

# Testing the spirits

1Jn 4:1-6

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1Jn 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. 2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; 3 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 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. 5 They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. 6 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. Introduction:

### Introduction to chapter four (1Jn)

1. 1Jn 4 is a very specialized literary unit on how Christians assess and verify those who claim to speak for God. To fully understand the predicament of the early Christians one must recognize that many claimed to speak for God (1 Cor 12:10; 14:26-33; 1Thes 5:20-21; 1Jn 4:1-6).

2. 1Jn is extremely hard to outline because of the recurring pattern of themes. This is surely true in chapter 4. It seems that this chapter re-emphasizes truths which were taught in earlier chapters, especially the believers' need to love one another (compare 1Jn 4:7-21 to 1Jn 2:7-12 and 3:11-24).

3. John is writing both to combat the false teachers and to encourage the true believers. He does this by using several tests:

- a. The doctrinal test - belief in Jesus (1Jn 2:18-25; 4:1-6, 14-16; 5:1, 5, 10)
- b. The lifestyle test - obedience (1Jn 2:3-7; 3:1-10, 22-24)
- c. The relationship test - love (1Jn 2:7-11; 3:11-18; 4:7-12, 16-21; 5:1-2)

4. Different parts of Scripture relate to different false teachers. I John addresses the heresy of gnostic false teachers. Other parts of the NT address other untruths (John 1:13; Rom 10:9-13; 1Cor 12:3). Each context must be studied separately to ascertain what error is being addressed. There was error from several sources: 1) Jewish legalists; 2) Greek philosophers; 3) Greek antinomians; and 4) Those who claimed special spiritual revelation or experiences.

### Introduction to 1Jn 4:1-6

John warns his readers not to believe everything they hear. There are many prophets and teachers who travel from church to church - many of them claiming some special secret.

John gives a simple test for what these teachers say. If their message is that Jesus Christ has come 'in the flesh', then this is a true and balanced understanding of the gospel. Jesus is truly the Christ, and has fully entered our human nature and experience.

There are only two possible sources of inspiration for these prophets and teachers; the Spirit of God or the spirit of antichrist. The spirit of antichrist is the devil, who denies Jesus and opposes his work.

John assures his readers that the Holy Spirit of God within them is more powerful than the spirit of antichrist, which is in the world.

## II. Word and phrase study of 1Jn 4:1-6

### 4:1 "Beloved, do not believe"

This means to stop an act already in process (believing the false teachers). The tendency of Christians is to unequivocally accept strong personalities, logical arguments, or miraculous events as from God. These false teachers claimed to speak for God, having special revelation from God.

### "do not believe every spirit"

Referring to a supposed message from God. Heresy comes from within the church (1Jn 2:19). The false teachers were claiming to speak for God. John asserts that there are two spiritual sources, God or Satan, behind human speech and action. The term spirit was used to express the man who pretended to be and teach under the Spirit's influence.

## **“but test the spirits to see whether they are from God,”**

### **Discerning of spirits is a spiritual gift.**

1Cor 12:7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1Cor 12:10 to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another ... (see 1Cor 12:7-11)

### **Greek words for "Testing" and their connotations:**

There are two Greek terms [words] which have the idea of testing someone (for a purpose):

**1. *peirazō, peirasmos*;** This term has the connotation of examination for the purpose of fault finding or rejection. It is used in connection to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

a. Attempt to trap Jesus (Mt 4:1; 16:1; 19:3; 22:18, 35; Mk 1:13; Lk 4:38; Heb 2:18).

b. The intensified form is *ekpeirazō* (Mt 4:7; Lk 4:12; 10:25; 1Cor 10:9).

c. The term (*peirazōn*) is used as a title for Satan (Mt 4:3; 1Thes 3:5).

It is used by Jesus to not test God (Mt 4:7; 6:13; Lk 4:12 [see also 1Cor 10:9]).

It also denotes the attempt to do something that has failed (Ac 9:20; 20:21; Heb 11:17).

It is used in connection with the temptations of believers (1Cor 7:5; 10:9, 13; Gal 6:1; 1Thes 3:5; Heb 2:18; as 1:2, 13, 14; 1Pt 4:12; 2Pt 2:9).

### **2. *dokimazō, dokimion, dokimasia***

**dokimazō** = to test, examine; to approve, prove; to recognize as genuine after examination; to deem worthy;

**dokimazō** = has the connotation of “to test with a view toward approval.”

This term is a metallurgist term for testing the genuineness of something (i.e. metaphorically someone) by fire. The fire reveals the true metal and burning off (i.e. purifying) of the dross. This physical process became a powerful idiom for God and/or Satan and/or humans testing others

### **Believers must think the best unless the worst is proven. We are to test:**

1Jn 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God,

Rom 14:22 The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

1Cor 3:13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work.

1Cor 11:28 But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

1Cor 16:3 When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem;

2Cor 8:8 I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also

2Cor 13:5 Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you--unless indeed you fail the test?

Gal 6:4 But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another.

Eph 5:8-10 ... walk as children of Light ... 10 trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.  
(see Eph 5:6-10)

Phil 1:10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ;

1Thes 2:4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts.

1Thes 5:21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; (1Thes 5:19-22)

1 Ti 3:10 These men [*deacons*] must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach.

Heb 3:9 WHERE YOUR FATHERS TRIED Me BY TESTING Me, AND SAW MY WORKS FOR FORTY YEARS.

1Pt 1:7 so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ;

## **Should Christians judge one another?**

### **Believers are admonished not to judge one another**

Mt 7:1-5 “Do not judge so that you will not be judged. 2 “For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. 3 “Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4 “Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? 5 “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.

(Lk 6:37-42; see also Rom 2:1-4; Jas 4:11-12)

### **Believers are also admonished to evaluate their leaders**

Mt 7:15-16 “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 “You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? (Mt 7:6; 1Cor 14:29;; 1Thes 5:21; 1Tim 3:1-13; 1Jn 4:1-6)

### **Criteria for proper evaluation:**

1. It should be for the purpose of affirmation to “test” with a view toward approval (1Jn 4:1).
2. It should be done in humility and gentleness (Gal 6:1).
3. It must not focus on personal preference issues (Rom 14:1-23; 1 Cor 8:1-13; 10:23-33).
4. It should identify those leaders who “can’t handle criticism” from within the church or the community (1Tim 3).

## **“because many false prophets have gone out into the world”**

The implication is that they have left the church yet continue to claim that they speak for God.

2Pt 2:1 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. (see Jer 14:14; 23:21; 29:8; Mt 7:15; 24:11, 24; Ac 20:28-30; 2Pt 2:1; 1Jn 2:18–19, 24; 3:7; 2Jn 7).

## **4:2 “By this you know the Spirit of God”**

### **The Holy Spirit always magnifies Jesus.**

Jn 14:26 “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.

Jn 15:26 “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me,

Jn 16:13-15 “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. 14 “He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. 15 “All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you.

### **This same test can be seen in Paul’s writings.**

1Cor 12:3 Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed”; and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

## **“every spirit that confesses”**

This points to a continuing profession, not a past affirmation of faith. The Greek term “confess” is a compound from “the same” and “to speak,” meaning “to say the same thing.”

This term implies specific, public, vocal acknowledgment of one’s affirmation of and commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is a recurrent theme in 1Jn.

1Jn 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1Jn 2:23 Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.

1Jn 4:2-3 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; 3 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.

1Jn 4:15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.  
(see also Jn 9:22; 2Jn 7)

### **“that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God”**

This is the essential doctrinal test for the false teachers (i.e. gnostics) whom John was combating in this book. Its basic assertion is that Jesus is fully human (i.e. flesh) as well as fully God. Jesus' humanity was not temporary, but permanent. Jesus is truly one with humanity and one with God.

2Jn 7 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. (Jn 1:1-4, 14)

1Tim 3:16 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.

The false teachers taught that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. But they denied that He was really a man (a human being). He only assumed Human Nature, He was only in appearance of man, that his human nature wasn't permanent; that there was no permanent union of His humanity with His divinity. The point made by John wasn't that Christ assumed human nature; He really was a man, there was a real incarnation; in opposition to the opinion that He came in APPEARANCE only, or that He SEEMED to be a man, to suffer and die. This was the opinion held by many.

### **"is from God"**

Everyone who comes from God, will teach that Jesus was truly a man, that there was a real INCARNATION of the Son of God. John regarded this as a very important point,

1Jn 5:6 This is the One who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. ... (see Jn 19:34-35; 20:25-29)

It is as important to be held now as it was then, for the fact that there was a real incarnation is essential to all just views of the atonement. If he was NOT truly a man, if he did not literally shed his blood on the cross, of course all that was done was in appearance only, and the whole system of redemption as revealed was merely a splendid illusion.

### **4:3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God;**

This doctrine (the humanity of Jesus) is essential to the Christian system; and he who does not hold it cannot be regarded either as a Christian, or recognized as a Christian teacher. If he was not a man, then all that occurred in his life, in Gethsemane, and on the cross, was in "appearance" only, and was assumed only to delude the senses. There were no real sufferings; there was no shedding of blood; there was no death on the cross; and, of course, there was no atonement. A mere show, an appearance assumed, a vision, could not make atonement for sin; and a denial, therefore, of the doctrine that the Son of God had come in the flesh, was in fact a denial of the doctrine of expiation for sin.

### **“this is the spirit of the antichrist”**

The term "antichrist", used here and in 2:18-25, is someone who denies Christ (any individual or group of people who deny the humanity or divinity of Christ Jesus). It is not speaking of someone attempting to usurp His position.

The word "antichrist," therefore, might denote anyone who either was or claimed to be in the place of Christ, or one who, for any cause, was in opposition to him.

### **“of which you heard it was coming, and now it is already in the world”**

The spirit of the antichrists has both already come and will come.

### **4:4 "You are from God, little children,"**

Note: "you ... they ... we" (1Jn 4:4-6)

All of these PRONOUNS are emphasized. There are three groups being addressed: true believers (John and his readers) and the false believers (gnostic teachers and their followers) and John's team. This same type of triad is seen in Hebrews 6 and 10.

### **“and have overcome them”**

Have triumphed over their arts and temptations; their endeavors to draw you into error and sin.

John is concerned with the Christian's victory over sin and the devil.

He uses overcome (*nikaō*) 6 times in I John.

1Jn 2:13 ... I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. ...

1Jn 2:14 ... I have written to you, young men, because ... you have overcome the evil one.

1Jn 4:4 You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you ...

1Jn 5:4-5 ... born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

1Jn 5:5 Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

He uses it 11 times in Revelation

(Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21, 21; 5:5; 6:2, 2; 11:7; 12:11; 13:7; 15:2; 17:14; 21:7), and once in the Gospel of John (Jn 16:33).

It was used only once in Luke (Lk 11:22) and three times in Paul's writings (Rom 3:4; 12:21, 21)

### **“because greater is He who is in you”**

This is an emphasis on indwelling deity.

Gal 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Col 1:27 ... the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.  
(see Jn 14:23; Rev 3:20)

### **"he who is in the world"**

The phrase "he who is in the world" refers to Satan and his followers. The term "world" (human society organized and functioning apart from God) in I John always has negative connotations.

Jn 12:31 Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out.

Jn 14:30 I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me;

Jn 16:11 and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.

(see also 2 Co 4:3-4; Eph 2:2; 1Jn 5:19)

### **4:5 “They are from the world”**

#### **"therefore they speak as from the world,"**

this might readily be interpreted "they speak concerning the world." Literally, it is: "they speak out of the world;"  
(from Vincent's Word Studies)

#### **“the world listens to them”**

Another evidence of Christian teachers versus the false teachers is who listens to them

Jn 15:19 "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.

1Tim 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,

### **4:6 "We are from God"**

#### **“he who knows God listens to us”**

Believers can recognize true preachers/teachers by both the content of their message and who hears and responds to them.

#### **"he who is not from God does not listen to us."**

## **“By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”**

**spirit of truth** = the Holy Spirit and the **spirit of error** = evil spirit, Satan.

Jn 14:17 that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.

Jn 15:26 “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, (1Jn 4:6; 5:7)

Jn 16:13 “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.

Believers must be able to discern the source of the message. Often they are both given in God’s name, supposedly by God’s speakers. One lifts up Jesus and Christ likeness and one lifts up human speculation and personal freedom.

## **III. How to judge prophecy:**

### **Prophecy needs to be judged**

1Cor 14:29-32 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. (1Cor 14:29-33)

### **Teaching also needs to be judged**

Ac 17: 11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. (Gal 1:6-9)

**David Pytches**, in his excellent book *Prophecy in the Local Church*, has a section on "beware of Theopaths" -- a word coined to describe certain good Christians who seem to have abandoned their God-given common sense, seeing significance in everything that happens.

### **Seven Tests: Seven questions to ask yourself:**

1. Does it edify, admonishing or exhort (1Cor 14:3)?
2. What are the fruits? Five test:
  1. Does the prophet have control (1Cor 14:32).
  2. Does the word bring confusion (1Cor 14:33)?
  3. Does the word bring peace to you (1Cor 14:33)?
  4. Does the word bring freedom or fear (Rom 8:15)?
  5. Does the word bring life or minister death (2Cor 3:6)?
3. Does the word glorify Christ (Revelation 19:10; John 15:26; 16:14)?
4. Does the word agree with the Scriptures (2 Ti 3:16-17; Gal 1:6-9)?
5. Are the predictive prophecies fulfilled (Dt 18:20-22)?
6. Does the fulfilled word John you away from Jesus (Dt 13:1-5)?
7. Does the word bear witness with your spirit (1 John 2:20, 27)?

### **Seven signs of manipulative and controlling prophecies:**

1. Usurping the will of others (acting as an infallible oracle).
2. Pulling rank (pushing a superior attitude).
3. Flattering (taking advantage of someone's vulnerability).
4. Giving dire warnings (employing implied threat).
5. Allowing no outside perspective (locking others into one's own view).
6. Using the phrase "the Lord told me so" (eliminating the need for feedback).
7. Promoting super-spirituality (boasting of personal accomplishment).

### **Sources used in this study:**

Study Guide Commentary Series  
The Bible Guide; A. Knowles  
Thayer's Greek Lexicon  
Barnes Notes  
Adam Clarke's Commentary  
Prophecy in the Local Church, by David Pytches,  
Developing Your Prophetic Gifting; By Graham Cooke