

Testing Spirits • 1 John 4:1–6

It seems to me that there are more contradictory claims and more crack pots in religion than perhaps in any other area of life in the world today. It is in the name of religion, at least in part, that the war was fought between Iran and Iraq with tens of thousands, perhaps over 100,000 deaths. In the name of religion there is the ongoing conflict that has devastated the city of Beirut. Beirut was once the prime city of the Middle East, a beautiful place, a place of tranquility and stability. But it has been laid in rubble and ruins all in the name of religion.

In the north of Ireland, there is ongoing conflict, again in the name of religion, a conflict where children at early ages are taught to hate and to murder. And it was in the name of religion that the Reverend Jim Jones took 1,000 followers from San Francisco and moved to the tiny South American country of Ghana and there led them eventually into a mass suicide.

It's all very frightening that there are so many competing claims for truth. So many people who speak for God, or at least claim that they do, and the result is often confusion. In fact, it is so confusing that there are people who have simply given up, who have simply said there is no way that they can figure out which one is right and which one is wrong. Therefore, they have given up altogether on religion and on God.

The problem is not limited to other places and other people, it's our problem as well. Most of us are bombarded on a regular basis by all kinds of claims. On cable television you can get religious telecasts that are side by side that provide contradictory claims from people who say they are speaking for God. You can read books that claim to be almost the oracles of God handed down directly from heaven. Some tell about the future. They tell you exactly when Jesus Christ is going to return. They will tell you the year and in some cases the month and even the day. There are those who say in writing that they have the secret from God for whatever the problem is that you're facing, whether it be financial distress or physical malady or spiritual question. They say they have gotten it from God and they are sharing it

with you.

Now all of this creates for us a problem. It is the problem of whom to believe. If we believe everybody, not only is there contradiction, but obviously we are going to be duped. There are many ways in which we are going to be deceived. Yet if we don't believe anybody, then aren't we risking missing out on the very good that God has for us?

I look at different people and it seems to me that the farthest ranges of response to this type of problem have on the one end gullibility and on the other end skepticism. There are many Christians who are genuinely gullible, who are naive. If they hear someone speak it from a pulpit or hear it on the radio or television or if it's written in a book, they believe it. As crazy as the ideas may be, as far-fetched and contradictory as they come, they believe it all.

At the other extreme are those who are skeptical Christians. They are not very likely to believe much of anything. You can show them a miracle and they will find something to criticize. They are the kind of people who say, "I'll believe it when I get a handwritten letter from God." They are reluctant to believe.

There is a better way. It was written about by the old man John, the closest friend of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament book of I John, chapter 4, he wrote, "Dear friends, 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."

This is one of the Bible's most practical principles. It tells Christians to always test before we believe. We need to understand exactly what John is here saying. When he

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speaks of spirits, he is not necessarily specifically talking about demons or ghosts or angels or some other type of invisible supernatural creatures. The Greek word that he used I John 4:1 is the word "pneuma", and it has lots of different meanings as we translate it into English. For example, pneuma can mean breath. Pneumonia is disease of the lungs and has to do with how we breathe. Or pneuma can mean air, and we have that in English as well. We speak of pneumatic chisels or drills or an air ham-

mer. Pneuma can also mean wind that blows through at whatever speed for good or for ill. And the word can also mean spirit. It's the word that's used in the Bible for the Holy Spirit or for an evil spirit. The meaning of the word is neither good nor bad nor neutral. It can depend upon the context and what is being referred to.

Actually, there is a sense in which all of these meanings may here apply. Christians are here told to test or to check out the spirits, whether it's the current fad or some speaker or teacher who makes a claim that is alleged to have come from God, or it may mean the Spirit of God or the spirit of the devil. The point here is that Christians should check out everyone and not believe anyone or what that person says simply because he or she speaks from a pulpit or is a teacher in a classroom or has written a book or is on television. We as Christians should first run some tests. The reason we should do it is because there are many false prophets who have gone out into the world.

When I was a college student I had, for a couple of years, a job where one of my responsibilities had to do with electrical installations and repairs. I had to put in some circuits and wire fixtures and do some repairs and installations of air conditioners and furnaces and things like that. Up until that point, my experience had been pretty much turning lights on and off. I had never really known very much about electricity or how the whole thing worked. The fellow that trained me in that job taught me some basic things and then I learned a lot from trial and error. One of the basic things he taught me that was most helpful was that you should always check first to find out whether a wire was hot before you put your hand on it. He had me buy one of those little electrical testers with the two wires and the metal probes that are at the end, and at the other end was a little light. When you touch it into an outlet or to a wire that's hot, you can see whether or not there is electricity there. I carried one of those inexpensive testers in my pocket and did that test probably thousands of times, finding out if the wire had electricity before I grabbed it.

That is the same principal that is applied here in the New Testament. Before we grab onto some teacher or some teaching, we must first run a test. Before we join a church, before we believe something that's in a book, before we give money to some cause that is supposed to be good and right, we test first. Always test to find out whether or not it's 'hot' before grabbing hold of it. The principle is simply

stated in four words, test before you believe.

The practical advice on how to actually conduct this test is here in I John, chapter 4. You will find there that the test is divided into a pair of categories referring to the test of the good guys who speak the truth and of the bad guys who speak falsehood.

Dear friends, 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. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

So first we run the good guy's test. The primary test is in verse 2. "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God." In other words, Jesus is the litmus test of truth.

If you want to find out if a liquid is acid or not, you can put litmus paper into it. If it turns red, that proves that it is acid. The same is true concerning any truth that is presented to us. We can check it against Jesus Christ to determine if it is accurate or if it is false. Jesus is the litmus test for every teaching and for every teacher.

How do you run the test? Well there are really two parts. One has to do with fact, and the other has to do with faith. In both cases, it involves acknowledging Jesus Christ. The fact is that Jesus is the Christ, the eternal Son of God who became human in flesh like ours. So we can test any teaching up against that fact. But there is also a faith factor in all this, and that is a personal acknowledgement of this Jesus as the Christ and as the God of my life. So it must be both, not just fact without faith nor just faith without the right facts. In other words, is the teacher Christian in belief about Jesus and in the facts about Jesus? Does that teacher acknowledge Jesus Christ in terms of accuracy, but also in terms of personal commitment? It is not just a matter of a teacher get-

ting the story straight, it is also a matter of whether or not that teacher has applied the truth of Jesus Christ to his or her life.

One of the earliest documents written by and for Christians after the conclusion of the New Testament was written right around the year AD 100 - the last book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation, having been written around AD 95. It was just a few years later that a book called the Didache, which means teaching, was written. The longer title of it is The Teaching of the Twelve. It is a most fascinating and helpful document of Christian faith and order. From it we get a lot of insights into the understanding that first century Christians had concerning the New Testament and what was appropriate in Christian faith. They faced the same issue that we face today, of who is the good guy and who is the bad guy and what is the truth and what is false.

In the Didache, number 11 and 12, we read two lines: First, "Not everyone who speaks in a spirit is a prophet." Now that's almost word for word what I John 4:1 says. But it's the next line I am particularly interested in: "He is only a prophet if he walks in the ways of the Lord." So they are further defining what it means to acknowledge Jesus Christ. The test of the teacher is right information, but the test of the teacher is also whether or not that teacher walks in the ways of the Lord.

Let's suppose that you walk into a church service or into some other meeting and someone is standing up teaching. You are not sure if what that person is saying is right or wrong. What you do is test the teacher and the teaching up against Jesus Christ and whether or not what is said is true and whether or not that teacher lives what is true and what is said. The test is passed—good. Then we move on.

In verse 6, the good guys do not only acknowledge Jesus but are also said to be from God. That is, they teach and they live in ways that are consistent with who God is and what God says. That is the most objective test there is in terms of the Bible. If someone starts spouting off all kinds of ideas that are based primarily upon personal experience, we need to beware because personal experience is not objective authoritative. People can tell you that they have experienced anything, and they do. But if we are going to base our faith on their personal experience rather

than the authority of the word of God, then we are in significant danger.

Earlier in this century there was a pastor in Fort Worth, Texas, named J. Frank Norris. One day a woman got past the secretary and went into his study. As she walked in, she reached in her purse and took out a revolver, pulled back the hammer, and pointed it right across his desk at him. She explained that she had received in a dream an instruction from God that she should come that day to shoot and kill him.

Norris, thinking far more quickly than I could under such circumstances, did not bat an eye. He looked her in the eye and said, "You are absolutely

right. God gave me the same dream. He told me that you would come here and shoot and kill me, but on Thursday. Today is Tuesday."

She thought for a moment and then released the hammer on the revolver and put it back in her purse and said, "You're right. I'll be back." And she walked out. True story. He called the authorities and she was arrested.

Now all of that is to say that people, by their own experience, can tell you anything, and they can tell you that it is from God. The question is whether it really is from God or not, and the only objective way we can test that is up against the objective authority of the scriptures.

You may hear all this and you say, "But how am I supposed to know?" There are people who teach wrong things, who spout off the Bible a great deal. In fact, many people who are heretical in their teaching are in fact very eloquent and very wise in the peppering of their speech with scripture quotations. And you say, "How am I supposed to know whether they are really speaking from God or really speaking from their own experience and their own authority?"

That is a continuing problem. So let's finish reading this "good guy test" in verse 6. "We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us." The one who originally wrote this was John, one of the 12 disciples of Jesus. He was in the inner circle, closest to Jesus, and identified as Jesus' best and closest friend. So when he speaks, he speaks with a clear authority that was acknowledged. He also says that those who are Christians in the first century community listen to what he says and agree with him. In other words, other Christians listen to the good guys. We as individual Christians need to be extremely

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cautious that we do not make unilateral and independent decisions concerning who is true and who is not. We need to look to others around us in the community of faith, those that we may know particularly well. We need to know what they believe and where they stand, and especially know whether they live in a way that is consistent with the teaching of the scripture. And if they give credence to a teacher that we may not be sure of, then that is a positive indication that that person then passed the test.

Suggesting that, I would guess that there are some of us who are uncomfortable with that test. We might say, "Can't all Christians be wrong? And what about the times when large numbers of people have been deceived? What about Jim Jones? He, at least initially, professed that he was speaking for the Bible and speaking for Jesus Christ, and yet he led these people off to something that was clearly contrary to the Bible and to cultic activities and eventually into suicidal death. So the test doesn't seem like a very good test. Actually, it is a very good test, for there are other Christians whom you know and whom you trust because you have had opportunity to observe them, I hope, over an extended period of time. They believe the Bible, they live the Christian life, and that makes their opinion very valuable and very significant in determining that if they listen, you should listen. But it's not a part of the test that stands alone.

Actually, I wish we could merge all of them together and understand them as a single test. For example, we have this teacher or this teaching and we say, "Does this teacher acknowledge Jesus Christ in terms of correct facts and personal faith? Does this teacher speak primarily from God rather than primarily from experience? Do other Christians I know to be credible also listen to this teacher and to this teaching?"

These tests are not exclusive, as if there are no others, for there are other tests within the Bible. They are not exhaustive; they are also not foolproof. What we need to do is understand the principle, and the principle is to test before we believe, rather than get hung up on the specific test.

Back when I was working with electrical repairs, if I inserted those two prongs into an outlet and it didn't light up, that would indicate that it wasn't hot. But, if I pulled it out and there were three-foot sparks that came out with it, I am smart enough to know that I shouldn't stick my finger in, regardless of the first test. What I need to do is recognize that the greater principle is that we should test all teaching

before we believe, and these are some of the tests that are offered to us.

These same tests work on the bad guys, only in this case the litmus doesn't turn red. The results are very different. So in verse 3 it says, "Every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world." There are a lot of false teachers who need to be tested about Jesus.

Like you, I have had representatives of various cults show up at my door. I try to be gracious and to represent Jesus Christ well. But I try also to bring the conversation around to what I consider to be the more important points, rather than let them control the conversation and its direction. I consider the most important point to be Jesus Christ. As soon as I possibly can, I graciously ask the question, "Who do you consider Jesus Christ to be?" I find that the representatives of these cults are often very well trained, and often very articulate. They begin with carefully chosen words. But I discover before long that they do not believe that Jesus is the Christ. They do not believe that he is God who has come in human flesh and who died on the cross to pay for human sin. I find rather quickly that they do not acknowledge Jesus as I acknowledge Jesus.

Now that is not meant in any way to say that they do not have a right to believe whatever they choose to believe, for indeed they do. However, their beliefs about Jesus are at enormous variance with the beliefs and the teaching of orthodox historic Christianity for 2,000 years, going back to roots in the scriptures themselves. The Bible here is rather blunt, that failure to rightly acknowledge Jesus makes someone antichrist, "anti" meaning opposite or opposed. As a Christian then, I cannot accept the teachings of anyone who is antichrist, opposite or opposed or against Jesus Christ.

The words that were first written here, 2,000 years back, were written not with the expectation that someone was going to ring a doorbell or knock at the door, they were written for the context of a local Christian church. And so that is the primary application to us. We need to be concerned about whether the truth is being taught within the context of the church, this church, Wooddale Church. If I, or anyone else, do not acknowledge Jesus Christ, don't believe what we say. It doesn't matter whether it is spoken from this pulpit or the podium of some classroom, in a hallway discussion, or as part of a small group that is somehow endorsed by Wooddale

Church. If it doesn't align with the truth as taught in the scripture and if the person who is the teacher does not live the truth that is taught, then disagree, walk out, kick out the teacher and the teaching. Do whatever is appropriate to do, but always test before you believe.

Verse 5 goes on to say that the "bad guys" who teach falsehood "are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. And so the bad guys flunk the test a second time. They are those who are not sourced in God. They speak in the wrong spirit and for the wrong spirit. What they speak is the "world stuff" rather than "God stuff." Whatever is the current philosophy, whatever is the issue, that is their teaching. It is not from the Bible, it is not from God, but rather it is from the current headline in the newspaper or last week's topic in the news magazine. It's the current fad that is going around. It is the philosophy that some people are buying into. Awhile back it was anti-communism; today it's New Age. It's going to keep changing; it has always kept changing. Whatever the hot topic is is not necessarily the topic that is from God himself.

We are not here saying that those who teach the truth from the scripture and about Jesus Christ should not be informed on current events, for surely we should. It is not suggesting that we be irrelevant; in fact, we ought to be very relevant. We ought to be informed and we ought to be responsive to the false teachings that are in the world. But if they are central and if they are primary, then we need to beware because there is the great danger of adopting the world's prospective as one's own. When people speak from the world's viewpoint, they are speaking from a whole philosophy of life that does not fit with Jesus Christ in the Bible. And let me tell you that there is enormous variance between what Jesus Christ teaches and the general viewpoint of the world.

The Bible instructs us that Jesus is the most important of all and that we should live for him. The viewpoint of the world is that we should live for ourselves. Those could not be more opposite. The New Testament teaches us that suffering can be and often is a good thing. The viewpoint of the world is that suffering is always a bad thing. The definition of sin and the appropriateness of sin are very different depending on whether you are buying into God's prospective or the world's prospective. Much of what God describes as sin, the world condones as pleasure. Much of that which is purported by the world

to be good, God says is bad. There is something of an essential antagonism between the Bible and so much of the world's viewpoint. If that doesn't come through, if that antagonism isn't there, if the teacher is one who pleases everybody who has the world's viewpoint, then by the test of scripture, he must be classified as a bad guy who is teaching falsehood.

What if you do all this and you are still uncertain? What if somebody gives you a book or a tape or you go to some church or some seminar and you hear some things that maybe you've never heard before? It all sounds very good, but you're not really sure. What do you do?

Well, there's good news in I John 4:4. The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. I take great comfort in that. I find enormous spiritual victory in that wonderful truth—that the Holy Spirit lives inside of me and you and every Christian and that the Holy Spirit is bigger and better and smarter and stronger than the devil and every other evil spirit and false teaching in all of the universe. The Holy Spirit who is inside of me as a Christian is absolutely committed with all of his power and all of his smarts to my protection and to my success. The Spirit is not going to allow me to innocently slip into the trap and into the power of the enemy. We have—think of this—we have in us the Spirit of God himself and he is greater than all. He is the greatest, and he is in us. Amen.

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