

First John: Authentic Faith for Jesus' People
#9: Developing Discernment in Confused Times
1 John 4:1-6

Translation: 1 John 4:1-6

¹ Beloved ones, stop believing every spirit, but examine the spirits [to determine] if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.¹ ² By this you^{p2} will come to know the spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,³ and every spirit that does not acknowledge this Jesus is not from God; and this is the [spirit] of the antichrist, which you^p heard that he is coming, and now he is in the world already.⁴ You^p are from God, little children, and you^p have overcome them, because greater is the One in you^p than the one in the world.⁵ They are from the world; because of this, they speak from the world and the world listens to them.⁶ We are from God; the one who knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we have come to know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Take a first look.

I. In 2018, Christian and pop singer Lauren Daigle got into some hot water from Bible-believing Christians. At the ripe young age of 27, this young woman from Louisiana had crossed over from the Christian musical genre into the mainstream of pop music culture, receiving Grammy nominations for her voice and hopeful lyrics.

I receive a daily email from The Colson Center for Christian Worldview entitled “Breakpoint Commentary.” At that time, John Stonestreet and Eric Metaxas provided these daily commentaries about current events and trends from a decidedly Christian and Biblical perspective. Stonestreet presented one entitled “Lauren Daigle on the Spot” on December 11, 2018. Here is some of what he said: “During an interview with iHeart radio, Daigle was asked, given her recent appearance on the Ellen DeGeneres show, whether she believes homosexuality is a sin.

“‘I can’t honestly answer that,’ Daigle replied. ‘I have too many people that I love, and they are homosexuals.’

As Stonestreet recounted, “She went on to explain that since she’s not God, she can’t say one way or another. Instead, people should just ‘read the Bible and find out’ for themselves.”

Stonestreet is charitable in his assessment of this situation: “Now let me say from the beginning here I understand how hard this high-pressure situation can be. For a young woman like Daigle with a skyrocketing career, calling homosexuality a sin in a public forum could mean closing a lot of doors and alienating a lot of fans. There’s a real cost that comes with taking a stand for the Christian view of sex and marriage. Deciding to pay that price in a split second with a microphone shoved in your face is something better-trained theologians and pastors have failed to do.”³

I hope that since that interview, Lauren has read her Bible more closely to find out for herself what God thinks about sexual morality. Let me suggest that we have in her case an example of one or both of two problems.

1. Is this *accommodation to the spirit of the age*? Clearly, our age is pretty much a free-for-all when it comes to human sexuality. People are becoming so confused that even the scientific and

¹ Robertson (*Word Pictures*, ad loc.): “Credulity means gullibility and some believers fall easy victims to the latest fads in spiritualistic humbuggery.” “Humbuggery”--gotta love that word!

² The superscript “p” means that the pronoun is plural.

³ Read the full Breakpoint Commentary from John Stonestreet, Colson Center for Christian Worldview and explore additional articles here: <http://www.breakpoint.org/2018/12/breakpoint-lauren-daigle-on-the-spot/>.

biological divide between male and female is getting fuzzy in their minds. It is not surprising that in the interest of not seeming totally weird and truly being “put on the spot” a young woman would shrink back from making a clear statement about a Christian view of sexual behavior.

2. So, in that matter, is this *a lack of clear teaching and resulting conviction*? Behind the accommodation to the spirit of the age is often this issue. People just haven’t been taught to “think Christianly” about the issues of our times. Some professing evangelical leaders have not provided a clear witness to the Biblical teaching on human sexuality, and so even those who attend church regularly have not been given any guidance on the subject. Such accommodation and the lack of clear, Christ-centered witness are not new.

II. There were a huge plenty of ancient accommodations to the spirit of the world. Consider these, for example:

1. *Arianism = ancient unitarianism*. This pastor named Arius was from Alexandria, when it was a center of Christian thought in the 3rd-4th centuries. He lived from about AD 250-336. He taught that God the Father was eternal but that the Word, the Son of God, was not. His bishop tried to correct this notion, but to no avail. This all came to a head in the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. The newly professing Christian Emperor Constantine called the Council to settle this question and keep the empire united. Arianism is really the parent of what we might call Unitarian ideas about faith: God is one, and even a person we call “the Son of God” is not equal to Him. Thomas Jefferson would have fallen into this realm, finding the concept of the Trinity irrational. Islam is militantly Unitarian with a fierce monotheism. “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammed is His prophet” is the central assertion of Islam. There is ample Biblical evidence for the concept of God which we summarize as The Trinity, but Arius did not accept it.

2. *Gnosticism = ancient “higher consciousness.”* There has been a lot of study and conversation about what constituted this basic approach to life in the world, a *worldview*, in ancient times. But a few ideas can be presented: (a) Gnostics believed that people needed to gain a higher “knowledge” (*gnosis* in Greek) to be fulfilled as human beings. (b) There is a radical divide between the spirit/soul, on the one hand, and the body, on the other hand, of a person—so what is done in the body either hinders spiritual fulfillment or does not matter. (c) Our human problem has arisen because the spark of divinity in each person has been separated from its origin in the universe and needs to be reconnected to it through that inner and specialized *gnosis*. Gets a little confusing, eh?

But we have remnants of similar ideas in the “Find-Your-God-within” movements of our time. I have described for you the philosophy behind the book and movie *Eat, Pray, Love* on another occasion.⁴ The journey to fulfillment on this road can lead to all manner of practices that the practitioner hopes will bring inner peace and happiness.

III. So, we have a perennial need for *discernment based on clear Christian teaching from the New Testament*.

Take a closer look at 1 John 4:1-6.

I. A call to discernment: “the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1, 6b)

1. *The problem: “stop believing every spirit.”* In John’s time as in ours, there are many voices out there claiming to be the path to fulfillment. “Beware!” John warns us.

⁴ See the treatment of this in Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (Free Press, 2012), pp. 211-241.

2. *The solution: “examine the spirits to determine if they are from God.”* In other words, be *teachable*, but not *gullible*! Just because something is popular does not mean that it is healthy or right or true.

3. *The evidence: “many false prophets have gone out into the world.”* True then, and true now.

A—The spirit of the age in our time and place is a spirit of self-made philosophy and religion. We might call it Radical Autonomy if we wanted to wax philosophical. Christian truth is surely an affront to this self-determined center for our lives. We need to find our center in Christ, or rather we need to be found by Him.

I—Consider this story as something as a parallel to what we need in the spiritual realm.

Nancy Abell tried to get Katharina Groene to turn back. But with 150 miles to go on her solo hike along the Pacific Crest Trail, Groene wanted to see her adventure through. Abell met Groene [in 2018] in Washington, after Groene had walked 2,500 miles northward from the Mexican border. It was late in the season, and Abell was concerned because Groene didn't have snowshoes.

She couldn't stop thinking about the German hiker all alone in the mountains. A few days later when forecasters said to expect two feet of snow in the mountains, Abell called the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office, explaining that Groene might be in trouble.

On the mountain, Groene was dehydrated and disoriented and thought she might have frostbite. She kept falling down and having to will herself to get back up, a sign of hypothermia. Surrounded by evergreens that were sinking under the weight of the snow, she screamed for help. No one heard her. She got out her phone and began recording messages for the friends and family she hadn't seen for months, apologizing for dying on the trail.

Officers launched a search, and soon found her. Rescuers said it's likely she would have died within a day. Groene told reporters one reason she went on the hike alone is because she had lost her “faith in humanity.” Thanks to Abell, it's back in “a really big way.”⁵

When we venture off alone into this wide world, we can easily be overcome by circumstances and be totally unprepared for what challenges our sense of meaning. We can be caught up in the spirit of the age that says, “You choose your own way.” And without someone looking out for our eternal well-being, we will most certainly perish. But, “*God loved the world like this: He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but will have eternal life*” (cf. John 3:16). That is God looking out for us! We need what only the true Jesus described correctly in this collection of books we call the New Testament of our Bibles. As Peter asserted when on trial for his faith in Jesus as the Christ/Messiah (Acts 4:12, FJV⁶): “*And this salvation is not in another, not even one, for there is not even a different name under the heaven which has been given among people by which it is necessary for us to be saved.*”

II. The criteria for discernment (2-3, 5-6), aka, The doctrinal test

1. Those from God:

a. They acknowledge that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (2). Notice the combination of language here and the various components of this statement: “Jesus” means Savior. “Christ” is Greek for Messiah, the Anointed Prophet, Priest, and King foretold in the First Covenant

⁵ David Finch, Oakland, Oregon; source: Antonia Noori Farzan, “A hiker in the Cascades thought she would die in a snowstorm. But a stranger was looking out for her.” *The Washington Post* (11-2-18).

⁶ It's back, the notorious Frank Johnson Version. This is a rather literal rendering of the original.

Scriptures and fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, according to the New Testament. And then, He “has come in the flesh.” Combined, this sentence affirms the deity and the humanity of Jesus. Deny either, and we have left the “faith delivered once for all to the saints” (Jude 3).

b. They listen to apostolic teaching (6). In essence, as we would now understand this, this statement affirms the apostolic foundation for the truly Christian understanding of the message of Jesus. “Whoever knows God listens to us” (1 John 4:6, ESV). The “us” means the Apostles of Jesus, the ones through whom we have received the authentic faith for Jesus’ people.

2. Those not from God:

a. They do not acknowledge Jesus (3). Disbelieving or mis-believing in Him.

b. They “speak from the world and the world listens to them” (5). “The world” as John has described it (see 1 John 2:15-17) is everything around us that is temporary and therefore not to be trusted with what matters for eternity. It shouldn’t be too surprising that the temporary world would not really understand or accept matters that are eternal. And so, we have a warning.

3. Warning: beware the spirit of antichrist, who is already in the world (3). Again, John is the exponent of this concept of “antichrist.” He has defined it well here and in 1 John 2:18-25. The spirit of antichrist is any worldview that diminishes our understanding of Jesus Christ as both fully God and fully human.

A—Any attempt to develop a “Christianity” apart from Jesus as presented in the New Testament writings is going to lead us away from our true spiritual home.

I—I like one particular feature of GPS units and mapping apps in our cars and on our smartphones. It is the feature that allows us to program a specific location as “home.” Once we have set that feature into the GPS memory, no matter where we might be, we can press the “Home” link and the GPS unit will guide us back to that location. We could well argue from the New Testament writings themselves that Jesus is really our spiritual “Home” link. Beware, however. There is always someone who wants to re-program that location and try to convince is that the newly programmed “Jesus” is our true home. Don’t believe it! When we draw near to Jesus Christ, no matter where we might be in our lives, no matter how lost we might feel we have become, when we turn to Jesus, as presented in the New Testament of our Bibles, in sincere and humble faith, He will lead us Home. In fact, we will find that we are already home when we draw near to Him. As James writes with characteristic bluntness (James 4:7-10, FJV): ⁷ *Therefore be subject to God, but oppose the devil and he will flee from you^{p7}; ⁸ draw near to God and He will draw near to you^p. Cleanse hands, sinners, and purify hearts, double-minded ones! ⁹ Be miserable and grieve and weep. Let your^p laughter be turned into grief and joy into gloominess. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you^p.*

We find our way home by humbling ourselves before the Lord Jesus Christ, asking Him to cleanse our hearts and draw us to Himself. As we can see, in Christ we have much more than a *guide home*. He is the power by which we both enter and travel on this journey.

III. The power of discernment: we overcome because “greater is the One in [us] than the one in the world” (4).

The person who overcomes is the one who is “from God,” because that person has been spiritually united with the very Son of God, Jesus Christ.

⁷ The superscript “p” means the original Greek pronoun is plural.

A—The Spirit of God works through the witness of the truth in Jesus Christ to empower our faith. He can work in a million mysterious ways to draw us into life in Christ.

I—Sometimes, He will almost “haunt” us into faith and life in Christ.

In the 1960s Mary Ellen Rothrock was a grad student in English literature at the University of Wisconsin. In 1998 she wrote in *Christian Reader* magazine:

Despair seemed to permeate the student body, especially those in the humanities. A fellow graduate student summed it up cynically, “Playwright Samuel Becket is right. Man is just a piece of trash in a universe that’s running down.”

In college, atheism became my religion. Yet when I got into grad school, I found myself seeking to fill a spiritual void in my life. I began practicing Transcendental Meditation (TM). I met periodically with a TM supervisor. After a year or so of meditating, I mentioned that I had a recurring thought when I was trying to concentrate on my mantra. ‘It’s a line from Handel’s *Messiah*. Something in my mind keeps repeating “And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”

To my young mind, not only was the music thrilling, but the words seemed to come from beyond this world. I loved the joyful language: ‘Hallelujah! for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. ... For unto us a Child is born ... And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.’”

Her TM supervisor told her to ignore the words that kept coming to her but “I told myself, ‘These aren’t just random thoughts.’ It suddenly hit me. The phrase *And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed* was an invitation from a personal God of glory to seek him! Why couldn’t he be ‘Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace?’

Within months, she met a woman who explained how she could have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. She said, “As I heard the words from the Bible, the words from the musical score made sense. The Holy Spirit convinced me of the truth: the God I’d hungered for, the personal God, loved me. ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth.’”⁸

Take it home (final applications).

I. Have we really listened to the music of Christmas? I don’t mean the “Holly, Jolly Christmas” music but rather the “Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come!” kind. He has come to draw us home. Have we received Him into our lives so that He can empower us to enter and complete that journey?

II. Are we growing in “the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (see 2 Peter 3:18), so that we will become more and more discerning between the Spirit of God and the spirit of the age?

We need the full counsel of God in the New Testament of the Bible, and in the Old Testament as understood through the lens of the New.

⁸ Mary Ellen Rothrock, “The Lyric that Saved My Life,” *Christian Reader*, Nov-Dec 1998; submitted: Lee Eclov, Vernon Hills, Illinois, to PreachingToday.com.