

TESTING THE SPIRITS

1Jno.4:1-6

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. This is a critical section of scripture in the Epistle of 1Jno. because it deals with a certain kind or type of false teacher.
2. Having previously spoken of the Spirit that God has given his children (1Jno.3:24), John reminds them in our text that there are other spirits abroad in the world; thus he pauses to warn them against these false spirits, or pseudo-prophets, that are gone out into the world.
3. “The false prophets are Satan’s counterpoise (‘to act against with equal power or effect’) to the true prophets of God, and, as the true prophets were really under Divine inspiration, the false prophets also claimed to be under Divine inspiration.
 - a. “For that best succeeds which is made to bear the closest resemblance to the truth that is active.
 - b. “Christianity was at that time wonderfully and powerfully active in the world.
 - c. “How was it to be counteracted? Satan always has a way to do it. At that time:
 - (1) “One way was to try to incorporate Judaism with Christianity.
 - (2) “Another way was to try to incorporate Gentile philosophy with Christianity, to which the name of Gnosticism was given. The general drift of Gnosticism was the substitute, for the plain facts of the gospel of Christ, philosophic myths.
 - (3) “Another way was a mixture of the two with Christianity; that is, Judaism and Gentile philosophy.
 - (4) “As a case in point, Neander, the church historian, described one by the name of Cerinthus, who was a contemporary of the apostle John in proconsular Asia, as ‘the intermediate link between the Judaizing and the Gnostic sects.’ That ‘as a Judaizer, Cerinthus held, with the Ebionites, that Jesus was only the son of Joseph and Mary, born in the natural way. As a Gnostic, he maintained that the Christ first descended in the form of a dove, on the carpenter’s son at his baptism; that he (i.e., the Christ, in

the form of a dove, ejd) revealed to him the unknown Father, and worked miracles through him; and that at length he took his flight, and left him, so that Jesus alone suffered and rose, while the Christ remained impassible.” – Pulpit Commentary, 1Jno.4:1-6, pg.127, Homilies By Various Authors, by R. Finlayson.

- (5) In other words, Cerenthus taught that the Christ had a temporary abode in Jesus, contrary to the truth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh as the Son of God.
4. Once again, in our present text, John seeks to make the faithful children of God, those who are of God, those who hear him and the other apostles of Christ who are of God, aware of their responsibility. But this time it is with reference to what is taught by deceitful prophets claiming to be true prophets of God, while denying that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh.
5. The faithful must test the spirits. For not all are what they claim to be; not all of them either believe or teach the truth with reference to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
6. He boldly declares there are two types or kinds of spirits in the world: namely, the spirit of truth and the spirit of error – and sets them in sharp contrast one to the other.
7. While both are in the world – the one is of the world; the other is not! It is of God.
8. By means of a plain, simple text they will be able to identify which spirit is of God and which spirit is not of God.
9. This does not surprise us because God always has had a way or means of testing the prophets.
 - a. Baal’s prophets were tested by Elijah, God’s true prophet, 1Kgs. 18:17-39.
 - b. The text of Deut.18:20-22.
 - c. The test during N.T. times during the stage of progressive revelation of God’s will, 1Cor.12:3-10.
 - d. Now, after the complete revelation of God’s will, Gal.1:6-9; Eph.3:1-5; 5:17; 1Cor.4:6; 1Pet.4:11; 2Jno.9; Rev.22:18,19.
10. Thus both they and we have divine assurance that they and we can overcome, can know, recognize, identify or discriminate the difference between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.
11. In our study of 1Jno.4:1-6, we shall notice three pertinent points taught in the text about testing the spirits; such as the following:

- a. 1st, The warning issued and the command given revealing the need for testing the spirits, 4:1.
- b. 2nd, The test to be applied in order to be successful in knowing or recognizing the spirit of truth and the spirit of error, 4:2,3.
- c. 3rd, John's assurance of their success in their having applied the required test to overcome by which they know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error, 4:4-6.

II. DISCUSSION

A. 1ST, THE WARNING ISSUED AND THE COMMAND GIVEN REVEALING THE NEED FOR TESTING THE SPIRITS, 4:1.

1. The warning issued against believing every spirit: "Beloved, believe not every spirit," V.1a.
 - a. He has reference to believing as putting trust in what certain spirits say and hence accepting and relying upon it.
 - b. In other words, they were to be on guard against deceptive spirits, pseudo-spirits, which then abounded, and are elsewhere alluded to in the Epistle. Cf. 1Jno.1:6; 2:28-23; 2Jno.7.
 - c. Be not credulous; be not placing your confidence and trust in what every man who calls himself a prophet, who claims to be bringing you God's word or God's truth, preaches and teaches and asks you to believe; there must be discrimination. Cf. Mt. 7:15; 2Cor.11:13-15; Rev.2:1,2; See Ac.17:10-12.
 - d. The tense of the verb is continuous. They were to be in the habit of refusing to believe every spirit.
 - e. Wuest's Word Studies, says it is "Stop believing every spirit," which, of course, indicates that some were being deceived by these spirits."
2. The command is given to try the spirits: "but try the spirits whether they are of God," V.1b.
 - a. Rather than believing every spirit or teacher who claims to be of or from God, you must prove, try or test them to see whether or not they really are of God; that is, whether they have God as their source.
 - b. "Do not be believing every spirit but (ever) be testing out the spirits." – Linski.

- c. “Try” or test or “prove”. Run an assay on them as a metallurgist does his metals, and determine whether they are of God.
 - d. This they were able to do with reference to the spirits under consideration here by means of the test revealed in Vv.2,3.
 - e. It was the brethren, all the brethren, who were to test the spirits.
 - (1) It was not taken out of their hands and reserved for the so-called clergy of the church.
 - (2) It was not to be done by some ecclesiastical hierarchy, church dignitary or official head.
 - (3) This, by implication, is positive proof of the falsity of the Pope’s claim of infallibility, and a denial of the Catholic church’s claim to the right of private judgment and authority in matters religious.
3. The reason stated for the warning and the command to try or test the spirits: “because many false prophets are gone out into the world,” V.1c.
- a. This identifies these “spirits” warned against, who are not to be believed, as “false prophets”, or pseudo-prophets, as human beings who are teaching falsely, but claiming to be of or from God, and to be led by the power of God.
 - (1) They were, no doubt, seeking to support their false theories in the same fashion, and by means of the same claims as do false teachers today. Cf. 2Th.2:9; 2Cor.11:13-15.
 - b. These would certainly include the lying “antichrists” referred in 1Jno.2:18-23, as well as those having the “spirit of antichrist” here in 1Jno.4:3; they are persons actuated or moved by “the spirit of error,” rather than “the spirit of truth.”
 - c. But either then or now, it matters not how pious, how nice, how “flannel-mouthed,” how seemingly righteous, or religious a teacher may affect to be, he is worthy of belief ONLY when his teaching is in complete harmony with the revealed word of God (in our case, the revealed written word of God); if otherwise, he must be repudiated. Cf. Tit.3:10; Rom.16:17,18; 2Jno.9-11.
 - d. Because Satan ever attempts to counterfeit the work and plan of the Lord, false prophets have every abounded, Lk.6:26; Ac.13:6; 2Cor.11:13-15; Rev.13; 16:13; Ac.20:28-30.
 - e. Perhaps there has never been a greater need than there is today for testing the teachers of religion to see whether they are true or false!

B. THE TEST TO BE APPLIED IN ORDER TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN KNOWING OR RECOGNIZING THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH AND THE SPIRIT OF ERROR, 4:2,3.

1. The test applied from the positive standpoint, by which the false prophets of 1Jno.2:18-23 and 1Jno.4:1-6 were to be discerned and identified: “Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God,” V.2.
 - a. “Hereby,” Lit. “in this,” or “in connection with this,” or “this is how you recognize,” and points to what follows, which provides believers with the necessary test.
 - (1) The Spirit of God is to be known or recognized as a result of trying the spirits.
 - b. Obviously, John is warning about those of the Gnostic heresy concerning the nature of Jesus Christ while on earth, some of whom questioned his **deity**; others, his **humanity**.
 - (1) One of the most infamous false prophets of Johns day was Cerinthus.
 - (2) The Cerinthian heresy, starting with the philosophical (pertaining to, or in accordance with, philosophy) postulate (to assume without proof) of an irreconcilable antagonism between matter and spirit, denied the possibility of the incarnation and drew a distinction between Jesus, the man, and Christ, the Messiah.
 - (3) Its spirit was not “the spirit of truth,” but “the spirit of error;” thus the necessity arose to “try the spirits.”
 - c. “Every spirit” does not refer to other beings than human beings, and what the spirit or teacher believes and teaches about Jesus Christ exposes his spirit, determines whether or not he is of or from God, whether or not it is the spirit of truth or the spirit of error motivating him.
 - d. This is the test to apply: examine his confession concerning Jesus Christ – what he believes and teaches about Jesus Christ.
 - (1) The Scripture nowhere asks us to look into a teacher’s heart, nor can we do that!
 - (2) Only God can do that! Or men miraculous aided by means of the power of the Holy Spirit. Cf. Ac.5:3.
 - (3) But a man’s heart can’t be right when his confession or his doctrine or his practice is wrong!

- (4) So we have a sure-fire means of testing a man's heart!
- e. Vine's Commentary: "every spirit who confesseth that Jesus Christ (himself) is come in the flesh," **not** "come into the flesh."
- (1) "The statement is directed against the Gnostic error promulgated (declared) by Cerinthus, that the Christ descended into an already existing man, namely Jesus of Nazareth.
 - (2) "All the Gnostic sects denied the truth 'that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh'; they denied that 'Jesus is the Christ.'"
 - (3) "The verb 'is come' or 'having come' is translated from a Gr. perfect, thus indicating past action with existing results. It represents an abiding effect. Thus signifying:
 - (a) "That the incarnation was past as to its occurrence, but its effects (benefits and blessings) yet remain and will continue to do so throughout time and eternity, involving the sum of all that Christianity means or makes possible to man.
 - (b) "From his Incarnation onward Jesus Christ was, and ever is, possessed of true manhood.
 - (c) "Involved in this is the truth that he is the 'one mediator between God and man, himself man, Christ Jesus, 1Tim.2:5 (RV).'"
- f. To make this confession about Jesus Christ was and is to confess both his **deity** and his **humanity**.
- (1) It was and is to admit that he was and is the Christ, and thus the Messiah of the O.T. prophets.
 - (2) To confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh was to repudiate the Docetic Gnostics of that day who denied it.
 - (3) Those of this persuasion denied the **humanity** of Jesus by alleging the he only appeared or seemed to have a body of flesh but, in reality, did not.
- g. To emphasize that it means to make this confession, exactly what it is that the true teacher was called upon to confess and by which he was tested, we note the confession in some detail: "Jesus Christ is come in the flesh"
- (1) The true teacher who was of or from God confessed **Jesus**.
 - (a) The name **Jesus** means **Savior**.
 - (b) Thus he believed and confessed that Jesus did come from God to save man, to be the Savior of the world of lost sinner.

- (2) The true teacher who was of or from God confesses Jesus as the **Christ**.
 - (a) The name **Christ** means **Messiah**, the Anointed One of God.
 - (b) Thus he believed Jesus of Nazareth to be the promised Messiah of O.T. scripture.
 - (c) Believed and confessed him to be the fulfillment of all the prophecies of O.T. scripture.
 - (d) To be the Anointed One sent from God to earth as Savior, Prophet, Priest and King in a spiritual kingdom to reign from heaven at God's right hand after his death, burial, resurrection and ascension.
- (3) The truth teacher who was of or from God confesses Jesus Christ to be **the Son of God**.
 - (a) Sent out of (ek) heaven, out of the spiritual world and dimension into this physical world for a spiritual purpose.
 - (b) Sent in human flesh to save man in fulfillment of God's scheme of human redemption planned from before the foundation of the world.
- h. This is the confession of and the teaching about Jesus Christ which characterizes every true teacher who is of or from God, and every true Christian who believes the Bible, the word of God, Isa.7:14; 9:6; Mt.1:21-23; 3:17; 17:5; 10:32; Lk.1:31; 12:8; Jno.1:1-3,14; Rom.8:3; Phil.2:5-11; 1Tim.3:16; Heb.2:11-14; 1Jno.2:22,23; 4:2,15; 5:11,12,20.
- i. This confession embraces the basic truth on which Christianity rests; it's the foundation stone on which the church is built, Mt.16:13-18.
- j. This confession as the test of a true teacher who is of or from God must not be thought of as being limited to confessing only the one fact or doctrine of the Incarnation, of the virgin birth of Jesus, so what it is thought to be of minor importance, when other facts or doctrines of the gospel of Christ, or of the doctrine of Christ, are either not confessed or are denied in some way.
 - (1) We must not think we can separate this confession of Jesus Christ from the doctrine of Christ, or require the one to the exclusion of the other.
 - (2) Cf. Vv.2,3,5,6. What they confess and what they teach or further speak serves to fully identify them as to whether

they are of God or of the world, or to identify them with “the spirit of truth” or “the spirit of error.”

(3) Also Cf. 2Jno.9-11.

2. The test applied from the negative standpoint, by which the false prophets of 1Jno.2:18-23 and 1Jno.4:1-6 were to be identified, V.3.
 - a. This is the negative of V.2, with the additional information that to confess not both the **deity** and the **humanity** of Jesus is to manifest “the spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.”
 - b. John’s fundamental affirmation is that Jesus was and is the Christ, the Son of God, and that this Son of God had become flesh, had become a man, in the person of Jesus, for the salvation of mankind.
 - c. He had spoken previously of these antichrists in Ch.2:18-23. Now he comes back to them in warning about the false prophets and the spirit of error.
 - (1) In 2:22,23, he says they were denying “that Jesus is the Christ,” and therefore were denying both “the Father and the Son.”
 - (2) Here, in 4:3, he says they were denying “that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh” or (perhaps a better translation) denying “that Jesus as the Christ had come in the flesh”; therefore, they were “not of (from) God.”
 - (3) They denied the Incarnation of Christ because of their erroneous belief that matter of any kind (including human flesh) was evil and that God, being infinite holy, therefore, could not come into contact with it so that the Christ and Jesus could be one and the same being.
 - d. Using the perfect tense of the verb, when John says that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, he is indicating something that took place in the past and that has continuing significance.
 - e. John then is affirming, and the false prophets were denying, that the Christ became man and continues to be man. John is denying that the Incarnation was a temporary union of God and man; he is affirming that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, has become human for all the ages to come; the antichrists were affirming the one and denying the other.
 - f. Even today the pseudo-prophet, the false teacher, does not confess that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, the Anointed

One, the Only Begotten Son of God; God in the flesh, but only a man.

- (1) He may or may not accept Jesus Christ as a great teacher and a great religious leader, perhaps, even the greatest.
 - (2) But he does not believe that Jesus Christ is **THE Savior**.
 - (3) He believes there are other ways to God, that other people who believe in God, but not in Jesus Christ as God's Son, will be as acceptable to God as will a follower of Jesus Christ.
- g. Some consequences of denying the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. It means:
- (1) That there is no salvation from past sins provided for us, Jno.3:16-18,36; 8:24; Rom.4:25.
 - (2) That there is no means of eternal life provided for us, 1Jno.1:2; Jno.3:16; 1Jno.2:24,25; 5:11-13; Tit.1:2.
 - (3) That we have no Advocate with the Father, and no propitiation for our sins, 1Jno.2:1,2.
 - (4) That there is no mediator between God and man, 1Tim.2:5.
 - (5) There is no cleansing of nor forgiveness for our sins, 1Jno.1:7,9.
 - (6) The O.T. is still in effect and there is no N.T., no better covenant.
 - (7) On and on the list could go, but the point is clearly seen. The false teacher of 1Jno. destroys the hope of salvation and of eternal life with God.

C. THE CONTRAST BY WHICH JOHN GIVES GOD'S CHILDREN ASSURANCE OF SUCCESS BY THEIR HAVING APPLIED THE REQUIRED TEST, HAVING OVERCOME THE PROPHETS OF DECEIT, BECAUSE OF THE GREATER ONE WHO IS IN THEM, AND BECAUSE THEY HEAR US WHO ARE OF GOD RATHER THAN THOSE WHO ARE OF THE WORLD, AND THEREBY KNOW THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH AND THE SPIRIT OF ERROR, 4:4-6.

1. First, his reminder and assurance of the fact of their victory over the prophets of deceit and the spirit of error: "Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them," V.4a.
 - a. The "ye" is emphatic by its position in the sentence, and is thus set in marked contrast to the pseudo-prophets previously referred to.

- b. He here draws a contrast between the faithful who are of God, who have overcome, and those false prophets who are of the world.
 - c. God is the source of the faith and practice of the faithful, but not of the others.
2. 2nd, the stated grounds, reason and cause for their victory, for their having overcome them and the spirit of error: “because greater is he that is I you, than he that is in the world,” V.4b.
- a. That is to say, the false teachers and their spirit of error.
 - b. They were not victorious in and by their own strength alone; for if left to their own resources and power alone, they could not overcome the forces of evil around them.
 - c. The overcoming consisted in having:
 - (1) Refused to listen to those who were of the world and the spirit of error.
 - (2) The greater One in them to whom they had taken heed.
 - (3) God’s indwelling presence. Cf. Jno.15:1-8; 1Jno.4:12,15,16.
3. In Vv.5,6, by means of contrast between those who are of God and those who are not of God, John offers further information concerning the manner or the means of their victory which enables them to know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.
- a. First, as to the origin and character of the one and whom they affect.
 - (1) The one is “of the world” (V.5a), as opposed to you “little children” who “are of God” (v.4d).
 - (a) “They” – of course, are the false teachers with “the spirit of error.”
 - (b) Their character and teaching are derived from that spirit which is in and of the world.
 - (c) The word “they” has special stress, just as the “ye” had at the beginning of V.4.
 - (d) The “world” in these passages has reference to the devil’s domain, that sphere which is dominated by the devil and to which that which willingly submits to his dominion.
 - (2) (For this reason) “Therefore speak they of the world,” V.5b.

- (a) They speak of the world; they teach a worldly or human approach to God.
 - (b) The character of their teaching is consistent with their character which is of the world.
 - (c) For all their utterances they have no higher source, and no other authority, but that of the world.
 - (d) They draw from no divine fountain; and no stream rises above its source.
- (3) These therefore affect only the world; for it's only the world that heareth them, or listens to them, V.5c.
- (a) What they teach meets with a ready reception on the part of those who are of the world.
 - (b) It likes their speech; it hears and nods full approval whenever and with whatever they speak.
 - (c) Their message appeals to men of the world because:
 - (1) It tends to excuse sin. Cf. 1Jno.1:6.
 - (2) Men love the sin and the evils of darkness rather than the light of truth. Cf. Jno.3:19-21.
 - (3) The world loves its own, Jno.15:19.
- (4) There is stress here upon the phrase "the world."
- (a) Remember, it is not that they speak concerning this physical universe, but the world of the devil's domain, that spiritual sphere which is dominated by the devil.
 - (b) The same spirit energizes both the teachers and their hearers.
- (5) What is here said of the world then is true of the world today.
- (a) Sad, but true, the masses of people of the world prefer to listen to pleasing falsehoods rather than what they deem to be unpleasant truths.
- (6) It's even true of many members of the body of Christ at times. Thus the warning of 2Tim.4:1-5.
- b. Second, by contrast, as to the other: "he that knoweth God" and "heareth us" who "are of (from) God," V.6.
- (1) "We are of God" (John, referring to himself and the other apostles), as opposed to "he that knoweth God" and "hearth us," V.6a.

- (2) “He that knoweth God hearth us” would be the “little children” of V.4 of whom John said, “ye are of God,” and have overcome them,” V.6b.
- (3) Emphasize those:
 - (a) Who hearth us who are of God: “he that knowth God” (he hears the word of God and responds to it; he obeys it).
 - (b) Who heareth not: “he that is not of God” (he does not listen; he rejects their word).
- (4) “Knoweth God,” the Gr. present tense – designates “one who keeps on knowing God.”

III. CONCLUSION

1. “Hereby (“from this”, i.e., from all that has been said in Vv.1-6) know we the spirit of truth and the spirit of error,” V.6c. (This is the way we know...)
 - a. John began the paragraph to tell them how to test the spirits.
 - b. Having done that in Vv.1-6b, he concludes by saying, “Hereby know”, or “from this know” in V.6c, referring to what has just preceded, and introduces an inference from it.
2. What is meant by the expressions “the spirit of truth” and “the spirit of truth,” in 1Jno.4:6?
 - a. Because Jesus identifies the Holy Spirit as “the Spirit of truth” in Jno.14:17; 15:26; 16:13, some conclude that John here in 1Jno.4:6 refers to the Holy Spirit, when he mentions “the spirit of truth,” and to the devil, when he mentions “the spirit of error,” but not so. Not so, for the following reasons:
 - (1) In V.1, when he says “be testing the spirits whether they are of or from God,” he cannot mean “be testing the Holy Spirit and the devil whether they are from or of God.”
 - (2) In V.2, when he says, “Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God,” he cannot be referring to the Holy Spirit. Cf. 1Cor.12:3.
 - (3) In Vv.3,5, when he says, “every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is the spirit of antichrist...even now already is it in the world...They are of the world:: they speak of the world, and the world heareth them,” he cannot be speaking of the devil himself, but of those of the devil’s domain.

- (4) John is revealing how to test and know the spiritual origin, nature, and quality of men or spirits, how to know who are the pseudo-prophets, and who belongs to their following, and how to know the spirits, the true prophets and teachers who are of God.
3. We thus conclude that “spirit” is here used as it was in V.1:
 - a. To designate the inner, spiritual nature of the man, which belongs to the truth, the whole truth, confesses and speaks it, reveals it to your ears;
 - b. Or belongs to the error, the deceit, fails to confess the truth about Jesus Christ (Vv.2,3), and speaks what pleases the world (V.5).
4. Or we might say that the “spirit of truth” is a disposition favorable toward the truth, and the “spirit of error” is a disposition friendly to error!
5. Men’s attitude toward Jesus Christ, the Son of God, having come in the flesh, and toward the doctrine of Christ, ranks them on this side or that – on God’s side or on the world’s and devil’s side!
6. As V.6 says, “Hereby know we” or “this is how we know” “the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.”