

1 John 4:1-6 Answers How To Test Spirits

Introduction: John wrote repeatedly in chapter 3 that we should love one another. We know that we have passed out of death into life if we love one another: **3:10, 11, 14, 16, 23** (read aloud). However, this love is not to be without discernment. In chapter 4 John continues writing about the importance of love (4b), but he also tells us to be shrewd about it (4a). We are to beware of spiritual deception and overcome the spirit of antichrist (4a).

******Why is it important for us to test every spirit (4:1-6)?** It is important because there are many false prophets animated by the spirit of antichrist.

Take Away Application: Don't be Gullible! Just as it is true that not everyone who talks about heaven is going there, so too it is true that not everyone who teaches about God is telling the truth. We have to teach little children not to trust strangers ("Don't take candy from strangers; don't get into a car with strangers"). Similarly, new believers must be warned to beware of false prophets.

What is the first command of 4:1? Do not believe every spirit. This is a wakeup call. Be wary.

ESV Proverbs 27:12 The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it.

When was the last time you heard a ghost teaching the Bible? What did John mean by spirit/spirits (4:1)? Here it refers to a person who is actuated by a spirit, either divine or demonic (Wuest, p. 159).

Truth: Demonic spirits influence false prophets with false doctrine.

ESV 1 Timothy 4:1 . . . the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons . . .

Insight: There are short-wave signals all around us, but you would never know that unless you had a radio to detect them. Similarly, there is more to the world around us than meets the eye! If Satan or his demons manifested themselves in red suits with horns, pointy tails and pitch forks they would be easy to spot. You would know not to believe them. Instead, they work in secret, invisibly, like termites eating away inside the walls of your home.

ESV 2 Corinthians 11:14-15 . . . Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.

What is the second command given in 4:1? We are to actively test the spirits.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:20-22 Do not despise prophecies, but test everything . . .

ESV **1 Corinthians 14:29** Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

Slick Trick: The Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, LDS) promote a “restored” gospel and “another” testament (their new writings which they claim are inspired): Old Testament, New Testament, Another Testament. They realize this is a hard sell, so they ask people to pray about the truthfulness of their claims. One LDS web site advises: “Sincerely pray to your Heavenly Father. Ask Him if what you are learning is true . . . Listen with your heart for the sweet feelings of inspiration from the Holy Ghost, who will to whisper the truth to your spirit and mind.” They say to look for a testimony or a burning in ones’ bosom that Mormonism is true. Prayer is indeed important, but John did not leave the test to a subjective experience. John said to actively test the teachings. John’s test is doctrinal in nature.

What is a prophet (4:1)? A prophet is someone who claims to speak for God. They claim God’s Spirit is speaking through them. John warns there are true prophets and false prophets (*pseudopropétés*)

Review: Based on 4:1, what source of inspiration do false prophets have? False prophets are influenced by the doctrine of demons, demonic spirits. Demons are not stupid. They have been in the business of deceiving people for 10,000 years. They are skilled, practiced, experienced and convincing.

Example: Joseph Smith claimed to be out in the forests of New York state when both God the Father and Jesus appeared to him. They told him all existing churches were corrupt and the true Gospel lost so they were going to start all over again with Joseph, giving him a restored gospel. **Assuming Joseph really did have some sort of supernatural encounter in those woods, who do you suppose he really saw?** He saw demons disguised as the Father and Jesus.

ESV **Galatians 1:8** . . . even if we or an angel from heaven [Moroni?] should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

John warned that many false prophets had gone out into the world (4:1). Where were they before they went out into the world? See 2:19. They had formerly been in the church, (2:19) but had defected into the world (Smalley, p. 219)

— 4:2-3 —

What doctrinal test did John establish in 4:2-3 to see if a teaching is from God or not?

John’s test of orthodoxy concerned the person of Christ. John’s basic standard was that **1)** Jesus is the Christ and **2)** He came in the flesh.

What can we learn about the spirit of antichrist from 4:2-3? Here we learn that the antichrist spirit:

1) Denies Jesus is the Christ:

ESV **1 John 2:22** Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.

Skeptics: Similarly, many today admit a man named Jesus existed, but they deny that He was the Christ. This is the modern spirit of antichrist: “Nothing to see here folks, keep moving”.

Christian Science: Mary Baker Eddie founded the Christian Scientists, which is neither Christian nor scientific. Jesus, they claim, was a fallible human and was not Christ. They teach that Christ is neither God nor an actual person, but rather a divine idea.

2) Jesus did not actually come in the flesh as a real man. It is possible these false teachers were early Gnostics, teaching that since God is spirit, all matter must be evil. There is thus no way the true Christ could be an actual flesh and blood man. Either Jesus was an actual man but not Christ, or He was truly Christ but not a real man.

ESV **2 John 1:7** . . . many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.

Beware Redefinitions! In order to appear orthodox, some false teachers will say they believe Jesus Christ came in the flesh, but they will redefine the terms. The really believe in a different Jesus, a Jesus who is not who the real Jesus claimed to be, such as Jesus who is not God in the flesh (so claim Jehovah’s [false] Witness). For instance, Paul complained to the Corinthians:

ESV **2 Corinthians 11:4** . . . if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed . . . you put up with it readily enough.

The Mormons, on the other hand, teach Jesus is “a” god, one god among many gods. They are polytheists.

Modern False Prophets: In the two millennia since John penned his warning, other false teachings have arisen. False spokesmen for God today deny Jesus is God, deny He died on the cross in order to pay for sins, deny He rose bodily from the dead, deny He is coming back, etc.

Based on 4:3, is antichrist a future event a present reality or a past problem? John had previously warned antichrist was coming, and as of the writing of his letter many antichrists had already come. Antichrist teaching was most certainly a problem when John wrote.

What has John already taught about the spirit of antichrist in this letter (4:3)? See 2:18-23. The only place antichrist is mentioned in the whole Bible is in John’s short epistles. In my opinion, antichrist was not one particular person but rather a demonic movement that expressed itself in various false prophets and false teachings about Jesus.

Antichrist: Antichrist is transliterated letter for letter from Greek into English (*antichristos*). The Greek prefix *anti* fundamentally means against; to be antichrist is to be against Jesus as the Christ, to be opposed to Christ. These antichrists were not themselves claiming to Christ, but they were denying that Jesus was the Christ. Based on **2:19**, antichrist teachers came from within the church! There antichrists were apostate Christians, false teachers who once claimed to believe in Jesus but who had departed from the Faith. Worse yet, they were trying to draw others out with them. Antichrist teachers were to the early church what the Catholic counter-reformation was to the Protestant Reformation. The spirit of antichrist centered in the apostate Jewish counter-Christian movement of the first century.

Was antichrist (4:3) a man or a movement, a person or a principle? Some believe antichrist to be an actual future person (like the man of sin in 2 Thessalonians or the beast of Revelation); others understand antichrist to have been a movement, a set of false teachings and the false teachers who taught it. John wrote of antichrist much as some might write of apostasy. There is no definite article (“the”) in front of the word antichrist in 2:18. This lack of an article stresses the category or quality (Rienecker, p. 788).

Application: I believe antichrist was a first century problem and that the last hour has come and gone (“last hour”, 2:18). John had already taught his readers about antichrist (“you have heard”, 2:18), so he did not elaborate on it in this letter. If it was still a problem for us to be concerned about, God would have seen to it that John was more specific. However, what we can learn from this in general is that there will always be demonically influenced false teachers who deceive others (Benny Hinn, Creflo Dollar, Rob Bell, Joel Osteen, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Edie, Charles Taze Russell).

The Ecumenical Creeds: The creeds were written in response to antichrist teachings that threatened the church. The ancient creeds of the early church are not inspired, but just as a smoke detector warns of smoke, the creeds can be used to easily detect heresy.

Nicene Creed Examples:

“We believe in one God” ~ This rules out Mormonism, as they are polytheists who claim Jesus and the Father are two separate gods.

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ . . . God from God . . . true God from true God” ~ This warns against Arianism, the antichrist teaching that Jesus is not God (so also claim the Jehovah’s Witnesses).

Jesus “became incarnate from the Virgin Mary” ~ Theological liberals deny the virgin birth. The Mormons believe God is a flesh being (rather than a spirit being) and explain the virgin birth as God the father coming to earth and actually, physically having relations with Mary.

“For our sake he was crucified . . . on the third day he rose again” ~ Liberals deny that Jesus’ death was propitiatory and also deny His bodily resurrection.

“He will come again in glory” ~ Hyper-preterists deny Jesus will come again. They claim just as the Jews missed His first coming, so also the church missed the second coming (it has already happened).

“We believe in the Holy Spirit . . . with the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified” ~ False teachers commonly deny the Trinity. They also claim the Holy Spirit is an it and not a he.

— 4:4 —

How had John’s readers been able to overcome antichrist (4:4)? The fact his readers were still in the church shows God’s Holy Spirit in them was a stronger influence than the world’s lure of false teaching.

ESV **John 6:39** And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me . . .

Who is he who is in the world (4:3)? This is a reference to Satan and by extension Satan’s demons.

ESV **1 John 5:19** . . . the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

— 4:5 —

Based on 4:5, what makes false teachers so effective and popular? Since they are from the world they speak the world’s language and have a worldly appeal.

ESV **2 Timothy 4:3-4** . . . the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

Based on 4:5, what is true of those who fall for grossly false teachings?

— 4:6 —

According to 4:6, how can you tell who are born of God and who are not? Those from God listen to the teachings of “us” (the apostles). As he preached, John had obviously experienced first-hand the cold, indifferent, and hostile stare of the worldling (Wuest, p. 167). Those who are not from God do not listen. John’s writings are not just John’s opinions about God. John writes with the authority of Jesus Himself. There are many people in the visible church who openly reject the teachings of the apostles (“us”).

ESV **John 13:20** . . . whoever receives the one I send receives me . . .

ESV **Luke 10:16** "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me . . .

What did John mean when he wrote, “by this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (4:5)? We can detect the spirit of error because it will not listen to/accept the teachings of the apostles.

ESV 1 Corinthians 2:14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

Teacher’s Note: “You” refers to John’s readers in the church, “they” refers to the false teachers and “us” refers to John and his fellow apostles.

So What?

What is the problem John dealt with in this paragraph (4:1-6)? False teachers animated by antichrist teachings were the problem. Modern manifestations include: The Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, LDS), The Jehovah’s Witnesses, Protestant Theological liberalism with the mainline denominations (Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran, United Churches of Christ, Congregational, Baptist, etc), the prosperity preachers and the Roman Catholic Church (at least since the Council of Trent).

Council of Trent: As part of the counter-reformation, the Roman Catholic Church came up with this declaration: “if any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof; let him be anathema”

How can believers test teachings to see if they are true? We are to examine the doctrine of various teachers. Do they listen to the apostles?

What ultimately enables Christians to resist false teaching? Christians overcome evil teachers because the Holy Spirit within us is greater than the demonic spirits of the world. The Holy Spirit uses the process of not believing every spirit and of doctrinally testing the spirits.

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session (30 minutes of teaching and 15 minutes of group discussion) and are based on the text of the ESV.
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