

That You May Know

*And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.
(1 John 2:3 ESV)*

*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers.
(1 John 3:14 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

Test The Spirits

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1 John 4:1-6

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! I hope you brought your Bible with you and that you are able to open it now to 1 John 4:1. 1 John 4:1-6 appears to be something of an aside – you can see this very easily for yourself. Look at the concluding verses of the last section that we looked at together last week.

And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us. (1 John 3:24 ESV)

So the argument in chapter 3 was basically, that the real children of God are going to be renouncing sin and loving one another and as they do those things, God is going to be drawing closer to them and they are going to have more confidence in prayer and a greater experience of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

But now he appears to anticipate an objection:

“But Pastor John, the heretics over there, the people who went out from us, they are saying that they’re having a powerful experience of the Holy Spirit too. So how can we know whether OUR SPIRIT is truly the Spirit of God?”

Well that's a very good question.

Every group out there is claiming to have an experience of the Holy Spirit – and often it seems like the more theologically wacky they are the greater the spiritual experiences they claim to be having. The Apostle Paul talked about this too. He said:

“The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders,¹⁰ and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” (2 Thessalonians 2:9–10 ESV)

So Satan is **BUSY OUT THERE** in the world trying to draw people away from the true Gospel and the true Christ of Scripture and in order to do that he makes regular use of **LYING SIGNS AND WONDERS**.

And of course this was going on in the Old Testament as well. Do you remember when Moses and Aaron stood before Pharaoh to do the signs that God had given them so as to authenticate their right to speak for God? Aaron threw down his staff and it became a snake – but right after that:

Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts.¹² For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. (Exodus 7:11–12 ESV)

So very early on in the Bible we are introduced to this reality that **ALONGSIDE** the legitimate working of God we should expect to encounter demonic counterfeits. But the good news is that the demonic counterfeits are ultimately weaker and less enduring than the true works of God – so that in itself is a call to discernment and patience. Watch and see! Be on the lookout! Be discerning! Or as John says here: **TEST THE SPIRITS**.

Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 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. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and 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. ⁴Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We 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 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

To help them figure out whether they are going to the right church or not, John provides them with a little checklist. He provides 3 criteria and he applies them both ways.

What Kind Of Church Am I Going To?

(Note to PowerPoint Team – use the graphic from Kathleen to denote movement from point to point, as opposed to these headings which are for my benefit only)

The first thing he says is that in a “Holy Spirit Church” you are going to find:

1A. Orthodox Views On Jesus

Whereas in a “Spirit of Antichrist Church” you are going to find:

1B. Modified Views On Jesus

That’s the first thing you want to be looking for.

You can see that 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,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. (1 John 4:2–3 ESV)

So - we've got two spirits operating in the world – the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Antichrist. By the way, God willing, we will do a sort of “Excursus Sermon” on “The Spirit of Antichrist” at the end of this series. There are 4 mentions of the antichrist in John’s letters and I just thought it made sense to wait until we have read all of them before doing a message on that theme. For now all you need to see is that orthodoxy – saying right things about Jesus – is the ultimate test for any person or prophet claiming to be animated by the Spirit of God.

The job of the Holy Spirit is to help the people of God grow in their understanding and imitation of the Son of God. So if a “spiritual experience” or a “spiritual utterance” does not contribute to that end – it is not of the Spirit of God.

Plain and simple.

Now you've heard me say a few times over the course of this series that the heresy in view here is an early version of what later came to be known as Gnosticism. In general these people denied the BODILY ASPECTS of the historic Christian confession of Christ. They didn't believe in the incarnation, they didn't believe in the Virgin Birth, they didn't believe that Jesus ACTUALLY died on the cross – or at least they didn't believe that Jesus WAS THE CHRIST when he actually died on the cross – and they didn't believe in the Bodily Resurrection.

And John says – if the “spirit” in your church, if the spirit animating your prophets is teaching that nonsense, then it is NOT the Spirit of God. You shouldn't be listening to those people.

So – let's get practical. If the person knocking on your door does not believe that Jesus Christ was TRULY HUMAN and TRULY DIVINE then that person is not filled with the Holy Spirit of God – and you should not listen to them. That means you shouldn't listen to Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses – and it means that you shouldn't listen to Liberal Protestants who deny the Virgin Birth and who often deny the Bodily Resurrection.

Those people are not saved. The spirit in them is the spirit of antichrist.

The second set of criteria can be seen in verses 4-5. John says:

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. (1 John 4:4–5 ESV)

Here John is saying that in a “Holy Spirit Church” you are going to find people:

2A. Persevering On The Old Path

Whereas in a “Spirit of Antichrist Church” you are going to find people:

2B. Paralleling The Path Of Culture

“The Spirit in you MUST BE the real Spirit”, John says, “because you have overcome them. You have successfully resisted the Siren’s Song. You could never have done that on your own – you must be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

The old Presbyterian Bible commentator Gordon Clark says here:

‘We children of John have conquered the false prophets.... We still believe in the virgin birth, the atonement and the resurrection. We have conquered them. They could not conquer us.’¹

Holy Spirit people never fall away – so if you are walking on the old Gospel path, then you must have the Holy Spirit working and moving in your church.

On the other hand, if you see a church walking parallel to the path of the world, they must be animated by the spirit of antichrist. The spirit of antichrist is the spirit of the world. F.F. Bruce makes that very point. He says:

¹Gordon Clark as cited by David Jackman, *The Message of John’s Letters*, ed. John R. W. Stott, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 114.

“But why should the leaders of the other party, with their followers, be said to be ‘of the world’? Because the philosophy to which they endeavour to accommodate the gospel, depriving it of what makes it the gospel in the process, is current secular philosophy, the prevalent climate of opinion.”²

That is the spirit that animates the apostate church. If you are in a church that is constantly shaving off the hard edges of the Gospel and constantly adapting the message of the Gospel to appease the spirit of the age – then you are in a “spirit of antichrist church” – and you need to get out immediately.

The third set of criteria comes to us in verse 6. John says:

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 4:6 ESV)

Sometimes John’s “wes” need to be explained. John Stott is helpful here. He says:

“The *we* of this verse is in direct antithesis to the *they* of the previous verse. So, if *they* means the false teachers, *we* must mean the true teachers, namely the apostles.”³

So what John is saying here is that in a “Holy Spirit Church” you are going to find people:

3A. Respecting Apostolic Authority

Whereas in a “Spirit of Antichrist Church” you are going to find people:

3B. Rejecting Apostolic Authority

Pretty simple – and pretty biblical. Afterall Jesus said – to his Apostles:

“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.” (Matthew 10:40 ESV)

² F.F. Bruce, *The Gospels & Epistles Of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 106.

³ John R. W. Stott, *The Letter of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 158.

So be very careful around people who want to “receive Jesus” but not “receive the Apostles”. Be very careful around the so called “Red Letter Christians”. A Red-Letter Christian is someone who wants to focus almost exclusively on the words of Jesus – and at first glance that sounds like a good idea – until you read your Bible and you discover how few Red Letters there actually are. You see the words of Jesus in the Bible are really like the tip of the iceberg – they are connected, necessarily and consequentially – to a great deal of content beneath. And as with an iceberg you ignore that content at your peril.

The Apostle Paul said that the true church is built upon:

the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20 ESV)

So that’s the Jesus that a real church is built upon. The Jesus ANTICIPATED by the Old Testament prophets and EXPLICATED by the New Testament Apostles. That’s the REAL JESUS – and the spirit of antichrist is always trying to chip away at that. His prophets are always saying: “You can’t trust the Apostle Paul! He was just a man – and a man of his times at that. The things he said are not on the same level as the things Jesus said.”

But that’s not what Jesus said.

Jesus said – to his Apostles just before he died:

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:12–14 ESV)

So Jesus himself said – in those fabulous Red Letters – that his words were really just the tip of the iceberg. There was much more to come! And it would come as the Holy Spirit took words from the ascended Christ and delivered them into the hearts and mouths of his Apostles. Those are still the words of Jesus. “He will take what is mine and declare it to you”.

So the words of the Holy Spirit inspired Apostles ARE THE WORDS OF JESUS.

And real believers recognize the words of Jesus. Whether they come from his mouth or from the mouths and pens of his Apostles.

Not so in a ‘spirit of antichrist church’. In those churches they are always trying to pry Jesus loose from his biblical moorings. Like demonic dentists they want to cut the root so as to remove the tooth. They want to make another Jesus and to do that they have to sever those interpretive connections. So they’re always going to be telling you: “We don’t need to read the Old Testament”; “we don’t need to read the Apostles”; “Just give me Jesus!”

But what Jesus?

Because the Jesus in the Bible said that his Spirit would speak through the Apostles and he said that his life and ministry was anticipated by the Old Testament prophets. He said:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me (John 5:39 ESV)

Do you see that? Jesus said if you read the Scriptures properly they will guide you straight to me!

So if you are going to a church that is trying to mute the Old Testament or that is trying to diminish the authority of the Apostles then you are going to a “spirit of antichrist church” – and you need to run for your life. Their Jesus doesn’t exist and their Gospel does not save.

Those are the stakes, brothers and sisters, therefore do not believe every spirit but TEST THE SPIRITS to see whether they are from God.

Implications:

Now as I said at the beginning 1 John 4:1-6 is really, a pastoral aside. You can see that for yourself. In chapter 3 we were talking about how the REAL CHILDREN OF GOD are

renouncing sin and loving one another – and John gets back to that topic in 1 John 4 verse 7.

Look at your Bibles:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7 ESV)

So we're right back to where we were at the end of chapter 3, meaning that whatever is going on here in verses 1-6 is somewhat parenthetical to the overall argument. John anticipated a question and he answered it in flow – and we're glad that he did, because what he said, simple as it was, has some pretty profound implications and before we end our time together I just want to make sure that you have seen them and taken proper note of them.

The first implication is this, given all of what John just said, I think we would have to agree that:

1. Apostasy is inevitable for some and impossible for others

Based on everything John says here combined with everything he said in chapter 2, I'm not sure how we could avoid this conclusion. In chapter 2 John said:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:19 ESV)

So here John is plainly saying that if they had been of us – if they had been REAL CHRISTIANS – they would not have been led astray by this particular false teaching. They would have kept to the old Gospel path. The fact that they didn't – the fact that they apostatized, INDICATES that they were never real believers in the first place.

Apparently, REAL BELIEVERS DO NOT and CANNOT leave the path. John goes on to say in chapter 2 verse 20:

But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. (1 John 2:20 ESV)

So unlike those apostates, you've got something INSIDE YOU – something of the HOLY SPIRIT – that will not ALLOW you to go along with the spirit of antichrist. You just can't go there. There is something in your spirit that will not allow you to go along.

Now, this wasn't the first time that John had taught this to these people. In John 10 verse 5 he recorded Jesus as having said:

“A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” (John 10:5 ESV)

F.F. Bruce refers to this as:

“a built-in spiritual instinct ... enabling them to hold fast to truth and reject error.”⁴

So again, this is like that LANE KEEP ASSIST function that we talked about a couple of weeks ago. Real believers have the SEED OF GOD IN THEM – according to 1 John 3:9 – and therefore they CANNOT be led astray by the spirit of antichrist. But if you don't have that – then you will be. You will succumb to the siren's song.

Thus – apostasy – is either inevitable or impossible depending upon whether you have the seed of God.

Which leads us to our next implication. If that's true – that apostasy is either inevitable or impossible, then obviously:

2. Perseverance is the ultimate test of faith

If the Bible is clear about anything it is that not everyone who SAYS they are a Christian actually is and not everyone who STARTS OUT AS A CHRISTIAN – or at least as a professed Christian – will finish the race and actually enter into their eternal reward. Many are those who begin enthusiastically and who end in utter tragedy. Like the seed sown on the rocky soil:

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Gospels & Epistles Of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 106.

“they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.” (Mark 4:17 ESV)

Jesus said that.

Jesus said stuff like that all the time. In the Olivet Discourse he warned the disciples that:

“many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.¹³ But **the one who endures to the end will be saved.**” (Matthew 24:11–13 ESV)

Not because enduring MAKES US CHRISTIANS but because BEING CHRISTIANS our endurance is inevitable.

A real Christian has the SEED OF GOD in them. They have LANE KEEP ASSIST and they will not be led astray by the Siren’s Song.

Which means if you want to know who the real Christians are just watch how people respond to pressure from the culture and persecution from the world. If they run, if they leave, if they edit, change and deny – then they were never saved.

Which means, paradoxically that:

3. Pressure and persecution are not entirely without benefit

God is Sovereign over all so we can be sure that even these painful processes will eventually work out for our good and his glory – can we not? Nothing happens apart from God’s Sovereign ordination. In fact the Bible is pretty clear that these pressures and persecutions ultimately come from the hand of God. God intends to use them to test and purify his people.

That is the consistent testimony of Holy Scripture.

I mentioned that this whole “testing the spirits” thing goes all the way back to the Old Testament. Moses said to the people in Deuteronomy 13:1-3:

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder,² and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Deuteronomy 13:1–3 ESV)

Are you hearing that?

God allows FALSE PROPHETS to do signs and wonders in the sight of the people of God so as to TEST their love and commitment. This is a TOOL in the hand of Almighty God!

The Apostle Paul said the same thing. He says:

Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false,¹² in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thessalonians 2:11–12 ESV)

So false teachers – operating in the power of the spirit of antichrist, actually serve to purify the church and to condemn unbelievers.

Like a good bush fire, sometimes what looks like a tragedy can actually result in long term blessing.

And the opposite is true – sometimes what looks like a blessing can actually turn out to be a long-term impediment.

Historians say that about 10% of the Roman population identified as Christian in the early days of the 4th century. And that was probably pretty close to a true number because in those days identifying as a Christian could get you killed. It would hurt your business. It would divide your family – so if you identified as a Christian, chances are, you really were.

But then in AD 312 when the Emperor Constantine at least nominally converted to Christianity, everything changed and by the end of the 4th century historians estimate that over 60% of the Roman Empire identified as Christian.

That's a huge advance – that's a GREAT BLESSING – or was it?

How real was the conversion of that 50% of the Roman Empire? Why hadn't they converted earlier? When it was hard. When it went against the grain. When it might cost you something. And so some historians actually say that the Christian church has never recovered from the mass conversion of the Roman Empire. Because whenever it is fashionable and favourable to become a Christian all manner of people WILL DO SO for debatable reasons. And that makes it really hard to be and to find a real Christian.

Christianity is hard when it's easy.

Do you know what I mean by that?

When half or more of the members of your church are not really saved and do not actually HAVE the SEED OF GOD IN THEM it is really hard to live and to steer and to serve as a team.

So PRESSURE and PERSECUTION are not entirely without blessing.

Now, I'm not claiming to be a PROPHET in any kind of special sense, but I will make a prediction based on my observation of history and my reading of these texts: the VISIBLE church of Jesus Christ will shrink dramatically in North America over the next several years.

Key word in that sentence: VISIBLE.

The actual church of Jesus Christ will not shrink at all – in fact I expect it to grow and come back to life in a fairly dramatic way – but the FOOTPRINT of the VISIBLE church will shrink DRAMATICALLY in this culture over the next 20 years.

Under pressure from the spirit of the age and under threat of persecution from the state the connection of nominal Christians to the true church of Jesus Christ will be far too tenuous to resist the Siren's Song. They will go out from us – because they are not of us.

But you – brothers and sisters – are of God. If you are holding on to the Christ of Scripture, if you have the SEED OF GOD within you – you will renounce sin, you will love one another and you will persevere in the faith once for all delivered to the saints – thanks be to God. Let's pray together.