

John 4:1-6. Test the spirits

Introduction:

As the saying goes, “If two people agree on everything, one of them is unnecessary.” In this letter John seems to repeat the same words, ideas and concepts over and over again. Although it is commendable that he is consistent, at what point do new ways of saying the same thing become superfluous?

The exchange of ideas and constructive dialogue are essential to learning. Nevertheless, John urges his fellow-Christians to practice spiritual discernment. He is not writing here to discourage questions or to stifle dialog, but to warn against those who have exchanged the truth about Christ for error. False teachers had appeared in the johannine community, leading others into error that led to a split in the church. Not only were they promoting false views of Jesus, but they claimed that their teaching was inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is natural therefore that John calls the leaders of this schism “false prophets” and “antichrists”. But he also holds those accountable who chose to accept their erroneous teaching.

John was not satisfied with warning the Christians of his day against false prophets. He gave the members of his church specific guidelines on how they could distinguish truth from falsehood, both individually and as a community. Today as well, outbreaks of false teaching can take root and spread, infecting others with errors both old and new. It is thus imperative that we too would learn how to “test the spirits”, to see if they are from God.

Text

^{4 1} 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.

² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

⁴ 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.

⁵ They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ 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.

A quick overview of 1 John:

As we have seen throughout this series, John wrote this letter to encourage his readers to know Christ personally and to live as true children of God. In chapters 1 and 2 he challenged them to “live in the light”. In chapter 3 he called on them to renounce sin (3:4-9) and to be obedient to God (3:10-24). In chapters 4 and 5 he urges them to reject worldliness (4:1-6) and to be loving and faithful (4:5-5:13). The emphasis shifts somewhat from a primary focus on our relationship to God in chapters 2 and 3 to a more practical, “here and now” emphasis on our relationship to other human beings and to the society we live in.

This passage (like much of 1 John) is polemical; John writes against false teachers and their followers who left the johannine community. The theology of this letter is christocentric and yet strongly trinitarian. Throughout John makes a clear, consistent link between belief and action, and often alludes to eschatological themes.

Literary structure of 4:1–6:

- The theme, “test the spirits”, is introduced in 4:1.
- Verses 2-6 develop the theme, giving guidelines for spiritual discernment. This objective is introduced in verse 2 [“this is how you recognize the spirit”] and repeated in verse 6 [“this is how we can distinguish the spirit”].
- The central point of this passage comes in verse 4, where John declares that true Christians are “from” (ἐκ) God, and that he is “in” (ἐν) them.
- The entire section is marked by antithetical parallelism, contrasting those who are of God and from God, and those who are not of God but from the world.

Key concepts include: “the world”, “truth and error”, spirit/Spirit, false prophets, the antichrist. We will discuss these terms and concepts as they come up throughout the passage. But an introduction and overview will serve as a helpful roadmap to better navigate the terrain ahead.

The world: John uses the word “world” six times in this passage.

- In verse 1 and verse 3, the world simply means the world that we live in. Coming into the world is not the problem *per se*. It simply means “to appear on the scene”. As John tells us in the prologue to his Gospel, Christ also came into the world.
- Where these prophets/teachers went wrong was to reject their Lord, the Creator and Savior of the world. As Jesus’ beloved disciple wrote in John 1:10-11, “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” By rejecting God’s own self-revelation in Jesus Christ, these false prophets chose to come under (or to remain under) the influence and inspiration of the Antichrist.
- In verses 4-6 the “world” takes on a negative, sinister meaning. The concept becomes personalized; now “the world” represents a system of cultural, political,

religious and economic beliefs, that together form social structures that are either actively opposed to God, or which simply fail to take God into account.

Worldliness: “Worldliness” then consists in having wrong *attitudes*, wrong *beliefs* and wrong *allegiance*, which results in making wrong *decisions* and taking wrong *actions*. To be worldly (or as John describes it, to be “of the world”, and “from the world”) is to chose, whether actively or passively, to belong in thought, word and deed to a society which does not know God or acknowledge God’s truth.

- Note that in 1 John 2:12–17 John relates worldliness to material possessions, as well as to pride and human ambitions.
- Here in 4:1-6 he contrasts God and the “world” chiefly in terms of truth and error, or “true faith and false teaching”.

False prophets = antichrists. This entire section, like the rest of John’s letter, is Christocentric. In several passages of this letter John alludes to eschatology (teaching concerning the end times). Here, he compares and contrasts Jesus (the true Christ) and “antichrists” (a term he uses in 4:3 to describe the false prophets of 4:1). These antichrists are agents of the Antichrist, who remains in the eschatological background. They can be recognized by the way they have modified or rejected the apostles’ witness concerning Jesus Christ. John further develops this comparison by describing the difference between Christ’s followers and those who follow such “antichrists”.

Truth and error: Throughout this passage John refers to correct and false teaching about Jesus. In 4:6 he makes this contrast explicit, by contrasting the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

- The false prophets who had appeared in the johannine community had led others astray through their false teaching, hence the need to test the spirits.
- These false prophets are little antichrists linked with the Antichrist who will appear at the end of this age.
- The main characteristic of the Antichrist is to oppose Jesus, the true Christ (the anointed one, the Messiah), which includes promoting false teaching about him. When these false teachers left the community, together with those who followed them, they demonstrated that they had exchanged the truth of the Gospel for error. By separating from the church, they showed that they did not truly belong to the Christian community, but rather to the world. They are neither in Christ nor from Christ, but in the world and from the world.

Spirit/Spirit: In our passage for today, John tells his readers how they can distinguish between “divine truth and worldly delusion”. Before he begins however, he connects this passage to what he wrote in earlier chapters by reminding his readers in verse 3:24 that they have been given the Spirit of God. He then proceeds to use the term “spirit” eight times in the next six verses. The word for spirit (pneuma) has a broad range of meaning in the New Testament. To make matters more difficult, John further modifies this term by referring to “the spirit of God”, “the spirit of the antichrist”, “the spirit of truth”, and “the spirit of falsehood”. How then can we tell if

John is referring to (the spirit of) human beings, to evil (demonic) spirits, or to the Holy Spirit?

The initial answer is: we can't tell from the Greek word alone whether "spirit" means: (1) The Holy Spirit (2) Evil spirit(s) (3) The human spirit (where spirit refers to human beings seen primarily in light of their relationship to God). (4) The (personalized) "spirit" of the World. As is often the case in biblical interpretation, we must determine the meaning of this term from its context.

- In 3:24, the Spirit which God gave to his people is the Holy Spirit.
- There are two possible references in 4:1-6 to the Holy Spirit, in verses 4:2 (the Spirit of God) and 4:6 (the Spirit of truth).
- Some references seem to refer to evil spirits, most obviously when John refers to "the spirit of the antichrist" and "the spirit of error. However, none *must* be understood as evil spirits or "demons".
- Some of the seeming references to "evil spirits" can be more broadly understood as representing the "spirit of the World", where the World is personalized as a social system which sets itself up against God, and which is inspired by Satan and his fallen angels.
- Some uses of "spirit" in 1 John 4:1-6 seem best understood as human spirit(s), that is to describe human beings who are led, influenced or inspired either by the Holy Spirit or by evil (demonic) spirits. It is in fact possible to interpret all uses of spirit in 4:1-6 in this way.

There are many advantages of understanding all uses of "spirit" in these verses as referring to human spirits who are (predominately) influenced either by the Holy Spirit or by evil spirits. The result of this approach is a consistent interpretation which puts the responsibility on individual believers and on the church community as a whole to discern truth from error by recognizing its ultimate source. This in turn allows believers both to correct and/or reject false teaching and thus to remain true followers of Jesus Christ.

It is equally plausible as well as more traditional to read verses 4:2 and 4:6 as references to the Holy Spirit. In our passage today I take verses 4:2 and 4:6 to refer to the Holy Spirit, and the remaining references to refer to human beings who are influenced or inspired either by the Spirit of God or by evil spirits, rather than referring to evil spirits directly. Regardless, the difference in practice between the actions of evil spirits and the actions of people influenced by them is subtle. John may have been purposefully ambiguous here at times, to allow for a double meaning (this is quite common in the Greek New Testament). In any case, the expression of divine or demonic influence in these verses is always evident and expressed in the thoughts, attitudes and behavior of human beings.

The passage as a whole follows a chiasmic pattern:

- A the spirit of God (2a)
- B the spirit who is of God (2b)

C the spirit not of God (3a)
 (D) you are of God (4a)
 C¹ they are of the world (5a)
B¹ we are of God (6a)
A¹ the spirit of truth (6b).

- This chiasmic parallelism provides a strong argument for the view that “the spirit(s) who are of God” in verse 2b refers to true followers of Christ in 6a, who “are of God” (4a).
- In a similar way, the spirit(s) who are not of God in verse 3a refers to the those who have not followed the truth (or who have fallen away from it) and thus are of the world (verse 5a).
- Finally, the Spirit of God in verse 2a is parallel to the Spirit of truth in 6b.

There is no need here to introduce the Holy Spirit vis-à-vis evil spirits (demons) in verses 2 and 3, and the argument of the passage becomes clear and consistent. This is not to say that spiritual warfare is not on the agenda here, but that the responsibility is placed on believers to discern whether the words and deeds of other “believers” are indeed inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit. As believers, John gives us no room to claim that, “the Devil made me do it”. Rather we are to discern whether others are indeed teaching and living in accordance with the Gospel, and to follow those who do.

Testing the spirits: The Spirit’s presence in the early church was often marked by powerful speech, notably glossolalia and prophecy, both of which are in practice subjective. There was a lot of “spiritual”, charismatic stuff going on here in the johannine community (cf. Paul’s letters to the Corinthians). How then can genuine spirit-activity be distinguished from false? Both the orthodox and heretical groups in the churches John is writing to claimed “spiritual inspiration” in support of their respective positions.

Prior to verses 4:1-6, John has already spoken of how to discern authentic spirituality.

- The conditions or tests he has given so far to determine whether we are indeed walking in the light include (1) righteousness (2:29; 3:10) and (2) love (3:14; cf. 4:8). Righteousness and love serve as moral tests for recognizing genuine believers.
- Now John presents a theological test: the right confession of Jesus (vv 2–3; cf. 3:23), which proves or disproves one’s claim to prophetic authority, as demonstrates the true allegiance of those who profess to follow Christ. Now, with these terms and concepts in hand, let’s take a walk through 1 John 4:1-6.

4:1 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.

4:1 “Stop believing every spirit, instead test the spirits ...” These spirits are the spirits of the “false prophets”, who claimed divine inspiration for their teaching, which in

fact was incompatible with the truth of the Gospel. They led others into error, and then left the apostolic community, together with those who accepted their teaching. What is more, such teaching was still present in the church, and some who yet remained in the church community were listening to and accepting it.

But what does it mean to “test the spirits”: In 1979 I took part in a evangelistic summer project in New England. On Saturday I joined the rest of the staff for a day in Boston. As part of our trip, we visited the mother church of the Christian Science movement. Both the original church and the larger, more modern church were beautiful, as was the fountain in front. As the tour continued, we were taken to see the Christian Science publishing house. At the same moment, we all turned to each other, with the same feeling that something was not right here spiritually, and that it was time to leave. The feeling of spiritual oppression led us to break off the tour early. Would I call that a case of “testing the spirits”. Certainly. But is it enough to go on a feeling? That is not what John encourages us to do here. Though it is crucial to listen when the Spirit of God speaks to our spirit, it is still possible to mistake our own feelings or the influence of spirits who are “not from God” for the Holy Spirit. How can “testing the spirits” be more concrete and less subjective? Fortunately, in the next few verses John gives us helpful guidelines.

4:2-3² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

4:2 Every spirit that confesses Jesus is from God. Following our understanding that these spirits are human beings, who are either under the influence of God’s Holy Spirit, or the spirit of the world, which is ultimately inspired and empowered by Satan and his demons.

It is important to realize that John is not writing about false teaching in general terms. Rather, he is addressing his own church community, and problems with false teaching that had already led to a split in the church and continued to distract members of the community. False teaching in our church(es) today might take similar or different forms. However, the central teaching of the Gospel concerns the person and work of Jesus Christ, that is who Jesus is and what he came to do. This will always be a crucial test of whether someone knows Christ and is led by the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean to “confess that Jesus has come in the flesh”? This confession strikes a blow at the heresies (false teaching) present in John’s own church. John is warning his fellow-Christians against the pre-gnostic teachings that Christ only seemed to have a physical body, and that he was a created being, not the Son of God, who is equal with God the Father and the Holy Spirit). John thus reaffirms (1) that Jesus **has come from heaven** (affirming Christ’s deity and preexistence). And he

also reaffirms that Jesus has come *in the flesh*, that is, he is fully God and fully human. This is the primary theological test of belief in Christ.

4:3 Next John goes on to declare that every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. Once again, the term “spirit” refers to human being as seen in light of their response to God, in particular to God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ). Those who have not chosen to follow Christ and to hence to be led by his Spirit are instead led by the spirit of the antichrist, hence they can be aptly described as “the spirit of the antichrist. John is historicizing the Bible’s teaching about the end times regarding the Antichrist who will come into the world [in the future], and who is already active in the world through those who have rejected Christ.

John will soon deepen the sense of “the world” in verses 4 through 6. Here, as in verse 4:1, the phrase “is already in the world” is best understood as “being present” in the world.

4:4 ⁴ 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.

In verse 4:4 John declares: “You who are from God have overcome the false prophets, whose teaching about Christ has proven to be false. The true followers of Christ have overcome these false believers.

This is central teaching of this passage. The key to spiritual warfare is knowing that Christ has already won the battle. Elsewhere in Scripture there is more explicit instruction on dealing with spiritual oppression and demon possession (though much less than one might expect). Regardless, in all our struggle against sin, the world and the devil, victory is possible and in the end certain because “he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world”. Note that this is the only direct reference to Satan in this passage. Cf. also John 16:33: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world.”

4:5-6 ⁵ They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ 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.

4:5 “They” here refers to the false prophets, whom John also calls the spirits of the antichrist. They are from the world, that is the social system set up against God, which makes its own rules and in effect makes itself out to be God. It is only natural then these prophets speak the language of the world, expressing the values and chosen lifestyles of the world, and that as a result the world (i.e. “worldly people”) listens to them.

4:6 But we are from God! This is a dramatic, powerful claim! Furthermore, just as those who are from the world listen to those who speak the world’s language, those

who know God recognize and listen to those who are guided by God's Spirit to speak the truth about Christ.

Conclusion/Application:

Isn't John a bit arrogant when he declares those who don't agree with his teaching are not from God? I would be if I made such a claim. And I must admit that I am uncomfortable when I hear such statements. It's one thing when the Apostle John makes such a statement, quite another when someone says that today. And the internet has only complicated things. There are many self-proclaimed authorities who criticize and attack those whom they disagree with or whom they simply don't like. But John doesn't speak here in his own name. Instead, he calls his readers to hold fast to the word of life which has been "from the beginning". This word provides objective criteria by which allegiance to the apostolic teaching about Jesus may be recognized.

John declares that "those who are from God listen to us and remain in fellowship with us, because they recognize that we are from God and that we speak the truth about Jesus. Those who are not from God don't listen to us. They lead others into error, and in the end either leave or cause a split in the church community. We can discern their spirit by observing (1) whether their confession of Jesus Christ is true or false; (2) whether or not they remain in fellowship with us. This then are the tests to discern the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

The gospel concerning Jesus, who is fully God and fully human, is basic to Johannine theology and thought. The Holy Spirit will always be in agreement with God's self-revelation in Jesus. Thus a key test of those who claim to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, is whether their teaching is faithful to the Gospel of Christ.

Spiritual warfare is certainly in view here, but it is in the background. Satan may be alive and well, but for the most part he exerts his influence through human beings who listen to his lies and come under his influence, and through the social systems and structures they build without taking God into account. So John doesn't speculate on the names and ranks of demons or how to talk to evil spirits. Instead, he emphasizes that Christ is already victorious, and he places the responsibility on us to discern whether those who teach the Word are indeed inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit. John gives us no room to claim that, "the Devil made me do it". Nor is he calling on us to become heresy hunters. Rather we are given the task to discern whether we ourselves, as well as others in our fellowship are teaching and living in accordance with the Gospel.

Looking forward to next week, it is important to note that John does not make an idol of tradition or even of correct belief. Sound doctrine means little unless it is matched or

surpassed by godly living. Christian belief and ethics are closely related, and John's teaching in 4:1-6 about the true confession of Christ is followed in 4:7-5:4 by instruction concerning practical love for one another.

Yet even in our passage for today, which seems to focus on doctrinal purity, the tone of the is consistently hortatory. John's readers are encouraged above all to reject "worldliness" and to live as true children of God. They are to do this by discerning where the truth lies (vv 1-3), and by making it their own (vv 4-6).