

“The True Spirit of Christmas” (An Exposition of 1 John 4:1-3)¹

Introduction

At Christmastime there is often a lot of talk about “the Christmas spirit.” By this we usually mean a sense of *cheerfulness and good will* that we associate with Christmas. At this time of year we might smile more, greet friends and strangers alike with “Merry Christmas,” and even be more charitable to those in need. All good things.

In our text this morning the Apostle John tells us about *a different kind of Christmas Spirit*, so to speak. Here John teaches us about the need for discernment in listening to those who would put themselves forward as Bible teachers and theologians. The Scriptures in general have a lot to say about this subject.

John instructs us *not* to believe every spirit, but rather to “**test**” them, “**to see whether they are from God.**” Why? Because, just like during the time of the Old Testament, “**many false prophets have gone out into the world.**” (v.1) And what is the test (or at least one of them) that John instructs us to use in order to discern between the Spirit of God and the spirit of the antichrist? He tells us “**Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.**” (v.2)

In other words, *true Christian teaching will always affirm and openly confess the truth of who the Lord Jesus Christ is* - that He is truly God and truly man, and that He “so was, and continues to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.” (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q/A 21) Without that, we have no Redeemer and no salvation.

What a timely message for us to look at with Christmas approaching, as our thoughts rightly turn to the truth of Christ’s incarnation! The *true Spirit of Christmas* always affirms and confesses the truth of the incarnation of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Need to Test the Spirits

The *first* thing that John teaches us here is *our need to test the spirits*. In v.1 he writes:

“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.”

We as Christians can tend to be rather trusting people, assuming the best of others, especially people who bear the title of “pastor” or “theologian.” But John tells us that in some ways this should *not* be the case. He plainly tells us *not* to “**believe every spirit.**”

To be sure, *cynicism and a general attitude of distrust* are *not* found listed among the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23; but *neither is gullibility*.

Brothers and sisters, we as believers in Christ are *not* to be gullible or easily deceived, accepting and believing whatever we hear. We must *not* check our *brains*, and certainly not our *Bibles*, at the church door. We should be as the noble Bereans, who searched the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was so.²

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² See Acts 17:11.

Now why doesn't John just say, "test the *teaching*, to see if it is from God." That is certainly the gist of what we are being commanded to do here, isn't it? Why does John say that we must **"test the spirits"**?

Every doctrine has a spiritual source – either *the Holy Spirit* (in the case of true Christian teaching from the inspired Scriptures) or *demons* (in the case of any teaching that contradicts the teaching of Scripture). The Apostle Paul warns of *the doctrines of demons* in 1 Timothy 4:1, where he writes:

"Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons . . ."

Think about that. False doctrine, doctrine that is contrary to the true doctrine of Christ, is demonic in origin. To say the least, that means that it is *evil*, and that it is *dangerous*.

It is also likely that the early Gnostics were claiming some kind of "spiritual" source for their teachings in order to assert authority for their strange doctrines. In some way this is what *every* cult or false teacher does – claim to be speaking on the authority of and in the place of God based upon something other than the teachings of the Apostles found in Scripture.

Some simply claim that "God told them" something, and so we are then expected to take their word for it. After all, to question them (they would say) is to question God! This is a most vile form of abuse and manipulation.

The Roman Catholic Church places their authority in their tradition, rather than Scripture. The Jehovah's Witnesses have their own "translation" of the Bible which is really nothing but a mutilated knock-off of the Bible, which they revise and edit to no end in trying to silence the Scripture's clear and ubiquitous testimony to the true deity of Jesus Christ (among other things). The Mormons add another book altogether, as if the Scriptures needed to be supplemented. The fact of the matter is that the Book of Mormon is used by them to supplant the Bible, in order to teach their strange and blasphemous lies.

Now notice the reason that John gives us for this need for testing the spirits. In v.1 he says that we are to do so because *they may not be from God!* In fact, it is *no rare occurrence* when teaching that claims to be Christian and from God is really anything but! In fact, he tells us **"many false prophets have gone out into the world."** *Many!*

This brings to mind the account in 1 Kings 22, where Ahab, king of Israel went to inquire of the Lord as to whether or not he should join Judah in war against Syria. He gathered the prophets together - **"about four hundred men"** (v.6) – 400 prophets! And they all told him what they wanted to hear!

But there was one other prophet, Micaiah, whom Ahab said he *hated*, because **"he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil."** (v.8) He alone prophesied (eventually) that Ahab would fall in battle if he went to war. All of the others were sending him to his doom, and in v.22 we are told that there was **"a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets."** Ahab did *not* test the spirits, and so he was slain.

But think about the numbers there. *400 false prophets to one true one!* And these men did great harm and were not of the Lord. They told the king what he wanted to hear. And do we think that *most* pastors and preachers in our own day are much different?

Are most *faithful*? Are most *true to God's Word*? Or do they just speak agreeable things, pleasant things, things that people want to hear? It is rare to find one faithful. *Test the spirits, beloved!*

It brings to mind Paul's words to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28-31. There he told them:

“Pay careful attention [“Be on guard” - NASB] to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.”

This was no hypothetical situation for Paul. He warned them that savage wolves were going to come. And they would come *both from without and from within!* In fact Paul was *so* concerned about this that he reminds them that **“for three years [he] did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.”**

And so it is clearly the responsibility of the elders and pastors of the church to *guard the church against error, false teaching, and heresy*. No one should occupy the office of elder or pastor who is unwilling or unable to guard the church against such things. Such men leave the flock as easy prey for the wolves that are sure to come.

But John *doesn't* stop there, does he? Who is it that is supposed to **“test the spirits to see whether they are from God”**? *Every believer!* Ian Hamilton writes: “This testing of the spirits is not the responsibility only of the church's leaders, though they surely have a great responsibility to do it (see 2 Timothy 3:1-4:6). John tells us that this is the responsibility of every Christian.”³ That means *you too!*

The Way to Test the Spirits

And so I hope that we have at least made progress in pressing upon you the need for testing the spirits. But how are we to do this? That is the next thing that John teaches us here – *the way to test the spirits*. In v.2-3 he writes:

“By this you know⁴ 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. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.”

So what is the test that John gives us for whatever doctrine we may hear? He says, **“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.”** In other words, any teaching which does *not* affirm the truth of the incarnation of Christ is **“not from God.”**

Now this is not the only doctrinal test that we are to apply; it is not even the only one in 1 John. Back in 1 John 2:22 John told us, **“Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.”** Notice that at the center of all of this is the doctrine of Christ – His person and work, who He is and what He has done for our salvation.

³ *The Letters of John*, p.54

⁴ “Know” here could be an imperative - “By this *know* the Spirit of God”

Always examine one's *doctrine of Christ*. That will tell you a great deal about whether someone is of God or not. The *Gnostics*, of course, *denied* the true bodily incarnation of Christ. They denied **“that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.”** That being the case, they were clearly not from God, and their false doctrine was then **“of the spirit of the antichrist”** (v.3) and of **“the spirit of error”** (v.6).

Brothers and sisters, *those* are our choices – either we will hold to *the true doctrine of Christ* which is of *the Holy Spirit* Himself, or we will be led astray by false doctrine which is of the spirit of the antichrist, the spirit of error, and is the doctrine of demons.

We must test the spirits to see whether they are of God. And we must do so by examining first and foremost their doctrine of Christ.

We must *affirm inwardly and confess openly* the truth of Jesus Christ, that He is the incarnate Son of God, truly God and truly man. *Shorter Catechism* Q/A 21 would be a really good one to memorize and put to use in this regard. It summarizes the truth of who Christ is for us:

“Q. 21. Who is the redeemer of God’s elect? A. The only redeemer of God’s elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continues to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.”

Who is Jesus? He is “the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is *the Lord*. He is God almighty, the ruler of all things. He is the Christ, the Messiah, God's chosen Redeemer and King! Jesus is “the eternal Son of God” without beginning or end; begotten, not created.

And the Son of God “became man” in such a way that He “so was, and continues to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.” He is not less than God in any way, nor is He in any way less than truly man.

And He could not be our Savior if any of these things were not true of Him! He could not die in our place for our sins if He were not truly a man; and His death could not be sufficient to redeem us from sin if He were not truly God!

A false doctrine of Christ is *a denial of the very gospel itself*! No wonder Satan is always finding ways to attack and undermine it! No wonder we need to test the spirits!

The True Spirit of Christmas

We who have believed on Christ for salvation are much in need of *the true Spirit of Christmas*. Not just the general sense of cheerfulness and good will that we might have for a few weeks at this time of year (at least until the credit card bills come due), but *the true spirit of Christmas*!

And that is the Spirit that confesses that the Lord Jesus Christ has *truly “come in the flesh”* in order to save sinners! May we *never* tire of hearing the story of Christ's birth and the blessed doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God for our salvation.

How many churches at this time of year spend all of their time on little more than *sentiment and moral platitudes*, rather than on the truth of Christ's incarnation for the salvation of sinners!

This world desperately needs Christ. It needs to hear *the truth of the gospel*. It needs to hear the true meaning of Christmas, that **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”** (1 Timothy 1:15)

Paul's words in Romans 10:9 still hold true:

“if you confess with your mouth that *Jesus is Lord* and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

And in v.13 he goes on to say, **“everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”**

May God grant in His great mercy in Christ that we may always *affirm and confess* the truth of Christ, that He has truly **“come in the flesh”** (v.2) for us and for our salvation, so that sinners may hear and believe upon Him for salvation from sin and eternal life in Him.

To the glory of God forever. - Amen.