

Which Spirits are from God? (1 John 4:1-3)?

by Kyle Butt, M.Div.

The first three verses of 1 John 4 contain certain elements that, at first glance, can be somewhat confusing. Yet, when taken in their proper context and compared with the rest of the letter, their meaning becomes much clearer. The verses state:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world (NRSV).

As a brief background to these verses, it should be noted that the book of 1 John deals in an in-depth fashion with the Gnostic apostasy that divided the Lord's Church during the later part of the first century and on into the second century. One of the main tenets of the Gnostic heresy was the idea that anything physical was, by its very nature, evil. Therefore, according to the Gnostics, if Jesus Christ actually came in the flesh, then He must have been tainted by sinful, evil flesh. This group suggested, then, that Jesus Christ never **literally** came "in the flesh," but only **seemed** to come in the flesh.

John's argument at the beginning of 1 John 4 is an encouragement to Christians to test the teachings and beliefs of everyone who would pretend to be speaking on behalf of God. [John used the word "spirit" to refer to the teachings, beliefs, and actions of people (in this case, true and false teachers). Lenski stated: " 'Spirit' is the person as such with his inner, spiritual character. There is no need to put more into this word" (1966, p. 485).] John then suggested the criterion whereby his readers could know if the teacher was speaking from God or not. John wrote: "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God." This particular phrase has caused some confusion in the religious world. Looking at the phrase by itself, it seems that every person who claims that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is "from God," regardless of any other beliefs or teachings that may conflict with the Bible. Using this verse, it has been argued that God accepts any religious group that acknowledges that Jesus has come in the flesh.

Upon further investigation, however, it can be shown that this phrase was not intended to offer blanket acceptance of all religious people or groups who simply state a belief that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. In fact, to state that one believes that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is to do no more than the demons did during the earthly ministry of Christ. In Mark 1:21-28, the gospel writer related a story about Jesus casting an unclean spirit out of a man who lived in Capernaum. Upon meeting Jesus, the unclean spirit cried out, "Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!" (1:24). Obviously, the unclean spirit recognized Jesus as coming in the flesh; yet few, if any, would argue that the unclean spirit's verbal confession would classify this demon as being pleasing or acceptable to God. Therefore, it is clear that John's statement does not mean that every person who merely **says** that Jesus came in the flesh is pleasing to God.

What does John's statement about confessing Christ mean? When looking at other parts of 1 John, several criteria for a faithful follower of God are enumerated. James Burton Coffman offered a list of at least seven things that John used in the epistle to gauge whether or not a person was faithful and acceptable to God (1979, p. 415). Among other things, John wrote that a person must: (1) confess his or her sins (1:8-10); (2) keep God's commandments (2:3-4; 5:2); (3) practice righteousness (2:29); (4) love others (3:10); (5) provide for the physical needs of others (4:17); and (6) believe and confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (4:1-3). As Coffman noted of these criteria:

They are not separate tests, actually, but a composite, each of the above scriptures being, in a sense, commentary on each one of the others.... [T]he unity of the tests is seen in the fact that "keeping his commandments," "loving one another," "doing righteousness," "possessing the Holy Spirit," etc., all amount to one and the same thing" (1979, pp. 415-416).

It is evident, therefore, that John's statement about confessing Christ was not meant to be a single test of authenticity, but rather a summary statement that entailed all of the other necessary conditions found throughout the book. Charles Ryrie wrote in regard to 1 John 4:2: "From this verse, we are not to suppose that this was the only test of orthodoxy; but it is a major one, and it was the most necessary

one for the errors of John's day" (1971, p. 1022). R.C.H. Lenski likewise stated: "It would be a serious mistake to think that John speaks of confessing only the one fact or doctrine of the Incarnation..." (1966, p. 488). Thus, mental acceptance and verbal acknowledgment of the fact that Jesus Christ came in flesh will never put a person in a right relationship with God without the proper actions and obedience to God's commands.

Additional comments are in order concerning John's reference to the "spirit of the antichrist." Countless people and groups have attempted to identify the antichrist. Simply type in the word "antichrist" on the Internet, and you will be inundated with suggested personalities such as the Roman Emperor Nero, Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and the Pope—which are but a few of the candidates put forth. In most cases, "the antichrist" is supposed to be connected with the end of the world, the number 666, and various other "signs of the times." However, John is the only biblical writer to use the word antichrist(s). He uses it five times in the following verses: 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7. In these five brief references, John made several things clear concerning the antichrist. He wrote in 1 John 2:18,22: "Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour.... Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son."

First, let it be noted that John specifically mentioned that many antichrists had already come into the world. If his readers were looking for a single, solitary figure distinguished as the sole antichrist, John disabused them of this notion by mentioning that **many** antichrists had come. Any attempt to identify the antichrist as a solitary political or religious personality misses the pointed statement by John that **many** antichrists had already come into the world. No doubt, John was specifically referring to those of the Gnostic persuasion.

Second, John unambiguously informed his readers that during their own lifetime (i.e., the first century), these antichrists had **already come** into the world. All efforts to connect the antichrist with some future, end-time predictions fail to account for the fact that John specifically stated that the many antichrists were already in the world at the time of his writing.

If, according to John, there were many antichrists in the first century, what was John's definition of an antichrist? John defined an antichrist as any person (or group) who denies the Father and the Son. In 1 John 4:3, he explained, "every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world." When analyzed critically, one can see that **any** person or group, which does not recognize that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come in the flesh, is a person or group that has been seized by the spirit of antichrist. As abrasive as it may seem, groups such as Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and even orthodox Jews would all fall under John's condemnation of denying the Son and the Father.

As John urged his readers almost two thousand years ago, so we must today: "Test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

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