May 9, 2021 Psalm 98

The Sixth Sunday of Easter – B Acts 11:19-30

Lutheran Church of Hope 1 John 4:1-11

Loveland, CO John 15:9-17

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**“TESTING THE SPIRITS”**

Am I the only one, or did some of you have parents that told you: “Don’t believe everything you “hear”? In our epistle lesson today, John is essentially saying the same thing. I suppose its human nature to receive as “gospel truth” everything we hear, especially when the source claims to be Christian or faith-based. But, because we live in a fallen world, we just can’t believe everything we read or hear. We need to be forever testing the spirits, as John would say. Testing the spirits is what I want to have us focus on today; and as we do, I want to highlight three things from our text.

Our text begins with John saying, ***“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God…”*** Here John exhorts Christians to test the spirits, not in order to see whether they agree with our own opinions, but to see whether they are of God. Test the spirits, says John.

The first thing to note is that there are **TWO SPIRITS.** In verse 6, John says that there is ***“the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”*** Let’s consider first **the spirit of truth.** We’re told to ***“test the spirits, whether they are of God.”*** The spirit of truth is the spirit of God.

The spirit of truth assumes and implies the existence and reality of absolute truth. There are those in the world, and sadly even in some Church circles, who say that there is no such thing as “absolute truth”, that “everything is relative.” Ironically, their point makes the case for absolute truth, for one cannot firmly hold the position of moral relativism without believing that their position is true; thus, affirming the very position they deny – absolute truth.

The spirit of truth assumes absolute truth – that there are things in our world that have always been, that are, and that will always be true, absolutely true, one-hundred percent true, all the time, every time.

The source of absolute truth is the God revealed in the Bible. Jesus, who is God in human flesh, said, ***“I am the truth”*** (Jn 14:6). The Bible says that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2); that His Word is truth (Jn 17:17); and that He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8). Thus, what the Triune God says in His Word is absolute truth. This is why we, in the AFLC, hold to the doctrine of inerrancy and the infallibility of Scripture. To deny either one is to deny the spirit of truth.

The other thing that should be noted about the spirit of truth is that it sets free. In John 8, Jesus says, ***“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”*** (v. 31-32). Truth (the truth of God’s Word) sets the captive free. It’s the only power that can. The spirit of truth.

The other spirit is **the spirit of error.** The spirit of error is anything and everything that is not absolutely true. The deceptive thing about the spirit of error is that it masquerades itself in truth. It mixes truth with error, so that it looks and sounds like truth, but in reality it is not. The spirit of error might be partially true; it might even be mostly true. But if it’s not absolutely true then it’s in error.

By its very nature, the spirit of error leads astray. Regarding the soul, the spirit of error either keeps one in bondage and slavery, or it leads the freed soul back into bondage and slavery. Paul warned the Galatian Christians not to return to the ***“yoke of slavery”*** (Gal. 5:1). In the end, the spirit of error leads to death. Proverbs 16:25 says, ***“There is a way which seems right to man, but its end is the way to death.”*** In Romans 8, Paul likens the spirit of error to the “flesh”; and he says that ***“to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit*** [i.e. the spirit of truth] ***is life”*** (v. 6).

Two spirits: the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. Christians are told to test the spirits, to see whether they are of God. The spirit of truth (which is of God) sets free and leads to life; whereas the spirit of error (which is not based on the absolute truth of God’s Word and therefore is not of God) leads astray, keeps one bound, and ultimately plunges into death.

The second thing to note is that there are **TWO PROPHETS.** The prophets correspond with the two spirits. John says, ***“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”***

What is a prophet? Most people think of a prophet as one who predicts future events. Though this is one aspect of the prophetic ministry, it is a small one at that. The basic definition of a prophet is someone who declares the Word of the Lord. A prophet is simply a teacher and preacher, a declarer of God’s Word, someone who speaks forth the Word of the Lord.

And, there are two types of prophets. There is, first of all, **the true prophet.** The true prophet is one who speaks the truth of God’s Word. The motive of the true prophet is faithfulness – faithfulness to proclaim the truth of God’s Word, regardless. Ezekiel (a true prophet) was commissioned by the Lord to declare God’s word whether the people would hear or refuse to hear (Ez. 2:7). Though the people refused to hear God’s word, Ezekiel was faithful to declare it. Paul, another true prophet, was also faithful to proclaim God’s Word in all its truth and purity. Because he was a true prophet, the Bible says that Paul refused to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word (2 Cor. 4:2), unlike many other prophets today. He also proclaimed God’s Word faithfully in spite of constant persecution to silence him.

One other thing about true prophets – Jesus said ***“You will know them by their fruits”*** (Matt. 7:16). True prophets bear the fruit of the Spirit. They demonstrate love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Elsewhere in the New Testament they are described as being temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, not quarrelsome or quick tempered, not a lover of money or greedy for gain, they’re not domineering, they manage their households well, they have a good reputation, they’re proven and serious, faithful in all things, not arrogant, and they set a good example for the flock to follow. True prophets.

The other type of prophet is **the false prophet.** John tells us that ***“many false prophets have gone out into the world.”*** False prophets are just the opposite of true prophets. They practice cunning, disgraceful, underhanded ways. Because they are lovers of men rather than lovers of God, they tamper with God’s Word in order to tell people what they want to hear, and thereby gain a following. They blur the truth of holy writ, calling good evil and evil good, putting darkness for light and light for darkness, bitter for sweet and sweet for biter (Isa. 5:20). Because they have exchanged the truth about God for a lie, they themselves walk in lies (Rom. 1:25).

Jesus said ***“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but are inwardly ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits”*** (Matt. 7:15-16). What are the fruits of false prophets? Though cheerful and charismatic on the outside, this is nothing but a façade to mask the inner spirit of pride and arrogance. They are usually harsh and domineering, argumentative and dogmatic, seeking above all to be the center of attention. Many are greedy for gain living a life of extravagance and are given over to sexual immorality. Their primary motive is generally two-fold: love of money and recognition. With their charm and charisma, they create a large following of people, eliciting from them adoration, worship, and undying loyalty, all of which are to be reserved for Christ alone.

The Old Testament had two tests to identify false prophets. One was if they were greedy for gain and extravagance; the other was their message. If what they said failed to come to pass, then they were considered to be a false prophet. More on this later.

Scripture tells us to beware of false prophets. False prophets abound, even today. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, their ministry, because it is not grounded upon the truth of God’s Word, leads others astray, even the elect of God who have been swept away by the alluring current of this false prophet and their spirit of error.

Two spirits, two prophets; let’s consider next the admonition to **TEST THE SPIRITS. Why** test the spirits? So that we would be kept and preserved in the one true faith, and not be led astray. Paul warned the Ephesian Christians about the danger of being ***“tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness and deceitful wiles”*** (Eph. 4:14). Jesus himself, said, ***“False prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray…even the elect”*** (Matt. 24:24). We test the spirits so that we can be kept and preserved in the true faith and not be deceived by the spirit of error and led into false belief, despair and other great and shameful sins. We test the spirits so that, as Paul would say, we won’t be swept away by some “other gospel” which would cause us to fall from grace and plunge us into spiritual ruin (Gal. 1:6-7; 3:1). If there was no danger of falling from grace and being swept away into false belief, Jesus would never have told us to beware of false prophets and to test the spirits.

So how do we test the spirits? What is the test? **The test** is three-fold. First and foremost is **the Word.** We test the spirits with the never-changing, infallible, inerrant Word of God. The Word of God will tell us if the spirit is the spirit of truth or the spirit of error. The Word of God will tell us if the prophet and his message is true or false. How we tell is by holding the prophet and his message up to the light of Scripture, God’s standard of absolute truth. If what is being declared is in keeping with Scripture, then the prophet and his message is true and trustworthy. That is to say, the message is of God. On the other hand, if what the prophet is declaring is incongruent with the biblical witness, then the prophet and his message are false and are to be disregarded.

This is what the Beroean Christians did. When Paul and Silas came to them preaching the Word of God, they didn’t automatically receive it as “gospel truth.” According to Acts 17, they put it to the test by ***“examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so”*** (v. 11).

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul talks about the gifts of the Spirit, one of which is discernment. In verse 10, he describes this gift as the ***“ability to distinguish between spirits.”*** Discernment is the ability to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, truth from fallacy. It is the ability to distinguish between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. Discernment is grounded in the truth of God’s Word, which enhances the ability to distinguish between spirits. Every day I pray that God would increase in each of my family members the gift of discernment; that He would cause them to grow in the knowledge and wisdom of His Word that they might be better able to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, truth and fallacy. The gifts of God’s Word and discernment go hand-in-hand. Test the spirits with the Word of God.

One false prophet in our day, who actually died in December of 2013, was multi-million dollar minister, Harold Camping. Back in 2011, he prophesied the end of the world to take place on May 21st, at 6:00 p.m. Camping never learned; neither did millions of Christian who clung to his every word. When Camping wasn’t raptured and the world didn’t end as he had predicted, he admitted he had made a mistake in calculation; and that the end was to take place five months hence – October 21st, to be exact. This was not the first time Camping had made such predictions. He had once predicted the world to end in 1988; and when that proved false, he readjusted his prediction of the world’s end to occur between September 15 and17, 1994. When those failed to pass, he changed his date to May 21, 2011, and then again to October 21st of that same year. Camping died two years later.

How do we test a prophet’s message? We test it with the Word of God. God’s Word is quite clear about all this. Matthew 24:36 records the following words of Jesus: ***“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”*** Only the Father knows when the end will be and when Christ shall return; and in His infinite wisdom, He has chosen to reveal that day and hour to no one, not the angels, not even His Son Jesus, and especially not the Harold Campings of the world.

Similarly related, a second test is that of **fulfillment.** What I mean by this is whether or not that which the prophet declares comes to pass. Jeremiah 28:9 says ***“When the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.”*** Deuteronomy 18:22 puts it this way: ***“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 which the Lord has not spoken.”*** In other words, he is a false prophet.

A third test is what I call **Christology.** Christology has to do with the study and doctrine of Christ. Here in our epistle lesson John says ***“every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist.”*** Though John is thinking particularly of the Docetists and Gnostics of his day, who denied that the Savior came in the flesh, his words pertain to any doctrine that ultimately denies Jesus as the only name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts. 4:12). There are many churches today that fall into this category.

Testing the spirits involves examining the prophet’s Christology, their doctrine of Christ. If their teaching denies or contradicts what the Bible says about Jesus as the only ***“propitiation for our sins”*** (1 Jn 4:10), then that teacher is in error, and may very well be a false prophet.

One of the most popular pastors in our country today, who I consider a false prophet, is Rob Bell. Bell is one of the leaders of what is known as the “Emerging Church.” The emerging church is consciously and deliberately provocative, using the tactic of shock as a way of attracting people to their fold, especially the unchurched and spiritually disenchanted. For example, Brian McLaren, one of their leaders, said, “I don’t think Jesus would be caught dead as a Christian, were he physically here today…” This is not only shocking, but also false; yet it’s the kind of thing that will prick the curiosity of many, especially the unchurched, and lure them into this movement for a closer look. The emerging church is all about spiritual pragmatism – that the end justifies the means; that it doesn’t matter how you get people into your church, just so long as you get them there.

The emerging church believes the institutional church needs to change. They believe it is necessary to deconstruct both the church as well as doctrine the Church has held and taught for centuries. Their movement is an attempt to fashion a new ecclesiology, that is, doctrine of the Church. They embrace the idea that we cannot know absolute truth; therefore all theology is a matter of conversation – everyone shares their own interpretation of scripture, and from that a consensus is reached as to what the Bible means. Thus, they rely on man’s perspective rather than God’s revelation. The emerging church stresses that how a person lives is more important than what he or she believes; and that it doesn’t matter which religion one belongs to, just so long as one loves God (as one defines God) and one’s neighbor as one’s self.

I could go on, but I think that is sufficient to give you an idea of what the Emerging Church is all about. I share this with you because Rob Bell is in the forefront of this apostate and heretical movement. In the past few years he has written a book that has become a favorite among thousands and thousands of Christians throughout the world, and especially in our country. This book, entitled, “Love Wins” uncovers Mr. Bell’s Christology.

The book essentially espouses universalism – the belief that, in the end, everyone will be saved. That’s what the title of the book “Love Wins” implies. Its basic premise is that, in the end, God’s love wins out…and everyone is saved. It’s the kind of message everyone loves to hear. The only problem, the message is false.

Bell reaches this conclusion of his by misinterpreting key passages of Scripture, such as John 3:16. His logic goes: Because God loved the world, He sent His only Son to earth to save the world from sin. Because Jesus died for all, all are saved; for God so loved the world.

What Bell fails to realize is that, though Jesus died for all and offers the gift of salvation to all, this gift is to be appropriated by faith (Jn 1:12; 3:16-18; Rom. 3:25-26; Eph. 2:8, just to mention a few passages). Those who do not receive the gift of salvation by faith will be condemned. Jesus himself said that ***“he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God”*** (Jn 3:18). The righteousness required for entrance into heaven is the gift of God, a gift however that is to be received by faith (Rom. 3:22). The Bible says that God clothes us with the garment of salvation and covers us with the robe of righteousness (Isa. 61:10); but Paul reminds us in Philippians 3:9, that this robe of righteousness is to be received by faith. If we do not trust in Christ alone for salvation, we will not gain God’s heaven. Why? Because, apart from the robe of righteousness, which is received and worn by faith, we will be attempting to enter heaven wearing the filthy rags of our own self-righteousness (Isa. 64:6); and the Bible says that nothing unclean will be permitted into heaven (Rev. 21:27).

To say that in the end, love wins (for everyone), is to reject the truth of Scripture. It is to make a mockery of the suffering and death of Christ, by denying the very words of Jesus, especially his words regarding the Day of Judgment and the separation of the sheep and goats, the wheat and tares. By denying the words of Jesus, we declare him a liar. And if he be a liar, then he could not have been perfect; and if he was not perfect, then he could not have been the Savior of the world.

Christology – the study and doctrine of Christ. When you examine Rob Bell’s theology, especially his Christology, you soon realize that what he teaches, though it all sounds pretty good, is nothing but heresy, for it ultimately rejects Jesus Christ as Savior.

One way to test the spirits says John, is Christology – what does the prophet believe and teach regarding Jesus Christ and his work of redemption?

There is a spirit of truth and a spirit of error. There has always been and will always be true and false prophets. This is why John tells us ***“not to believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”*** How do we test the spirits? We test them with the tools of God’s Word, fulfillment, and Christology. By testing the spirits in this manner we will know whether or not the spirit is of God.

May we all heed John’s admonition to test the spirits, that we would be kept and preserved in the one true faith, now and forever more. Amen.