

EPISTLE OF 1 JOHN
SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT
1 JOHN 4:1-6

Introduction

Sadly, we live in a world that is full of deceit and deception! Deception has been around since the very beginning when the Serpent beguiled Eve in the garden of Eden! And as the years go by and the more sophisticated our society becomes, the easier it is to deceive and to be deceived! In fact Scripture says:

2 Timothy 3:13-14 “13 But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived. 14 But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them;”

False cults and religions lure millions into their traps, promising them fulfillment, happiness, and more. Both Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses still aggressively promote their heresies in just about every country of the world. It has been predicted that **Islam** will take over Europe before the end of this century, and it is also growing in America.

But listen, even among those claiming to be *evangelicals*, who say that they believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, false teaching abounds. Some evangelical pastors often say that we don't need to emphasize doctrine or theology, because that is divisive. Rather, we need to come together on the areas where we agree and demonstrate love, tolerance, and unity to the world. This includes unity with the Roman Catholic Church, which teaches a false way of salvation. (*i.e. Ecumenism or the Ecumenical Movement*)

The **Emergent Church** movement embraces much of the postmodern philosophy says that there is no absolute truth. There are so many **“movements”** that are out there in Christendom that it is hard to keep up with them all!

In view of these many deceptive tactics by the enemy, John’s words in our text are absolutely vital for the preservation of God’s truth. After telling us in **3:23** that God’s commandment is *“that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another,”* John now tells us not to believe everything in **4:1!**

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John especially had in mind the false teachers who had left the church and were drawing others after them! (**2:19, 22-23**)

It is significant that this warning comes in the midst of John’s discourse about love, because false spirits tend to make a great deal of the subject of love. Every cult, every deviant group, every false movement makes its appeal in the name of love.

Like John, Paul emphasized the demonic aspect of false teachers !
1 Timothy 4:1 Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;

Of course, the deceitful spirits teach through people who advocate the false teaching. So we must pay close attention to John’s words. **He is saying that Believers must be discerning in spiritual matters!**

I. THE REASON FOR DISCERNMENT! (4:1)
Discernment is essential because just as God is at work in this world, Satan and his forces are also at work in the world!

Some folks hold the position, *“It doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you believe in something.”* That is sheer and utter nonsense!

e.g. You can believe that you can fly and leap from the edge of the Grand Canyon, flapping your arms for all you’re worth. But believing such has no effect on keeping you in the air.

Of course, those who argue that it doesn’t matter what you believe would say that there is a great difference between science and spiritual matters. They would say that science is objectively true, whereas spiritual matters are subjectively true. If it **“works”** for you, then it’s **“true.”**

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But that assumes that God is merely a projection of people's imaginations, rather than that He actually exists and that He is the creator of all that is.

The Bible reveals that God really exists and that He spoke the heavens and earth into existence! (*Genesis 1:1*) Furthermore, the Bible teaches the actual existence of Satan and other fallen angels, called demons!

John's teaching here assumes that behind all truth in the spiritual realm is the *Spirit of truth!* (*John 14:17; 15:26*)

Behind all spiritually false teaching is "*the spirit of error*", led by Satan, but including all of his demonic forces. (*1 John 4:6*)

Whether they know it or not, **behind every false prophet or false teacher is an evil spirit promoting the errors that they teach.**

From the day that Satan deceived Eve in the garden (Genesis 3), until the last days, when the final antichrist will deceive the world (*2 Thessalonians 2:3-12*), evil spirits both have promoted and will continue to promote false teaching to lead people away from the living and true God!

When John says, "*many false prophets have gone out into the world,*" we should realize that these were not sinister, evil looking characters. They didn't blatantly encourage Satan-worship or child-sacrifice! They used Christian lingo and professed to believe in Jesus!

No doubt, they had attractive personalities and convincing arguments. Jesus called them wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). Paul warned both the Corinthian believers (and us) that these men disguise themselves as the apostles of Christ and ministers of righteousness. Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, not the darkness that he is! (*2 Corinthians 11:13-14*)

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So, John tells these believers what he does in *4:1!* Paul said a similar thing in *1 Thessalonians 5:20-21* "*20 Despise not prophesyings. 21 Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.*"

True faith is not a blind leap into the dark. It examines its object carefully before putting trust in it.

So, we need spiritual discernment because Satan and his forces are alive and well, promoting error at every opportunity. But, how do we try or test the spirits?

II. THE BASIS FOR DISCERNMENT! (4:2-3)

Discernment is based on the confession concerning Jesus Christ!

A false teacher may be gentle and loving. He may speak prophecies that come true. He may even perform miracles or cast out demons or speak in tongues (Matt. 7:22; Exod. 7:11, 22; 8:7; Deut. 13:1-3).

But, the question is, does he lead people to follow a false god? Specifically, John lays down the rule here in *4:2-3!*

To confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh means to agree with that statement, but it also means something more. After all, the demons all agree that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who has come in the flesh! (See Mark 1:24; 3:11; 5:7).

To confess this truth about Jesus implies submitting your life to Him as Lord of your life!

Romans 10:9-10 "9 That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. 10 For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

Furthermore, John's test requires **believing in the true deity and humanity of Jesus!** "*Has come*" implies His preexistence as the **eternal Son of God.**

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Jesus stated His own preexistence when He told the Jews, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).

Or, as John begins his Gospel (*John 1:1*), “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*”

When John states in *1 John 4:2* that “*Jesus Christ is come in the flesh,*” he is referring not only to His true deity, but also to His true humanity.

Some taught that matter is evil; so they also taught that Jesus was only a spirit-being who seemed to be a real man. The Gnostics, one group whom John was combating, taught that Jesus was a mere man, but that “*the Christ,*” a divine emanation, came upon Him at His baptism, but left just before His crucifixion.

John’s test refutes both of these heresies. Jesus is the Christ (the Anointed One, or Messiah) who was conceived supernaturally by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary which allowed him to have a human body, although apart from sin.

To deny that Jesus is true God and at the same time true man is to deny the Christian faith. To deny either Jesus’ deity or His humanity is to deny that He is our Savior. **If He were not God,** He would have been a sinner and His death on the cross could not have atoned for anyone’s sins! **If He were not man,** He could not have assumed our sins on the cross! (*See Hebrews 2:14-17*) If either of these were true, then faith in Him to save from sin would be worthless!

So, any teaching that denies that Jesus is true God and true man, that as the second person of the Trinity, Jesus took on human flesh in the incarnation, is a doctrine of demons. **It is the spirit of antichrist!**

The content of our theology matters greatly! The difference between a person in a false cult who is going to hell and a true believer in Jesus Christ, who is going to heaven, is largely one of theology.

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Sadly, cultists are often more zealous and more knowledgeable about what they believe than most true Christian Believers are!

But, they deny that Jesus is true God in human flesh; we affirm it!

So I encourage you to study sound doctrine, especially with regard to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

John has shown us **the reason for discernment**, because Satan and his forces are actively trying to deceive us on essential biblical truth.

He has shown us **the basis for discernment** is a person’s confession about Jesus Christ as true God and true man.

III. THE EVIDENCE OF DISCERNMENT! (4:4-6)

Discernment is evidenced in the response to the Apostles’ witness!

Each of these verses begin with emphatic the pronouns: Ye, they, and we.

The first two pronouns portray two very different responses, that of true believers (John’s “little children”) and that of the false teachers and those who follow them.

The “we” of verse 6 sets forth the standard by which to measure others’ or our own response, namely, how does a person respond to the witness of the Apostles?

A. Those Who By The Spirit Overcome False Teaching Are From God! (4:4)

When John says, “*Ye are of God, little children,*” he is pointing again to their **new birth**. Christianity is not just a matter of subscribing to certain creeds or correct doctrines, although that is essential.

It is a matter of being born of God so that you receive new life from Him and become His child!

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This new birth is absolutely essential if you want to be able to understand and hold to the truth. By way of contrast, the false teachers and those who follow them are *“of the world”* !

Without the new birth, a person is incapable of understanding or obeying God’s truth. Look at what Jesus said to the unbelieving Jews in *John 8:43-47*.

Jesus was using **hear** and **heareth** in the same way that John uses it in *4:6*. **It refers to hearing in the sense of both understanding and obeying the truth.**

By *“overcome them,”* John means that his hearers have resisted the false teaching. The reason that they have overcome is not only that **they are of God by being born again**, but also with the new birth, they also received the indwelling Holy Spirit! (*Cf. “the anointing,” 2:27*)

The Holy Spirit in them and us is greater than he who is in the world (Satan, who inspires the false teachers).

Even though the Gnostic teachers may have been intellectually superior to John’s *“little children,”* **the presence of the indwelling Spirit gave his readers the ability to discern and thus avoid the errors of the false teachers!**

How does the Spirit preserve us from error? Well listen up! It is not enough to be a spiritual ignoramus and say, *“the Spirit will protect me from error.”*

The Spirit protects us through God’s Word, which reveals the truth about the person and work of Christ! (4:2-3)

**The Word is the measure by which we try the spirits!
So we need to be diligent in our study God’s Word in dependence on the Holy Spirit for understanding!**

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Then and only then will we be able to overcome false teachers!

B. Those Who Teach Error And Those Who Follow Their Teaching Are From The World! (4:5)

As we have seen in *2:15-16*, the world is that evil system under Satan’s dominion that is opposed to God and His kingdom.

The world system is built around the principle of taking glory from God and transferring it to proud, self-willed man.

That was Satan’s original temptation to Eve in the garden. He challenged God’s Word and suggested to Eve that if she ate the forbidden fruit, she would become like God, knowing good and evil! (Cf. Genesis 3:1-5)

Any teaching that detracts from God’s glory and sovereignty and exalts man by feeding his pride is satanic at the core.

Verse 5 says the world is listening to the false worldly teachers! When you tell the world what it wants to hear, you will not lack an audience.

When a false teacher sets aside the unpopular notion that all have sinned, and he tells people that they are wonderful and that God exists to help them fulfill their desires, he will gain a following.

But the problem is, that message is not from God. It is from the world and the god of this world. Don’t judge the success of a ministry by its size! Judge it by its faithfulness to the truth of the Gospel as revealed in the Bible.

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C. The Standard By Which To Measure Discernment Is A Person's Response To The Apostles' Witness. (4:6)

Some understand the “*we*” of *verse 6* to refer to all believers. But the “*we*” of *verse 6* stands in opposition to the “*they*” of *verse 5*, and so it is referring to the Apostles.

The one that “*knoweth God*” in *verse 6* is synonymous with the one who is “**of God**” in *verse 4*...i.e. the one who is born again!

These people listen to the Apostles, which means that they **listen with understanding and obedience**. They **accept** the Apostles' witness to Jesus Christ as God in human flesh.

The one who is **not** of God **does not listen to the Apostles!**

The apostles were entrusted with the special authority to lay the foundation of the Church through their witness and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ! (*Matthew 16:16-18; John 14:26; Ephesians 2:22; 2 Corinthians 10:8*).

We have the Apostles' teaching preserved for us in the New Testament. So, the standard by which to judge anyone's (including our own) spiritual discernment is,

“What is the person's response to the Apostles' teaching about Jesus Christ as found in the New Testament?”

Without that standard, every person becomes his own measure of “*truth*,” filled with pride, and not in submission to Christ as Lord!