



## TESTING WHAT'S TRUE

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No one starts out wanting to believe a lie. But when the truth becomes inconvenient, we may prefer an alternative. Or if a teacher persuades us that a falsehood is better for us or for those we love, and makes it appear to be true, we may choose to believe him and adopt his professed position.

Some such teachers may be knowingly deceptive, or they themselves may have been deceived and believe they are speaking truth. In either case, such teachers find their way into the Church and capture the ears of gullible Christians. This has always been so. In the first century, the apostles recognized the danger to Christ's followers, and warned them frequently, as in these words from Apostle John (4:1-6):

*1 John 4:1 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to determine if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 4:2 By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses Jesus as the Christ-who-has-come-in-the-flesh is from God, 4:3 but every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God, and this is the spirit of the anti-christ, which you have heard is coming, and now is already in the world.*

*4:4 You are from God, little children, and have conquered them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.*

*4:5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world's perspective and the world listens to them. 4:6 We are from God; the person who knows God listens to us, but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit.*

When John warned the Church, “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits,” he was not suggesting calling out demons to quiz them about their identity or intentions (even though Jesus did just that on a few occasions). He was talking about the much more common encounter with teachings that purported to be “from the Spirit,” whether by prophesying or preaching. In other words, do not believe every spiritual communication, or every word attributed to the Spirit of God. “God told me to tell you...”

The danger in John's day centered around the traditions of Judaism, since the Early Church was primarily Jewish. Some of the traditions they had developed and codified countermanded the spirit of the Scriptures they had been given, and painted a different picture of the God

they professed to worship and serve than the Scriptures did. That was their issue. But the trappings of the danger shift with every culture and era.

If you want to trap birds, a quantity of rich seed will provide good bait. But if you want to trap rabbits, a garden full of rich lettuce will do better. And if you want to trap bear or wolves, neither will suffice, because it's not what they love—you'd better use meat.

Whatever we naturally desire is the best bait for trapping, even humans. And for Americans today—those who migrate to this country, or those who choose to stay here—that bait is freedom, wealth, or power. Nothing innately wrong with any of the three, but we don't handle them well. The old saying, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely," could equally be applied to freedom and wealth.

The trappings of the danger—the baits that deceivers use—shift with every culture and era. We need to recognize what appeals most to us and to others, in order to be on guard against deceit.

Do not be deceived—anyone can be deceived, even those who know the truth.

So, John wrote to Christians everywhere (and in every generation): Don't believe everything you hear. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God, or represents Him accurately.

In fact, even those who ARE sent by God are fallible and may speak inaccurately. The onus is on you to judge perceptively—Are their words in line with the revelation of the Scriptures? Is their heart motivated by love for God and love for people? Do their words and actions agree?

There are a lot of lying preachers loose in the world. It has always been so. Therefore, you must carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. And to do that, you must yourself be well-acquainted with the Bible—its story, its purpose, its characters, and the God it reveals. And like a good scientist, you must test, test, test what you encounter.

A word about "good science": a scientist begins her study with a hypothesis. That is a hunch or an idea that one thing may cause, or lead to, another. The word "may" is absolutely vital to the definition, because without it, the explorer already has an opinion, a preference, a prejudice that will blind her to what the test results reveal, or twist the apparent results to tell the story she prefers.

Similarly, if you test the teachings of another from the standpoint of trying to prove or disprove them, you have begun amiss, and your findings will be skewed. The hardest thing for us to do is to test impartially—to admit I don't care what the truth is, but I must know what is true. A good scientist pursues truth.

I may not like the truth I find, but I must be willing to confess that what I find is true. I may choose not to change my behavior based on that discovered truth, but I must be willing to admit I have preferred to live by a lie. A good scientist will not deny what she knows to be true.

If the truth challenges my familiar and perhaps, favored, beliefs, I should change my erroneous thinking. If the truth demands me to let go of something or someone I have cherished, I should let it go. If truth demands me to do something I have hated or feared, I should find the courage to do it. But I may not. The choice is mine. And the inevitable consequences will be mine, as well.

So, how does one “test the spirits”?

The foremost test, we may call the “God incarnate” test: Everyone who confesses openly his faith in Jesus Christ—the Son of God, who came as an actual flesh-and-blood person—comes from God and belongs to God. And everyone who refuses to confess faith in Jesus has nothing in common with God.

What do they say about Jesus Christ? Do they give Him pre-eminence? Is His name prominent in their teachings? Is He presented as God (divine, deity, the Origin of all that is)?

Or is Jesus just a “spiritual person” (even the MOST spiritual person)? An extraordinary teacher? A worker of miracles? Was He merely an example of the best of humanity, set before us that we might aspire to be like Him? All of these questions express half-truths. They omit the Source of His spirituality, His teaching, His miracles, His wisdom, His goodness—and that is His deity. Jesus was God-in-human-form. And that’s why He is called The Christ. There is no other Christ but this. Anything less than that—even if it appeals to your strongest or most noble desire—is a cover-up, a sham, a lackluster imitation. You have been warned.

This is the spirit of antichrist that you heard was coming. Well, here it is, sooner than we thought!

Notice that he wrote *“it is the spirit OF the antichrist,”* not the beast himself, for long before the beast appears, the spirit of the beast is already at work, preparing the masses for his arrival. This is not a particular spiritual being, like a demon, but the general influence of attitudes and thoughts that are in line with the beast’s intentions—preparing for his acceptable reception. By the time he comes, the world will be touting his ways, as if they were their own.

In the same way, the arrival of Jesus in our world was preceded by the activities of His Spirit throughout many generations, refining and preparing a select people, by His words and deeds, to represent His values and announce His coming to others. And we are now that people.

John wrote, *“You are from God, little children.”* You have been born of His Spirit, washed by the blood of Jesus, and you belong to God the Father. Although it has nothing to do with your personal qualifications—your deservingness—you have come from God and now belong to God. *“For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so that no one can boast.”* (Ephesians 2:8-9)

As a result of God’s extraordinary kindness, you have already won a big victory over such false teachers and their teachings, for the Spirit who is in you is far stronger than any attitude or idea in the world. And, as John wrote elsewhere, *“God has anointed you with His Spirit, so all of you know what is true”* (1 John 2:20), And the Spirit of Truth does not lie; you can depend on His Word, as well as His whispers and promptings.

In this sense, Christ has come “in the flesh” again—in His Church. I hasten to add, not in any individual believer (for the “you” in these verses is plural), but in the Church as a gathered unit, as a whole. For we (together) are the body of Christ, and He is our Head. Individually, we are but members of His Body.

These teachers and their followers belong to the Christ-denying world. They talk the world’s language and the world eats it up. What the world “eats up” can be very appealing, if your self-image is damaged (and whose has not been?) and you crave to belong. IF “everyone is doing it,” what could be the harm? It all may sound so positive, and give you the “warm fuzzies,” that you might even adopt their terminology and promote their concepts, because they are more acceptable than the Gospel. Beware!

Anyone who knows God understands us when we present Christ and listens to us. The person who has nothing to do with God will, of course, not listen to us.

This is another test for telling the Spirit of Truth from the spirit of deception.

There are people in the world who know God, but don’t yet know Jesus Christ, for the first awakening does not provide specific truths, but a general awareness. Think of it like your first thought or action after waking from a sound rest, when your head is not yet clear of sleep. You’re up, but not yet fully awake.

In my own experience, my first encounter with God was profound but full of erroneous thinking...

Nevertheless, I had awakened and could never sleep completely again. Indeed, I dozed sometimes during my search for the truth about God, like I do some mornings before the first cup of coffee does its work, but when I met Jesus Christ, all that changed! You see, I had known OF

God, but until I met Jesus, I did not know God personally. But when I met Jesus, I met the Father. My sleep left me. My blindness was gone. My shame was washed away. Assurance came to me. Courage arose in me. The Light had come!

The person who has nothing to do with God will, of course, not listen to us. And John concluded that this is another test for telling the Spirit of Truth from the spirit of deception.

If you are intrusive, and people reject you, that is your fault. If you are belligerent, and people turn away, that is your fault. If you are haughty, and people argue with you, that is your fault.

But if you are gentle and respectful, and they reject your appeal, their issue is not with you, but with the Gospel. And they have not rejected you; they have rejected Jesus.

Apostle Peter said, *“Always be ready to defend your confidence in God when anyone asks you to explain it. However, make your defense with gentleness and respect. Keep your conscience clear.”*

*“Telling the Spirit of Truth from the spirit of deception”* is not code for demonizing people. It’s about having discernment, knowing what you’re dealing with, and knowing how to respond. As much as we may wish we could make people believe what is true, we cannot. And it is not our job to do so.

Our task is to bear witness of Christ, faithfully and accurately, and also gently and respectfully. It is the Holy Spirit’s job to convict them of the truths we share, just as He did for you.

1 John 4:1-6; The Message

*My dear friends, don’t believe everything you hear. Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God. There are a lot of lying preachers loose in the world.*

*Here’s how you test for the genuine Spirit of God. Everyone who confesses openly his faith in Jesus Christ—the Son of God, who came as an actual flesh-and-blood person—comes from God and belongs to God. And everyone who refuses to confess faith in Jesus has nothing in common with God. This is the spirit of antichrist that you heard was coming. Well, here it is, sooner than we thought!*

*My dear children, you come from God and belong to God. You have already won a big victory over those false teachers, for the Spirit in you is far stronger than anything in the world. These people belong to the Christ-denying world. They talk the world’s language and the world eats it up. Anyone who knows God understands us and listens. The person who has nothing to do with God will, of course, not listen to us. This is another test for telling the Spirit of Truth from the spirit of deception.*

Now, you know why it is important to test what you hear, and what it means to “*test the spirits.*” And now you understand better why some people don’t listen when you try to share the reason for your confidence in Jesus. And, hopefully, you will find greater courage to share, since their rejection is not about you—it’s about them.

Most importantly, what others need is for people like yourselves to appropriately and accurately represent the truth of the Gospel—the story of Jesus Christ—in such a way that, if God has awakened their heart, they may receive the truth and believe in the Savior. And, if not, the good seed has been sown, so pray for it to germinate and bring a harvest.