



THAT YOU MAY KNOW: A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

LESSON 11: “Assurance and the Discernment of Error”

TEXT: 1 John 4:1–6

On Sunday, January 18, 2009, an Episcopal priest by the name of Gene Robinson delivered the opening prayer at a kick-off concert held at the Lincoln Memorial for the inauguration of the newly elected U.S. president, Barack Obama. The concert’s theme was “We Are One,” and Robinson was invited to open in prayer particularly because of his openly homosexual lifestyle. To prepare for the occasion, Robinson studied the invocation prayers delivered at previous presidential inaugurations. He was “horrified” to learn how narrowly “Christian” many of those historic prayers had been. So, to honor the theme of the concert, the moral convictions of the newly elected president, and his own gay lifestyle, Robinson determined to deliver an inclusive, non-judgmental prayer. He began his “prayer” began with these words:

“O God of our many understandings, we pray that you will . . .”

Robinson went on to pray about common social causes, never once citing the language of the Bible nor mentioning the name of Jesus Christ. But the god to which Robinson prayed was not the One true God, the triune God of heaven and earth. It was a god of Robinson’s own liking, an idol he created after his own image, an imaginary force subservient to Robinson’s own carnal desires.

Afterward, the prayer was regarded as a beautiful example of love, tolerance, and inclusivism. It was hailed as a model of a new and improved kind of Christianity which did away with judgment and a narrowly defined “Christ” and opened its arms to embrace “our many understandings” of who God is.

Sadly, what Robinson communicated is increasingly common among those professing to be Christians. On Monday, February 9, 2026, Andy Beshear, governor of the state of Kentucky, appeared on the TV morning talk show, *The View*, and explained why he vetoed a bill adopted by the Kentucky General Assembly that prevented the mutilation of children through gender reassignment treatments. As justification for his veto, Beshear cited his Christian “faith”—a faith that he claimed is based on “the Golden rule that says we love our neighbor as ourself and on that parable of the Good Samaritan that says that everyone is our neighbor.”

Other examples of this kind of “Christianity” are easy to find. But these examples do not reflect the Christianity of the apostles of Jesus Christ. In fact, the apostles themselves vividly warned the Christians of their day to be on guard against those who would cleverly attempt to introduce error into the Christian message.

1 John 4:1–6 – “Assurance and the Discernment of Error”

The promotion of a false Christianity is not new to the turn of this millennium. It began in force even while the last of Christ’s apostles, John the son of Zebedee, was still alive. This ancient counterfeit, known as *Gnostic Christianity*, maintained certain concepts and terms from the apostles’ teaching, but integrated other religious and philosophical “understandings” to form a new kind of Christianity. It was a blend of partial truths and outright lies.

Ironically, some of those who promoted this quasi-Christianity were at one time members of the original apostolic community of churches. They had gathered with the true saints for the reading of Scripture, the singing of hymns, the breaking of bread, and the ministry of the one-anothers. Yet over time, the spurious nature of their faith became evident. They could only tolerate hearing of the apostolic teachings so long. Eventually, they had to signal their opposition. The apostle John describes this response when he writes, “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us” (1 John 2:19).

But these counterfeit Christians were not content just to leave and start their own religion. They wanted to take as many others from the churches with them, or at least to confuse as many members as possible by muddying the apostles’ teaching. The ensuing upheaval caused many of the sincere believers to doubt their own faith and

falter in their assurance. Questions like “Did I believe the right message?” and “Will I depart from the apostles’ teaching and leave the church too?” were on their minds. It is in response to this sinister effort that John writes 1 John 4:1–6.

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the *spirit* of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak *as* from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

I. The Call for Discernment (4:1)

In response to the aggressive spread of false forms of Christianity in his day, the apostle John first issues to his audience *a call for discernment*: **“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”**

It is important once again to notice John’s manner of address: **“Beloved.”** Consistent with his purpose of strengthening their assurance (see 5:13), John reminds his readers through his use of this term of both his personal affection for them and his confidence in their spiritual state (see also 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:7, 11). Although he is about to warn them about a serious matter, he is confident of their status before God.

- A. **The Call Stated Negatively.** John first states the call as a *prohibition*: **“Do not believe.”** “To believe” means to “consider something to be true and therefore worthy of one’s trust,” and what is *not* to be believed is **“every spirit.”** By referring to “spirits” in v. 1, John is not implying that spirit-beings were speaking to those in his audience. Rather, he uses the term in this context to emphasize the fact that behind the “false prophets” who were speaking there were definite *spiritual influences*. False teaching isn’t something to play around with. It is the direct product of dark spiritual forces seeking to obscure the truth of God, replace truth with error, and harm God’s people through confusion and doubt. (Read Eph 6:12; 1 Tim 4:1.)
- B. **The Call Stated Positively.** John then states the call as a *positive command*: **“Test.”** “To test” means “to make a critical examination of something to determine genuineness.” It requires *active, intelligent, informed discernment*. Instead of being gullible and accepting every religious teaching about Christianity that comes their way, John calls upon his readers to be careful, knowledgeable, and discriminating. What were they to look for? John states it concisely: **“to see whether they are from God.”** Here is the fundamental test: do the teachers’ teachings demonstrate that they originate *from God* (“from God” is a major theme in this paragraph, used 6x in vv. 1–6)? In other words, do these teachings conform to the Word of God?

It is noteworthy that John does not issue this command to an elite group within the church. Instead, he calls upon *all who are the “beloved”* to implement this call for discernment. All Christians are to be vigilant and judicious. As one commentator stated, “The fact that faithful pastors and orthodox professors are better able to evaluate does not excuse those in the pews from doing their own evaluating” (Gordon Clark, *First John*, 123). Why? **“Because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”** John uses the term “prophet” here not strictly in the sense of one who makes predictions about the future, but in reference to one *who proclaims a message in God’s name*. John says **“many”** of these teachers have gone out into the world, indicating that a force has been released and continues to this day as an ever-present threat.

As D. Edmond Hiebert states, this “propagation” effort by these teachers is “a satanic parody on the mission of Christ. Even as Christ came out from the Father and came into the world to do the work of His Father, so these evil spirits have gone forth from their evil abode and come into the world to work through the false prophets in order to further the purposes of the evil one” (Hiebert, *The Epistles of John*, 180).

II. The Criteria for Discernment (4:2–3)

But how can believers discern the presence of error? By what standard? John provides the criteria in vv. 2–3.

A. The Criteria Stated Positively (v. 2). John begins by identifying the source of all true teaching about Christianity: **“By this you will know the Spirit of God.”** The Holy Spirit is the source and revealer of all true doctrine and spiritual understanding (see John 14:16–17; 15:26–27; 16:13–14; 1 John 2:20, 27; 3:9, 24; 4:13). How is the Spirit’s presence manifested in a religious teacher? **“Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.”** The act of *confession* here is not mere lip service, but “an open and forthright declaration of the message of one’s own position” (Hiebert, *Epistles of John*, 181). The *object* of that confession is **“Jesus Christ,”** for what one believes *about Him* is the primary litmus test of orthodoxy. (For a similar test given by the apostle Paul, see 1 Cor 12:3.)

Specifically, John emphasizes the absolute necessity of believing exactly what that name **“Jesus Christ”** implies: *one person, two natures*—one nature divine (“Christ”) and one nature human (“Jesus”). Specifically, John points to the absolute necessity of believing that He **“has come in the flesh.”** The language of this phrase emphasizes that Christ didn’t just “appear” to be human, or that he was human “for a time,” but that He took on human “flesh” (human nature) and possess it *to this day!* In other words, John is emphasizing the absolute necessity of believing in the **incarnation** of the Son of God. Although John does not specify it here, this sweeping confession implies affirmation of all the supporting doctrines, including Jesus Christ’s virgin conception, His sinless life, His atoning death, and His bodily resurrection. Without these facts, there could be no “shedding of blood” (human death) by the Savior, and without this shedding of blood, there would be no propitiation for sins (see 1 John 1:7; 2:2). It is upon a right understanding of these truths about the God-man Jesus Christ that Christianity stands or falls.

B. The Criteria Stated Negatively (v. 3). John then states the criteria negatively: **“and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the *spirit* of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.”** Notice that John’s standard is not that true religious teachers are *believers* while false religious teachers *do not believe in anything*. That would make the challenge so much easier! Instead, both true and false teachers *claim to believe*. The issue between them is *belief in truth vs. belief in error, or belief in truth vs. rejection of certain aspects of truth*. To identify a false teacher requires a look at what they *reject* despite the fact that they still generally profess belief in Christ.

Having pointed to the *incarnation* in v. 2, John assumes it here again in v. 3. Any teacher that cannot affirm as part of his own “open and forthright declaration” that Christ **“has come in the flesh”** is to be unequivocally rejected. Even if this teacher appears to be sincere in his convictions, even if he appears to be right in other aspects of doctrine, even if he shares certain moral or political values, he must be decisively rejected as a heretic—as of **“the spirit of the antichrist.”** John leaves no room for tolerance in inclusivity. (For another strong statement from John along these lines, see 2 John 7–11.)

With such definitive criteria for acceptance and rejection, it quickly becomes obvious that we will need to reject many who, while professing to be Christians, reject the biblical teaching concerning the incarnation of Jesus Christ (e.g., Oneness Pentecostals, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Unitarians, Christian Science). But this should not surprise us. John explains, **“you have heard that it [the spirit of the antichrist] is coming, and now it is already in the world.”** (See also 1 John 2:18.)

III. The Cause for Discernment (4:4–6)

John now provides the *cause* for discernment in vv. 4–6. He does so by contrasting true believers with false teachers, examining how each category drastically differs in terms of each’s *identity* and *response to truth*. Remember who believers *are* by nature, and how they *relate to truth*, provides encouraging motivation.

A. The Difference in Identity (vv. 4–5). John describes the identity of true believers in three statements. First, they are **“little children,”** a term John again uses to express pastoral affection and affirmation (2:1, 12, 28;

3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21 – 7x). Second, they are **“from God,”** pointing to their status as “children of God” (3:1, 2, 10) and thus, as those “born of God” (3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). This status has come about not by their own doing, but by God’s sovereign grace. Third, they **“have overcome the world,”** a description which emphasizes a guaranteed outcome even though the process toward it is still taking place. As Hiebert states, “John has no fear that they will be deceived by the false teachers, but his fatherly heart prompts him to remind them of their true identity. Confronted by the increasing forces of alluring evil, his readers, like believers today, ought never to forget their divine heritage” (*The Epistles of John*, 187). Later in 1 John, the apostle will return to this description when he states: “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (5:4–5).

Why can believers be identified in this way? **“Because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.”** The Holy Spirit who indwells believers (see 1 John 3:24; 4:13), and not believers themselves, is the One who guarantees the victory. It is His strength that overcomes, not the believer’s. What encouragement!

But who are the false teachers? **“They are from the world,”** John says. They are those whose origin is natural and worldly, and their “lord” is “the evil one” (see John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). **“Therefore,”** John continues, **“they speak as from the world.”** Their message is agreeable to this world’s values, even when they include in their speeches references to “Christ.” As a result, they gain popularity and success, because **“the world listens to them.”** Ultimately, the false teachers will suffer the same fate as “the world” (see 1 John 3:8b).

B. The Difference in Response (v. 6a–b). To demonstrate this difference, John refers to himself and the rest of the apostolic team: **“We are from God”** (see also 1 John 1:1–3). How do true believers respond to them and their message? **“He who knows God listens to us.”** In other words, those born of God have spiritual ears predisposed to recognize and pay attention to the voice of truth (see John 8:47; 10:4, 27–28). As Hiebert again states, “The Holy Spirit in the heart of the speaker witnesses to the heart of the hearer and vitalizes the sense of their mutual fellowship in Christ” (*The Epistles of John*, 192). Christ’s sheep hear His voice!

But what about the false teachers? In contrast, **“He who is not from God does not listen to us.”** At times believers can be mistaken, but they will always be convinced by the correction offered by God’s Word. But not heretics. Their distinguishing mark is the refusal to accept the apostolic message. Although we do not have the apostles with us today, we have their writings in the New Testament. Consequently, those who reject the teachings of the New Testament demonstrate that *they are not from God*. As Colin Kruis states, “A persistent acceptance of the gospel proclaimed by the author and his community marks those who are from God, and a persistent rejection of their gospel marks those who are not from God” (*Letters of John*, 161).

For Discussion

1. What makes false teachers difficult to identify at times? What is the litmus tests that John identifies in light of the doctrinal threats of his day?
2. Why does Christianity stand or fall upon a right understanding of Jesus Christ—particularly of His *incarnation*?
3. Oneness Pentecostals, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses all deny the apostolic teaching about the incarnation. In light of this text, how are we to understand their professions of faith or claims to Christianity?
4. Read 2 John 7–11. How should we respond to any person who tries to promote errant Christology?

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 4:1; Matthew 7:15
2. **Listen to** the 3-part sermon series by John MacArthur, entitled “A Plea for Discernment,” preached at The Master’s University in November 2002: <https://www.gty.org/sermons/series/304/a-plea-for-discernment>.
3. **Sing** the hymn, “Speak, O Lord” (*Hymns of Grace* #368) as a prayer for greater attentiveness to God’s Word.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: February 18 – 7pm – “The Pillars of Marriage: Pillar 4” (Chris Hamilton)