

That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life

An Elaboration of the Doctrinal Test

1 John 4:1-6

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Scripture

Let's suppose you are new to town and you are looking for a place to worship and belong. And let's suppose you visit a worshipping community, pick up a bulletin, and sit down. You read the mission of the group, which is as follows: "The mission of the [Blank] Temple is to encourage benevolence and empathy, reject tyrannical authority, advocate practical common sense, oppose injustice, and undertake noble pursuits."¹

"That's good," you think. "I certainly want to belong to group that encourages benevolence and empathy. I agree with them in rejecting tyrannical authority. And who doesn't want to advocate practical common sense? Of course I oppose injustice. There is far too much of that in this world anyway. And I really want my life to count by undertaking noble pursuits. I think this might be a good place to check out."

Now, you may (or may not) be surprised to learn that the mission statement that I read to you is taken directly off the website of The Satanic Temple. It sounds benign, almost like a group to which you might want to belong. But, of course, it is the complete opposite of Biblical Christianity.

So, how do you discern between truth and error? How can know what teaching will get you to heaven and what teaching will get you to hell?

In his First Letter, the Apostle John helps his beloved flock know how to discern between truth and error.

Let's read about an elaboration of the doctrinal test in 1 John 4:1-6:

¹ See <https://thesatanictemple.com/pages/about-us>.

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. (1 John 4:1-6)

Introduction

In his book *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, Leonard Sweet tells the story of Ed Faubert. Faubert is what you call a “cupper” – in layman’s terms, he’s a coffee-taster. And his sensitive taste buds are actually certified by the state of New York!

So refined is Faubert’s sense of taste for coffee that even while blindfolded, he can take one sip of coffee and tell you “not just that it is from Guatemala, but from what state it comes, at what altitude it was grown, and on what mountain.”²

That ability takes uncommon discernment. Very few people in the world are able to make that level of distinction.

I think that one of the greatest challenges for Christians today is to discern between truth and error. Some may assert

² Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2007), 54.

that it takes an uncommon level of discernment to distinguish between truth and error. But I don't believe that.

And I don't believe that the Apostle John believed that either. He wrote his letter to help believers – believers at all levels of maturity – distinguish between truth and error.

Lesson

First John 4:1-6 teaches us how to discern between truth and error.

Let's use the following outline:

1. A Command to Test the Spirits (4:1a)
2. A Reason to Test the Spirits (4:1b)
3. A Guide to Test the Spirits (4:2-6)

I. A Command to Test the Spirits (4:1a)

First, let's look at a command to test the spirits.

John writes in verse 1a, **“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits.”** Let me begin by defining what John means by **“spirit.”** The Greek word for **“spirit”** (*pneuma*) occurs seven times in the Greek text in John 4:1-6. In the context of this paragraph, John uses the word **“spirit”** to refer to the animating force of a person. In other words, John has already taught that there are only two groups in the world: those who are the children of God and those who are the children of the devil (*cf.* 1 John 3:10). So, every person is a voice either for God or for the devil. Therefore, the **“spirit”** behind each person is either God or the devil.

John says that Christians must **“not believe every spirit, but test the spirits.”** He was warning his beloved flock against the false teachers who were teaching that they had special

knowledge of God. They claimed to have the Spirit of God in them. But John insists that they have the spirit of the devil in them. Not everyone who claimed to speak by the Spirit of God was doing so. John did not want believers to accept every claim to inspiration. Believers must **“test the spirits.”** John wants believers to be aware that there are many false claims to Spirit-inspired speech. Therefore, believers must always **“test the spirits”** to determine whether they are speaking from God or from the devil.

Micky Moore and his wife were active participants in concerts. He says that one night as they were packing up after a concert, they sent a young woman to pick up their children from the home where they were staying. Since the children didn't know the young woman, Mickey told her to give their six-year-old son, Trevor, their secret family code word so he would know she was authorized to pick them up.

A little later Mickey received a phone call. Trevor refused to leave because the woman hadn't given the right word. The mix-up was on Mickey's part. He had said the code word was “Dinosaur Monster,” which his son informed him was incorrect. “It's Dinosaur!” he said.

“Are you sure? I was certain it was Dinosaur Monster,” Mickey replied.

“I'm sure,” said Trevor confidently.

“Well, okay, son,” Mickey said. “You're probably right. But it's okay for you to come back to the church with this lady.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. Then Trevor said, “Who is this?”

“It's me, your father, Mickey Moore! Now get in the car and come on!”

“All right,” he replied and hung up.

Mickey Moore concludes, “It was an odd feeling to be interrogated by my six-year-old son. He knew the word, and even though he was given words that were very close to the real thing, they weren’t true – and he knew the difference.”³

Christians must grow in their knowledge and understanding of God’s word so that they can **test the spirits**.

II. A Reason to Test the Spirits (4:1b)

Second, let’s notice a reason to test the spirits.

John’s reason for testing the spirits is that there are many false teachers in the world. He puts it this way in verse 1b, “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.**” Christians should never accept at face value teaching about God and the Bible and how to have a relationship with God. John warns his flock that they need to be on their guard for the truth and against error.

In our day, false teachers may claim to be “anointed by God.” Because of this “anointing,” they can heal people. Usually, these false teachers only do their healing at large meetings but they also do so on TV. One red flag concerning these false teachers is that they want people at their meetings or watching TV to “sow a seed of faith.” Having done so, the false teachers claim, God will then heal the person. This is the prosperity gospel in action. While these teachers claim to be anointed with the Spirit of God, it is nothing but sheer fraud. Believers today should have nothing to do with them. Believers need to be on their guard for the truth and against error.

³ See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1998/july/5247.html>.

III. A Guide to Test the Spirits (4:2-6)

And third, let's examine a guide to test the spirits.

John has commanded his readers to test the spirits. He has told them that the reason for doing so is because there are many false teachers in the world. Now he gives his readers guidance for how to test the spirits. There are two tests.

I. *Examining the Content of Their Teaching (4:2-3)*

First, test the spirits by examining the content of their teaching.

John is helping his beloved flock discern what is false teaching. He writes in verses 2-3, **“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. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.”** If a teacher affirms that Jesus is God in human form, then he is a true teacher sent from God. The false teachers were claiming that a divine spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism and left him before his death on the cross. But John insists that Jesus was both God and Man throughout his entire life.

John's test is Christological. That is, the test by which truth can be discerned from error has to do with what is taught about the Person and Work of Jesus. The person teaching by the Spirit of God affirms that Jesus is fully God and fully Man in one person. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. He was born of the Virgin Mary. He lived a perfect life of obedience. He died on the cross at Calvary. Three days after he died, he was resurrected back to life again. He did all of this to make a

substitutionary and sacrificial atonement for the sins of all believers. All those teaching by the Spirit of God teach this.

I don't encounter people today who believe that a divine spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism and left him before his death on the cross. More common is the denial that Jesus is God. People may believe that he is a great teacher, an outstanding moralist, and so on. But they do not acknowledge that Jesus is both God and Man in human form. However, we must insist that Jesus is more than a great teacher and an outstanding moralist. He is fully God and fully Man in one person. How does that work? I don't know. That is the mystery of the incarnation. But we affirm it and we must proclaim it.

So, the first way of testing the spirits is by examining the content of their teaching. The one who teaches by the Spirit of God affirms that Jesus is fully God and fully Man in one Person. The one who teaches by the spirit of the devil denies this truth.

II. *Examining the Character of Their Lives (4:4-6)*

And second, test the spirits by examining the character of their lives.

John writes in verse 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.”** John once again refers to his beloved flock as **“little children.”** This is a term of endearment from the aged pastor to people for whom he has great affection and concern. Many of them may well have been his spiritual children. John assures them that they belong to God. Moreover, they have not only withstood the false teaching of the false teachers, but they also have **“overcome them.”** The verb **“to overcome”** is used six times in this letter, which

is more than any other book in the New Testament, except for Revelation, where it appears seventeen times. (The Revelation was also written by the Apostle John.) This note of victory is prominent. Believers have victory over false teachers because God, who indwells believers, is greater than the devil, who is the one in the world promoting false teaching.

Believers today need constant reminding that we are already victorious. By his death and resurrection, Jesus has conquered sin and Satan. As we rest in that truth and grow in the knowledge and grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we have overcome sin and Satan. Sin no longer has power over us. And Satan – the devil – is no longer our father. We belong to the family of God. We are citizens of the kingdom of God. We are co-heirs with Jesus. We have an abundant life now. And we will spend all eternity with God. We should never be deceived by the lies of the devil and the false teaching that he spreads about who we are in Christ.

John writes in verse 5, **“They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.”** **“They”** are the false teachers. John insists that the false teachers are **“from the world.”** John emphasizes the word **“world”** by using it three times in this sentence. The false teachers are from the **world**, they speak from the viewpoint of the **world**, and their audience is the **world**. That is the character of those who are false teachers. John is warning his beloved flock not to listen to false teachers. The message of false teachers will resonate with a large group of people, but those with whom it resonates are not believers.

In our travel this summer, we reconnected with a long-time friend of my wife. A few years ago, she started attending a local church that she loves. And the reason she loves it is that the teaching is so solidly based on the Bible. In contrast, I think

of many mainline churches that have capitulated to the world by proclaiming a message that resonates with the world. These churches emphasize love but not the holiness of God. They talk about goodness but not about sin. They talk about systemic evil but not about personal sin. These churches have a declining influence on the culture because they are parroting the message of the world. Let us stand firmly on the word of God and the message of the gospel, regardless of how the world reacts to us.

John distinguishes between true teachers and false teachers, between believers and unbelievers. The difference between the two is that one group belongs to God and the other group does not. So he writes in verse 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.”** John reminds his beloved flock that there are only two groups of people in the world: those who are the children of God and those who are the children of the devil (*cf.* 1 John 3:10).

We should not be surprised that unbelievers do not want to listen to us. We do not know in whom God’s Spirit is at work. Our task is to proclaim the good news to all people. Believers are like parched travelers who have found an oasis of fresh water and they tell others to come and drink. Last year, in the early days of the pandemic, many items quickly became unavailable in the stores. Friends would call others and tell them which stores had the diminishing supplies so that their friends could go and purchase some for themselves. The gospel is good news that must be spread to others so that they can find life for themselves.

So, the first way of testing the spirits is by examining the content of their teaching. And the second way of testing the

spirits by examining the character of their lives.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the topic of the spirit of truth and the spirit of error in 1 John 4:1-6, let us evaluate all teaching through the lens of God's word.

On his second missionary journey, Paul, along with Silas, came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews (Acts 17:1). On three Sabbath days, Paul preached from the Scriptures that "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ" (Acts 17:2-3). Some Jews, devout Greeks, and women leaders believed Paul's message. However, the majority of the Jews did not believe Paul and sought to do him harm. After a mob scene, the newly converted Christians sent Paul and Silas on their way by night to Berea, which was about fifty miles southwest of Thessalonica. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue and preached the message about Jesus being the Christ to them. Acts 17:11 says, "Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (*NIV*).

Beloved, the way to discern truth from error is to examine all teaching through the lens of the Scriptures. If the Berean Jews checked the Apostle Paul's teaching through the lens of the Scriptures, then you need to check mine too. Let us heed the teaching of John, "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." Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can
be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons.
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp.
3. www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=Fred-dyFritz.

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