

1 John 4 – Part C

1 John 4:2-3

¹Jn 4:2 By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

One of God’s primary purposes is that of confronting men with the truth. The truth is what He uses to actually change people’s lives when they respond to that truth. Opposite that effort is the work of Satan which confronts people with that which is not true.¹ Because of that simple conflict, every discerning believer must carefully evaluate that to which they are listening. In his final exhortation to the Thessalonians, Paul gave this instruction to them in [1 Thessalonians 5:21-22](#) when he said,

¹Th 5:21 Test all things; hold fast what is good. ²² **Abstain from every form of evil.**

There is absolutely nothing wrong with having what might be called “spiritual skepticism”. Certainly it has to be recognized that not every Bible teacher is a credible teacher. John fully recognizes that there are many spiritual deceivers and liars in the church, and they work desperately hard to gain people’s trust and allegiance. Therefore it is crucial that believers must evaluate doctrine that is being taught to them. They must investigate the theological implications of what someone is teaching. In fact, as John taught in v1, the word “**test**” meant to put something to a very rigorous and careful examination.² It is not spiritual to be naïve and gullible to what people are teaching. In fact, often times there is a very real misguided tolerance of false teaching and an unwarranted charity toward false teachers.³

In beginning these verses, it is important to recognize that they are the ultimate exam for testing the spirits, and it all centers around the person of Christ. Obviously, if a teacher is wrong about Christ, then the rest of their teaching will be wrong. Secondly, it should be clear that just because he is dealing with the issue of false teachers that John is clearly communicating to his readers that there actually were false teachers, false prophets, and antichrists within the church itself. Please do not miss this point. The place where teachers empowered by demonic spirits actually function are within the church itself, and in every case they will articulate that they believe in Jesus Christ. [Jude 4](#), speaking of these kinds of false teachers, says,

Jude 1:4 For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

[2 Peter 2:1](#) speaking on the same subject 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.

[2 Peter 2:14](#) further describes their methodology,

2Pe 2:14 **having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls. They have a heart trained in covetous practices, and are accursed children.**

Jesus said the following about false prophets in [Matthew 7:15](#),

Mt 7:15 **"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.**

John has already dealt with the term “**antichrists**” in [1 John 2:18-23](#). In that passage those who were called “**antichrists**” did not fully deny Jesus Christ. That would have been much too obvious. So, what was it that they did? It was not that they denied Christ, but the false teachers simply misrepresented who Christ was.⁴ Misrepresentation is much more subtle than outright and blatant false teaching. It borders on being shrewd, tricky, and very deceptive, and that is exactly why often times it is difficult for someone who is undiscerning to actually recognize false teaching when they listen to it. False teaching always has a particular slant to it. It is something unique or different, and most likely something that requires a vivid imagination. So the problem was simple – they were preaching Jesus, but as Paul declared in [Galatians 1](#), it was a different Jesus, another Jesus, or a new kind of Jesus.

Now, without over developing the actual false teaching that existed in the early church, it was a teaching concerning the fact that Jesus Christ had two natures. Because of the Incarnation, one nature was divine and the other nature was human. So the false teaching revolved around the Incarnation and what it really was. The term that describes this particular phenomena is the term the God-Man. God the Son never relinquished His Godness, but he fully took on a human nature, and that is why He is called the God-Man – a very accurate term. In v3, it is clear that the false teaching that was infiltrating the early church was that Jesus Christ did not “**come in the flesh**”. John simply says in that verse that these teachers are “**not of God**” and are being controlled by “**the spirit of the Antichrist**”. I.e., they were denying the Incarnation.

Without over stating the issue, the Incarnation has to be one of the top three doctrines in the Bible along with the sovereignty of God and the Atonement. To not understand the Incarnation and its impact on Christ is to not understand Christ. There were many heresies regarding this issue within the early church, and the majority of them were not fully resolved until the canon of Scripture was completed. This was a very vital concern to the life of the early church, and certainly something which John had to address. What someone believes about Jesus Christ has enormous implications. All of the major cults confess Christ, but it is the wrong Christ. So, just from a practical perspective, a very important question that must be asked when listening to someone is the following question - what does this individual teach concerning the person of Christ? That is the all-important question that has to be asked. It must be asked. Please notice that in v1-6 that John uses the term “**of God**” seven different times, and then he uses the term “**the world**” six different times. So, he is constantly contrasting that which is “**of God**” or “**not of God**” with “**the world**”.

In these two verses John clarifies that he wants the believer to “**know the Spirit of God**”. Please notice that the word “**Spirit**” begins with a capital letter signifying that he is specifically talking about the Holy Spirit. The word “**know**” means that the individual comprehends something intellectually and sees things as they truly are. In other words, what is known is not just an opinion or an individual’s speculation about something. However, one of the nuances of the meaning is that the word is used of

personal relationships. It is the idea that one person is personally acquainted with another person and a part of that relationship was a very strong trust in the individual that was known. As an example, I know my wife intimately and I trust her completely. I have comprehended through experience and observation that my wife is trustworthy, and therefore I trust her. So, the biblical concept of the usage of this word extends beyond a mere intellectual knowledge and moves into the area of trust and obedience.⁵

Now, one of the things that John is stating is that what he is about to tell us is one of the ways that believers know that something is of the “**Spirit of God**”. He does that by using the two words “**by this**”. By what? By what he is about to state in v2-3. It is important to appreciate that John has associated the word “**spirit**” with the phrase “**many false prophets**” in v1. So when he uses the term “**spirit**” in v2-3, John is actually referring to the spirit that is governing and controlling false teachers, and his purpose is to help the believer to be able to determine who is a false teacher and who is not a false teacher. Obviously, this is a very important issue for the New Testament church. Most believers will generally be inclined to follow the teaching of those people whom they listen to the most. So, if they lack discernment relative to who is a false teacher, then most likely they will begin to integrate the false teaching into their life and into their lifestyle.

Now obviously, in v2-3 John draws a distinction between two completely opposite kinds of teachers. In fact he says that one is “**of God**” and the other is “**not of God**”. He even uses the term “**Antichrist**” to further emphasize the complete and utter difference to which he is drawing attention. If he uses such a strong term to emphasize what he is saying, then the reader has to pay attention to that kind of language. In v5 he further says that false teachers “**speak as of the world**” and in v6 that they have the “**spirit of error**”. Just think for a moment about the implications of that last phrase - the “**spirit of error**”. In other words, ultimately their teaching is worldly, or what I often refer to as being “**man-centered**” and it is energized by demonic spirits whose sole purpose is to lead people into error. Please appreciate that false teachers utilize biblical words, but ultimately their teaching is worldly and not a Christ-centered message except as it benefits their purposes. It is the utilization of biblical terms that often creates the lack of judgment in a believer who is not very discerning. So, from a very practical standpoint, do not lose sight of the fact that false teachers use biblical words to develop spiritual principles. Do not be deceived and undiscerning by listening to men and women who are highly articulate in sculpturing words for their benefit. The best Bible teachers that I know personally are individuals who teach through the Scriptures systematically rather than topically. What this does is prevent someone from developing teachings out of context. The more topical that someone is overall, probably the more unbiblical they ultimately become. Scripture has a certain order to it and it is important to maintain that biblical order as it is delineated in the various New Testament letters. Obviously, it is not improper to teach on a topical subject – not at all. In fact, many doctrinal issues are better taught systematically. In most cases they cannot be taught exhaustively by a verse by verse commentary on a New Testament letter. The difference, however, between a biblical teacher and a false teacher is the degree of attention that they give to the details of a passage or to a particular topic such as justification, sanctification, the sovereignty of God, the incarnation, or the atonement. The details of Scripture are what create the biblical weight and substance of a passage. So if someone is always skipping from subject to subject and topic to topic, in essence they are deleting the biblical substance from their messages and generally interjecting their

own private ideas and notions into their teaching. That approach is very dangerous and there needs to be a high level of discernment relative to someone who uses that teaching methodology.

So what is the primary attribute that John says needs to be discerned in determining who is and who is not a false prophet? The key is found in the word “**confesses**”. The Greek word for “**confess**” is “*homologeō*”. Both uses of the word in v2-3 are in the present tense, indicative mood, in the active voice. Now what is important about that is the present tense. What the present tense is saying in both cases – one positive (v2) and one negative (v3) – is that a proper confession or an improper confession is the ongoing and continuing attribute of the individual. So it is very critical to understand the meaning of the word “**confess**” and how it is to be applied in this passage. The Greek word “*homologeō*” comes from two Greek words – “*homo*” and “*logos*”. “*Homo*” means the same, and “*logos*” means something said.⁶ So literally, it means to say the same thing that someone else says, and in this case it means to say the same thing about Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit says. However, the word carries a deeper meaning than just a mere verbal confession, and that is where the problem often arises in the interpretation of this passage. It is the idea that we often interpret a word by what it means to us rather than what it meant to those to whom it was written. It is easy to say the right things and to say what someone may want to hear, but that does not mean that the individual is actually confessing and embracing what they are saying in their life. In fact, that is the entire point of what John is saying. He is clearly communicating that false teachers do not integrate the truth into their life and into their lifestyle.

Just to emphasize this point, there are several passages in the Gospels that clearly reflect this principle. One is found in [Matthew 10:32-33](#) and says the following,

Mt 10:32 "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. ³³ But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.

The word for “**confesses**” in this passage is the same Greek word “*homologeō*”. In this passage it is clearly conveying the idea of confessing allegiance to Christ as one’s Master and Lord, and as a loyal follower of Christ.⁷ When someone confesses allegiance to Christ, it will always be reflected in their life and in their lifestyle. Allegiance to Christ and one’s personal lifestyle cannot be divorced from one another. Someone cannot be a faithful follower of Christ without actually following Christ, and that is clearly demonstrated and reflected in their life. If someone was willing to do an honest and transparent evaluation of the false teachers who have captivated the Christian media, their extravagant lifestyles would immediately come into focus. Then to make it even worse, many of them have been publicly caught having affairs. It is the excessive, showy, and elaborate lifestyles of false teachers that betray their true allegiance to Jesus Christ. Not one single disciple or apostle in the New Testament lived the way that the modern false prophets live – not one. The Greek word for “**denies**” in v33 is the word “*arneomai*” and it means to contradict and to reject. It is a disowning and denying Christ as Lord And Master of one’s life. In fact, one of the nuances of the meaning of this word is to apostatize by propagating pernicious and damaging teachings – the very essence of what false teachers do. It also includes denying Christ as Master and Lord by engaging in immorality.⁸ Obviously, the meaning also includes to simply deny that Christ is the Son of God. These false teachers would generally be found in the cults such as the Jehovah Witnesses and the Mormons who both deny the deity of Christ. In [1 John 4:2-3](#), John is very clear that the person of Christ and His deity are of supreme importance. True teachers

must be teaching that Jesus is the Christ and is God. He is fully God and God the Son who became the God-Man. That cannot be denied, and anyone who teaches anything different is a false teacher.

Now, just to further emphasize this one point, in v3 John says that it is the “**spirit of the Antichrist**” that is responsible for this work in the false teachers. It goes without saying that the “**spirit of the Antichrist**” is against Christ, so it is only reasonable to conclude that those whom he is empowering will ultimately deny Christ. Now someone is going to rightly mention that many of the media teachers would never publicly deny Christ as being God, and that would be an accurate evaluation. However, the issue is more related to their over-arching emphasis on other very secondary issues and principles. It could be stated that the very subtle false teachers would never deny the person of Christ or His Godness, but rather that they give their attention to more man-centered topics that satisfy their audiences. It will be found that in evaluating false teachers that there are vital areas of truth that are not present in their teaching. It would be subjects like repentance, confession of sin, abiding loyalty to Christ no matter the cost, deep seated prayer, personal sacrifice, and other subjects that are descriptive of meaningful discipleship. If those kind of topics are absent from the message, then they are teaching a very flawed and inaccurate message. A true biblical teacher must teach the full counsel of God, or that teacher is not worthy of their calling.

The following is a list of some of the books which have been written by Joel Osteen. Listen to the titles of these books and see whether or not you would agree that they are man-centered rather than Christ-centered: I Declare; You Can, You Will; Your Best Life Now; Become a Better You; It’s Your Time; The Power of I Am; Fresh Start: The New You Begins Today; Every Day a Friday. Every one of these books is about what the individual can get God to do for their life. There is nothing about personal commitment, personal sacrifice, or personal surrender to the person of Christ - not one word. It is all about how you can become personally fulfilled and live a life of ease and comfort. These are the books that sell, and by the same token they are the books that make millions of dollars for their authors. It is all about money – always, but it was never so in the New Testament. In fact, one of the defining marks of a false teacher is that of greed. No wonder v5 says that “**the world hears them**”. Mark it down as a biblical principle that the more a teacher calls you into a sacrificial and loyal commitment to Christ, the more likely they are of God. Then mark it down as a biblical principle that the more a teacher promotes personal fulfillment, the more likely they are not of God.

ENDNOTES

¹ Vines, 150.

² Akin,

³ Stott, 157.

⁴ Lloyd-Jones, 412.

⁵ Harris, *ginosko*, electronic page.

⁶ Strong, 1268.

⁷ Strong, 1268.

⁸ Strong, 987-988.

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