

DISCERNING THE SPIRITS, Pt. 2
1 JOHN 4:1-6

I've always been pretty curious, and I like to collect questions and somewhere I picked up these:

- ✓ What color is a chameleon on a mirror?
- ✓ Where does weight go when you lose it?
- ✓ Why are Chinese fortune cookies written in English?
- ✓ Why is abbreviated such a long word?
- ✓ Is there another word for synonym?
- ✓ Why is there only one Monopolies Commission?
- ✓ How do you write "zero" in Roman numerals?
- ✓ How much deeper would the ocean be without sponges?
- ✓ Would a fly without wings be called a walk?
- ✓ Why don't sheep shrink when it rains?
- ✓ What was the best thing before sliced bread?
- ✓ Where do forest rangers go to "get away from it all?"
- ✓ How is it possible to have a civil war?
- ✓ Whose cruel idea was it for the word "lisp" to have an "s" in it?
- ✓ Why is there an expiration date on sour cream?

Now some questions are more useful than others. And while we might chuckle at those, some questions are essential for a believer in Christ. A mature believer is discerning and he cultivates that discernment by asking questions. He doesn't accept every teaching as true. He doesn't accept every teacher as being right just because he is a teacher. He digs and queries and probes. He does this because he wants to distinguish between the true and the false, so with his questions he is conducting a series of tests. How can we tell who is true and who is false? By giving tests.

TO BE A DISCERNING BELIEVER, TEST WHAT YOU ARE TAUGHT.

In John 4, John provides five tests to determine whether a teacher and his teaching are informed by the Spirit of God or the spirit of Satan.

- 1. Does the Teaching Originate from GOD? (v. 1)**
- 2. Does the Teaching Exalt CHRIST? (vv. 2-3)**
- 3. Does the Teaching Oppose WORLDLINESS? (vv. 4-5)**
- 4. Does the Teaching Honor SCRIPTURE? (v. 6a)**
- 5. Does the Teaching Elevate TRUTH? (v. 6b)**

- One commentator has said, “some believers fall easy victims to the latest fads in spiritualistic humbuggery.” There are times when we should not believe and we should question.
- Instead of believing everything and everyone, John says we should **test the spirits**. The word **test** is a word that means to test for the purpose of demonstrating authenticity. So a coin was put on balance scale to demonstrate it was the correct weight. And that is what the believer is to do with every form of teaching — put it on the balance scale opposite of God’s truth and see whether it weighs as genuine teaching.

TO BE A DISCERNING BELIEVER, TEST WHAT YOU ARE TAUGHT.

John gives five tests to discern what teaching are informed by the Spirit of God —

1. Does the Teaching Originate from GOD? (v. 1)

- The first thing the believer is to test is whether the teaching is **from God**. What John is talking about is the origin of the message — from where did it come? And he is asking, “what is the identity of the teacher?” Is the teacher identified with God or someone else? It is the same test that Jesus gave His followers — Jn. 7:17; 8:42, 47.
 - ✓ What John also implies with this phrase is that there is an objective, verifiable standard that will reveal whether or not someone or something is from God.
 - ✓ So the question is, “Does the teaching conform to the standard and character of God?”
- Why does the origin of the message and messenger need to be tested? **Because there are many false prophets**. There are many teachers who purport to be prophets of God who are false and they are not from God. It has always been this way. It was true of Israel; it was true in the early church; and it is true today. This is not just a past or future concern; it is a present problem — they **have gone out** — they went out in the past and they are still out there. They are a constant problem.
- So the first test of every teaching is, “does it originate from God?” Does it reveal the nature and character of God, or is it inconsistent with how God is revealed in Scripture? The second test...

2. Does the Teaching Exalt CHRIST? (vv. 2-3)

- If you want to know whether or not the Spirit of God is behind a particular teaching, the question is this: Does the teaching exalt the Lord Jesus Christ?

- The heresy that had infiltrated the church that John was addressing was a heresy about the nature of Christ; that's why John wrote what he did in **2:22-24; 4:9-10, 14-15; 5:1, 10, 13**.
 - ✓ Some were asserting that Jesus was only divine and not human; others asserted that he was human and not divine. In either case, the teachers created an incompetent Christ.
 - ✓ This still persists today, as evidenced by a recent book by Bart Ehrman —

Ehrman's core argument [in his book, *How Jesus Became God*] is that Jesus was a mere man who gradually, over time, came to be regarded as more and more divine, until he was ultimately (in the fourth century) regarded as the God of the universe. He states,

It will become clear in the following chapters that Jesus was not originally considered to be God in any sense at all, and that he eventually became divine for his followers in some sense before he came to be thought of as equal with God Almighty in an absolute sense. But the point I stress is that this was, in fact, a development (p.44). [Michael Kruger, ["How Jesus Became God: A Review"](#)]

- ✓ If you want to know if the Spirit of God is behind some teaching or work, just as the question, "Is Jesus Christ exalted or is someone or something else exalted?" If Christ is not revealed and honored, then what you are seeing is not the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit exists to exalt Christ (Jn. 14:26; 16:13-14). That is John's point in 1 Jn. 4:2.
- This is where so many cults go wrong and this is where so many involved in the charismatic movement go wrong — either lies about Christ are taught, or Christ is de-emphasized and perversions about the work of the Spirit are emphasized.
- If a teacher and teaching are true, then the true Christ will be magnified and exalted. If any teacher denies Christ and distorts the Spirit, he is *of the spirit of the antichrist* (cf. **2:18-19**).
- The reason that this truth is so essential is because Christ is given to us as sufficient for all things; if He is denied, then we are left looking for something to supplement or replace Christ. But Christ is all and He is in all (Col. 3:11). He — and He alone — is our propitiation (1 Jn. 2:2). With Christ, we have all that we need.

3. Does the Teaching Oppose WORLDLINESS? (vv. 4-5)

- In the final three verses, John again stresses the origin of teachers — *you are...they are...we are from*. His point is that there are particular characteristics for each of these groups.
- And what he says about his readers (*you*) is intended to encourage them about their position.

- ***You are from God*** — They have their origin and position in Christ as a gift from God. They are identified with God and they belong to Him; their spiritual origin is in God and Christ. They have the Spirit of God within them and the discernment He gives protects them from apostasy (1 Cor. 2:12ff).
 - ✓ Because that is true, John says they don't need to be afraid of ***them*** — the ***antichrist*** teachers (v. 3) because they have ***overcome them***.
 - ✓ The word ***overcome*** is the word *nikaō / nikē* (Nike), which means “victory.” Now they are victorious not because of their own inherent strength, but because of the power of the one who inhabits them — the Holy Spirit. And because of the Holy Spirit, they have overcome and they are continuing to live victoriously. They are battling against sin/world because they hate it.
 - ✓ This doesn't mean Satan and his demons are inconsequential; it does mean Christ and the Holy Spirit are always infinitely superior. God is always greater than Satan.
 - ✓ Just as Christ died, rose, and sits interceding and advocating on behalf of the believer (2:1-2), the believer can be sure that he need not sin — “the victory is ever Christ's...”
 - ✓ That Christ is victorious and that His Spirit is living Christ's life in us does not mean that we will never face temptation; it does not mean that we will never have to struggle against sin; it does not mean that we will not ever sin. But it does mean that in Christ we have everything to stand against temptation, we have everything we need to win the struggle against sin, and we have everything we need not to sin (i.e., it is possible not to sin). Cf. **Rom. 8:31, 37-39**.
 - ✓ And most of all it means that we want to fight against sin and the world.
- But false teachers and false spirits have a different perspective.
 - ✓ They aren't interested in not sinning.
 - ✓ Why do they not care about sin? Because, John says, ***they are from the world***. Their origin (the pronoun is emphatic, stressing the difference between ***us***, vv. 4, 6, and ***them***) is in the world system that is ruled and operated by Satan. This is another way of saying that they do not belong to Christ and do not have Christ in them.
 - ✓ Notice how deeply rooted they are in the world system — their origin is ***from the world***. What they ***speak*** reflects that the world is their origin (apply Lk. 6:45 to this — what they are saying reveals the true love of their lives) and the ***world listens to*** and accepts ***them*** because they are saying what the world wants to hear. Cf. Jn. 8:47 — the only reason the world accepts them is because their message is worldly.
 - ✓ Since this is true, it also means that “worldliness” is more than just what one does — it is a philosophical approach to life and a system of beliefs that are articulated in ideologies. To be worldly, then, is to espouse a philosophy of life that removes God as authority and diminishes the person of Christ. Anything that minimizes Christ is worldly thinking and philosophy.

- ✓ In contrast, Christ is not from the world. And while living in this world, Christ's followers are not to live in harmony with this world (**Jn. 17:14; 1 Jn. 2:15-17**).
- ✓ Do you want to know if a man or his teaching is Spirit-empowered and Christ-honoring? What is his relationship to the world? Does he love the world? Is he attracted by what attracts the world? Or is he and are his desires different? The Spirit of God will produce a life in contrast to the world, not in harmony with the world.
 - "To be of the world is...[to live life] apart from God." [Lloyd-Jones]
 - "Worldliness is whatever makes sin look normal and righteousness look strange." [DeYoung]
 - Those who are false teachers shun God's righteousness and embrace sin and call it good (**1:8, 10**). Any teacher who minimizes sin, embraces sinful practices, and lives as if God's laws are not relevant for him is lawless (3:4), a deceiver (4:1), and an antichrist (4:3). No matter what he says about loving Jesus, if he lives and teaches worldly philosophy and indulgence, he is actually opposed to Christ.

Within the charismatic paradigm, genuine fruits of the Spirit (such as humility, patience, peace, and a sacrificial commitment to Christ's lordship) are often obscured, replaced by a perverse obsession with physical health, material wealth, and temporal happiness. That emphasis on prosperity theology explains the phenomenal growth of the Charismatic Movement in recent decades-promising unregenerate sinners the things their hearts already desire, and then baptizing those carnal lusts in Christian language as if they represent the good news of Jesus Christ. Although almost nine of every ten Pentecostals live in poverty the prosperity gospel continues to lure people into the movement. The needier the culture, the easier it is for the prosperity preacher to bilk people:

Over 90 percent of Pentecostals and Charismatics in Nigeria, South Africa, India, and the Philippines believe that "God will grant material prosperity to all believers who have enough faith." And in every country, significantly more Pentecostals than other Christians believe this....With such a great message, it's no wonder people are flocking to sign up. The prosperity gospel is a divinely guaranteed version of the American dream: a house, a job, and money in the bank. And the global success of the prosperity gospel is the exporting of the American dream.

The prosperity message unashamedly calls people to place their hope in the passing pleasures of this world. Rather than denouncing wrong desires, it glorifies worldly lifestyles, feeds on sinful greed, and makes poppycock promises to desperate people: "Get right with the Lord and he will give you a well-paid job, a nice house and a new car." The prosperity gospel is more morally reprehensible than a Las Vegas casino because it masquerades as religion and comes in the name of Christ. But like the casinos, it attracts its victims with glitzy showmanship and the allure of instant riches. After devouring their last cent, like a spiritual slot machine, it sends them home worse off than when they came. [MacArthur, *Strange Fire*, 58-9.]

- After giving multiple illustrations of worldliness among charismatics, he concludes:

“The irony is inescapable: the movement that claims to be most in tune with the Holy Spirit is simultaneously the least concerned about personal holiness and purity at the level where Scripture sets the highest standard — the qualifications for those who preach and teach....A true work of the Spirit produces holiness in people’s lives. When the leadership of a movement is continually stained by scandal and corruption, it calls into question the spiritual forces behind it.” [MacArthur, 66.]

- It can sometimes seem overwhelming to attempt to discern whether a given teacher is teaching spiritually and truthfully. Here is a very simple test: does his teaching affirm worldly philosophy or does it shun the world? And when the world hears what he says, does it embrace his teaching or does it persecute and vilify him for what he says? (That ought to tell us something about some of the best-selling authors who are claiming to be Christians.)

4. Does the Teaching Honor SCRIPTURE? (v. 6a)

- So having said all these things about the nature of the true working of the Spirit of God, some might say, “What about you, John? Is your teaching from the Holy Spirit or another Spirit?” John answers — ***we are from God***, and “the way you know that we are from God is that ***He who knows God listens to us....***”
- John is not being arrogant with these words. He is not saying “He who knows God listens to me...” but he says, ***us*** — that is, the apostles. He is speaking as one of the apostles who were given special and unique authority by Christ (Acts 1:22, 24) to carry forward His message. He is simply saying that a true, Spirit-empowered teacher leads people to submit to apostolic teaching and the authority of the entire Word of God.
 - ✓ Those who are ***from God*** (believers) love the Word of God and listen to and obey it (hearing and heeding go hand-in-hand in the Bible, e.g., **Js. 1:21ff**; 4:17).
 - ✓ In contrast, those who are ***not from God*** are uninterested in obeying Scripture.
 - ✓ The sheep of God love to obey and follow the voice of Christ (**Jn. 10:4-5**, 8, 16, 26-27; **14:15**).
 - ✓ What does that look like? Here’s one example I read this week (from Al Mohler):

“It is well and good for the preacher to base his sermon on the Bible, but he better get to something relevant pretty quickly, or we start mentally to check out.” That stunningly clear sentence reflects one of the most amazing, tragic, and lamentable characteristics of contemporary Christianity: an impatience with the Word of God.

The sentence above comes from Mark Galli, senior managing editor of *Christianity Today* in an essay entitled, “[Yawning at the Word](#).” In just a few hundred words, he captures the tragedy of a church increasingly impatient with and resistant to the reading and preaching of the Bible. We may wince when we read him relate his recent experiences, but we also recognize the ring of truth.

Galli was told to cut down on the biblical references in his sermon. “You’ll lose people,” the staff member warned. In a Bible study session on creation, the teacher was requested to come back the next Sunday prepared to take questions at the expense of reading the relevant scriptural texts on the doctrine. Cutting down on the number of Bible verses “would save time and, it was strongly implied, would better hold people’s interest.”

As Galli reflected, “Anyone who’s been in the preaching and teaching business knows these are not isolated examples but represent the larger reality.”

✓ He’s right — that’s not an isolated example.

- But the Holy Spirit loves the Word of God — as we discovered with the doctrine of the filling of the Holy Spirit, to be filled with and submitted to the Spirit is synonymous with being filled with and submitted to Scripture (Eph. 5:18-19 and Col. 3:16).
- The Holy Spirit and the Scriptures are inseparable:
 - ✓ The Holy Spirit inspired the writing of the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pt. 1:20-21)
 - ✓ He uses the Bible to convict the world of sin (Jn. 16:8-11; Acts 2:37)
 - ✓ He uses the Bible to point sinners to the Savior (Jn. 5:39)
 - ✓ He uses the Bible to conform believers to Christ (Jn. 17:17; 2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Pt. 2:2)
 - ✓ The Bible is the Spirit’s sword (Eph. 6:17) which he uses to bring conviction to the unbelieving (Heb. 4:12).

“The Holy Spirit would never deter people from reading, studying or applying the Holy Scriptures — the book that He inspired, empowers, and illuminates for salvation and sanctification.” [MacArthur, 67.]

5. Does the Teaching Elevate TRUTH? (v. 6b)

- The world doesn’t like the distinction between right and wrong and truth and error. Or better said, the world does like a standard if it is personally beneficial (like fulfilling contracts and keeping bank balances according to the rule that $2+2=4$ and not $2+2=3$). But the world doesn’t want a moral standard that confronts them with their sinfulness (which is why the debate over homosexual marriage is being lost so quickly).
- Do you want to know if someone is a true teacher? Is there a distinction between **truth and error**?

- ✓ The battle between truth and error is the battle for competing moral control over humanity.
 - ✓ There are those who stand and say, “there is an objective truth that is knowable and it is unchangeable and it is an imperative for our lives.” The competing side is “error.” Those who are opposed to truth are not characterized as having another kind of truth that is just as binding and forceful. There is only one truth and those who oppose it are in **error** — they lead astray and they are deceived and deceitful (2:26).
 - ✓ Satan and his demons “are engaged in a relentless effort to lead believers into spiritual error and deception, working in and through their human agents.” (2 Cor. 11:13-15).
- So false teachers will minimize the importance of absolutes and will dilute the clear teaching of Scripture:

“Well, I don’t know if I believe [unbelievers are] wrong. I believe here’s what the Bible teaches and from the Christian faith this is what I believe. But I just think that only God will judge a person’s heart. I spent a lot of time in India with my father. I don’t know all about their religion. But I know they love God. And I don’t know. I’ve seen their sincerity. So I don’t know. I know for me, and what the Bible teaches, I want to have a relationship with Jesus.”

“Well, in my mind [Mormons are Christians]. Mitt Romney has said that he believes in Christ as his Savior, and that’s what I believe, so you know, I’m not the one to judge the little details of it. So I believe they are.” [Joel Osteen, quoted by MacArthur, 51.]

- The false teacher teaches like the teachers in the time of the judges — what is right in his own eyes (Jg. 21:25). The true teacher unflinchingly teaches the truth of the Bible. He is unafraid to say, “That’s not true...but this *is* true...”
- The church today needs more men like John Calvin who had refused to give communion to a well-known sexually promiscuous man named Philibert Berthelier. So one Sunday Berthelier and his supporters came to worship with swords drawn demanding the right to have communion. So Calvin descended from the pulpit stood in front of the communion table and declared, “These hands you may crush, these arms you may lop off, my life you may take, my blood is yours, you may shed it; but you shall never force me to give holy things to the profaned and dishonor the table of my God.” Berthelier and his friends withdrew without receiving communion.
- Calvin took his stand because he believed in truth, having written earlier, “The theologian’s task is not to divert the ears with chatter, but to strengthen consciences by teaching things true, sure, and profitable.” [*Institutes*, 1.14.4 [p. 164)]

CONCLUSION:

On Friday evening, Emily graduated from High School and I was asked to give a short address to the graduates; among the things I said was, “You haven’t reached the end; you are just entering the starting blocks for the race of life.” It might be tempting for them to say, “I finished all my tests — no more tests for the rest of my life.”

That’s certainly not true for an 18-year-old. There will be a great many more tests in the years to come. And that is also not true for believers. Rather, we are constantly testing and questioning — is this true is this right? We do that because we want to follow the true and only Spirit of God.

We want to cultivate discernment; and to be discerning test what you are taught —

- ✓ Is it from God?
- ✓ Does it exalt Christ?
- ✓ Does it oppose worldliness?
- ✓ Does it honor Scripture?
- ✓ Does it elevate truth?