

Try The Spirits!

by

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1 John 4:1-6

Previously in this epistle, John has discussed what our relationship should be (or not be) in regards to:

- God – 1 John 1:5-6, *“This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth.”*
- Jesus – 1 John 2:3-4, *“And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”*
- The things in the world – 1 John 2:15, *“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”*
- Sin – 1 John 3:4-5, *“Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law. And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin.”*
- Our brethren – 1 John 3:11, *“For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”*

Chapter four begins with John exhorting us concerning a very real danger: false prophets!

1 John 4:1-6, *“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world. Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.”*

With another term of endearment (“beloved”), then, John exhorts his brethren to...

Try the spirits!

Believe not every spirit.

1 John 4:1, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but *try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.*”

Don't believe everything you hear, or everyone who claims to be from God. How foolish it would be to do so, should be obvious...

We would be in a constant state of confusion (believing one thing one moment, and another thing the next). We would be easily misled by those teaching error.

Try the spirits.

1 John 4:1, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.”

The word “try” (“test” – NIV) means...

- To examine, prove scrutinize (Thayer).
- To see whether a thing is genuine or not.

So don't just accept what some teacher or preacher is saying; examine what is being taught. Those who have this attitude are highly commended in the scriptures.

- **The Bereans** – Acts 17:11, “*These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.*”
- **The Ephesians** – Rev. 2:2, “*I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars.*”

Because of false prophets.

1 John 4:1, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.”

This is the reason we must “try the spirits”.

Others have also warned us of this fact...

- **Jesus** — Matt. 7:15, “*Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.*”
- **Peter** — 2 Pet. 2:1-3, “*But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not.*”
- **Paul** — 2 Cor. 11:13-15, “*For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.*”

So we must examine, prove, and scrutinize everything that is taught us! But HOW shall we test the spirits? In our text, John shares with us several tests...

The tests

Do they confess that Jesus has come in the flesh?

- 1 John 4:2-3, “*Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.*”
- 1 John 4:6, “*We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.*”

Verses 2-3 are best understood in light of the Gnostic-like errors that were prevalent at that time in which some denied Jesus Christ actually came in the flesh.

2 John 1:7, “*For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.*”

Whose doctrine was leading many astray, possibly because the false teachers claimed inspiration by the Spirit.

But those who would teach such falsehood are not led by the Spirit of God, but possess the spirit of the Antichrist!

2 John 1:7, *“For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.”*

Do they listen to the apostles of Christ?

1 John 4:6, *“We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.”*

This verse reveals how we can distinguish between *“the spirit of truth”* and *“the spirit of error”*.

- Those who truly know God listen to the apostles.
- Those who are not of God will reject them.

Does the teaching agree with what the apostles teach? For Jesus taught that to receive them was to receive Him and God.

John 13:20, *“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me; and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me.”*

Thus, the early church continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine.

Acts 2:42, *“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”*

For they recognized their words as the commands of the Lord.

1 Cor. 14:37, *“If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”*

And even the apostles recognized their fellow-apostles’ writings as inspired scriptures.

2 Pet. 3:15-16, *“And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.”*

Therefore, those who are of God will heed the apostles, and agree with their teaching!

This is a test that we can easily apply today on virtually every issue!

But it implies knowledge and understanding of the apostles' doctrine on our part. Yet, that should not be a problem if we follow the example of the first church in Jerusalem.

Acts 2:42, *“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”*

Though not mentioned by John, here are two more “tests”:

The test of Deut. 18:21-22, *“And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.”*

To be used when a person claims to be a prophet of God. If their prophecy fails, they are shown to be a false prophet.

The test of Deut. 13:1-4, *“If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Ye shall walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him.”*

To be used when wonders are performed, and prophecies seem to be fulfilled. If their doctrine contradicts what God has already revealed, they are to be rejected (this is akin to what John wrote).

Conclusion

In the midst of these warnings to “*try the spirits*”, John provides some comforting words in verses 4-5:

1 John 4:4-5, *“Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them.”*

By being of God (because they have heeded the words of His apostles), they can overcome the false prophets, for the One in them is greater than he (Satan?) who is in the world.

Don't be surprised to see the world following after the false prophets, for the false prophets are of the world and speak in a way as to appeal to the world; therefore don't be deterred by the "apparent success" of the false teachers (size and numbers are not a proper measure of truth!).

In view of the abundance of religions and various doctrines bombarding us today, all in the name of Christ and the Spirit of God, the exhortation of John is very relevant and important for us:

1 John 4:1, "*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.*"

Are you continuing steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine so you can properly apply the test?

