

“Discriminate!” (1 John 4:1-6)

Today, I'd like to call us to be people who discriminate. Yes, you heard right. But I am not talking about racial, social, or political discrimination. I'm speaking of doctrinal discrimination. Although doctrinal discrimination is not PC (politically correct), it is BC (biblically correct). In fact, the Bible is full of admonitions to protect ourselves and others from teaching that contradicts the Bible.¹ Jesus Himself said, “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt 7:15). One of the great emphases of Scripture is to shepherd the flock of God and ensure that she is not fleeced.

Now perhaps you're thinking, “Keith, you sure are a judgmental person. You are narrow-minded and black-and-white.” My response to that assumption is, “You're right...I am guilty as charged.” When it comes to essential, non-negotiable, biblical doctrine, I am narrow-minded and black-and white. Yet, I would also suggest that you are a judgmental person too, for thinking that I am judgmental☺. Seriously, we're all “judgmental” to one degree or another. As a society, we don't allow drunk people to drive. We don't allow people to smoke on airplanes. We don't allow pedophiles to be with children. We are judgmental. We discriminate for valid reasons. Therefore, the Bible states that *we are called to be believers in truth and unbelievers in error.*²

In our series through the book of 1 John we have learned that a proper grasp of truth is essential to experience fellowship with God. Equally necessary is the need to love others in a Christlike manner. Thus, we must be strong in holding to biblical truth, yet kind in interacting with others. Like Jesus, we are called to model “grace and truth” (John 1:14). Unfortunately, most Christians do not balance this tension well. Instead, we tend to go to extremes. In most circles, it seems to be “anything goes” or “nothing goes,” doctrinally speaking. Practically speaking, we are either too tolerant or too intolerant. Today, I hope to help us find a biblical medium. John ended our previous section (3:10b-24) by mentioning the Holy Spirit (3:24b). But now John wants us to understand that God's Spirit is not the only spirit manifest in the world. In 1 John 4:1-6,³ John explains how to distinguish the Holy Spirit from other spirits at work in the world.

1. Discern the truth from error (4:1-3). John begins our passage with these words, “**Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world**” (4:1). John commands his readers to discern what spirits are true and what spirits are false. However, before challenging his readers, John reminds them that they are “beloved.”⁴ He loves his readers as a father loves his own children. Thus, he does not want them to be led astray. Instead, John wants his beloved children to know the truth. In 3 John 4, John puts it like this: “I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.” Do we share John's heart? Are we concerned that our biological and spiritual children walk in the truth? Is this the joy of our lives? Let me move from the generic to the specific. Do you know what your children believe? Do you know what your children are watching on television? Do you know what websites your children are surfing? Do you listen to the lyrics of the songs they are listening to? Or have you given your children too much freedom?

I'll never forget a conversation I had with a friend of mine who was a seminary graduate. He informed me that he wasn't going to push Christ on his children. He didn't want to unduly influence them. He wanted them to arrive at their own conclusions. As graciously as I could, I shared with my friend that if he didn't influence his children someone else would. I had this conversation more than a decade ago. I was concerned for his children then. But I am even more concerned than ever for our children. In this day and age, like never before, it is imperative that we take the initiative in raising our children. When we relegate our responsibility to be spiritual guardians, someone else will be all too glad to influence our children.⁵ Thus, we must not allow anyone to usurp our parental and spiritual authority.

It is significant that John calls his readers to discern the truth from error. He could have told his beloved children to simply rely upon the apostles. Instead, he expects these believers to step up to the plate.⁶ In fact, throughout 4:1-6, John's verbs are plural ("together all of you test the spirits"), implying that this spiritual discernment is an obligation of the gathered body and its leadership. Therefore, it is not simply permissible but is incumbent upon the church to weigh what is being taught within its ranks (i.e., sermons, Sunday school, small groups, children, and youth ministries). Additionally, every Christian is obligated to be discerning in what he listens to and believes in (Acts 17:11). And we all have this ability through the anointing of the Spirit (2:20, 27; 3:24). If you are a leader in our church, how are you protecting others from false doctrine? How are you educating our people in biblical truth? When have you warned someone against a dangerous heresy? When have you graciously corrected someone who spoke in error? Do you love Christ's church enough to do this?

In 4:1 John also commands us to "test the spirits,"⁷ to protect ourselves and others from false teaching. (A translation in our vernacular would be "don't believe everything you hear.") The word "test" (*dokimazo*) means "to try to learn the genuineness of something by close examination."⁸ The word was employed in ancient times to refer to the testing of metals for genuineness. The idea behind this word is to test something with the expectation of approving it (see Luke 14:19). For example, when a store makes an outrageous claim, if you're smart you will investigate the claim before forking your money out. That's what the word "test" is describing—that ability to look beneath the surface, to dig deeply into the claim to see what's underneath. John is telling us that before we trust any spiritual experience, any religious leader, or any religious group, we must first test them—dig beneath the surface, and look closely to determine whether it's a snow job or the real thing.

Tests are common in many areas of life. Students must pass an ACT or SAT test in order to enter college. When I call my credit card company to make a payment or secure information they put me to a test. They ask for the last four digits of my social security number, my zip code, and if they have any questions they ask for my mother's maiden name. The test is designed to weed out inappropriate callers. Teachers are required to pass a teacher's exam in order to get their teacher's certification. Testing is a part of life...and nowhere is it more important than in the church!

I cannot emphasize enough just how important testing the spirits is. Americans have a tendency to be very gullible people when it comes to claims about the supernatural. We tend to believe anything we hear about the spiritual realm, whether it's from a guest on Oprah or an article in *Guideposts* magazine, whether it's a radio talk-show host or an expert being interviewed in *Newsweek*. No place is this more true than in the Christian community. If a person stands up quoting a few Bible verses and making reference to Jesus a few times, we're apt to swallow willy-nilly whatever he or she has to say. Two examples should suffice: David Koresh and the Branch Davidians talked about Jesus and quoted Bible verses, yet his followers ended up setting themselves on fire in an effort to usher in the battle of Armageddon. Jim Jones was ordained by a prominent Christian denomination, he quoted his Bible frequently, he talked about Jesus, yet he led hundreds of people into the biggest mass suicide in history. John wants us to stop being so gullible, to not believe everything we hear about the spiritual realm. After all, *we are called to be believers in truth and unbelievers in error.*

Discerning the truth from error is especially important because "many false prophets have gone out into the world today."⁹ Yes, it was bad in John's day, but in our day Satan and sinners have really perfected their craft. There are approximately 4,200 different world religions and cults.¹⁰ Moreover, there are new ones popping up every day. What's especially scary is this: Many false teachers from these various religions and cults attempt to creep unrecognized into the fellowship of God's people (2:18-24; Matt 7:15; 24:11-24; 2 Pet 2:1; Jude 4). We must continually be vigilant so that we do not fall prey to false teaching. Will you pray today that the Lord will guard your heart and help you to discern the truth from error?

So how do we “test the spirits?” John tells us one way in 4:2-3: **“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God;¹¹ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist,¹² of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.”¹³** When we “test the spirits,” we should spend the bulk of our time and energy protecting ourselves and our flock from heresies in the essential realm. We don’t become preoccupied with non-essential issues that will never be resolved in this lifetime! By majoring on the minors, we can fail to major on the majors. And let’s face it; we can’t afford to be paranoid. Nor can we turn into heresy hunters who go on regular witch hunts.

Instead, it makes sense to focus on the biggest issue: the person and work of Jesus Christ. Nothing is more important than a person’s view of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, every world religion and cult is in error concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the crucial question has been and always will be, “What do you think of Jesus Christ?” (Matt 22:42) The question cannot be, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ?” Most cults and world religions will answer, “Yes.” Yet, tragically, they have an unbiblical view of who Jesus is.¹⁴ Even if they have an accurate view of who Jesus is, they do not believe that faith in Jesus Christ is sufficient for salvation.

It is important to observe that John did not say every spirit that denies Jesus, but every spirit that “does not confess Jesus” (4:3). Often, heretical teaching masks its deviations from the truth by simply failing to affirm important biblical truth. Rather than proclaiming, “Jesus is not the Christ,” they fail to affirm that He is the Christ. It is important to realize that false teaching is not only speaking false doctrine, it is also refusing to speak true doctrine. For example, have you ever had anyone say to you, “Why do Christians insist that Jesus is the only way to God? What about sincere followers of other religions? Are you really saying that these good people go to hell?” How you respond to questions like this will prove your mettle. It is incredibly difficult for most Christians to graciously and truthfully respond to such questions, yet to do otherwise is to be guilty of false teaching by not confessing Christ.

It is also worth noticing that John did not say we can tell false spirits by their *works*. He said we can identify that they are false spirits by their *message*. This was the acid test of a false prophet in the Old Testament (Deut 13:1-5). Likewise, Jesus declared that false prophets were to be tested “by their fruits” (Matt 7:16-20). Contrary to popular interpretation, this does *not* mean that they were to be tested by their *works*. On the contrary, as Matt 12:33-37 proves, their fruits are their *words!*¹⁵ This is why it is especially important that when we focus on “testing the spirits” we don’t get caught up in a person’s works, character, or motives. The critical issue is the message. Anything that is not from God is “the spirit of the antichrist!” John doesn’t pull any punches. It’s either of God or of the devil! John doesn’t give us the freedom to say, “Well, whatever works for you just as long as you’re sincere.”

So what do we do when we come in contact with false teachers and those that do not adhere to our Christians beliefs? Let’s begin with an example of what not to do. Some Christians who mean well use Christian t-shirts as a means of promoting their faith. While I certainly respect and appreciate the boldness of these individual’s faith, I question the effectiveness and appropriateness of this method. For example, there is a black-and-white, two-sided t-shirt that reads on the front: “Intolerant: Jesus said....” Then on the back of the t-shirt is the following: “Homosexuality is sin; Islam is a lie; and abortion is murder. Some issues are black and white.”

Now, do I agree with the tirade on this t-shirt? Absolutely! Yet, I would not wear such a t-shirt because it closes the door on any meaningful conversation that I might have with a non-Christian (and frankly, many Christians as well). This alienates people. Let’s be honest, the gospel is already offensive enough; why would we want to create further offense? Our goal must be to love people with the love of Christ (John 13:34-35). We must seek to learn from them so that they will desire to hear from us.

[It may be discouraging and daunting to think that there are false teachers under the influence of Satan infiltrating Christianity and trying to deceive us. Fortunately, John has an encouraging word...]

2. Claim the truth over error (4:4-6). In 4:4 John declares, “You¹⁶ are from God,¹⁷ little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.”¹⁸ Again, John takes a moment to encourage his readers. He assures them that they are indeed Christians. He does this because in the midst of battling false teaching it is easy to grow weary and discouraged. We all need a brother or sister that we respect to come alongside of us and say, “God loves you. You are His child. You’re growing in Christ. He’s using you in a powerful way!”¹⁹ I try to encourage my wife and children on a daily basis. When I meet with another believer, I’m always looking for ways to encourage him or her. We all need this. The Hebrew writer declares that we need to continue to encourage one another all the more as we see the day drawing near (Heb 10:25). Is this one of your commitments? Do you look for ways to build up other believers? When is the last time you have written a fellow believer a handwritten note just to say, “I appreciate you?” When Lori and I were at Ecola Bible School last week, Lori had a session with the female students. As a result of that session, she received two handwritten cards from women expressing their gratitude to her. Those two cards were meaningful to both of us. Now I’m a realist and recognize that most of us may not write handwritten cards. That’s okay, I’m confident that you can still be saved.

But perhaps you can email another person some encouragement. In just a few minutes you could write an email that changes the course of someone’s week. Or how about this: My friend Gabriel likes to close his eyes and scroll through his cell phone numbers. When he opens his eyes, he looks at the name he landed on and calls that person just to say, “I love you.” He then encourages that person in the Lord. If you are especially bold, maybe you can walk up to another believer and verbally affirm him or her. This can mean so much. Many of us are going through challenging seasons of life. We are tempted to buy into Satan’s lies. We can also be tempted to not confess and appropriate God’s truths.²⁰ We need encouragement. We need the affirmation. It’s hard to go up against the world and the devil. Yet, John’s bottom line is this: We can have confidence that we have and will continue to overcome false teachers. Regardless of what Satan has up his sleeve, we are already victorious. Satan will pull out all the stops as he draws near to the end of the line; however, we can always affirm 1 John 4:4.

One of my favorite stories is told by Erwin McManus. It is about his son Aaron.

One summer Aaron went to a youth camp. He was just a little guy, and I was kind of glad because it was a church camp. I figured he wasn’t going to hear all those ghost stories, because ghost stories can really cause a kid to have nightmares. But unfortunately, since it was a Christian camp and they didn’t tell ghost stories, because we don’t believe in ghosts, they told demon and Satan stories instead. And so when Aaron got home, he was terrified. “Dad, don’t turn off the light!” he said before going to bed. “No, Daddy, could you stay here with me? Daddy, I’m afraid. They told all these stories about demons.” And I wanted to say, “They’re not real.” He goes, “Daddy, Daddy, would you pray for me that I would be safe?” I could feel it. I could feel warm-blanket Christianity beginning to wrap around him, a life of safety, safety, safety. I said, “Aaron, I will not pray for you to be safe. I will pray that God will make you dangerous, so dangerous that demons will flee when you enter the room.” And he goes, “All right. But pray I would be really, really dangerous, Daddy.”

Isn’t that great? Have you come to that place in your own life where you stop asking God to give you a safe life, and make you a dangerous follower of Jesus Christ?²¹ We do not have to be intimidated by Satan. The Spirit of God is greater than the spirit of Satan.²² We have the Spirit of truth, and if we are alert, we won’t be fooled, and we will not be defeated. What Christ has accomplished for us in the past will continue to be true in the present and future.²³ We have been called to be overcomers.

This is needful encouragement because false teachers can be enticing, and they can have a sizable following. Verse 5 explains, **“They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them.”** To be “from the world” and to “speak as of the world” means that the false teachers get their material from Satan who holds sway over the flow of this world (5:19), and they teach from a worldly point of view.²⁴ The phrase “the world listens to them” means that their words are not only audible but that they have a following in the world. People listen to and obey their false teachings.

So John reminds us that popularity isn't the test of truth (cf. 1 Kgs 22:1-28). Just because people in our world clamor after false belief systems, false religious leaders, and counterfeit organizations doesn't mean that God is any less great or that something's wrong with what we believe. The spiritual journey isn't a popularity contest of how many people we can lure to our side, but it's about being faithful to what God has revealed about Himself through Jesus Christ. False religious systems will be popular, if for no other reason than the fact that they appeal to what the world already values. So the world listens because they tell them what they want to hear. I think of the popularity of the Church of Scientology among entertainers like Tom Cruise, John Travolta, and Nicole Kidman. The central claim of Scientology is that humans are gods, that we're all divine, and we simply need to discover that inner divinity. John would tell us not to be so surprised at the Church of Scientology's popularity because it's speaking what the world wants to hear. But he also tells us that people will come to know Christ as well, that God is working in the hearts and lives of people, and so we will see people come out of the world system and into faith in Jesus Christ. Always remember these words: It's better to be right than popular.

John wraps up our text by presenting the second way we are to test the spirits. Remember, the first part of testing the spirits involves asking the question: What do they think of Jesus Christ? The second part of testing the spirits involves asking the question: Do they divorce authority from the Bible? I get this from 4:6, where John says, **“We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”**²⁵ It may not be clear to you how this verse relates to the authority of the Bible, so let me explain. The personal pronouns are very significant here. They are a point of emphasis, both in the Greek words John uses and the way he has arranged his sentences. Verse 4 starts with an emphatic “you.” Verse 5 starts with an emphatic “they.” Now, 4:6 starts with an emphatic “we.” To whom does John refer when he says, “we?” We have seen in earlier studies that John normally uses the term, “we” to refer to himself and his fellow apostles (1:1-4). Therefore, when John says, “we are of God,” he is saying that the apostles are agents or prophets of the Spirit of God in conveying the very words of God to us (2 Pet 1:20-21).²⁶ To whom is John referring when he says, “he who is not of God?” The context clearly suggests that John is referring to a false prophet or false teacher.

With this in mind, when John says, “he who is not from God does not listen to us” he is saying that he who is a false teacher does not submit himself to the authority of apostolic teaching. Where do we find apostolic teaching today? It's preserved for us in the Bible. So, in effect, John is saying that false teachers do not submit themselves to the authority of the Bible. They divorce authority from the Bible. They don't hold the Bible as their highest authority under God. They may appreciate the Bible. They may extol the Bible as a collection of good moral stories. They may say the Bible is a wonderful piece of literature from which we can learn. They may portray images of the Bible in the stained glass of their churches. They may even study the Bible. But they will not “listen” to it as their final authority for what to believe and how to live. Other authorities are considered higher, such as human reason, or human feelings, or church tradition, or whatever seems to work better.²⁷

May we not fall prey to this way of thinking! For a mechanic to know what is wrong with your car he needs to know something about engines. For a doctor to diagnose your illness he needs to know something about how the human body functions. Likewise, for the Christian to distinguish truth from error he needs to know his Bible from cover to cover.²⁸ Will you recommit yourself to the Word today?

A week ago, we dropped our kids off with Lori's mom and then made our way to Cannon Beach, where I was going to be teaching. Normally, when we travel to Cannon Beach we cut through Kelso. This time though, we went through Portland. On this Saturday evening, it was particularly stormy (as some of you recall). I was driving our Dodge Grand Caravan and I was going faster than I should have been in poor visibility. (Keep in mind, there is a big difference between driving a Dodge Grand Caravan and my small Honda Accord that will stop on a dime.) Several times, Lori gingerly told me that I was going too fast. But being a stupid man, I was bent on making it to our destination—dead or alive. On the last leg of our trip, I sensed the Holy Spirit say to me, "Lori is right. You need to slow down." So I dropped my speed down to 35-40 mph. (I won't tell you how fast I was going previously.) All of a sudden, three elk crossed the street in front of our van. I slammed on the brakes and just missed hitting one or more of these elk. I can't recall ever being more terrified on the road than at that moment. I was so stunned that all I could say to Lori was, "Those weren't elk, they were something like buffalo. They were HUGE!!!!" (You can tell who the hunter in our family is.) Obviously, if I had not dropped my speed and listened to the words of my wife and the Holy Spirit, I could have totaled our van. Moreover, I could have severely injured us or even killed us!

John has told us that we are to discern the truth from error and then claim the truth over error. If we do so, we will fulfill our calling to be *believers in truth and unbelievers in error*.

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Scripture Reading

1 John 4:1-6

2 John 7-11

2 Corinthians 11:13-15

Ephesians 6:10-18

1 Thessalonians 5:21-22

Matthew 7:15-20

2 Peter 2:1-22

Study Questions

1. Can I think of a time when I was tricked by claims that were “too good to be true?” How did I feel when I found out the claim was false? What examples come to mind of Christians preaching or imparting error? How did I react when I heard the error? How should I respond if someone I know is perpetrating the error?
2. Many people in our culture embrace the idea that all religious claims are equally true and valid. How would I respond to the following statement? “There is no such thing as absolute truth; different people can define truth in conflicting ways and still be correct.” How can I follow Jesus’ example and balance “grace and truth?”
3. The test of 1 John 4:1-3 relates to the “incarnation,” which is the Christian belief that God Himself took on human flesh in Jesus Christ. Read John 1:1-3 and 1:14 for the biblical teaching on the incarnation. How would I respond to someone who says they believe in Jesus, yet who denies the truth of the incarnation?
4. John informs his readers that they have overcome false spirits (4:4). How does this encourage me? When have I experienced the reality of this statement? How have I encouraged other believers this past week? Do I find it hard to verbally encourage others? If so, why do I struggle?
5. How well do I know my Bible? Can I point to tangible evidences that I prioritize God’s Word as the supreme truth? If not, why not? What goals will I set this week to grow further as a Bible student?

Notes

¹ E.g., Matt 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22; Luke 6:26; Acts 13:6; 2 Cor 11:13-15; 1 Thess 5:21-22; 1 Tim 4:1; 2 Pet 2:1; 2 John 2:7; Rev 16:13; 19:20; and 20:10.

² The gist of this idea came from a sermon by Ray Stedman, “When Unbelief is Right” (1 John 4:1-6):

<http://www.pbc.org/ray>.

³ The present section, 4:1-6, is one of three units within the epistle (the other two are 2:12-14 and 2:15-17) that virtually all interpreters would regard as a unit. The subject matter of each of these sections is so clearly distinguished from the surrounding context that there can be little doubt that each constitutes a self-contained unit of thought. See W. Hall Harris, “Exegesis of 1 John 4:1-6”: http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=2061.

⁴ John uses the word “beloved” (*agapetos*) in his epistles ten times (1 John 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11; 3 John 1:1, 2, 5, 11).

⁵ Every time, I watch “Christian” television, my wife, Lori rebukes me. She is afraid that the false teaching will have an adverse affect on our children. She expresses concern that my children are not as discerning as I am and she doesn’t want them being influenced by either naïve false prophets or outright charlatans. Therefore, I need to be sensitive to my own children. I can’t put false doctrine before them.

⁶ In 1 Cor 12:10, Paul wrote about those who had “the ability to distinguish between spirits” (ESV). But here John doesn’t seem to be talking about individuals who have a special gift. He refers to a general ability possessed by all Christians. See also Fritz Ridenour, *How to Be a Christian Without Being Perfect* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1986), 150.

⁷ What are these “spirits” of whom John speaks? In 3:24, it was clear that John was talking about the Holy Spirit. But here, he is talking about different spirits and the translators of our versions clue us in to the difference by capitalizing the word, “Spirit” in 3:24, but not in this one. The word “spirit” is used in different ways in the Bible. It can refer to the Holy Spirit. It can refer to other supernatural spirits like Satan or demons. It can refer to the human spirit. It can even refer to a disposition like “a spirit of fear.” It’s helpful to understand how these interrelate in this context—a context in which we’re talking about distinguishing true and false teaching, true and false Christianity.

⁸ This is the only time the Greek word for “testing” (*dokimazo*) occurs in the Johannine literature, although it occurs often in the New Testament (twenty-two times). It appears in Paul’s letters when he challenges his churches to assess the validity of irregular teachings (see 1 Thess 5:21; 1 Tim 3:10).

⁹ It almost sounds like the false prophets are operating somewhere outside the Christian church. But I suspect that going “out into the world” refers not to the *location* of the false prophets; rather, it refers to the *nature* of the false prophets. They’ve gone out into the world in the sense that they reflect a worldly perspective. They are agents of Satan’s world-view.

¹⁰ See <http://www.adherents.com/> (11/19/06).

¹¹ Barker writes, “When people confess that Jesus came in the flesh, when they hear God speak to them in the gospel of his Son and are obedient to it, then the ‘Spirit of truth’ has been present and active. When people deny the gospel, when they will not hear it as God’s Word and will not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, then ‘the spirit of falsehood’ has been at work.” Glenn W. Barker, “1 John,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981 [2001]), Electronic Ed.

¹² The term “antichrist” may refer to a specific figure who appears in the end times, or it may simply refer to a representative false teacher in the world now. Back in 1 John 2:18 we are told that there are many antichrists in the world now. Whatever the case, the focus is on the one spirit behind it all: the spirit of Satan who is opposed to Christ. It is interesting to me that the term is not “antijesus;” it’s “antichrist.” Few are opposed to the historical reality of a spiritual teacher named Jesus. Few are opposed to the goodness of a man named Jesus. But many are opposed to the idea that Jesus is the Christ.

¹³ Westcott writes, “The test of the presence of the Divine Spirit is the confession of the Incarnation, or, more exactly, of the Incarnate Saviour. The Gospel centres in a Person and not in any truth, even the greatest, about the Person.” Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text with Notes* 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 140.

¹⁴ It is interesting to compare 4:1-3 with 2:18-22. In the first section, having a right relation with the Father leads to a correct view of the Son. In the second, having a right relation with the Spirit leads to a similarly correct view of the Son. In each case the Son is central in all true contacts with God. Jesus Christ is the only point of communication between heaven and earth. Gary M. Burge, *The Letters of John: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 176.

¹⁵ See Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God’s Love* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 176.

¹⁶ The word “you” (*humeis*) is emphatic. John is saying his readers (“YOU!”) are from God.

¹⁷ “You are from God” is the center of a chiasm that embraces 4:2-6.” Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*: WBC series (Waco: Word, 1984), 216.

¹⁸ John frequently refers to “the world” (24 times in the letters), and in some cases he sees it simply as a place of benign unbelief. God loves this world and sent his Son to save it (2:2, 15, 17; 4:9, 14; 5:4-5; see discussion on 2:15-17). But John also sees “the world” as a place of genuine hostility to God, a place where the forces of evil and falsehood are marshaled (3:1, 13; 4:1). In fact, in 5:19 he says that the world is under the power of the evil one. See Burge, *The Letters of John*, 176.

¹⁹ See also Michael Eaton, *1.2.3 John: Focus on the Bible* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 1996), 135.

²⁰ “Since John issues warnings to his readers against being taken in by the false teachers (2:24; 2 Jn. 7-11), he appears to have reckoned with the possibility of true believers going astray.” I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*. NICNT Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 210.

²¹ Erwin McManus, “Seizing Your Divine Moment,” *Preaching Today*, Issue 252.

²² G.K. Chesterton once said, “Five times in human history the church went to the dogs. All five times it was the dog that died.”

²³ The phrase “have overcome them” contains a perfect tense verb (*nenikekate* from *nikao*) which means something took place in the past and brings present, ongoing results. We have the victory through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. On the cross Jesus secured our victory (Col 2:15), but we must daily claim it as our own (John 16:33).

²⁴ The term “world” (*kosmos*) is probably to be understood in two ways: as a system of thought antithetical to Christian belief and as a description of those members of the community who were led astray by the false teachers. Marshall writes, “The word “world” has several nuances of meaning; in 4:3 it means more the area inhabited by men, but in 4:4 it refers rather to sinful mankind, while in 4:5 the stress is more on the sinful principle found in such people.” I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*: NICNT Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 209, n. 18.

²⁵ The argument is parallel to that of Jesus in John 8:47: “He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God” (cf. John 10:4-5; 18:37).

²⁶ Some understand the “we” of 4:6 to refer to all believers. But it stands in antithesis to the “they” of 4:5, and so it is better to interpret it as referring to the apostles.

²⁷ This is tragic since the only way to tell the difference between truth and error is by appealing to the Bible. More than 3,800 times the Bible declares “God said” or “Thus says the Lord.” The Bible is the authoritative word of the Creator (Ps 119:128, 152, 160).

²⁸ Sam Gordon, *Living in the Light*: 1.2.3 John (Greenville, SC: Trans World Radio, 2001), 147.