed by making judgments about who the dogs and pigs are! Clearly, then, the Bible does not tell us that it is unloving to make distinctions between what is true and what is false. We need to make sure that we do it in humility and in love, but we do need to do it.

John tells us that there are "many" false prophets in the world. Satan is hard at work, trying to pollute and corrupt the gospel. And if there were "many" false prophets in John's day, consider how many more there must be in our day! One could argue that it is easier today to find false teaching than it is to find sound biblical teaching. Make no mistake, there is a lot of spiritual deception taking place in our world. There are many ways in which we are tempted to put our trust in something other than Jesus Christ for our salvation and for the redemption of this world. And we need to remember that false teaching typically comes to us wrapped up in attractive packaging. It does not present itself to us with an evil laugh and say that it is seeking the destruction of our souls. On the contrary, false teaching tries to come across in ways that sound very appealing to us. It makes promises that sound good to our ears. It offers a picture of life that looks attractive to our eyes. But we always need to remember what John tells us here: there are evil spiritual forces behind the false teachings that we hear. They are empowered by the spirit of the antichrist.

In verses 2-3, John gives us a litmus test that we can use to discern whether a spirit is true or false. It is a very straightforward and simple test: spirits that confess Christ are from God, and spirits that do not confess Christ are not from God. As we would expect, it all comes down to Jesus Christ. Jesus is the determining factor when it comes to distinguishing between spirits. The yardstick for measuring the presence of the Holy Spirit is Christ.

As I said, this is a straightforward test, but it is also stated so succinctly that we need to take some time to consider what it means. What does John have in mind when he says that “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God”? Let's begin to answer this question by stating a couple of things that John does not mean.

First of all, John is not suggesting that this phrase is some kind of magic formula that guarantees the spiritual vitality of anyone who says it. He is not saying that anyone who utters the words “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” is a true Christian. There are far too many false professions of faith, both the Bible and in everyday experience, for us to say something like that.

Neither is John saying that the confession that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” is the lowest common denominator of the Christian faith, as if the incarnation were the only belief that is essential to the gospel. John is not rendering all other doctrines non-essential. If he were, he would be contradicting the plain teaching of a number of other passages. For example, there is no indication that the false teachers whom Paul was confronting in his letter to the Galatians denied the doctrine of the incarnation, yet Paul

says of those who accept their teaching, "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace." [Gal. 5:4] If it is possible for a person who believes in the incarnation to turn away from the gospel, then the gospel is clearly more than just the doctrine of the incarnation.

What, then, does John mean when he says that those who confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh are from God? He is simply giving a statement that summarizes the gospel. It is the gospel in a nutshell. It is a rudimentary creed, a very basic confession of faith, an encapsulation of the Christian message. And this is not the only statement of this kind in the Bible. Other passages sum up the essence of the gospel in other ways. This is because these statements were written in particular contexts, so that the concerns and emphases of the biblical writers caused them to sum up the gospel message in different ways.

There is a reason why John chose to summarize the gospel in this passage by focusing upon the incarnation. The false teachers who were afflicting the churches to whom John was writing were teaching an early form of a heresy that would later be referred to as Docetism. Docetism said that while Jesus seemed to take on human flesh, he did not actually become a man. Those who held to this heresy believed that matter was inherently evil, making it impossible for the Son of God to become a real human being. It is a heresy that is still around today, most notably in the attempt by some to separate the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history.

As I said, John's statement in verse 2 should not to be taken as the only essential doctrine of the Christian faith. However, it is a useful summary of what Christians believe. To begin with, the verb "confess" tells us that the Christian religion is not merely a private affair between the individual and God. The standard lexicon for the study of biblical Greek says that this verb is used to describe a "public...profession of allegiance." [BDAG, 708] Being a Christian is not simply a matter of having a personal relationship with God. Anyone could claim to have that. Being a Christian involves professing your faith in the presence of the people of God and continuing to participate in the life of the covenant community as it contends for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

The next thing to point out about John's summary statement is the phrase "Jesus Christ has come." There are a number of things that make this phrase significant. First, by saying that Jesus came into the world, John is also saying that Jesus existed before he was born. You and I came into existence when we were conceived in our mother's womb. But it was not so with Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God, the second member of the Trinity. He did not come into existence at his conception. He has always been. As he himself once said, to the great surprise of his hearers, "before Abraham was, I am." [Jn. 8:58]

Note also that John uses Jesus' human name, the name that he was given at his birth paired with his title as the Christ, to refer to Jesus as he existed before his birth. The person who came from heaven was Jesus Christ. This testifies to the union of Christ's

two natures as God and man. The man Jesus was fully God; the eternal Son had become fully man.

The other thing to note about the verb “has come” is that it points us to the purpose for which Jesus came into the world. Jesus came so that he might be the light of the world. He came to testify to the truth. He came into the world to seek and to save the lost. As the Nicene Creed puts it when it speaks of Christ's incarnation, “who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven.” Jesus became incarnate in order that he might be the one mediator between God and man, the true prophet, priest and king for his people.

The last thing to point out about John's summary statement here is that he says that Jesus came “in the flesh.” Jesus was a real flesh and blood human being. He was fully human in every respect. He was just like us, the only exception being that he was without sin. But it is important to note that Jesus' sinlessness did not make him any less human than we are. In fact, the opposite is true. Man was not created sinful, but good. To be human is to reflect the glory of God as a divine image bearer. No one did this better than Jesus Christ. And for this reason, we can say that Jesus lived the most human life that has ever been lived. And he did so while facing every kind of temptation and trial known to man, yet without ever committing even one transgression of God's law.

This, then, is what it means to confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. And this confession remains a very useful litmus test to this day. Mormons and Jehovah's

Witnesses and Unitarians do not pass this test. And there are even many churches that call themselves Christian that would not pass it either.

This confession is indeed good way of summing up the Christian faith. We could even say that almost everything else that we believe as Christians flows from our confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. Furthermore, making this confession is not merely a matter of intellectual understanding and assent; it is also a matter of the heart and the will. In the words of Jonathan Edwards, "There is a difference between having a right speculative notion of the doctrines contained in the word of God, and having a due sense of them in the heart." ["Christian Knowledge"] If the things that we confess are really true - if the eternal Son of God has truly taken on human flesh, walked among us, suffered, died, been buried, been raised, and ascended into heaven where he is in God's presence as our advocate - if these things are true, then there is nothing in this life that is more important than seeking to honor and serve and adore such a great God. To confess Christ truly is to confess him as your Lord. But some make that confession with their lips and then go on to live as they see fit rather than as Christ calls them to live. The 20th century Scottish pastor William Still once wrote about this danger to his congregation with these words:

"Some have allowed their spiritual life to become dried up until the whole thing becomes a duty and then a bore, and they [need to] find other outlets to make life interesting. How does it happen? It can be simply stated. Whatever the past

occasion and circumstances, some have come to a place in their pilgrimage where costly obedience was called for, and they balked, and have continued to balk, until all joy and then interest in spiritual things has gone out of their lives. Now they are souls on the defensive, looking for excuses.” [*Letters*, 104-5]

We need to remember that confessing Christ means professing your allegiance to him. To confess Christ is to live under his rule.

In the last three verses of our passage, John has a number of things to say about the true gospel message and the message(s) proclaimed by false prophets. First, he says that true Christians have overcome false teachers, and he says that we obtain this victory not by our own strength, but by the strength of the one who dwells within us. Here we are reminded that the thing that sets the church apart from the world is the presence of Christ. Christ dwells within us by his Spirit, and he is far greater than the one who is in the world, the devil. This should not cause us to be careless, but it should give us great confidence as we remain vigilant in testing the spirits. If we fight in our own strength, we are doomed, but if we rely upon God's strength, we are invincible. This is underscored by the fact that John speaks in the past tense here: he says we “have overcome” them. Our victory is so certain that it can be viewed as already accomplished.

Next, John says that those who preach the truth speak words that come from God, while false prophets speak words that simply mirror the beliefs of the world. This is a very helpful principle. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the world in which

we are living, because one of the church's perennial temptations is to accommodate its teachings to the culture around it.

John also says that the world will not listen to the apostolic message: "whoever is not from God does not listen to us." The world's man-centered point of view makes the gospel sound foreign and strange. The world wants to hear words of affirmation and encouragement, not words calling it to repentance and a life of faith and obedience. On the other hand, John tells us that those who know God will listen to the gospel. This reminds us of the words of Jesus in John 10, where he said, "you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." [vv. 26-7] The only people who are willing to receive the apostolic testimony are those whom God has given to be a part of Jesus' flock, the elect of God. Left to ourselves, we would never listen to the words of God. We do not want to. But, as theologian R.B. Kuiper writes, "the very first step in the salvation of the elect is their being made willing to be saved, which comes to pass in their regeneration." [*To Be or Not to Be Reformed*, 62]

I want to conclude now by calling your attention to the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in this passage. On the one hand, John assures us that we will not be overcome by the allure of false teaching. The one who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world. He causes us to listen to the preaching of the gospel and enables us to submit to it. On the other hand, John tells us that it is of the utmost importance that we test the spirits. We must not be careless. We must not be lazy.

Sermon on 1 John 4:1-6
An Exposition of John's Epistles, # 13

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Rev. Andy Wilson

We must not be led astray by the assumption, held by so many in our culture, that the practice of spiritual discernment is mean-spirited and unloving. God promises that he will keep us from the snare of worldly thinking, but he also tells us that we need to be sure to do the work of distinguishing between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.