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SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

1 John 4:1-6

By

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Spiritual Discernment 1 John 4:1-6

P. T. Barnum made a fortune on the theory that “a sucker is born every minute,” and he has many disciples today. The Internet has only widened the door of opportunity for those that prey on the unsuspecting. I have read that the second most lucrative industry in Nigeria is scamming foolish Americans out of their money by promising to give them millions of dollars.

Perhaps even more widespread than financial scams are spiritual scams. False cults and religions lure millions into their traps, promising them fulfillment, happiness, and more. Mormonism is growing rapidly worldwide. Jehovah’s Witnesses aggressively promote their heresies in just about every country of the world. It has been predicted that Islam will take over Europe before the end of this century, and it is also growing in America. And, judging by the popularity of it, many Americans are apparently being sucked in by the blasphemous book and movie, *The Da Vinci Code*.

Even among those claiming to be evangelicals, who say that they believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, false teaching abounds. The “New Perspective on Paul,” which has captured many evangelical scholars and pastors, undermines justification by faith alone. The Emergent Church movement embraces much of the postmodern philosophy that there is no absolute truth. *Christianity Today* (March, 2006, pp. 52-54) recently ran an article on a theologian who was at Bethel College, but now teaches at Regent University. He suggests that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world’s other major religions and that Christians should “be open to learning from and being enriched by the Spirit’s work in world religions” (p. 54)! With respect to other religions, he asks, “If others have something to say about God, should we not at least listen both sympathetically and critically?”

In addition to these blatant errors, the “seeker church” movement has subtly redefined the gospel, so that the issue is no longer that we are sinners who need reconciliation to a holy God. Rather, we are religious consumers with needs that God is willing

and ready to meet, if we will just give Him a try. An ad this month in our local paper, sponsored by a seeker church, read,

Have you ever wanted more out of life? We can help! Discover powerful and easy secrets that have been proven and are guaranteed to give you the results you want. Whether you desire love, health, money or simply more fulfillment and satisfaction in your life, now is the time to take advantage of this new and exclusive series being introduced for the first time in the Flagstaff area—absolutely free. Learn how you, too, can start seeing an immediate difference! No matter who you are, you, too, can profit from knowing these safe, trusted and easy-to-understand principles for personal growth and achievement. Stop missing out on the life you could be living. You have nothing to lose ... everything to gain!

The ad goes on to invite interested people to attend their first session, “How to Find That-Something-More.” I wonder, are they going to get people in the door and then tell them that they must repent of their sins and deny self to follow Jesus as Lord? If not, what are they offering in the name of Christianity? Where does the Bible promise to grant sinners’ desires for love, health, money, or more fulfillment and satisfaction?

Evangelical pastors often say that we don’t need to emphasize doctrine or theology, because that is divisive. Rather, we need to come together on the areas where we agree and demonstrate love, tolerance, and unity to the world. This includes unity with the Roman Catholic Church, which teaches a false way of salvation.

In view of these many deceptive tactics by the enemy, John’s words in our text are absolutely vital for the preservation of God’s truth. (Many who buy into the current thinking would wince at my statement, which implies that there is such a thing as God’s truth, and that anyone can know it and proclaim it.) After telling us (3:23) that God’s commandment is “that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another,” John now (4:1) tells us *not* to believe everything: “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.” John especially had in mind the false teachers who had left the church and were drawing others after them (2:19, 22-23).

As Ray Stedman points out (*Expository Studies in 1 John* [Word], p. 296), "It is significant that this warning comes in the midst of John's discourse about love, because false spirits tend to make a great deal of the subject of love. Every cult, every deviant group, every false movement makes its appeal in the name of love."

Like John, Paul emphasized the demonic aspect of false teachers (1 Tim. 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." Of course, the deceitful spirits and their demonic doctrines teach through *people* who advocate the false teaching. So we must pay close attention to John's words. He is saying that ...

Believers must be discerning in spiritual matters.

Our text falls into three parts: John gives us the reason for discernment (4:1); the basis for discernment (4:2-3); and, the evidence of discernment (4:4-6).

1. The reason for discernment: Discernment is essential because Satan and his forces are at work in the world (4:1).

A familiar falsehood goes, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe in something." That is sheer nonsense! You can believe that you can fly and leap from the edge of the Grand Canyon, flapping your arms for all you're worth. But believing such falsehood has no effect on keeping you in the air. Of course, those who argue that it doesn't matter what you believe would say that there is a great difference between science and spiritual matters. They would say that science is objectively true, whereas spiritual matters are subjectively true. If it "works" for you, then it's "true."

But that assumes that God is merely a projection of people's imaginations, rather than that He actually exists and that He is the creator of all that is. The Bible assumes rather that God really exists and that He spoke the heavens and earth into existence (Gen. 1:1). Furthermore, the Bible teaches the actual existence of Satan and other fallen angels, called demons. John's teaching here assumes that behind all truth in the spiritual realm is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26). Behind all spiritually false teaching is "the spirit of error" (1 John 4:6), led by Satan, but including all of his demonic

forces. Whether they know it or not, behind every false prophet or false teacher is an evil spirit promoting the errors that they teach.

From the day that Satan deceived Eve in the garden, until the last days, when the final antichrist will deceive the world (2 Thess. 2:3-12), evil spirits have promoted false teaching to lead people away from the living and true God. When John says, “many false prophets have gone out into the world,” we should realize that these were not sinister, evil looking characters. They didn’t blatantly encourage Satan-worship or child-sacrifice. They used Christian lingo and professed to believe in Jesus. No doubt, they had attractive personalities and convincing arguments. Jesus called them wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matt. 7:15). Paul warned that these men disguise themselves as apostles of Christ and servants of righteousness. Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, *not* darkness (2 Cor. 11:13-14).

Hence, John tells his beloved flock (4:1), “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” Paul said a similar thing. After saying that we should “not despise prophetic utterances,” he added, “But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:20-21). True faith is not a blind leap into the dark. It examines its object carefully before putting trust in it. Thus, as John Stott observes (*The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 153), both Paul and John assumed, as the Reformers insisted, that “even the humblest Christian possessed ‘the right of private judgment’ ... and both could and should apply the objective test John is about to give in the next verse.”

We need spiritual discernment because Satan and his forces are alive and well, promoting error at every opportunity. But, how do we test the spirits?

2. The basis for discernment: Discernment is based on the confession concerning Jesus Christ (4:2-3).

A false teacher may be gentle and loving. He may speak prophecies that come true. He may even perform miracles or cast out demons or speak in tongues (Matt. 7:22; Exod. 7:11, 22; 8:7; Deut. 13:1-3). But, the question is, does he lead people to follow a false god? Specifically, John lays down the rule (4:2-3), “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.”

To *confess* that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh means to agree with that statement, but it also means something more. The demons all agree that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who has come in the flesh (Mark 1:24; 3:11; 5:7). To confess this truth about Jesus implies submitting your life to Him as Lord (Rom. 10:9-10).

Furthermore, John’s test requires believing in the true deity and humanity of Jesus. “Has come” implies His preexistence as the eternal Son of God. Jesus stated His own preexistence when He told the Jews, “Before Abraham was born, I am” (John 8:58). Or, as John begins his gospel (John 1:1), “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

When John states (1 John 4:2) that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh,” he is referring not only to His true deity, but also to His true humanity. The Docetists taught that matter is evil; thus Jesus was only a spirit-being who *seemed* to be a real man. The Cerentian Gnostics, whom John was probably combating, taught that Jesus was a mere man, but that “the Christ,” a divine emanation, came upon Him at His baptism, but left just before His crucifixion. John’s test refutes both of these heresies. Jesus is the Christ (the Anointed One, or Messiah) who was conceived supernaturally by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary. He had a human body, although apart from sin.

To deny that Jesus is true God and at the same time true man is to deny the Christian faith. To deny either Jesus’ deity or His humanity is to deny that He is our Savior. If He were not God, He would have been a sinner and His death on the cross could not have atoned for anything beyond His own sins. If He were not man, He could not have assumed our sins on the cross (Heb. 2:14-17). Thus faith in Him to save from sin would be worthless. Thus any teaching that denies that Jesus is true God and true man, that as the second person of the trinity, Jesus took on human flesh in the incarnation, is a doctrine of demons. It is the spirit of antichrist.

Implicit in John’s warning here is that the content of our theology matters greatly! The difference between a person in a false cult who is going to hell and a true believer in Jesus Christ, who is

going to heaven, is largely one of theology. Cultists are often more zealous and more knowledgeable about what they believe than we are. But, they deny that Jesus is true God in human flesh; we affirm it. John Calvin observes (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on 4:2, p. 232), "Yet he only repeats here what we have met with before, that as Christ is the object at which faith aims, so he is the stone at which all heretics stumble. As long then as we abide in Christ, there is safety; but when we depart from him, faith is lost, and all truth is rendered void." So I encourage you to study sound doctrine, especially with regard to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Thus John has shown us why we must be discerning, because Satan and his forces are actively trying to deceive us on essential biblical truth. He has shown us that the basis for discernment is a person's confession about Jesus Christ as true God and true man. But, how do we recognize such discernment in others or in ourselves? How do we identify true discernment?

3. The evidence of discernment: Discernment is evidenced in the response to the apostolic witness (4:4-6).

Most English translations reflect the Greek text, which begins verses 4, 5, and 6 with emphatic pronouns: *You, they, and we*. The first two pronouns portray two very different responses, that of true believers (John's "little children") and that of the false teachers and those who follow them. The "we" of verse 6 sets forth the standard by which to measure others' or your own response, namely, how does a person respond to the apostolic witness?

A. Response 1: Those who by the Spirit overcome false teaching are from God (4:4).

When John says, "You are from God, little children," he is pointing again to the new birth. Christianity is not just a matter of subscribing to certain creeds or correct doctrines, although that is essential. It is a matter of being born of God so that you receive new life from Him and become His child. This new birth is absolutely essential if you want to be able to understand and hold to the truth. This is so important that John repeats the phrase "from God" in 4:1, 2, 3, 4, & 6 (twice). By way of contrast, the false teachers and those who follow them are "from the world" (4:5, twice).

Without the new birth, a person is incapable of understanding or obeying God's truth. Jesus said to the unbelieving Jews (John 8:43, 47), "Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word.... He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God." Jesus was using *hear* in the same way that John uses *listen* (4:6). It refers to hearing in the sense of both understanding *and* obeying the truth.

By "overcome them," John means that his hearers have resisted the false teaching. The reason that they have overcome is not only that they are from God, but also that with the new birth, they also received the Holy Spirit ("the anointing," 2:27), who indwells them. He is greater than he who is in the world (Satan, who inspires the false teachers). Even though the Gnostic teachers may have been intellectually superior to John's "little children," the presence of the indwelling Spirit gave his readers the ability to discern and thus avoid the errors of the false teachers.

How does the Spirit preserve us from error? It is not enough to be a spiritual ignoramus and say, "the Spirit will protect me from error." The Spirit protects us through God's Word, which reveals the truth about the person and work of Christ (4:2-3). The Word is the measure by which we test the spirits, but as Calvin points out (p. 230), "except the Spirit of wisdom be present, to have God's word in our hands will avail little or nothing, for its meaning will not appear to us." So we need diligently to study God's Word in dependence on the Holy Spirit for understanding. Then we will be able to overcome false teachers.

B. Response 2: Those who teach error and those who follow their teaching are from the world (4:5).

"They [the false teachers] are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them." As we have seen (2:15), the world is that evil system under Satan's dominion that is opposed to God and His kingdom. The world system is built around the principle of taking glory from God and transferring it to proud, self-willed man. That was Satan's original temptation to Eve in the garden. He challenged God's word and suggested to Eve that if she ate the forbidden fruit, she would become like God, knowing good and evil (Gen. 3:1-5). Any teaching

that detracts from God's glory and sovereignty and exalts man by feeding his pride is satanic at the core.

Verse 5 may imply that these false teachers were drawing a big crowd. The world was listening to them. When you tell the world what it wants to hear, you will not lack an audience. When a false teacher sets aside the unpopular notion that all have sinned, and he tells people that they are wonderful and that God exists to help them fulfill their desires, he will gain a following. But the problem is, that message is not from God. It is from the world and the god of this world. The practical application for us is, don't judge the success of a ministry by its size! Judge it by its faithfulness to the truth of the gospel as revealed in the Bible.

- C. The standard by which to measure discernment: a person's response to the apostolic witness (4:6).

Some understand the "we" of verse 6 to refer to all believers. But it stands in antithesis to the "they" of verse 5, and so it is better to interpret it as referring to the apostles. "We [apostles] are from God; the one who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us." The one who *knows God* is synonymous with the one who is *from God*, the one who is born again. These people listen to the apostles, which means that they listen with understanding and obedience. They accept the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as God in human flesh. As we have seen, the one who is not of God does not hear His word (John 8:47; see 1 Cor. 2:14).

John Stott (p. 158) points out that John's claim, "whoever knows God listens to us," would be the height of arrogance if he were speaking as an individual. But the apostles were entrusted with the special authority to lay the foundation of the church through their witness and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:16-18; John 14:26; Eph. 2:22; 2 Cor. 10:8). We have the apostolic teaching preserved in the New Testament. Thus the standard by which to judge anyone's (including our own) spiritual discernment is, "What is the person's response to the apostolic teaching about Jesus Christ as found in the New Testament?" Without that standard, every person becomes his own measure of "truth," filled with pride, and not in submission to Christ as Lord.

Conclusion

The late A. W. Tozer had some wise counsel on “How to Try the Spirits” (adapted from, *Moody Monthly* [12/79], pp. 51-55). He posed seven tests to apply to any teaching:

- (1) How does the teaching affect my relationship with God? Is He magnified and glorified, or diminished?
- (2) How does the teaching affect my attitude toward the Lord Jesus Christ? Does it magnify Him and give Him first place? Or, does it subtly shift my focus onto myself or some experience?
- (3) How does the teaching affect my attitude toward Scripture? Did the teaching come from and agree with the Word? Does it increase my love for the Word?
- (4) How does the teaching affect my self-life? Does it feed self or crucify it? Does it feed pride or humility?
- (5) How does the teaching affect my relationships to other Christians? Does it cause me to withdraw, find fault, and exalt myself in superiority? Or, does it lead me to genuine love for all that truly know Christ?
- (6) How does the teaching affect my relationship to the world system? Does it lead me to pursue the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life? Does it lead me to pursue worldly riches, reputation, and pleasures? Or, does it crucify the world to me?
- (7) How does the teaching affect my attitude toward sin? Does it cause me to tolerate sin in my life or to turn from it and grow in holiness? Any teaching that makes holiness more acceptable and sin more intolerable is genuine.

Ray Stedman titles his sermon on our text, “When Unbelief is Right.” His final statement is (p. 304), “God help us to be unbelievers in error as well as believers in truth.”

Application Questions

1. What is the difference between biblical discernment and the sin of being judgmental? Can discernment be taken too far?
2. How can a Christian develop discernment?
3. Discuss the implications of this statement: Every Christian is a theologian; the problem is, some are sloppy theologians.
4. What is the basic problem with the ad (cited in the message) that presumably is trying to reach people for Christ?

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