

Discernment in Religion

I John 4:1-6

Introduction

In this next section of John's letter - - - he wants give his readers another test of authentic salvation

This time he gives us a Christological test

I 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.'

The Christological test – is a recognition of the full humanity and deity of Christ

Did God – in the person of His Son take on human flesh and dwell among us?

That is the assertion of the Christian church

SCC doctrinal statement: 'We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, became man, without ceasing to be God, having been conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, in order that He might reveal God and redeem sinners.'

John 1:14 - 'And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.'

John says – if one denies Christ – or does not confess the incarnation / the deity of Christ - - - they are not of God - - - that is the spirit of the antichrist

I saw a news broadcast recently – on the Palestinian conflict with Israel

On this broadcast – a Palestinian said part of the reason for the attack of October 7th – is a growing concern among Muslims that the Jews will destroy the al Aqsa mosque - Dome of the Rock and build a temple there

In fact – they refer to October 7th – as the Al Aqsa flood - - - a day in which 1200 Israelis were killed and numerous more taken hostage

The Al Aqsa mosque – is considered to be the third holiest of sites in Islam - - and it sits on the temple mount area of Jerusalem

The mosque was completed in 692 AD – and is the oldest Muslim structure in existence today

There are a few curious things about this mosque

Inscribed on the walls of this mosque are all kinds of statements in relation to Jesus – [denying His deity / sonship]

On the E side – ‘The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a Messenger of God.’

NW – ‘It befitteth not God that He should take unto Himself a son. Glory be to Him!

Inside the mosque are quotes from the Qur'an that reflect the Muslim view of Jesus – ‘a prophet, but not a messiah; the Son of Mary, but not the son of God.’ (Sura 19:33-35).

i.e. – it’s a religion that goes out of its way to expressly deny the Christian doctrine of the incarnation of Christ

In contrast – we find in the NT – Peter’s great confession of faith

Matthew 16:16 - "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Nicene Creed [325] - 'I believe in one God the Father Almighty; maker of heaven and earth . . . and in one Lord Jesus Christ . . . God of God, light of light, very God of very God

At Jesus’ baptism

Matthew 3:17 - 'And behold, a voice out of the heavens saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Those who deny the humanity or deity of Christ - - - they fail the Christological test

John gives us two more tests that validate authentic faith

The Christological = confessing that God’s Son took on human flesh

The Apostolic = embracing the truth as revealed to us by the apostles

‘Do I believe about Jesus what the apostles taught?’

I John 4:6 - '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.'

I. Testing the Spirits - vv. 1-3

John begins this section with a call to ‘test the spirits’

We are not to believe those who are false – we are to exercise discernment

We are not to be gullible or reckless in what we choose to believe – or how we live

Ideas and behavior have consequences – sometimes drastic

People can be extremely gullible and foolish at times

The Beach Boys like the Beatles - - -went thru an eastern religious phase

In fact – one of their albums was recorded in Fairfield, Iowa – at the Maharishi school there -
- - it was one of their worst selling albums

Dennis Wilson – the drummer – once picked up a couple of hitchhiker girls [in S. CA] – took them back to his place - - - they ultimately moved in with a small group of people [unbeknownst to him – he just welcomed the Manson family – a religious cult]

According to one account – Manson threatened him – and Dennis beat him up - - - but he could not get them to leave - - since they were living off of his dime / eating his food / stealing his clothes / driving his cars - - - he simply moved out – left no forwarding address

About a year later – the Manson murders took place

Manson – gave wild interpretations of the Bible – claimed to be Jesus - - - predicted a race war to end the world / etc. - - he died in prison – 2017

I John 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 deceivers / religious charlatans in the world – they're on t.v

False prophets were a problem in the OT

You had legitimate prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel - - - but you also had false prophets who contradicted the message God was sending to His people

Jeremiah 14:14 - 'Then the Lord said to me, "The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility, and the deception of their own minds.'

One of our responsibilities as Christians is to be discerning

We are to test the spirits

What is the spirit behind this teaching?

Satan is not opposed to religion – he invented most of them

I Timothy 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.'

When a campus leader in a Duke University chapel prays to the great queer one in the sky - - you know there is a different spirit there / not of God

This verse has implications for how we listen to Christian radio – books we read – how we choose a church – how we listen to teachers

Joel Beeke: 'Technically, all who claim to be prophets today are false because the prophetic office no longer exists. Prophets along with the apostles were the foundational leaders of the church. [Eph. 2:20]'

Beeke takes the position of cessationism – which we hold as well

We have the word of the Apostles recorded in Scripture - - - and the canon is closed - - - God is not still adding to the Bible - - - we do not have apostles or true prophets around today - - - God has warned against adding to the word or taking away from it

Augustine in the 4th century – once said these words

Augustine: 'Miracles have not been allowed to stretch into our time, or the soul would always be looking for sensations.'

Jonathan Edwards [Colonial America]: 'The first century was the era of miracles. But soon after that, the canon of Scripture being completed, when the Apostle John had written the book of Revelation, which he wrote not long before his death, these miraculous gifts were no longer continued in the church.'

i.e. – God saw to it that we no longer needed apostles or prophets - - because we had the completed canon of Scripture – [that is cessationism]

The New Apostolic Reformation – is a movement of people claiming that God is restoring the office of both apostle and prophet to the church today - - - and is raising up an army of miracle working Christians in the church today

If you were to attend Bethel Church in Redding, Ca - - - you would find pastors over prophetic ministries

One woman on their website – Naomi Gross – her title is ‘Dream Interpretation Activation Pastor.’

Write down your dreams – go to her

Many are buying into this model - - - without stopping to test the spirits

John MacArthur: "NAR, the New Apostolic Reformation. It is not new, it is not apostolic, and it is not a reformation, by the way. It is like Grape-Nuts, it's not grapes and it's not nuts, it's like Christian Science, it's not Christian and it's not scientific. Well the New Apostolic Reformation isn't new, it isn't apostolic and it isn't a reformation. But it is a rapidly expanding movement being generated by some of the same old troubling false teachers and false leaders that have been around in Charismania for decades, always dishonoring the Holy Spirit, always dishonoring the Scripture, always claiming miracle signs, wonders, visions, dreams."

Part of the allure is the quest for the miraculous

One trademark of the NAR movement - - - is an exalted view of man – and a demotion of God

Jenn Johnson – [a worship leader at Bethel] – says that when we tell God who He is - - - He becomes who we say He is!

That is shockingly blasphemous

In this movement – you not only get to hear from prophets today - - but you are told that you too can be a prophet! - [just take this seminar / etc.]

You don't have to always get it right - - [One lady told John Piper – that she had a prophecy for him - - - that his wife was going to die in childbirth - - - and that he would have a girl -- - his wife didn't die - - - and they had a boy [that's not from God]

We say – who needs that kind of prophecy? That's just folly

Mike Bickle [who claims to be a prophet today] explains the ground rules for prophesying today – [He was part of IHOP – International House of prayer]

Mike Bickle: 'Unlike the Old Testament ground rules for prophets, where 100 percent accuracy was required upon the penalty of death, the NT doesn't require the same standard of its prophets.'

You can get it right 10% - that's good enough

Of course – IHOP has distanced themselves from him - - - due to several sex scandals that have come to light in his past

How do we evaluate claims to being a prophet today?

Accuracy – if God is speaking - - it stands to reason that prophecies must be accurate – 100%

Otherwise – it's not a message from God

That is a biblical concept – this is the test given in the OT

Deut. 18:20-22 - 'But the prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he shall speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. And you may say in your heart, "How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?" When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken presumptuously.'

The NAR prophets try to insulate themselves from any criticism - - by arguing – 'touch not the anointed.'

Psalm 105:15 - 'Do not touch My anointed ones, and do My prophets no harm.'

They take Psalm 105 – and use it to try to insulate themselves from any critique - - - i.e. – don't test my spirits!

That is horrendous exegesis of Scripture – it ignores the fundamental question in play: 'Who is a true prophet'

There is gullibility of a high order - - - and mis-direction

A fellow named Nabeel Qureshi – Nabeel had been a devout Muslim – but after discovering evidence for the resurrection and Jesus' claims to being God - - - He converted to Christianity. He wrote a book describing his journey - - - a NY Times bestseller – 'Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus.'

But – in 2016 – at just 33 years of age – he was diagnosed with advanced stomach cancer. A devoted husband and father to a young daughter - - - he was looking for any way to continue life. At the urging of friends – he travelled to Bethel seeking healing.

During his visit to Bethel - - - about 1700 people made prayer declarations for his healing at a service. “We thank you that he is even now being healed.” – declared one of the church leaders - - - but sadly – less than a year later Nabeel died from the disease.

It was another misappropriation of the promises of God - - - and how we pray to Him

They demote God / elevate man - - - we are in charge

We declare our reality

We certainly believe in prayers for healing – but we would never sanction making such outlandish prayer declarations – we come as humble supplicants

Bill Johnson says, ‘I can’t pray - “if it’s Your will” – because for me that’s a prayer of unbelief.’

I John 5:14 - 'And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.'

Jesus Himself prayed to the Father and said – ‘nevertheless – not My will but Thine be done’

*** False teachers do not love the God of the Bible - - - they invent a God of their own crafting

There was an ecumenical faith gathering in Minneapolis – 1993 – it was dubbed the re-imagining conference – supported by the United Methodist church / the world council of churches - - - the blasphemies outnumbered any truths that might have been uttered

Nadean Bishop, a lesbian minister in the American Baptist church was a speaker, said that Mary and Martha in the Bible were not actual sisters but lesbian lovers.

Prayers were offered to the goddess – Sophia

Delores Williams, theology professor at New York’s Union Theological Seminary, told the gathering: “I don’t think we need a theory of atonement at all...Atonement has to do so much with death...I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping ...We just need to listen to the god within.”

The Apostle Paul would beg to differ:

I Corinthians 1:18 - 'For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.'

The cost of being careless or indifferent to the truth is too costly

Christian maturity is saying – 'I believe what the apostles taught - - - I reject what is not consistent with the Bible.'

We are to be Bereans

Acts 17:11 - 'Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.'

II. Greater is He who is in you - vv. 4-6

Here John reminds us of our resources

We have the Holy Spirit within – who guides us into all truth

John is saying that God is more powerful than Satan – and those who are indwelt by His Spirit overcome the evil one - - - are not led astray by Him

But – we need to make use of the Word of God – which Paul calls the sword of the Spirit

Ephesians 6:17 - 'And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.'

True believers receive the testimony of the apostles in Scripture

Those who are not of God – reject the teaching of the apostles – [the Bible]

If someone says, 'I disagree with Paul' – they are rejecting the testimony of the apostles

They are showing themselves to not be from God

I John 4:6 - '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 world listens to those who deny the Bible or exalt the greatness of man

When pastor Rob Bell wrote a book – denying the biblical teaching on hell - - - he was rebuked and refuted by conservative theologians and pastors - - but he was celebrated by the secular media

Time magazine gave his book a cover article [2011] – with the title: ‘What if there’s no hell? A popular pastor’s best-selling book has stirred fierce debate about sin, salvation and judgment.’

Oprah Winfrey hailed him as her favorite pastor

His church dismissed him – for his heresy – [they tested the spirits!]

The world listens to the world - - - but those of the truth listen to the Word of God

Conclusion

If someone offers up the sensational – the miraculous - - - many will surely be drawn unto it

Matthew 16:4 - 'A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah.' [kjv]

What was the sign of Jonah? [just as Jonah was three days in the belly of the fish – so shall the Son of Man be in the grave - - rising on the third day]

Jesus told the Pharisees - - - the only sign they would be given would be that of the resurrection

Charles Swindoll: 'You don't need a miracle a day to keep the devil away. Jesus won't do the spectacular in your life hour by hour. He often works quietly and slowly. But perfectly and deeply.'

Trust God – Believe His Word – turn from sin / embrace His truth / love another / Be discerning – test the spirits

Who do you say that I am? [asks Jesus] - - - Peter got it right

Matthew 16:16 - 'And Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."