

THAT YOU MAY
KNOW

A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

“Assurance and
the Discernment
of Error”

1 John 4:1–6

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“Assurance and the Discernment of Error” – 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

1 John 4:1

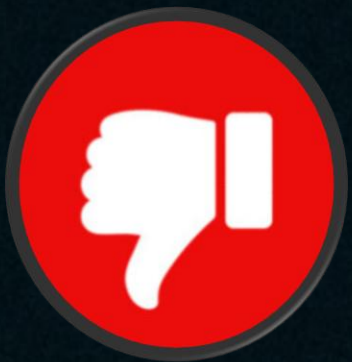


*"Do not believe every spirit,
but test the spirits to see whether they are from God."*

“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” (4:1).

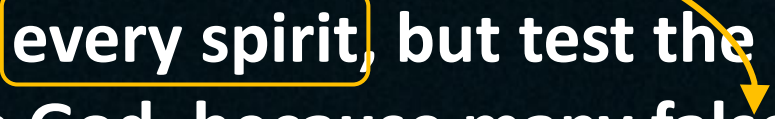
- **“Beloved”** – John again addresses his audience with a term of affection and affirmation (see also 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:7, 11); though preparing to issue them a warning, he is nonetheless confident of their faith.

A. The Call Stated Negatively



- **“Do not believe”** – John begins with a *prohibition*; do not “believe” = do not “consider something to be true and therefore worthy of one’s trust.”

“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” (4:1).



- “**Every spirit**” – John is not implying that spirit-beings were speaking with them; he uses the term to emphasize that behind the “false prophets” who were speaking there were *spiritual influences*.
 - **Ephesians 6:12** – “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”
 - **1 Timothy 4:1** – “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.”

“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” (4:1).

B. The Call Stated Positively



- “**Test**” – John now states the charge as a *positive mandate*; “test” = “to make a critical examination of something to determine genuineness”—an *active, intelligent discernment*.
- “**Whether they are from God**” – the fundamental test: do the teachers’ teachings demonstrate that they originate *from God*? (“from God” is used 6x in vv. 1–6).

- John issues this mandate not to an exclusive segment within the church (e.g., elders), but to all who are part of the “**beloved.**”

“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



“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” (4:1).

- **“Many false prophets”** – not necessarily those who make predictions, but those who proclaim *a false message in God’s name*; there are not just some, but *many*.
- **“Have gone out into the world”** – a force that has been unleashed and continues as an ever-present, on-going reality.
- Theirs 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).

“But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. You may say in your heart, ‘How will we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?’ When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.”

—Deuteronomy 18:20–22

“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

—Matthew 7:15

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.”

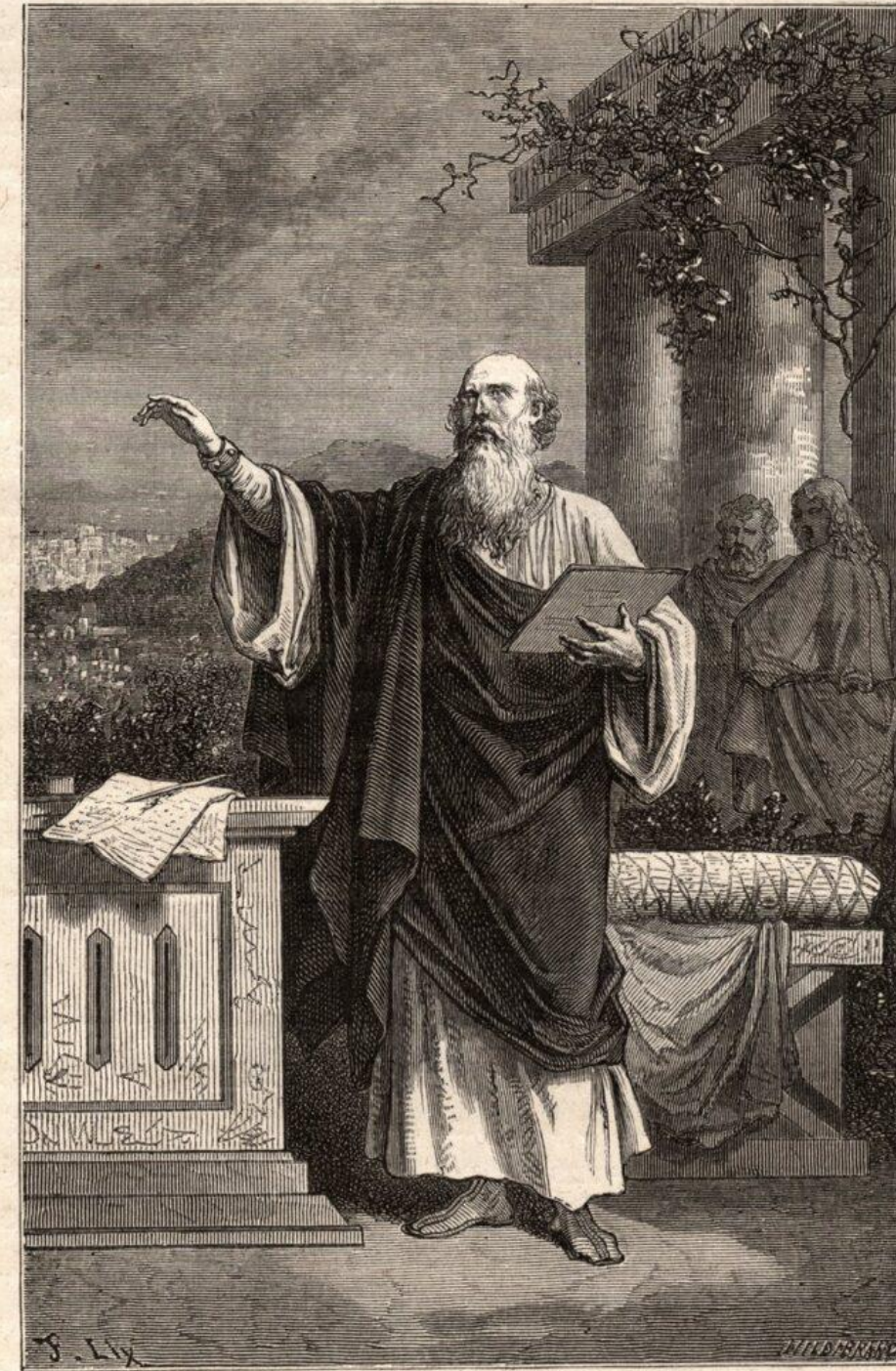
—Acts 20:28–30

“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.”

—2 Peter 2:1

“Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, but its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced . . . more true than the truth itself.”

—Irenaeus (AD 125–202)



“The success of an illegitimate coiner depends largely upon how closely the counterfeit resembles the genuine article. Heresy is not so much the total denial of the truth as a perversion of it. That is why half a lie is always more dangerous than a complete repudiation. Hence when the Father of Lies enters the pulpit it is not his custom to flatly deny the fundamental truths of Christianity, rather does he tacitly acknowledge them, and then proceed to give an erroneous interpretation and a false application.”

—A. W. Pink



II. The Criteria for Discernment

1 John 4:2–3



*“Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has
come in the flesh is from God.”*

“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (4:2).

A. The Criteria Stated Positively

- **“The Spirit of God”** – the source/revealer of all true doctrine and understanding (see John 14:16–17; 15:26–27; 16:13–14).
 - **1 John 2:20, 27** – the “anointing” all born-again believers receive.
 - **1 John 3:9** – the indwelling “seed” all born-again believers have.
 - **1 John 3:24** – “We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.”
 - **1 John 4:13** – “By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.”

“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (4:2).

- **“confesses”** – not mere lip service, but “an open and forthright declaration of the message of one’s own position” (Hiebert, *Epistles of John*, 181).
- **“Jesus Christ”** – the primary litmus test of truth: a correct view of *Christology*; the two names are joined together to show *one person* in two natures: *divine* (Christ) and *human* (Jesus).
- **“Has come”** – not merely that He appeared for a time, but that He entered into an ongoing state.
- **“In the flesh”** – humanity; a reference to the *incarnation*, the doctrine upon which Christianity stands or falls.

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life— and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us— what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

—1 John 1:1–3

Men of the Word

“For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men,
the man Christ Jesus”

—1 Timothy 2:5

“By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness:
He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit,
seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on
in the world, taken up in glory.”

—1 Timothy 3:16

“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” (4:3).

B. The Criteria Stated Negatively

- “**Does not confess**” – i.e., does not confess Jesus *as coming in the flesh*; this was not an issue of belief vs. unbelief, but belief in the correct things vs. belief in incorrect things.
- “Half-truths are always more dangerous than clearly discernible falsehoods, particularly when it comes to Christology and its implications for the Christian life” (R. Alan Culpepper, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John*, 81).

“For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ *as* coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into *your* house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.”

—2 John 7–11

Men of the Word

The Gnosticism of Cerinthus (c. AD 50–100)

“Christ” entered Jesus at his baptism, guided him in his miracles and teaching, but departed from him prior to the crucifixion.

According to Irenaeus, John met Cerinthus once in Ephesus: “Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is inside!”
(*Against Heresies* 3.3.4).





“Stop your ears, therefore, when any one speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born, and did eat and drink. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and truly died He was also truly raised from the dead, His Father quickening Him, even as after the same manner His Father will so raise up us who believe in Him by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we do not possess the truth life.”

—Ignatius of Antioch (AD 30–107),
Letter to the Trallians, 9:1–2,
addressing “Gnostic” Christianity.

“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” (4:3).

B. The Criteria Stated Negatively (cont’d)

- “The spirit of the antichrist” – the rejection of the apostolic witness to the incarnation of Jesus Christ ultimately springs from the ultimate enemy of Jesus Christ—the evil one.
- “Is coming . . . is already in the world” – the antichrist is on his way, but his lesser antichrists are already here and active.
- **1 John 2:18** – “Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour.”

“No matter how charming, how plausible, how eloquent the prophets in question may be, the test of their witness to Christ and His truth is the test by which they must be judged.”

—F. F. Bruce, *Letters of John*, 109

III. The Cause for Discernment

1 John 4:4–6



"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."

“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” (4:4–5).

A. The Difference in Identity

- **“Little children”** – John addresses them again with pastoral affection and affirmation (2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21 – 7x).
- **“You are from God”** – i.e., “children of God” (3:1, 2, 10), and thus, those “born of God” (3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18).
- **“Have overcome them”** – the verb emphasizes a finished reality; the victory is so certain that it can be described as already achieved!



“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.”

—D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistles of John*, 187

“The battle has been thus decided, even if it is not yet over. By faith Christians participate in this victory and are thus placed in a position to overcome the world for themselves.”

—W. Günther

Men of the Word

“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?”

—1 John 5:4–5

“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” (4:4–5).

- **“Because”** – introduces the *reason* for the believer’s guaranteed victory.
- **“Greater is He who is in you”** – a reference to the Holy Spirit (see 3:24; 4:13; also 2:20, 27; 3:10); every believer will overcome *not* because of *their strength*, but because of the *strength of the One who indwells them*.
- **“Than he who is in the world”** – the evil one, the devil—the one whose works Jesus came to destroy (1 John 3:8b).

“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” (4:4–5).

- **“They are from the world”** – those who teach a false Christ; their origin is of *this world*—i.e., of the evil one (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11).
- **“Therefore”** – the logical consequence.
- **“They speak as from the world** – their message is agreeable to this world’s values, even when they speak about “Christ.”
- **“The world listens to them”** – they are popular, successful, attractive.

**“We are from God; he who knows God listens to us;
he who is not from God does not listen to us” (4:6a–b).**

B. The Difference in Response

- **“We are from God”** – i.e., the apostles, the prophets of Jesus Christ who carried the true message (see 1 John 1:1–3).
- **“He who knows God listens to us”** – those born of God have spiritual ears predisposed to recognize and pay attention to the voice of truth (John 8:47; 10:4, 27–28).
- **“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”** (Hiebert, *The Epistles of John*, 192).

“We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us” (4:6a–b).

- **“He who is not from God”** – the false prophet/teacher, who is of this world and advances the agenda of the antichrist.
- **“Does not listen to us”** – to the apostles, the chosen and authoritative spokesmen for Jesus Christ; these false teachers *reject* the apostolic message, which has been recorded in the New Testament Scriptures.
- “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” (Colin Kruis, *The Letters of John*, 161).

“By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (4:6c).

C. A Final Summary

- **“By this”** – A reference to the truths recorded in vv. 2–6.
- **“The spirit of truth”** – a reference to the *Holy Spirit* (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).
- This is the affirmation that comes from your attitude toward truth:

Your persistent attraction to, hunger for, and perseverance in the apostolic message of Jesus Christ is powerful evidence that you are born of God, as is your persistent aversion to and rejection of errant teachers and teachings about Jesus Christ.

THAT YOU MAY **KNOW**

A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

- ✓ Take responsibility to make judgments.
- ✓ Be vigilant; Satan masquerades as an angel of light.
- ✓ Know your Bible.
- ✓ Don't be soft on error.
- ✓ Gain assurance from your desire to be in the context where the Bible is taught.