

1 John 4:1-6 Overcoming the Spirit of the Antichrist

Introduction:

In John's day, the Greco-Roman world held to a hodgepodge of religious beliefs. With travel and communication being what they are today, the spiritual gumbo is thicker and gooier than ever.

"For someone who goes deeper into Buddhist practice, which is based on voidness, interdependence, and no absolute, there is no place for belief in a creator."

– the Dalai Lama, in *Imagine All the People: a Conversation with the Dalai Lama*

In Scientology, the goal is to move through the levels of *Solo* and *Clear* and eventually reach the 8 stages that carry the title of *Operating Thetan (OT)*. According to L. Ron Hubbard the founder of Scientology, *"Neither Lord Buddha, nor Jesus Christ were OT's according to the evidence. They were just a shade above clear"*

"While Christianity asserts that Jesus is both human and divine, Islam does not accept the belief in Jesus' divinity. Hence, while Christians worship Jesus, Muslims instead revere Jesus and believe in him as a prophet..." – Dr. Alan Godlas, professor of Islamic Studies at the U. of Georgia

And we could go on and on. We can't see into the hearts of the people who hold to these various spiritual outlooks – nor can most of us really hope to understand more than a few of these perspectives in any depth. What John encourages us to do when discernment is needed is to apply two primary tests. We start by examining what someone says about Jesus. We then see how they respond to the truth about Him.

The only way we overcome the spirit of the Antichrist is by believing and proclaiming the truth.

Outline:

- I. What do they say about Jesus? 4:1-3
- II. How do they respond to the truth? 4:4-6

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I. **What do they say about Jesus?** 4:1-3

4:1 **Test the spirits** According to John, the duty of testing the spirits is not only one for the experts, the scholars or the church's leaders. Every Christian needs to be able to do this on their own. None of us should be so gullible as to believe any teaching that sounds spiritual and just happens to tickle our ears. We need to apply John's tests. We need to test the spirits.

The way John sees it, there are only two spirits - the Spirit of God and the spirit of Antichrist. John's terminology is akin to that used in some of the Judaism of his day. The Qumran literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls at one point declares that God *"has appointed for man two spirits in which to walk until the time of His visitation: the spirits of truth and falsehood."*

4:2 First of all, there is a reference to each Person of the Trinity embedded in this verse.

R.W. Orr translates John's test statement like this: *"Every spirit which confesses Jesus as Christ come in the flesh is of God."*

What is John talking about? We can go to the beginning of his Gospel for a closer look.

John 1:1-5 ¹*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. ⁴In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.*

John 1:14 *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

The starting point of the gospel is that the eternal Christ, God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, took on human flesh and became a man with a complete human nature. And Jesus Christ walked here among us on earth. John was one of the original followers of Jesus and knew Him personally. He got to know Jesus a man but recognized that He was infinitely more.

The role of the Holy Spirit, the **Spirit of God**, according to John, is to affirm the biblical revelation about Jesus. When a person is "led by the Spirit" they will think and behave in ways that agree with the Bible. The Scriptures are the essential starting point from which we can learn what the Holy Spirit wants to say to us about Jesus or anything else. He is the "inspiration" behind the inspired text.

4:3 John's conflict with the false teachers was not based on differences in personality or some rivalry within the leadership of the church. The essence of the gospel was being challenged. The conflict was not earthly or natural but spiritual and supernatural. This is even more true today than it was in John's time.

Ephesians 6:12 *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*

1 Timothy 4:1-2 ¹*Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, ²speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron...*

John knows the seriousness of what's at stake. He wants us to clearly identify where the Bible draws the lines between truth and error. He then wants us to draw all our own doctrinal lines in exactly the same places.

So where exactly are these lines to be drawn? Anyone can talk about Jesus and even believe that he lived on earth. Other religions and philosophies normally have no trouble affirming this. Still, unless and until such people affirm both the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus, they are not truly "confessing Jesus." As John states in no uncertain terms, they are under the influence of **the spirit of the Antichrist**.

F.F. Bruce said it in this way, *"No matter how charming, how plausible, how eloquent the prophets in question may be, the test of their witness to Christ and His truth is the test by which they must be judged."*

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So the first test John asked us to apply is, **"What do they say about Jesus?"** The second test is,

II. How do they respond to the truth? 4:4-6

The Holy Spirit within us will resonate with the Spirit-inspired Scriptures. The message that comes from God, through the apostles and prophets will be totally at home in our hearts. This will not be true for the opponents of Jesus Christ.

Each one who can be described as “from God,” or, let’s say, “motivated by and under the influence of God,” therefore, **knows God** and listens to the apostolic voice.

Ever since the time of Jesus, apostolic doctrine has been the standard and the way to distinguish between truth and error. True Christianity will always be apostolic Christianity. Any teaching that comes from any other source is at best optional and at worst diabolical.

4:4 John uses the phrase “**little children**” repeatedly when addressing his readers in this letter – and it is usually when he is trying to make a serious point. Here’s F.F. Bruce again:

“John’s readers were not more learned, more skilled in philosophical debate, than the false teachers; yet by refusing to be persuaded by the false teachers they had overcome them.”

Despite the truly dark and demonic forces operating in this world, as Christians, we don’t have to defeat false teachers or false teachings in some kind of epic battle. The victory is already ours. The first step in overcoming false teachers and their teachings is simply to recognize them as false and then refuse to follow them.

We need to see the reality of the spiritual struggle we are engaged in, but then fully grasp the reality of Christ’s victory over any and all demonic powers.

Pastor Chuck Smith: *“How important it is for us to remember that the victory is already ours because of the One who lives in us. Satan is the god of this world, temporarily, because man handed it over to him. But God lives in us, if we have accepted Him, so we don’t have to worry about Satan. God will take care of him.”*

John 16:33 *These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*

4:5 **They** These are the antichrists who have left the fellowship of the church. They are still, however, unquestionably spiritual. They are not promoting atheism or absolute mobocracy. They have a religious message – but one that is robbed of the essentials of biblical content.

Why are these false teachers so popular with the world? Because they say what the world hopes to hear. That’s what the false prophets did in OT times – they gave a message in which the content was tailored to the audience rather than the truth.

We need to realize that it’s possible to speak such a message with enormous conviction. It’s possible to frame it in a way that makes your opponents look foolish. That doesn’t change the fact that the message is simply not true.

OT Illustration: The people of Israel fell for the false prophets assuring them of peace and safety. In the end the nation was conquered and their society was destroyed.

Regarding the gospel, David Jackman explains,

“There is an attraction in re-stating the Christian gospel in terms of an ethic, in changing the message from one of submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ to one of following his splendid example, or asking him to touch us up in those areas of our lives that need a fresh coat of paint. It is all governed by this world and the desire to make it a more comfortable place where you can enjoy yourself more.”

The same principle is at work today. The truth doesn't always feel good. Christians who faithfully proclaim the truth will not usually win popularity contests as a result.

Truth is hard for the world to accept. The world loves good works, but will not easily receive good doctrine. Our faith commits us to the task of giving the world both.

4:6 What John says in this verse is really a lot like what Jesus said:

John 10:27 *My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.*

Thinking through the implications of this verse, R.W. Orr sums up John's point as,

“Prophets and teachers are therefore to be judged by their doctrine; and doctrine is to be judged, not by its emotional quality and strength, but by its agreement with the apostolic testimony to Jesus.”

Or as Charles Ryrie puts it, right doctrine – or even a right heart toward God – is judged by, *“whether or not one accepts the teaching of the apostles.”*

From our perspective, we can just put the Word of God out there so that people can hear it and respond to it. Teachers who are right with God will want people who respond to the pure Word of God. People who are right with God will want teachers who will give them the pure Word of God. The spirit of truth and the spirit of error reveal themselves by how they respond to the Word – specifically the apostolic testimony to Jesus.

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Conclusions:

1. We can't see into the hearts of other people. With all the different forms of spirituality that are out there, how do we identify who is really from God and who is not? John gives us two tests we can apply in virtually every situation where spiritual discernment is necessary.
 - a. We look at what they say about Jesus.
 - b. We observe how they respond to the truth.
2. It's not only the experts, the pastors, the Bible teachers, who need to be able to "test the spirits," as John puts it. All of us need to be able to do this.
3. In 1 John, the apostle presents the Holy Spirit's role as affirming the biblical revelation, not as a source of new revelation. First of all and most of all, this applies to revelation about Jesus. We should not expect later testimony of the Holy Spirit to contradict what the Holy Spirit said earlier. That is how we can know whether what various groups claim about Jesus is true. It will agree with biblical revelation.
4. Further, when people say that "God told them to do something," or that "they feel led" to do something, it is vital that we compare what they say with God's written word. God the Holy Spirit will not lead us to sin, for this would be in contradiction to the written Word of God.
5. The Bible is the source of our teaching. We can and should present it in a way that makes it easier to understand and in a context in which people can relate to it. Still, the Bible is what we present. How people respond to it is ultimately their own business.
6. Let's clarify the gospel message once more: The eternal Christ, God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, took on human flesh and became a man with a complete human nature. This God-Man, Jesus Christ, walked here among us on earth. He then died for our sins and rose the third day. He ascended into heaven and will return to earth again. He will one day judge the living and the dead.
7. Our first concern is what we believe about Jesus. But while Jesus is coming back, He isn't here yet. The apostles aren't here either. So if people are going to hear the truth about Jesus the church is going to have to proclaim it.
8. While still on earth Jesus told His disciples,

Matthew 9:37-38 ³⁷*Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. ³⁸Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."*

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