

“Test the Spirits”

November 27, 2011

Text: 1 John 4:1-6

The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

reported the following in a 2003 that=>

Hundreds of research studies on television-violence and children have found that children may become immune to the horror of violence, gradually accept violence as a way to solve problems, imitate the violence they observe on television, and identify with certain characters, victims and/or victimizers.

Dr. Peter Olsson, a Professor of Psychiatry at Baylor College of Medicine, adds this=>

“It seems clear to me that adults are also vulnerable to the psychologically adverse effects of television and movie violence and irresponsible sex. Our American culture seems to be in massive denial of this reality.”

In the words of another university professor, “ideas have consequences”—not just the ideas acted out on TV, but theological ideas taught in our churches, as well.

Like our society as a whole, many Xns live in denial of this fact.

Some don’t think it matters much what churches teach, as long as they don’t take too long in teaching it.

They view theology as something preachers have to learn at seminary so they can graduate, get out, take churches, then start preaching about more important/useful subjects, such as how to become

confident/successful, how to get control of one's life,
and how to organize one's garage.

**In our text today, the Apostle John will warn us to test the
theological ideas being taught in our churches.**

He believed that what churches teach, really does matter.

So John will write "*Test the spirits*" behind that teaching.

In order to really understand what John means by that, let's first
consider who/what "*the spirits*" are that he's talking about.

"Spirit" can have a variety of meanings in Scripture.

God is a spirit, as are angels/demons, and man has a spirit.

In I Thes 5, Paul wishes for the Thessalonians=> "*May your
spirit and soul and body be preserved complete*"
(5:23).

Man's spirit/soul constitutes the intangible aspect of his
nature.

The body constitutes his tangible aspect.

There is a connection between our spirit and God's Holy Spirit.

In Ezek 36, God promised His people=> "*I will give you a new
heart and put a **new spirit** [disposition] within you; and I
will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you
a heart of flesh. / And I will put **My Spirit** within you and
cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to
observe My ordinances*" (Ezek 36:26).

The NT gives us further insight into the nature of man's spirit.

* In Jn 3:6, Jesus said=> "*That which is born of the flesh is
flesh, and that which is born of **the Spirit** is **spirit**.*"

* In the next chapter He added that "*true worshipers shall*

*worship the Father in **spirit** and truth”* (Jn 4:23).

- * In Rom 1, Paul wrote that he served the Lord “in his spirit” (1:9).
- * In Acts 17:16, he said his spirit was provoked w/i him,
- * And in Acts 19, he “***purposed in the spirit***” (19:21) to go to Jerusalem.

I believe man’s spirit has a spiritual capacity which links him to the spiritual world.

Dictionary of NT Theology=> “Pneuma [spirit] denotes that power which man experiences as relating him to the spiritual, the realm of reality which lies beyond ordinary observation and human control.... Thus the spirit of man is that aspect of man through which God most immediately encounters him..., that dimension of man wherein and whereby he is most immediately open and responsive to God.”

There are 2 spiritual domains—1 of the H.S., the other of evil spirits.

One is a domain of truth/holiness, the other of error/evil.

As man becomes identified with either one of these 2 domains, he takes on its moral character, adopts its purposes, and derives his spiritual power from it.

Jesus said that true worshipers worship God in spirit, which means that they adore Him with that inner spiritual capacity, seeking to become like Him morally, having adopted His eternal purposes, and having been empowered by His Holy Spirit.

When Paul served God in his spirit, God's purposes became his purposes, he sought to fulfill them in God's power, & his spirit became morally provoked w/ God's own provocation, over the sinfulness of Greek idolatry.

When a person becomes born again and indwelt by the H.S., the Spirit gives him a spiritual gift, which is a particular capacity for Spirit-empowered ministry to other believers.

By the same token, the unsaved can become identified with evil spirits in opposing God, just as Xns can identify w/ the H.S. in serving/worshiping Him.

E.g. when Jesus asked the demonized man who lived among the tombs, what his name was (Mk 5:9), he answered, "*My name is Legion; for we are many.*"

Clearly, the man had become unified/identified-with demon spirits w/i him, adopting their moral character/purposes.

They so empowered him that he could actually tear apart the chain/shackles that bound him
(Mk 5:4).

Conclusion: The "spirit" of man becomes an active participant in the spiritual war between God/Satan, as it is submitted to either the H.S., or demon spirits.

On a less dramatic but more common level, this principle is illustrated by the activity of false teachers.

False teachers are also under demonic influence, adopt demons' morals/purposes, & are spiritually empowered by them.

It's much more subtle than actual demonization, but it's just as real, despite it's appearing more civilized.

They're part of the world system that lies in the power of the evil one (I Jn 5:19), but demonic influence w/i them is even greater than it is in most people who are "of the world."

* E.g. I Tim 4:1=> *"the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons."*

Who are these "deceitful spirits" ?

They are false teachers, &/or the demons identified w/ them.

The doctrines they teach come from demons (according to what Paul says here).

* In 2 Cor 11:4, Paul rebuked the Corinthians, saying=>

*"If one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a **different spirit** which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully."*

The "different spirit" was apparently a demon-influence that counterfeited the H.S.'s indwelling.

A teacher w/ a demonic message, that contradicted the true gospel message Paul had taught, had brought this “*different spirit*” into the Corinthian church.

* In 2 Thes 2:2, Paul counseled the Thessalonians not to become disturbed=> “*either by a **spirit** or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.*”

The “spirit” that was disturbing them seems to have been a false-teacher who claimed to receive revelation and who was allied w/ a demon spirit/spirits.

It was all so subtle, the Thessalonians didn’t even realize that’s what was happening.

This problem still plagues us today, but the “doctrines of demons,” and the demonic teachers, take many forms.

They may be Buddhist priests who totally ignore Jesus;

* Or Muslim mullahs/imams, who claim Jesus was just a prophet, and an inferior to Mohammad;

* Or Mormon teachers who claim Jesus is the spirit-brother of Lucifer, denying that He is the Second Person of the Godhead;

They too have a demonic counterfeit for the indwelling of the H.S. called “the burning in the bosom.”

* Or a secular teacher, teaching that “string-theory” eliminates Christ’s role as Creator of the universe;

* Or a Catholic priest who destroys Jesus' unique primacy, by teaching that Mary is His co-equal, co-redeemer, and co-mediator.

When Xn churches form partnerships w/, or adopt the ideas of, any of these groups, they align themselves with the doctrines of demons, & directly/indirectly w/ demon spirits who invented those doctrines in the first place.

I used to flatter myself, thinking that no one who has sat under my teaching for long, would ever do that—I was wrong. So when John says, “*test the spirits,*” I hope you will listen, & that if some strong personality invites you to join their undiscerning congregation, you'll think about John's words very carefully.

In today's text, John gives us two tests by which to identify false teachers, and their false teaching.

First, the doctrinal test of their Christology—false teachers will always twist/pervert/downsize the doctrine of Jesus X.

Whether it comes in the form of Buddhism/Islam,

Mormonism/Catholicism, evolution/the New-Age, it will, w/o exception, always attack the doctrine of X.

It will prob. attack other Xn doctrines as well;

But the Xn doctrine of Christology will be the central focus of the attack.

Second, the association test—false teachers’ followers are “of the world” (their spiritual source), so they always/only associate on a spiritual level, with others of the world.

* **The Test of Christology**

John begins our text by commanding us to test the spirits by carefully examining what religious teachers teach.

We find that command in [1 John 4:1]=> *“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”*

John is telling us to discern/verify which realm religious teaching & teachers are from: that of the H.S. or that of the demons.

Behind every prophet is a spirit, for whom he speaks.

True prophets speak for the H.S., whom John calls=>
“the Spirit of truth.”

False prophets speak for demons in *“the spirit of error.”*

There is an urgency about our testing these spirits, because
“many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

We are surrounded by them, and they all want a hearing,
esp. from Xns.

They have *“gone out”* from their native darkness into the world, like missionaries of evil, on a mission of deception/error/confusion.

The pernicious influence of their going out continues on indefinitely.

It's naïve to be tolerant of their false teachings, thinking they are just harmless ideas.

Peter warns us=> *“False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves”* (2 P 2:1)

John gives us a method for determining whether a teacher & his teaching is from God, or from the demonic realm.

The spiritual origin of any teaching can be discerned by comparing it with the Bible's doctrine of Christ (Christology).

[Verse 2]=> *“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit [every teacher whose spiritual source is the H.S.] that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God;”*

“Confesses” means more than “believes”—it means openly & boldly proclaims/professes Jesus X, as having come in the flesh.

John isn't merely talking about people who have private faith.

He's talking about teachers who publicly teach that faith.

The original wording means that the main subject of what they teach is X Himself—not just facts about Him.

They know/love Jesus Christ, and they want to bring others into a personal relationship with Him, as well.

Those who do that, are from God—He is their Source.

Those who deny that, are not from God, but are empowered by the spiritual realm of evil.

The fact that Jesus came in human flesh, revealed the nature of His mission=> He came as a man, to save other men.

He also came as the Son of God, incarnate in a human body, as John mentioned at the beginning of his letter (1:3).

But that's not the point he emphasizes here, because the false teachers plaguing his readers were pre-Gnostics, arguing that Jesus really didn't come in a man's physical body, but as a phantom.

So John makes that the point of confrontation at which he directly attacks/contradicts their demon-inspired heresy.

Today there are people who are considered Xn teachers, but who will openly deny, either that Jesus is God, the Son of God, or that He is a true human being.

E.g. every modern liberal theologian argues that Jesus was a man, but only a man.

Their open denial of His deity makes them the easiest of all false teachers to identify.

The real challenge is to discern those teachers who subtly cloud the issue of Jesus' nature as Christ the Messiah, the Son of God.

E.g. some will acknowledge the union of X's divine/human natures, then go on to teach other ideas which implicitly deny that truth.

E.g. they may teach that someone other than the incarnate Son of God could also redeem us from sin, or serve as a mediator between God/us—e.g. Mary.

And that, in spite of I Tim 2:5=> *“There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”*

Or they may teach that we can have a hand in redeeming ourselves, by our own religious deeds.

Perhaps the most dangerous of these false teachers are those who simply say nothing about the nature of X at all.

What they don't say is more important than what they say.

What's missing from their sermons is due to intentional negligence, out of a desire to avoid controversy.

But it's silent denial, nonetheless.

People who find theology boring, like such teachers, because they make man the center of attention—not God/X.

They are humanists.

If they mention Jesus at all, they picture Him as a helper whose main job is to enable man to reach his full potential & to avoid anything unpleasant in this life.

Their worship services may have all the trappings of a traditional church, but when you really listen to what they say/don't-say, you realize that they are *“holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power”* (II Tim 3:5).

You may come out of there feeling good, but you
won't have actually worshiped God, at all.

Now we see the other side of John's doctrinal test=>

[Verse 3]=> *“and every **spirit** that does **not** confess Jesus is **not** from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.”*

The question John is answering here, is “Which teachers are from God?”

In verse 2 he said those who confess/profess the truth about the nature of Jesus X are from God.

Now he adds that those who don't confess the truth about Him, but deny it, are not—they are from the spiritual realm of darkness.

In fact, they are inspired by the same spirit that will inspire the Antichrist, when he comes.

Theirs is an anti-Christ spirit, because they oppose Jesus X. The ultimate Antichrist will come in time, but the spirit that will animate him is already here.

It is now animating many lesser antichrists, who also deny that Jesus is God's Son, come in the flesh to save those who believe in Him.

The real identity of Jesus X is the true litmus test of Xn faith.

He is central to our faith, & no real Xn should belong to a church that won't openly confess both His deity and His humanity.

There are a number of evangelicals today who might surprise you, because they believe/teach that all monotheistic religions worship/serve the same God.

They reason that God wouldn't let a Moslem suffer in hell simply because he didn't hear-about/believe in X as his Savior;

That God's mercy is too wide for such narrow thinking/doctrine.

But Jesus Himself said=> *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me"*
(Jn 14:6).

Denial of what the Apostles taught about Jesus X isn't just an intellectual error, but is lying rebellion against both God the Father and God the Son, animated by the same spirit that will someday drive the Antichrist.

I Jn 2:22=> *"Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son."*

So test #1 for determining from which spiritual realm a teacher comes, is the doctrine of X that he teaches;

Or that he refuses to teach.

The 2nd test has to do with that teacher's followers=> What kind of people does he attract?

True-believers/non-believers?

*** The Test of Association**

Verses 4, 5, & 6 each begin with a "from" statement=>

- * “*You [John’s Xn readers] are from God.*”
- * “*They [false teachers & their followers] are from the world.*”
- * “*We [Apostles like John] are from God.*”

There’s an old saying that “Birds of a feather flock together.”

On a spiritual level, that’s John’s point in this part of our text.

- * Those who are truly saved have their spiritual Source/origin in God, & listen only to teachers who proclaim God’s Word accurately.
They will not follow false teachers, but flock together with teachers of the Truth.
- * Those who are not saved have their spiritual origin in the world, talk like the world, listen only to worldly ideas, and always flock with worldlings like themselves.
They never listen to those who proclaim God’s Word.

Believers can never have spiritual fellowship with non-believers because the two groups are incompatible, come from opposite origins and are impelled by opposite spirits=> One the spirit of Truth; and the other, the spirit of error (verse 6).

II Cor 6:14=> “*What partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?*” Obvious answer=> None!

Sometimes people ask me if a person can be a true Xn and associate w/ 1 of the false religious groups I've already mentioned.

My answer is always, "Not for long."

If he's truly born again, he has nothing spiritual in common w/ them, & by his very nature he doesn't belong with them.

This impossibility of fellowship between spiritual light and darkness accounts for the disconnect between the saved the unsaved of this world, & between the unsaved and the truth of God's Word.

The Saved

[Verse 4]=> *"You are from God, little children, and have overcome them [false teachers]; because greater is He who is in you [HS] than he who is in the world [the devil—in whom the whole world lies]."*

How have born-again believers overcome the false teachers?

By not being duped into believing what they teach.

1 John 5:4-5=> *"Whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. / And who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"*

The world strives to destroy the Xn's faith.

But we haven't allowed it to do so.

In that way we have overcome the world.

False teachers teach that Jesus isn't the Son of God.

True believers say, “You’re wrong, He is.”

Why haven’t they believed the false teachers’ teachings?

Because true believers are from God, His seed remains in them (1 Jn 3:9), and that makes false teaching spiritually incompatible with their new nature.

In addition, they have been indwelt by the H.S., they have X w/i them, and they are “in X Jesus” themselves.

The Spirit of God within them is greater than any demonic spirit w/i a false teacher, from this evil world.

So there is no way their faith can fail to overcome his lies.

“*Overcome*” is a perfect tense verb, which means they have overcome, and will always continue to do so.

Moreover, they are spiritually sealed w/ the H.S., so Satan knows he will never win them over to his side.

So our protection from Satanic deception is two-fold=>

Sound doctrine, and the indwelling H.S. who illumines our minds as we “test the spirits.”

How could we ever have fellowship with the world and its false teachers if we constantly overcome them? We couldn’t!

So true teachers can be identified by those who listen to and associate with them=> true believers.

The Unsaved

The world is a closed system which can only speak from its own nature, and can only hear what is compatible with that nature.

So you can identify a false teacher by virtue of the fact that he & his followers are so locked into that system, the light of God's truth can never penetrate through their darkness. Wherever you find lost sinners grouped together around Satanic deception, there will be a false teacher(s) somewhere in the middle of them, teaching it.

[Verse 5]=> *“They [false teachers] are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, & the world listens to them.”*

“The world” is the present moral order, in which mankind is united with Satan in opposing God.

The world recognizes its own people and listens to their message because it reflects the world's own perspective.

The character of its teachers' words matches the character of its hearers, which is shaped by the wicked character of the world itself.

That makes what false teachers teach persuasive to those of the world, so they are glad to listen to-it/to-them.

These birds of a feather flock together—apart from Xns.

The Truth of God's Word

[Verse 6]=> *“We [the Apostles] are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth & the spirit of error.”*

We can recognize the true teaching of true teachers because God's regenerated people love to listen to God's Word written by the Apostles, which they preach.

The unregenerate can't bear it.

There are times when, as I stand at the door greeting people after a service, someone whom I've never met will scowl at me. They don't like me, because they don't like God's Word, and I have just proclaimed it to them.

Those who aren't from God don't listen, refuse to believe the truth, and prefer the spirit of deception/error.

On the other hand, there is an affinity between God's people and His Word, which causes them to want to hear more of it, so they can learn more about Him.

Jesus said=> "*He who is of God hears the words of God*"
(Jn 8:47).

In our own text "*knows God*" is progressive=> the Xn is progressively getting to know God better/better, & wants to hear whatever he can about the God he loves.

So Paul wrote, we who preach God's Word smell of death to the spiritually dead, but are a fragrance of life to the living
(2 Cor 2:16).

False-teachers/true-teachers are clearly discernable by the kinds of people who want to hear what they have to say.

With this understanding, we can (& we should) test the spirits of those who assume the role of religious teachers.

“Test the Spirits”
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Text: 1 John 4:1-6

1. In our text today the Apostle John will warn us to [10 test] the theological ideas being taught in our churches.

I Thes 5:23; Ezek 36:26; Jn 3:6; 4:23; Rom 1:9; Acts 17:16; 19:21

2. There are two spiritual domains—one of the Holy Spirit, the other of [10 evil] spirits.

Mk 5:9; 5:4

3. False teachers are under demonic influence, adopt demons’ morals and purposes, and are spiritually [22 empowered] by them.

I Jn 5:19; I Tim 4:1; II Cor 11:4; II Thes 2:2

4. In today's text John gives us two tests by which to identify false [20 teachers] and their false teaching...

* **The Test of Christology**

[1 John 4:1]

II Pet 2:1

5. The spiritual origin of any teaching can be discerned by comparing it with the [12 Bible].

[Verse 2]

I Jn 1:3

6. Today there are people who are considered Christian teachers but who will openly deny either that Jesus is God the Son of God, or that He is a true [12 human] being.

II Tim 3:5

[Verse 3]

7. The real identity of Jesus Christ is central to our faith, and no real Christian should belong to a church that won't openly confess both His [12 deity] and His humanity.

Jn 14:6; I Jn 2:22

* **The Test of Association**

8. Believers can never have spiritual fellowship with non-believers because the two groups come from opposite origins and are impelled by opposite [16 spirits].

II Cor 6:14

This impossibility of fellowship between spiritual light and darkness accounts for the disconnect between the saved and the unsaved, and between the unsaved and the truth of God's Word...

The Saved

[Verse 4]

9. How have born-again believers overcome the false teachers? By not being duped into [20 believing] what they teach.

10. How could we ever have fellowship with the world and its false teachers if we constantly overcome them? We [20 couldn't].

The Unsaved

[Verse 5]

11. The world recognizes its own people and listens to their message because it reflects the [16 world's] own perspective.

The Truth of God's Word

[Verse 6]

Jn 8:47; II Cor 2:16

12. False teachers and true teachers are clearly discernable by the kinds of people who [10 want] to hear what they have to say.