

An Expository Study of 1 John
Part 7 (of 10 parts):

An Exposition of 1 John 4:1-6

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The first six verses of chapter 4 form a unit on the conflict between two spiritual realms, "the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (v. 6). They show no close connection with what follows and are best viewed as an elaboration on the reference to "the Spirit whom He has given us" (3:24). The conflict now presented forms the final aspect of the conflicts of the faith that John had been depicting since 2:18. He had already dealt with the conflict between truth and falsehood (2:18-28), the conflict between the children of God and the children of the devil (2:29-3:12), and the conflict between love and hatred (3:13-24). Now John marked the supernatural character of this conflict as ultimately involving "the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

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. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; 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. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We 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 and the spirit of error (1 John 4:1-6).

John now showed the importance of the proclamation of a sound Christology for confidence and victory in the Christian community.

Those who are truly of God must adhere to the apostolic message concerning Jesus Christ, who constitutes the very heart of the Christian gospel. Those who reject that message thereby reveal their anti-Christian character.

John urged his readers to test the spirits to determine their true identity (v. 1); he gave them criteria for testing the spirits (vv. 2-3); and then he set forth criteria for identifying the true character of the human speakers (vv. 4-6).

The Charge to Test the Spirits

In dealing with this crucial matter, John as a wise pastor again addressed his readers with the tender designation, "Beloved" (Ἀγαπητοί; cf. 2:7; 3:2, 21). It expresses his personal, loving concern for them as they faced the subtle danger of the false spirits. John charged them to test the spirits to determine their nature (v. 1a) and added why such testing is needed (v. 1b).

THE COMMAND IN REGARD TO THE SPIRITS (v. 1a)

John formulated his charge to the readers both negatively and positively. Negatively, his command is, "do not believe every spirit" (μὴ παντὶ πνεύματι πιστεύετε). John spoke against a gullibility prone to believe "every spirit" claiming to be from God. The use of the dative (παντὶ πνεύματι) with the verb warns against an attitude of acceptance and personal trust in the various spirits declaring their message through the human messenger. The force of the original order, placing "every spirit" between the negative (μὴ) and the present tense verb, has been differently understood. Robertson held that the negative is to be taken with the immediately following adjective "every"; this connection would negate an uncritical attitude which accepted every spirit, but would permit acceptance of some of the spirits as from God.¹ Kistemaker thinks the separation of the negative from the verb gives emphasis to the prohibition.² The negative with the present imperative generally means "stop believing." Burdick thinks this prohibition "suggests that the readers had shown a tendency to give credence to the false teachers."³ It is possible that some members had been prone uncritically to accept the claims of the spirits; but it is unwarranted to assume that John now

¹ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 5th ed. (New York: Richard R. Smith, n.d.), p. 752.

² Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 324.

³ Donald W. Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), pp. 291-92.

censured them by commanding them to stop the practice. Rather, John insisted that they must never yield to such an attitude of credulity. Let them not "believe" or give credence to every spirit that claims to be from God. As those who have personally experienced the divine endowment of the Holy Spirit (3:24), they must not uncritically accept every spirit speaking through some "inspired" human messenger who claims to be God's prophet.

The reality of powerful spirits speaking through human individuals as their mouthpiece was well known in the pagan world of John's day. The reality of such false prophets was long known to the people of Israel as well, and it early manifested itself in the church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:1-3). It seems clear that John's charge was prompted by the presence of mighty spiritual powers working through professed spokesmen of God. Whether various signs and wonders accompanied their teaching is not indicated. At various periods in the history of the church individuals have claimed supernatural empowerment which exhibited itself in professed revelations, prophecies, miracles, and the like. As Plummer observes,

About all such things there are two possibilities which must put us on our guard: (1) they may be unreal; either the delusions of fanatical enthusiasts, or the lies of deliberate impostors; (2) even if real, they need not be of God. Miraculous powers are no absolute guarantee of the possession of truth.⁴

It is a perilous mistake simply to identify the presence of the supernatural with the divine. Need for a critical assessment of religious teachers and their pronouncements has always been felt by Spirit-directed believers. And today, with the sweeping influx of cults and occultic forces, the need for spiritual discernment is urgent.

Positively, John insisted that believers must "test the spirits to see whether they are from God." The use of the adversative "but" (ἀλλὰ) marks the contrast between an attitude of credulity and intelligent discrimination. The present imperative verb "test" (δοκιμάζετε) presents this as a standing duty, while the second person plural lays this duty on all the readers. In 1 Thessalonians 5:21 Paul used this same term in directing his readers, "Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good." In 1 Corinthians 12:10 Paul mentioned this "distinguishing of spirits" as a distinct gift, but clearly all believers must be alert to this necessity. Church history shows that in all periods certain Christians have possessed outstanding ability to discriminate between true and false religious teachings. But as Clark remarks, "The fact that faithful pastors and

4 A. Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (1883; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), p. 141.

orthodox professors are better able to evaluate does not excuse those in the pews from doing their own evaluating."⁵ The ability and the duty to "test the spirits" is not restricted to any specific ecclesiastical or educational groups. Palmer remarks that John called his readers "to use their heads and to examine closely the theologies and doctrines of all their teachers. There, are no benefits to ignorance or to sloppy thinking."⁶

The verb rendered "test" (δοκιμάζετε), which occurs only here in the Johannine writings, basically means "to put to a test, to examine," like coins being tested for genuineness or full weight. The verb, as Plummer notes, "commonly implies a good, if not a friendly object; to prove or test in the hope that what is tried will stand the test."⁷ Another verb used in the New Testament (πειράζω),⁸ also has the general meaning of "putting to a test," but generally implies a sinister purpose, a testing applied with the hope that the object tested will fail; hence it is commonly rendered "to tempt." Trench notes that the verb John used here is never used of the work of Satan, "seeing that he never proves that he may approve, nor tests that he may accept."⁹ In testing the spirits believers need to maintain a "biblical balance, avoiding on the one hand the extreme superstition which believes everything and on the other the extreme suspicion which believes nothing."¹⁰

The specific point of the test is to determine the source of the spirits in whose power the speakers present their message, "to see whether they are from God" (εἰ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν). As Barker remarks, "The warning is not against those who feign the Spirit's presence but against genuine evil spirits inspiring the existence of false prophets."¹¹ Such testing implies the existence of an objective standard according to which the test is applied, and it has a clear precedent in the Old Testament. As Burdick points out,

⁵ Gordon H. Clark, *First John: A Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., n. d.), p. 123.

⁶ Earl F. Palmer, *1, 2, 3 John, Revelation*, The Communicator's Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1982) pp. 59-60.

⁷ Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 141.

⁸ In the Johannine writings πειράζω occurs only in John 6:6; 8:6; Revelation 2:2, 10; 3:10.

⁹ Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1947), p. 281.

¹⁰ J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 153.

¹¹ Glenn W. Barker, "1 John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 12:340.

Moses gave the people criteria by which to test anyone who professed to be a prophet (Deut. 18:20-22), namely, (1) what he said must agree with what God had previously revealed, (2) he must speak in the name of the Lord, and (3) it must come to pass. See also Deuteronomy 13:1-5; Jeremiah 23:9-22; 28:9.¹²

The test John set forth would reveal whether the prophets were "from God," whether they derived their message and inspiration from God. It would inevitably reveal their fundamental nature.

THE FACT NECESSITATING THE TESTING (v. 1b)

John set forth the historical situation that made it necessary for believers aggressively to test the spirits: "because many false prophets have gone out into the world." It was no mere future danger; "many false prophets" (πολλοὶ ψευδοπροφήται) were already at work. The adjective "many," as in 2:18, indicates that these "false prophets" were numerous. Jesus had explicitly foretold the coming of such false prophets (Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 24; Mark 13:21-23). Paul (Acts 20:28-30) and Peter (2 Pet. 2:1) had also foretold their coming. The use of the perfect tense "have gone out" (ἔξεληλύθασιν) marks their presence as an abiding reality. The force of the preposition rendered "out" (ἐκ in the compound verb) has been variously understood. Smalley takes it as an echo of the picture in 2:19 of the antichrists withdrawing from the Christian community.¹³ But in view of the use of two prepositions, "out" (ἐκ) and "into" (εἰς), Westcott suggests that "out" implies that these false prophets "are gone out on a mission of evil from their dark home," while "into" denotes their entry "into the world as the scene of their activity."¹⁴ Speaking through the false prophets, these evil spirits are now making the world of mankind their lecture hall. Plummer notes that this understanding of the arrival of the spirits on the scene of human history from the spiritual world is in accord with John's terminology in his Gospel (cf. John 3:17; 10:36; 12:47, 49; and esp. 16:28).¹⁵ Such a view seems consistent with John's portrayal of the supernatural nature of the spirits speaking through the false prophets.

While the designation "false prophets" ("pseudo-prophets") might denote individuals falsely claiming to be prophets, the term here clearly means individuals who proclaim a false message. The

¹² Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 293.

¹³ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 51 (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), p. 219.

¹⁴ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St John* (1892; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), p. 140.

¹⁵ Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 142.

term "is applied to the rivals of the true prophets under the old dispensation (Luke vi. 26; 2 Pet. ii. 1); and to the rivals of the apostles under the new dispensation (Matt. vii. 15, xxiv. 23, f.; Acts xiii. 6)."¹⁶ They were not merely teachers with an erroneous message but spoke under the inspiration of evil spirits characterized in 1 John 4:3 as being "the spirit of antichrist." As spiritual counterfeits of the New Testament office of prophets, they were a subtle and serious danger; the urgent need was to expose and repudiate them.

Some interpreters simply equate these "many false prophets" with the "many antichrists" in 2:18-19 who arose within the Christian community but separated themselves. The reference here to "many false prophets" will include the antichrists in 2:18, but the scene now is broader; it may include the representatives of the various cults that claim to be Christian as well as other religious movements that are distinctly non-Christian in their teaching and impact. The present sweeping inroads of occultic forces through the agency of mystical oriental leaders with their fantastic teachings and dynamic appeal certainly constitute a ringing challenge today to God's people to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God."¹⁷

The Criteria for Testing the Spirits

In verses 2-3 John presented the fundamental test in determining the identity of the spirits. In verse 2 the test is stated positively, indicating the assured presence of the Spirit of God; in verse 3 the test is stated negatively, revealing the spirit of antichrist.

THE EVIDENCE OF THE SPIRIT OF GOD (v. 2)

The words "By this you know the Spirit of God" look forward to the test as formulated in verse 2. The verb rendered "you know" (*γινώσκετε*) may be either imperative or indicative. Some interpreters take it as a command, corresponding to the imperatives in verse 1 ("do not believe . . . but test").¹⁸ It is more probable that the mood is now indicative, "appealing to his orthodox readers' knowledge and experience here, as so often in this letter (cf. 2:29; 4:6)."¹⁹

¹⁶ Westcott, *The Epistles of St John*, p. 140.

¹⁷ See Dave Hunt, *America: The Sorcerer's New Apprentice* (Irvine, CA: Harvest House Publishers, 1988); Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity: Spiritual Discernment in the Last Days* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1985); F. LaGard Smith, *Out on a Broken Limb* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1986); Ronald Enroth, *The Lure of the Cults and New Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: Int:erVarsity Press, 1987).

¹⁸ So Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909), p. 396; Clark, *First John: A Commentary*, p. 123.

¹⁹ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 220.

The use of the plural, rather than the abstract singular, "it is known," involves his readers directly in the application of the test. The knowledge gained involves a mental deduction—carefully noting the content of the spirit's confession concerning Jesus Christ and then drawing the conclusion.

The decisive test is that "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God." "Every spirit" (πάν πνεύμα) marks the comprehensiveness of this test; all are either approved or rejected by its application. Every spirit approved "confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh." The verb "confesses" (ὁμολογῆι, literally, "says the same thing") denotes not mere verbal acknowledgment but an open and forthright declaration of the message as one's own position. The present tense marks it as an ongoing acknowledgment. Such a confession is crucial for a vital Christian faith (Rom. 10:9-10; 1 John 2:23; 4:15).

The determinative confession is "that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα, literally, "Jesus Christ in flesh having come"). The insertion of "that," which is not in the original, makes it a confession of a doctrinal truth about what Jesus Christ has done. The expression, which is in the accusative case as the object of the verb "confesses," sets forth the Person being confessed, "Jesus Christ in flesh having come." Bultmann takes "Jesus" as the direct object and "Christ in flesh having come" as a predicate accusative. Moffatt represents this view in his translation, "every spirit which confesses Jesus as the Christ incarnate."²⁰ But such a separation of the double name in the accusative case is not certain. Kistemaker remarks,

The combination Jesus Christ occurs eight times in John's epistles (1:3; 2:1; 3:23; 4:2; 5:6, 20; 2 John 3, 7). In two places John clearly separates the names by writing "Jesus is the Christ" (2:22; 5:1). Therefore when the names appear together they need to be translated as such.²¹

Keeping the two names together best represents John's insistence that in the historical Person "Jesus Christ" is the abiding union of the human and the divine in the Incarnation. This is indicated in the added words "has come in the flesh." In saying "in flesh" (ἐν σαρκὶ), rather than "into flesh" (εἰς σαρκὶ), John repudiated Cerentian Gnosticism. Cerenthus (ca. A.D. 100), a late contemporary of John at Ephesus, separated Jesus from Christ. He taught that the Christ spirit came on the man Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary, at His baptism and empowered His ministry, but left Him before His

²⁰ James Moffatt, *The New Testament: A New Translation*, rev. ed. (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.).

²¹ Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, p. 327.

crucifixion; only the man Jesus died and rose again. Cerenthus thus rejected the doctrine of the Incarnation and obliterated the Christian teaching of the atonement.

The perfect tense, "has come in the flesh," makes clear that when Jesus Christ came into this world to carry out His messianic mission, He took on Himself a real human body, not just a phantom appearance as a man, as Docetic Gnosticism maintained. The perfect tense also marks the Incarnation as an abiding reality. This permanent union of the divine and the human now qualifies Him to be the Mediator between God and men (1 Tim. 2:5). The apostolic teaching on the incarnate Christ "gathers within its total significance the other great doctrinal truths such as the Virgin Birth, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. The Incarnation is the essential creed of Christianity; on this doctrine all else which calls itself Christian stands or falls."²² Every spirit that freely confesses the apostolic message concerning the Person of Jesus Christ reveals that it "is from God" (ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν), that it proceeds from God who has revealed Himself through the incarnate Son. John related the spirit that inspires the speaker to proclaim this message so intimately with the human messenger that he represented the spirit as making the confession. The indwelling Holy Spirit gives and molds the message of His ministers (1 Cor. 12:8) and so provides the instruction needed by God's people (Rev. 2:7, 11).

THE EVIDENCE OF THE SPIRIT OF ANTICHRIST (v. 3)

The adversative "and" (καὶ) presents the negative aspect of testing spirits. For a complete picture of the spirits, this negative is essential. Failure to recognize this part of the test would expose believers to serious deception. John stated this negative aspect as the spirit's failure to confess Jesus (v. 3a), identified the spirit as of antichrist (v. 3b), and pointed out the fulfillment of prophecy (v. 3c).

The failure to confess Jesus (v. 3a). The negative aspect of the test is stated inclusively: "every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God." In again saying "every spirit" (πάν πνεῦμα) John allowed no intermediate position between the spirit that confesses Jesus Christ and the spirit that fails to confess Him. Smalley notes, "John is not discussing the contrast between faith and unbelief; he is condemning those heretical beliefs, within and beyond his community, which amount to a determined and anti-Christian rebellion against God (v. 3b)."²³

²² Harvey J. S. Blaney, "The First Epistle of John," in *Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1967), 10:388.

²³ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 223.

John's negative statement abbreviated the fuller positive statement in verse 2. The crucial point of the test is the spirit's failure to confess Jesus, as set forth in the preceding verse. It is possible to talk glowingly about the Man Jesus and yet refuse to accept the apostolic teaching that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was indeed God incarnate. Marshall remarks, "If a person claims to believe in Jesus, it is proper to ask, 'Is your Jesus the real Jesus?'"²⁴

This negative statement of the test is beset with textual variants. Various manuscripts of the Old Latin, the Vulgate, and some Latin church fathers have readings that assume the Greek read *λύει*, "looses, destroys, annuls," rather than *μη̄ ὁμολογεῖ*, "not confesses." Some scholars have favored this reading as probably original,²⁵ but the overwhelming manuscript evidence is decidedly against it. It is the reading of no Greek manuscript;²⁶ it is found in the margin of minuscule 1739, dating from the 10th century. The Latin variants apparently arose from the second-century polemic against the Gnostics who made a sharp distinction between the earthly Jesus and the heavenly Christ. The longer reading in the King James Version, "every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh," follows the Textus Receptus and is one of five variant readings.²⁷ It seems clear that these arose as scribal efforts to explain the shorter and more difficult reading "the Jesus" (*τὸν Ἰησοῦν*).

John's use of the negative *μη̄*, rather than the more usual of, with the indicative verb "confess" has also evoked comment. Blass and DeBrunner, who accept *λύει* as the original reading, simply stamp the negative as "a spurious reading."²⁸ David Smith feels that the negative *μη̄* "makes the statement hypothetical: 'every spirit, if such there be, which does not confess.'"²⁹ But clearly John had no question as to the reality of such spirits. Robertson remarks

²⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, New International Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 207.

²⁵ See Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, for a listing of these scholars and the arguments for and against this reading, pp. 207-8, n. 11.

²⁶ For the textual evidence see United Bible Societies, *The Greek New Testament*, 3d ed. (New York: American Bible Society, 1975). On a scale of A to D the editors rate the reading *μη̄ ὁμολογεῖ* as a B.

²⁷ For these variant readings and the manuscript evidence for each see United Bible Societies, *The Greek New Testament*. The editors rate the reading *τὸν Ἰησοῦν* as B.

²⁸ F. Blass and A. DeBrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 221.

²⁹ David Smith, "The Epistles of St. John," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.), 5:189.

that "there is a certain aloofness about me here."³⁰ Most probable seems the suggestion of Law that the use of the negative expressed "the subjective conviction of the writer that there are no exceptions to the statement he is making."³¹

John's negative statement, "every spirit that does not confess Jesus," is broader in scope than the positive, "every spirit that denies Jesus," would have been. An open denial of "Jesus" stamps such a spirit as "not from God" (ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ), not coming from or proclaiming God's truth. But John's negative statement also comprehends any spirit speaking through a false prophet that sought to hide its true identity by avoiding discussion of the decisive issue. John knew that what such a spirit did not say about Jesus in speaking of Him was also significant. In this epistle John never spoke about Jesus without adding some term to show that He is more than a mere man.

The spirit of antichrist (v. 3b). The failure of the spirit to confess the full truth concerning "Jesus" establishes its positive identity: "and this is the spirit of the antichrist" (καὶ τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ τοῦ ἀντιχρίστου). "And" (καὶ) joins this positive with the preceding negative statement. Since John did not write "spirit" here, some take the neuter demonstrative pronoun "this" (τοῦτό) to refer back to the spirit's refusal to confess the true nature of Jesus. But it is more natural to take the demonstrative as closely united with the neuter article (τὸ), with "spirit" rightly supplied from the context. John pointed out that "this spirit" by its refusal reveals the spirit "of the antichrist." Westcott suggests that the omission of the word "spirit" (πνεῦμα) "gives greater breadth to the thought, so that the words include the many spirits, the many forces, which reveal the action of antichrist."³² Over against the work of the Holy Spirit inspiring the message of the true prophets of God are the many evil spirits carrying on the deadly assault against the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ. Marshall well remarks, "John is in no doubt that denial of the apostolic confession about Jesus Christ is not merely intellectual error, still less 'advanced theology'; it represents the very spirit of rebellion against God and can only be condemned."³³ They already manifest the great rebellion against God which will find full expression in the eschatological Antichrist; in character; they belong to the same realm.

³⁰ Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, p. 1169.

³¹ Law, *The Tests of Life*, p. 396.

³² Westcott, *The Epistles of St John*, p. 143.

³³ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 208.

The fulfillment of prophecy (v. 3c). John immediately reminded his readers that the operation of such evil spirits should not surprise them, since it is in accord with the prophetic warning they had received. Their operation is a matter "of which you have heard that it is coming" (ὃ ἀκηκόατε ὅτι ἔρχεται). In 2:18 John reminded them that they had been warned that the Antichrist was coming; now he reminded them that they knew that the spirit of the antichrist also was coming. The perfect tense "you have heard" (ἀκηκόατε) indicates that these realities were part of the regular Christian teaching concerning the future. The verb "coming" is frequently used of the historical coming of Jesus Christ; the coming of the spirit of antichrist, operating through these many antichrists, is likewise a historical reality.

The added words, "and now it is already in the world" (καὶ νῦν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἐστὶν ἤδη), are a firm declaration that the spirit of antichrist was active on the scene of human history. But the term "the world" recognizes that this spirit operates in a "world" that is estranged from and antagonistic to God and His truth. The use of "now" (νῦν) at the beginning of the statement underlines the presence of this evil power as he writes (cf. 2 Thess. 2:7, "the mystery of lawlessness is already at work"), manifesting its presence through insidious and often violent action against the church. The added "already" (ἤδη) at the end suggests, as Westcott notes, that "the prophecy had found fulfillment before the Church had looked for it."³⁴ It also implies that a fuller and more vicious manifestation of this spirit of rebellion against Christ awaits the coming of the eschatological Antichrist (Rev. 13; 2 Thess. 2:7-12). At the head of this rebellion is Satan himself.

The Criteria for Testing the Prophets

Having set forth the criteria for testing the spirits (1 John 4:2-3), John now stated the criteria for testing those through whom they speak. In verses 4-5 he indicated the criteria to determine their true origin. In verse 6a he pointed to the reaction to their message as a further criterion. The last half of verse 6 summarizes the discussion.

THE CRITERIA FOR ESTABLISHING THEIR ORIGIN (vv. 4-5)

In verse 4 John reminded his readers of the identity of the true people of God; in verse 5 he pointed out the identity of the false prophets.

Those who are of God (v. 4). With genuine pastoral concern John

³⁴ Westcott, *The Epistles of St John*, p. 143.

assured his readers, "You are from from God, little children, and have overcome them." The initial "you" (ὕμεις) is emphatic, contrasting his readers with the deluded world. In the words of Wilder, "The distinction between the two kinds of spirits is carried over now into one between two kinds of men, those of God and those of the world."³⁵ As true believers, they "are from God" (ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἔστε), have their origin in God and carry on His warfare against evil in the world. They have a personal relationship with God that the false teachers lack.

The affectionate address, "little children" (τεκνία; cf. 2:1), expresses their birth-relationship; they are members of God's family. John had no fear that they would be deceived by the false teachers, but his Fatherly heart reminded them of who they were. His readers, like believers today, confronted by the increasing forces of alluring evil, ought never to forget their divine heritage.

The added assertion, "and have overcome them" (καὶ νενικήκατε αὐτούς), gives evidence of their true identity. The masculine plural pronoun "them" marks the passing from the anti-Christian spirits to the false teachers who are their mouthpieces. John's readers had detected and rejected their false message. By applying the criteria in verses 2-3 they had "overcome." The perfect tense "have overcome" denotes a definite time when they faced the temptation to accept their alluring message, but having tested it they rejected it and were victorious. As Gunther remarks, "The battle has thus been decided, even if it is not yet over. By faith Christians participate in this victory and are thus placed in a position to overcome the world for themselves."³⁶ Their victory is grounded in the victory Christ won on Calvary (John 12:32; 14:30; 16:11). But to maintain their victory believers need to continue to adhere to the truth (Eph. 6:10-18).

In adding "because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" John reminded his readers of the true secret of their victory. While their understanding of and adherence to the apostolic truth was involved, the victory was produced by the divine indwelling, "He who is in you" (ἐστὶν ὁ ἐν ὑμῖν). The reference clearly is to one of the Persons of the Godhead, but characteristically John did not explicitly identify the indwelling Enabler. Generally interpreters prefer simply to say "God."³⁷ Westcott suggested

³⁵ Amos N. Wilder, "The First, Second, and Third Epistles of John," in *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 12:276 (italics his).

³⁶ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. "νικάω," by W. Gunther, 1:651.

³⁷ So Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers* (reprint, Chicago:

that the reference was to "God in Christ,"³⁸ while Smalley holds that the reference "combines an allusion to God as Father, 'Son and Spirit' and in support appeals to "the trinitarian character of John's theology in this section."³⁹ Still others understand it as a reference to the indwelling Holy Spirit.⁴⁰ This view has in its favor the explicit statement concerning the Holy Spirit in 3:24. Burdick further notes, "In verses 2 and 3 John has been contrasting the Spirit of God with the spirit of antichrist, and he again refers to these two spirits in verse 6. In 2:27 the anointing (Holy Spirit) is said to dwell in believers."⁴¹ This view is fully in accord with New Testament teaching concerning the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit in believers (Rom. 5:5; 8:9; 2 Cor. 1:22; 3:18; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 3:16-19; Titus 3:5-6).

John stressed not the identity but the superior greatness of this divine Enabler: "greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (μείζων ἐστὶν ὁ ἐν ὑμῖν ἢ ὁ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ). The masculine articles make clear that the contrast is between two personal powers, while the comparative adjective "greater" stresses the superior authority and power of the One in believers. Their opponent, the one in the world, is the devil, "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31), whose work the Son of God came to destroy (1 John 3:8). Clearly John "does not subscribe to a dualist system in which the universe is the battlefield of two essentially equally powerful spiritual forces."⁴² The superior rank and power of the indwelling Holy Spirit assures Christ's victory over the devil in the lives of believers.

Having assured his readers that this greater One was "in you," John might have been expected to refer to this personal evil opponent as being "in them," that is, the anti-Christian false teachers. Instead he presented the devil and his minions as being "in the world." The term "the world" here has a strong moral quality, denoting the

Moody Press, n.d.), p. 1737; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, Hermeneia series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p. 63; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (1945; reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), p. 490; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 208; Smith, "The Epistles of St. John," p. 190.

³⁸ Westcott, *The Epistles of St John*, p. 144.

³⁹ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 227 (italics his).

⁴⁰ So Barker, "1 John," p. 341; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1970), p. 106; Zane C. Hodges, "1 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), p. 898; Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, p. 328; and Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Real* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1972), p. 135.

⁴¹ Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, pp. 201-2.

⁴² J. L. Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), p. 110.

organized world of humanity in its hostility to God and His kingdom. Left to their own power, believers could only experience defeat by such a foe, but God's provision and power offers them continuing victory in their daily encounter with the world, the flesh, and the devil. But believers need to appropriate that victory personally.

Those who are of the world (v. 5). "They are from the world" (αὐτοὶ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου εἰσὶν) marks the difference between the false teachers and true believers (v. 4). For John there was no middle ground between the two. In verse 3 John identified the anti-Christian spirits as being "not from God"; now he stressed that the false teachers are "from the world," marking their source and essential character. The triple use of "world" in verse 5 underlines this relationship. They belong to the godless world-system of which Satan is the prince.

John pointed out the evidence: "therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them." What they are is revealed by their message as well as the followers they draw.

The content of their message establishes that the false teachers are "of the world"; "therefore they speak as from the world" (διὰ τοῦτο ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου λαλοῦσιν, more literally, "because of this out of the world they are speaking"). Because their being is rooted in the world, their message reveals what they are. They draw the substance of their teaching from the philosophy of the godless world, revealing that they have no connection with the divine fountain of revealed truth. The present tense verb "they speak" portrays them as continually presenting their message from the viewpoint of the world. They confirm the words of Jesus in John 3:31: "He who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth." In adjusting and restating the content of their message to conform to the spirit and philosophy of the world, they distort and deform the message of God. As Bruce observes, "There is no form of 'worldliness' so inimical to Christianity as this kind of 're-statement.'"⁴³

The added comment, "and the world listens to them" (καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτῶν ἀκούει),⁴⁴ further confirms their nature from the fact that their message appeals to the world. It seems that these false teachers had experienced a measure of success outside the apostolic churches. The world had given them a ready hearing, since the world listens to those who speak its own language. John held that

⁴³ Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 106.

⁴⁴ The classical rule for *akouein* [to hear] is: the person whose words are heard stands in the genitive, the thing about which (or whom) one hears in the accusative" (Blass and DeBrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, p. 95). "*Akouein* takes acc. of the thing heard, genit. of the person from whom it is heard" (Smith, "The Epistles of St. John," p. 190).

success with the pagan public revealed a fundamental affinity between the false teachers and paganism. Of course the fact that a person draws large crowds does not necessarily mean he is a false teacher. It is a fact of history that under the power of the Holy Spirit large crowds are being drawn to faith in Christ under the faithful preaching and ministry of godly messengers. As Dodd points out, a negative response to the Christian message "may often be due to a defect in the preacher's presentation of the message, or to his failure to understand' sympathetically the people to whom he appeals."⁴⁵

THE CRITERION FROM THE REACTION TO THE SPEAKER (v. 6a)

The world's response to the false teachers led John to formulate another criterion: The character of the messenger is established by the response of the hearers. He stated this criterion by pointing out the twofold response to the apostolic messengers.

The assertion, "We are from God" (ἡμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐσμεν), emphatically marks the contrast between the false teachers (v. 5) and the apostolic messengers (v. 6a). Some understand the intended scope of the emphatic "we" as a reference to the Christian community, or to John and his readers.⁴⁶ But the context suggests that the intended contrast is between the false teachers of verse 5 and John and his fellow apostles in verse 6a.⁴⁷ Plummer asserts, "The opposition here is not between true and false Christians, but between true and false teachers."⁴⁸ The assured expression, "We are from God," reflects the consciousness of certainty and authority manifested by Christ's chosen and commissioned messengers. In the words of Plummer, "Here once more we have that magisterial tone of Apostolic authority which is so conspicuous in the Prologue (i. 1-4). It underlies the whole Epistle, as it does the whole of the Fourth Gospel. . . . It is the quiet confidence of conscious strength."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1946), p. 1(11).

⁴⁶ So Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, p. 64, n. 15; Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 491; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 209.

⁴⁷ So Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers*, p. 1738; James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 137; R. W. Orr, "The Letters of John," in *A New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1969), p. 617; Alexander Ross, *The Epistles of James and John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), pp. 198-99; Stott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 158.

⁴⁸ Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 145 (italics his).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

In setting forth this criterion John echoed the words of Jesus, "He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God" (John 8:47; cf. 10:4-5, 26-27). Both positively and negatively the response to God's Word reveals the nature of the hearers.

Positively, "he who knows God listens to us" (ὁ γινώσκων τὸν Θεὸν ἀκούει ἡμῶν) characterizes one who has a continuing and growing acquaintance with the true God that draws him to the true messenger of God. His relationship with God is "no mere intellectual knowing but a living apprehension with full effect on mind, heart, and life."⁵⁰ Such an individual "listens to us" (ἀκούει ἡμῶν),⁵¹ responds approvingly to the message and the messenger. The result is, as Westcott observes, "The hearer discerns the true message. The teacher discovers the true disciple. And this concurrence of experience brings fresh assurance and deeper knowledge."⁵²

The negative reaction to the apostolic message is also significant: "he who is not from God does not listen to us." His rejection of that message establishes that he is "not from God" (οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ). Instead of saying such a person "does not know God," John characterized him as being "not from God," lacking that inner spiritual relationship with God imparted through the new birth. Only one who has been born of God is attentive to the Word of God. The ministry of preaching not only confirms the true nature of the speaker but also serves to lay bare the spiritual state of the hearers.

THE SUMMARY CONCERNING THE TESTING OF THE SPIRITS (v. 6b)

John concluded this discussion with a summary comment: "By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." "By this" (ἐκ τούτου) looks back to the preceding discussion, but it is not clear whether "this" refers to the whole section (vv. 1-6), or to the last half (vv. 4-6), or only to the first half of verse 6. Burdick holds that "this" "refers back to the positive and negative statement of the test in the first part of the verse—to the established fact that like listens to like."⁵³ Smalley holds that the reference is "in the first place to the criterion mentioned in v. 6 itself (whether or not attention is paid to the apostolic proclamation)" but agrees with those who hold that "an allusion to the earlier test (a proper acknowl-

⁵⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 491.

⁵¹ See note 44.

⁵² Westcott, *The Epistles of St John*, p. 145.

⁵³ Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 304.

edgment of Jesus, vv. 2-3) is almost certainly in view as well."⁵⁴ This broader reference, including both tests John mentioned, is essential for full certainty in testing the spirits.

The plural "we know" (*γινώσκουμεν*) ascribes to all true believers this ability to recognize or distinguish the true nature of the spirits, not just to the apostles or the official leaders of the church.

Conditions then, as now, demanded that believers be alert to distinguish between "the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." The two spirits represent two distinct moral realms competing for control over the lives of human beings. English translations generally parallel the two instances of the word "spirit"; but the NIV and the Good News Bible⁵⁵ capitalize the first occurrence of the word to indicate that the reference is to the Holy Spirit, already referred to in verse 2 as "the Spirit of God." The designation "the Spirit of truth" denotes the Holy Spirit in John 14:17; 15:26; and 16:13. The genitive "of truth" seems best understood as descriptive, setting forth the essence of the Spirit as actively communicating and interpreting God's truth (cf. John 14:6). Those who proclaim the truth of God do so under the leading of the Spirit of truth.

Opposed to the work of the Spirit of truth is "the spirit of error" (*τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς πλάνης*), a phrase occurring only here in the New Testament. The genitive "of error" is descriptive of the relentless activities of the devil and his cohorts. The articular noun rendered "error" (*τῆς πλάνης*) may be either active or passive in meaning. Actively it means "the leading astray, deceit," while passively it signifies "the being led astray, error, delusion." The context clearly supports the active meaning here. The reference to the "false prophets" in 1 John 4:1 involves the concept of active deception; and in 2:26 John used the cognate verb to warn his readers against "those who are trying to deceive you" (cf. also 3:7). Satan and his demonic forces are engaged in a relentless effort to lead believers astray, working in and through their human agents. This warfare between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception is indeed the climactic aspect of the conflicts in the Christian life.

⁵⁴ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 230.

⁵⁵ *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1978); *Good News for Modern Man* (New York: American Bible Society, 1966).

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