

Test the Spirits! They Are Not All from God

1 John 4:1-6

Introduction: 1) Recently, Christian rapper and friend Shai Linne stirred quite a controversy with his song “Fal\$e Teacher\$.” It is a critique of “the prosperity gospel,” and in it he does the unacceptable in our hyper-tolerant/non-critical day: he names names. In the song Shai particularly calls on Christians outside of America not to be deceived by these “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” the words of Jesus (Matthew 7:15), who export their heresies around the world. To be specific, he says,

Don't be deceived by this funny biz, if you come to Jesus for money, then
he's not your God, money is!
Jesus is not a means to an end, the Gospel is.
He came to redeem us from sin, and that is the message forever I yell!
If you're living your best life now you're heading for hell!

Turn off TBN that channel is overrated. The pastors speak bogus statements,
financially motivated.
It's kind of like a pyramid scheme. Visualize heretics Christianizing the
American dream.
It's foul and deceitful, they're lying to people, teaching that camels squeeze
through the eye of a needle!

John Piper via twitter said of the song, “My my, Shai, this is good.”

2) Calling out and identifying false teachers is neither fun nor popular. It is, however, both biblical and necessary. They are often more dangerous and more plentiful than many Christians realize. The apostle John makes that clear in 1 John

4:1-6. In words similar to those he penned earlier in 2:18-27, the last living apostle draws a contrast between true prophets and false prophets, the true Christ and anti-christs, that which is of the Spirit of God and that which is of the spirits of this world. Six times he will use the phrase “from God” and six times he will use the phrase “the world.” Amazingly, these who are of “the world” and not “from God” have worked their way into the churches. Again we are reminded that our greatest dangers are not from without but from within. Therefore we must “test the spirits” (v. 1), because they are not all from God. John provides a 4-fold test we must take. This exam is more important than any you will ever take in any school. Its results are of eternal significance.

I. Are you following false prophets?

4:1

1) John again begins with a word of affection and love: “Beloved” (*agapetoi*).

He deeply cares for these brothers and sisters in Christ and he is very much aware that danger is lurking about, possibly from within.

2) John wants them to be aware of the fact that not every spiritual teacher is a credible teacher. There are spiritual deceivers and liars out there, and they work hard to earn our trust, our allegiance. So John says, “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” Both “believe” and “test” are imperatives of command calling for continuous action and vigilance. Further, the word “test” carries the idea of putting

something to rigorous examination to discover its genuineness. And, “do not believe” and “test” are in the plural. This is a church wide community responsibility. We are all to be doctrine detectives, theological investigators!

3) Our goal is to determine if these prophets are from God or is their origin to be found in another source, in a different kind of spirit. John’s point is straightforward: behind every prophet, every proclamation, there is an energizing spirit. Their message will inform us as to the origin and source of their message. They are not all from God. Watch! Listen! Test! Here a healthy dose of “spiritual skepticism” is warranted. In fact it is essential for the health and well-being of the Christian community. And note, these false prophets (*pseudoprophetai*) are everywhere, “many have gone out into the world.” They are demonically inspired missionaries on satanic assignment. They are not simply guilty of theological error, they are guilty of theological heresy!

4) False prophets are not new! They have been around for a very long time.
 – Deuteronomy 13:1-5; “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 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 knows, ‘and let us serve them,’ 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. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”

– Deuteronomy 18:20-22; “But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die. And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?’ When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.”

– 2 Corinthians 11:1-4; “I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone

comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.”

5) There is a tendency with most people to ascribe any unusual phenomenon to God. Such a lack of discernment opens the door for false teaching and provides an opportunity for demonic activity to invade the church.

Remember: spiritual or religious activity is not necessarily godly activity!

Watch and wait. Look and listen. Evaluate the message and the messenger by the Word of God. False prophets are deceptive in their message. And, they have a Great Commission, being sent out “into the world.”

6) Jesus warned us (Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 14; Mark 13:21-23). Paul warned us (Acts 20:28-30). Peter warned us (2 Peter 2:1-22). Jude warned us (Jude 4-19). You cannot say, “I was never warned.” Where there is truth, error will be lurking in the background. There are those who are deceptive by their message. Be on the lookout.

II. Are you confessing the true Jesus?

4:2-3

1) In *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Eerdmans, 1989, p. 242), Lesslie Newbigin writes, “The gospel is news of what has happened. The problem of communicating it in a pluralist society is that it simply disappears into the

undifferentiated ocean of information. It represents one opinion among millions of others. It cannot be ‘the truth,’ since in a pluralist society truth is not one but many. It may be ‘true for you,’ but it cannot be true for everyone. To claim that it is true for everyone is simply arrogance. It is permitted as one opinion among many.” Once again John makes it plain that Christianity is rooted and grounded in “the Christological question.” What do you believe about Jesus? If he is just another enlightened religious teacher, he “is permitted as one opinion, one option, among many.” If, however, He is the very incarnation of God, the gospel and only the gospel is true, and He is the only option for salvation amidst the millions of others.

2) Testing the spirits of v. 1 is greatly aided by asking “the Jesus question” of verses 2 and 3. “By this you will know,” recognize, come to understand the Spirit of God and those who bear His gospel message. Verse 2 puts the issue in a positive light and verse 3 in the negative. What confession (Gr. *homologe*) bears witness to the presence of the Spirit of God? It is this: “Jesus [of Nazareth] is the Christ [the Messiah of God] who came (perf. tense) in the flesh [He is the incarnation of God]”. Such a confession (“confesses” is pre. tense) is not mere words, some glib statement. It is heartfelt, mind engaged and soul committed. It is on this truth that authentic Christianity stands or falls, that there was a true, genuine and permanent

wedding of deity and humanity in the person of God's eternal Son, Jesus Christ.

- 3) The Spirit of God always honors Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus said in John 16:14 concerning the Spirit, "He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you." If there is no glorifying of Jesus as God incarnate then there is no Spirit of God present.
- 4) Amazingly, even demons got it right and recognized the deity of Jesus while He walked on earth (Mark 1:24; 3:4; 5:7-8). Tragically some demons have a better theology than do some pastors, teachers and theologians.
- 5) When it comes to what people believe about Jesus, the 1st century is a lot like the 21st century. Already there were people who refused to believe the truth about God sending His Son as the Savior of the World in the person of Jesus.
 - Verse 3 is the antithesis of verse 2. Those who deny the truth of the incarnation of the Son of God: 1) are not of God and 2) are of the Antichrist.
 - Docetists said Jesus was a phantom or ghostly spirit who only appeared to be human. A man named Cerenthus said the Spirit of God's Christ empowered the human Jesus at His baptism but left Him at the crucifixion. Bottom line: they denied the genuine reality of the incarnation and the wedding of deity and humanity in the person of Jesus.

- Antichrist here means “against Christ” (cf. 2:18, 22; 2 John 7). John says you heard he was coming (and he is), and he (his devilish spirits) is now already in the world. He was active in John’s day, he is active in our day, and he will remain active until the day that Jesus comes again.
- I. Howard Marshall well says, “If a person claims to believe in Jesus, it is proper to ask, ‘Is your Jesus the real Jesus?’” (p. 207). What one thinks about Jesus has enormous consequences. In a real sense it determines everything! Tell me what you think about Jesus and I will tell you 95% of the rest of your theology. He is the center, the hub of all theology. All of it radiates out from Him. So once more: Are you confessing the true Christ? Do you confess with the apostles, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matt. 16:16).

III. Are you trusting in the greater Spirit?

4:4

- 1) There is what we could call “a divine irony” for those who believe in and follow after Jesus. The opposition of Satan, the world system that daily assaults us, false teachers that seek to seduce us, faulty worldviews that attempt to confuse us, and our own sinfulness that yearns to enslave us; they are all divinely ordained to fail. Why? Because of the glorious truth of verse 4, “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” We have a

Champion, a Victor, a source of Power that all of these enemies of hell combined are no match for.

2) Again a word of tenderness, “Little children.” Interestingly, the phrase “you are of God” proceeds this warm affirmation. It is fronted for emphasis and it is emphatic adding intensity: “You, yourselves, and no one else, are of God, little children.” And, you have overcome, in an abiding and settled fashion, them (the world, the false prophets, those who are of the spirit of antichrist). How did we obtain this victory? The Greater Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is in you, and He is greater than he who is in the world.

- Is the world strong? Yes, but our God is infinitely stronger!
- Are false prophets wise? Yes, but our God is infinitely wiser!
- Is Satan great? Yes, but our God is infinitely greater!

And this one who is infinitely stronger, wiser and greater now and forever “is in you!” By a true and faithful confession of Jesus as Messiah, as Savior, I declare that “I am God’s”. In response, God gives Himself to me by His Spirit and takes up residence in me and in each and everyone who calls Jesus, “Lord”. Amazingly the God who can live anywhere desires to live inside of you and me! I now move forward in a life of loving, sacrificial service, like my suffering, Servant Savior (note what follows in 4:7-21) confident, blessed with supernaturally given assurance that I am His and that

I fight a battle in which victory is mine for the taking. John Piper applies this truth beautifully in a two-fold manner: 1) Do not take credit for your listening ear or your confessing heart or your correct view of Christ. Give credit to the Spirit who is in you, and give God the glory. 2) When you are threatened by any deception of the evil one – any temptation, or discouragement, or anxiety, or cowardice – remind yourself that “he who is in you is greater than he that is in the world.” Almighty God abides within you. Trust him. For this is the victory that overcomes the world, your faith (5:4) in the sovereign indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. (“Test the Spirits To See Whether They Are of God” 5/5/85).

IV. Are you listening to the right teachers?

4:5-6

- 1) John brings this section to a close with words that are simple and, at first blush, can sound rather arrogant. However, a closer look will reveal he is directing us exactly to the place we should go and the teachers we should listen to.
- 2) John draws a contrast between those of the world, the evil, organized system controlled by Satan (v. 5) and those who are from God (v. 6). Those who are from the devil’s domain speak out of that worldview and spirit inspiration. They speak Satanic sermons. They deliver demonic discourses and those who belong to that worldview system listen to and embrace their teachings.

- 3) Never be surprised when the lost think like lost people and live like lost people. This is true even for those who once claimed to believe in and follow Christ. Those enslaved to the world cannot help but listen to those who speak their own language.
- 4) Verse 6 paints a different picture. In John 8:47 Jesus says, “Whoever is of God hears the words of God.” This is a helpful commentary on the meaning of this verse. Those who know God thru confession of Jesus as the incarnate Christ and Savior (cf. 4:10) listen to those who were with Him, who were commissioned by Him. They stay with the apostles and the prophets (Eph. 2:20) and refuse to move away from this true and trustworthy source even one inch! There is no “Jesus plus” or “Bible plus” theology for those who truly know God. And, there is no “Jesus minus” or “Bible minus” theology either. This is how you can know without question “the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”
- 5) Now that raises a very important and very practical question: How can we listen to the apostles when they have been dead for almost 2000 years? I love the answer of Thabiti Anyabwile, “Through a certain kind of preaching. The preaching that takes the apostles’ words, explain their words, and apply their words is the kind preaching that enables us to listen them today. We call this expositional preaching because it exposes what the apostles have written and

the meaning and application of their words. When you listen to the word of God expositively preached, you are listening to the apostles, and ultimately you are listening to God himself.” (Unpublished sermon notes).

6) The phrase “spirit of error” is interesting. It has the idea of wandering away from the truth. False prophets and those who listen to their teachings hang around the truth for a while, but they don’t stay. They wander away. And again and again, it comes back to what they think and believe about Jesus. A few examples:

- The Bible says He is God – they wander away and deny His eternal deity.
- The Bible says He is sinless – they wander away and say He sinned or at least committed error.
- The Bible says He did miracles – they wander away and say these are myths and fables.
- The Bible says He is the only Savior – they wander away and say He is a savior.
- The Bible says He died on the cross for our sins – they wander away and deny penal substitution.
- The Bible says He rose bodily from the dead – they wander away and say the disciples imagined that He did.

- The Bible says He ascended into heaven as Lord – they wander away and say just another myth.
- The Bible says He is coming again – they wander away and say again, just another myth.
- The Bible says He will judge us all – they wander away and say God is love and eventually all will be saved. In the end they say “love wins.”

Conclusion: 1) The 16th century Reformer Martin Luther well said, “It does no good to say: I will gladly confess Christ and His Word in all articles except one or two which my tyrannical masters will not tolerate....But he who denies Christ in one article or word has in this one article denied the same Christ who would be denied in all articles; for there is but one Christ in all His words, collectively and individually.” (From: Martin Luther. *Luther’s Works*. Weimar Edition.

Briefwechsel, vol. 3, pp. 81-82. Also in: Martin Luther. *What Luther Says: An Anthology*. Translated by Ewald M. Plas (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), vol. 1, p. 407.)

2) The battle is indeed raging for the hearts, the minds, the souls of men and women. Be a good soldier of Christ and the cross, of that which is true and that which is right. Test the spirits, confess Christ as Lord, trust the Holy Spirit who is within, and stay lashed to the Word. Here is your strength. Here is your safety. Here is your salvation.

