

Of God or the World?

Discerning the Spirit of Truth

(1 John 4:1–6)

What is True & What to Do:

The bible says that genuine Christians will understand that true teachers possess the Spirit of God and proclaim Jesus Christ alone as the risen Lord who came in the flesh, as both fully God and fully man. Thus, Christ followers should discern false teachers, condemn all forms of their wrong teaching, and avoid all forms of false doctrines.

Background:¹

Thus far, we have looked at two markers of spiritual re-birth. First, the test of “doing what is right” (righteousness) in 1 Jn. 3:4–9. Second, the test of “loving one another” in deed and truth. Today, we will look at the third test: the test of “discerning truth and error” as found in 1 Jn. 4:1–6. The context of 4:1–6 concerns the source of true and false teaching. God is the source of truth. Satan is the source of error. There are three tests given for discerning truth vs. error. Is there (1) a biblical Jesus, (2) biblical doctrine as delivered by apostles and prophets, and 3) divine Truth?

Southern Baptist professor and author Dr. David Allen describes the question of spiritual discernment along these lines, saying, “Spiritual “truth and error” are not [perceived] by logical or intellectual reasoning alone. Intellectual reasoning [plays a role in] the truth discernment process, but truth is not [recognized] that way alone. Some of the brightest people on the face on the earth are dead wrong about some things they believe and teach [because they do not have the Spirit of God indwelling them]. Spiritual truth is therefore not discerned, known, or identified by [human] reason alone. [Spiritual discernment is made possible by the Spirit of God indwelt inside a person]. To first know God, you must come to Him in faith and love. Intellectuals who are intoxicated with their own wisdom and knowledge cannot figure out that their own investigative methodologies are flawed to the core when it comes to discerning spiritual truth. The source of all true Christian teaching is God, as shown by the Holy Spirit.”

Satan desires spiritual truth’s destruction, and failing that, he desires its corruption. In John 7:17 Jesus says, “If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.” See also, Gospel of John 5:39; 14:15, 15:26, 16:13.

➤ Three “tests” exist for examining teachers of spiritual truth and their spiritual beliefs to determine their origin. Do they originate from God or the World? (v. 1–6)²

- The phrase “from God” occurs six times in these six verses and the New Testament affirms to us that the Holy Spirit is our helper with the functions of preaching and teaching (Acts), leading us into all truth (Jn. 16:13). The source of true instruction concerning Christian doctrine and belief(s) is God, as empowered through the Holy Spirit. And if not, it is opposed to Christ (antichrist).
- The word “Spirit” (capital ‘S’) indicates John is referring to the Holy Spirit. He uses the word “spirit” with a lowercase ‘s’ when referring to demonic spirits and as a metonymy (a literary device meaning using the part for the whole) for the person / false teacher who speaks about God and what he teaches about God. The supernatural is real, but it is not always is it from God!
- “Testing” is how we go about determining if something is genuine. Is God the source of this teaching, or is a demonic spirit behind it? The reason we are told to test the spirits is because many false prophets have gone out into the world.
- Testing the spirits is not optional. Three commands (imperative form) are given in verses one and two: “do not believe”, “test the spirits” (v. 1), and “you know [the Spirit of God]” (v. 2) appear in a verbal form indicating continuous, ongoing, never ending, action.
- False prophets “have gone out” occurs in a completed and final form in the original prose; likewise, Christ “has come in the flesh.”

1.) **DIVINE JESUS IN THE FLESH? Do the beliefs properly confess a biblical Jesus as the risen Lord who came to earth fully human but also fully God? (v. 2–3)**

- Salvation comes only through Jesus; ascertaining genuine knowledge of Christian teaching has a supernatural origin. It is not merely intellectual. This is a rebuke of the Gnostics and their false idea that “secret” knowledge led to salvation.
- The phrase “every spirit that confesses Jesus has come in the flesh is ‘from God’” is meant to emphasize the way we can know if a particular spiritual belief is of divine origin (of God).

- Beliefs must teach the correct truths about Jesus of the Bible. For example, Jehovah Witnesses, Islam, Christian Science, Mormons all fail to declare a biblical Jesus. Antichristian teaching is not necessarily always an open denial. They can distort Christ or misrepresent teaching of apostles/prophets.
- Orig. language in verses two and three read: “And every spirit that [keeps on] confessing Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God.” Ex. someone may deny Christ but later repent.

2.) **DIVINE SPIRIT? Does the Holy Spirit validate these beliefs as God’s truth handed to us by the apostles of Jesus Christ and as recorded in Holy Scripture? (v. 4)**

- We are from God; false teachers are not. We have the Holy Spirit; false teachers do not. The Christian source and standard of truth is God and His Word. We “overcome” and have victory over false teachers because we embrace true teaching and reject false teaching. This is because the Holy Spirit inside of us leads us into all truth (Jn. 16:13) and is greater than the spirit of antichrist.
- Well-known 18th-century American preacher Jonathan Edwards rightly noted, “When the spirit that is at work operates against the interests of Satan’s kingdom, which lies in encouraging and establishing sin and cherishing men’s worldly lusts, this is a sure sign that it is a true and not a false spirit.”³
- “You are of God, little Children” is a personal, heartfelt appeal, but the linking verbs in “are of God” and “is in you is greater” are each verbally continuous and without ceasing action (e.g., always are of God; always is in you is always greater); also, the phrase “and have overcome [the antichrist]” is written in a completed form (it is done, accomplished, there is no undoing this victory).“
- “The [Holy Spirit] is greater than the one who is in the world.” We have a Champion, a Victor, a source of power that the enemies from hell cannot overcome.

3.) **DIVINE OR WORLDLY TRUTH? Does the world of unsaved people affirm and listen to these beliefs and/or affirm its teachers? A “yes” may signal worldliness. (v. 5–6)**

- John is saying: You must test the teaching you hear as to whether it comes from God or not, test whether it acknowledges

that Jesus Christ came to earth in human form, and test whether the world of unsaved people listen to it. The world hears its own.

- The word “they” in verse 5 contrasts strongly with “you” in verse 4. False teachers are not from God but from the world. Their source and motivation is from godless humanity. You are of God.
- “By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” Saying “by this” in verse 6 refers to both verses 5 and 6. Those following the Spirit of truth listen to the apostles; those following the spirit of error do not. There are only two ways: the way of Truth and the way of error, the way of Christ and the way of antichrist. We are called to serve Christ, and those who are truly of God will do so.

APPLICATION:

- Be stewards of the truth. Christians should continuously be evaluating every spiritual belief heard, as well as those individuals who teach them.
- Admit to the possibility of demonic influence among those who want to sabotage the church. Be equipped for spiritual battle to combat all forms of evil (Eph. 6); Make the centrality of Christ the centerpiece of your test and evaluation of spiritual truth.
- Do not accept all things (i.e., false doctrine) in the name of unity; just because we want to be accepting does not mean we can.
- We must nurture a watchful eye for error without becoming cynical. Do not allow yourself to become arrogant, unteachable, or harsh. Any impulse to critique must be worked out in the body of believers; solicit input from other Christians in humility.
- Ensure that false teachers do not have access to the church as a platform for their teachings. Those who teach are to be vetted as theologically and spiritually qualified to do so.
- If you hear wrong teaching in Sunday School, do not remain silent. First, privately instruct in a loving way like Priscilla and Aquilla (Acts 18:24-26); If there is stubborn refusal to change, and you are positive of the error being taught, follow Mt. 18 for believers and take someone else with you to lovingly confront your brother or sister. If that still does not work, involve church leaders more broadly. The person may not really be a true believer, but instead, someone with an opposition to Christ.

³ Edwards, *Distinguishing Marks*, p. 267