

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### 1 John 4:1-6

### *"Discernment"*

In times of great uncertainty, people look to faith for some solid reassurance, but too often they are disappointed. It is true today, as it was in the 1<sup>st</sup> C. and many times since, that when a culture is showing signs of decay there is a proliferation of different "spiritualities" on offer. How to know what is true, what is false? What can you rely on?

John is writing to late 1<sup>st</sup> C. Christians at a time when splinter groups were appearing and divergent teachings were creating uncertainty for the early believers. He talks several times about the "false prophets" who have "gone out into the world," and he wants to reassure the Christians that they do not have to be confused or misled by them. So in this letter he repeatedly offers "tests" by which the Christians can reassure themselves that they do indeed hold the true faith. As we have seen, these include the test of faith - do you believe that Jesus is the Christ of God in the flesh? - the test of righteousness - do you repent of sin and are you striving to live a moral life? - and the test of love - are you living in harmony with others?

#### 1) *We Have The Spirit*

In the last passage we saw John reassuring people whose consciences were troubling

them - probably over their inability to live up fully to their Christian calling - by invoking how God knew and loved them. "God is greater than our hearts... whenever our hearts condemn us," he says, and concludes that thought with the reassurance that "We know he lives in us by the Spirit he gave us."

Here then is another basic Christian teaching: that to people who have faith in Jesus Christ, God gives the Holy Spirit. As Paul says, "no-one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). In earlier times, the Spirit of God came upon people at certain moments for certain purposes, but since Pentecost the Spirit had been "poured out" on all believers. The Spirit came to bring new dimensions to faith: an experience of the personal presence of God, an understanding of the truth of God, an ability to live for God, a giftedness to serve God.

So Christians could be reassured about their faith by knowing that the Spirit was at work in them. But in the face of competing "spiritualities," John knows that believers also need to be able to distinguish the Spirit of God from other "spirits." How could they do that? That this is even a question is a reminder to us that the Spirit of God

ministers in ways that we would not have anticipated. The constant teaching of the NT, beginning with Jesus, is that the Spirit is not an independent source of authority. He is "sent" by the Father and the Son; he testifies to Jesus; he reminds believers of Jesus' teachings; he witnesses to the truth of God. He does not "work on his own," he is not – you might say – self-authenticating; his presence is not "unmistakable."

Therefore the presence of "spiritual" activity does *not* guarantee the presence of the Holy Spirit of God. It is only when "spiritual" activity points towards Jesus Christ and the Father that we can know that the Spirit of God is at work. So John sets up his characteristic "truth" test: just as believers acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh, so "the spirits" also must acknowledge the same truth. John was probably confronting an early form of Gnosticism, which among other things denied that Jesus was both human and divine. To John, this denial shows the "spirit of antichrist" which inspires the "false prophets." It is a denial of the truth.

But there is a second strand to the discernment that believers should apply to "the spirits." Do they inspire people to accept the truth of God, to listen to his Word, to respect the authority of the "apostolic band" who had first carried the Gospel into this area and founded the churches there? John says "whoever knows God listens to us... this is how we recognize the Spirit of truth." Now to readers then and now, this could sound like intolerable arrogance – unless we grasp how utterly convinced were the eye-witness generation (who had been with Jesus) that his words had been passed on to them; that he said whoever listened to *him* belonged to God (Jn 8:42-47), and they had inherited his authority and his criteria for discerning true faith – not least because

he had promised *them* his Spirit to lead them into the truth!

We find it hard, at this distance, and in our culture, to grasp what authority of that kind meant to those who held it and to those who encountered it. The sense that the NT writers have of a "sacred trust" that has been given to them to pass on to others – what Paul in his letters calls "the deposit of truth" (2 Tim 1:14) – is to most of us now almost incomprehensible. We live in a culture that questions everything, accepts no authority, even doubts that there is such a thing as "truth" – let alone that any one person or group can know it! So of course we bristle at the idea that John could use the criterion that "those who listen to us belong to God and have the true Spirit in them." But so it was then, and that was the confidence in God that propelled the Christian Gospel across the Roman world in just a few years.

## 2) *Spirits Of Truth and Falsehood*

But how then do we who live in a culture where "truth" has lost credibility deal with Christian teachings? Perhaps we can see that there is still a major lesson for us here: that we need to be discerning about truth and falsehood, and about "spiritual" claims.

Catching this broader significance of John's writings for us, Eugene Peterson in his NT paraphrase *The Message* renders John's words "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God" as "*Don't believe everything you hear. Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God.*"

Eugene Peterson, and John, are surely right about that! We should not believe everything we hear, even from our favorite preacher! We should look it up, research it, discuss it, weigh whether it is so! One of the best accolades in the book of *Acts* is given to the

church in Berea: it was “of more noble character” than others because the people there “received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Ac 17:11).

Don’t believe everything you hear. Develop the spiritual discernment that enables you to recognize truth from falsehood or error. And remember error and falsehood are not the same thing – both are untrue, but one accidentally and the other deliberately so. Learn to distinguish one from the other. Learn the linguistic and non-verbal signs that someone is lying to you, and knows it.

There are many people proclaiming “spiritual truths” today, and when we weigh them one against another we know they can’t all be right! And that’s only within what claims to be the Church of Jesus Christ! There are also plenty of non-Christian “spiritualities” claiming our attention. Some of them are attractive, some are powerful. But the presence of spiritual power is no guarantee of its truth or its origin. Paul says that the ability to “distinguish between spirits” is itself a gift from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:10), and it is one we should all pray for and develop.

And what we learn about spiritual discernment we shall surely need to apply to the wider world we live in. Our culture has lost its grip on truth, and even our young people now parrot the idea that some things are “true for you but not true for me” – as you can tell, they don’t teach logic in schools today! It’s a sign of our intellectual flabbiness that we have allowed the reality of multi-culturalism and pluralism – that is, that the world’s barriers are coming down and it’s a smaller world than ever, so that we all now live in communities of mixed ethnicities, religions, cultures, and we have to behave accordingly, with due respect to people who

are “different from us” – we have allowed that sociological fact to slide into a philosophy of relativism that says all so-called “truths” are culturally conditioned, and “all opinions are equal.”

But of course all opinions are not equally valid! Cannibalism is not normal, no matter who claims it is. Child pornography is evil, no matter who likes it. A cleric who calls women “uncovered meat” disgraces his religion. Negative political advertising demeans the craft and the profession of politics. All opinions are not equal! Lord help us if we can’t sift the true from the untrue, the errors from the outright falsehoods, the “hype” from the facts.

Of course that is made much more difficult in modern American culture by the deliberate fuzzing of the boundaries between fact and opinion. Whether it’s the “marketing” of public policy by the government, or the “entertainment” values that now dominate TV news, or the blending of reporting and commentary in the newspapers, it’s getting harder and harder to tell what’s true from what’s not. One of the great ironies is that you may need to watch Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show* on Comedy Central to get the clearest view of the day’s news!

We need discernment to evaluate the things that people tell us. As Peterson says, “Don’t believe everything you hear,” whether it comes from the top 10 “hits” on a Google search, or from the TV, the White House, the Congress or a pulpit. “Not everyone who talks about God comes from God.” We need to learn our Bibles, our Christian history, our creeds, and our culture well enough that we are not misled by everyone who claims they have a “word from the Lord.” Sometimes they are deluded, sometimes they are making it up, sometimes they are just lying in your face.

But as John says, if you are a Christian you have a resource within you that is far greater than the forces of deception and falsehood that are at work in the world. Yes, there is a “spirit of falsehood” at work, and it has its origins in the “liar” and “deceiver” who is at work in this world. But the Holy Spirit within believers is far greater; he can protect Christians from being led astray, and make them “victorious” over the “false prophets.”

Now you may dismiss talk about “spirits” at work in the world, but notice that John knows that there are patterns of words and action in the world that are aptly described as embodying “a spirit of falsehood.” Those patterns of deception are at work in many places – politics, entertainment and religion are only the most obvious ones! But they are at work too in the corporate world, in finance, in science, in medicine, in the fine arts, in sports, in construction, in retail, in sales, in manufacturing, in technology, in service industries of all kinds. If you work in these areas, you know the “spirits of falsehood” that are at work there - and you know how they function in ways that outsiders could never even guess at. If you are a Christian, *you* have the gift of discernment in that area. Use it well; use it to advance what is good and right and true!

Pray that each of us who call ourselves Christians may experience the inner presence of the Holy Spirit, so that we become capable of discerning and overcoming the “spirits of falsehood” that are at work in our world, and so also find ourselves reassured about the truths of God.

Let us pray...