

Detecting False Teachers, and Characteristics of Christian Fellowship

1 John 4

1 John 4:1-6 - *“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. 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. ⁴ You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵ They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. ⁶ We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”*

Background Notes

When the apostle John wrote this epistle near the end of the 1st century AD, false teachers and their false teachings had already crept into the Christian church. False teaching can be very subtle and deceptive, and it can cause believers to doubt their salvation. John wrote this epistle to give true believers assurance of their salvation, to warn them of the false teaching, and to inform them how to detect false teachers.

The “bottom line” test for detecting the many false teachers or false prophets who are in this world is found 1 John 4:2-3: *“By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, 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.”*

The Gnostic false teachers of John’s day taught that Jesus was not fully God - that He was only an “emanation from God.” They denied the incarnation - that God became Man. They denied that Jesus was the eternal Son of God who took on flesh.

This is still true today. So the bottom line test for detecting false teachers or false prophets today is whether or not they confess that Jesus is Lord and that He is God incarnate. Do they believe that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully Man? Do they believe that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh? This test is good for detecting false teachers, and also for detecting the lying demonic spirits behind such false teaching. In 1 Timothy 4 the apostle Paul spoke of “doctrines of demons.” The primary “demonic doctrine” is that Jesus Christ is not fully God and fully Man.

This test, by the way, is where the cults fail. The so-called “Christian” cults today (such as the Jehovah Witnesses, the

Mormons and others) fail this test. They deny the truth of the incarnation. They deny that Jesus is still 100% God, while at the same time being 100% Man. They call themselves Christians, and they say they accept the Bible as God's Word, and they say they follow the teachings of Jesus Christ - but they are false teachers because they fail the bottom line test of 1 John 4. Thus they are really anti-Christ.

Verse 4 is an encouragement: we have the Holy Spirit within us, and He is greater than "*he who is in the world*" - Satan. Satan is behind all false teaching. But the Holy Spirit, who is within us, can give us the power to detect and overcome false doctrine.

Verses 5-6 provide us with another way to detect false teachers: Look at their followers! A false spiritual leader may be a great speaker, and he or she may say a lot of nice things that sound really good - but if the leader's followers are primarily unbelievers, that's a good sign that the leader is a false teacher, and of the world.

"By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (v6). People who really know God follow a true Teacher and a true Shepherd!

Doctrinal Point

Love is the obvious trait of Christian fellowship.

In chapter 2 we saw that love for fellow believers is a test of Christian fellowship, and that love is an important family characteristic in chapter 3. Now in chapter 4 we again have an emphasis on brotherly love (v7-21). Why is there so much emphasis on love in this epistle? The theme of 1 John is Christian fellowship, and the obvious trait of Christian fellowship is **love** for God and for our fellow believers.

Love is the mark of the Christian! The Gnostic false teachers said that knowledge was the mark of the Christian, but they were wrong! ***Love is the mark of the Christian.*** Church history tells us that the non-Christian world's comment about Christians in the 1st century was: "My, how they love one another!" Love is the mark of the Christian.

Our doctrinal point is divided into two sub-points.

a. The evidence of spiritual life is love.

1 John 4: 7-11 - "*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.*"⁸ *He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.*"⁹ *In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.*"¹⁰ *In this is love, not*

that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

When you become a Christian, you not only receive forgiveness of sins and a ticket to Heaven, you also receive divine life. You are born into God's family, and you now have spiritual life from above. Because in His essence God is Love, those who have spiritual life in God's family will exhibit love as an obvious "family trait." Love of fellow believers is evidence of spiritual life in the family of God.

The word for love that's used for our love for fellow believers in 1 John is "agape." Agape-type love is not an "if" type of love: "I love you if you love me." And it's not a "because of" type of love: "I love you because you love me." No, it's an "in spite of" type love: "I love you in spite of what you are, and no matter what you've done to me."

Agape is the kind of love that God showed to us when He gave His one and only Son to die for us (v9). It's the kind of love God showed us when He sent His only Son to the cross to be the propitiation for our sins (v10). "Propitiation" means "that which satisfies the wrath of a Holy God against sin."

"If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (v11). The evidence of spiritual life is love.

b. The evidence of spiritual maturity is love.

1 John 4:12-18 - *"No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love."*

The word "perfected" in verses 12, 17, and 18 comes from the Greek word "telios." When referring to people, it means to "come to maturity." The point of this passage is that believers have divine life and the Holy Spirit indwells us, so as we walk with the Lord and abide in His love, that love will be manifested. It will be seen in our lives! No one has seen God at any time (v12) but the evidence of God can be and will be seen in the mature believer's life.

The apostle went on to say that a believer who is spiritually mature has nothing to fear at the Judgment Seat of Christ (v17). In fact, the spiritually mature believer may actually have boldness and confidence at the Judgment Seat of

Christ! Why? Because of **love!** Love is the evidence of spiritual maturity, and perfect, or mature love, casts out fear (v18).

Follow the apostle John's argument here. Fear is the most self-centered of all emotions. The more you are concerned about yourself, the more will be your fear when your "self" is threatened. Love is just the opposite. Love is the most selfless of emotions - **if** it is the *agape* type of love. So fear and mature *agape* love cannot exist together. Therefore - perfect love casts out fear.

Are you spiritually mature? Do you have a lot of fear in your heart - or a lot of love? If you're a spiritually mature believer, you won't have a lot of fears about your own well-being. Rather, you will have a lot of love for others! Verse 18: *"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love."*

The evidence of spiritual maturity is love.

Practical Application

Remember the illustration of "the spokes on a wheel"!

1 John 4:19-21 - *"We love because He first loved us. ²⁰ If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? ²¹ And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also."*

Think about a bicycle wheel. In this illustration, God is the hub or center of the wheel, and believers are the spokes. There's more space between the spokes of the wheel at the rim – where they are farther from the center of the wheel. But as the spokes get closer to the center of a wheel, they get closer to each other.

Do you see how this illustrates love for our fellow believers? God is love - and *"we love because He first loved us."* Since God is love, His love should characterize us. So the closer we get to our "Center" – the Lord - the more His love will be seen in our lives, and the closer we'll be to our fellow believers. *"As He is, so are we in this world"* (v17).

If you're not exhibiting love for your fellow believers, how can you say that you love God (v20)? But if we truly love God and are walking in fellowship with Him, then we will truly love one another.

As spokes get closer to the center of the wheel, they get closer to each other - so remember the illustration of the spokes on a wheel!