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Cultivating Authentic Christian Community: A Study in 1 John

Test the Spirits

1 John 4:1-6

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It can be confusing and somewhat frustrating with all the different groups and people in the world today seeking to define God—who He is, how you please Him, and how you get to Him. When you think about it, there are hundreds of different people explaining that truth in the world, and it does get very confusing. What's true? What's false? And how do I know? The reality is that they can't all be true.

One of the solutions in the post-modern mind is to simply say, "Well, it's all true. You can just believe whatever you want to believe and define God your own way, because in the end it's all true." But any reasonable-thinking mind would say, "That is really not possible. If these two views are opposing, then one has to be true; therefore, the other has to be false." So you have the truth and you have false teachers.

These views about God come packaged in a number of ways. Around the world they are packaged in what we call World Religions. You have the Muslims, which we hear a lot about right now with the war that is going on. Or it could be Hinduism or Buddhism, or any number of the world religions that we are familiar with.

But it is often more subtle than that. Sometimes it might come into your home through the airwaves. For example, are you aware of Oprah Winfrey's commitment to the New Age movement? She is very religious; she is very spiritual; she is very committed to her New Age beliefs, and her show is a platform to teach those beliefs. A recent issue of *Christian Research Journal* featured a cover article about Oprah and her commitment to her New Age religion. If you look at the New Age teachers and authors that are the *Who's Who* in the New Age religion, they have all appeared on her show and promoted their beliefs. That's her mission. She is a significant force because about 22 million Americans watch that show. It is also seen in about 160 foreign countries, so that is a big platform.

Sometimes it may not come through the airwaves; it may come as a knock on the door. People come to your door and want to talk about God and your religion and your beliefs. They seem very sincere. As a matter of fact, they use language that sounds kind of familiar, and they do claim a commitment to the Scriptures. But they are false teachers—they really don't believe what the Bible teaches.

We had a reprint of an article in *The Tidings* recently about some changes that the Mormon Church is going through in terms of marketing. They want to be more acceptable in the mainstream of Christianity, so they are moving away from the name "Mormon" and they are moving away from the name "Latter Day Saints." They want now to be called just "The Church of Jesus Christ," which makes them more acceptable. It is a way to infiltrate the Christian subculture in order to teach their beliefs.

It may even be more subtle than that. Sometimes it arises within our own materials. For example, for the last several years we have used material for a program called the "Weigh Down Workshop," put together by a woman named Gwen Shamblin. It has helped a lot of people and was very helpful to many people here. But we started to hear things about Gwen

that we were uncomfortable with. So we did some investigating and finally reached the conclusion to pull the plug on that program, because she had stepped outside the bounds of orthodox Christianity. A recent article states this:

Gwen Shamblin, best selling author of the “Weigh Down Diet,” whose spiritually-laced weight loss system boasts a huge Christian following, has publicly attacked the doctrines of the Trinity and salvation by grace through faith alone. The denial of these historic biblical doctrines is apparently the cornerstone of a new church, Remnant Fellowship, which she leads. In an interview with writers for the *Christian Research Journal*, Shamblin alleges that salvation is by faith plus works and that Martin Luther invented grace in order to justify sin. Shamblin has also stated that Jesus Christ is not God and that the Trinity was a pagan concept smuggled into the church in the fourth century.

– *Christian Research Journal*, July 2001

That would clearly put her in the category of a false teacher. We all have a responsibility to be aware of false teachers and to identify them, and it can be very confusing.

Sometimes we tend to think that just because someone opens up the Bible and appears to be teaching from it, that we are hearing God’s truth. But that isn’t necessarily true, either. If you turn on the television you will see a lot of television preachers who have the Bible open, but they’re not telling you what it says. It’s very clever; it’s very deceitful. Don’t forget that David Koresh and Jim Jones preached out of the Bible, and they were clearly false teachers. So it is not as simple as that.

It is interesting that in the New Testament one of the themes which emerges in almost every single letter, and is a theme of nearly every New Testament writer, is the theme of false teachers. It’s the warning that these false teachers are going to come, and there are going to be lots of them. They are going to be very clever and very deceitful, and they’re going to lead people astray. Jesus talked about it. Paul talked about it in almost every one of his letters. Peter talked about it; Jude talked about it; John talked about it. The danger of false teachers and the impact it can have on lives is one of the major themes of the New Testament.

So the question is: How do we know? With all this teaching and all this “God stuff” going on, how do we know what is true? John gives us two tests that we can apply, which he calls “testing the spirits.” What he is really talking about is testing the false teachers to see whether or not they are from God.

I mentioned in a previous discussion that John has organized this material in a spiral effect, where he has talked about three significant elements to authentic Christian community. Then he keeps going back and hitting these and further discussing them. He talked about truth; he talked about righteousness; and he talked about love. Then he went back and he again talked about truth and righteousness and love. Now, he’s back to truth once more, and he is talking more about the significance of truth. In this case, he is talking about determining what is true and separating out what is false.

At the end of verse 24 in chapter 3, John says, “We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit which He has given us.” John reminds us that the very Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus, dwells within us. This isn’t a new concept in John’s letter. If you go back to 1 John 3:9, he told us that His seed abides in us, which is His Spirit. In 2:27 he said there is an anointing in us, which is His Spirit; and the role of that Spirit is to lead us to truth. And again,

in 2:20 he told us we have an anointing from the Holy One—that is His Spirit which dwells within us.

That is a very positive truth—that when we trust Jesus as Savior, His Spirit dwells within us and leads us to truth and convicts us of sin. But that doctrine can be abused by people who say they have the Spirit of God within them and then say, “God told me this”... “thus saith the Lord”... “I have a word from God.”

What was happening in the first century is that, because there was such strong teaching that the Spirit of Christ dwells within believers, these false teachers were saying, “Yes, and the Spirit has told me that *this* is true, and has told me that *this* is true, and *this* is true.” And the people were saying, “Well, it is true that God’s Spirit dwells within us and He may have spoken to them, so this may be true.”

Therefore, John is coming back and saying to be very careful of that. Just because someone says this is from God doesn’t mean it *is* from God. Just because they say the Spirit of God told them something doesn’t mean that it’s true. So he calls it “testing the spirits” to make sure that it is from God and not from the enemy. That is the language in 4:1: “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.”

There are a couple of things we need to notice from that verse. Notice he says *many* false prophets. That is very consistent language in the New Testament. It’s not a few...it’s not an occasional... but it is *many*. There will be many false teachers (“false prophets”) who are going to come at us from the world.

He says, “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits.” That word *test* is an interesting word. It was a word used to describe testing a coin to make sure it was not counterfeit. It was also used to describe testing a person who was running for public office to make sure they were authentic, to make sure they were legit. When you think about both of those, it is interesting as it applies to false teachers. When we think about counterfeiters, we think of it more with paper money than with coins. But when you think of that counterfeit, you think of something that is so similar to the original, it is hard to tell. If you didn’t know what you were looking for, probably most people could pass a counterfeit by you and you wouldn’t even know it.

That is what often happens in the world of religion. The counterfeit seems so similar. They use the right language. They know what to say and how to say it, and sometimes it is hard to detect the error. False teachers don’t stand up and say, “I just want you to know I’m a false teacher and now I’m going to speak...” They don’t do that. As a matter of fact, they are very convincing and very clever.

Sometimes I find myself watching some of the television preachers, and some of them are very good, while others are not so good. When I’m watching, I’m sometimes thinking, *Something about this doesn’t seem right*, but it’s hard to figure out where the error is. They can be very subtle. But that is the whole point of a counterfeit—it is an attempt to pass as the real thing.

Also, when you think of the concept of someone running for public office and determining if this person is legit, that is the same idea of testing these spirits. What about the

person who is promoting this belief—are they real? Are they authentic? Is it a scam? Is it just public talk or is this something that is really a way of life for them? That is all wrapped up in this idea of testing the spirits—of checking them out.

One other thing to notice: Whose responsibility is it to test the spirits? According to verse 1, it's not just the pastor's; it's not just the elders' responsibility. It is your responsibility. When he says, "beloved" that means everybody. "Beloved" is a reference to the congregation—to the family of God. The fact is, I can't live in your home. I can't tell you what is true and what is false. Neither can anyone else. Every believer has a responsibility to test the spirits to decide for yourself what is true and what is false, and together we are part of that process. But, in a sense, what John is saying is that we need to all arm ourselves because we're all under attack.

How do we do that? 1 John 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, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world."

Test #1 is to *test the truth concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ*. That is what he is saying, and this has been a big theme in his letter. John has said that truth is the cornerstone of Christian community, and that is the first thing we should always go to. Whenever someone has some new doctrine or belief, the first thing you go to is, "What do you believe about the person and work of Jesus Christ?"

When he says "Jesus Christ," that is not referring to his first and last name. "Christ" is His title and it means the "Anointed One" or "Messiah." There is much Old Testament theology poured into that title, with an understanding that He was God in the form of flesh who became man and dwelt among us. As a matter of fact, that is why John refers to that concept in verse 2: "...confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and is from God." It is the idea that God became flesh and was born of a virgin; lived a perfect life; was nailed to a cross in payment for the sins of the world; was buried; in three days rose again; ascended to the Father; and is coming again.

Those are the basics of the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the Bible is very clear about that. I would say there is no wiggle room there—no margin for compromise—because that is an essential of our faith. And that is really what he means by "Jesus Christ, who has come in the flesh, is from God." Those who espouse that exhibit the Spirit of God. But those who deny that would be the spirit of the antichrist—from the enemy.

The Gnostics were false teachers who believed that Jesus was born from an ordinary birth. They believed that he was *not* God, but that at some point in His life a divine spirit came upon him and he did miraculous things, but then the divine spirit departed and he died and didn't rise again. So they really denied the basics of the person and work of Jesus Christ, and John is saying, then, that they are not from God.

It is interesting how 2000 years later this is still the pivotal point for false teachers. If you look at the person and work of Jesus Christ, it would rule out all world religions. Almost every single cult that exists would be ruled out as false teachers, because they deny the person and work of Jesus Christ. That is the focal point—that is always the place to start.

Now, you have to be careful with that because these people are clever. They know what they need to say—they know the language. Somebody knocks on your door, and they're telling you about a belief system. You could ask them the question directly, "Do you believe that Jesus is God?" And their answer would be, "Yes, we do." But you need to investigate that a little bit, because what they mean by that is that He is a god, like we can become gods, but he wasn't *the God*. Basically, they are denying the deity of Christ, and they're trying to hide that belief. When it comes to testing the spirits, the starting place is always with the person and work of Jesus Christ. That is the core—that's the essential.

That was the issue that these New Testament believers were dealing with—the issue of false teachers. But if you abstract that up just a little bit, the principle would be the principle of truth. It's the truth concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ, but really it's the truth as defined by the Scriptures. John is saying that the first test is that you determine whether or not what they are saying is true, and the source of truth would be the Bible, the inspired, authoritative word of God. That really is the ultimate test, and every doctrine, every belief, every teaching must be run through the grid of this Book to see whether or not it is true.

Related to that, I do want to make a couple of comments. Oftentimes I hear people state their frustration when they say, "You know, it's so hard to know what's true, because you have so many doctrines, so many groups, and so many people who are all claiming to believe in the Bible, but they all say the Bible says something different." I would suggest to you that is a myth. I don't think that's true at all. I think that's just a smokescreen, and let me explain what I mean by that.

First of all, we're starting with the belief that this Book is the authoritative, inspired Word of God. If people don't believe that, then they're not taking their doctrine from this Book; they're taking their doctrine from themselves and their traditions. In other words, they have become the source of their own truth. They have already believed false teaching, so they're in a different camp—they aren't getting their truth from this Book. Just because they're plucking out something here and there doesn't mean they are committed to this Book.

But, we are talking about those people who are committed to the Bible as the inspired, authoritative Word of God. Now, if you take that group of people and they apply the basic principles of interpretation—the science of interpretation—it is not a subjective thing where everybody can just make the Bible say whatever they want it to. This idea that there are a lot of beliefs, where everybody thinks the Bible says something different, simply isn't true. There are principles of interpretation called hermeneutics and, by and large, everyone who is committed to this Book as the authoritative Word of God basically "buys into" these principles of interpretation. That group of people would be united that the Bible teaches a consistent teaching related to the core doctrines of our faith. We would have some disagreement on the secondary issues—those things that God hasn't been quite as clear about. But on the primary issues, we would all be in agreement, because it is all coming out of the same Book.

Let me illustrate that. I have some friends who are senior pastors of other churches here in town. Pretend that I were to bring them here this morning to preach. You would see Bill. Bill is the senior pastor of Capitol City Christian Church. Then I might bring Stu. Stu is the pastor of Zion Church, which is Presbyterian. Then I could bring Dave. Dave is pastor of Christ's Place Church, which is Pentecostal. And then I would represent the Bereans. If all of us were to stand here and teach you what we believe the Bible says about the fundamental,

primary core doctrines of the faith, we would all preach the exact same thing from the same passages—the same interpretation, the same way. This idea that we all believe in something different is just false—it's a myth. We would all be on the exact same page. I have spent time with these guys for years, and I know that to be a fact.

See, the reality is that when it comes to the primary doctrines of the faith, those who believe in this Book as the inspired and authoritative Word of God are all united. We're together, and we're all on the same page, because the Bible is very clear about those teachings.

The other comment I want to make has to do with the approach that we take to preaching, teaching, and Bible study here at Berean. I practice what is called expository teaching for two reasons. The first reason is because I think it is the best way to study the Bible. This method means you start at the beginning of a book and you work your way through to the end of the book or the letter. You study everything in its context, where it belongs, following the train of thought, which I think is the best way to study the Bible. If you don't study that way, you could pluck verses from here and there and make the Bible say anything you want it to say.

But, not only do I use expository teaching because I think it's the best way to teach, but I also do that because it causes me to be accountable to you. I try to help you understand exactly how I'm arriving at the conclusions I'm teaching. We look at where the Scripture is found in the book, what the train of thought is, and how the book is organized. Basically, there is nothing hidden. There is nothing deceptive and we're not trying to pull anything. But we are just walking through this study together, in order that you can follow right along. You can then conclude whether or not that is what God's Word is saying.

There is a big difference between that and someone who takes a word or a verse or a phrase and off they go. As a matter of fact, if you watch the television preachers, that's what most of them do, and there's a real danger in that. They quote something from the Bible, and for the next 20 minutes they're off. They really aren't telling you what the Bible says. They're telling you what they believe, and it gives the appearance that this is coming from the Bible. But you've got to be careful with that because, in many cases, it's not. They are just reading a phrase and off they go. There's a big difference between that and letting the text speak for itself and just trying to explain it as it is written in the Bible.

Our name, as Bereans, comes from Acts 17:11. The Bible says that the Bereans were noble-minded people who searched the Scriptures daily to make sure what they were being taught was true. That is our heritage—that's who we are as Bereans. So I try to teach in a way that is consistent with that, and you can follow along and conclude for yourself this is what the Bible says, and this is why we believe it says that. No person should ever walk out the door and believe something I have said, simply because I've said it. That is very dangerous. Don't believe it just because I have said it. Believe it because you've checked it with the Word of God and you believe that is what the Word of God teaches. That is the responsibility we each have—to test the spirits. And that is true of our responsibility in any environment where we are being taught.

The first test is the test of truth, and I think it should always start with the person and work of Jesus Christ. Beyond that, it is a test of the essential, or the core doctrines of the faith. How does what you are being taught line up with what the Bible teaches?

Some of you might say, “You know, but I really struggle understanding what the Bible teaches...and what are those principles of hermeneutics—that science of interpretation?” One of the things we offer here at Lincoln Berean is a class called the *Workman Class*. Its name comes from 2 Timothy 2:15 where it says to study to show “yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” We offer this class at different times and on different days throughout the year. Currently there is a *Workman Class* meeting on Saturday night, one on Wednesday night, and one on Monday night. Each session consists of approximately 16 weeks of classes to teach principles of interpretation, with the goal of helping you learn to interpret a text of Scripture and arrive at the conclusion that God intended from that passage. By learning that for yourself, you will be able to go to this Book and study it yourself and arrive at legitimate conclusions that God intended. I would strongly encourage you to think about taking that class when it is offered again; and if you are interested, you can call the church office and sign up for the next session.

Well, having said all that, some of you still may be thinking, *You know, I still don't feel confident that I know what this Book teaches. I'm learning and I'm growing, but I'm not there yet. How do I make sure that I do not get led astray by a false teacher?* If that's how you feel, then this second test is for you.

In verse 4, John says, “You are from God.” He is talking about the church, the believers. “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them.” Who are the “them”? The “them” are the false teachers. It is an interesting statement. John is saying you have overcome them, even though at that time it almost seemed the opposite. It seemed like the false teachers were causing such confusion that maybe they were overcoming the believers. So why does John say, “You have overcome them”?

It is because of what he says next: “because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.” In other words, greater is the spirit of truth within you than the spirit of deception that is in the world. Because of that, the truth will always win out. False teachers will convince people and they will lead people astray. But when it is all said and done, the truth will always win the day because the power of the truth is greater than the power of the deception. Often we quote that verse “greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world” in relationship to spiritual warfare, and there is a legitimate point to be made there. But the real context of that verse is in relationship to truth—to true teachers and false teachers.

You know, there are a lot of people—every world religion, pretty much every cult—who deny the person and work of Jesus Christ. But Paul says one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God. In other words, the truth will win in the end because greater is He who is the author of truth than he who is the author of the lie.

Let's imagine somebody came here and they were very persuasive and very charismatic, and they sought to convince you that you can fly, saying, “You can...you really can fly!” Suppose they were so convincing that, by the time they were done, there were a number of you who were convinced you could fly. Now suppose I stood up here in my dry sense and tried to convince you that you couldn't fly. But I was no match for this charismatic individual, so he won the day and convinced you to fly. So he took you up on the roof and said, “We might as well test our faith!” He lined all of you up on the roof, and you jumped. Guess what? The truth always wins in the end—literally, “in the end.” The fact is, no matter how sincerely you believed you could fly, it didn't change the fact that what's true is true, and

the truth prevails. That's exactly what John is talking about when he says, "Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world."

Have you ever thought about the fact that 2000 years later, most of you have never even heard of the Gnostics, but the truth of Jesus Christ is alive and well? That is exactly what John said—the truth did overcome. Have you ever thought about the fact that, with all of the attempts to eliminate the Bible and all of the false teachers who have come and gone, it's amazing that we still have the pure, unadulterated truth from God? That's an amazing thing. It's not just some mixed-up mess where we have to try and figure out what's true and what's not. We can actually go back to the very Book that God inspired and preserved and read the truth exactly as He gave it. As a matter of fact, if you aren't convinced in the English translation, you can even go back to the original Greek and Hebrew text and determine the truth exactly as God gave it. That is pretty amazing! That has happened because God not only inspired His Book, but He preserved His Book. We have an authority source that we can go back to because greater is He that is in us (the truth) than he that is in the world (the lie).

So the test is in verses 5-6: "They {*notice the contrast: verse 4, "you"; verse 5, "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."

The second test is to look at *who is receiving the truth, who is believing it, and who is following it*. That gives you a pretty good indication if this is from God or if this is from the world. If someone speaks with the spirit of the world, those who follow are going to be the people of the world. If someone speaks with the Spirit of God, those who follow are going to be people filled with the Spirit of God. So if you feel like you're just not equipped with enough information from the Bible to even know what is true and what isn't, then you need to find godly people whom you respect. Find those people who know this Book, and you know that they live out their faith on a daily basis. Then you need to pay close attention—what do they believe is true? What are they following? What are they concerned about?

The cults tend to prey on those who are weak, discouraged, uninformed, and struggling in life—those who need some help. Those are the people who tend to be drawn to what appears to be very sincere people. There is a big difference between them and those people who have a relationship with God. Those who have a relationship with God have the Spirit of God dwelling within them, and they follow the teachings of God.

If I were to bring my pastor friends, Bill, Stu, and Dave here to speak to you, you would immediately sense a connection with them. Because, within each of them is the Spirit of God, and it would connect with the Spirit of God within you. That is a part of community. You would sense that connection and you would know we are all on the same page—all on the same team.

But, if I went somewhere else in town and picked someone from a liberal church, who denies the person and work of Jesus Christ, and allowed them to speak to you, you would grow uncomfortable immediately. You would begin to sense there is something wrong here—that something is not connecting.

As a matter of fact, if you were to go today and find those preachers who deny the person and work of Jesus Christ, and deny the Bible as the inspired Word of God, you would

find a pastor speaking from the spirit of the world and you would find people who are filled with the world sitting in those pews listening. But, if you go anywhere in town and find a preacher who is filled with the Spirit of God and believes the Bible is the authoritative Word of God and is preaching that, you would find people in the pews who are godly people.

That is exactly what John is saying. When someone speaks from the spirit of the world, it is the people of the world who respond to the message. When someone speaks from the Spirit of God, it is the people of God who respond to the message.

Do you think it is possible for me to stand up here, week after week, and to teach heresy? It could never happen. I might get away with it for one week. But, there are far too many godly people who would immediately identify that there is something wrong here, and that would be the end of it. That's what John is saying. It just would not connect, because the Spirit of God connects with the Spirit of God together.

If I were to take my message from 1 John into one of those liberal churches in town, would they receive that? Would they come to me afterwards and say, "Oh, that was a great message"? Absolutely not. They don't want to hear it and they wouldn't hear it, because the Spirit of God connects with the Spirit of God, and the spirit of the world connects with the spirit of the world. So John says the second test is to look at *who is listening*, look at *who is receiving*, look at *who is following*—who are these people? That will help you understand if this is coming from God or if this is coming from the world.

The fact of the matter is we will be bombarded with false teachers. They're going to knock at the door. They're going to come through the airwaves. They may even emerge in some of our own materials. Each of us has a representative to test the spirits to see whether or not they are from God. How do we do that?

First, we start with the test of truth, and we start that with the person and work of Jesus Christ. From there, we run everything through the grid of this Book to make sure it lines up with what the Bible teaches, especially when we are talking about the primary doctrines of our faith.

Then, the second test is that we look at who is listening, who is receiving, who is responding, who is going with that movement. Are they the people of God, or are they the people of the world? That gives us a pretty good clue if this is coming from God or if it's coming from the world.

It is absolutely essential for cultivating authentic Christian community that we stand on the truth. And to do that, we must be diligent to test the spirits.

Our Father, we are thankful for your truth. Lord, we're thankful for your Spirit that dwells within us, that leads us to truth. Lord, I pray that you would help us to be diligent in testing the spirits, that we would not be led astray by false teachers, but, that we would stand upon your truth, knowing that your truth will always prevail. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.