

Putting Teachers to the Test

Heart to Heart, Part 6

1 John 4:1-6

Long before the Apostle John picked up a quill and began to write letters to Christians, a Persian soldier had become a rich man.

500 years before the birth of Christ, Cyrus, the king of Persia wanted to conquer Sardis and capture its legendary stash of gold. But he first had to capture the fortress which protected this ancient city. The fortress was built on the edge of a cliff and there was simply no way to attack it from the front.

Cyrus offered a large reward for any soldier who could figure out a way in. A soldier by the name of Hyeroades determined to watch the soldiers that guarded the cliff side stone walls of this fortress. One evening, a soldier accidentally knocked his helmet off the wall. Hyeroades watched that same soldier carefully make his way down the wall, pick his way down the cliffs, recover his helmet and climb back up. The Persian soldier mentally marked that path and later, as he led a small group of soldiers under cover of darkness, they found depressions cut into the rock. When they eventually reached the top of the battlement, they found the walls unguarded except for a few sleeping soldiers.ⁱ

Even though one of the world's most powerful empires was in battle array in the valley below, the soldiers of Sardis weren't concerned enough to even keep watch.

It's no coincidence 500 years later that God will effectively refer back to this event as He warns the church located in Sardis to wake up. Twice God admonishes the church that they are spiritually sleeping at the wheel and in grave danger.

And John the Apostle translates God's warning to Sardis in his Book of Revelation and chapter 3, using this verb *gregorew* (γρηγορεω) which means

to be [alert] or awake. Today, we use that verb γρηγορεω as a name – Gregory – or Greg.ⁱⁱ

And in Revelation chapter 3, the Apostle John uses the imperative form of γρηγορεω which means, literally, "Wake up!" – exclamation point

Every man in here named Greg is now wide awake. This is evidently just for you.

The Apostle Paul will use the same word as he warns the believers living in Corinth – he writes to them, exhorting them to ***be on the alert . . . stand firm in the faith. . . act like men and be strong (1 Corinthians 16:13).***

One of the great concerns of the Apostles was the protection of the church. Even to a new church, the threat was ever present.

The Apostle Paul warned the Ephesian church that they needed to be discerning so that they wouldn't be spiritually gullible, ***carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming (Ephesians 4:14).***

The Apostle Paul actually lays a good deal of the responsibility of spiritual alertness and protection at the feet of the elders of the church. He warned the elders of the church in Ephesus that as soon as he left them, false teachers would try and find a way into the assembly – he says, ***"I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock."* (Acts. 20:29)**

One author writes, "Many an elder fails because he is not vigilant. He took it for granted that there were no wolves, no birds of prey, no robbers; and while he was sleeping the enemy arrived. False ideas, destructive interpretations and false teaching came into the flock; and he never knew it – errors as fierce as wolves and pitiless as hyenas; they tear

faith, hope and love to pieces and leave churches mangled and half dead.ⁱⁱⁱ

The danger is even more subtle now simply because false teaching can reach a member of the flock through so many different methods . . . false teachers don't have to come in through the front door of the assembly anymore.

Furthermore, in Paul's day and in ours, deceiving teachers don't wear red suits with horns and a tail and carry pitchforks in their hands.

They often do many good things and present themselves as family oriented, values driven, model citizens, ever smiling who happen to be in touch with just the kind of Jesus you'd really want to follow.

The *Devil [doesn't just] prowl around like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8)* - the Devil also appears as *an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14)*, spreading his *false teaching (1 Timothy 4:1)*, through *false ministers (2 Corinthians 11:15)* and even as fallen angels masquerading as messengers of the gospel (*Galatians 1:8*).

If the Apostle's had problems with counterfeit teaching in the First Century, why would we ever think we wouldn't have all the more challenges in the 21st century?

The truth is, detecting counterfeit truth and counterfeit gospels and counterfeit spiritualities and counterfeit teachers is as great a problem for the church today, than it ever has been.

I've had several people in the banking or financial world come up after one of our morning services in recent weeks following our study in John's first letter and tell me of special training offered to those involved in handling currency.

The American Banking Association sponsors a two-week training program to detect counterfeit bills. During this unique program, however, one author wrote, the tellers never once looked at a counterfeit bill; all they did for two weeks was handle, observe, count, hold, inspect – hour after hour, day after day – the genuine item.^{iv}

One individual told me that this training can include times when all the lights are turned out and the trainees handle the money in complete darkness.

They're going to be able, later one, to detect counterfeit money, as it were, with their eyes closed – just by the texture of the paper.

Detecting and avoiding counterfeit teachers – counterfeit, deceiving doctrines is one of the big

strings on John the Apostle's fiddle and he plays it over and over again throughout his letters.

And he's about to do the same again as he gives us a wonderful and objective way to put teachers to the test – to see if they are really delivering the truth.

Here's how to test the teacher.

First John chapter 4 and verse 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.

In this opening verse, John gives the believer a command.

The Command

There are two parts to this command – first, what not to do – ***do not believe every spirit.***

The word *spirit* is not a reference to some vaporous being – some disembodied ghost – it's a reference to anything under the guise of spiritual truth or spiritual wisdom or spiritual direction.

In other words, don't believe everything that comes under the banner of "spirituality"; which is another way of saying, "Don't believe everything you hear." There is no spiritual prize for gullibility.

I'll never forget eating breakfast one Saturday morning with our twin sons when they were around 8 years old. We were in a booth eating all we could eat a breakfast bar – that's what I call quality time. We were eating and talking together and I remember there was a couple in their mid-30's sitting in the booth next to us having this intense conversation.

I remember hearing the word, "spiritual" . . . and that got my attention. I tried to find out what they were talking about that was spiritual. Turns out that the woman was trying to convince her companion to follow her guru slash teacher. I remember my heart sinking . . . she was trying to convince this man to follow her teacher, toward the truth. She referred to her teacher's wisdom and his many years of experience. Near the end of her conversation she said with this sense of great urgency, "You must follow the voice of [his] experience."

That's **not** the message of John. He doesn't say here in ***verse 1***, Do not believe every spirit unless they've got experience.

It doesn't matter how experienced, or erudite, or intellectual or well referenced they are.

Don't believe everything that comes along in spiritual garb.

That's what **not** to do . . . now here's **what** to do: John adds, *verse 1, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God*

The word for *test* that John uses here is the word dokimazo (δοκιμαζω) which means "to examine – to scrutinize – to put to the test."

Do what a young lady from Colonial did recently who moved away for her job and went looking for a new church; she met with the pastor of a church in her area – she brought with her a list of biblical and doctrinal questions. Way to go.

When you were in school – maybe you're still there – you listen to a teacher and then you take a test. John says here, "No, no no – you first test the teacher and then – perhaps – you listen to him.

Create a role reversal . . . put the teacher to the test!

The word for *test* here was commonly used in John's generation for testing the genuineness of coins.^v

In early American history the simplest, but not always accurate, test for determining real gold from fool's gold was to bite down on it . . . real gold was soft and fool's gold was hard . . . which is why in old Western movies you often saw some old ranch hand bite down on a coin he was given – he wanted to see if he could make a dent in it and prove it was genuine.

John isn't suggesting you go around biting people who want to be your teacher – but he does command us to examine everything about their lives and their teaching – to see – he writes in *verse 1 – if they are from God*. That is, to see if what they say and how they live is something God would be willing to associate with.

Now the Old Testament tests for determining true spokesman or prophets were fairly simple.

- Did they draw people away from God? (Deuteronomy 13)
- Did the prophet deliver man-pleasing messages, or did they deliver the message from God? (Ezekiel 13 and Micah 3)
- Did their moral character meet God's standard? False prophets were charged with lying and immorality (Jeremiah chapters 8, 14 and 23) . . . lying and immorality just seem to go together.
- And probably the most obvious of all – did their prophecies come true? (Deuteronomy 18:22 – do they come to pass?)^{vi}

Did what they predict actually happen?

If it didn't, guess what happened to the prophet's retirement plan – he lost it because he lost his own life for daring to masquerade as a spokesman of God (Deuteronomy 18).

Anybody who predicted the future or supposedly received information from the spirit world and it didn't come true was executed – which had a way of keeping people from volunteering.

I couldn't help but think of the recent case of those missing girls who were abducted and held for 10 years. One of the mothers was on a television talk show that featured a psychic who has a spirit guide that informs her . . . when she was asked by this woman about her daughter, she responding definitively by saying that the girl was dead – she's now on the other side but her last words were, "Goodbye Mom, I love you."

The mother was crushed . . . in fact, she would die a year later of heart failure. But then 9 years later, her daughter, very much alive, escaped from her abductor.

Of course, the psychic came under intense fire. She would respond to being held accountable for her false prediction by saying, "I have been more right than wrong."^{vii}

Being a spokesperson for God was never a matter of percentages.

Notice what John writes at the end of *verse 1 – many false prophets have gone out into the world*.

This isn't some future danger – this is now. In fact, the phrase – they have *gone out into the world* – implies that these false teachers have gone out on a global mission – they are literally on their own mission trip.^{viii}

Just as we are sending missions teams around the world to deliver the gospel of Christ, false teachers are also racking up their frequent flier miles delivering a false representation of the spirit world, a false understanding of the nature of God and a false interpretation to the gospel of Christ.

Keep in mind that in the Bible, a prophet isn't necessarily someone who foretells the future – but someone who represents themselves as delivering a message from God.^{ix}

And just think – if John is saying that there is this proliferation of false prophets 2,000 years ago, imagine how many false prophets and false religions and false teachers and false spiritual leaders there are today – all claiming to speak with spiritual authority for God.

And listen, that doesn't mean they're really bad people and they always do bad things. John doesn't make that alone the litmus test for authenticity.

They may have done a lot of good things!

In fact, not every deceiving prophet or teacher will be exposed until the final judgment.

Think of it this way – as Warren Wiersbe in his wonderful little commentary on First John illustrated – Suppose you have a counterfeit \$10 dollar bill. You think it's genuine and you use it to pay for a tank of gas (I would update his commentary to clarify – you didn't buy a tank of gas, you bought 2 ½ gallons of gas); the gas station manager later used the bill to buy supplies. The supplier used the bill to pay for groceries; the grocer bundled the bill up with 49 other \$10 dollar bills and took it to the bank. And the teller said, "I'm sorry, but this particular \$10 dollar bill is a counterfeit." Now that \$10 dollar bill did a lot of good things while it was in circulation; but when it arrived at the bank and was handled by an expert – it was exposed for what it really was."^x

And that day is coming when many will stand before the Lord and say, "***Lord, didn't we prophecy in your name? And Jesus will respond "I never knew you . . . depart from me."*** (Matthew 7:22-23) . . . that day of reckoning is coming.

In the meantime, John writes to every believer, "Stay alert . . . don't be gullible . . . put your teachers to the test."

And now John provides the most important test you can use on your teachers.

He follows his command in *verse 1* by giving us the criterion in *verse 2*.

The Criterion

Verse 2 - By this you know the Spirit of God – in other words, this is how you know the Spirit of God is speaking and not some counterfeit spirit – notice – 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, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.

John has already introduced us to the Holy Spirit in *chapter 2* and more explicitly in the last verse of *chapter 3* – where John writes that the Spirit *has been given to us – He abides in us*.

John will call this third person of the Godhead the Holy Spirit several times in his Gospel account – the Gospel of John (***1:33; 14:26 and 20:22***).

Now John is going to refer to the genuine ministry of the Holy Spirit who protects the believer from deception as the believer measures every spiritual message past this key criterion of gospel truth – here it is – what does the prophet or the messenger or the teacher or the spiritual guide say about Jesus?

More specifically, does that teacher confess that Jesus Christ (***vs. 2***) ***has come in the flesh*** – not upon the flesh – or on the flesh, but literally ***in the flesh***.

John is attacking the Cerinthian Gnosticism developed by Cerinthus during the last years of John the Apostle's life. Cerinthus was the first to teach that Jesus and Christ weren't the same person: that Jesus was just an ordinary man upon whom a 'Christ spirit' came – and it descended on Jesus at his baptism.^{xi}

That dove like figure was really some kind of Christ spirit. And the Christ spirit empowered Jesus to do amazing things but then, at the crucifixion, the Christ spirit left Jesus.

So Jesus was just an ordinary man – empowered by God only temporarily.

Of course, this effectively destroys the atonement – a man can't die for the sins of the world; a sinful man can't save sinners.

So note carefully here how John clearly equates Jesus with Christ – Jesus wasn't empowered by Christ – Jesus was – and is – Christ.

John writes, Jesus Christ – already existing – ***came in the flesh***.

He was a real man with a real human body – who preexisted as equal to the Father (Philippians 2); He was none other than God the Son, now in human flesh.

John is also answering the Jewish argument that Jesus was not the Messiah.

Christ – *christos* – was the term for the coming anointed One from God the Father – the Messiah.

In other words, Jesus didn't begin His existence in Bethlehem – Bethlehem was simply the birthplace where God's Son, who existed from all eternity, first appeared on earth in human flesh.^{xii}

So in this one brief phrase, John answers Gnosticism and Cerinthianism and Judaism and Mormonism and Islam and Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists and Buddhism and Hinduism and every religious system since that refuses to

confess that Jesus Christ is deity – uniquely God the Son, the Messiah, preexistent and eternal.

By this criterion you can examine the religions and isms and spasms of our religious world – what do they say about Jesus?

Now what John does next, following the command and the criterion, is provide a contrast.

The Contrast

Notice the contrasting relationship.

Verse 4 – You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.

In other words, by means of the Spirit of God through the word of God about the truth of the Son of God – you have defeated these false teachers.

The verb – ***you have overcome*** – is in the perfect tense which implies a definite time when believers faced these false teachers with their alluring message, but having tested their teaching they rejected the messengers, resulting in victory.^{xiii}

John may have had an incident or two in mind, we don't know what they were; but John has already used the present tense in ***verse 1*** that the believer is to continually test the spirits.

So the total picture here in John's mind and heart as he writes this is that these believers and ourselves included – may have won a victory or two; but we are to maintain alertness – we are to stay at our posts – we are to keep our helmets on – we are to ***stay awake*** – **Gregory** – or whatever your name might be – we are to evaluate what we hear and see and read about Jesus Christ against the truth of scripture – and additional victories over false teaching can be won.

Now notice **the contrasting response** to this truth – ***verse 5. They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them.***

These present tense verbs indicate that these false teachers *keep on* speaking out of worldly wisdom – and the world *keeps on* hearing them.^{xiv}

If you've ever wondered why heretics and false religions and false teachers gain such an incredible following, it's because they speak the same language as the world.

In fact, the word John uses here for the world listening – in ***verse 5*** – ***and the world listens to them*** – is a word that refers to ***eager reception***.

In other words, the message of false teachers arouses and stimulates the world's base attitudes and desires.^{xv}

The world is hearing from them what they want to hear!

They may wrap their lessons in pseudo-spiritual lingo, but it is utterly corrupt . . . John writes in ***verse 3, it is antichrist*** – that is, it doesn't glorify Christ, it exalts the human being.

These teachers have, as in John's day, proliferated – they are everywhere.

One talk-show host that literally has a following of millions, talking often about spiritual themes – but never coming to genuine spiritual truth; she's lived for 25 years with a man to whom she's not married; she has created a convoluted self-made religion with elements from Christianity, humanism, Catholicism, new ageism, eastern mysticism and more.

You might have seen her on television . . . she regularly invites mystics, spiritualists, pseudo-spiritual leaders and teachers on her show.

Well, she spent a weekend a few years ago – a weekend of spiritual silence. She brought along her yoga instructor to provide meditation and guidance as they rediscovered their “center” – as she put it. She completed her weekend and then described it in her magazine which is simply called O after her name – Oprah.

I bought that magazine by the way, it caught my eye in the grocery store because of this headlining article; I wanted to see what all the spiritual insight was really about that so many people inside and outside the church talked about.

Here's what she learned from her weekend of meditation, “Our real power comes from knowing who we are . . . and that begins with looking inside ourselves in silence. I've always believed you really need no leaders, no guides – just yourself. You have all your own best answers. What you are trying to find is already there. Be still and know it.”^{xvi}

I hardly need to comment.

Listen, the truth isn't found in you – it is found in Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life.

You don't need a weekend of silence – you need the Savior.

In case you're new in the faith, the Bible doesn't actually say, “Be still and know it . . . or be still and know yourself – because all the answers are in you.”

No, David wrote in ***Psalms 46:10***, which this poor dear lady twisted to make her own convoluted point

– the Psalmist is actually quoting God who says, **“Be still and know that I am God . . . I will be exalted among the nations . . . I will be exalted in the earth.”**

Because the world doesn’t want to hear that anyone beyond themselves is to be exalted – to be sovereign – they rush to applaud the message of those who merely tell them what they want to hear in the first place.

But – John continues this contrasting response – **those who have the Spirit of God within them – verse 6. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us** – he’s referring specifically to the Apostles – God’s messengers who are true spokesman, delivering to the church what we now hold in our hands – notice further; **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 word for **error** here is from the word plane (πλανη) which gives us our word for planet; a word the ancients used to describe something that randomly wandered around the heavens – roaming around the heavens with no direction or meaning.

What a tragic description of unbelieving mankind.

Three summary statements as we wrap up this paragraph.

1. Remember the problem of spiritual deception isn’t new

It started in the Garden, right?

John battled false teaching related to the person of Christ in the first century and so do we.

In fact, spiritual deception will continue on – and even rise up at the end of the millennial kingdom after Jesus has personally reigned on earth with all his redeemed with Him – still, at the end of near perfect conditions on earth, millions of people who refused to believe in Christ will be deceived and they will actually form an army to march against Jesus Christ Himself (Revelation 20).

Spiritual deception isn’t new.

2. Remember the principle that the Bible is enough.

The Bible is God’s inspired word, sufficient to equip every believer for every good work (2 **Timothy 3:17**).

You have everything you need that pertains to life and godliness (2 **Peter 1:3**)

Many of the religions and cults of the world have the Bible plus something else.

- It is the Bible plus Joseph Smith’s Book of Mormon;
- It is the Bible plus Mary Baker Eddy’s Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures
- It is the Bible plus the Jehovah Witnesses Zion’s Watchtower
- It is the Bible plus the Hindu’s Bhagavad Gita
- It is the Bible plus papal decrees and church traditions
- It is the Bible plus Scientology’s Dianetics
- It is the Bible plus the Jewish mystics Kabbalah

False religions always promote something in addition to the Bible.

Isaiah the prophet warned, **“If they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. (Isaiah 8:20).**

The teachers fail the test.

3. Remember the Person of Jesus Christ is eternally divine.

Be alert to anything that diminishes His glory – His sacrifice – His resurrection – His coming to reign. He is and always was, God the Son – who took on flesh for a purpose.

Dean Niferatos was riding the Number 22 CTA bus in Chicago. The bus was filled with dozing office workers, restless young people and affluent shoppers. At the Clark and Webster stop, two men and a woman climbed in. The driver, a seasoned veteran, immediately called out, “Everybody, watch your valuables – pickpockets are on board!” Everybody woke up – everybody paid attention – men checked for their wallets, women clutched their purses. All eyes, he wrote, were fixed on these three who, looking rather insulted and harassed, didn’t even break their stride as they promptly exited through the middle doors.^{xvii}

So . . .

- stay alert . . .
- stay awake . . .
- encourage each other . . .

- boldly warn others of false teaching – they’ve come to steal away truths that matter . . .
- they’ve come to take what they can get and leave you with nothing but trouble and grief;

- stay in the word and don’t follow those who stray keep you away from it . . .
- and above all, keep your eyes on Jesus – exalt Jesus – follow Jesus Christ – surrender to God the Son your Savior . . . keep your eyes on our Lord Jesus who is the author and finisher of the faith.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/16/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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