

Don't Believe Every Thing You Hear

I John 3:23 - 4:7

The need for discernment has never been greater than it is now. P. T. Barnum was an American whose personal aim was "to put money in his own coffers." Barnum is widely, but erroneously, credited with coining the phrase, "There's a sucker born every minute." That's because phrases like this have been used by many sales people, gamblers, frauds, hoaxers, and con artists over the years to describe the people they are trying to trick.

Today we are aware that we are prey to swindlers. I've heard that the second most lucrative industry in Nigeria is scamming foolish Americans out of their money by promising to give them millions of dollars if we just put some money down, up front.

A number of you have received a phone call from someone who wants to fix your computer. But you don't have a computer. And if you do have a computer, these frauds have ways to mess up our computers, then call from countries, where the authorities don't go after them, and offer to repair what they have messed up.

We've learned to be leery of business practices. We've all heard of how Bernie Madoff swindled \$64 billion from many investors. And we know that governments and politicians are not immune to trying to misinform us, to spin information, or get us to think positively about a new policy. So it seems all sectors of society have some involvement in trying to spin, alter, fool, and offer reasons for what they do. We could share the various ways we've been fooled and the scams we've heard of.

Con artists know how to appeal to our greed and our best interests. My Dad, was a sucker for any appeal about the blind. One of his major accomplishments was establishing a blind school in Taiwan which is still helping blind children as well as those with other special needs. But as his critical thinking ability

diminished, he responded to every appeal, legitimate or not, for the blind – until we discovered this and stopped it.

I share all this to make the case, we need to be careful and informed, because it seems based on history, people are easily fooled, gullible in every area of life. We now have two new phrases, alternative facts and fake news, that reminds us to test and be cautious and examine what we hear.

You and I have the task of discovering truth or facing the consequences when it comes to life, as well as in spiritual & eternal matters. It's possible that spiritual scams are even more wide spread than financial scams. False religions and cults lure millions into their traps, promising fulfillment, happiness, status, a close connection to God and more. Many teachers will find some pet doctrine or issue and they elevate it higher than it should be at the cost of a holistic view.

Jesus, religion and the right feelings are now a product that is widely sold through books, pictures, plaques, nick knacks, and so on. The Christian world goes from fad to fad, personality to personality, gathering up our attention, time and dollars. Some Christians redefine the gospel and make surprising theological claims. A compelling speaker with a small doctrinal departure & winsome personality seems like no big deal. But it's too easy for us to jump on the band wagons.

Today, as in the ancient church, many forces are arrayed against Christ. One of the most serious errors of today is that people consider there are many roads to salvation. The uniqueness of Christ as the Son of God is denied or down played, because of erroneous views about Jesus.

Also, we must notice as Ray Stedman points out, (Expository Studies, (p. 296) "It is significant that this warning comes in the middle of John's discourse about love, because false spirits tend to make a great deal of the

subject of love. Every cult, every deviant group, every false movement makes it's appeal in the name of love." So Christian love isn't just going along to get along. Love also encourages each other to embrace reality, true facts, and challenge fake news, alternative facts about Jesus.

So the apostle John warns us, do not believe every spirit, but test them to see if they are from God. I John was written to expose false teachers within the church, to offer believers assurance of salvation, and to clarify a proper belief in Jesus.

It's important to remember the NT was written as the church was developing and there was the need to clarify theological issues and especially the role of Jesus Christ. This has always been a challenge as people find ways to use the Gospel for their own benefit. But it was and is especially important to clarify issues of Christology – the study and understanding of Jesus Christ.

So in AD 325 the Council of Nicaea stated God's presence in Jesus. It avowed that Jesus was the only begotten Son of God, not made, but truly God and truly human.

But the issues didn't go away so in AD 451, the Council of Chalcedon, again declared Jesus to be both God and human. Through-out church history, including during the reformation and the emergence of the Anabaptists, and even today, people come up with various ways of redefining Jesus.

But if Jesus wasn't incarnated, as Christian doctrine traditionally understands it, we can go in wrong directions. Gertrude Roten, a past AMBS professor puts it well. "The life and death of Jesus is at the heart of I John 4:1-4. Jesus lifted our sights, compelling us to obey and follow him."

His human existence encourages us to attempt a way of life that we might otherwise conclude is impossible. Through his death, salvation is extended to us. In his innocence he died the death that we all must die. In that death God

and humankind met and were reconciled. Ultimately the incarnation is an incomprehensible mystery. It's a matter of faith, that only the Holy Spirit can move us to embrace.

Which raises another concern. Being told to not believe every spirit, makes sense. But how do we test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because there are lots of false prophets and various ideas and theologies about many things?

In the world of John's time, and in many places around the world today, the spiritual world is near and powerful. Here in North America, we either ignore or are unaware of the spirit world. Some become fascinated by it, often to our own harm & even sanity. Some Christians become enamored by it to the extent they see Satan behind every event or a good spirit or angel with every good result. I suspect North American Christians don't know a lot about the spirit world since it's hard to collect tangible data, we aren't taught much about it, nor accept that we are influenced by it, and so we ignore it or fear it.

But John tells us, we can know the Spirit of God, and he tells how we can know. Every spirit that does not confess Jesus incarnated is not from God, it is the antichrist. And every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is from God. I know it's hard at times to hear clearly and understand enough to discern well, especially when someone says, the Holy Spirit told me.....

What's the test John tells us to carry out? Do they confess Jesus has come in the flesh from God? The Apostle John tells us three core beliefs: (1) the man Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the divine Word of God; (2) that Jesus Christ was and is fully divine as well as human; and (3) that Jesus is the sole source of eternal life since he alone reveals the Father to us and atones for our sins.

How do we test this? First, **pray**. James 1: 5 tells us, “If any of you lack wisdom they should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given.”

Part of prayer is **waiting**. It’s so easy to rush to judgement. But Psalm 37: 7 tells us, “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.” Give God time to talk to us.

Second, be **grace oriented**. Don’t spend lots of energy finding fault. I like Reagan’s line, “trust but verify.” Our job is not to have critical spirits but to be critical thinkers.

Third, **listen with discernment**. Identify falsehoods. Identify false teachers. See what lies behind what they are teaching and only follow that which is true, biblical, and exegetically faithful to God’s Word and his gospel. Listen to the logic. Do they use familiar words but with a different meaning? Do they over emphasize a good biblical teaching – and go to extremes with it to the detriment of other teachings? Are they focused on getting rich? Examine the lives of the people you are listening to.

Fourth be **theologians**. If we aren’t students of the Bible, it’s easier to be fooled. Understand doctrinal differences between denominations as one way to help us measure, evaluate, weigh truth claims. Today with all the knowledge we have at our fingertips, whose fault is it if and when we get fooled?

Fifth, know **church history**. It should not surprise us that the same techniques, the same styles, and the same falsehoods come around again and again. Why? Because they work! They often are in a different package, but they still fool people. Satan knows us only too well.

A Sixth way to test the spirits is, examine **the spiritual health of the community**. Do trusted friends, the pastor, the church family, help us grow in Jesus, or take us away from Jesus’ values? Do they cause me to step away

from my responsibilities or do they encourage me and support me? Do they help strengthen my walk with God? Do people around me build me up, help me develop or do we just laugh together? Are people free to question and doubt?

Up to now the points I’ve offered are more passive and also focus on learning facts and gaining experiential knowledge in our walk with Jesus. This point is be more **assertive**. There are times we need to not sit back and evaluate, but with humility, caution, love and a spirit of inquiry, we need to be brave and bold enough to ask clarifying questions and dig deeper, face to face, if possible, with those who we think might be pushing doctrinal boundaries. It’s too easy to just be nice – which helps evil prevail.

An Eighth way to test the spirits is, **do we sense God’s peace and life and light** or do we feel uneasy? Do we hear sarcasm, fault finding, negativity, and I’m right – they are wrong - frequently? Because of our abiding in Jesus, and doing the above mentioned things – we gain a sense of what feels and sounds right. So having a sense of unease – even if we can’t put our finger on it – may be the Holy Spirit alerting us, be cautious – the Devil’s at play. Peace does not always mean we have found comfort and rest, but it does mean we have a sense that our discernment is Godly.

There are other points you could make but let’s close with two major themes of First John. **Are we abiding in Christ?** John continually talks about followers of Jesus – abiding in him, and vice versa. This helps us stay in tune with the Holy Spirit.

In verse 5 John shows that the false prophets & the world are in perfect agreement. Those who celebrate the teachings of the false prophets are of the world. In contrast to them, the true teachers are from God. Those who know God listen to the true teachers and prophets, and abide together.

In contrast, the Holy Spirit inspires those who are from God. There is a harmony, a correspondence, an abiding between the Holy Spirit in the believer and the Holy Spirit in the prophet. When God's Spirit inspires a prophet, his people will discern God's truth. The people of God know His voice and respond fully to Him.

The last point, **what does our love look like?** Besides what we believe about Jesus, this is the other major test of the spirits. What is their fruit? Increased love?

John G. Paton, often lived in danger as he worked among the hostile aborigines in the South Sea Islands who had never heard the gospel. Once, three witch doctors, claimed to have the power to cause death, publicly declared their intentions to kill Paton with their sorcery before the next Sunday. To carry out their threat, they said they needed some food he had partially eaten.

Paton asked for three plums. He took a bite out of each and then gave them to the men who were plotting his death. On Sunday, the missionary entered the village with a smile on his face and a spring in his step. The people looked at each other in amaze-ment, thinking it couldn't possibly be Paton.

Their "sacred men" admitted that they had tried by all their incantations to kill him. When asked why they had failed, they replied that the missionary was a sacred man like themselves, but that his God was stronger than theirs. From then on Paton's influence grew, and soon he had the joy of leading some of the villagers to the Lord.

It is our work to recognize the great power God has given us in the person of His Holy Spirit. Let us fearlessly go forward, over coming, conquering every spiritual foe in the name of Jesus. As John tells us, "Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them, for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is

in the world.... From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

Plus, we can trust that: "God helps us be unbelievers in error as well as believers in truth." (Ray Stedman)