

Wednesday Night BIBLE STUDY

Wednesday, August 28, 2024 – First Baptist Church Buda
Midweek Prayer Meeting & Bible Study



THAT YOU MAY KNOW – A STUDY OF 1,2 & 3 JOHN *Spiritual Discernment* *1 John 4:1-6*

“¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. ⁴You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. ⁶We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”
– 1 John 4:1-6 (NKJV)

Application Questions

1. What is the difference between biblical discernment and the sin of being judgmental? Can discernment be taken too far?
2. How can a Christian develop discernment?
3. Discuss the implications of this statement: Every Christian is a theologian; the problem is, some are sloppy theologians.

BACKGROUND AND SETTING FOR 1ST, 2ND, & 3RD JOHN:

(1) **AUTHOR = The Apostle John** – Tradition holds that John was sentenced to death in a boiling vat of oil, yet he emerged unharmed from the experience. Again tradition tells us that John lived into old age perhaps dying sometime after AD 98... He is thought to have

died in Ephesus – But in fact the mystery and unknowns concerning John’s death and what happened to him are not known and are varied...

- (2) **DATE = A.D. 90-95** - As with most books in the Bible, we cannot know for certain when and from where these epistles were penned. As to a date, it is commonly believed to have been written close to the end of the 1st century, with a fairly wide possible time frame... somewhere between 90-95 A.D.
- (3) **PLACE OF WRITING = Ephesus** – It is believed by most Biblical scholars that John wrote these letters from Ephesus, the place believed to be where he died. It is usually accepted that John wrote them late in his life.
- (4) **RECIPIENTS = Different audiences** - The Epistles of John were written to various audiences. They were all written after John was an old man living in Ephesus.
- (5) **PURPOSE = Multiple purposes** - In terms of a positive stated purpose, John actually gives us reasons why he wrote these epistles:

3 Stated Positive Purposes for These Letters:

1. **That your (our) joy may be made complete = 1 John 1:4**, *“⁴ And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.”* How may a Christians joy be full if they lack assurance of faith, or if they are unsure that that are even a Christian and assured of salvation? Why do you think that is?
2. **That you may not sin = 1 John 2:1-2**, *“My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”* What affect does sin in the life of a Christian have on his or her assurance? Why? What is John telling us here that might help?
3. **That you may know that you have eternal life = 1 John 5:13**, *“¹³ These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.”* Why do you think this (assurance) might have been a stated purpose of John’s writing? Why so important?

Why is it important to be discerning today?

(READ: 2 Timothy 3:1-13) *“¹This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. ²For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, ³Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, ⁴Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; ⁵Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. ⁶For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, ⁷Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁸Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the*

faith. ⁹ But they shall proceed no further: for their folly shall be manifest unto all men, as their's also was. ¹⁰ But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, charity, patience, ¹¹ Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of them all the Lord delivered me. ¹² Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. ¹³ But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived." -2 Timothy 3:1-13 (NKJV)

"But know this, that in the last days perilous (difficult) times will come." Paul wrote of days yet future to him, but we can speak of these days as having arrived. What he described fits our times with precision. The word "perilous" (or difficult) is a vivid term meaning "harsh, hard to deal with or handle, fierce, perilous, painful, savage"... and it is so for any number of reasons which he names in his words. Ours are exceedingly violent times. From the description Paul gives us of the types of behavior associated with difficult times (vv.2-5, 7, 13) we can draw several conclusion about those times.

6 Observations About the Times Paul is Describing in 2 Timothy 3:1-13: (*Remember that Paul is basically describing our day in which we live... a day he saw coming that now is*)

- (1) It will be harder to walk with God -
- (2) It will be more difficult to keep marriages and the family strong -
- (3) The activity of the enemy (Satan) will be hard to handle and fiercely powerful -
- (4) It will be far more threatening for men and women to stand for the things of God in the arena of society -
- (5) It will see surges in crime, immorality, temptation, and heresy -
- (6) It will lead to great times of deception both inside and outside the church -

In recent times the events of society have defied past imagination. With current trends, that which seems startling and bizarre today will be upstaged by something worse twelve months later. The contrast is perhaps most noticeable when one looks back several decades to times when:

Remember when: (*These are some things that have changed drastically in my lifetime in the last 50 years or less*)

- (1) There would never have been on film or television what is now considered regular diet... nudity, perversion, violence that was once reserved for a seediest of back alley adult bookstores and novelty shops
- (2) Except in a very limited number of places in large cities, people were safe on the streets both day and night... and in some neighborhoods no one even locked their doors. Crime was something that happened some place else.
- (3) Magazines and newspapers were vehicles of interesting and informative journalism, rather than lewd, sensual, and violent exposes; and you could count on some level

of truth and integrity in media, not the over-propagandized media of today that routinely lies and is in the tank for their chosen political

- (4) The law was respected. Agencies of government were viewed with reverence and dignity. Today law enforcement, police department and agents of the law are routinely denigrated, degraded, and vilified... maligned, belittled, and scorned
- (5) Punishment of criminals was encouraged, and the rights of victims was honored. Politicians were servants of the people. Today, the criminal has more rights than the victim and usually is back out on the street even after committing serious crimes with in hours.
- (6) Marriage vows were upheld and honored in most cases. Today marriage has been completely redefined to include same-sex marriage, polygamist unions, and polyamorous marriages
- (7) Children were valued... not abused, mutilated through gender altering surgeries, or killed in the womb to the degree they are today (we recently had a political convention that offered free abortions to attendees with an mobile abortion clinic parked outside the convention center... appalling and unheard of... folks, God judgement is going to fall on us)

3 Reasons Christian need to be Discerning Today:

- (1) **Progressive Christianity / Theology** - The term *progressive Christianity / theology* today classifies a loosely defined “christianity” that is contrary to Scripture and orthodox Christian theology/teaching/doctrine. In most cases the term is associated with a thoroughly unbiblical perspective. When *progressive* implies an evolving or drastically changing theology, it’s invalid. When it implies an overly earthly focus at the expense of faithfulness to God’s revealed truth, it’s likewise incompatible with biblical faith. Political terms vary over time, as well as by culture. In the modern West, progressivism in the church is associated with concepts such as radical social justice, environmentalism-socialism/marxism, gender and transgender ideologies and so forth. Modern progressivism and progressive churches today typically aligns with non-biblical views of life, sexuality, gender, and family, and it generally rejects worldview assumptions undergirding the gospel, hence a Biblical worldview. These churches will most often be found flying rainbow flags on their churches, encouraging same-sex marriage and ordination of gays and lesbians, supporting things like the Marxist BLM movement and marching in their parades, espousing the very un-Biblical CRT (Critical Race Theory) and hosting service where white people are encouraged to renounce their “white-privilege” and apologize for their innate (inborn, intrinsic) racism. Some often respected and well-known pastors and Christian leaders of some of the largest churches in the U.S. today who have embraced progressive Christianity are men like Andy Stanley, Rick Warren, J.D. Greear, and Russell Moore (former leader of the SBC ERLC, now Editor in Chief at Christianity today... which has today become a watered down mouth piece for progressive Christianity). Shocked! Don’t be! This indicates a very dangerous drift in our own denomination.

➡ **Deconstruction / Exvangelicalism** – Faith deconstruction, also known as deconstructing faith, evangelical deconstruction, the deconstruction movement, or simply deconstruction, is a phenomenon within American evangelicalism in which Christians rethink their faith and jettison previously held beliefs, sometimes to the point of no longer identifying as Christians. It is closely related to the exvangelical movement. The term can have a range of meanings. Alisa Childers defines deconstruction as "the process of systematically dissecting and often rejecting the beliefs you grew up with."

➡ Pastor Joshua Ryan Butler says, "Doubt is hip (these days). The desire to fit in with the cultural ethos of our moment is strong. That's why so many deconversion stories sound like everyone's reading off the same script—its well-worn clichés signaling conformity to accepted norms." And he says, "Celebrities are leading the charge. There's influence to be had, platforms to be built, and money to be made. It gets Rob Bell on Oprah, bolsters Glennon Doyle's book sales, and lets Rhett & Link host Nacho Libre and Harry Potter on their popular YouTube channel. A wave of #exvangelical podcasters and TikTok stars are following in the wake, with a whole cottage industry to welcome and cheer them on. There's clout in distancing oneself from "outdated" views of sex and gender, an "obscure" Bible with talking snakes and forbidden shellfish, and "offensive" doctrines like wrath and hell. I'm not claiming to know the heart of such influencers. Motivations other than street cred can be powerfully at play. I'm simply observing that social pressure is a powerful carrot on the stick—and not just for celebrities. The cultural hostility is real. Whether in progressive urban centers (like my hometown of Portland), or university environments (like where I currently live), Christians are decidedly not the cool kids. It's hard to be the awkward one sitting alone at lunch. Many of us feel the social pressure—and the release valve is a simple Instagram post away. Some who have today claimed "deconstruction" from the faith are; Joshua Harris (former Christian pastor, speaker and author, "I Kissed Dating Goodbye), Christian recording artist, Derek Webb (Caedmon's Call and solo artist) and Kevin Max (D.C. Talk & Audio Adrenaline) and Marty Simpson (Hillsong United), Jen Hatmaker, Rob Bell, and many other lesser knowns.

(3) **Biblical Shallowness / Doctrinal Error** - R.C. Sproul, of Ligonier Ministry, said, "Do you know the greatest danger facing the church today? It's not the significant external problems of rising antagonism against convictional Christians in the West or the barrage of lies about gender and sexuality assaulting the rising generation. An even greater danger threatens the church from within. Many Christians don't know the Bible."

➤ ***73% of evangelicals claim Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God*** - That is the Arianism condemned by church councils which recognized that Scripture teaches the full deity of Christ. While Mormons believe Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God, evangelical Christians historically have believed Jesus is the infinite Creator, not a finite creature. In 325 A.D., based on multiple Scriptures, the Nicene Creed declared, as a refutation of Arianism, that Jesus Christ was "not made" but "eternally begotten" and is "one in being with the Father."

- **43% of evangelicals believe that Jesus was a great teacher but not God** - Another remarkable findings of the survey: when presented with the statement “Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God,” 43% of evangelicals surveyed agreed (compared to 30% in 2020). This means that more than four out of ten people who claim to be evangelicals don’t believe in the deity of Jesus Christ! (Of course, it would be seven out of ten based on the responses to that question about Jesus being created.)
- **56% of evangelicals believe that God accepts the worship of all religions including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam** - And 56% of evangelicals agree with the statement “God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.”
- **26% of evangelicals believe the Bible, like all sacred writings, contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but is not literally true** - 26% of evangelicals (up from 15% in 2020)—affirmed the statement, “The Bible, like all sacred writings, contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but is not literally true.” And 38% agree with “Religious belief is a matter of personal opinion; it is not about objective truth.” The percentages demonstrate that these are no mere fringe ideas; they are already prevalent in U.S. churches and are gaining traction at an alarming rate.
- **37% of evangelicals believe that gender identity is a matter of choice** - 37% think that “Gender identity is a matter of choice,” and given the strong trajectory of our culture, and schools in particular, we should expect this number to increase.

As one cult expert has repeatedly stated, **“The cults are the unpaid bills of the church.”** ←

- *What do you think he means by that?*
- *What might be the “unpaid bills of the church”?*
- *Perhaps, he mean that what the church has failed to do in grounding it’s members in the Word of God, the cults had capitalized on!*

The cults thrive because Christians are lacking in biblical and theological understanding.

➤ Cult and False Religion expert, **Dr. Walter Martin** stated, **“The rise of the cults is directly proportional to the fluctuating emphasis which the church has placed on the teachings of biblical doctrine to Christian laymen... If the church engaged in solid and in-depth Bible teaching, the cults (and I might add the progressives, the deconstructionist, the false teachers) would not flourish as they do today.”**

Some popular evangelical pastors today, in an effort to be “seeker-friendly” or to appear less divisive, say that we don’t need to emphasize doctrine or theology, because that is divisive.

➤ Rather, we need to come together on the areas where we agree and demonstrate love, tolerance, and unity to the world. **Dr. John MacArthur** says, **“Many Christians nowadays simply don’t care about the prevalence of false doctrine, nor do they take seriously their duty to fight against apostasy. Instead, they want a friendly atmosphere of open acceptance for everyone, tolerance of opposing ideas, and charitable dialogue with the apostates.”**

In view of these many deceptive tactics by the enemy, John’s words in our text are absolutely vital for the preservation of God’s truth. (Many who buy into the current thinking would

wince at my statement, which implies that there is such a thing as God's truth, and that anyone can know it and proclaim it.) After telling us (3:23) that God's commandment is "that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another," John now (4:1) tells us *not* to believe everything: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." John especially had in mind the false teachers who had left the church and were drawing others after them (2:19, 22-23).

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

Like John, Paul emphasized the demonic aspect of false teachers (1 Tim. 4:1), "But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons." Of course, the deceitful spirits and their demonic doctrines teach through *people* who advocate the false teaching. So we must pay close attention to John's words. He is saying that ...

Believers must be discerning in spiritual matters.

"¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. ⁴You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. ⁶We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."
 – 1 John 4:1-6 (NKJV)

Our text falls into three parts:

John's 3 Part Rationale for Discernment in the Life of a Believer:

- (1) The **reason** for discernment (1 John 4:1)
- (2) The **basis** for discernment (1 John 4:2-3)
- (3) The **evidence** of discernment (1 John 4:4-6)

THE REASON FOR DISCERNMENT: DISCERNMENT IS ESSENTIAL BECAUSE SATAN AND HIS FORCES ARE AT WORK IN THE WORLD (1 John 4:1)

“¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God;”

Why is it important to be discerning today?

➔ A familiar falsehood goes, **“It doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you believe in something.”**

➤ **What are your thoughts about that statement?**

➤ **What might be wrong with that statement and why?**

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

But that assumes that God is merely a projection of people’s imaginations, rather than that He actually exists and that He is the creator of all that is.

- The Bible assumes rather that God really exists and that He spoke the heavens and earth into existence (Gen. 1:1)
- Furthermore, the Bible teaches the actual existence of Satan and other fallen angels, called demons.
- John’s teaching here assumes that behind all truth in the spiritual realm is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26).
- Behind all spiritually false teaching is “the spirit of error” (1 John 4:6), led by Satan, but including all of his demonic forces.
- Whether they know it or not, behind every false prophet or false teacher is an evil spirit promoting the errors that they teach.

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

So, John tells his beloved flock in verse 1 of our passage, **“¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God;** Paul said a similar thing in 1

Thessalonians 5:20-21. After saying that we should “not despise prophecies...” he added, “²⁰ Do not despise prophecies. ²¹ Test all things; hold fast what is good.” (1 Thess. 5:20-21).

➔ True faith is not a blind leap into the dark. It examines its object carefully before putting trust in it. Thus, as John Stott observes (*The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 153), “Both Paul and John assumed, as the Reformers insisted, that “even the humblest Christian possessed ‘the right of private judgment’ ... and both could and should apply the objective test John is about to give in the next verse.”

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

THE BASIS FOR DISCERNMENT: DISCERNMENT IS BASED ON THE CONFESSION CONCERNING JESUS CHRIST (1 John 4:2-3)

“² By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.” – 1 John 4:2-3

3 Things That May Make Discerning False Teachers Difficult:

- (1) **A false teacher may be gentle and loving** – Matthew 7:21-23, “²¹ Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. ²² Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ ²³ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”
- (2) **He may speak prophecies that come true** - Deuteronomy 13:1-3, “If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, ² and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods’—which you have not known—‘and let us serve them,’ ³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”
- (3) **He may even perform miracles or cast out demons or speak in tongue** – Exodus 7:11, “¹¹ But Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers; so the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments.” Exodus 7:22, “²² Then the magicians of Egypt did so with their enchantments; and Pharaoh’s heart grew hard, and he did not heed them, as the Lord had said.”

But, the question is, does he lead people to follow a false god? Specifically, John lays down the rule in verses 2-3, “² By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that

Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God,³ and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.”

3 Things That To Confess That Jesus Has Come in the Flesh Means:

- (1) **To confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh means to agree with that statement** – It means to agree with the statement that Jesus is who He claimed to be, but it also means something more. The demons all agree that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who has come in the flesh. Mark 1:23-24 tells the story, ²³ *Now there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ²⁴ saying, “Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!”* We see it again in Mark 3:11 where Jesus is shown in his earthly ministry, healing the sick and meeting the needs of the hearing and verse 11 says, ¹¹ *And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out, saying, “You are the Son of God.”* And then in Jesus’ healing of the demon possessed Gadarene in Mark 5:6-7, ⁶ *When he (the demoniac) saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped Him. ⁷ And he cried out with a loud voice and said, “What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God that You do not torment me.”* Remember James’ words in James 2:18-19, ¹⁸ *But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!”*
- (2) **To confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh implies submitting your life to Him as Lord** - Listen to Paul’s words in Romans 10:8-13, ⁸ *But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): ⁹ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. ¹³ For “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”*
- (3) **To confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh requires believing in the true deity and humanity of Jesus** – Notice our passage again in verses 2-3, ² *By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God,³ and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.”* *“Has come”* implies His preexistence as the eternal Son of God. Jesus stated His own preexistence when He told the Jews, *“Before Abraham was born, I am”* (John 8:58). Or, as John begins his gospel (John 1:1), *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* When John states (1 John 4:2) that *“Jesus Christ has come in the flesh,”* he is referring not only to His true

deity, but also to His true humanity. Jesus is the Christ (the Anointed One, or Messiah) who was conceived supernaturally by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary. He had a human body, although apart from sin.

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

Why is all of this so important as the basis for discernment... namely that discernment of truth, and of what is false (false teaching, doctrine drift or what is off) is based on the confession concerning Jesus Christ? Why? Because it always boils down to the question, "What do you do with Jesus?" (Who is Jesus? What does this say about who Jesus is and is it consistent with who Jesus reveals Himself to be in Scripture?)

➤ One of the most common characteristics of cults and false religions is what they do with Jesus. In Walter Martin's classic work "The Kingdom of the Cults" he gives "10 Characteristics of Cults and False Religions." One of those characteristics is, "they preach or proclaim another Jesus" (other than the one identified in Scripture/God's Word). Walter Martin writes, "One characteristic that is found in all cults is false teaching about the person of Jesus Christ in light of historical biblical Christianity. The Apostle Paul warned about following after "another Jesus" (2 Corinthians 11:4) who is not the same Jesus who is revealed in Scripture. The "Jesus" of the cults is always someone less than the Bible's eternal God who became flesh, lived here on earth, and died for our sins."

Remember these 2 alarming statistics I shared early...

- ***73 percent of evangelicals claim Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God*** - That is the Arianism condemned by church councils which recognized that Scripture teaches the full deity of Christ. While Mormons believe Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God, evangelical Christians historically have believed Jesus is the infinite Creator, not a finite creature. In 325 A.D., based on multiple Scriptures, the Nicene Creed declared, as a refutation of Arianism, that Jesus Christ was "not made" but "eternally begotten" and is "one in being with the Father."
- ***43% of evangelicals believe that Jesus was a great teacher but not God*** - Another remarkable findings of the survey: when presented with the statement "Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God," 43% of evangelicals surveyed agreed (compared to 30% in 2020). This means that more than four out of ten people who claim to be evangelicals

don't believe in the deity of Jesus Christ! (Of course, it would be seven out of ten based on the responses to that question about Jesus being created.)

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

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

THE EVIDENCE OF DISCERNMENT: DISCERNMENT IS EVIDENCED IN THE RESPONSE TO THE APOSTOLIC WITNESS (1 John 4:4-6)

"⁴ You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵ They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. ⁶ We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." — 1 John 4:4-6

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

3 Responses:

(1) Response 1: Those who by the Spirit overcome false teaching are from God (1 John 4:4) - *"⁴ You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."* When John says, *"You are of/from God, little children,"* he is pointing again to the new birth. Christianity is not just a matter of subscribing to certain creeds or correct doctrines, although that is essential. It is a matter of being born of God so that you receive new life from Him and become His child. This

new birth is absolutely essential if you want to be able to understand and hold to the truth. This is so important that John repeats the phrase *“from God”* in 4:1, 2, 3, 4, & 6 (twice). By way of contrast, the false teachers and those who follow them are *“from the world”* (4:5, twice). Without the new birth, a person is incapable of understanding or obeying God’s truth. Jesus said to the unbelieving Jews (John 8:43, 47), *“Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word.... He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.”* Jesus was using *hear* in the same way that John uses *listen* (4:6). It refers to hearing in the sense of both understanding *and* obeying the truth. By *“overcome them,”* John means that his hearers have resisted the false teaching. The reason that they have overcome is not only that they are from God, but also that with the new birth, they also received the Holy Spirit (*“the anointing,”* 2:27), who indwells them. He is greater than he who is in the world (Satan, who inspires the false teachers). Even though the Gnostic teachers may have been intellectually superior to John’s *“little children,”* the presence of the indwelling Spirit gave his readers the ability to discern and thus avoid the errors of the false teachers. How does the Spirit preserve us from error? It is not enough to be a spiritual ignoramus and say, *“the Spirit will protect me from error.”* The Spirit protects us through God’s Word, which reveals the truth about the person and work of Christ (4:2-3). The Word is the measure by which we test the spirits, but as Calvin points out (p. 230), *“except the Spirit of wisdom be present, to have God’s word in our hands will avail little or nothing, for its meaning will not appear to us.”* So we need diligently to study God’s Word in dependence on the Holy Spirit for understanding. Then we will be able to overcome false teachers.

- (2) **Response 2: Those who teach error and those who follow their teaching are from the world (1 John 4:5) –** *“⁵ They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them.”*

“They [the false teachers] are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them.” As we have seen (2:15), the world is that evil system under Satan’s dominion that is opposed to God and His kingdom. The world system is built around the principle of taking glory from God and transferring it to proud, self-willed man. That was Satan’s original temptation to Eve in the garden. He challenged God’s word and suggested to Eve that if she ate the forbidden fruit, she would become like God, knowing good and evil (Gen. 3:1-5). Any teaching that detracts from God’s glory and sovereignty and exalts man by feeding his pride is satanic at the core. Verse 5 may imply that these false teachers were drawing a big crowd. The world was listening to them. When you tell the world what it wants to hear, you will not lack an audience. When a false teacher sets aside the unpopular notion that all have sinned, and he tells people that they are wonderful and that God exists to help them fulfill their desires, he will gain a following. But the problem is, that message is not from God. It is from the world and the god of this world. The practical application for us is, don’t judge the

success of a ministry by its size! Judge it by its faithfulness to the truth of the gospel as revealed in the Bible.

- (3) Response 3: The standard by which to measure discernment... a person's response to the apostolic witness (1 John 4:6) –** *“We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”* Some understand the *“we”* of verse 6 to refer to all believers. But it stands in antithesis to the *“they”* of verse 5, and so it is better to interpret it as referring to the apostles. *“We [apostles] are from God; the one who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us.”* The one who *knows God* is synonymous with the one who is *from God*, the one who is born again. These people listen to the apostles, which means that they listen with understanding and obedience. They accept the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as God in human flesh. As we have seen, the one who is not of God does not hear His word (John 8:47; see 1 Cor. 2:14).

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

CONCLUSION

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

Seven Tests of How to Try the Spirit: (A.W. Tozer)

- (1) How does the teaching affect my relationship with God? Is He magnified and glorified, or diminished?**
- (2) How does the teaching affect my attitude toward the Lord Jesus Christ? Does it magnify Him and give Him first place? Or, does it subtly shift my focus onto myself or some experience?**
- (3) How does the teaching affect my attitude toward Scripture? Did the teaching come from and agree with the Word? Does it increase my love for the Word?**
- (4) How does the teaching affect my self-life? Does it feed self or crucify it? Does it feed pride or humility?**
- (5) How does the teaching affect my relationships to other Christians? Does it cause me to withdraw, find fault, and exalt myself in superiority? Or, does it lead me to genuine love for all that truly know Christ?**

- (6) How does the teaching affect my relationship to the world system? Does it lead me to pursue the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life? Does it lead me to pursue worldly riches, reputation, and pleasures? Or, does it crucify the world to me?
- (7) How does the teaching affect my attitude toward sin? Does it cause me to tolerate sin in my life or to turn from it and grow in holiness? Any teaching that makes holiness more acceptable and sin more intolerable is genuine.