

Truth versus Error

1 John 4:1-6

by Arthur Goodwin

At the end of 1 John 3 we find John saying, "And we know that He abideth in us, by the Spirit whom he hath given us." Here the apostle is clearly referring to the Holy Spirit. In the opening verse of chapter 4 we read, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world." So here the apostle is warning us that there are other spirits in the world whose testimony is in direct opposition to that which the Holy Spirit of God would make known.

In 1 John 2:18 the apostle had intimated, "Even now there are many antichrists, by which we know that it is the last time." These spirits are false spirits and are purveyors of false teaching. *Imitation* has long been one of Satan's ploys. From the earliest times both primitive and modern man of whatever nation or colour have always had an appreciation of some supreme Being to whom should be given allegiance and even worship. Satan knows this and has responded by sending out evil teachers to divert men's thoughts from the true God who has manifested Himself.

Man is a triune being composed of body, soul, and spirit, and it is this which gives us the capacity to know and so we can read in Romans 8:16, "The Spirit Himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." The Holy Spirit working in unison with our spirit enables us to discern good from evil. And so we read in the Authorised Version in 1 John 4:2, "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God". This is not a good translation, for it simply means that the confession is only an *historical* one, simply that Jesus Christ was a man here upon earth. The second "that" and the "is" should not be there and the reading should simply be, "Every spirit that confesseth Jesus Christ come in flesh, is of God".

It is not merely an historical acknowledgement, but a confession of the Person of Christ — who He is. An ordinary man could have come in no other way but in the flesh for the simple reason that he *is* in the flesh, but Jesus Christ is of God and could have come in other ways. For example, it is generally thought that the Angel that appeared to Abraham was in fact a theophany or a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God (Gen. 18). The confession here is truly a confession of His *deity*.

This the spirits of the antichrists deny as John says in chapter 2:22-23, "Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son. Whosoever denieth the Son the same hath not the Father; he that confesseth the Son hath the Father also." Jehovah's Witnesses, Moslems, and others do not deny His presence on earth, but will not confess that He is Jehovah the Saviour, the Christ — the Anointed of God.

In 1 John 4:3 the apostle states the *negative* side. An abbreviated rendering of this verse but which nevertheless has excellent authority translates it, "(...) and every spirit that confesseth not Jesus". Such a translation emphasises the Person of the Lord and obviates any historical event. A professing teacher who cannot make such a confession is "not of God." Paul in Acts 20:29 had warned the Ephesians elders of false teachers who would come in amongst the saints. John who outlived all his contemporaries was a witness to the fact.

In verse 4 the opening pronoun is emphatic; John is about to distinguish between the children of God and those who are of the world. The former are overcomers, for they have rejected the false teaching of the anti-Christian teachers. The latter are indwelt by the spirit of the wicked one, and in the next chapter he says that they lay in Satan the chief who is behind these spirits of error (1 John 5:19). On the other hand, the children of God — and again the pronoun is *emphatic* — are indwelt by the Spirit of God, "who is greater than he that is in the world". What a mighty resource the Christian has!

The false teachers who are of the world proclaim what the world wants to hear, and so the world listens to them and receives them. Paul in his second letter to Timothy refers to these very same people saying, "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine but, after their own lusts, shall they heap up to themselves teachers, having itching ears" (2 Tim. 4:3).

I cannot help but think we have very much such preaching in our present day. How many preachers there are who from their pulpits will proclaim politics and philosophy and their congregations will go away and say, "That was a good sermon, was it not?" But how much do we hear of the sinnership of men and of salvation through the blood of Christ? The ears are tickled, but the consciences are not touched.

But says John, "we are of God." No doubt he is here referring to himself and the other apostles of those early days who were the ¹outpiece – of God. Today their teaching is incorporated into the New Testament and now this is our authority. By accepting it we demonstrate that we are of God. By reading and studying it we may judge what is truth and what is error. The apostle Paul touches on this subject in his first letter to the Corinthians. Here we read, "If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant" (1 Cor. 14:37,38).

Without doubt we are in the last days. The apostles and the prophets have gone, but the New Testament remains. Antichrists abound and just as they refused the apostolic teaching of former days so today they refuse the teaching of the New Testament. They are not "of God". Another has said, "The essential principle for faith is to have God speaking to His children in His *Word*".