

1 John 4 – Part A

1 John 4:1

¹Jn 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

It is a critical element of the Christian life that a believer develops the very important attribute of spiritual discernment. It should be more than obvious that within the framework of Christianity that there are many false teachers leading people astray with their false teaching. Throughout all of the New Testament, Paul would constantly call people by name who were leading people into error. In [2 Timothy 2:17-18](#), Paul called out two men specifically,

²Ti 2:17 And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, ¹⁸ who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some.

T.D. Jakes for instance has recently come out in support of the gay/lesbian movement within churches. Rick Warren appears to be involved in what is known as “Chrislam”. Chrislam is an attempt to syncretize Christianity with Islam. While it began in Nigeria in the 1980s, Chrislamic ideas have spread throughout much of the world. The essential concept of Chrislam is that Christianity and Islam are compatible, that one can be a Christian and a Muslim at the same time. Chrislam is not an actual religion of its own, but a blurring of the differences and distinctions between Christianity and Islam. It denies the deity of Christ.

Rick Warren recently addressed the convention of the Islamic Society of North America. He stated that Muslims and Christians must work together to combat stereotypes, promote peace and freedom, and solve global problems. Just think of that for a minute - Christians and Moslems – faith mates, soul mates and now work mates. This was one of his opening statements: “Before we ‘shake your hand’ in responding to your letter, we ask forgiveness of the All-Merciful One and of the Muslim community around the world.”

Joyce Meyer teaches that Jesus stopped being the Son of God, that He was born again, that we are called little gods, that Jesus went to hell and suffered for our sins, that she is not a sinner, and that she receives special revelation knowledge – just to name a few.

[2 Peter 2:1-3](#) says,

²Pe 2:1 But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, *and* bring on themselves swift destruction. ² And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³ By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

In fact, believers are encouraged not to be deceived or led astray by these individuals. [Ephesians 4:14](#) says,

^{Eph 4:14} that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting,

The problem that arises when individuals lack discernment is that they increase their vulnerability and exposure to deception. Spiritually, this has a very serious liability associated with it. Scripture is clear that Satan and his false emissaries disguise themselves as “**angels of light**”. It must be understood that false teachers are very skilled at what they do. They are articulate, winsome, and very likable. Often times they seem to speak with great authority and generally have a high level of charisma. Most of the time they are very entertaining. The issue, however, is that within their charismatic personality package they mishandle the Word of God and distort its true meaning to such a degree that people buy into their teaching. This is so prevalent in the current Christian culture within America that it is utterly frightening the level of impact that the false teachers are having within the church. Their books are the best sellers in the Christian bookstores. They draw thousands of people to their conferences. Most of them are on Christian television networks and most every one of them are multi-millionaires. They live extravagant lifestyles, own enormous homes and real estate, and fly everywhere in their personal jets.

No wonder John encouraged his people in these verses to “**test the spirits**”, to examine what is being taught with great scrutiny, and to carefully analyze exactly what it is that someone is listening to before accepting the teaching. Without over developing or overstating the issue, it must be discerned that all false teaching has satanic roots. Jesus Himself said that Satan was the father of all lies. In [1 Timothy 4:1](#), Paul wrote these words,

^{1Ti 4:1} Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons,

Please appreciate that the term “**deceiving spirits**” does not refer to people who are just blatantly and obviously in great error, but rather it refers to people who come across as very likable, friendly, pleasant, and congenial. They have the unique ability to deceive people with words. They carefully develop and skillfully articulate various doctrines and teachings that are easy for people to accept and embrace. There is always some kind of “bait” in the message that hooks people into accepting their teaching and implementing it into their life. No wonder Paul told Timothy that he was to “**guard the truth**” at all costs. However, it is very difficult to “**guard the truth**” when the individual does not even know the truth. So the more false teaching that someone accepts because of a lack of discernment in their life, the less they will be able to convey God’s truth to other people.¹ In fact, the issue that arises is that they are not even able to distinguish that which is false from that which is true because of their lack of discernment. So discernment is intensely vital for living a meaningful and purposeful Christian life.

In approaching this passage of Scripture, the primary issue is always that of arriving at the truth of a passage. The problem that arises within the current Christian culture is that too often people claim to have experiences that are not in alignment with Scripture, and the result is that their experience becomes the foundation of their doctrine. In their case, experience overrides and eventually undermines the truth. Doctrine can often be validated by experiences, but doctrine can only be founded on the truth provided in the Word of God. So even if someone does have a particular experience, and one which cannot actually be denied, it does not mean that it is in alignment with the Word of God. Experience simply cannot trump the Scriptures. That is why John encourages his readers to actually provide a level of spiritual testing of that which is being taught. It is important at this point to stress the necessity for testing – not only of others, but of ourselves as well. Anyone who teaches the Word of God must be willing to allow others to scrutinize, to examine, and to validate the truthfulness of what they are

teaching. No one has a monopoly on the truth – no one. No one is right about everything all the time, therefore honest and intelligent scrutiny should be readily accepted. In [Acts 17:11](#), Paul had gone to Berea and this is what he said about the Christians who were there,

Ac 17:11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

The word for “**searched**” means to examine, to scrutinize, to investigate, to interrogate, to determine, and to discern.² It further carries the meaning of examining something very closely and carefully so that the truth can be ascertained and understood. The actual antonym of this word simply means to dismiss and to neglect.³ Please note that Paul, the most profound teacher of the New Testament, was actually commending these people for examining what it was that he was teaching.

It is the duty of every Christian to understand what it is that they say that they actually believe. If someone does not understand what they say that they believe, then they will never be able to communicate God’s truth to other people in an understandable and meaningful way. That should be obvious. There must be meaningful definition and valid research on every passage. The technical areas of a verse and of a major passage must be understood, or the church will find itself not having the willpower or the intellectual understanding to refute false doctrine. All of the successful cults are primarily built around false doctrine that is technically misunderstood and eventually misapplied. The Jehovah Witnesses, for instance, base much of their doctrine on the misinterpretation and mishandling of one word – the word “**Son**”. They interpret it without a capital letter and remove the deity of Christ. So all of their doctrine is founded on one small letter in the alphabet that is severely misunderstood and misappropriated. The individual who is not interested in doctrine and the details of doctrine is probably just lazy when it comes to handling the Scriptures.

As a pastor, I understand that not every Christian enjoys the same kind of teaching. However, my pastoral job is not to make Scripture enjoyable – not at all. The first duty of anyone who teaches must be to “**rightly**” divide the Word of God. [2 Timothy 2:15](#) says,

2Ti 2:15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

The words “**rightly dividing**” are just one word in the Greek language – “*orthotomeo*”. The Interlinear Greek Bible translates it as “**keeping on a straight course**”. Strong’s says that it means to expound the divine message correctly, to dissect it correctly. It means to rightly deal with something and to teach Scripture accurately, carefully discerning each nuance as much as is possible.⁴ The stress is on the Greek word “*orthos*” which means straight. In other words, the Word of God is to be handled strictly along the lines of what it is teaching.⁵ Often times teachers take the liberty to spruce up the Word of God and to try and make it more appealing to their hearers. That is a very dangerous path to take. The hermeneutical principle that should always be maintained is to simply let the Word of God say what it says. A teacher does not have the spiritual liberty to embellish and to make the Word of God more attractive and interesting. That is never the responsibility of a biblical teacher – never. Their sole responsibility is to rightly divide the Scriptures. When this does not happen, people will be led astray and greatly deceived. In fact, in the [2 Timothy 2:15](#) passage, Timothy is encouraged to be a “**worker**” or “**workman**”. The obvious point of using that particular word is that the individual who is teaching has to labor and toil in

the Word of God. The Greek word “*ergates*” comes from another Greek word “*ergon*” which simply means to work and to toil at something with great effort.⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ MacArthur, 153.

² Strong, 945.

³ Zodhiates, 152.

⁴ Strong, 1273.

⁵ Vine's, 319.

⁶ Strong, 1111.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1-3 John*. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 2007.

Strong, James. *The New Strong's Expanded Dictionary of Bible Words*. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001.

Vine, W.E. *The Expanded Vine's: Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. A Special Edition. Edited by John R. Kohlenberger III. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1984.

Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. Revised Edition, 1993. Chattanooga, Tennessee: AMG Publishers, 1992.