

Test the Spirits

1 John 4:1–6

June 25, 2017

Maybe you don't know whom to believe anymore. You used to think the first person across the finish line was the superior athlete. Doping now makes you wonder.

Maybe you used to think what you read in the newspaper corresponded to reality. Now, you've matured—or been scarred—so even the finest of sources seem to have biases coloring the lede. Everything looks like reality TV, fitting in life's categories, but you sense there's a script.

Or maybe you used to believe the people closest to you. But the trusted have eventually uncovered your naiveté.

A room full—maybe a nation full—of skeptics must learn to discern truth. And they must do so amidst a cacophony of voices. John tells us in our text today to test the spirits (lower-case s). Then, he gives us two ways to test them.

Note first, **Test the Spirits**

John addresses the congregation in verse 1, *Beloved*. This isn't the first time he's called them this; he's teaching those he loves. And love is not averse to instruction. In fact, love warns. *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*

Though John calls them spirits, the end of the verse is less vague. False prophets fill the world. Those are the spirits to be tested.

A few moments ago, we read Jeremiah 29. In that context, the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon. They're in a foreign land, surrounded by immorality. This was not the place to raise Israelite toddlers. Like you might were you in that circumstance, they wondered how long this captivity would last. Enter the prophets. One man shows up and tells them, in essence, "God told me you'll be out of here in 2 years." He brought good news, while using the magic words, "Thus says the Lord." I'm sure a number of these exiled Israelites rejoiced. However, in the text we read—Jeremiah 29—another prophet (the one

that book is named after) brings a message from the Lord, “*it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord.*”

From high school break-ups to mega-cathedral pulpits, “God told me” has been summarily abused. Claiming divine inspiration for your latest whim can often be a trump card. Who dares question that?

So, false prophets inhabited Babylon in Jeremiah’s day, Ephesus hundreds of years later in John’s day, and the States were no different this past week. John says, “*Do not believe every spirit.*” John Stott writes, “Unbelief (believe not every spirit) can be as much a mark of spiritual maturity as belief.”¹

Jesus said false prophets looked like sheep. Therefore, we need to keep in mind that false prophets don’t claim to be heretics. They might be moral, intelligent, eat at Chick-fil-A, while carrying a Bible. That’s why John warns these readers. False teachers are slick.

When I was a sophomore in High School, one of my teachers had the courage to take about 80 of us to New York City. We rode on buses for the 12 plus hours from Sparta, TN. A number of teenagers from South Woods are riding to Louisville tomorrow and I’m sure are wondering who they’ll end up sitting by. Well, I was the same. This was going to be quite a haul. No one had cell phones, of course. So, my entertainment was going to be a book or the person I sat next to. Well, I ended up sitting by a guy a couple years older than me. Fortunately, he was probably the second coolest guy on the trip. Further, he was the Chris Wilbanks of White County High School. Everyone liked him.

But, also, he was a devout Mormon.

And it came up. And it wasn’t for 5 minutes. Primarily because of him, we talked for hours about our faith. Now, this was my first experience talking to a Mormon about Mormonism. I’m sure he’d been trained on this more than I had at that point. And do you think he pointed out all the differences between the views of his church and mine? Of course not. He had a bible in his lap. He quoted Scripture. He kept saying, “We’re the same. I’m a Christian too.”

I remember thinking how odd it was that he wasn’t saying he was different than us. And as a young believer, sitting with one of the more popular guys on the bus, I was impressionable.

¹ John Stott, *TNTC*, 153.

The false prophets in John's day were similar I'm sure. They claimed to speak for God. They probably talked about Jesus. But that's not sufficient, we'll find out soon enough. I can put on a white coat and a stethoscope, but you know better.

Rather than believing everyone claiming to speak for God, John encourages his readers to *test the spirits whether they are from God*. The word here for test is the same word often used in that era for testing metal coins to see whether they were genuine or not.² Like the testing of metals, the spoken word was to be tested. According to John, thus says the Lord isn't always the case. God does not break the law of non-contradiction.

Of course, in our day, the ascent of available knowledge has not meant the ascent of discernment. It might even perpetuate the opposite. Patently false stories get hundreds of thousands of shares. The danger of confirmation bias is always present. As one friend wrote about the consumption of media, "news is less about information and more about affirmation."³ Your heart is tapping the blue thumb all the time. You agree with this. You disagree with that.

But are you being discerning? John says *test the spirits*.
But, how do we test the continual barrage of voices? John gives us two ways.

2. Test the spirits by their teaching

Though there's already been a few lower case spirits in this text, John introduces their superior in verse 2, *By this you know the Spirit of God*. John's not giving a command for discernment without helping the readers know how to discern. There are spirits; and there is *the Spirit*.

If you've read John's gospel, you know the role of the Spirit. He's a teacher, but His syllabus isn't unclear. He points and illuminates another. Verse two continues, *By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God*.

Fundamentally, the first test is theological. It hinges on the particulars of what the prophets, or spirits, are saying. What is it that they confess?

² Daniel Akin, *NAC*, 170.

³ Trevin Wax, *This is our Time*, 25.

John says two things here. It might seem like one, but Robert Plummer argues that this is what grammarians call the double accusative.⁴ The verb “confesses” has two objects.

First, *every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ*. Most commentators stop here, emphasizing the importance of John’s word choice. Christ is not to be understood as a surname, of course. John’s saying more—that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Messiah promised. That is what Christ means. It’s His title.

But, secondly, that Jesus of Nazareth—the Christ promised—came as a human in the flesh. Note v. 2 *every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*.

As we’ve said a few times, some of the false teachers attempting to influence this congregation leaned toward a Gnostic duality between flesh and spirit. This was growing in popularity within some offshoots of the church. Cerinthus, one of those teachers, asserted that God only descended on Christ at His baptism, but then left him somewhere in the Garden of Gethsemane. Like an OT Saul, God empowered Christ for a time, but no more. In John’s second epistle he notes that Cerinthus was not alone, “*For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.*” (2 Jn 2:7).

This dualistic false dichotomy didn’t come out of nowhere. It would’ve been common in their day, due to a few prevailing philosophies in the West. There’s a painting at the Vatican done by Raphael called the “School of Athens.” It’s one of the more famous frescoes in that building. Multiple philosophers are in the painting, but at the very center are Plato and Aristotle, men who lived 300 and 400 years before Christ. Interestingly, Raphael has both men pointing. Plato points up and Aristotle points down.

Not unlike us, though they might’ve been more cerebral than we desire, these men were searching for truth. And they wrote about it. The direction they point in this painting indicates where they thought truth was found. Plato thought it to be found skyward, in a transcendent world of ideas. Aristotle pointed down, thinking one finds truth by observing ideas, not transcendent, but *in* the world.⁵ He looked around.

As you know, both these men profoundly influenced the worldview of generations to come. Plato argued for two diametrically opposed realms, physical and spiritual. Aristotle’s disagreement with him might’ve even cemented the dichotomy. For Plato, one

⁴ Plummer, Daily Dose of Greek, 1 John 4:2

⁵ You know I don’t know this stuff, but Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew’s *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* talks about this fresco on pages 72–76.

man writes, “the material world and the body were evil impediments to true spiritual life.”⁶ Therefore, if something’s spiritual, it can’t be physical.

Into this prevalent worldview, Jesus—Son of God and Son of Man—enters. And, in visceral opposition to Platonic philosophy, John would assert that the most transcendent idea in the world—God himself—had come in the *flesh*. (1n 1:14)

Jesus is God asleep in the boat. Jesus is man stilling the storm. Without mixture, confusion, separation, or division, Jesus is God and man.⁷

The incarnation is not a fringe doctrine. Jesus was a baby. I like N. D. Wilson’s sentence, “If He’d wanted a spiritual kingdom, He could have saved Himself a huge amount of trouble by just skipping Christmas.”⁸ 8 years after Bethlehem, he was an 8 year old. 5 years later, he was a teenager. Then he was a man, hammering nails and getting tired and sneezing and blinking and crying and laughing.

Because those are the kind of people he was going to substitute Himself for. The gospel hinges on this reality. He came in the flesh. He died in the flesh. And He rose in the flesh. Which of course means we can too.

The spirit that confesses that Jesus came in the flesh is, verse 2 declares, *from God*. False prophets may abound, but this prophet is not false.

But verse 3 continues, *and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already*. The Jesus John refers to here is the Jesus of the previous verse. Again, Robert Plummer notes that the use of the definite article before Jesus’s name is an “article of previous reference.”⁹ The spirit that does not confess Jesus as having come in the flesh is not from God. It has a different source.

While you might be tempted to think the theological particulars of the person of Christ are not quite that important, John disagrees. To teach a Jesus other than the God–man Christ is to embody the spirit of the antichrist. 1 John 2:22, *Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist*.

These truths are of such import, martyrs laid down their lives holding to them.

⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁷ See R. C. Sproul’s, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, The Humanity of Jesus.

⁸ N. D. Wilson, *Death by Living*.

⁹ Robert Plummer, *Daily Dose of Greek*.

So, how can you know whom to believe? You test the spirits by the content of their teaching. This is how you know the capital S Spirit of God taught them. My Mormon friend would be exposed.

But that's not all John mentions here.

3. Test the spirits by who listens to their teaching

Verses 4, 5, and 6 all begin with a pronoun in the original. Verse 4 is “you” in the plural. Verse 5 is “they.” Verse 6 is “we.”

Since we were just talking about the false prophets denying Jesus as having come in the flesh, let's start with them. The false prophets' words reveal their source. Their teaching reveals their teacher. Verse 5: *They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world.*

When John uses world, he's not referring to the grass and trees and stars. His dualism is not between physical and spiritual, but between those who follow and those who oppose Christ. In John 17, Jesus calls a people *out* of the world. And that world, Jesus asserts, hates them. So when John uses world, that's what he has in mind. These false prophets speak with the spirit of the antichrist, because they are anti dash Christ. They are from the world. That's their origin. Therefore, that's how they speak.

In v. 6 John moves from they to we. Again, teaching reveals the teacher's teacher. The confession reveals a source. John writes, *We are from God.*

John's epistle is as black and white as the font in front of you. Here, there are two teachings. These teachings come from two diametrically opposed sources. Further, these two sources produce two distinct audiences. Because the teachings are so opposed, they actually produce two different kinds of people. And John wants us to look at them as well.

This is his second test for the spirits.

Back in verse 5 John says the false prophets are from the world. It's no surprise he goes on to say, *and the world listens to them.* The world might not articulate their antagonism toward the incarnation or toward Jesus being the Messiah. They might not even subscribe to the false prophet's podcast. But they believe the heretics.

Further, who they listen to proves who they are. One man said, “The world welcomes their (false prophets) message gladly because they are saying just what the world

wants to hear.”¹⁰ Their deeds make clear they couldn’t believe Jesus is the Christ. Nor had God put on flesh. If he’d come in the flesh, that would affect how they lived in the flesh. And if He were God, that would affect everything else.

The converse is true; there’s a second audience. Stott asserts, “You can recognize God’s word because God’s people listen to it.” John 10:27 says something like this, *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*

This second audience is different than the world. John’s not been vague about that. He’s been describing this crowd throughout the letter. According to 1:7, they live in the light. Chapter 2:6 asserts that they walk in the same way Jesus walked. In chapter 2:15, they’re not to love the world, i.e. giving in to the desires of the flesh or the eyes or the pride of life. In chapter 3, they love their fellow Christians, but not merely in talk. In fact, they lay down their lives for their fellow believer. They practice righteousness, according to 3:7. They abide in God. Of course, in all this they sporadically fail, so they’re also a people marked by confession of sin, according to 1:9.

This is a different kind of people, is it not? While John’s told us throughout the letter how we can know whether we’re Christians—the doctrine of assurance—he’s also told us how we can recognize other Christians. So, now that you have that composite picture of this kind of people, you might ask, “Who do those people listen to?”

Because another characteristic of these people is their preferred teacher. Verse 6: *We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us.* John Stott writes, “We can test the spirits, by examining not only the message they proclaim but the character of the audience which listens to them.”¹¹

Who are the Christians listening to? Ultimately, they hear God’s voice. But how has God chosen to speak? When John says, “*we*,” in *we are from God* he means to include himself among the apostles. God inspired these authors. And whoever knows God listens to them. The Christians were listening to the apostle’s teaching about Jesus.

Now, maybe this is a belabored application—as it should be—but we need to ask ourselves whom we’re listening to. The only way to hear the apostles—and ultimately God—is via the intake of the Scriptures. For the one yet to open God’s word outside this building,

¹⁰ Yarbrough, BEC, 228.

¹¹ Stott, *TNTC*, 159

John's statement lands with a certain gravity, *Whoever knows God listens to us*. Verse six states the terrifying alternative, *whoever is not from God does not listen to us*.

Further, this is a good reason to be a bit leery of theological novelty. If one test of a teacher is the character of those who listen, and another the faithfulness of the message, we might be wise to listen to those whom Christians have listened to for generations. The latest theological bestseller ought to be tested. We ought not believe it because so—and—so publishes it.

Further, this truth highlights the need for a community of people discerning truth *together*. If this church, the one Paul spent three years with and Timothy pastored, needed to be admonished to test the spirits, I dare say we do too. I believe this to be one reason we read books and talk about them together. This is why we prioritize bible study together. We don't think we can do it alone. Isaiah's not the easiest book to interpret, so our teachers are working through it this summer. They won't learn it all. In the fall, some of you will share truths they've yet to consider. All along the way, we'll keep one another from the ditches of heresy. That's one of the church's tasks.

And our passage ends, *By this we know the Spirit of truth* (capital S) *and the spirit of error*.

There are two tests in this passage for those attempting to speak for God. The content of the message they share and the character of their followers. The Scriptures and the Spirit are sufficient to help us with this task.

But we skipped the verse you all memorized as kids. Note verse 4, *Little Children, you are from God and have overcome them*. Those false teachers—the ones speaking in the spirit of the antichrist—John says you've overcome them. This almost sounds overdone, especially when you consider this is the same verbiage Jesus uses in John 16:33, *In this world you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world*.

The best podcast I listened to last week happened to be the 3–5th grade Sunday School class. One of the boys happened to bring up C. S. Lewis during prayer requests, which led to another young person bringing up Aslan. Of course, the white witch came up, Edmund, etc. I'm the teacher with a prepared lesson, but I'm just sitting back at this point. They aren't just talking to me, they're talking to one another. Clearly, their parents have taught them.

Eventually, the conversation turned to the power of evil and the power of good. Kids are worried about that. The reality is that adults don't read stories with the kind of fear

we used to. The white witch might not scare us. We're more worried about interest rates. We've heard them enough that we're pretty certain who will triumph.

But kids' insights help us recapture some of what really matters. They want to know, "Who is stronger?" "Who wins?"

John says, in v. 3, the spirit of the antichrist is in the world already. The bad guys are real. Jesus ascended, but these false prophets remain. That could be terrifying.

Yet he says, *you have overcome them*. This is the language of victory.

What's he mean by that? While there are two spirits warring for our ears, John says, "You've not believed the lies." This was true for the church John wrote. We can be sure when the false teachers left this congregation they pressured those who remained, "Come with us." But the recipients of this letter had stayed.

And this overcoming is no less true for us. 2000 years later, here you are listening to John. *Whoever knows God listens to us*. The false prophets haven't won. You listened to the Spirit of God.

But, note, this is not because of you. Why have you overcome? Verse 4: *for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world*. You've overcome the lies because of the Spirit of God. God met you. While the other message was appealing to our sin, selfishness, pride, yet the Spirit of God drew us. Though nothing in us preferred this message, we met a grace irresistible.

Conclusion

In our world, the voices keep coming, contradicting one another, yelling at one another. Maybe you're not sure whom to believe. John makes clear that we're not to believe everything. Some do. Instead, we're to test the spirits.

But there's an equal and opposite danger to being spiritually gullible. That is, the suspicious skeptic believes nothing. But John gives us these tests not only to keep us from falsehood but also because there's something—or someone—we're to be sure we believe.