

Three Ways To Discern the Truth

A Study in 1 John 4:1-6

This message is based on 1 John 4:1-6. One of the reasons John was inspired to write the first Epistle, was to help us become aware of false teaching, and to help us distinguish between the true and the false. John says in chapter 2:26, "These things have I written unto you, concerning them that seduce you." The word "seduce" means "to lead astray." We need instruction and guidance in order that we might distinguish between the false and the true, because there are seducers trying to mislead us. And certainly if it was necessary to distinguish between the false and the true in John's day, it is all the more needful today. Jesus warned His disciples that deception would increase as we approach the end of the age. Paul says that evil men and seducers (those who lead astray) will wax worse and worse as we approach the time of the end.

In our day there is a babel of confusing voices all around us. Many times the teachings presented become conflicting and bewildering and we hardly know which way to turn. Therefore we must learn the art of discernment; we must learn to sort out the true from the false. Verse 1 of our lesson in 1 John 4 says that we must "try" the spirits. The word "try" means "to prove or test." We are not to be like a sponge soaking up everything we hear, John says, there are too many false teachers around. We must test what we hear and read. We must examine it and analyze it and see to it that we accept only that which is true. You say, "But is it possible amidst all this maze of religious teaching, to know the difference between truth and error? Can we distinguish between the false and the true? Can we sort out what comes from God and what comes from the devil?" And the answer is definitely "yes." We can know the difference. John concludes the first six verses of chapter 4 by saying, "Hereby know we the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

John, in the first six verses of chapter 4, shows us three simple rules by which we can distinguish between the true and the false. And then he concludes in the latter part of verse 6 by saying that this is how we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

1. The Confession of a Divine Lord

1 John 4:2-3 says, "Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God; and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come, and even now already is it in the world."

Christianity is wrapped around the person of Jesus Christ. Anyone who detracts from the deity of Jesus Christ, His miraculous conception, His vicarious atonement, His bodily resurrection, and

His visible return, is an imposter and a false teacher. Many modern false teachers do not deny that **Jesus** has come in the flesh, but many of these same teachers deny that **Jesus Christ** has come in the flesh. There is a difference you know. "Jesus" is the name of our Master's humanity. "Christ" is the title of our Lord's deity. And many false teachers simply don't believe that the human Jesus who lived and walked among men, was the divine Christ. This, John says, is the spirit of antichrist. They confess that Jesus is come in the flesh, but not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. Paul speaks of those who preach another Jesus. They speak of a Jesus who was the son of man, but not necessarily the Son of God; a Jesus who was crucified, but not necessarily raised again; a Jesus who was born of David's royal line, but not necessarily the everlasting King of Glory. These men say Jesus was a remarkable youth, a great teacher, and a promoter of wonderful ideals, but He was not God come down to earth in human flesh.

The first simple rule by which you can discriminate between the true and the false, is to ask the question, "What place does this teacher give the person of Jesus Christ? How does he stand on the blood atonement? What does he teach about His sinlessness and His resurrection and His coming again?" Jesus Himself said, "He that honoreth not the Son, honoreth not the Father which hath sent him" (John 5:23)

Here is where the cults and the false religious systems break down. One translation of the Bible translates John 1:1 like this: "Originally the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god." Now "the Word" here speaks definitely of Jesus Christ because verse 14 of the same chapter says, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." The translation quoted above says that Jesus Christ was "a god," and "god" is spelled with a small "g." It appears that this is an attempt to distort the truth concerning our Lord's deity. The translators say that Jesus Christ was a man, neither more nor less. Before He came to the world, they say, He was a created angel. Jesus was a creature. He was not the combination of two natures (human and divine), but when He was in the flesh, He was a perfect human being, nothing more. Such persons do not confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh.

A noted British writer (who represents the modern liberal preachers within Protestantism) ridicules the deity and humanity of Jesus in this way: He says in his book: "The traditional view (that Jesus Christ is God come to earth in human flesh) leaves the impression that God took a space-trip and arrived on this planet in the form of a man." And yet in spite of this preacher's blasphemy, the Bible does actually teach that Jesus Christ is God come to this earth in the form of a man. In fact our lesson in 1 John 4 says that one who confesses not that Jesus is God come in the flesh is antichrist.

One basic test of any religious system, is its teaching concerning Jesus Christ. If its attitude toward Him is wrong, we may be sure that its entire body of doctrine is dangerous. The teaching concerning the incarnation of our Lord is important, because if Jesus is not God come

in the flesh, then Christianity is just like all other religions—man trying to approach God. But Christianity is just the opposite—it is God moving toward man. God moved toward man in the sense that God himself became man, so that men could comprehend Him, and respond to His love.

One more thing should be said here. Notice that it is not one who “denies” that Jesus is come in the flesh, that is antichrist, but rather, it is one who “confesses not” that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. Many false teachers do not openly blaspheme the person of Christ and deny His deity, but neither do they come out with a strong, positive statement proclaiming His deity. We must guard against the absence of true doctrine just as much as the presence of false doctrine.

2. The Indwelling of a Divine Spirit

1 John 4:4 says, “Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.”

When a person is born again and meets the conditions of salvation, the Holy Spirit actually comes into the heart of that newly-born child of God, and lives there. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:16, “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” It is almost unbelievable that God would come and live inside us, but it is true. God does not dwell in earthly temples made with bricks and stones; God dwells in the cleansed temple of the human heart. God dwells in you (1 Corinthians 6:19). Now John says here in verse 4 of our lesson, “Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.” In other words, God the Holy Spirit, who lives in you, is more powerful than the devil, who reigns in this world.

The devil has a great host of unseen angels who are constantly seeking to deceive men and to lead them astray. Notice in our lesson that when John speaks about false teachers, he does not say, “Believe not every teacher,” but he says, “Believe not every spirit.” John is simply saying that evil spirits are at the source of false teaching, and that men who promote false teachings are influenced by devils. And so you see, the battle against apostasy is spiritual. It’s not a matter of opposing men; it’s a matter of opposing wicked spirits. And therefore we cannot discern between the false and the true merely on the basis of our own intellectual knowledge. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:12, “For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but (by) the Spirit of God.” Paul is simply saying that no man can know God’s thoughts unless God’s Spirit reveals them to him. Discernment comes not from our reasoning powers, nor from our intellectual ability—but from the Spirit’s ministry within our hearts. By maintaining a close fellowship with the Spirit who lives within God’s children, we will have light for the problems that face us, and we will be able to detect that which is counterfeit and false.

The Holy Spirit gives us a mutual attraction for that which is true and makes us repulsive to that which is false. On a number of occasions, I've watched huge electric cranes unload scrap-metal from railroad cars. The crane had a tremendous magnet on it, that was dropped down into the car, and then lifted up, and huge quantities of steel would cling to the magnet. The operator of the crane would swing the magnet over to the scrap-pile, and then he would cut off the electricity and the metal would fall away. But you know, those magnets attracted only certain kinds of materials. Whatever stuck to the magnet, had to have an attraction to it. Certain kinds of materials just wouldn't stick. An old rubber tire, for example, just wouldn't lift, and so it is in the spiritual sense. Contact with error will be repulsive and contact with truth will be responsive to the person who is yielded to the Spirit of God. When you are in contact with truth, the Holy Spirit will, so to speak, "ring a bell" in your heart, and you will automatically sense that what is being preached is the truth. There will be an urge within to say "Amen." On the other hand, when you are in contact with error (and you are yielded to the Spirit of God), the falsehood just will not "ring a bell." People have often said to me concerning some kind of teaching they may have heard on the radio or read in books or heard from a pulpit—"There was just something about it that didn't seem right to me." They were not always able to give a clear theological explanation of what was wrong, but they knew something about it didn't sound right. This was the Spirit of God making them sensitive to that which was false and counterfeit. And this is a second test by which we can tell whether a teaching is true or false. How does the teaching in question accord with the inner conviction the Holy Spirit produces in your heart? Does it "ring a bell"?

Here is where much of our Protestant liberal denominational Sunday School literature breaks down. Listen to the writers of one denomination's Sunday School Literature as they describe the Book of Ezekiel, one of the great prophetic Books of the Old Testament: "Ezekiel is a weird book. The vision of God in chapter 1, reads like a modern fiction story. The animals could easily qualify as creatures from Planet X. It's a mad book . . . it's a dirty book . . . Ezekiel was a preacher's kid, but he knew how to shock his listeners." My Christian friends, if the Holy Spirit is living in your heart, that kind of language is going to be repulsive to you! The Holy Spirit who is the Author of these Books of the Bible, doesn't appreciate having one of His Books called "a mad book" and a "dirty book." And the writers imply that Ezekiel may have had something like an epileptic fit. If you're walking in fellowship with the Spirit of God, you're going to be sensitive to this kind of teaching. The Holy Spirit who lives in you, is greater (and wiser) than he that is in the world.

3. The Authority of a Divine Word

1 John 4:5-6 says, "They are of the world; therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God. He that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us."

John (the writer of the Scripture here) says, "He that knows God, hears us." The words "we" and "us" are emphatic in the original Greek, and thus these pronouns refer especially to the apostles themselves (and not to Christians in general) as the authorized teachers of the truth. John (the writer of Scripture) says, "We (the writers of Scripture) are of God." We have been especially commissioned by the Lord to teach God's truth. And then he says, "One who loves God and one who is eager to teach the truth, will get his final authority and his teaching from us (from the Scriptures)." Those who are false, by way of contrast, will follow the opinions and reasonings of men.

There is a contrast in these verses between what the world says (what men say) and what the Word says. Those teachers who belong to God and who are trustworthy and promoters of the truth, will identify themselves clearly by following carefully the authority of the Scriptures. On the other hand, teachers that are false and not to be trusted, will identify themselves by following the reasoning of men and by casting doubt upon the Scriptures. In other words, this final "test" that John calls to our attention, has to do with the teacher's attitude toward the Bible. Does he take the Bible seriously? Does he believe that the Bible is trustworthy? Does he strive to stay by its teachings? Or does he ridicule the Bible, and make light of the Word of God, and try to explain his way around certain teachings? How does the message in question accord with the Scriptures?

Isaiah 8:20 says, "If they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." We must test every message we hear and every message we read by comparing it with the Word of God. And if the message is not in accord with the Bible, it must be rejected. The Bereans studied the Scriptures each day to see if the things which Paul and Silas were telling them, were true. They realized that they were only to accept those things that were in accord with the Scriptures.

Here again, some writers often question the validity of the Word of God. They say, concerning Jonah and the big fish: "Did it really happen? Was Jonah really swallowed by a big fish? No one can really answer this question . . . nearly all the evidence points to the fact that Jonah is not meant to be a historical account, but as suggested (before), a parable." The writers of this literature are saying that Jonah may have not been a historical character; that "Jonah and the fish" was likely only a parable. But look at the Scriptures: "Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights"

(Jonah 1:17). And listen to Jesus (Matthew 12:40): “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” To say that the account of Jonah is not reliable is to cast reflection upon the integrity of Jesus, who Himself spoke of Jonah as a real historical person, and not as a fictitious character. Jesus compared His own death and burial and resurrection with the experience of Jonah and the great fish. If there’s nothing to Jonah, there’s nothing to the Gospel! Those teachers who ignore the Scriptures and ridicule the biblical accounts, are not from God, but are promoting doctrines of devils.

These have been three simple rules by which we are to discern truth from error, and by which we can discriminate between that which comes from God and that which comes from the devil. The three rules are: The confession of a divine Lord, the indwelling of a divine Spirit, and the authority of the divine Word. If the teacher in question exalts Jesus Christ as the Son of God, virgin born, sinlessly perfect, coming again; and if his teaching strikes a note of harmony with the inner voice of the Holy Spirit; and if his teaching is in accord with the Holy Scriptures—then you can be certain that he is a man sent from God, and that his teachings are in harmony with the truth. If the teacher confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh; if his teaching does not accord with the inner voice of the Holy Spirit in your heart, if he ridicules certain Scriptural accounts, and doubts the truthfulness of the Bible—you can be certain he is promoting teachings of devils.

We need to read God’s Word regularly, and hide it in our hearts daily, and ask God often for the gift which enables us to discern between truth and error. We need to pray like Solomon did in 1 Kings 3:9, “Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart . . . that I may discern between good and bad.” Dearly loved friends, don’t always believe everything you hear, just because someone says it is a message from God; test it first to see if it really is, for there are many false teachers in the world.

If you have not yet taken Jesus Christ into your heart, and committed your life to Him, why don’t you do it today?

-Harold S. Martin

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