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Discernment

1 John 4:1–6

Once upon a time, there wasn't much confusion about what you were supposed to believe. You could always depend on the king or the priests or the prophets to go out of their way to ensure that you knew precisely what to believe on all the important issues. Certainly, some people had differing opinions, but their voices rarely carried very far into the public square—and if they did, those voices were generally not allowed to continue speaking much longer.

Of course, the kings, priests, and prophets might have been mistaken, and they might have even known they were not speaking the truth. That, however, was beside the point. The point was that they, and they alone, had the power to speak, so they alone had the ability to influence their respective listeners.

But then democracy happened. Common people began to speak out their respective opinions, and they were aided by new technologies that allowed their voices to carry increasingly far at an increasingly quick pace: the printing press, the telegraph, the telephone, the radio, the television, the computer, and now the internet. Suddenly, we live in a world where anyone can announce his opinion to the entire world about any issue, in any place, at any time, and he can do it right from the smartphone he carries in his pocket.

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Chris Anderson's 2006 book *The Long Tail* tells the story of how technology fundamentally reshaped American culture and American media.¹ Even in the twentieth century, he writes, only those with a great deal of power, wealth, or influence had the technological resources to speak in the public square. By the twenty-first century, however, everything had changed. Three major changes made it possible for anyone to speak up and be heard.

First, the means of production were democratized with cheap hardware (computers, microphones, cameras, etc.) and powerful software. With these inexpensive tools, anyone can self-publish a book, record an album, or produce a video. Second, the means of distribution were democratized with internet superstores like Amazon, iTunes, and Netflix so that even the most unknown writer, musician, or filmmaker can get her creation into the marketplace and sell to anyone, anywhere. Third, advanced filters like Google's search engine or suggestive selling algorithms ("People who bought this book also bought...") connect buyers with exactly the kind of content they are looking for, regardless of the seller's geographic distance or obscurity.

The net result is that we live in world that incentivizes producing, distributing, and discovering hyper-specific niche media in every area of our lives, from commerce to entertainment to theology. We are bombarded with an unprecedented number of voices pushing us to think and act and believe in an unprecedented number of directions. With the click of your mouse or a swipe on your mobile device, you can access any conceivable kind of political commentary, sales pitch, theological treatise, terrorist propaganda, cooking recipe, pornography, encyclopedia article, hate speech, world literary classic, cat video, or indie music—and you can access all of it in a single afternoon.

We are inundated with influencers.

TEST THE SPIRITS

Because of this, John’s plea is extraordinarily relevant today:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits *to see* whether *it* is from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1)

Even in John’s day there were many false prophets in the world, despite the fact that none of them had the ability to publish a blog on the internet or to upload a video to YouTube. Still, John is not primarily concerned with the conspiracy theorist or the edgy youth but rather with a specific distortion of the truth that he will warn us about in 1 John 4:2–3.

Before we rush on to those verses, however, we twenty-first-century Americans desperately need to give our full attention to verse 1 by itself. Why? Because we rarely even try to test the spirits!

Certainly, we avoid crossing certain intellectual and philosophical lines. Liberals reject what they hear from conservatives, and conservatives refuse to listen to liberals; people who hold any religious beliefs (or who reject religion altogether) tend to become offended when their views are treated with contempt; and the list goes on and on. There is a reason Amazon has invested unimaginable amounts of money into suggesting the same kind of books to you as what you have already purchased: they wouldn’t make as much money if they suggested books written from other perspectives, even if those books would balance out what you had already been reading!

Still, we hardly ever think about the vast majority of the messages that assail us every day. We completely miss the underlying consumerism conveyed in the commercials we find so funny. We have lost the ability to recognize that our favorite sitcoms are actually portraying a very particular, unbiblical worldview in regard to family, faith, sex, power, and money—and that they are portraying that worldview as

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absolutely normal. We are numb to how deeply we are shaped by the songs we sing along with on the radio.

John is warning us to recognize that no message is ever value-neutral. Every message arises from some kind of spirit, and every voice is a kind of prophet for one spirit or another. Many false prophets have gone out into the world, and so John warns us to test the spirits carefully to see whether the messages we hear are from God or not. Before John teaches us how to exercise discernment and differentiate between the various spirits, he first alerts us here in verse 1 to the reality of false spirits and false prophets.

Do you ever evaluate the various voices you listen to? What is the message of the music, podcasts, or the talk radio programs that you listen to? What are your books and blog articles arguing? What kinds of discussions are you engaging with on social media? What exactly are all of these voices teaching you?

Are you prioritizing time for listening to the messages that are from God? Are you diligent to study the Bible? Do you listen carefully to the sermons your pastor preaches? When you hear the word of God, are you praying that God would teach you the truth of Jesus by his Holy Spirit?

THE DOCTRINE OF THE INCARNATION

Once we recognize the sheer number of messages we hear every day, John begins to teach us how to discern the difference between truth and error in them. In particular, John teaches us the specific truth he wants us to embrace and the specific error he wants us to avoid:

²In this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ having come in flesh is from God, ³and every spirit that does not confess the Jesus is not from God, and this is the *spirit* of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming, and now is in the world already. (1 John 4:2–3)

At stake are three major issues. First, John is concerned about the doctrine of the incarnation, the idea that the Son of God took upon himself the fullness of human nature: Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

There were two major heresies in John’s day that denied some aspect of Jesus’ incarnation. One, called docetism, held that Jesus only *seemed* to be human (the name of this heresy comes from the Greek word for “seem,” *dokeo*) but that, in fact, he was not. The other, called adoptionism, held that the Divine Christ descended on the human Jesus from the point of Jesus’ baptism and remained, departing the human Jesus just before the cross so that only the human Jesus, and not the Divine Christ, ever actually suffered. Both of these heresies stem from the belief that spirit is good and that physical matter is bad and that therefore God’s Divine Spirit would never willingly unite himself to human matter or to human suffering.

In 1 John 2:18–27, John had written against those who question the full divinity of Jesus (i.e., his status as the only begotten Son of the Father), but here, John turns his attention to those who question the humanity of Jesus—his “having come in flesh”—since the incarnation is the foundation on which the entire Christian gospel rests. Quite simply, Jesus would not have been in a position to redeem and restore humanity if he had not been fully human himself.

The early church father Gregory of Nazianzus (330–90) put it this way: “For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved.”²² In other words, Jesus was only able to save the aspects of human nature he himself took on through the incarnation. If he did not have a real human body or a real human mind or a real human will, then he could not have redeemed those aspects of humanity.

Also, the doctrine of the incarnation does not change the fact that Jesus was fully God. Notice the last part of Gregory’s statement: “that which is united to His Godhead is also saved.”

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The glory of the incarnation is that Jesus was fully human and fully God. He did not lose his divinity, and he did not become some kind of hybrid between the two natures, half-human and half-God, but he took on every aspect of human nature while retaining every aspect of the divine nature at the same time.

If you find yourself confused about how this could be, you aren't alone. The early Christian church wrestled for centuries with this question, searching the Scriptures (including the passages we have been looking at in 1 John) and debating back and forth, trying to understand what exactly God had revealed about the human and divine natures of Jesus. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the representatives settled on a definition that is considered the standard of orthodoxy to this day, even if we still struggle to wrap our minds around all of its implications. Here is the full text of the definition:

Following the holy Fathers we teach with one voice that the Son [of God] and our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same [Person], that he is perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, very God and very man, of a reasonable soul and [human] body consisting, consubstantial with the Father as touching his Godhead, and consubstantial with us as touching his manhood; made in all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of his Father before the worlds according to his Godhead; but in these last days for us men and for our salvation born [into the world] of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God according to his manhood. This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son [of God] must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, inseparably [united], and that without the distinction of natures being taken away by such union, but rather the peculiar property of each nature being preserved and being united in one Person and subsistence, not separated or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten, God the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ,

as the Prophets of old time have spoken concerning him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ hath taught us, and as the Creed of the Fathers hath delivered to us.³

This definition makes it clear that Jesus was fully human and fully God and protects us from three dangerous errors. First, it is a mistake to think that Jesus' two natures were not fully united, as though his divinity and his humanity were divided like oil and water. So, Chalcedon made clear that Jesus held both natures without division and without separation.

Second, it is a mistake to think that Jesus' two natures combined to form an entirely new nature—no longer really human, and no longer really divine, but some kind of a third substance that is altogether different from the other two natures. So, Chalcedon insisted that Jesus held both natures without confusion and without change, “without the distinction of natures being taken away by such union” into a single person. Jesus' humanity is fully human, and his divinity is fully God, even though both natures are united into one person.

Third, it is a mistake to imagine that the human Jesus was a different person from the divine Son of God, as though Jesus had two personalities. So, Chalcedon clarified the “peculiar property of each nature being preserved and being united in one Person and subsistence, not separated or divided into two persons.”

This definition is very clear, but there is a tension and mystery in this truth that our limited human minds really cannot fully resolve. How could Jesus be completely human and yet completely God? How could those two natures exist completely unified in one person, without any kind of confusion, change, division, separation, or annulment of any aspect? We are not called, however, to understand Jesus completely, since he is so much greater than we are. Instead, we are called only to believe the truth, to stand in awe of Jesus, and to worship him.

So, any spirit—and any prophet—that rejects, distorts, or mocks the doctrine of the incarnation is not from God but is

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the spirit of the antichrist. The incarnation is not a debatable point that Christians are free to believe or to reject. Apart from the incarnation, there is simply no hope of salvation.

CONFESSING THE INCARNATE CHRIST

The second issue at stake in 1 John 4:2–3 is that John has more in mind than just getting us to rubber-stamp the doctrine of the incarnation. This isn't something we assent to with our heads just to check off a prerequisite for entering the kingdom. Listen to Donald Burdick, who argues that confessing Jesus is something much deeper than a mere mental exercise:

The KJV, NASB, and NIV all translate this confession as follows: “that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” The weakness of this rendering is that the Greek text does not have the word *hoti* “that,” and it is doubtful that it should be supplied in the English translation. Actually, to supply the word *hoti* is not an incidental matter, for it alters the very nature of the confession. With *hoti* the confession is propositional in nature. It is a declaration *about* what Jesus Christ did; without *hoti* the text contains a confession of Jesus as a person rather than a confession of a proposition about the Person. Brooke puts it aptly when he declares, “It is a confession not of the fact of the incarnation, but of the Incarnate Christ.”⁴

So, rather than translating “every spirit that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh,” we need to read verse 2 this way: “In this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ *who* came in the flesh is from God.” Very literally, the phrase is “Jesus Christ having-come-in-flesh,” so the entire phrase “having-come-in-flesh” functions as a single descriptive statement to clarify the specific Jesus Christ we are talking about. This is not a confession about facts we believe (the facts are assumed) but a confession of our faith in the person who came in flesh.

As we talked about in the first chapter, truth is a person. We

do not believe in the incarnation as a theory, but our confidence is in the person of Jesus Christ who came in flesh, the God-man who healed us by uniting the fullness of our human nature to the fullness of his Godhead in the incarnation.

CONFESSING THIS HAVING-COME-IN-FLESH JESUS

Third, John goes one step further to insist upon the reality of Jesus Christ having-come-in-flesh. Donald Burdick is helpful once again concerning the clause “every spirit that does not confess Jesus [*ton Iesoun*, or “the Jesus”] is not from God” in verse 3: “John insists that it is ‘this Jesus’ who must be confessed—the Jesus of verse 2 who came in flesh (*en sarki eleluthota*).”⁵

Just as John had used the word *thein* in 1 John 3:16 to emphasize this righteousness-love, so now he uses the word *the* to speak of *this* Jesus. This Jesus is the one whom the Spirit of God will confess, and this Jesus is the one we must confess. This Jesus is the Redeemer God who came to save his people by becoming one of them—by having-come-in-flesh!—and this Jesus is the Lion of Judah, the Lamb who was slain at the cross for our sins but raised up in victory over sin, death, and the devil at the resurrection. This Jesus is worthy of all worship, praise, adoration, glory, and honor. And any person who denies this Jesus (even by suggesting to you another jesus) is an antichrist, prophesying the message of a devil who wants to drag you to hell by any lie necessary.

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, denying this Jesus who came in flesh.

THE DISCERNMENT OF THE SAINTS

So, if we are talking about evil spirits we cannot see but who have recruited prophets who are skilled in lying, what chance do we reasonably have of standing our ground? After all, our own faith isn’t based on watertight logic, self-evident truths,

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or “lofty speech or wisdom” (1 Corinthians 2:1), but instead the good news of Jesus comes to us “in weakness and in fear and much trembling” (1 Corinthians 2:3). Should we be concerned about our ability to discern the difference between, on the one hand, the foolishness of men, which is the wisdom of God, and on the other hand, the folly of false prophets who lure us down the road to hell?

Yes and no.

Certainly, John means for us to have some kind of healthy concern about being led astray. If not, then he would not be exhorting us to “test the spirits” and warning us about all the false, antichrist prophets who are now in the world. We need to start paying attention to the messages we hear every day, in every corner of our lives.

But on the other hand, John isn’t worried in the least. In fact, he doesn’t continue on piling up warning on top of warning in the next few verses. Instead, he spends 1 John 4:4–6 explaining why there is no reason to become overly concerned:

⁴You are from God, little children, and you have overcome them, for greater is the one in you than the one in the world. ⁵They are from the world, for this *reason* they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. The one knowing God listens to us. The one who is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

We have already overcome these false prophets! We are not marching into a hopeless battle, but we are instead marching in a victory parade. Of course, we ourselves contributed nothing to this victory. We have overcome the world exclusively because the one who is in us is greater than the spirit of error who is in the world.

More than that, God has graciously given us supernatural ability to overcome the lies of the evil one through discernment between truth and error. I love what John Stott writes about this:

This “overcoming” is not so much moral (as in ii. 13, 14, where the same word occurs) as intellectual. The false teachers have not succeeded in deceiving you. Not only have you tested them and found them wanting, but you have conquered them. You have not succumbed to their blandishments or believed their lies.⁶

The fact of the matter is that God has given us ears to hear his voice—that is, the voice of his Spirit of truth through his faithful prophets. John is not being arrogant when he says, “We are from God. The one knowing God listens to us. The one who is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1 John 4:6). Rather, he is speaking as an apostle who has been charged with delivering God’s word faithfully, as though God himself were uttering the words. Whoever listens to the apostolic witness that has been preserved for us in the Scriptures, then, is from God.

And so this passage imparts to us a comfort and an admonition. We should be comforted by the fact that he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. We have the Holy Spirit (Truth himself!) reigning in our hearts and anointing us with his knowledge, and we should be comforted by the fact that God will not ultimately allow his children to be deceived.

But we also should be warned against the deceitfulness of the world. There are many spirits in the world, and those spirits have recruited many antichrist prophets to spread their malicious propaganda. Do not be deceived—these forces are cunning and brutal. They will destroy you to whatever extent they are able.

So test the spirits, and do so by clinging to Christ by his Holy Spirit. This Jesus who came in flesh has overcome the world.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What voices are you listening to regularly in your life? If you began to see those voices as prophets, then how would you characterize the spirits they are prophesying for?
2. How does understanding the incarnation of Jesus change the way we interact with all of creation, including how we think about and interact with ourselves?
3. What are you really depending on to defeat the lies of Satan? Your own wisdom and strength, or the wisdom and strength of the Spirit of truth? What would be different if you were depending fully on the Spirit of truth?

CHAPTER 6: RIGHTEOUSNESS (I JOHN 3:11–24)

1. Donald Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle: An In-Depth Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 267.
2. Ibid., 273; John Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 147.
3. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle of John*, in *Calvin Commentaries*, vol. 22 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 222–23.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 210, 213.
5. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle of John*, 224.
6. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 149.

CHAPTER 7: DISCERNMENT (I JOHN 4:1–6)

1. Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).
2. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Letter 101,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 7, trans. Charles G. Browne and James E. Swallow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 440.
3. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, vol. 14, trans. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905), 264.
4. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 295.
5. Ibid., 298.
6. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 157.

CHAPTER 8: LOVE (I JOHN 4:7–21)

1. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 495.
2. Additionally, John made emphatic use of the article *the*