

I JOHN: A STUDY IN SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

XI. Discerning The Spirit Of God From False Spirits

(1 John 4:1-6)

I. Introduction

- A. 1 John was written to counter heretical views (Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 881), so the epistle provides discernment, and is thus “filled with contrasts – light and darkness (1:6-7; 2:8-11); love of world and love of God (2:15-17); children of God and children of the devil (3:4-10); the Spirit of God and the spirit of Antichrist (4:7-12, 16-21).” (Ryrie Study Bible KJV, 1978, “Introduction to the First Letter of John: Contents,” p. 1770)
- B. We view the epistle for much needed spiritual discernment today, and study 1 John 4:1-6 on discerning the Spirit of God from false spirits for our insight, application and edification:

II. Discerning The Spirit Of God From False Spirits, 1 John 4:1-6.

- A. Having introduced the subject of the Holy Spirit and His discerning ministry for the believer in 1 John 3:24b, John noted that “the Spirit of God must be distinguished from false spirits,” Ibid., B. K. C., N. T., p. 898.
- B. The need for this discernment is great: many (*polloi*, U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 820) false prophets have gone out into the world and have become **permanent** fixtures there, the verb “gone out” (*exeleluthasin*) being in the perfect tense (Ibid., U. B. S. Grk. N. T.; The Analyt. Grk. Lex., (Zon.), 1972, p. 145), so if these many false prophets who are permanent fixtures in the world minister apart from the Holy Spirit, we must discern them from messengers led of the Holy Spirit or we will be greatly deceived and led into error! (1 John 4:1)
- C. Thus, John provided two tests for discerning the Holy Spirit from false spirits in 1 John 4:2-6 (as follows):
1. First, John gave the test of confessing Christ’s Incarnation as showing one’s salvation status, 1 John 4:2-3:
 - a. John stated this test in the positive sense in 1 John 4:2 KJV (as follows):
 - i. Every spirit, that is, every spirit by which a religious messenger ministers, that confesses that Jesus Messiah is come in the body is of God, 1 John 4:2.
 - ii. The word “confesseth” translates the Greek verb *homologeō*, meaning “confess that one is something” (Arndt & Gingrich, A Grk-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 571) and goes beyond just mouthing words to admitting as one’s own belief that Jesus Messiah is come in the body.
 - iii. We add 1 Corinthians 12:3 that “no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Spirit.”
 - iv. In other words, one possesses the Holy Spirit as a believer if he admits that he personally believes that Jesus Christ is the Creator God of Scripture come in the physical body as the Messiah!
 - b. John then stated this test in the negative sense in 1 John 4:3 KJV (as follows):
 - i. Every spirit by which a messenger ministers that “confesseth not” (the Greek verb *homologeō* again, Ibid.) literally “the Jesus” described back in 1 John 4:2 as the Creator God come in the physical body as the Messiah, is not of God, but is of the antichrist as an unbeliever, the false spirit that is in the world, 1 John 4:3. [The KJV in verse 3 repeats the verse 2 phrase “that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh,” but the better manuscript reading omits that phrase in verse 3 and instead uses the definite article “the” with “Jesus” so that John in verse 3 referred to the claim he made about Jesus in verse 2. (Bruce M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek N. T., 1971, p. 714)]
 - ii. This reveals that false teachers may not overtly deny Christ’s Incarnation, but they do not volunteer as their personal belief that Jesus is the Creator God come in the body as the Messiah!
 - iii. John added the note that his readers had overcome the antichrists because greater was He (the discerning Holy Spirit of God) Who was in them than he (Satan) who is in the world, 1 John 4:4.
 2. Second, John gave the test of accepting apostolic teaching as showing a spirit to be true or errant, v. 5-6:
 - a. The false antichrists are of the world, so they speak of the world’s thinking, and it hears them, 1 Jn. 4:5.
 - b. In stark contrast, John claimed that “we” the apostles of Christ (Ibid., B. K. C., N. T.) were of God, and he who fellowships with the Lord hears and thus accepts the words of Christ’s apostles, 1 John 4:6a.
 - c. He who is not of God does not hear so that he does not accept the words of Christ’s apostles, 1 Jn. 4:6b.
 - d. In this way, believers experientially know (*ginosko*) the spirit of truth and the spirit of error, 1 Jn. 4:6c.

Lesson: We discern that a teacher is saved if he admits Christ’s incarnation as his belief, and we know he has the spirit of truth if he accepts the words of Christ’s apostles. Failing to confess Christ’s incarnation marks one as an unbeliever with the spirit of antichrist, and rejecting the words of Christ’s apostles shows one is an errant teacher.

Application: May we apply these tests to all teachers that we might avoid being misled and be spiritually edified.