

# Don't Believe Everything You Hear!

## 1 John 4:1-6

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The title of this sermon is, *Don't Believe Everything You Hear!* That may be self-defeating as you are going to hear me on this subject. If I tell you not to believe everything you hear, that includes me, doesn't it?

But it requires something else—by what standard will you listen? How will you determine whether what I am saying is to be believed and followed or not? This applies not just to me, but to anyone or anything you hear, or read, or watch. When you think about all the information that pours into our brains every day, it's mind numbing. We would be foolish to think that we aren't affected by it. Further, when you consider the explicit anti-God worldview that our culture's entertainment juggernaut constantly screams at us, we see how critical it is to listen for the truth. This has always been the way it is. The need for discernment has never been greater than it is now.

John's exhortation in 1 John 4 is an urgent need today, even within the Christian church subculture. You would think walking through Family Christian bookstore or listening to Christian radio would be safe. *It says Christian over the door so everything in here is true! Pick any book you want! Listen to any album you want. As long as it says it's Christian, then it's okay.*

Really? This teacher preaches Jesus and says his name; he must be okay. This writer says she's a Christian; it must be okay.

You may think, *That's not a problem at Bethel, is it?* I mean, we are a truth-focused church, we do expository preaching, and we are a doctrinal church. *This is a message other churches need, right?*

I have had enough people tell me they listen and read teachers, like, for example, Joel Osteen, to know that this is a problem in certain quadrants of our church. Further, the likelihood that someone is upset that there may be anything possibly wrong with Joel Osteen's teaching is another indication of a problem. If you can't see it in an easy one like Osteen, how will you discern more subtle and subversive false teachings?

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for 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, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (1 John 4:1-6 ESV)*

Verse 1 gives a simple formula. Don't do this; rather do this.

## **What Not to Do – Believe Every “Spirit”**

Do not believe every spirit. The vernacular of that is a bit strange to us but remember we are separated by 2,000 years from the way people spoke about things. Just consider it was only a few decades ago when everyone wanted to have a “groovy” time. The language has changed but the basic concepts remain consistent.

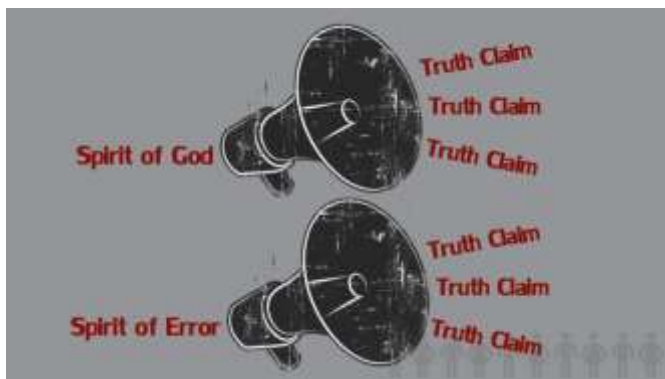
What does “spirit” mean here? Look at verse 6 again, it will help. *By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.* What John is doing is dividing all teachings and claims to truth into two broad categories: that which is true, and that which is not true. I think it’s helpful to realize that “not true” includes almost true, somewhat true, at times true, and completely false. Truth is fully true and always true.

John’s paradigm is of teaching that flows from either the Spirit of God, or a spirit of error, what he calls the spirit of antichrist. God is true and all he says is true. Satan is the father of lies and what he says is subtly and deceptively not true.

Think of two famous temptations as examples: Satan and Eve, and Satan and Jesus. In both cases, Satan quotes God’s Word but subtly twists the words to mean something slightly different. Eve did not detect the lie and she fell to the temptation to eat of the fruit of the tree. Jesus saw the subtle lie and countered it by quoting truth from the Old Testament.

You may have heard the saying, “All truth is God’s truth.” Indeed. We can also say, “All lies are Satan’s lies.” Behind the truth is a Spirit—the Spirit of God. Behind the lie is also a spirit—a lying spirit—Satan or one of his demons.

So when John says, test the spirits, what he is saying is, listen to spiritual claims and teachings, but you must discern which spirit lies behind it—the Spirit of God or a spirit of error.



## **How Do I know if What I Hear is True or Not?**

*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. (1 John 4:2-3) If “spirit” throws you off, put in “teacher” or “pastor” or “professor”: By this you know the Spirit of God: every [teacher] that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh is from God, and every [teacher] that does not confess Jesus is not from God.*

Remember, these false teachers in John's church were saying all kinds of things. Apparently part of their teaching platform had to do with who the historical Jesus was and when and how he became the Christ. We don't know too much but we can read between the lines that John is emphasizing this basic doctrinal statement: *Jesus is the Christ who has come. Has come* meaning he pre-existed. He was the eternal Son of God *who came in the flesh*. This is his incarnation. He is fully God as the eternal Son of God. He is also fully man. *Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*. There is a Christological litmus test. Apparently the false teachers were not saying that. They were saying something different. It's not likely they were saying that Jesus wasn't the Christ, but it was rather a subtle departure that Jesus *became* the Christ or that the Spirit of Christ came upon the man Jesus. He wasn't eternal or he wasn't fully God or fully man. It was just a little twist of the truth.

How dangerous does that sound? What is the difference between Jesus *being* the eternal Christ and Jesus *becoming* the Christ? Or what is the difference between Jesus being God in flesh and Jesus appearing to be God in the flesh. How many average American Christians have their theological radar on a sensitivity setting to hear the difference between those two? Add to that a compelling teacher with a winsome personality and that small departure seems like no big deal. *Why make all the fuss? We're having a good time, our children are behaving better as a result of the children's ministry, and we feel good when we leave.*

At issue here is the gospel. There's only one that saves. Paul says in Galatians 1:9, *If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.* When that gospel is altered in ways that change the core truth, it is no longer a gospel that can save. Does that mean anyone who doesn't catch the distinction between being Christ and becoming Christ isn't saved?

There is a difference between not yet knowing something and denying it. I became a Christian when I was six years old. If you would have asked me at age six, "When did Jesus become the Christ?" I would have looked at you in bewilderment. New Christians, even adults, have lots to learn about God and how he saves us. Yet there is a big difference between not knowing something and denying it. Not knowing allows for room to grow. Denying a truth doctrine reveals that the Holy Spirit is not in you.

A teacher that denies or twists what God says is true, by that teaching, shows they do not have the Holy Spirit in them.

That is the point of verses 4-6: *Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*

Most of 1 John is about identifying true Christians and false ones. This section is about identifying true teachers and false ones. Verse 6 says true Christians listen or hear the truth. "Listen" means *embrace*. They don't hear or listen to the spirit of error. Is that because we are smarter than those who don't? No! It has nothing to do with that. It is because the Spirit of God is stronger than the false spirits and false teachings in the world.

*He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.* (1 John 4:4) This is quoted a lot to say the Holy Spirit is stronger than Satan. While that is true, that is not exactly what it means to say. It is saying that the genuine Christian has the stronger Holy Spirit in him which produces a listening and following of the true gospel about Jesus. The Spirit's work in us leads us to truth and overcomes all the false spirits and their teachings.

*Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:3)*

One of our church members for some time was a K-9 officer. He lives in my neighborhood and every day he or a family member would be out walking this gigantic German shepherd. The head on this dog was enormous. It was hard to miss him as he walked around...the earth shook like when the T-Rex was close in *Jurassic Park*. I was talking one day with this man and asked him about the German shepherd. I asked him about the different commands for the dog. He said, "The dog only knows German." I thought that was one of the funnier things I had heard and assumed he was kidding, you know, like French poodles only know French. "What do you mean, 'All it knows is German?'"

He went on to explain that they train the dogs with commands in German because in a confrontation where there is a lot of noise and words are being shouted, the dog is trained to only hear German commands. So if you are ever around a German shepherd, don't say, *Angreifen!* Attack!

Christians are like German shepherds. We live in a world shouting all kinds of teachings. It is a cacophony of sounds and words. With all this confusion, Christians walk around and are listening for German, *Whoever knows God listens to us*. We are able to discern the voice of truth in the midst of all these other voices because when we were saved, the Spirit made us fluent in truth, like the dog who can identify German. The Spirit is inside every true believer and he is greater than any other voice in the world. So what I am asking today is, "*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*" What would you say about a German Shepherd who claims to be a police dog who doesn't know German or who can't discern the difference between German and English? Perhaps worse yet, rather than following German orders, regularly joins the poodle for French class? He can claim to be a police dog, but if he doesn't know German well enough to discern it from other languages, he can't be a police dog.

All true Christians hear and follow the truth by the power of the Spirit enabling them to discern what is true from the cacophony of what is false.

### **Toward the Goal of Discernment**

This Christological test was greatly needed because of the particular heresy the false teachers were teaching. Some have to do with Scripture or salvation or the nature of God. Many are related to Christ but it would be oversimplification to say this is the only test. To that end, let me identify common categories of teaching that can trip us up. In other words, German sounding like French.

#### **Mostly true**

This was Satan's temptations in the garden and in the wilderness. Almost true. Enough true that it sounds mostly right, but there is a slight change or twist.

This is the category that tripped up mainline denominations in the last century. There were foundational issues related to the inspiration of God's word that produced this. But the message in the pews was: *God is love. Yes, we need to be loving. Yes, we need to meet needs around us. Yes, Jesus did that. Yes, we need to be like Jesus. Yes, that is the essence of Christianity. Amen!*

The churches mistook the fruit for the root. They mobilized to meet physical needs as their primary mission. Their sanctification lacked justification. They were doing good as the gospel instead of doing good because of the gospel.

God is love. We need to meet needs. Jesus did that. That's all true. However, the gospel first meets our spiritual needs and the church is called to make disciples of Jesus as our primary mission. Think of how many huge largely denominational type churches there are everywhere with very few people worshipping in them this weekend. That little change devastated the church.

Beware of mostly true—part of the truth mistaken for the whole truth.

### **True but emphasizing the wrong things**

*"We have somehow got hold of the idea that error is only that which is outrageously wrong; and we do not seem to understand that the most dangerous person of all is the one who does not emphasize the right things." (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 224)*

So many people get caught in this and the danger is there for all of us. Many teachers will find some pet doctrine or issue and they elevate it higher than it should be. Their churches become all about that doctrine or their take on it. There are many good secondary things that if you make them the core, lead down wrong paths.

### **Right words, wrong meaning**

There are words spoken that make us feel like that teacher must be okay. God. Church. Jesus. Gospel. But behind those words are hugely important definitions. This is part of the confusion of the health and wealth teachers like Mr. Osteen. They say words that sound like words you hear in a good church—"sin," "blessing," "judgment"—but what they mean by those words is not what the Apostles meant. Robert Schuller, perhaps the most famous TV preacher of all, wrote that man's problem is that, "Deep down we feel we are not good enough to approach a holy God." (Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, pp. 63-64). Really? That's our problem? Now to a French poodle, that sounds encouraging. To a German shepherd, that's biblical nonsense.

Behind the words of "sin," "atonement," "substitution," "eternal life," "rich," and "healing," false teachers hide what they really mean and those who lack discernment go right along with them.

### **Biblically true and provable**

Scripture holds out an example for us to follow in Acts 17:11. Paul is preaching in the city of Berea. Those who were listening did something with what he said, *Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.*

They were learners but they weren't gullible learners. They held the Bible as the final authority, not the charisma of the teacher or his or her winsome words.

Spiritually, we must have our Bibles open. We must listen with discernment. Like the Bereans, we must examine the Scriptures to see if what is said is true. Please do that with my sermons and all the teaching here at Bethel Church. Not everything is heresy and there

are a lot of things that after studying you agree good Christians can disagree on because Scripture isn't clear. But it is clear that on the things that matter. On foundational gospel truths, God's people cannot tolerate any spirit of error. Rather, we are to test the spirits. Listen with discernment. Identify falsehoods. Identify false teachers. See what lies behind what they are teaching and only follow that which is true, biblical, and exegetically faithful to God's word and his gospel.

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