

Reading: 1 John 4:1-6

Theme: Testing What is Taught.

In the passage we read, John writes the 3rd test in the cyclic series, the test about truth - the truth (doctrine) of Jesus Christ. In v1 John gave a word of tenderness "*beloved*", a word of warning "*there are false prophets*" and a word of necessity "*do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God.*" We, like John's 1st readers, are not to be naive, gullible or unthinking. John uses commands, imperatives as he told all not to gullibly believe every spirit, but to lovingly and wisely test them. Of necessity this will involve a knowledge of truth and error, of right and wrong, involve seeing beyond things said - even if accompanied by phenomena, great oratory or by someone with incredible experiences or even by a person we like and respect. We are to test what is actually said. We saw last week some dangerous tests if used in isolation and some safe tests.

John wanted his 1st readers and all believers to test what is said or taught (v2-3) and how a person lives (v4-6). We are going to focus on v2-3 this evening and are to remember it is not the only test, but it is a critical, a crucial, vital test for it centres on what a person believes and teaches concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. I want to look at these verses using 3 headings:

1. Consideration of the spirits.

We are never to forget that as well as the Spirit of God there are other spirits in this world. Here in this passage we have the Holy Spirit described as the Spirit of God (v2), the Spirit of truth (v6) (*correctly capitalised in some versions*), but also there is the spirit of the antichrist (v3) and the spirit of falsehood or error (v6).

We know of counterfeit items - money, goods, sought after products. The devil will seek to counterfeit the glorious genuine

works of the Holy Spirit and distract, deceive people - else we would not need John's word of warning. That is why we need to keep on testing the spirits and not to keep on believing every spirit. We need to be on our guard against forgeries in the Christian scene and life. Every Christian has to be on guard and take part in this solemn duty and not be fobbed off with something that is ultimately going to prove worthless as it is a counterfeit of the genuine and we miss out. It is not unloving or unkind to question an experience, teaching, or some new idea, process or scheme. It is very wise, sensible and, in fact, very biblical.

There needs to be a consideration of the spirit behind the teaching of a person, to see if it is of God or not! False teachers, prophets or heretics do not come in with labels on their heads, or displayed on a T-shirt and not with satanic evidences lit up in neon lights. That would make it too easy. Such false teachers could come as angels of light; they give truth along with a subtle dose of error, a crafty addition to or a subtle denial of an important truth, especially concerning the Lord Jesus. That is why we need to give consideration to the spirits - so that we can recognise the Spirit of God and the spirit of the antichrist. We need to be positive about the truth, negative about error and be able to recognise which is which after due consideration.

John speaks of the consideration of these in v2-3. I want to urge us all not to be naive, gullible or unthinking; but to test the spirits - by the teaching and lives of those who deliver the messages - that goes for me or any minister of God's word who preaches here or we hear elsewhere. There needs to be a consideration of the spirits, but John says this especially:

2. Centres on the Saviour.

This critical test does not focus on signs and wonders, on any gift, or experience, or the niceness of the speaker, or on how the message makes us feel. The focus is on what do they proclaim about the Lord Jesus. We noted last week one of the safe tests is that the Holy Spirit will always glorify Christ; always point people to Him as the centre of all. Here John deals with fundamental, basic, foundational truths and gives a very precise definition of what the Spirit of God will have proclaimed by His messengers. This is the positive about Christ, by which we are to judge and measure all else, especially any negative teaching.

There has been and always will be in churches, those who do not hold to the truth of who Jesus is, what He has done, is doing and will do. Some are in error because they take away from Him - who He is and what He's done. JW's, Mormons deny He is fully God and say He is a lesser god or a divine being. That is an obvious danger, but others detract from Him and call Him only a good man, a prophet, or an example, a teacher or a combination of those; but they fall short of who He really is. Some are in error because they add to Him, all He's done, is doing and will do. Some say we need saints or Mary to pray through as they act as mediators between us and God; or we need to go through special religious men, we need special baptising as a baby or adult to be saved. Some say we need to make confession to men and have a proclamation from them. All these are detracting from who Jesus is, what He's accomplished and add things to what Jesus did and so make out the way of salvation Jesus has accomplished is not enough. We are to beware of and be aware of those who preach "*another Jesus*" other than the one the Bible, the word of God, especially the NT, reveals.

John says here that the true spirit of God acknowledges, confesses (*and keeps on doing so*) that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. This is an important definition for us to remember.

I need to say at this point that we are not to be fooled by a person's words and terms - we are to find out what they mean as there is a lot of doubletalk going on in the Christian scene - where what the Bible means by a word and we here in the church use the word in that way, is not what many mean by it. So "sin" has become ignorance or the neglect of certain social structures; Jesus is a pattern for creative living - an example or a revolutionary. "Salvation" becomes liberation from oppression, social injustice or imbalance; "evangelism" means working to overthrow entrenched injustice. We need to ask people what they mean by... By using simple questions-and-answers we find out what they mean and may be shocked at their replies.

When John used the phrase "*Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*" he was deliberately using words and terminology that countered some of the heresies, the false teaching which his 1st readers were exposed to. One group of the false teachers said that the man Jesus had the divine Christ come upon Him at His baptism and leave Him before the cross (*which is a teaching still about today*). Another group of false teachers said Jesus only appeared to have a body, but it was a surreal, a phantom body as God couldn't be that closely identified with corrupt human nature. Another group says the human Jesus raised Himself to divine level by His life etc.

John goes head-to-head, nose to nose with them and says "*Rubbish*"; saying so in this important phrase. John is specific about what he teaches and emphasises here. John says Jesus Christ has (*or is*) come in the flesh - not just Jesus, not just Christ, but Jesus Christ. Some scholars argue that grammatically it could read

“*Jesus as Christ* has come in the flesh.” John is emphasising the unity of His person. The Lord Jesus Christ is one person, but has 2 natures - human (Jesus) and divine (Christ) and yet there is only One person. Jesus is the God-man, God manifest in the flesh. This is the wonder of Christmas and the mystery of the Incarnation - the 2nd person of the godhead took our nature to Himself deliberately and permanently.

John wrote that Jesus Christ “has come”. He does not say that Jesus is born, but has come. It shows us, suggests to us that He existed before He came into the world. We are born into the world and while Jesus had a normal birth process (*though His conception wasn't - as that was divine*), but John emphasises here He came into the world. Jesus had a pre-existence before His coming into the world, He entered into a sphere of existence from His eternal sphere - as we read at the start of John 1 or 1 John 1.

Jesus Christ came into this world in the flesh - a real body. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, God was manifest in the flesh - a real body that grew, needed food, felt pain, cold, that could hurt, cry, bleed and be tired etc. We are not to forget the true humanity of the Lord Jesus. God the Son came in the flesh, but the tense of the word “*has come*” (perfect tense) indicates He took flesh in the incarnation and still is in possession of it permanently. In heaven the One on the throne of the universe is the God-man, with glorified humanity and He took human nature to Himself for ever and yet He is not restricted by it in all His working, omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, rule and reign of all of history.

If anyone takes away from this teaching, they attack the Saviour and the salvation He offers. If He, the Son of God, did not really become a man, then the incarnation is not true, it means He did

not humble Himself if He had no real body, then there was no real suffering, no real atonement on the cross, no real accomplishment of salvation, no atoning death, no real bodily resurrection and no Ascension to heaven. To be honest it means we have no hope, no salvation and Christianity is a waste of time if John's statement is not true. Yet if it is true, and I believe it is, then we have every hope that heaven can be ours and we are not wasting our time. In fact, we need no one and nothing extra than Jesus Christ only. He alone is enough and sufficient for our salvation and to bring us safely to heaven. We do not need schemes, isms, strivings, good works, saints, Mary, indulgences or masses for Jesus and Jesus alone is enough and all sufficient.

This is the one the Holy Spirit will speak of, glorify and centre on. He will point all to the Lord Jesus Christ, who He is, what He has done, is doing and will do. Do we acknowledge, confess this Jesus Christ as our Saviour? He alone is the hope for our eternal souls. This is the One we are to proclaim by the help and strength of the same Holy Spirit. We are to declare His person and work in all its fullness; not add to, take away from or dilute it for our own or any generation. This test centres on the Saviour, but John also indicates the foundation of our knowledge, so quickly note that the Spirit of truth:

3. Conforms to the Scriptures.

John does not say this directly and explicitly here, but he does say it! It was one of the safe tests I gave last week and it is worth noting again and opening up on a little bit. How could John's 1st readers and even we decide whether a teaching about Jesus is true or false? John as an apostle and the other apostles taught about Jesus - we are to note well chapter 1:1ff and what John says there. John often speaks in this letter of what these believers heard, were taught at the beginning. John says in effect "*What we taught was*

true, is true and remains true". So, his 1st readers and we are to keep on finding out what they taught and to believe that. Thankfully they wrote these things down, were inspired and guided by the same Holy Spirit and we have a fourfold and four faceted account of Jesus' life in NT. We have the inspired application of that teaching for the early Church, for all the Church.

We are to realise the Apostles were given unique authority. We read the Church's foundations were the apostles and the prophets (Ephesians 2:20). Some argue the term prophets here mean the OT prophets - in other words the OT and it means the church is built on both the foundation of OT and NT. Here is a solid, a fixed base and foundation. That is why we stress the fact we are an evangelical church - using 'evangelical' in the historical sense of the word - meaning a Bible believing and teaching church. The Bible is our foundation, our measure, our standard for life and belief. We do not look for new revelation, there's no need to put in a new foundation again, but we carry on building our lives and our church on the foundation of God's word.

Paul wrote strongly concerning this issue in Galatians 1:8-9 *"But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"* Paul wanted, insisted that all believers test the preachers according to the revealed word of God through the apostles and even if 'an apostle' or 'an angel' went against it, he wanted them to be eternally accursed. That is not unloving, even though it may sound hard and grieve us and people, but it is like a surgeon cutting out a cancer or disease from someone's

body - it may be painful, upset people, but it is necessary to stop it spreading and killing them.

We are not to be negative people, but positive and stress the positive as much, if not more than the negative. As we know the truth, live out the truth, we will hopefully know when error or falsehood is proclaimed. We are to test the spirits by what they teach through their mouthpieces – even if accompanied by great oratory, passion, phenomena and experiences. We are to be those who always test the truth of what is said and are not be taken in by how dramatic or sweetly it has been said.

We are not to indulge in a theological witch hunt, but recognise where Scripture draws the line between error and truth, between one interpretation and another. There are areas where Christians can and will agree to disagree over secondary issues e.g. mode of baptism or church government, interpretation of the Lord's return. Yet other areas are fundamental and primary and we are not to tolerate heresy or false teaching in those.

Also we need also to distinguish between heresy and mistaken belief as some need help and teaching to see and to understand the truth of God's word. We are not to have an unrestrained laxity nor a hard, proud rigour, but we are to be wise, loving and discerning. I pray this for you and I hope you will pray it for me in our days.