

The Epistles of John

Week 35: 1 John 4:1-6

One of the real problems that happens for Christians is that they begin to do fear-based thinking rather than faith-based thinking. They make decisions on the basis of fear. 'Oh, we've got to protect our children. We've got to protect this. We've got to protect our assets.' What our author wants is not fear-based thinking from Christians. He wants faith-based thinking, even though Christianity has plenty of nefarious competition from the powers of darkness.

Ben Witherington III

1 John 4:1-6

1 John 4:1-3 (ESV)

1 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.

2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,

3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

1 John 4:1-6

Here's the thing: The demonic spirits are perfectly good at inspiring people to say all kinds of impressive-sounding things that are not the truth. Our author does not believe that Christians are merely up against what we would call a secular world, a world of objections to the gospel. No, he sees this life-and-death struggle between good and evil, and he suggests that either a message or a prophecy is inspired by the true Spirit of God or it's inspired by something else, not the Spirit of God.

Many Westerners probably struggle with this assumption that spiritual forces influence human behavior.

1 Thes 5:19-22

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

1 John 4:1-6

I met a young Presbyterian pastor and his wife during a conference in Michigan where I was speaking. In our conversation they spoke late into the evening about his first pastorate in Florida. Early one morning on his first week he entered the darkened church only to see demonic spirit-appearitions that had been witnessed by many others. This spirit-encounter required a ministry to deliver this church from its bondage. This is, of course, a highly unusual situation. But other destructive spirits need to be named and confronted in our churches—spirits bringing illnesses, sin, and destruction to Christ's body. It is not eccentric to hold such a view. Any Christian cosmology that posits a personal God and angels should also have room for a personal devil and his cohorts. I shared these stories with a Hispanic pastor from south Texas, who smiled and said, "Our communities have known about these realities all along."

1 John 4:1-6

Paul also dealt with the importance of distinguishing between the spirit of truth and error. The tendency to ascribe any unusual phenomenon to God led Paul to encourage the Corinthians to test the spirits by evaluating exactly what was said (1 Cor 12:1–3; 14:29). Christians “needed to be reminded that demonic activity could penetrate their churches.” Spiritual activity is not necessarily Godly activity.

The existence of true prophets made it necessary to discern and avoid the false, of which John says there were “many.”

The author, and presumably his readers, believed that a variety of “spirits” were at work in the world.

1 John 4:1-6

The notion of spiritual forces was accepted in the post-NT period as well. Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch, twice makes reference to this in his letters, before his martyrdom during Trajan's reign (AD 98–117)

The second person plural of “you” (in the imperatives “believe” and “test”) makes it clear that all believers are to exercise the responsibility of discerning truth from error.

1 John 4:1-6

1 Corinthians 12:1-3 (ESV)

1 Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.

2 You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.

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

1 Corinthians 14:29 (ESV)

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

1 John 4:1-6

Our author is saying, if you don't have that Christology straight, and if somebody is not acknowledging that, then however inspiring the speaker may be—however inspired he may be—it's not being inspired by the true Spirit of God, and you need to be able to critically discern that.

The actuality of the incarnation is not secondary or optional. It is essential. The Spirit of God always gives honor to Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.

One should not receive as true every prophetic pronouncement just because the prophets claim to speak with divine authority. Perhaps in their readiness to hear from God John's readers were unwisely open to what the false prophets had to say. The verb "test" (*dokimazete*) means "to prove, to examine," like coins that are being tested for genuineness and proper weight—something that should be done on a continual basis.

1 John 4:1-6

1 John 4:4-6 (ESV)

4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.

6 We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

1 John 4:1-6

This is one of the great promises of this book. There are devils in the world. There are demonic forces at work. There are dark powers out there—the dark side of the Force, if you will—and there is even a devil, but our author says, Be of good cheer. “Greater is he who is in you”—the Holy Spirit; the Father, Son, and the Spirit—“than any of these forces [in] the world, that the world throws against you.” So you don’t need to be afraid.

The difference between false prophets and true believers is their origin. The use of the word kosmos three times in verse 5 only underscores the relationship between the deceivers and the prince of this world—Satan. They speak continually (lalousin, present tense) from the world, and their message reveals their source.

1 John 4:1-6

The church is called to be the custodian of the truth. When John says that we must “test the spirits,” he is addressing the corporate body of Christ. Throughout 4:1–6 his verbs are plural (“together all of you test the spirits”), implying that this spiritual discernment is an obligation of the gathered body and its leadership.

Are destructive spirits at work in the world? In the church? There can be no doubt that they are. The church must be equipped to combat all forms of evil.

Application for This Week

We have three applications this week:

Not all spirits or prophets come from God so they must be tested and discerned by their message as well as their belief about Jesus.

The spirit within us enables us to overcome the spirit in the world.

The church and believers must be prepared and engaged in discerning and combatting the false prophets and spirits.

Homework

My blog with past lessons is:

www.UnapologeticallyJohn.com

Thank you for coming!

See you back next week