

# Test the Spirits

1 John 4:1-6

Your doctor confirms your worst fear. It is cancer, and he urges you to start chemo right away. You get a second opinion, and this doctor says that this kind of cancer doesn't respond to chemo. He urges surgery followed by months of radiation.

*Your life hangs in the balance. Who are you going to believe?*

Your investment advisor tells you that the market has gotten too risky. "Move your assets into precious metals and bonds," he tells you. But your favorite investment letter says that the recent volatility will result in some great buys. Get out of bonds and precious metals and into stocks, it says.

*Your retirement income hangs in the balance. Who are you going to believe?*

Your son and his wife are getting a divorce. She promises plenty of opportunities to visit your grandchildren when she gets custody. He says she is moving to Europe and you'll never see them again.

*Your heart hangs in the balance. Who are you going to believe?*

Your neighbor asks you to sign a petition to the P&Z Commission protesting a neighborhood school. The petition says it's unsafe for kids, bad for traffic and hurts property values. Proponents says schools have little impact on traffic, the kids will be safe, and that no one has proven real harm to property values.

*Your peace of mind hangs in the balance. Who are you going to believe?*

Every day you make choices that affect your life, choices that range from whether to add salt to your meal, to whether to have the angioplasty or the bypass. Every choice is made in the face of competing truth claims. Depending on to whom you listen, the results could be wildly different. So what do we do? We listen to the experts, consider the facts and decide for ourselves who we're going to listen to!

A similar thing happens in religion. We are inundated with competing truth claims about the things that really matter: the ultimate nature of the universe, the meaning of life, if there is an afterlife, what it will be like, and how do we get there.

*Heaven and hell hang in the balance. Who are you going to believe?*

In this passage, John teaches we must discriminate doctrinally. We must **"test the spirits."** We must learn to discern between **"the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."** These 6 verses are a parenthesis on his discourse about love. Love demonstrates our fellowship with God but love can never be divorced from truth.

Let's examine the command to test the spirits and three criteria by which we test the spirits.

## **I. The Command to Test the Spirits (v.1).**

**"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."**

### **A. Why We Are to Test the Spirits.**

1. John is speaking to believers. He calls them **"beloved."** He says we are not to **"believe every spirit"** but **"test"** them as to **"whether they are of God."** Why? Because there are **"many false prophets"** who have **"gone out into the world."**

2. Historically, the background of this passage is in the era in which the NT was being completed. There was no NT Bible. The apostles were still in the process of

writing the inspired books that define our understanding of the Christian faith.

3. During John's time, God often delivered His word to the congregations of believers in part by the verbal word of divinely gifted and inspired prophets. We read about the powerful and prevalent gift of prophecy in 1 Cor.12 and 14.
4. John warns his readers not to "**believe every spirit**" but to "**test the spirits whether they are of God**" because not everyone who claimed to be a prophet was inspired by God.
5. There was and still is the great necessity of critical assessment of spiritual teaching. John was right. There are many false teachers in the world.
6. Paul wrote a similar warning in 1 Thess.5:20-22, "**Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good.**"
7. Jesus warned in His Sermon on the Mount in Mt.7:15-16, "**Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits...**"
8. In Acts 20:29 Paul warned the Ephesian elders of these false teachers saying, "**For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.**"
9. Peter also offered this warning in 2 Pet.2:1, "**But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.**"
10. Today there is still a great need for biblical discernment and discrimination. Many believers remain biblically illiterate and spiritually gullible. Anytime someone opens a Bible and claims to have a word from God there are people who naively accept anything that person teaches as truth.
11. In Eph.4:14, Paul says that a sure sign of spiritual immaturity is being "**tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of teaching, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful scheming.**"

## **B. What it Means to Test the Spirits.**

1. The spirit world is real. In fact, every believer has the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. At the end of the last chapter, in 3:24, we learned "**by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.**" Back in chapter 2:20, John calls the presence of the Spirit "**an anointing from the Holy One...**" and says in 2:27, "**But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.**"
2. God has given us His indwelling Spirit but John now points out that there are other "**spirits**" loose in the world. Since we have the Holy Spirit, we ought to "**test the spirits.**"
3. Christians often test teaching by how it sounds, the words used, the inflection of the voice, the stories told, if it moves them or makes them feel good. None of these are appropriate tests.
4. There are two categories of spirits operating in the world. When someone proposes to speak for God, you should "**test the spirits**" or you might "amen" the

wrong spirit! I've been in some churches where they would "amen" almost anything. The word, "**Test**" in v.1 means "to approve or examine." The term was used of gold put in the fire to test its purity. Paul and Peter both use this word in describing how our works and our faith is tested and proved genuine:

**each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.**  
(1 Cor 3:13 NKJV)

**that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,** (1 Pet 1:7 NKJV)

5. Before we trust any teacher, we must "**test the spirits.**" Behind every prophet, behind every teacher of scripture is a spirit. The great question is, "*Does the Spirit of God or an evil spirit lead this teacher?*"

### **C. Failing to Test the Spirits is Dangerous.**

Every good parent teaches his children to differentiate, to discern. We teach them to never take candy from strangers or accept a ride from strangers. Why? We know that there are evil people in the world who will take advantage of the naïveté of our kids. Too many of God's kids have never learned to discern. They are led astray by spiritual candy with a pseudo spiritual wrapper that is nothing more than sugarcoated error. It tastes good and makes them feel good for the moment but leaves them with nothing but empty calories. There is no spiritual nutrition because there is no truth. How discerning are you?

If I were to make this statement, "The Devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a symbol of evil." How many of you would agree with me? Raise your hand.

How about if I said, "Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and others all pray to the same God, even though they use different names for that God." How many of you would agree?

George Barna did a survey where he asked people who claimed to be born again believers if they agreed with those statements. 48 percent, almost half of Born Again believers either agreed that Satan is only symbolic or said they did not know!

On the statement about Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and others all praying to the same God, 60 percent of born again believers either agreed or did not know! (What Americans Believe, pp. 206-212).

1. If you follow the wrong spirit, you will pay a price. The famous circus entrepreneur, P.T. Barnum is quoted as saying, "**There's a sucker born every minute.**" Satan has many slick sideshows that sidetrack God's children and rob them of their spiritual riches.

2. There are "many" false teachers in the world today. The spiritual candy store is full. Satan has all flavors of teachers and preachers ready to fill your spiritual appetite with a sugarcoated experience that will leave you with a bellyache. "**Test the spirits!**"

A few years ago Tim Stafford wrote about a pastor named Stephey Belynskyj in Christianity Today. Belynskyj starts each confirmation class with a jar full of beans. He asks his students to guess how many beans are in the jar, and on a big pad of paper writes down their estimates. Then, next to those estimates, he helps them make another list: their favorite songs.

When the lists are complete, he reveals the actual number of beans in the jar. The whole

class looks over their guesses, to see which estimate was closest to being right. Belynskyj then turns to the list of favorite songs. "And which one of these is closest to being right?" he asks. The students protest that there is no "right answer"; a person's favorite song is purely a matter of taste.

Belynskyj, who holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Notre Dame asks, "When you decide what to believe in terms of your faith, is that more like knowing the number of beans in the jar, or more like choosing your favorite song?" Belynskyj says, from old as well as young, he usually gets the same answer: Choosing one's faith is more like choosing a favorite song. Stafford wrote, "When Belynskyj told me this, it took my breath away." "After they say that, do you confirm them?" he asked him. "Well," smiled Belynskyj, "First I try to argue them out of it." (Tim Stafford, Christianity Today, September 14, 1992, p. 36.)

3. John is writing to the "**beloved**," all Christians. You don't have to have a seminary degree to test the spirits. You don't have to attend a spirit-testing seminar. Why? Because the Holy Spirit already resides within you.

## II. The Criteria for Testing the Spirits .

2 "By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world."

### A. How Do They View the Son of God? (vv.2-3).

1. The first test is the acknowledgement of the historical incarnation of Jesus, that "**Jesus Christ has come in the flesh**." Believers are to test for truth based on a teacher's attitude concerning the person and work of Jesus. The first question is always "**What do they believe about Jesus?**" because if you are wrong about Jesus you are wrong about God.

2. In John's day there was a teacher known as Cerinthus who taught that Jesus was a man who *became* the Christ at His baptism. The Spirit came upon at His baptism and at His death on the cross, the Spirit left Him and He died. Cerinthus taught his disciples that Jesus did not *come as God* but *became the Son of God* for season. This was a terrible false teaching.

3. Jesus did not become the Son of God. He has always existed as the Son. He was incarnated; He came "**in the flesh**" to be our Savior. Jesus was fully God and fully man. The baby in the manger humanly did not know anything but divinely knew everything. The baby in the manger could humanly be only one place at a time but divinely was omnipresent, equally present everywhere. The baby in the manger was humanly terribly weak and hopelessly dependent but divinely was all-powerful. The baby in the manger was humanly unable to speak but divinely had spoken the worlds into existence.

4. Many religions seek to honor Jesus as a great man or a great teacher but do not recognize Him for who He is. Some of them knock on your door with attractive publications and reverent, religious words but they don't believe that Jesus is the "**express image of His person**" (Heb.1:3). They will say He is God's Son but just for a time, not for eternity. They will agree that He is a great prophet, but they want to put him on the level of Mohammed or Confucius.

5. A teacher must not only acknowledge the incarnation as a historical fact but they must also "**confess**" Him. They must commit their lives to Him.

6. Satan and his demons acknowledge the historical incarnation but do not

**"confess"** Him as Lord. Evil spirits readily recognized Jesus during His earthly ministry. In Mk.1:24 we read the words of one spirit encountered by Jesus, **"Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are; the Holy One of God!"** In Mk.5:7 another said, **"What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God that You do not torment me."** James 2:19 remarks, **"Even the demons believe; and tremble!"**

7. Christian Scientists claim that Jesus was a man who received the Spirit of the Christ. Mormons say Jesus was a man who became god to show us how to become gods. Liberal theologians in the Jesus Seminar deny the virgin birth of Jesus and thus deny His incarnation and His deity. All these people fail to **"confess"** Him as God.

8. There are many people in church every Sunday who believe Jesus is the incarnate Christ but have never truly confessed Him.

9. The one who is led by the Holy Spirit will always **"confess"** Jesus. Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit would testify of Him and glorify Him. He said in Jn.16:13-14, **"However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you."**

10. Paul states in 1 Cor.12:3, **"No one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit."**

11. John says in v.3, to proclaim anything else about Jesus smacks of **"the spirit of the Antichrist."** John has already mentioned the Antichrist in chapter 2. We know there is a deceiver coming known as **"the Antichrist,"** however; **"the spirit of the Antichrist"** is **"now already in the world."**

#### THE IMPLICATIONS OF DENYING THE INCARNATION OF CHRIST:

If Jesus Christ has not come in the flesh, then it means...

- that God has not sent us the Word of life (1 John 1:1).
- that there is no eternal life (1 John 1:2).
- that there is no true fellowship with God or with each other (1 John 1:3).
- that there is no fullness of joy, not for sure (1 John 1:4).
- that we are still in our sins because Jesus' blood could not cleanse us (1 John 1:5).
- that Jesus Christ is not our Advocate (1 John 2:1).
- that He could not have taken away God's wrath for our sin (1 John 1:9; 1 John 2:2).
- that Jesus could not have given us the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:20).

To deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is to say that we have no Savior. Because Jesus can only be the Savior if He is both God and man. There is no Gospel, no good news, if Jesus, the Son of God, did not come in the flesh, live a perfect life, die a substitutionary death, rise from the dead on the third day, and ascend to the throne in heaven. This is the truth of the gospel that we must believe to be saved. We believe it, because it is true.

#### B. What is Their Relation to the Spirit of God? (v.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."**

1. In saying that believers "**have overcome them**" John is telling us that the false teachers have not succeeded in deceiving us.
2. False teachers are intimidating. They ask, "**How can you believe that?**" Raise the issue of creation in your biology classroom and watch them go into a frenzy. However, truth is absolute. It is immutable. It never changes.

If I play a B-flat on the piano you will hear a B-flat. A B-flat was a B-flat a thousand years ago and will still be a B-flat in the next millenium. It is absolute. Truth is absolute. Jesus is absolute. Heb.13:8 says, "**Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.**"

3. Why have we "**overcome**" them? Not because we are smart, sharp or extremely intelligent, but because of the Spirit is within us. "**He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.**" Although, Satan is great, the Holy Spirit is greater!

We all have insulation in our houses. Insulation keeps the warm air in and the cold air out or visa versa. The Holy Spirit is the God-given insulation in the believer's life who helps us keep out error. Have you ever heard a sermon or listened to religious discussion and thought, "**Something doesn't sound right?**" That is the Holy Spirit filtering out the error and leading you in truth.

### **C. Are They in Harmony with the Word of God? (vv.5-6).**

**5 "They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. 6 We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."**

1. Notice three pronouns in vv.4-6. In v.4 John speaks of "**you**" or Christians. In v.5 he speaks of "**they**," false teachers. In v.6, he speaks of "**we**" or the God-ordained apostles.
2. Now in v.5 we see that "**they**" are heard by the world. The world recognizes its own people and listens to their message. One of the easiest ways to recognize a false teacher is by whether the world is comfortable with him.
3. When you are on the job and speak about the truth of Jesus, someone will invariably say, "**I don't want to hear that!**" Why? Truth divides. People want to feel good about themselves. Truth always makes them take a hard look at themselves.
4. When I prepare a sermon, I don't ever ask, "**Will they enjoy this message?**" My goal is not your entertainment but your edification. Truth always will help you.
5. In this church we wear the name Baptist but our allegiance is to the Bible. Just because it is a Baptist teaching does not necessarily mean it is a biblical teaching. We "**test the spirits**" and the chief measuring stick is the Scripture!

In order to survive under the water, you need special equipment. Scuba gear enables a diver to live and function in a hostile environment. In the same way, the Spirit of God and the Word of God enable us to function in the world.

6. When John says, "**He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us,**" it sounds somewhat arrogant. In effect, he is saying, "**You can tell our message is God's message because God's people receive it.**" I could never say that. It would be prideful and presumptuous for me to say, "**Whoever knows God agrees with me and only those who don't know God disagree with me.**" I've known a few preachers who've come close to that level of arrogance though.

7. John is an apostle; I am a pastor. John personally walked with Jesus. By inspiration, he wrote words of Scripture. To agree with the apostles is to agree with Scripture. Eph.2:20 says the church is "**built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.**"

8. Turn the page to **2 Jn.10-11**. Churches met in houses in those days. John was saying don't let him in the church. In this church we discriminate doctrinally.

9. Someone might say, "**Truth, truth, truth! Pastor you major on truth, but what about emotion? What about feelings? I want to feel the presence of God.**" Amen! I want to feel Him too. He gave me my emotions. I want both spirit and truth. However, I want to be certain what I am feeling. I don't want to get off into subjective feelings until I am dead-on in objective truth!

We can navigate a course by the use of a compass. A compass points to the north because of the magnetic field. Christians can navigate life by responding to the "true north" of the Word of God. We have the Word of God before us and the Spirit of God within us. Let us "**test the spirits**" and the teaching of anyone who claims to speak for God.

The following story, told by a Christian musician, illustrates the point:[4]

One night as we were packing up after a concert, we sent a young woman to pick up our children from the home they were staying in. Since the children didn't know her, I told her to give our son, Trevor, our secret family code word so he would know she was authorized to pick them up.

A little later I received a phone call. Trevor refused to leave because the woman hadn't given the right word. The mix-up was on my part--I had said the code word was "Dinosaur Monster," which my son informed me was incorrect. "It's Dinosaur!" he said.

"Are you sure? I was certain it was Dinosaur Monster," I replied.

"I'm sure," said Trevor confidently. He knew the right word, and even though he was given words that were very close to the real thing, they weren't true—and he knew the difference.

"Well, OK, son," I carried on. "You're probably right. But it's OK for you to come back to the church with this lady."

There was silence on the other end of the line. Then Trevor said, "Who is this?"