

Growing Discernment in the Spirit of Truth (1 John 4:1-6)

How can I be assured of my salvation?

1. He walks in the light as God is in the light, and is the light (1:5-7)
2. He sees his sin, confesses it, and repents of it (1:8-10)
3. He abides in Jesus and walks as He walked (2:1-6)
4. He loves the brethren in word and deed (2:7-11; 3:14-18)
5. He does not love the world (2:15-17)
6. He practices righteousness considering Christ's return (2:28-3:3)
7. He sins less, not sinless (3:4-7)
8. God's seed abides in him, not the devil's (3:8-10)
9. The world hates him because of God's righteousness in him (3:11-13)
10. His heart (conscience) does not condemn him (3:19-22)
11. The Spirit of Christ (Holy Spirit) dwells in him (3:23-24)

12. He listens to the truth in growing discernment (4:1-6)

- Two explications, according to John, of abiding in Christ and the gift of His Spirit (3:24) are: loving the brethren in word, deed, and truth (2:10; 3:11-18, 23) and growing discernment regarding truth and error.
- A. God's people are known by what truth they embrace and error they reject (v.1)
- As he did previously, John is correcting the heresy of false teachers with which the churches in Ephesus would have been contextually familiar (1:8-10; 2:1).
 - The maturity of a child of God is recognized by what teachings he receives and rejects.
 - His command is to test the "spirit(s)":
 - The "spirit" (4:1) is a metonym for human agents and refers to their teachings. These are false prophets propagating false doctrine.
 - To test means to "measure out" against a standard (as a blacksmith would with horseshoes, a carpenter would with a wooden board or a banker with metal coins).
 - The testing alludes to Moses' warning to the nation as they entered the Promise Land. (Deut. 13:1-5; 18:15-22).
 - A challenge facing that church in Ephesus was the gullible nature of some congregants in considering these false teachers.
 - False teachers have always propagated their truth under the guise of "love," which is falsely equivocated with "acceptance" and "toleration."
 - Combined with biblical illiteracy (though the canon was not closed) was a false understanding of what "love" entails.
 - False teachers had infiltrated many of these "infant" congregations to disseminate heresy. Their teaching was not due to theological arrogance but was instead demonic, satanic, and worldly (v.2-5).
 - As Jesus warned, many false prophets have and will arise (Matt. 7:15-16; 24:11; 2 Pet. 2:1), "creeping in," causing division (Jude 4).
- B. God's people will not be led astray by heretical false teaching (v.2-5)

Immediate context in Ephesus, ~90 AD (4:2):

- False teachers (many of whom were docetic Gnostics) believed that the body was evil and the spirit was good.
- They taught that God could not have possibly put on human flesh because the body was evil. Jesus merely appeared to be in the flesh (as a phantom).
- Nowadays, similar to the context of 1 John (v.2), we have false prophets and teachers not only in Protestant churches but also in other religions:

- Mormonism (Church of Latter-Day Saints) and Jehovah's Witnesses
- The spirit of the antichrist, which is now in the world (v.3), taught several heresies during the time of John (same is true of today): sinlessness for the believer (1:8-10), antinomianism (2:1-6), merely the appearance of flesh for the Son (vs. actual incarnation).
- These false teachers propagate a doctrine inconsistent with God's revealed word. They are of the world, the evil one, and demonic (Jn. 1:10; 3:31; 17:17; 1 Jn. 3:1; 5:19).

Why would someone listen to a false teacher?

- They are unregenerate, and their willing submission under that error affirms it. Otherwise, why would they remain?
- They are regenerated but too immature in fundamental foundational truths of Scripture and newness in Christ to realize it (short term).

How long can a regenerated child of God sit under the spirit of error?

- Scripture does not speak to the length of time but the progression of maturity. Grace and mercy must always be extended to infants until they mature (Eph. 4:13-14). The mature will be able to navigate the best way to warn and exhort (1 Thess. 4:14).
 - Maturity, discernment, wisdom, and comprehension of divine truths grow in response to divine grace and enablement (monergistic) and progressive sanctification (synergistic).
 - God bestows varying degrees of grace upon believers while simultaneously commanding them to grow in that grace (2 Pet. 3:14-18).
 - Just as infants develop from a diet of drinking milk to eating solid food (1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12-14), there must be room for believers (as infants in the faith) to grow.
 - The infant eventually grows in spiritual discernment and will detect false teaching.
 - The longer someone has "walked with the Lord" (2:5-6), the more they will think, act, and model Jesus Christ.
- C. God's people submit themselves to the Word of God (v.6)
- Whoever listens to "us" (v.6): John is exercising his apostolic credentials and has the authority to make that claim. Apostolic authority was phased out when the last apostle (John) died at the end of the first century. By this time, the canon (Bible) was complete.
 - John acknowledges the supernatural conflict between truth and error and light and darkness and commands his "children" to be on guard, reject the false teachers (whom they would have been familiar with), and listen to "us" (v.6).
 - He reminds them that they are from God (v.4), not the world (v.2-5).
 - Despite the onslaught of false teaching, God's people will persevere, for they abide in Christ (3:24) and have overcome the world (4:4).
 - A growing, Spirit-filled child of God cannot endure false teaching rooted in the non-negotiables of the Christian faith (inerrancy, Trinity, the sufficiency of Scripture, the person and work of Christ, etc.).
 - The Spirit of Christ inside the believer (John 14:16-17; Rom 8:9) recognizes His own words (2 Tim. 3:16) and will navigate the growing child to good pasture (John 10:4, 5, 8, 16, 26, 27) as they mature.
 - The apostle has spoken of the Christian hearers (v.4) and now the teachers (v.6). In each case, the preacher and the pew have a living and abiding dependence on God, and it will produce its full effect. The hearer discerns the true message, and the teacher discovers the true disciple.
 - Growing spiritual discernment from childhood to adulthood is measured by what the professing Christian believes and rejects (v.1). In submitting to heresy, a man proves that he still abides in the darkness of the world (1:5; 2:11, 15-17; 4:4).