

“The Spirit of Truth”

The Eighth in a Series of Sermons on John’s Epistles

Texts: 1 John 4:1-6; Deuteronomy 13:1-5

In his first Epistle, John is defending the doctrine that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh against a group of false teachers who have departed from the truth by teaching that Jesus was not a flesh and blood Savior, but a deity who merely appeared in the form of a human. John calls this teaching—which is known to us today as the heresy of docetism—the spirit of antichrist. For the Apostle, Christianity is not a religion in which one learns a set of secret principles revealed to a few enlightened individuals who have managed to gain insight into the “real” teaching of Jesus. For John, Christianity is a religion grounded in the historical work of a flesh and blood Savior (Jesus Christ) whom John has heard preach, whom John witnessed perform miracles, and whom John even touched with his own hands. To deny that Jesus is truly human is to deny Christianity. Given the importance of this essential point, John once again returns to a discussion of the nature of the Christian truth claim, and warns us yet again of false teachers and antichrists, who will inevitably come and attempt to deceive God’s people. But John does more than merely warn us about these false teachers, he gives us a test to determine whether or not someone has imbibed from the Gnostic heresy—“does a teacher confess that Jesus is God in human flesh?”

We have been working our way through John’s epistles, and we now come to fourth chapter of 1 John. As we have seen in each of the last few sermons, John is returning to issues in chapter 3 he’s already addressed in the first couple of chapters. John likely does this for the sake of emphasis. In chapter two John had emphasized the need for Christians to obey God’s commandments, to reject worldliness (the non-Christian way of thinking and doing), and to heed his warning about the presence of many antichrists in the age in which we now live.

In chapter three, John repeats these themes while emphasizing different aspects of them. For example, not only must God’s people strive to obey his commandments, they are no longer to be characterized by the practice of sin. Furthermore, Christians will strive to love their brothers and sisters in Christ, while rejecting the murderous ways of Cain, who is the epitome of worldliness, and whose indifference toward God (i.e., his produce offering) and hatred of his brother Abel (whom he killed) prefigures those whom John describes as antichrists. These false teachers, says John, deny that Jesus is God in the flesh. They seek out “esoteric,” secret truths about God, and they deceive themselves into thinking that they have somehow risen above sin. This explains their indifference to God’s commandments and their lack of love for both God and his people. They may claim to have gained “wisdom,” but John has repeatedly exposed them to be theologically clueless, which is a very serious and dangerous place to be.

In chapter two, John tells us that the difference between these two groups (Christians and those taken in by the false teachers) is as plain as the difference between light and darkness. In chapter three, John says the contrast between the two groups is apparent in the fact that Christians struggle against sin, while the proto-Gnostics do not. Now, as we make our way into chapter four, John stresses that the contrast is also made plain through someone’s confession about Christ. In this case, the truth claim is very specific. “Is Jesus God manifest in the flesh, or is he not?”

Recall that in verses 18-25 of chapter two, John introduced the figure of antichrist. As we saw when we worked through that portion of this epistle, according to John, many antichrists have already come. In 1

John 2:18-22, the apostle writes: *“Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.”*

If an antichrist is someone who proclaims a message which denies that Jesus is the Christ (God manifest in the flesh), and if the very presence of these antichrists is characteristics of the last hour (the final period of human history), then the conclusion we must reach is fairly obvious. The final period in human history began with Christ’s ascension into heaven. We live in that same period of redemptive history as did John’s original audience. And just as the Christians in Ephesus (to whom John is writing) did combat with these antichrists, so must we. And while too many of our contemporaries have interpreted John’s message through the distorted lens of modern dispensationalism—antichrist is the one who makes a peace treaty with Israel at the start of the seven-year tribulation period and will attempt to brand everyone with the mark of the beast, the mysterious 666—John’s test for the presence of an antichrist is rather different. What does someone confess about Jesus Christ? Do they confess that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh? Or do they claim that Jesus is God who merely took the form of a man (like someone putting on a costume and playing a role) but was not truly human (with real flesh and blood).

To put it another way, Christianity is founded upon a particular set of historical facts. Did God truly take to himself a true human nature in the person of Jesus of Nazareth? Did that same Jesus, who has true and eternal God and true man, suffer and die for our sins, offering up a propitiatory sacrifice which turns aside God’s wrath toward our sins? Did that same Jesus rise bodily again from the dead and ascend into heaven where he presently intercedes for us as our advocate with the Father? If he did, then Christianity is true whether someone believes it or not. If he didn’t, then Christianity is false, no matter how many Christians believe it to be true.

This is John’s primary point as we move in chapter four—Jesus is God manifest in the flesh—and this explains why John is so opposed to those teachers who deny that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. Their denial not only flies in the face of what John knows to be true—I saw, I heard, I touched—but this destroys the foundation of the gospel. If Jesus is not truly human, then how can he save those of Adam’s race who have fallen into sin? A flesh and blood Jesus can be punished for us, in our place, because he is one of us. A phantom Jesus cannot bear the guilt of our sins in his flesh—since he has no true human nature and therefore cannot be punished for our sins.

You’ve heard the philosophical parlor game question, “if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?” It is the same thing with those who claim that all religions fall into the realm of emotion, feeling, and subjectivity, so that Christianity is just another expression of a person’s fear and uncertainty of the world around them. If people are afraid, they invent a God to help them cope. People may prefer Christianity to other religions, or they may be Christians because they were born into a Christian family. Or, they may even be Christians for a whole host of personal reasons. But because religion is purely subjective, then, there is no compelling reason to believe it other than personal opinion.

On the contrary, John declares that Christianity is founded upon the entrance of the eternal God into history in a particular person—Jesus of Nazareth. Those who deny this truth claim in the name of a phantom Jesus are antichrists. Those who deny this claim deny the truth, and they cannot be Christians

no matter how pious they may be. By the way, the tree makes noise when it falls. And if Jesus rose from the dead as God in human flesh, then Christianity is true whether anyone was there to see it or not. Yet, God saw fit to give us witnesses of Christ's resurrection. Paul even says that in addition to those in the apostolic circle, over five hundred witnesses at one time saw Jesus alive after his resurrection.

If it is vital for us to understand the indicative and imperative moods to understand John's teaching about the relationship between being born again (the indicative) and the necessity of good works (the imperative), it is also vital for us to understand that John is making a truth claim when he speaks about Christ's incarnation. Those who have been born again, those for whom Christ has died, and those for whom Christ presently intercedes, will do good works. There is a cause and effect relationship here. Likewise, those who believe that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh must definitively reject any teaching that conflicts with this truth. Darkness is not only moral or ethical, it is also theological. Furthermore, they must reject (as a Christian) anyone who teaches anything contrary to the doctrine taught by the apostles who were witnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus.

John has warned the Ephesians about the presence of many antichrists "who went out from us because they were not of us" (1 John 2:19). As we have seen, the Apostle is warning us about these antichrists as well. So, just as he has repeated his points about the necessity of obedience to the commandments, the warning about worldliness, and the need to love our brothers and sisters, so too John reminds us that Christianity is grounded upon a truth claim, and that God's people must oppose all those who deny the truth that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. Christians must do combat with the spirit of antichrist.

So, with that bit of background, we turn to our text, 1 John 4:1-6, where John returns to the subject of antichrist as well as giving us a test by which we can determine who is doing the work of antichrist and who is not.

Although he's writing perhaps as much as thirty years earlier than John, in 2 Corinthians 11, the Apostle Paul describes another serious situation facing the church in Corinth in the late fifties of the first century. Beginning in verse 3, Paul writes "*But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. . . . And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.*" According to Paul, largely through the efforts of Satan, who is the author of lies, there will be false teachers who come and preach a different gospel. And that false gospel centers in what Paul calls "another Jesus" and a "different spirit."

Apparently, John sees a similar crisis facing the church in Asia Minor. In verse 1 of chapter 4, John seeks to warn his readers, "*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*" In Galatia, Paul was dealing with Judaizers—Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but who were insisting that Gentiles undergo circumcision in order to be justified. In Corinth, Paul was dealing with certain individuals whom Paul calls "super-apostles." These were men who were masquerading as ministers of the gospel, and who were using their office as an excuse to engage in all kinds of sinful behavior as well as to promote a false gospel. Likewise, John calls upon his beloved in Ephesus to "*test the spirits to see*

whether they are from God.” It happened in Galatia. It happened in Corinth. It happened in Ephesus. It can certainly happen in Anaheim.

When John sets out his test for true prophets—those who properly preach about Christ—in many ways, his words echo the theological test required of God’s prophets as set forth by Moses in Deuteronomy 13:1-5.13 (our Old Testament lesson): *“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”*

Notice carefully, that the test is not the performance of signs and wonders, but faithfulness to prior revelation from God. In fact, in 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12, Paul gives us this warning about the Man of Sin (who may be the final culmination of John’s series of antichrists). *“The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”* Signs and wonders offer cover to false teachers. But false teachers can never hide behind the truth—hypocrites maybe, false teachers, never.

In John’s context in Ephesus, the issue is an early form of Gnosticism which held that certain enlightened teachers had gained “knowledge.” This knowledge was tied to secret teachings which were not recorded in the New Testament, but which circulated independently among those interested in the “real truth.” This particular body of knowledge held that Jesus was not God manifest in the flesh, but God merely appearing in human form. John describes how such men left the church once they became enlightened. And having left the church (*gone out into the world*) they are now to be classified as “false prophets.” These false prophets are not to be believed and their message is to be tested. They have “another spirit” (to use Paul’s terms), which John now describes as the “spirit of antichrist.”

John’s test to determine whether or not these men possess the Spirit of God is quite simple. John spells it out for his readers in verses 2-3a. *“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.”* While many, no doubt, would expect God to confirm his prophets through some miraculous means, the fact is, he uses a much less spectacular method—the truth of the message, i.e., the gospel which had been preached by the disciples from the beginning.

In 1 John 3:24, John told his readers that those who are Christ’s (who have been born again, for whom Christ has died, and for whom he intercedes) are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Since there is only one Holy Spirit, when John mentions other “spirits” he is referring to those who claim to be speaking in the “Spirit” but who are actually speaking falsehoods in the name of the Spirit. This would be especially relevant in the context in which John finds himself—proto-Gnostics claiming to have knowledge, but who in actuality know nothing about Jesus or the Spirit. Because false teachers claim the authority of the Holy Spirit, believers need to test whether or not those who preach in the name of Christ are preaching

the truth. The proof is found in the content of the preaching. Does the preacher proclaim that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh? If he does, then the Spirit of God is at work in and through his preaching. If someone who claims to have knowledge, and claims to be speaking “in the spirit,” but then denies that Jesus is God in the flesh, then that teacher is not from God, no matter how many miracles they may perform, no matter what secrets they may claim to know, or no matter how pious they may be.

John makes it perfectly clear that this “spirit” which denies Christ’s human nature is not the Holy Spirit, but the “spirit of antichrist.” As the Apostle writes in the last part of verse 3, “*This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.*” In the final days of his messianic mission, Jesus did indeed warn his disciples about the presence of false teachers. In the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:3-6), Jesus answers a very insightful question from his disciples. “*As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.’*” Toward the end of the discourse, Jesus goes on to say in verse 23, “*Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it.*” The proof is not in the signs and wonders, but in the faithfulness of the doctrine to that which Christ and his apostles have already revealed.

As John now reminds the Ephesian Christians, the presence of false teachers should not come as a surprise. Jesus warned his disciples about false teachers, and John is echoing that warning, only directing it against these proto-Gnostics in Ephesus. The spirit of antichrist is *already* in the world when John writes, and the spirit of antichrist remains in the world even now. In fact, it is not hard to identify those who do the work of antichrist. There is one question which gets to the root of the issue—what do these teachers confess about Jesus? Is he God in human flesh?

Despite the gravity of John’s warning, Christians need not fear false teachers or these antichrists. In verse 4, John reminds his readers, “*Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.*” The word “antichrist” is so loaded in our day that we have a hard time hearing it in connection with heresy as John’s original audience did. Even then, the mention of foes who attempt to negate everything that the apostles have proclaimed about the Jesus whom they saw, heard, and touched, probably prompted a fair bit of fear in the congregations. Yes, John is writing to warn his reader about the danger of false teaching, and he is certainly writing to give Christians a simple test to determine who is an antichrist. But he also writes to comfort those who might panic at the news that false teachers and false doctrine arising in the church is an inevitability. We need not be afraid of such people because they are easy to overcome. Truth is to a false teacher what kryptonite is to Superman.

John reminds his reader of one very important fact—“dear children, you are from God!” More than that, greater is he who indwells you (the Holy Spirit) and that spirit which is in the world (the spirit of antichrist). And since you have been born again, you know the truth. You have been indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This is why you have not been taken in by the false teachers. As John puts it, “you have overcome them.” The language here is that of spiritual combat and of a decisive victory.¹ Those who

¹ Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 226.

have held to the truth have not been taken in (deceived) by those who have attempted to lure them away from Christ through their false teaching and secret knowledge. The implication is that God's dear children and John's beloved have heard the truth (the apostolic preaching of the gospel), they have believed in the Christ who is the content of that preaching, and they have been indwelt by the Holy Spirit. They know not to believe the lies coming those who have departed from the faith and who now claim to have gained insight into the secret teachings of Jesus. The Ephesian Christians have already decisively overcome the deceivers. They have done so by holding fast to the truth.

But John knows full well that in one sense the false teachers have a big edge—while they may misrepresent the apostle's teaching about Jesus, since they speak the language of the world, John knows they'll always gain a hearing. There will be plenty of itching ears who want to learn their "insights." As John puts it in verse 5, "*They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.*" Human nature, being what it is (sinful), there's something in many of us that is attracted to the kinds of religious secrets and insights taught by these proto-Gnostics. We've *already* heard the gospel. We *already* know the commandments. We want to move on from that old stuff to the new teaching which tickles our ears. We want to know the hidden secrets of Christianity so that we can control our destinies. We like what we see and hear on TBN. We like the people who appear on Oprah.

But John tells us not to be like those who are "of the world," and who listen to the spirit of antichrist, which is in the world already. "*We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*" John's standard is pretty basic. If we have believed the gospel, we are from God. If we are from God we listen for Christ's voice in his word, not in the secrets which some claim to have grasped, and which they are all too happy to tell us. These proto-Gnostics are not interested in the word of the gospel which gives us life. That's old news to them. Their lack of interest in the gospel and their denial that Jesus is the eternal son of God manifest in the flesh is the sure sign to us that someone is not from God. If people don't love the truth, they'll flock to error like a moth to a flame. And that is how we are to discern truth from error.

What application can we take with us from this passage?

As we see throughout John's first letter, John's focus falls upon the truth of the gospel which had already been preached to the churches and which is the standard by which we are to judge everything we hear from those who preach and who teach. Never forget that the Christian faith is a truth claim, grounded in the person and work of Christ. And because it is a truth claim grounded in history, Christianity is not grounded in my experience, my preferences, my upbringing, or my culture. John directs us to the message of what Jesus did as the word manifest in the flesh as the weapon to oppose the spirit of antichrist. The proof is in the doctrine—does what someone teaches and confesses about Christ, comport with the Scriptures, the revelation given us by Jesus and his apostles? And this doctrine does not change, nor does it need to be supplemented by additional revelation.

In fact, the importance and centrality of our confession about Jesus is why, historically, Christian worship has included the recitation of the Apostle's or Nicene Creed (both of which summarize the Bible's teaching about the basics of our faith). Reciting the creed is the equivalent of a Jew reciting the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4). When we recite these creeds, we are confessing the very thing John sets forth as the key test for truth. Who is Jesus and what did he come to do? When we recite the creeds, we are waging war on the spirit of antichrist. So, next time we recite the creed, remember that you are not only confessing Christ as God manifest in the flesh, you are opposing the spirit of antichrist.

I've made this point before, but since John makes it again, so will I. You cannot overcome error if you don't know the truth. John is warning us that heretics will come—it is not a matter of “if” but when. And if you don't know the truth, you (and your families) are defenseless in the face of false teaching. John reminds his readers to go back to the truth they had heard from the beginning, and then measure everything they heard against that teaching.

The application for us is to know our Bibles and to make full use of our catechism. If you are not in the word, and studying the catechism, the degree to which you neglect to do this is the degree to which you will be defenseless against that foe who is sure to come. Remember, heretics never come and announce “I'm a heretic.” They always use some measure of truth to smuggle in their error. You don't circulate \$3.00 bills with purple ink and Mickey Mouse's face and expect people to fall for your ruse. The counterfeit has to look like the original. But if you don't know the original, you'll fall victim to the counterfeit. There is another Christ, another gospel, and another spirit. And if you know the truth and put these claims to the test, John says you'll decisively defeat the false teachers.

Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, he always will point us to that Savior who brought us from death to life, who turned aside God's wrath, and who even now intercedes for us before the Father. The Spirit of truth will always direct us to that Christ who is the word manifest in the flesh. The Spirit of truth will never lead us away from the true Jesus to a Jesus who is but a mere ghost. The Spirit of truth will never reveal to someone secrets not already revealed in God's word. The test for truth *is* the doctrine. This is how we tell truth from error.