

The Necessity of Testing Spirits in Overcoming Deception: An Exegetical Study of 1 John 4:1–6

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Abstract

This exegetical study examines 1 John 4:1–6, focusing on the apostolic imperative to “test the spirits” as a vital response to deception and false prophecy. Addressing a Johannine community threatened by internal division and heterodox teachings, the passage provides clear Christological criteria for discerning the Spirit of God from the spirit of antichrist. Employing grammatical-historical exegesis, this research explores the historical, literary, and theological dimensions of the text, while paying attention to the socio-religious context of late first-century Asia Minor. The study argues that the command to test the spirits rests upon a dualistic framework, contrasting the spirit of truth with the spirit of error. This distinction finds concrete expression in the confession (or denial) that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh) (v. 2), making orthodox Christology the decisive test for all spiritual claims. The passage further highlights the believer’s resources for victory: divine sonship, the indwelling of the Greater one (v. 4), and adherence to apostolic teachings (v. 6). This can inform contemporary conversation and challenges—particularly the rise of prosperity-oriented movements and other doctrinally distorting voices in African Christianity. This research demonstrates the enduring relevance of John’s discernment framework not merely as a spiritual gift but as a theological necessity and pastoral responsibility for safeguarding the integrity of the Christian faith. Ultimately, the study contributes to Johannine scholarship by showing how apostolic teaching offers a timeless, Scripture-centered model for distinguishing truth from deception in every generation.

Keywords: 1 John 4:1–6, Testing Spirits, Spiritual Discernment, Antichrist, Johannine Theology



Introduction

In an age marked by spiritual pluralism, competing prophetic voices, and the proliferation of deceptive teachings, the Apostle John’s exhortation in 1 John 4:1–6 remains strikingly relevant. The passage forms a coherent literary unit that confronts the Johannine community with the urgent imperative to “test the spirits” to discern truth from error.¹ By issuing this command, John addresses a community already experiencing internal division and external pressure from false prophets who claimed spiritual authority while denying core apostolic teaching about Jesus Christ.

Literarily, 1 John 4:1–6 elaborates on the theme of indwelling Spirit introduced in 3:24 and continues the series of contrasts that characterize the entire epistle. John has already addressed the conflict between truth and falsehood (2:18–28), the distinction between the children of God and the children of the devil (2:29–3:12), and the antithesis between love and hatred (3:13–24). In chapter 4, John elevates the conflict to its supernatural dimension: the opposition between “the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (v. 6).²

Historically, the passage reflects the challenges faced by late first-century Christian communities in Asia Minor, particularly the emergence of proto-Gnostic and Docetic teachings associated with figures such as Cerinthus. These teachers reportedly distinguished between the human Jesus and the divine Christ, thereby undermining the reality of incarnation.³ John’s response is both pastoral and theological: he equips believers with concrete Christological criteria for discernment while assuring them of the superior power of the indwelling Spirit.

This exegetical study examines 1 John 4:1–6 through the grammatical-historical method. It investigates the historical method. It investigates the historical, literary, and theological dimensions of the text with special attention to the original Greek, key lexical terms (such as δοκιμάζετε, ομολογεί, and εν σαρκι), and the socio-religious context of the Johannine community. The study argues that the central criterion for testing the spirits is Christological, specifically the confession that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (v. 2). This confession serves as the decisive test that distinguishes the Spirit of God from the spirit of antichrist. Furthermore, the passage underscores the believer’s resources for victory: identity in God (v. 4), the indwelling presence of

¹ Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 144-47.

² Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 204-6.

³ Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, vol. 38, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001) 67-68.



the greater One (v. 4), and alignment with apostolic teaching (v. 6). By engaging recent scholarship on Johannine theology and discernment,⁴ This research bridges the ancient text with contemporary ecclesial realities, including the influence of prosperity-oriented movements and other forms of doctrinal distortion prevalent in African Christianity and beyond. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that testing the spirits is not only a theological necessity but a pastoral responsibility essential for safeguarding the integrity of the gospel in every generation.

Exegetical Analysis

The Charge to Test the Spirits (v. 1)

Apostle John recognizes that spiritual claims alone are insufficient proof of divine origin. Since false prophets also claim spiritual authority, believers must exercise discernment. The literary flow demonstrates that discernment is necessary because the presence of spiritual activity does not automatically indicate God's presence. The literary context of verse 1 demonstrates that the charge to test the spirits arises from a broader concern about false teaching and deception within the church. Flowing naturally from the discussion of the indwelling Spirit in 3:24, John exhorts believers to exercise discernment because many false prophets have entered the world. The surrounding passage provides doctrinal tests centered on the incarnation of Christ, while the broader epistle consistently contrasts truth with error. Consequently, the command to test the spirits becomes a crucial pastoral instruction aimed at preserving the church in sound doctrine, spiritual truth, and faithful fellowship with God.

In addressing this significant issue, John, acting as a pastoral leader, refers to his audience as “Beloved” (Ἀγαπητοί, also found in 2:7, 3:2, 21). This designation reflects his genuine concern for their well-being as they encounter the nuanced threat posed by false spirits. John instructs his readers to test the spirits to discern their character (v. 1a) and explains the necessity of such discernment (v. 1b).

The command not to believe in every spirit (v. 1a)

John provided guidance to the audience through both positive and negative expressions. In his negative phrasing, he states, μὴ παντὶ πνεύματι πιστεύετε (do not believe every spirit). This serves as a caution against uncritical acceptance of any spirit claiming divine inspiration. The dative case

⁴ For example, Larry L. Lichtenwaller, “The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit in the General Epistles and the Book of Hebrews,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 23, no. 2 (2012): 55-60; and Randall K. J. Tan, “A Linguistic Overview of 1 John,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 76-94.



παντί (every) used alongside the verb πιστεύετε (believe), emphasizes the need for discernment when trusting spirits, particularly those conveying messages through human agents. Structurally, “every spirit” is positioned between the negative term (μή) and the present tense verb, leading to varied interpretations. Kistemaker contends that detaching the negative from the verb underscores its prohibitive essence.⁵ Generally, using a negative with a present imperative conveys a directive to “cease believing.” Certain members may have uncritically embraced the assertions made by the spirits; however, it is unjustified to conclude that John reprimanded them by instructing them to cease such practices. Instead, John emphasized the importance of avoiding a gullible mindset. He urged them not to “believe” or lend credence to every spirit purporting to originate from God. As individuals who have directly encountered the divine gift of the Holy Spirit (3:24), they should not accept every spirit communicated through an “inspired” human messenger who claims to be a prophet of God without scrutiny.

The presence of powerful spiritual entities communicating through human beings as their representatives was widely recognized in the pagan society during John’s time.⁶ Similarly, the concept of false prophets was familiar to the people of Israel for quite some time and soon emerged in the early church (see 1 Cor. 12:1–3). John’s warning arose from the existence of significant spiritual forces operating through individuals who claimed to be God’s messengers. The text does not specify whether various signs and wonders accompanied these teachings. Throughout different eras in church history, some individuals have asserted they possess supernatural abilities, which manifested as claimed revelations, prophecies, miracles, and similar phenomena. As Smalley notes, there are two critical considerations regarding such occurrences that warrant caution: (1) they could be fabricated, either resulting from delusions of overly enthusiastic individuals or intentional deceit by fraudsters; (2) even if genuine, they do not necessarily originate from God. Miraculous abilities do not serve as an infallible indicator of possessing truth.⁷

John emphasized that believers are required to “test the spirits to determine if they are from God.” The conjunction άλλα (but) indicates a distinction between naivety and prudent judgment. The present imperative verb δοκιμάζετε (test) signifies an ongoing responsibility, directed at all readers in the second person plural form. Similarly, Paul used this term in 1 Thessalonians 5:21,

⁵ Simon J. Kistemaker, *James, Epistles of John, and Jude* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986), 324

⁶ Randall K. J. Tan, “A Linguistic Overview of 1 John,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 74-76.

⁷ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1984), 216.



instructing his audience to “Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good.” In 1 Corinthians 12:10, Paul referred to the “distinguishing of spirits” as a specific gift; however, all believers should remain vigilant regarding this obligation.⁸

The verb δοκιμάζετε (test), which appears exclusively in the Johannine texts, primarily means “to examine or evaluate,” as in assessing the authenticity or weight of coins.⁹ As noted by Brown, this verb typically suggests a positive, if not amicable, intent; it conveys the idea of proving or testing with the expectation that what is assessed will be validated.¹⁰ Conversely, another term found in the New Testament, John 6:6 (πειράζω) also denotes “putting to a test,”¹¹ but generally carries a negative connotation, implying malicious intent aimed at ensuring failure of the subject under examination; thus, it is often interpreted as “to tempt.” Brown observes that John’s choice of verb here is never associated with Satan’s actions, since he does not test for approval or acceptance.¹²

In evaluating spiritual influences, believers are advised to uphold a “biblical balance,” steering clear of both excessive superstition, which accepts everything, and extreme skepticism, which dismisses all. The core objective of this assessment is to ascertain the origin of the spirits from which speakers derive their messages: specifically, εἰ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν “to see whether they are from God.” The caution pertains not merely to those who falsely claim to possess the Spirit, but also to genuine, vicious spirits that motivate false prophets. This testing process establishes an objective criterion for evaluation and draws on Old Testament precedents. Moses provided guidelines for discerning true prophets (Deut 18:20–22): namely, (1) their proclamations must align with prior divine revelations; (2) they must declare messages in the name of the Lord; and (3) their prophecies should come to fruition, also Deuteronomy 13:1–5 and Jeremiah 23:9–22; 28:9.

The Fact Necessitating the Testing (v. 1b)

John outlined the historical context that necessitated believers rigorously evaluating spirits, stating, “because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” This was not merely a potential future threat; πολλοί ψευδοπροφήται (many false prophets) were already active. Jesus had clearly

⁸ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 164-65.

⁹ Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 207-9.

¹⁰ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 487-488.

¹¹ (G3985 - Peirazō - Strong’s Greek Lexicon (NASB20), n.d.)

¹² Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 488.



predicted the emergence of such false prophets (Matt 7:15; 24:11, 24; Mark 13:21–23). Both Paul (Acts 20:28–30) and Peter (2 Pet 2:1) also warned of their arrival. The perfect tense, ἐξεληλύθασιν (have gone out), signifies their ongoing presence as a lasting reality.¹³ The meaning of the preposition translated as εκ (out, in the compound verb) has been interpreted in various ways. Smalley views it as a reflection of the depiction in 2:19, where antichrists separate from the Christian community.¹⁴ However, considering the use of two prepositions—εκ (out) and εις (into)—Westcott postulates that “out” suggests these false prophets have embarked on an evil mission from their dark origins, while “into” indicates their entrance into the world to carry out their activities. Through these false prophets, malevolent spirits are now transforming humanity’s realm into a venue for their teachings. It can be observed that this interpretation aligns with John’s language in his Gospel regarding spirits entering human history from the spiritual realm (cf. John 3:17; 10:36; 12:47, 49; particularly 16:28). This perspective seems to be in harmony with John’s depiction of the supernatural essence of the spirits conveying messages through false prophets.

While the term “false prophets” or “pseudo-prophets” typically refers to individuals who falsely claim prophetic status, in this context it specifically indicates those who deliver a misleading message. This designation applies to opponents of the genuine prophets during the old covenant (as seen in Luke 6:26 and 2 Peter 2:1) and to adversaries of the apostles in the new covenant (referenced in Matthew 7:15, 24:23, and Acts 13:6). These figures are not simply misguided teachers; they are influenced by malicious spirits identified in 1 John 4:3 as embodying “the spirit of antichrist.” Acting as spiritual imitations of genuine New Testament prophets, they pose a serious threat that necessitates exposure and rejection.

The Criteria for Testing the Spirits (vv. 2–3)

In verses 2–3, John outlines the essential criteria for identifying different spirits. Verse 2 positively articulates this test, affirming the undeniable presence of the Spirit of God. Conversely, verse 3 expresses the test in a negative light, highlighting the spirit associated with the antichrist. First, the evidence of the Spirit of God (v 2); the phrase “By this you know the Spirit of God” anticipates the examination outlined in verse 2. The verb translated as γινώσκετε (you know) can function as either an imperative or an indicative form. Some scholars interpret it as a directive, paralleling the commands found in verse 1 (“do not believe... but test”). However, it is more likely that this mood

¹³ Taking ἐξεληλύθασιν as perfect active indicative.

¹⁴ Smalley, *I, 2, 3 John*, 219.



is indicative, appealing to the knowledge and experience of his orthodox audience, which is a common approach throughout this epistle (see 2:29; 4:6).¹⁵ Using the plural form rather than an abstract singular, such as “it is known,” directly involves readers in applying the test. The understanding attained requires mental reasoning—carefully examining what the spirit confesses about Jesus Christ and subsequently concluding.

The crucial criterion states that “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” The term *πάν πνεύμα* (every spirit) indicates that this evaluation encompasses all spirits; each will be validated or dismissed based on this standard. Spirits deemed acceptable are those that “confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” The verb *ομολογεί* (confess), literally meaning “says the same thing,” implies more than simple verbal recognition; it signifies an explicit and honest declaration of one’s alignment with the message. The use of the present tense conveys that this acknowledgment is ongoing. Such a confession is essential for a vibrant Christian faith (Rom 10:9–10; 1 John 2:23; 4:15).

The pivotal confession is “that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” *Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα*, which translates literally to (Jesus Christ in flesh having come). The addition of the word “that,” which does not appear in the original text, transforms it into a declaration of doctrinal truth regarding the actions of Jesus Christ. This phrase, functioning as the accusative object of the verb “confesses,” highlights the person being acknowledged: “Jesus Christ in flesh having come.” Bultmann interprets this structure by designating “Jesus” as the direct object and viewing “Christ in flesh having come” as a predicate accusative. Moffatt conveys this perspective in his translation, stating, “Every spirit which confesses Jesus as the Christ incarnate.”¹⁶ However, the distinction between the dual names in the accusative form remains uncertain. Kistemaker observes that the combination of Jesus Christ appears eight times throughout John’s epistles (1:3; 2:1; 3:23; 4:2; 5:6, 20; 2 John 3, 7). In two instances, John explicitly separates them by writing “Jesus is the Christ” (2:22; 5:1). Therefore, when these names are presented together, they should be translated accordingly.¹⁷

Maintaining both names together most accurately reflects John’s assertion that within the historical figure of “Jesus Christ,” there exists a continuous union between humanity and divinity

¹⁵ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 220.

¹⁶ James Moffatt, *The New Testament: A New Translation*, rev. ed. (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), 264.

¹⁷ Kistemaker, 327.



through incarnation.¹⁸ The additional phrase emphasizes this concept, “has come in the flesh.” By using *εν σαρκι* (in flesh) instead of *εις σαρκι* (into flesh), John effectively counters Cerinthian Gnosticism. Cerinthus (AD 100), who was a contemporary of John in Ephesus, distinguished Jesus from Christ. He posited that at His baptism, a spirit identified as Christ descended upon Jesus—the son of Joseph and Mary—to empower His ministry but departed before His crucifixion; thus, only Jesus experienced death and resurrection. Cerinthus’s views ultimately dismissed the doctrine of incarnation and undermined key Christian teachings surrounding atonement.¹⁹

The perfect tense in the phrase “has come in the flesh” emphasizes that when Jesus Christ entered this world to fulfill His messianic role, He assumed a genuine human body rather than merely an illusory form, as Docetic Gnosticism suggested.²⁰ Furthermore, the perfect tense signifies that the incarnation is a lasting reality. This enduring union of divine and human natures enables Him to serve as the Mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5).²¹ The apostolic doctrine regarding Christ’s incarnation encompasses significant theological truths, including the Virgin Birth, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. The incarnation is a fundamental tenet of Christianity; all beliefs claiming to be Christian either stand or fall on this doctrine. Every spirit that openly confesses the apostolic message about Jesus Christ’s identity indicates that, *εκ του Θεού εστιν* (it is from God), emanating from God who has made Himself known through His incarnate Son.²² John closely associates the spirit inspiring this proclamation with the human messenger, representing it as if the spirit itself were confessing. The indwelling Holy Spirit shapes and imparts the messages delivered by His ministers (1 Cor 12:8) and provides essential guidance for God’s followers (Rev 2:7,11).

Second, the evidence of the spirit of antichrist (v. 3); the adversative conjunction *και* “and” highlights the negative facet of discerning spirits. To fully understand these spirits, acknowledging this negativity is crucial. Neglecting to recognize this aspect of the evaluation could lead believers into significant deception. John articulated this negative dimension through the spirit’s inability to

¹⁸ Constantine R. Campbell, *1, 2, and 3 John*, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 133-37.

¹⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, III/14 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2008), 92-6.

²⁰ Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 15-16.

²¹ Tokunboh Adeyemo, gen. ed., *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars* (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 3718-19.

²² Peter Rhea Jones, *1, 2 & 3 John*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, vol. 29b (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2009), 161-9.



confess Jesus (v. 3a), categorized it as antichrist (v. 3b), and referenced the fulfillment of prophecy (v. 3c).

The inability to confess Jesus (v. 3a) is presented comprehensively: “every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.” By reiterating *παν πνεύμα* (every spirit), John eliminates any neutral stance between those spirits that acknowledge Jesus Christ and those that do not. Smalley observes, “John is not addressing the dichotomy between belief and disbelief; rather, he condemns heretical views both within his community and beyond that constitute a deliberate rebellion against God (v. 3b).”²³ John’s negative assertion condenses the more comprehensive positive declaration found in verse 2. The key aspect of this test lies in the spirit’s inability to acknowledge Jesus, as indicated in the previous verse. It is possible to speak highly of Jesus as a man while simultaneously rejecting the apostolic teaching that identifies the historical Jesus of Nazareth as God incarnate. Akin notes, “If someone professes belief in Jesus, it is appropriate to inquire, ‘Is your Jesus truly the authentic Jesus?’”²⁴

John’s choice of the negative *μή*, instead of the more commonly used *οὐ*, with the indicative verb “confess” has drawn attention. Wallace accepts *λύει* as the original text, dismissing this negative form as “a spurious reading.”²⁵ Campbell argues that the negative *μή* renders the statement hypothetical: “every spirit, if such exists, which does not confess.” However, it is evident that John did not doubt the existence of such spirits; he also notes a certain detachment in John’s use of *μή* here.²⁶ Jones suggests that this negative construction reflects “the writer’s subjective conviction that there are no exceptions to his assertion.”²⁷

The reference to the antichrist spirit (v. 3b). The absence of acknowledgment of the complete truth regarding “Jesus” solidifies its clear identity: *καὶ τοῦτο ἐστὶν τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ἀντίχριστου*, (and this is the spirit of the antichrist). The conjunction *καὶ* (and) connects this identification with the prior negative assertion. While some interpret John’s omission of “spirit” here and view “this” (*τούτο*) as referring back to its refusal to acknowledge Jesus’ true nature, it is more logical to associate it directly with the neuter article (*τὸ*), inferring “spirit” from context. John indicated that through its refusal, “this spirit” reveals itself as belonging to “the antichrist.”

²³ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 223.

²⁴ Akin, *Exalting Jesus in 1, 2, 3 John*, 104-9.

²⁵ Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 134-37.

²⁶ Campbell, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 133-37.

²⁷ Jones, *1, 2 & 3 John*, 161-9.



Westcott proposes that omitting πνεῦμα (spirit) broadens the concept so that these words encompass numerous spirits and forces embodying the antichrist’s actions.

In contrast to the Holy Spirit guiding God’s genuine prophets, many vicious spirits actively oppose and attack the truth revealed in Jesus Christ. Marshall aptly observes that John firmly believes denying apostolic testimony about Jesus Christ is not merely an intellectual mistake or “advanced theology”; it embodies outright rebellion against God and warrants condemnation.²⁸ These spirits already demonstrate significant defiance against God, foreshadowing their full manifestation in the eschatological antichrist; they inherently belong to this same domain.

The fulfillment of prophecy (v. 3c). John promptly reminded his audience that the activities of such malevolent spirits should not catch them off guard, as they aligned with the prophetic warnings they had previously received. This occurrence is something, ὃ ἀκηκόατε ὅτι ἐρχεται, (of which you have heard that it is coming). In 2:18, John had already warned them about the impending arrival of the antichrist; now he reiterates that they were also aware of the spirit associated with the antichrist’s approach. The perfect tense, ἀκηκόατε (you have heard), signifies that these concepts were integral to the consistent Christian teachings regarding future events. The term “coming” is often used in reference to the historical arrival of Jesus Christ; similarly, the emergence of the antichrist spirit, manifesting through various antichrists, constitutes a historical truth.²⁹

The phrase, καὶ νῦν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἐστὶν ἤδη, “and now it is already in the world,” asserts emphatically that the spirit of antichrist was indeed active within human history. The inclusion of νῦν (now) at the beginning emphasizes the existing presence of this malicious force as he writes (2 Thess. 2:7, “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work”), revealing itself through subtle and often aggressive actions directed against the church. Additionally, the word ἤδη (already), at the conclusion, suggests that “the prophecy had found fulfillment before the Church had anticipated it.” It also hints at a more extensive and brutal manifestation of this rebellious spirit against Christ, which awaits the arrival of the eschatological Antichrist (Rev. 13; 2 Thess. 2:7–12). At the forefront of this insurrection stands Satan himself.

²⁸ John L. Bogart, A Review of *The Epistles of John*, by I. Howard Marshall, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99, no. 4 (December 1980): 208.

²⁹ Campbell, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 2017), 136.



The Criteria for Testing the Messenger (Prophets) (vv. 4–6)

Having established the guidelines for discerning spirits (1 John 4:2–3), John now outlines the standards for evaluating the individuals delivering those messages. In verses 4–5, he describes the benchmarks to ascertain their genuine source. Additionally, in verse 6a, he highlights the response to their teachings as another measure. The latter part of verse 6 encapsulates this discussion.

The Criteria for Establishing their Origin (vv. 4–5)

In verse 4, John emphasized the identity of God’s true people, while in verse 5, he highlighted the nature of false prophets. Those who are of God (v. 4). With a genuine pastoral concern, John reassured his audience by stating, “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them.” The initial pronoun *υμεις* (you) is used emphatically to distinguish his readers from the misguided world. The distinction between the two kinds of spirits gives rise to a differentiation between two types of individuals: those belonging to God and those belonging to the world. True believers *εκ του θεου εστε* (are from God), indicating their origin in God and their role in opposing evil within the world.³⁰ They possess a personal relationship with God that is absent in false teachers.

The affectionate term *τεκνια*; cf. 2:1, “little children,” signifies their familial bond; they are part of God’s household. John had confidence that false teachers would not mislead them; however, his paternal instincts reminded them of their identity. His readers, much like contemporary believers faced with increasing temptations from evil, must never forget their divine lineage. The additional statement *και νενκηκατε αυτους* (and have overcome them) serves as proof of their authentic identity. The masculine plural pronoun “them” signifies a transition from anti-Christian spirits to the false teachers acting as their representatives. John’s audience recognized and rejected these erroneous teachings. By applying the criteria outlined in verses 2–3, they had successfully “overcome.” The perfect tense “have overcome” indicates a specific moment when they encountered the temptation to embrace these alluring messages but ultimately dismissed them and emerged victorious. Campbell states that the battle has been decided, even though it continues, noting that through faith, Christians participate in this victory and are thus equipped to overcome worldly challenges.³¹ Their triumph is rooted in Christ’s victory on Calvary (John 12:32; 14:30;

³⁰ Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 182.

³¹ Campbell, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 136-37.



16:11). However, sustaining this victory requires believers to remain committed to the truth (Eph. 6:10–18).

By stating “because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world,” John reminded his audience of the fundamental source of their victory. While understanding and adhering to apostolic truth plays a role, it is ultimately through divine indwelling, εστίν ο εν ύμιν (He who is in you), that this triumph occurs. This reference clearly pertains to one person of the Godhead; yet John does not explicitly name this indwelling source of empowerment. Most interpreters refer to it as “God.” Brown suggested this refers specifically to “God in Christ.”³² Smalley contends that it encompasses an allusion to God as Father, Son, and Spirit based on “the Trinitarian character” present throughout John’s theology in this section.³³ Others interpret it as referring specifically to the indwelling Holy Spirit—a view supported by explicit mentions regarding Him in 3:24. Kruse further points out that “in verses 2 and 3 John contrasts God’s Spirit with that of antichrist,” reiterating these two spirits in verse 6. Moreover, he notes that “in 2:27 it states that the anointing (Holy Spirit) dwells within believers.”³⁴ This aligns well with New Testament teachings about the work of the Holy Spirit dwelling within believers (Rom 5:5; 8:9; 2 Cor 1:22; 3:18; Gal 4:6; Eph. 3:16-19; Titus 3:5-6).

John emphasizes not just identity but also the superior greatness of this divine Enabler when he declares μείζων εστίν ό εν ύμιν ή ό εν τω κόσμω (greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world). The use of masculine articles clarifies that there is a contrast between two distinct personal powers. At the same time, the comparative adjective “greater” emphasizes superiority and highlights the authority and capability inherent in those who believe. Their adversary—the one represented as being “in the world”—is identified as the devil or “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31), whose mission was countered by Christ’s redemptive work, “the Son of God came to destroy” (1 John 3:8).³⁵ As John himself states, he does not endorse any dualistic perspective where two equally powerful spiritual forces vie for dominance over creation. Instead, he assures believers that because they possess superior rank and power via the indwelling Holy Spirit, they can experience Christ’s triumph over evil influences.

³² Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 492.

³³ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 227.

³⁴ Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 155.

³⁵ Jobs, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 182.



Upon assuring his audience that this greater presence is “in you,” one might expect him to discuss how personal evil manifests among them, namely through anti-Christian false teachers. Instead he portrayed such malevolent entities as residing “in the world.” Here, “the world” carries significant moral implications signifying organized humanity’s hostility toward both God and His kingdom at large. Left unaided against such foes, relying solely on their own strength, believers could only face defeat; nevertheless, empowered by divine provision, they can achieve ongoing victories amidst daily struggles against worldly temptations stemming from fleshly desires or demonic influences. However, personal appropriation remains essential if they wish to sustain such hard-won successes.

Those who belong to the world (v. 5) αυτοί εκ τού κόσμον εισίν “they are from the world,” distinguishes false teachers from genuine believers (v. 4). For John, there was a clear dichotomy between these two groups. In verse 3, he described anti-Christian spirits as “not from God”; now he emphasizes that the false teachers originate “from the world,” indicating their source and fundamental nature.³⁶ The repetition of “world” in verse 5 highlights this connection. They are part of a godless system where Satan reigns as its ruler. John provided supporting evidence: “Therefore, they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them.” Their identity is revealed through both their message and the followers they attract.

The substance of their teaching indicates that these false teachers are indeed “of the world”; thus, δια τούτο εκ τον κοσμον λαλούσιν “they speak as from the world,” more literally translated as “because of this out of the world they are speaking”. Their existence is rooted in worldly values, reflecting what they truly represent. Their teachings draw heavily on secular philosophies, suggesting a disconnection from divine truth. Kruse states that the present-tense verb “they speak” shows that they consistently convey their message through a worldly lens. This aligns with Jesus’ assertion in John 3:31: “He who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth.” By modifying and presenting their message to align with worldly ideas, they distort God’s intended message.³⁷

Furthermore, John adds that και ό κόσμος αυτών ακούει “the world listens to them,” reinforcing their nature by indicating that their message resonates with worldly audiences. It appears these false teachers had found some success beyond apostolic circles, since those who

³⁶ Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 228.

³⁷ Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 189-91.



communicate in familiar terms often capture the world’s attention. John believed that this popularity among pagans revealed a deep-seated connection between these teachers and pagan beliefs. However, it should be noted that attracting large crowds does not inherently indicate that someone is a false teacher; historical instances demonstrate that, under divine influence, many individuals can draw substantial followings to faith in Christ through sincere preaching by righteous messengers. An observation is that negative reactions to Christian messages may stem from inadequacies in how preachers present their messages or misunderstandings regarding those they seek to reach sympathetically.

The Criteria from the Reaction to the Speaker (v. 6a)

The global reaction to the false teachers prompted John to develop an additional criterion: the messenger’s character is determined by the audience’s response. He articulated this criterion by highlighting the dual reactions to the apostolic messengers. The declaration ἡμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐσμεν (we are from God), distinctly contrasts the false teachers mentioned in verse 5 with the apostolic messengers in verse 6a. Some interpretations suggest that the emphasis on “we” refers to either the Christian community or specifically to John and his readers.³⁸ However, contextually, it appears that John intends to contrast the false teachers of verse 5 with himself and his fellow apostles in verse 6a. Smalley notes, “The distinction here lies not between true and false Christians but between genuine and fraudulent teachers.”³⁹ The confident assertion, “We are from God,” conveys a sense of certainty and authority characteristic of Christ’s appointed messengers. Brown remarks on this authoritative tone as reflective of apostolic confidence prevalent throughout both this Epistle and the entire Fourth Gospel: “It embodies a quiet assurance born of conscious strength.”⁴⁰

In presenting this criterion, John also echoed Jesus’ words: “He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them because you are not of God” (John 8:47; cf. 10:4–5, 26–27)—responses—both positive and negative—to God’s Word illuminate the nature of those listening. On a positive note, ὁ γινώσκων τον θεον ακούει ημών (he who knows God listens to us) describes someone who maintains a deepening relationship with the true God, which draws him towards His authentic messenger. This relationship entails more than mere intellectual

³⁸ Campbell, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 133-37.

³⁹ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 228.

⁴⁰ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 499.



understanding; it represents a profound engagement affecting mind, heart, and life. Consequently, such a person ακούει ημών (listens to us), showing approval for both the message and its bearer. As Yarbrough observes, “The listener recognizes the genuine message. The teacher identifies a true disciple. This shared experience fosters renewed assurance and deeper insight.”⁴¹

Conversely, the negative response to apostolic teachings bears significance as well: “he who is not from God does not listen to us.” This individual’s dismissal of such messages indicates that he is “not from God” (οὐκ ἐστὶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ). Rather than stating that this person “does not know God,” John emphasizes that he lacks an intrinsic spiritual connection to God, bestowed through rebirth. Only those born of God will be attuned to His Word. Thus, preaching serves not only to affirm the speaker’s true nature but also to reveal the spiritual condition of those who listen.

The Summary Concerning the Testing of the Spirits (v 6b)

John concluded this with a summarizing comment, ‘The spirit of truth and the spirit of error.’ “By this”: that is, by what He had just been saying about Himself and His death, though it is not clear whether “this” means the whole section (vv. 1–6), nothing more than the second part (vv. 4–6), or even to v. 6a in particular. Kruse says “this” refers to the statements, both negative and positive, in the first part of the verse, which suggests that those who are similar resonate.⁴² On the other hand, Smalley insists that it refers primarily to what is stated in verse 6 itself (namely, whether apostolic teaching is or is not heeded). He aligns with those who think there is a probability here of an earlier test of the correct confession of Jesus (vv. 2–3).⁴³ This wider implication that holds for both tests mentioned by John is an essential requirement for full assurance in testing spirits. And that this is the privilege of every true believer, and not only of apostles or church rulers, we learn from the way in which he begins: We know.

Conditions then were as now: Believers were called upon to live in the sound judgment of “the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” Between these two spirits represent contrary moral tendencies struggling for mastery over human destiny. Most English translations make this parallelism apparent, though translations such as the NIV and Good News Bible capitalize “Spirit” in the first reference to indicate that it is to be read against the background of verse 2, where “the Spirit of God” has already been mentioned. The Holy Spirit is named, in John 14:17, 15:26, and

⁴¹ Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 228.

⁴² *The Letters of John*, 155.

⁴³ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 230.



16:13, “the Spirit of truth.” The genitive of truth should be construed descriptively, as if to say that this Spirit remains active in passing on and explaining the truth of God (cf. John 14:6). The Spirit of truth moves those who confess the truth of God.

Opposed to what the Spirit of truth does is “the spirit [literally, ‘spirit’] of error” (το πνεύμα της πλάνης), an expression found nowhere else in New Testament writings. The genitive “of error” is descriptive of constant conduct, belonging to Satan and his emissaries. The specific noun associated with της πλάνης “error” has equally active and passive meanings. As an active, it means deceiving others, leading them astray.⁴⁴ As a passive, it is a delusion. The context greatly confirms its positive sense before us. Conveniently for John, reference to “false prophets” in 1 John 4:1 highlights active deception; which is just how he used a cognate verb earlier (2:26) by warning his readers to beware of “those trying to lead you astray” (cf. also 3:7). Here then Satan and His demonic force are not ashamed to work through human means to lead believers away from their faith. It is this tension between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception that characterizes key battles in the Christian life.

Application

Throughout church history, certain Christians have demonstrated remarkable discernment between authentic and deceptive religious doctrines. The responsibility and capability to “test the spirits” are not limited to particular ecclesiastical or educational circles. Palmer observes that John urged his readers to engage thoughtfully and to scrutinize the beliefs and teachings presented by all their instructors, since ignorance or careless reasoning offers no advantage.⁴⁵

The message of 1 John 4:1–6 is remarkably relevant for the contemporary church, particularly in contexts experiencing rapid growth alongside significant spiritual confusion. Akin notes that in an era of spiritual pluralism, social media prophets, and competing religious voices, John’s command to “test the spirits” remains an essential safeguard for Christian communities.⁴⁶

First, the passage challenges believers to move beyond subjective spiritual experiences to objective doctrinal discernment. Not every claim of spiritual power, revelation, or miracle is from God. Just as in the first century, many false teachers today promote distorted Christologies—

⁴⁴ (*G4106 - Planē - Strong's Greek Lexicon (NASB20)*, n.d.)

⁴⁵ Earl Palmer, *The Preacher's Commentary, Vol. 35: 1, 2, and 3 John / Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 59–60.

⁴⁶ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 170-72.



downplaying the full humanity or deity of Christ, or presenting a “prosperity Christ” disconnected from the biblical gospel. Yarbrough stipulates that the Christological test remains decisive: does the teaching faithfully confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh? Any spirit or teacher that diminishes the incarnation, the atoning death, or the bodily resurrection of Christ is not from God but bears the spirit of antichrist.⁴⁷

Second, John’s assurance in verse 4 offers profound encouragement: “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world.” In contexts where believers face intimidation from powerful religious figures, cultural pressures, or apparent success of false teachings, this promise grounds confidence not in personal ability but in the indwelling Holy Spirit. Victory over deception is already secured in Christ and is appropriated through dependence on the Spirit and adherence to apostolic truth preserved in Scripture.⁴⁸

Third, verse 5 provides a sobering diagnostic test. False teachers often gain a large following because “they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.” Teachings that align with worldly desires—emphasizing material success, self-fulfillment, or accommodation to culture—naturally attract audiences. In contrast, Akin notes that faithful apostolic teaching may be less popular but remains the true measure of authenticity (v.6). The church must therefore evaluate ministries and messages not primarily by numerical success or charismatic appeal, but by their fidelity to Scripture and the apostolic witness.⁴⁹

For the African church and global Christianity today, this text calls for renewed commitment to biblical literacy, theological education, and Spirit-led discernment at every level of church life—not only among pastors and theologians, but among believers. It summons the church to reject gullibility on one hand and cynical skepticism on the other, cultivating instead mature, balanced discernment rooted in the truth of the incarnate Christ.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this exegetical study of 1 John 4:1–6 has demonstrated the enduring significance of the Apostle John’s command to “test the spirits.” Far from being a peripheral instruction, this imperative constitutes a vital theological and pastoral safeguard for the church amid pervasive

⁴⁷ Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 214-16.

⁴⁸ Kruse, *Letters of John*, 150-52

⁴⁹ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 169-71.



deception. John equips believers with a clear, Christological criterion—the confession that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh”—as the definitive test for distinguishing the Spirit of God from the spirit of antichrist. The passage unfolds three major movements: first, the urgent charge to test every spirit and the sobering reality of many false prophets active in the world (v.1); second the provision of objective criteria centered on orthodox Christology (vv.2–3); and third, the practical evaluation of teachers through their origin, message, and reception by the world, coupled with the believer’s assured victory through the indwelling Greater One (vv.4–6). Throughout, John maintains a dualistic contrast between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error, while grounding believers’ confidence in their identity as children of God and their alignment with apostolic teaching.

In the contemporary context—marked by the proliferation of prosperity-oriented gospels, syncretistic spiritualities, and charismatic claims lacking biblical grounding—this ancient exhortation speaks with fresh urgency, particularly within African Christianity. Discernment is shown to be neither optional nor reserved for the spiritually elite; it is the responsibility of every believer who walks in the light of apostolic truth and depends on the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, 1 John 4:1–6 calls the church to vigilant faithfulness. By testing the spirits, rejecting falsehood, embracing the incarnate Christ, and remaining rooted in Scripture, believers can navigate an age of confusion with confidence. The promise remains: “greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world” (v. 4). As the church faithfully applies this Johannine framework, it upholds the integrity of the gospel and bears credible witness to the One who is the truth.

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