

1 John 4:1-6 ▪ Applying Spiritual Discernment

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Truth; False Teaching; Apostasy

A call for confessing believers to be discerning as to what is taught and believed about Jesus Christ.

Intro: “Jesus Christ is bigger than your problems.” That’s what the sign reads coming down I-26 South, somewhere by Newberry. It caught my eye recently.

What are the problems that we think Jesus is bigger than?

—We think of the things that cause anxiety or stress.

—Maybe health problems, financial problems, or relationship problems.

But what about the problem of error, and false teaching which calls for spiritual discernment? Is that a big enough problem for Jesus to be concerned with?

Do you think that makes the list of typical problems that people care about?

*The problem of false teaching was a major one; one that moved the Spirit-inspired pen of John to write.

Review: As I mentioned before, 1 John weaves certain *tests* throughout the letter.

—Moral test

—Love test

—Truth/doctrine test

- Here, the word “test” is in the text (v2)—the word means “to make a critical examination in order to determine the genuineness.”
- Sometimes it carries the meaning “to prove”.

Some years back when I still used cash to buy stuff, I handed the cashier a \$20 bill. Next thing I knew the worker took out what looked like a sharpie magic marker and drew a big line down through the bill. At first it seemed like a joke; then I asked what that was all about....it was checking to make sure my bill was genuine, to prove that it was legit.

› We “test” and “prove” things we value.

If we do that with money, how much more important is it to do spiritually.

It's clear from this passage that all Christians are called to apply spiritual discernment. It's not a separate gifting, or only for the nerdy type.

- The call for spiritual discernment goes way back into Israel's history.

Deuteronomy 13:1–3 CSB

“If a prophet or someone who has dreams arises among you and proclaims a sign or wonder to you, and that sign or wonder he has promised you comes about, but he says, ‘Let's follow other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let's worship them,’ do not listen to that prophet's words or to that dreamer. For the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul.

- › The test is really about worship—does the teaching lead to true worship, or away. Does it encourage adoration, or idolatry?

This is also a reminder that God's people are to be a thinking people. We live in a pretty feelings-based age. But you can't determine truth based on feelings.

- This is also not a call to be overly cynical or to go on doctrinal witch hunt.... but be biblically discerning.

It's a call to be like the noble Bereans in [Acts 17:11](#)

The first Sunday I preached in my first church is still etched fondly in my memory. The former pastor, committed to the ministry of the Word, left on good terms to serve God in the mission field. He also unintentionally left his sermon manuscript from the last message he preached.

It was a kind call to welcome me, the new pastor, with love and support.

But what struck me most was his conclusion:

“Don't just believe Ryan because he says something; test everything by the Word of God.”

That was not offensive to me. It was not a call to be cynical, but discerning. It's how all teaching should be handled.

—We need to remember the context: Applying spiritual discernment is not how we interact with unbelievers; (secularism in our day). In context, John is addressing teaching that happens within the church. The call to apply spiritual discernment applies to all teaching that falls under the umbrella of “Christian”.

- Let's look at the text. What is a call to apply spiritual discernment all about?

A call to apply spiritual discernment (1, 6)

- V1—Do not believe every spirit
- “Do not believe” is in the present tense. It meant the threat was a real, present, near, and active.
- Spirit: referring to the *spiritual influences* behind teachers and teaching.

Every teacher has an influence behind their teaching—either it’s God or Satanic/worldly (v3).

It’s a warning against gullibility. A spiritually gullible person believe everyone who says: God told me. Or reads and believes every word from every so called Christian author.

In our day, a spiritually gullible person will elevate someone and give them a hearing just because they have a Youtube channel, or social media platform.

There is a need to apply spiritual discernment...there is a need to *test*.

- The text is framed with an awareness of spiritual discernment—v 1

Call—v1

Confidence—v6

There is a great confidence in the Lord that we can be a spiritually discerning people...but it does require a careful watch.

Hebrews 2:1 ESV

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

—In one sense, the entire book of Hebrews is a call to Spiritual discernment.

—Some were tempted to take on a worldview that downgraded Jesus.

- › One of the greatest threats—problems—is a downgraded Jesus worldview.

It’s surprising who ends up drifting. It becomes increasingly common over the years.

I was not surprised to see kids from the youth group, that I was a part of when I was converted, drift—they already seemed to have a shallow relationship to Christ.

I was more baffled sitting at a Cracker Barrel in Louisville, KY...listening to a friend/seminary, student-youth pastor tell me he no longer was going to be in ministry or enrolled at seminary because he had severe doubts about his faith.

Just last week another man in the Reformed evangelical world shared his “deconversion” on social media.

So how do we avoid the drift?

1 John gives us 3 Anchors.

Anchor 1: The Reality of Jesus Christ (2-3)

- The litmus test of a Christian is knowing Jesus.
- The error circulating in the early church that John writes to, was denying Jesus was a real flesh and blood person; that he came “in the flesh” (incarnate).

Here we need to be reminded that all religious cults probably give some nod to Jesus...but is it the real Jesus?

- First, let’s start with the name—Jesus Christ; or it could be translated Jesus Messiah.

What does that mean? It’s essential, since it’s how Peter made his great confession.

Matthew 16:16 CSB

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

—It means a few things:

1. All God’s promises are fulfilled in him (2 Cor 1:20)

Deuteronomy 18:15 ESV

“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen,”

Jesus takes a prophetic role—*which means taking him serious means listening to him.*

Psalms 2:6 ESV

“As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”

Psalms 110:2 ESV

The LORD sends forth from Zion
your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your enemies!

Jesus fulfills a kingly role—*taking him seriously is living under his rule.*

Isaiah 53:5–6 ESV

But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;

and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Jesus Messiah takes on a priestly role—

Taking him seriously means trusting in him, his work as the one complete sacrifice.

**For all of these offices to be fulfilled—Jesus needs to be a real person.

- The offices of prophet, priest, and king are all woven into Adam’s humanity.
- So, the Messiah that the OT foreshadows—the true Son of God—will also take on a true humanity.

—real voice, real life, real blood that atones.

Do you confess Jesus? The true Jesus? Do you believe what the Bible says about him—he came in the flesh—a real person, that he fulfills the promises and purposes of God?

Is Jesus Christ real to you? If so, drop the first anchor to avoid the drift.

Anchor 2: The Holy Spirit (4-5)

- There was likely a group of false teachers that had infiltrated the church, caused a stir, and left—and likely took others with them.

The point of the letter is to encourage those who have remained and stayed the course.

- (v4)—You have overcome/conquered them (them being the false teachers).

But what causes people to stay?

What is the defining difference between someone who stays committed to Jesus, and one who strays?

Is it intelligence? Is it a certain amount of focus, mental fortitude?

| There are a lot of people more intelligent and disciplined who end up drifting.

The difference is not who you are, but who is *in you* (v4)—those who stay and persevere in the faith have one thing in common: they are possessed by the Holy Spirit of God.

- The Spirit is mentioned in 3:24—indwelling every believer.

Romans 8:9 ESV

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

—Yet the emphasis in v4 is that the Spirit is actually greater—it's presses the degree of power.

- This is the opposite of dualism, that sees two opposite, but equal forces at work in the world (good and evil); here it is clear that two persons are at war—Holy Spirit and Antichrist.

False teachers will never win true believers over, due to the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in them.

In other words, study the Word; take doctrine, prayer, and seeking God seriously—but remember the rock-solid assurance of a true believer.

John 10:29 ESV

My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

Anchor 3: Apostolic Teaching (6)

- It's a basic question, but one of the most critical: how do you know God?
- This verse gives confidence, and evidence.

It's important to hear this clearly in our postmodern culture that promotes skepticism, and questions if you can really know truth.

“Whoever knows God listens to us” —i.e. accepts and embraces the Bible as truth.

- I think John is referring to “us” as the apostles.

Acts 2:42 ESV

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

What is “apostolic preaching” —how can we spot it; have an ear for it?

Apply: In other words, I know that many Christians listen to other preachers besides this preacher—which is fine, and I'm thankful for the wealth of good preaching. You may read Christian books/blogs.

- › How do you know what is healthy or not?

Look for the marks of apostolic preaching.

Apostolic preaching (biblical)

1. Christ centered, scripture based

1 Corinthians 15:3–4 ESV

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

2. Call for a response: faith and repentance

Acts 2:37–38 ESV

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

3. Highlights holy living

1 Peter 1:14–16 ESV

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

John uses different terms—Walk in the Light; Do not love the world...but it means the same thing: Holy Living must be highlighted in our lives.

It’s striking that John connects false teaching with the world.

One question I’ve asked if trying to discern teaching: is it helping me fit more into the world, or not.

Do I feel more at home in the world through this teacher, or more homesick—longing for heaven?

The path of the world is never the path of holiness.

- › The teaching that most attracts us should be what draws us to God’s holiness and holy living!

Conclusion:

Maybe the litmus test of spiritual discernment then is how much Holiness grips us?

Do we have an overwhelming view of God as Holy?

—The world has zero categories or care about holiness....yet is so close to what God is passionate about.

We use the phrase: “on the same page”.

Are we on the same page?

The question then—are we on the same page as the world, or the same page of the Lord Jesus Christ. One is full of lies, the other full of grace and truth.

May the Lord give us discerning minds after the truth and burning hearts after his holiness.