

Beloved, Do Not Believe – *1 John 4:1-6*

Introduction – Unbelievers today will often deride Christians as the most gullible people on earth. Of course, the charge can go both ways. In our passage, John returns to his theme of how we are to see the antithesis in everything including our pursuit of knowledge and truth; we are to recognize the difference between the Holy Spirit and the spirit of Antichrist, the difference between light and darkness, between the city of God and the city of man. An underlying corollary to this passage is that if you are not listening to what the Holy Spirit confesses, you will be listening to what the spirit of Antichrist is saying. There is no neutrality when it comes to truth and error. And here we are taught how to test.

Testing the Words of Spirits (vv1-3) – The command to believe on the name of the Son of God (3:23) is quickly followed with a command not to believe every spirit (4:1) much in the same way the command to love our brothers and sisters (2:7-11) was followed with a command to “*love not the world*” (2:15). Neither love nor faith is to be indiscriminate when it comes to following Christ. Today, in a world fraught with relativism, believers must go into every situation with godly skepticism. We must reject the pluralistic error that teaches that as long as it is sincere and passive (on the front end), it must be a good thing. Unbelief can be as much a sign of spiritual maturity as belief.

Do Not Believe – John wrote at a time when the church had to sort out whether prophecies were false or true (Paul gives similar instructions in Corinthians and Thessalonians). Even if the words were from a spirit, the spirit was to be tested. And today, we still must test the spirit of the teachings that come forth as to whether they are aligned with the truth of Scripture. A fundamental test was the doctrinal test: did the teaching and the teacher confess that Jesus was Christ come in the flesh? And the idea of “confess,” just as it was used in 1:9, is not simply the muttering of words, but a genuine, reverent confession.

The Holy Spirit – Here we see the work of the Holy Spirit. Somewhat paradoxically, the Spirit is known by His testimony to the incarnate Son. Any spirit who does not confess this (not only those who contradict it) are the spirit of Antichrist. We already studied antichrist (2:18ff), but it is a good reminder to note that the spirit of Antichrist is doctrinal error, not political tyranny.

Testing the Ears of Listeners (vv4-6) – The one who gives ear is just as responsible for what he listens to as the one who teaches. It is the responsibility of the believer to listen to truth and to deny falsehood; it is of course his responsibility to grow in such discernment as well. Note the audience of each verse: “*You are,*” “*They are,*” and “*We are.*”

Withstanding Evil – The reason they have overcome the false teachers is because the Spirit in them is greater than the spirit of the world/unbelief. The false teachers are listened to by the world because the world does not and cannot listen to the Spirit of the apostles; they are left listening to the unbelief of the world. The apostles are from God and therefore those who are also from God will hear them, for this is what the Spirit does – He opens ears to hear (Acts 16:14, Deut 29:4).

Apostolic Christianity – is marked by listening to the apostles, who with the prophets, laid the foundation of the Christian faith (Eph 2:20, 3:5). It is not marked by some false-idea of apostolic succession of men, but of adherence to the teachings of the apostles. And this cannot be done apart from the gift of the Holy Spirit. Of course, John’s claim that his message is proven to be from God because God’s people listen to it could sound like the height of arrogance – if he was saying this as an individual. But he is writing as one of the apostles who, like Christ, have the voice of God which His sheep hear and follow (John 10:25-29).

Proclaiming and Listening to Apostolic Christianity – Where is orthodoxy? It seems so hard to know where we are to find true truth with all of the competing voices. John is making the argument that ends with this book – the Bible – the compilation of the prophets and apostles of Jesus Christ. Today, it is to be proclaimed through the church by means of her pastors. These are not to be men bent on developing some kind of personality cult, but rather servants who are standing in an office declaring the gospel of Jesus (Rom 10:14-15). The church is to listen and test the spirit of the teaching. Does it come from a voice who confesses Jesus who is Christ come in the flesh? Does it come from one who has the marks of the Holy Spirit (he believes on Jesus and loves like Jesus – 3:23)? The only words that can pass this test and the only ears that can administer this test are those whose hearts and minds have been brought to life by the Holy Spirit.