

THE BOOK OF I JOHN

3. Test the Spirits

I John 4:1-6

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Ever since the 2016 presidential election, the United States has become a more divided nation.

There are the Never Trumpers, or the Resistance, who are still in shock, and rage over Donald Trump's surprising election.

And there are the MAGA's, who agreed with candidate Trump that America has been in decline and needs to return to greatness.

For me, this divide has been with us since the tumultuous 1960's.

This has been well-documented in a scholarly history I have been reading titled THE UNRAVELING OF AMERICA.

It seems everyone has a theory for the situation we find ourselves in today.

Some of these theories are ideological: conservatives denounce liberals as free-spending socialists, while liberals denounce conservative criticism as hate speech,

Some theories suggest that America's creaky institutions, based on an 18th Century Constitution, are no longer capable of responding to the challenges of a polarized country and a globalized world.

Others counteract that America's exceptional success as a nation originates from literal interpretation of the Constitution and the liberty and opportunity it offers individuals.

The most potent theories, however, include religion.

This is as it should be, because, at the deepest level, every human culture is religious, defined by what its inhabitants believe about some ultimate being or reality, and what they think is demanded of them.

This reality doesn't have to be a personal God.

It can be tenets of capitalism or Marxism, the cult of the individual, the Social Gospel, or the Gospel of Prosperity.

I think Bob Dylan had it right in his song, “You Gotta Serve Somebody,” and every culture or ideology does.

This insight forms the basis for two of the most popular explanations for America’s current predicament — one offered by the Christian Right, and the other by the Secular Left.

The first holds that Americans have lost their way ever since God and prayer were taken out of public schools in 1962.

From that time onward, Americans have been bullied into apostasy by the secular elites through an amoral Hollywood, activist judges, an agnostic media, and progressive educators.

The other follows the 19th Century French advocate, Alexis de Toqueville, in suggesting that American democracy, while formally secular, has always relied upon religion to provide a moral framework for its citizens.

The eclipse of Christian belief has led inevitably to the decline of public morality and private virtue.

While these two versions seem mutually contradictory, both contain an element of truth.

America has indeed become less traditionally Christian since the 1960's, just as religious conservatives insist, while liberals point to faith-based activism as the impetus for combating racism, poverty, and discrimination as a means of correcting America’s flaws.

In his insightful book, BAD RELIGION, the op-ed columnist for The New York Times, Ross Douthat, claims that America’s problems aren’t too much religion or too little of it.

He writes:

“It’s BAD religion: the slow-motion collapse of traditional Christianity and the rise of a variety of destructive pseudo-Christianities in its place” (p. 3).

Douthat continues:

“Since the 1960's, the institutions that sustained orthodox Christian belief — Catholic and Protestant alike — have entered a state of near-terminal decline” (p. 3).

The churches with the strongest ties to the Christian past have lost members, money, and authority.

The elite that was once at least sympathetic to Judeo-Christian values has become hostile or indifferent.

The culture as a whole has turned its back on many of the faith's precepts and practices.

Continuing his analysis of contemporary Christianity, Ross Douthat offers:

“In this America, the Christian teaching that every human soul is unique and precious has been stressed, by the prophets of self-fulfillment and gurus of self-love, at the expense of the equally important teaching that humans are, by nature, sinful and unclean.” (p 3).

Take sin out of the equation, and religion becomes a license for egotism, selfishness, and feelings easily employed to justify what used to be considered deadly sins.

The result is a society where pride becomes ‘healthy self-esteem,’ adultery becomes ‘following your heart,’ greed and gluttony become ‘living the American dream.’

Douthat comes to this not too startling conclusion:

For all its piety and fervor, today's United States needs to be recognized for what it really is: not a Christian country, but a nation of heretics.

If the writer of today's proscribed passage was here among us, he would say, using today's lingo: “That's what I'm talking about!”

In his on-going discussion of the Christian life, the aging Apostle, John, returns to a theme that he has already introduced in the Second Chapter of his First Letter — the contrast between truth and error, between deceiving “antichrists” and trustworthy teachers.

In today's text, John focuses on the responsibility, not of teachers, but of hearers — our responsibility to distinguish truth from error.

John begins by expressing his concern for the doctrinal purity of his readers by issuing two serious commands.

He commands these things because he cares deeply for his readers.

They are his beloved children in Christ.

John has already written to these believers about the importance of loving one another, and not loving the *world*.

He says our love must be discriminating, discerning, distinguishing love.

To that end, John issues these two commands.

The first is negative, the second is positive:

“Do not believe every spirit” and ***“Test the spirits”*** (4:1).

The term translated as spirit originally meant *“breath”* or *“wind.”*

Here in First John, it signifies a person who is inspired by the spirit — the spirit of truth or the spirit of error.

The fact is, every human teacher, whether true or false in his or her teaching, is motivated and empowered by something that inwardly impels and drives them.

John uses his characteristic method of setting the truth in his no-nonsense, cut-to-the-chase style.

Everyone who teaches in the Church is either the mouthpiece of the spirit of truth, speaking for God and Christ, or the mouthpiece of the spirit of error, speaking for the spirit of the age.

It has been said that one who marries the spirit of the age is soon left a widow or a widower.

John’s first command is essentially “Don’t be gullible.”

In other words, don’t believe everything you hear.

To put it another way, “Look before you leap.”

The Apostle is cautioning believers to look beyond the outward and discern or detect the inward spiritual reality.

This leads to the second command:

We are to ***“Test the spirits”*** of teachers ***“to see whether they are from God”*** (4:1).

That brings to mind the image of a well-trained watch dog, like a Doberman Pinscher.

The moment a Doberman hears a sound or spots a movement in its domain, its pointy ears pop up, and its eyes fix on the source.

And, if there’s a threat, that watch dog springs into action to protect its territory.

John is suggesting that we Christian believers need to be equally alert and equipped to discern between truth and error, particularly when it comes to the basic beliefs and tenets of our faith.

John uses the term, *'test,'* in a way similar to Paul's use in his First Letter to the Thessalonians:

"Examine everything carefully, hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil" (5:21-22).

The word means *"to make a critical examination of something to determine its genuineness."*

For example, I was at my local bank, making a deposit into our account.

The teller went through each of the large bills and swiped them with a special pen.

When I asked her what she was doing, she replied that the ink distinguished genuine bills from counterfeit ones.

In the same way, believers must have a thorough understanding of the genuine Christian faith to be able to test competing truth claims.

John's warning isn't just hypothetical.

He doesn't follow up his command with:

"Don't be alarmed."

I'm only telling you these things in case of the possibility that maybe, someday, some false teacher or teachings so happen to be taught or passed down or on to us."

No, John is addressing an immediate crisis in his own day, and one that has only grown broader and deeper down through the centuries.

John offers two tests — faithfulness in word and deed to the person of Jesus Christ, and faithfulness and obedience to God's Word.

These are sure, reliable guides for discerning between the spirit of truth or error.

Beloved people and children of God,

never forget we are living in transitional and treacherous times.

Our doctrinal discernment plays a vital role in surviving and thriving as a Church.

Our historical roots and doctrinal truths must continue to be valued and embraced.

Each generation of believers has a serious responsibility to keep the faith and to pass it on to the next generation.

Church leaders are given the task of equipping the saints both in the faith and for the work of ministry.

A strong and healthy Church is no guarantee of the same tomorrow.
Remember these words of Jesus that John probably first heard as a
disciple:

“My sheep hear my voice and they follow me” (10:27).

Can you discern Jesus’ voice for your life in this age of heresy?
Remember, discernment should be loving, but, at the same time,
love must be discerning.

AMEN