

True or False? 1 John 4:1-6

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Friends, when I was a student and the teacher said there was going to be a test, I always hoped it would be a true or false test. One reason I preferred them was because even if I didn't know whether a statement was true or false, I still had a fifty percent chance, even if I just guessed. In a multiple-choice test, if there were four possible answers to a question, I only had a twenty-five percent chance of guessing correctly. Eventually I learned that on most true and false tests, the major statements are true, so if I just marked every statement "true," I would score better than fifty percent. Of course, I did have a little higher goal than that, so I would try to figure which statements on a test were true, and which were false. Yet, that was not always an easy choice to make. Often the false statements were "almost true." For example, "It never rains in Southern California." That is a false statement, even though a 1972 song implies it is true. A false statement may be almost true, but though almost might count in horseshoes and hang grenades, it does not count in true and false tests.

Friends, each of us takes some spiritual true and false tests. We might be listening to a sermon here at church, or listening to a teacher on a podcast or radio program. We might be reading an article or book, but we come across all sorts of ideas and teachings. Many of them will contradict each other. For example, I once heard a television preacher say, "Every Christian should own a new Cadillac or a Lincoln. God is our Father, and we need to live like a child of the King, like a prince or princess." On the other hand, I have heard other pastors say something like this, "A Christian should never be driving a new Cadillac or Lincoln. We should be giving money to the poor, instead of spending so much money on a car." So, who is right? At least one of those statements is false. And in this case, both are.

The internet gives us access to literally hundreds of different teachings or doctrines and many folks seem content to just guess which ones are true and which ones are not. Some people decide, "Well, maybe they are all true, at least to some degree. As long as people are sincere, and as long as they are kind to others, it doesn't really matter what they believe." Others claim, "God is much more pleased with a generous atheist than

with a selfish Christian. Our actions are far more important than our beliefs." But is that really the case? As we have explored the first three chapters of this letter we call First John, we have found it is a very practical book. John is very concerned about how we live. Yet, he never indicates that what we believe is unimportant. He knows how valuable true teaching is, and how destructive false teaching can be. Friends, this morning our text is 1 John 4:1-6. Let's pause and pray the Lord would use His word this morning to help us see how important it is to believe what is true and reject what is false.

When asked what false doctrine was, one boy in the Sunday school class eagerly raised his hand and said, "It's when the doctor gives the wrong stuff to people who are sick." Indeed, false doctrine is bad spiritual medicine. Throughout the New Testament and especially in 1 John, the Lord teaches us that truth and practice, right belief and right living, cannot be separated. They go hand in hand. One is useless without the other. It is, as I say, like the flesh and bones of the human body. The skeleton by itself is dead and ugly, but the flesh without bones is weak and useless. If all our Christianity consists of is believing right doctrine, then our faith often ends up being ugly. I have seen churches like that. There are long discussions about whether the Rapture happens before, after or during the Tribulation, but you see very little love expressed either for God or for other people.

Yet, without true teaching, right belief and doctrine, Christianity becomes pretty much useless. It ceases to be Christianity. That has happened to some churches. I think of what are often called mainline Protestant denominations. For example, there is the Presbyterian Church USA. One hundred years ago or so, most Presbyterian churches were solidly Evangelical, and committed to following what the Bible teaches. However, professors, pastors, and regular people within these congregations began to compromise their beliefs. First it was only a minority who questioned the authority of the Bible, but eventually that became the predominant attitude. Today the PCUSA officially advocates abortion rights, ordains pastors who are practicing homosexuals, encourages same-sex marriage, and has churches where people pray to "the divine mother, Sophia," rather than to our

Father in heaven. Now, don't be confused. There are Presbyterian denominations such as the PCA (Presbyterian Church in America) and other smaller groups which are very Evangelical. Even within the PCUSA there are many people who are genuine Christians, love Jesus, and believe the Bible. My cousin is a Presbyterian pastor who I think falls into that category. Yet, the sad reality is that many churches and pastors in this denomination have abandoned genuine, biblical Christianity.

A big reason why this happened, is because many in that denomination compromised the truth by accommodating false teaching and refusing to reject it. However, compromise with a false teaching doesn't work. It is like the story of the compromise between the bear and the hunter. As the hunter raised his rifle to shoot the bear, the bear said, "Wait a second, what do you want?" "I'd like a fur coat," the hunter replied. "That is reasonable," answered the bear. "I just want a full stomach. Let's just sit down and work out a compromise." So, they sat down and after a while the bear walked away alone. He had his full stomach, and the hunter had his fur coat. Well, the point of that rather gruesome story is that compromise is not always a good thing. And a compromise between true and false teaching, can never result in truth. It can only lead to a new version of false belief. In John's day and in ours, it is essential for Christians to reject false teaching and to not compromise with it. Yet, to do so we need to be able to distinguish with is true from what is false. When you read an article on the internet, hear a program on the radio, or listen to someone preaching from this pulpit, you want to be able to figure out whether what you are being taught is true or false. You want to be able to discern, what is fact and what is fiction, what is truth and what is error, what is truly from God, and what is not.

That is why **1 John 4:1** says, *Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to determine if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.* The situation John is addressing is this: a human teacher or prophet often claims to have a message from God. However, we need to realize that is not always the source. When a false teacher proclaims false doctrine, those ideas are rooted not in the Holy Spirit, but in the demonic. That doesn't mean false teachers are demon possessed or something. Yet, false ideas about God originate with the enemy of truth, Satan himself. Likewise, a teacher who

proclaims the truth is being prompted in some way by the Holy Spirit, as the NLT puts it: *do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit.* Don't be gullible. Check it out and make sure it is really truth. Make sure what is being taught is rooted in the Holy Spirit, rather than an evil spirit.

To enable us to distinguish between true and false, John gives us three tests or questions to use in evaluating any teacher we hear. These criteria were important in the first century, and this is still important in the twenty-first century.

Number one, is the teaching correct about Jesus Christ? **4:2, 3** *This is how you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. But every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist; you have heard that he is coming, and he is already in the world now.* A number of weeks ago, as we studied chapter 2, we noted John's view of Jesus Christ. In his day, like ours, there were those who either denied that Jesus was fully God or that He was fully human. John uses the phrase "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" to affirm his conviction that Jesus is 100% God and 100% human. Anything contrary with that is a false teaching. Anyone who advocates something contrary to that is a false teacher. The heart of Christianity, is Jesus Christ. To be wrong about Jesus is to be wrong, period! A religion can advocate good moral values, encouraging strong families, discouraging consuming a drug like caffeine, and even make some of the best commercials on television. However, if they are wrong about Jesus, they are wrong...period. Those, like Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses, who say Jesus was a created being, someone less than God, or liberals who say He was merely a great man, or other religions, such as Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism are all wrong about Jesus Christ, which makes them wrong, period. That makes them false religions. It doesn't mean they are horrible people, but it means they are wrong.

"What about Judaism, Pastor Dan? Some folks claim God's covenant with the Jews means that it is okay for them to not believe in Jesus, because God has them on a separate track of some type. Yet, that is completely contrary to what the New Testament teaches. To deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, is to deny God." Yes, as Christians, we need to always remember, we are the branches being grafted into the tree of what Judaism is a natural part. (Romans 11) As Edith

Schaeffer used to say, "Christianity is Jewish." But, we must always remember that the great news of who Jesus is and what He has done for us is the only source of salvation, Romans 16, to the Jews first and also for the rest of us, the Gentiles.

Some of you are thinking, "Boy, Pastor Dan, you sure are a narrow minded and judgmental person. How can you be so hard on all those other religions? We have to be tolerant of other beliefs." And friends, I do believe we need to be tolerant. A few hundred years ago, people were burned at the stake if they were wrong about Jesus. That was not right! We should never use force or coercion to try to persuade someone to believe the truth about Jesus. We should be tolerant of and respectful toward people who disagree with us. We should love those folks. We should love them enough that we care about the fact they are putting their eternal destiny at risk because they are wrong about Jesus. Folks, our beliefs about Jesus Christ are just as important as they were a few hundred years ago. Sometimes we can make a mistake, do something wrong, and it will have little impact on our lives. If I really believe I can run a one-hundred-yard dash in ten seconds, and it takes me thirty seconds to do so, I might be a little embarrassed, but my false belief will not really harm me. But, if I believe I can safely jump from a ten-story building, and do so, my mistaken belief will have serious consequences. Disastrous consequences.

I think there are some mistaken, false teachings which people can believe without causing significant spiritual harm. For example, some Christians maybe even some in this room, believe in the practice of infant Baptism. I think you are wrong. But, I don't think something terrible is going to happen to you. Presbyterians, Lutherans and others will be a little embarrassed when they get to heaven and find out that we Baptists were right, but if they are trusting in Jesus Christ, they will be in heaven, and that is what really matters. Being mistaken about Jesus, however, has serious consequences. Our salvation depends on Jesus being both God and man. To deny that is who He is, is to reject the salvation God provides through Him. No other mistakes could be more serious, deadly or permanent. Anyone who seeks to persuade others to deny Jesus Christ is clearly a false teacher, who is actually called an "anti-Christ." This friend, is the most important basic question in the test, but John has two more.

Number two, is the teaching in agreement with what the Bible teaches? Specifically, does the teaching agree with the New Testament, with the teaching of Jesus and His apostles? **4:5, 6** *They are from the world. Therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Anyone who knows God listens to us; anyone who is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception.* In other words, false teachers speak from a "worldly perspective." John says he and the other apostles speak from God's perspective. Thus, the bottom line is that a teaching is true if it agrees with the apostolic teaching. Now that seems to be an extraordinary claim. It seems quite arrogant. Yet, John's confidence is justified because of the unique relationship he had with Jesus. folks, today we have the authoritative teachings of Jesus and His apostles right here, in the Bible, in the New Testament. When you hear a sermon, read an article, listen to someone on the radio, you need to be asking, "Does this contradict what the Bible says?" For example, when I hear someone say, "God doesn't know what choices we are going to make tomorrow," I say, "No, that is wrong. It is contrary to what the Bible teaches in Psalms 148 and many other places." When I hear someone say, "There are many different paths to heaven." I say, "No, that is wrong, that is not what the Bible says in John 14:6 and many other places." When I hear someone say, "There is nothing wrong with two people who love each other getting married, even if they are the same sex," I say, "No, that is wrong, that is not what the Bible teaches."

Of course, a problem sometimes arises, because we don't know the Bible well enough to determine if a particular teaching conflicts with what the Bible says. Charles Spurgeon, the nineteenth century pastor, said, many Christians knew their ledgers better than their Bibles. Today there might still be a few Christians who know their checkbooks better than their Bibles. And some folks know all about the latest movies, but don't really know their Bibles. And other people know the Green Bay Packers have won thirteen NFL championships, including four Super Bowls, but don't know the basic teachings of the Bible. The way to identify false teachers is to compare what they say to what the Bible teaches. To do that we need to have a good idea about what the Bible says. It is important that we study the Bible so we know it well enough to apply this test.

Number three, is the teaching in conflict with what Christians have always believed? Most Christians agree that what the Bible teaches is true. However, disagreements exist on what particular texts mean and how they should be interpreted. One thing that helps us determine whether a teaching is true or false is to compare it to what other Christians at other times and other places believed. Remember, verses 5 and 6 tell us that a sign a teaching is true is God's people, those who are genuine Christians, accept it as true. For example, let's say someone stands in this pulpit and reads **Luke 14:26a** *If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters...he cannot be My disciple.* He then says, "Your assignment today is to go home and email your father and mother saying that you hate them." Friends, even though that is what the Bible might appear to say, that would be a false teaching. How do we know that? Well, one, other places in the Bible tell us we are to honor our father and mother. Comparing one passage in the Bible with another is an important part of making sure we are understanding it correctly, two, we can note that for two thousand years, Christians have agreed that even though our love for God should be greater than our love for our family, we should not hate our parents. We should always have a healthy skepticism about new and novel ideas. When someone claims to discover a new meaning to a biblical text that no one has ever seen before, it is likely that this new interpretation is a wrong one.

Now, I don't believe in infallible church tradition. God may indeed inspire one individual to rediscover a neglected truth. There is what He did in the reformation when Martin Luther began to proclaim salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. Yet, we need to be very cautious about accepting teachings that are contrary to what most Christians have always believed.

John makes one more important point. **4:4** *You are from God, little children, and you have conquered them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.* John is confident that led by God's Spirit, his readers will not be led astray. He is confident that Christians, whether in the first century or the twenty-first century, will be able to discern between true and false teaching. The Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth, just as Jesus promised in John 16:13.

Friends, we live in a day of much doctrinal confusion. Even within Evangelical churches there

are those who claim salvation is possible in other religions and it is not necessary to believe in Jesus Christ. There are some who argue eternal punishment in hell is not a reality. Others think the Bible's teaching that there are distinct roles for men and women, both at home and in the church, was only temporary, is out dated and needs to be abandoned. Some believe that committed homosexual relationships are not sinful. How do we know whether these teachings are true or false? Well, we ask those three questions:

1. Is the truth about Jesus Christ being affirmed?
2. Does the teaching agree with what the Bible says?
3. Does it agree with what most Christians have always believed?

If the answer to those three questions is yes, the teaching is probably true. And then we need to ask the Lord to help us recognize the truth, and trust Him to do just that.

Yet, when it comes to choosing truth over error, true teaching or false, an ounce of prevention is probably worth not a pound, but a whole ton of cure. We need to train ourselves to recognize the truth, by saturating our hearts and minds with truth. C. S. Lewis said, that despite what we may have heard, Satan's main strategy is not to put false ideas into our heads, but rather to keep true ideas out. Yes, we need to guard against false teaching, but our primary focus needs to be filling our minds and hearts with the truth. Many of you are aware that when FBI agents are trained to identify counterfeit money, they study not fake bills, but real ones. An agent who knows what a real, true, fifty dollar bill looks like is able to spot a fake, counterfeit one. Friends, each of us needs to strive to grow in our understanding of truth. It doesn't matter if you have been a Christian for sixty years, or if you are still trying to figure out what this Christianity thing is all about. We all need to keep growing. Reading the Bible each day, being here at church on Sunday, being part of a small group Bible study, reading good, solid Christian books or articles, are all things we can be doing if we want to grow in our understanding of the truth. May the Lord enable us to choose the truth over the false each and every day.