

True or False?:
Avoiding Spiritual Deception Through Discernment

1 John 4:1-6 (ESV)

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1 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. 2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. 4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. 5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Nicholas Barclay vanished from San Antonio, Texas at the age of 13. All efforts to locate him proved futile. For everyone who knew him, it was a tragic disappearance. Three years later, the family received a phone call. Nicholas had been found! But to their shock, he was in France. In a rush, his 31 year-old half-sister Carey, booked a flight to Europe. Once she arrived at the shelter, she met him in one of the rooms. She jumped up and gave him a hug. He did seem distant, different. But as they spoke, she learned how he had been abducted and sold into a ring of child prostitution, and her heart was broken. The ordeal had changed him. He had a slight French accent. He called her “Carey” now instead of “sis.” His eye color had changed, but this was Nicholas. He had the same nose like Uncle Pat, the same cross tattoo near his thumb. And once he shared how they’d injected dye to alter his eye color, she swore under oath that he was her brother. The next day, he was flown to be reunited with his family. Nicholas lived in that home for 5 months before a local private investigator began to grow suspicious.

Fredrich Bourdin had a difficult childhood. He never knew his father. When he was 2, he was taken from his mother due to neglect, and placed with grandparents in France. As a teenager, he ran away to Paris in search of the love and affection that he had never received. In the city, he discovered a very unusual way to belong. He became a serial imposter. Bourdin pretended to be an orphan on numerous occasions to receive the compassion of strangers. So polished were his lying skills, that he earned the nickname, “the chameleon.” He would go on to masquerade behind an estimated 500 false identities. Most of these personalities were invented. But in at least 3 cases, he assumed the identities of actual missing teenagers, the most famous of which was his impersonation of a young boy from San Antonio. Bourdin passed himself off as Nicholas for almost half a year before a comparison of his ears with an older photograph of Nicholas exposed the lie. The FBI proved that he was guilty of fraud and perjury and sent him to prison for 6 years.

When people hear this story, they're baffled at how an entire family could be deceived into believing an imposter to be their own son and brother. No doubt the chameleon was a master of disguise. I mean, he twisted pieces of his own past to help him keep his stories straight, claiming that a good liar uses the truth. He had refined the craft of trickery into an art form. But how could he fool an entire family in such an intimate setting? One interviewer said it like this, "Most cons are filled with logical inconsistencies, even absurdities, which seem humiliatingly obvious after the fact. People are rarely on guard and by playing on some primal need—vanity, greed, loneliness—men like Bourdin make people suspend their doubts." In the sister's words, "Your heart takes over and you want to believe." Bourdin himself acknowledged what any con man knows but rarely admits. It is not that hard to fool people.

The apostles are almost gone. The last remnant of those who personally walked with Jesus had begun to fade away. Few witnesses remain. In their decline, false teaching spreads like a cancer. Our particular strain that we see here seems to be a strain that plagues this group of Christians that John is writing to. Leaders in their midst have twisted the apostles' message about Jesus. Crafty teachers have introduced heresy that leads several members of the congregation into apostasy. The result is doubt, panic. Such deceit leaves the church wondering if they can be sure their beliefs are true; if they really know God. It's a crisis of spiritual identity. So John writes to give them assurance, to bring clarity to this confusion between dark and light. In 1 John 1:3-4 and especially 5:13, he wants to complete their joy, remove this doubt, restore confidence in true fellowship and communion in Christ. He wants to testify as an eyewitness to help them know for sure that Jesus is the real deal; that He's fully God, fully man, and that people who know Him, who have a relationship with Him, can have assurance.

So in this letter, he presents some ways they can examine themselves and others to discover who the real deal is. He offers what seem to be three general kinds of tests: A social test, a moral test and a doctrinal test. And when it comes to the doctrinal test of truth, perhaps the foremost example is in our passage today. It's included by John as a warning, because he knows from personal experience that deception is difficult to discern because people are easily fooled.

Not a day goes by that we don't face false messages. We hear policies at work, curriculums at school, offers on our phones, and spins from the news, all coaxing us toward certain beliefs. Countless movies claim to have powerful messages. Songs and even musicians are called "prophetic voices." There's no escape! I even got a message from my Hyvee fortune cookie last month. (Congregational Laughter!) "For a good cause, wrongdoing may be virtuous," it said. Advice on situational ethics from a grocery store. False messages are everywhere. And these lies are made to look and taste good. So how do we avoid being deceived? How do we exercise discernment? How do we tell the difference between messages that are true and ones that are false? How can we be on guard? This passage gives us at least three ways that we can avoid deception, three measures that people of discernment take to escape lies. They are three ways to counter Satan's attacks.

Measure #1—Stay Alert [Think] (4:1)

If you want to be on guard against spiritual deception, you have to stay alert. That means think about how we receive messages. It means we need to maintain a mindset of discernment, and the word for which is vigilance. It means to be watchful, attentive, wary. Stay alert and think!

In 1959, the Joint Chief of Staff developed a system of military alertness to help our nation prepare for dangerous situations called the DEFCON system. It's short for defense readiness condition. DEFCON 5 is a normal state of readiness. DEFCON 3 means the Air Force is ready to mobilize in 15 minutes. DEFCON 1 means maximum readiness; nuclear war is imminent. One of those occasions of DEFCON 3 was on September 11, years ago. That afternoon, the entire North American air space was closed. There was an eerie silence in the skies as the president addressed the nation and said that the military at home and around the world was at high alert status. There was a watchful vigilance that in some ways was cemented into our understanding through the creation of a government agency, the Transportation Security Administration. This is the kind of heightened alertness to threats that John is talking about here. Stay Alert! Think! You might call it "Stranger Danger."

I 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.

John wants his readers to understand that God's design for His people's safety is through discernment. He makes an appeal toward that end, and we can see it from three different angles. There are three pleas that he makes toward discernment.

Plea #1 Wake up: Think Spiritually

This is the way they're supposed to stay alert. The kind of alertness he's commanding, the kind of mentality he wants them to enter, is spiritual. It is to think spiritually. This is a time when prophecy is prevalent. Paul's letters show us that the churches were places where God was speaking through prophets and giving specific messages to people. There was an abundance of what John calls "spirits." What does he mean by that? It's not easy to say, but I believe the thought is that every prophet, every message has a spiritual origin, a source from which the content flows. And by using this term "spirit," he's addressing not just the people claiming to speak for God, but the underlying ideologies, the spiritual origin and impulses that flow from that message. Every message rests upon a spiritual foundation. There's something behind it.

Each year, thousands of Americans set aside a Sunday afternoon to watch the Super Bowl. Fans are interested in the game, but not everybody is interested in the game. Some people are there for what? Commercials! They cost somewhere around \$400 million in advertising. They're there to watch the commercials; to laugh, to cry. But discernment tells you that behind the ad there's a company. The message has a design. They didn't pay that much money to give us all the feels. They have a purpose, a goal in mind. And so, every message has a source with a specific aim. And there's a vital point here that we

need to note. Not all spirituality is good. Just because something is spiritual, it doesn't mean it comes from God. D.A. Carson calls spirituality an applause word. It's always positive. No matter who says it or when, everybody cheers. But not all spirituality is good, and the challenge is knowing the difference.

Plea #2 Look Sharp: Think Carefully

He explains the kind of alertness is spiritual, but here are the reasons why; the motivations for why we need to think carefully, the reasons.

Motivation # 1: Affection

John is motivated by his care for them. His warning comes from a place of love in verse 1. Look at the endearing title by which he addresses them, his warmth.

I Beloved, ...

Loved ones. Dear friends. Affection. And this affection moves him into the second motivation which is

Motivation # 2: Concern

He has concern about the danger that they face. We see the end of verse 1.

I... many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Many false prophets! It's the sobering reason for vigilance. Stay alert because the world is flooded with lies. Don't believe every teaching that claims to be from God. Hesitate! Be skeptical not of their sincerity, but of the source. They may be sincere. Someone could claim to have heard from an angel and they might even be telling the truth. But here's the question: Did that angel come from God? In John's day, not all the Scriptures had been written and organized the way that we have them now. The church was still dependent upon prophecy and people speaking God's Word. And John says don't believe everything that you hear because some spiritual teaching is not divine, but demonic. This is not a small issue. It's huge! There are many deceivers in the world, and they themselves are being deceived. They are false prophets with messages that come from demons. Not all spiritual activity is good. And we see this happening throughout the Old Testament. There are examples of false prophets. And we're told in Deuteronomy 13 that God would allow false prophets to come and they would even perform signs and wonders.

Deuteronomy 13:1–3 If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

God is allowing this to happen. It was to the mouths of Israel's prophets that lying spirits were sent to entice the kings to war. You remember one prophet who God told, "Don't return this way." And so he stays, but another prophet claims, "God spoke to me and He said it's okay for you to do that." And so he went back and he was attacked by a lion (1 Kings 13:1-34). False prophets! Spiritual warfare! It can occur right under our noses without us even knowing it. Judas had Satan himself enter in (Luke 22:3) and the very apostles of Jesus sitting at the same table didn't even recognize it. They still thought Judas was belonging as one of them and about to do a good spiritual work. They were blind to it. Warnings come straight from Christ.

Matthew 7:15 Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

Matthew 24:11 And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.

Matthew 24:4-5 And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray.

Mark 13:22-23 For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.

And so Peter warns as well in 2 Peter 2.

2 Peter 2:1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

Lies and deception are a part of this world and we need to be prepared. So he says, look sharp and think carefully. He has a deep sense of care for them and an awareness of the danger. Those are his motivations.

Plea #3 Go Deep: Think Critically

We've seen the kind of alertness and the reasons why. But now we can see how. These are the means by which we show alertness. He gives some commands or mandates here. One is negative; the other is positive. The first negative command is

Means # 1: Caution

I Beloved, do not believe every spirit,

Don't swallow what they claim or the impulses they may encourage. Prophecy was happening, but the church was still to test it. We see in Paul's letter in 1 Corinthians 14 that yes, two or three prophets could speak, but let the others weigh what is said (1

Corinthians 14:29). Test it! Examine it! And this is not just with doctrine. It also comes in the area of love. You can see in 3:23, we're told to "believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ..." And then later, here in chapter 4, we're told to not believe every spirit. Back in 2:7 and 11, we see that we're supposed to love our brothers and sisters. And later, in verse 15, we're supposed to not love the world and the things in the world. So there's a sense of appropriate discrimination; of being critical in understanding what to love and what not to love; of what is true and what is not true. It's caution! The verb contains a sense that they need to stop believing every spirit. It's as if they were a little too open-minded already to be thinking critically.

Means # 2: Examination

This is a positive command. So not only don't believe every spirit, but he says test them. Don't just hesitate; discriminate! Test the teaching. Examine it. This is a term used for coins being tested for their value, the proper weight and purity. They need to know the difference between true gold, pure gold and fools gold. The idea is not one of confrontation, but evaluation. Think back when the Psalmist prays to God

Psalm 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!

This is the idea of testing. In the New Testament, it's connected with many passages about doctrinal assessment; test, examine. Paul says before you take communion, you should examine yourself (1 Corinthians 11:28). He warns believers to examine themselves to test whether they are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). And even when he talks of deacons he says those who are appointed should first be tested (1 Timothy 3:10). This is the idea of examination, evaluation. Just because someone speaks with authority, does not mean that they are right. Satan knows how to look good. He doesn't appear with a pitchfork and horns.

2 Corinthians 11:14–15 And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

He knows that no one drinks poison when it's labeled with crossbones. But who can resist an elixir packaged and scented like maple syrup? Before you start drinking in teaching, make sure you test for poison. Evaluate claims of truth. Be discerning. We have a responsibility to evaluate because some people will be deceived, naïve, and gullible. God's call for us is to not be like that, but to be like the Bereans of Acts 17:11.

Acts 17:11 Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:21,

1 Thessalonians 5:21 ...test everything; hold fast what is good.

Now this idea of examination or testing is not really talking about confronting demons physically or personally. Paul talked about what the ministry of apostleship was in 2 Corinthians 10.

2 Corinthians 10:3–5 For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,

Spiritual leaders are a gift given for the spiritual warfare of the mind. It's why God makes it such an important element of elders in Titus 1. It's the ability to "hold firm the trustworthy word as taught..." (Titus 1:9) It's why Paul spoke to the elders in Acts 20.

Acts 20:28–30 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Doctrine is vital! It's why teachers are given to the church.

Ephesians 4:14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

It's important, but here's a brief reminder. Doctrine is important, but it's not everything. In Revelation, Jesus addressed the seven churches. And in chapter two, He commends the church in Ephesus because they have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. It's a good thing. But later to the same church he says,

Revelation 2:4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

This is just one component. Paul says to Timothy that the aim of our charge is love (1 Timothy 1:5). There's more to church than mere doctrine, but certainly not less. Doctrine moves toward love. They're connected. So how do we test these spirits? Well, we'll get to that in our next point. But there's a hint here in verse 1. It's the condition that we evaluate to see whether they are from God.

I Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God,

Stay alert, because heresy, not from God, will be inevitable.

1 Timothy 4:1, 6 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,...be a good

servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.

So examination and caution. This is how John tells us to stay alert. Wake up. Look sharp. Go deep. Here's the point. God's design for His people's safety is discernment. It is one that requires vigilance. So we stay alert. There are so many false messages that beckon us today. Here's a brief summary. We covered these in our youth group this past semester. There are lies like:

Universalism: "It's all good. Everyone gets to heaven." Hedonism: "Live it up. Do whatever makes you happy. Life for is pleasure. YOLO! (You Only Live Once)" Moralism: "Do better. If you're good enough you can earn God's favor." Nihilism: "Nothing matters. Life has no meaning." Naturalism: "Get real. There is no supernatural." Mysticism: "Follow your heart. Feelings will lead you in the right direction." We've heard songs and seen movies about this time and again. None of these are new. D.A. Carson says, "Eventually Ism's become wasm's and are repackaged as new ism's." Anywhere people can talk, there will be lies. We need to ready ourselves to be alert to the allures of spiritual deception.

Are our homes places to think spiritually, carefully, critically? Are we focusing on our children or our physical, material, academic, financial concerns, to the neglect of the spiritual? What are the portals, the ways that messages enter our home through books or programs or apps or devices? We need discernment! We need to stay alert. Christ is a leader who expects His followers to think. Remember what He said to His disciples.

Matthew 16:6-12 Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." But Jesus, aware of this said, "O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Think! Stay alert! Vigilance!

Measure #2—Study Up [Test] (4:2, 3, 5, 6)

We receive messages with alert minds, but now we evaluate them with studied methods. We test with diligence. It's careful and persistent work.

Exposing counterfeit paintings by testing for authenticity is a valuable science. It's one for which investors will pay very dearly. One of the most famous consultants is a man named Jamie Marton. He relies on research, his vast knowledge of art history, and a collection of highly specialized tools. He was brought in to examine paintings shown by a

certain gallery. And he was with some of the forgeries and he discerned them within one hour. And he ended up exposing, in all, there were around 63 fakes. They were sold for \$80 million in what some called “the biggest art scam in U.S. history.” Diligent study and a discerning eye made him one of the best fakery spotters in the world.

Chapter 4, verses 2, 3, 5, and 6 teach us how to deal with what we can call “Mixed Messages.” If we want to avoid getting deceived, we need diligent study to build discernment. There are two different spirits to identify between: the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error. This is how you know the spirit of truth, John says. It’s how you know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. What does that look like? Here’s the work that he unfolds for us. There are two steps to his method. There’s more as you look at the whole book, but just in this section, there are two markers of authenticity here. The first step toward practicing discernment and testing messages, is to

Step #1 Listen Close: Test the Message Doctrinally

John says start by testing what they say; the content of their message. Examine their confession. To confess means to say the same thing, to agree. It’s to agree with the Scriptures about what they say about Jesus. This doctrinal examination is Christological, more specifically. They’re testing what the speakers are saying. There is the criteria and the conclusion. The criteria of the test, they’re testing the confession here, is one of orthodoxy. Is the confession orthodox, or is it unorthodox? Orthodox means that it is the original. It means that it is the traditional, the conventional, the belief that Jesus taught from the beginning. These are the orthodox confessions, the normal Christian beliefs.

So an orthodox confession of the spirit is that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. This is the test to see if someone believes the true Jesus. And it seems almost too simplistic, but it’s often overlooked. If you want to know if someone is true, what do they say about Jesus? Do they have an orthodox confession? Do they say that He is the Messiah, the Chosen One, the God-man? Or do they say that He was a created being, as was taught by ancient and modern cults? Do they teach that He was fully God and fully man? Do they affirm His humanity and divinity? That He was God who could fully satisfy God’s wrath, and yet a man who could suffer the just punishment for man’s sin. Any message that twists or distorts that confession is not of God. Some people claim that all religions worship the same God, but Jesus said this is not true.

Luke 10:16b...the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

John gives orthodox confessions about Jesus in the beginning of his gospel and in the beginning of this letter here. In John’s gospel, he says

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

This is what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2.

1 Corinthians 2:2-5, 10 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God...these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.

Now, natural man won't accept these things. They're revealed to us through the Spirit. And John says this is the test.

2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,

But there's also another result. If it's not orthodox, it's unorthodox. It's a spirit of error, contrary to truth. When something is brand new or innovative or ground-breaking or fresh or novel or inventive in our day, it's usually a good thing. But not when it comes to confessions, to truth. If something is true, it's true. It doesn't change. And so unorthodox teachings that are strange or new or innovative, they're to be examined and tested carefully. And when you test them, you will determine where they come from, their origin. So, the truth, like its speaker, comes from God. John makes this claim in verse 6.

6 We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

God is the source of truth and John claims to be from Him. He's an apostle, a follower of Jesus. And here's one test result. It is that origin can be divine. It comes from God. But there is another. It's where lies come from. Demons! No stream rises above its source. When someone says strange things about Jesus, this teaching is not from God.

3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

John diagnoses this message as the spirit of the antichrist. It's not about Christ, but it's supplanting or going against or replacing Jesus. We don't have time to get into a deep discussion about antichrist other than to say that Paul discusses it in Thessalonians. He mentions a figure, an antichrist, the man of lawlessness who will one day come. But he mentions this mysterious power of lawlessness already at work in the present time. That seems to be what is in view here. It's the presence of influence counter-Jesus. You can see it in 2:18. John references this conflict of people leaving.

1 John 2:18-19 Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would

have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

John says listen close and test what's said. That's step 1. Listen close. Second though, there's not only a doctrinal test, but a moral one.

Step #2 Look Around: Test the Audience Morally

Look at not only what they say, but who listens to them; the content of their message and the character of their listeners. Examine their conduct. The same two aspects we see here. First, the criteria is not orthodoxy, but morality. John contrasts the two audiences in verses 5 and 6 to be his listeners and then the listeners to the false messengers. He says "the world listens to them, but whoever knows God listens to us." He's giving two contrasting test results. The audience is either godly or worldly. If they're godly, they will listen to the Scripture and the apostles' teaching. He says in verse 6,

6 We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

If the audience is worldly, then they listen to the false messengers, because

5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.

So this is how you recognize false teachers. One way, one aspect...and he's speaking in generalizations here. But he says the substance of their teaching is drawn from the godless world. The world listens to them because they speak the same language.

1 Corinthians 2:14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

The person of the world, Paul describes in Ephesians 2 as

Ephesians 2:1-2 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.

And yet, this was all of us. He says this is where you were. You were dead! In Ephesians 4 he says you were

Ephesians 4:18 They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.

This is where the world is without the grace of God. The world hates Jesus and His followers. And so, if the world loves a certain teaching and is listening, you can suspect

that there is error. Paul says this is not the way of teachers of truth. He says of himself in 2 Corinthians,

2 Corinthians 4:2–4 But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

So Paul proclaims Him. But there are people who are going to be naïve, that Jesus warns us about, and who will be drawn into division. And some of that audience will reveal the origin of the message. Now when we talk about examining the audience, we're not talking about a cavalier judgmentalism about people around us. We're looking just in general at how people are responding. It's kind of a picture you can realize by the people who are gathering around. You dress in your suit and go to the symphony, getting ready to listen. And before even a note is played, you can realize that you accidentally walked into a rock concert by looking at the audience. You look around and you can sense what is happening over time and in general ways.

I was speaking with someone from Bethany at the hospital last week. We were talking about brain surgery. It's a serious thing. We were talking about what a hard job being a brain surgeon is. And he said, "I don't want to be a brain surgeon and have that responsibility for someone's life in my hands." Then he kind of paused and looked at me and said, "I wouldn't want to be a pastor either and have the responsibility of people's lives with what you say." It's terrifying! It's terrifying because the very thing that is so dangerous is right next to the thing that is so vital. The people are together, and just as you do brain surgery, it's such a dangerous thing. It's the same sense when you're trying to apply God's Word. It's a dangerous thing and so difficult to do.

Jesus told a story of what and tares, how the wheat was sown and the enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat. Some said, "Let's rip it out." They were cavalier. "No, no," Jesus said. "You're going to hurt the tares. Be so careful." (Matthew 13:24-30) And by God's grace, sometimes, He allows what John expresses in chapter 2, that some people leave. God allows for divisions to bring about for the protection of the tares. But in general, there are many times where there's going to be a mixture and it's difficult to discern. So this is not cavalier. This is not easy. This is something that's very difficult.

We pray for our pastor. We pray for our elders as they make some of the difficult decisions. But as we see a collective audience living in ungodly ways, in worldly ways, we start to sense the origin of the message. If a teaching draws people out of the world to enjoy things and they don't change, you should be on your guard. Jesus had tax collectors and sinners being drawn to Him, but they were being changed. It's not that there aren't worldly people, but are they being changed and transformed? Look around. The audience will tell you a lot about the message.

Certain leaders gather specific types of fans according to earthly demographics. So age, ethnicity, wealth, styles, gender. It's not like this with Jesus, though, because the gospel is not defined by worldly limits. But it does have a specific audience. People who like to listen to Jesus do so because they like to follow Him. Jesus' audience is not measured by vocation, but by devotion. You see, what marks His audience is a godliness that they want to follow Him.

John 10:4–5 When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.

There's going to be one flock and one shepherd. And He warns that some don't believe, and they're not among My sheep. But My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow Me. (John 10:11-16)

Later on, He's talking with Pilate. He said

John 18:37–38 Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him.

Those who are of God, listen to God. Those who aren't, don't. Jesus spoke very clearly to non-believers in John 8. He said

John 8:23, 47 He said to them, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world... Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

He said to His followers in John 15,

John 15:19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

There's a difference between the listeners. It's just like the child who is playing on the playground and when they hear other parent's shouting, they ignore it. But when they hear the voice of their own dad, they come running. They know the voice of their father. So those who listen to the truth are marked by godliness. So listen close, look around, test what is said and who listens. The point is, discernment takes work. It requires vigilance, but also diligence. So we study up.

Measure #3—Keep Calm [Trust] (4:4)

If you want to be on guard, you have to keep calm. That means trust. It's viewing these messages with calm hearts and confidence in Christ. It's to be at peace.

An illustration we've used before is that of the world war. By the time of fierce fighting, some historians suggest the turning point occurred on the beaches of Normandy. Many suppose that on D-day, the outcome of the war had been secured. If we are to believe them, in one sense, the war was over. But the enemy didn't give up. The battle got fiercer. But in a sense, they had been conquered. D-day, in many ways, is like the cross. The outcome is secure. It's finished! But it doesn't mean that we're out of the fight. It may intensify, but we fight for victory. So in 4:4, is a verse we'll call "Blessed Assurance."

4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

Discernment takes work, but it's always available to those who seek it in Christ. It's always available. The need for vigilance and diligence is no reason to lack confidence. Discernment should have a trust. And there are some healthy reflexes for people with discernment.

Reflex #1 Lean in: Trust God's Heart Relationally

They lean in because they trust God's heart relationally. You need a reason to keep calm with all of that stuff going on? Here's one. You are loved! You are loved by God, cherished! Here is the assurance. Look at the affectionate title by which John addresses his readers.

4 Little children, ...

You see his tenderness? It's a heartfelt relationship with John, yes, but also with God. He says

4 Little children, you are from God...

He hints back to our new birth from chapter 3. We are born of God.

1 John 3:1a See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.

You have a sign, a seal. The flag on your uniform is on the winning side. You're not of this world. You're origin is new. You're from God; the same God from chapter 5:1.

1 John 5:1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.

A plural term "children" in verse 4, means in the Greek, y'all are from God. This is a family. And the reflex is to lean into that.

Reflex #2 Grab Hold: Trust God's Power Theologically

We know that yes, we're cherished, but we're also secure. We are loved, but we're also protected. Our new identity means a mysterious and unstoppable victory.

4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them,...

God wins! It's like a fighter or a boxer who says to his opponent, "You're dead meat!" He's speaking of it as if it's in the past tense because he's so certain it's going to happen. The victory is sure. You've overcome them.

1 John 5:19 We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

That's a scary thing, but we're not afraid. We can keep calm and enjoy victory because of a superiority.

4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

Yes, the world lies in his power, but we can keep calm because our victory is not in our own strength or power, it's in Christ as we abide in Him and His body. This is a plural promise. We are part of His body so that, just like Jesus said in John 16:33,

John 16:33 I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

Keep calm because of your identity and victory.

1 John 5:4 For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

That is, what we believe.

Ephesians 6:10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

Romans 8:37 in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

We think of John 10. Jesus makes this promise to those sheep.

John 10:28–29 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

What is your reflex? Train yourself to trust, to lean in and grab hold. Because the point is, discernment is always available to those who seek it in Christ. So we can keep calm.

Where do you belong? Are you at home in Christ's body? Belong to Him. And may God grant us the ability and desire to call others out of the darkness and lies, into the family of light. The need is so great!

Jim Jones was born into a family in rural Indiana. He grew up studying leaders, and formed very strong social views. He decided the most effective way to advance them was through religion. He launched his own "church" called the "Peoples Temple Christian Church Full Gospel." He was celebrated by many for being an integrationist, adopting several children from difficult backgrounds. Many were drawn to the idea of belonging in what he called his "rainbow family," and dreaming of what he promised to be a better world of love and peace.

In time, he challenged his followers to move on to California, and later to a mission as a utopian colony in the South America jungle called Jonestown. But after complaints and U.S. government interaction, Jones felt threatened and he did the unthinkable. He used conspiracy theories to compel a massacre. He had a metal tub filled with water. They poured in powdered grape juice flavoring. They added cyanide. And he used armored guards to pressure all of his followers to drink. Those who refused were forced to comply. Kids were given the drink first. Even infants were fed with syringes. And families were told to lie down together. On that day, over 200 children perished. And in total, over 900 lives were lost. This is evil!

Now as tragic as that event was physically, it is only a slim picture of the devastation wrought by the evil one spiritually. Some poisons work fast, others go slow, but they always, always kill! False doctrine is a poison that if not addressed, it will result in death. Satan

John 8:44...was a murderer from the beginning, and he does not stand in truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Truth gives life. Lies kill. Sound doctrine delivers. False doctrine destroys. Jesus came not to kill, but to be killed, that He might give His life and life abundantly to all who would believe. The distance between orthodoxy and heresy is infinity. Is a message true or is it false? The answer is a matter of life and death. May God grant us discernment to know the difference.