



“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (I John 4:1).

Determine the Difference

Central Truth: The Holy Spirit helps to discern truth.

L256. Date: January 1990. **Text:** I John 4:1-6. **Topic:** Doctrine: Heresies In:

How do you know whom to believe when there are so many conflicting teachers and teachings today? Some teachers are so persuasive, logical, and convincing that many people believe they must be right. The Bible warns against those who serve their own interests rather than the Lord Jesus and *“by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple”* (Romans 16:18). A person is not to be believed simply because he is an orator. The real question is, “What is he teaching?”

God holds each of us responsible for discerning what is true, believing it, teaching it, and living it. We must discern between truth and error, holding the former and rejecting the latter. There is “the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error” (I John 4:6). We can distinguish one from the other. We can and we must “Determine the Difference.”

But what is the very foundation truth of our faith? It is the doctrine of Jesus Christ. That is why John puts that as the touchstone to separate truth from error. A person could err in some doctrines and be an erring Christian. But one who rejects the doctrine of Christ is not a Christian at all. The coming of God in human flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, is the heartbeat of our faith.

I. DIFFERENCE IN TEACHERS (I John 4:1)

A. Be careful whom you believe. The Bible warns, *“Believe not every*

spirit” (verse 1). No one teaches apart from the influence of a spirit. One will teach under the direction of the Holy Spirit or his teaching is influenced by a demonic spirit. You are not dealing merely with a person but with the spirit which directs that person.

False prophets are like wolves in sheep's clothing. They are not what they appear to be. Their destructive heresies are brought in secretly until they have snared the unwary. Those teachers are seducing spirits. Their doctrines are demonic. They teach lies in hypocrisy. (Examine the biblical description in II Peter 2:1-3 and I Timothy 4:1-3.) Be careful that you do not believe them.

B. Test a teacher before you believe what he teaches. Do not be skeptical or critical of every teacher you hear, but do not accept new doctrines without checking out the teachings. Hearers of Paul and his missionary party in Berea set the example *“in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so”* (Acts 17:11). What was the standard by which the teachings were judged? It was not the personality of the preachers or the logic of their teachings. It was the Bible!

Check all teachings by the Word of God. God stated that principle through His prophet Isaiah, saying that people should teach according *“to the law and to the testimony.”* He said, *“If they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them”* (Isaiah 8:20). Test every teacher by the Word.

C. Do not believe some teachers. Today we can hear teachers who match the description of II Timothy 3:1-7. We are under the command of God to withdraw ourselves from every person, even one whom we would call a brother, who does not hold to the doctrine of Christ and walk in His ways (II Thessalonians 3:6). The danger is real and present. Beware! Believe those whom you know to be men of God and faithful to Bible doctrines.

II. DIFFERENCE IN DOCTRINES (I John 4:2-4)

A. Receive the doctrines concerning Jesus Christ (verse 2). The doctrine of Christ begins at Genesis 3:15 in biblical revelation. It continues as the Christ is shown to be the Son of a woman; a descendant of Shem; a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; of the tribe of Judah; of the house of David; and finally the Son of the virgin Mary. You can trace the prophecies concerning Him through all the Old Testament.

Romans 10:8-10 states that salvation comes by confessing with the mouth the Lord Jesus and believing in the heart that God has raised Him

from the dead. Notice that salvation is directly and solely related to Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to be a child of God (I John 5:1). It is safe to believe and receive the doctrines of Christ.

B. Reject false doctrines concerning Jesus Christ (verse 3). Not everyone believes that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of God. Many who believe Him to be a great teacher reject His claims that He is God in human flesh. John warns, “*Many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. . . . Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God*” (II John 7, 9). If a trusted teacher of former times, or even an angel from heaven, comes and teaches a different doctrine, do not accept him or his teachings. Let both be accursed (Galatians 1:6-9). If that sounds harsh, so be it. That is what God says.

C. Experience the blessed reality in Jesus Christ (verse 4). Here are two blessed assurances from God himself: (1) you are of God's family, and (2) you have the mastery over the false teachers and the spirit which moves them. What precious truths! What a reason to rejoice! Does your heart thrill at hearing it?

You are of God because you have been born of God (John 1:11, 12), are indwelt by the Spirit of God (I John 3:24), and are a child of God by faith in the Son of God (Galatians 3:26). Oh, praise the Lord for such assurance.

You have overcome the wicked one because you are in Christ and He has overcome him (I John 5:4). One day soon God will crush the devil's head under your feet (Romans 16:20).

God dwells within you, and He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. God is sovereign. Even the devil himself is subject to God. You share in God's triumph because you are in Christ. Everything revolves around Jesus, doesn't it?

III. DIFFERENCE IN SPIRITS (I John 4:5, 6)

A. There is a spirit of error. It is identified in the text as being “*of the world*” (verse 5). It is not from the Lord God. It has nothing to do with the perfection of His person or the certainty of His revelation to mankind. It is opposed to truth and is called simply “*the spirit of error.*”

Remember that “*world*” does not refer to the inanimate creation — rocks, trees, hills, and valleys. It refers to human society apart from God. It is man in his natural state, alienated and at enmity with the Lord God. The spirit of error is identified as being “*of the world.*” Therefore, it is opposed

to God, the people of God, and every purpose of God. By nature it is of the world. By testimony it deals with the world. Its reception is by the world. The Christian should have nothing to do with it.

B. There is a spirit of truth. It is “*of God*” (verse 6). Its essence is stated in I John 5:20: “*We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life.*” The spirit of truth is bound up in Jesus Christ who is the truth.

Those who “*know*” God hear the spirit of truth and follow the ways of truth. “*He that is of God heareth God's words*” (John 8:47). On the other hand, “*The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned*” (I Corinthians 2:14). Those who trust Jesus are given the Holy Spirit to instruct them in the things of God. They receive the truth, believe it, teach it, and live by it.

What a great distinction there is between truth and error. What a sharp contrast there is between those who follow the spirit of truth and those who follow the spirit of error. Discern between truth and error. Follow truth. “*Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth*” (Romans 14:22).

Questions for discussion

1. How does the warning of Romans 16:18 apply today?
2. What does it mean to “*believe not every spirit*”?
3. How is Acts 17:11 a proper example for us?
4. Why is the doctrine of Christ the key to our faith?
5. What does this say about good religious people who do not believe in Christ?
6. Why do false teachers attack the doctrine of Christ?
7. How can you test a teacher without being harsh and critical?
8. How might “*the spirit of error*” be manifesting itself today?
9. Why is Bible study so important in view of this lesson?
10. How can you help your loved ones to know the way of truth?