

## The Marks Of A False Prophet

1 John 4:1-6

### Introduction

1. “What do you believe about Jesus?” No question is more crucial or important. No question has received more confusing and mistaken answers. That is certainly true in our day, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
2. 1) “Jesus was a subversive sage. His witticisms tended to undermine the everyday view of things. Jesus taught them: If someone sues you for your coat, give them your shirt as well. In a two-garment society, that would have been funny.” *Robert Funk, founder of the Jesus Seminar.*
- 2) “I am inclined to the view that Jesus caught a glimpse of what the world is really like when you look at it with God’s eyes. He endeavored to pass that glimpse along in short stories we call parables and in subversive proverbs we call aphorisms. But He did not spell out what He meant. My glimpse is informed by, but bypasses, the Jesus of the Gospels – the Christ superimposed by the evangelists on their own glimpse of the real Jesus. I am convinced that the New Testament conceals the real Jesus as frequently as it reveals Him.” (*Robert Funk, Honest to Jesus, Harper San Francisco, 1996*).
- 3) “I asked my class, “Who was Jesus?” Most said he was a religious figure. Some said philosopher, comparing him to Socrates. Then there was Jesus as political leader, with one student comparing him to Mao and Stalin.” *Tyler Roberts, lecturer and head tutor of religion at Harvard University.*
- 4) “He was a feminist. He cured ill women, allowed them to become people who related his truths, forgave a repentant prostitute, allowed her to touch him. Women gave their money to support him. Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the Resurrection – what’s more important than that, in Christianity? She was apostle to the apostles, told by Christ to go to tell them that he had risen. There should be a role for women to preach and teach today – a role too often denied.” (*Susan Haskins, Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor*).
- 5) “It’s in the scrolls if you really study the codes: It was not a resurrection. He was put on the cross. Those within his own party, trying to help him commit suicide, gave him poison – the sponge dipped in vinegar. He was unconscious but not dead. His side was pierced, blood came out. A dead body does not bleed, so his followers knew he was not dead. They put him in the cave. He lived until his seventies, and it was he – Jesus acting behind Paul – who led their party out of Judaism and to Rome. He married Mary Magdalene and had four children.” (*Barbara Thiering, Dead Sea Scrolls interpreter, author of Jesus, the Apocalypse*).
- 6) “With the deepest respect for others and their beliefs, to my mind Jesus, and John the Baptist also, were mistaken and misguided ‘end-time’ prophets: Jesus was neither a mediator nor a savior, neither superhuman nor divine. The time has come to leave Jesus to his place in history, and to move on.” *The Rev. Andrew Furlong, Church of Ireland’s dean of Clonmacnoise and rector of Trim and Athboy (RNS, 2002)*. He resigned from his post 3 days before he was due to appear before a church court on charges of heresy.
- 7) “Poll: One fourth of Americans Believe Jesus Sinned on Earth.” “A quarter of Americans feel strongly that Jesus sinned when he lived on earth,” the Barna Research Group reports. Twenty-five percent of Americans surveyed this year said they strongly agreed that “when he lived on earth, Jesus Christ committed sins.” (*June 2002 RNS*)

3. Such confusion and mistaken notions about Jesus do not stop with Him. If you get it wrong about Jesus it is certain you will get it wrong elsewhere. Listen to Eric Weight, a Mormon, who helped in the construction, with hundreds of others, in building a Hara Krishna temple in Spanish Fork, Utah, “You find out they’re not that much different than we are. They’re children of the Heavenly Father.” (*RNS*, 3-5-02). Hear persons like Jan Willis, named by *Time* magazine in the year 2000 as 1 of the 6 top Religious Innovators for the New Millennium who calls herself a “Baptist Buddhist.” Her defense of such an odd combination: “It seemed to make sense because it was my experience.” She adds: “If I have learned anything about myself thus far it is that in my deepest core I am a human being, graced by the eternal truths espoused both by Baptists and by Buddhists. And more than that, I am aware that it is not any particular appellation that matters. For ultimately, what I have come to know is that life – precious life – is not a destination. Life is the journey.” (*RNS*, 2-22-02). Cross the Atlantic to Great Britain where the Prince of Wales, Charles, heir to the throne, recoils from the historic title given to the monarch of England, “Defender of the Faith,” opting rather for the title, “Defender of Faith.” He says, “I personally would rather see it (his future role as king) as Defender of Faith, not just the faith (the Church of England), because it means just one particular interpretation of the faith, which I think, is sometimes something that causes a great deal of a problem.” (*RNS*, 1-11-02). Or return again to this side of the Atlantic and listen to God allegedly speaking to Neale Donald Walsch in his book *Conversations with God* (quoted in “What in the World!”, Vol. 24, No 7, 1998, page 2). “Listen to your feelings. Listen to your Highest Thoughts. Listen to your experience. Whenever any one of these differs from what you’ve been told by your teachers or read in your books, forget the words. Words are the least reliable purveyor of Truth.”
4. To all of this John sounds an essential warning, “Test the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” (4:1). John believes that drawing contrast is an excellent method of teaching. In this letter he repeatedly gives us antitheses to help us see spiritual danger and what is at stake:

Truth vs. falsehood (2:18-28)

Children of God vs. Children of the devil (2:29-3:12)

Love vs. hatred (3:11-24)

Now he adds a 4<sup>th</sup>: the Spirit of God vs. the spirit of Antichrist (4:1-6). John now challenges us to be “prophet investigators” that we might snuff out that which is of God and that which is of the devil, that which is of the Lord and that which is of the world, that which is of Christ and that which is of Antichrist.

## I. Know them by examination. 4:1

- × 4:1-6 parallels at many points 2:18-28.
- × 4:1-6, along with 2:18-28 and 2 John 7 are the only texts to use the term Antichrist.
- × John begins with a pastoral and compassionate word, “beloved” (*NIV*, “dear friends;” 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11). He genuinely loves the people to whom he is writing and therefore the urgency of the warning is only heightened by this term as he begins.

### 1) They are different as to their master.

Do not believe (*me* with the pre. imp.) every spirit.

Test – (pre. imp.) to prove by putting to the test to discover its genuineness.

Whether they are of God – Behind every prophet, every proclamation, there is a spirit, but they are not all from God. Watch how they act. Listen to what they say, esp. about

Jesus, salvation, the Bible, God. Real faith will examine its object before trusting it. Real faith will examine the energizing power acting behind the scene. False prophets and teachers have a different master and it is not God. That leaves only one other possibility.

2) **They are deceptive in their message.**

- × False prophets (*pseudoprophetai*) – prophets yes, but liars also, “spiritual peddlers of error.”
- × All of us: “not believe” and “test” are in the plural! It is the whole church’s responsibility to be prophet investigators, heresy hunters, doctrine detectives!
- × False prophets are not new!
  - Deut. 13:1-5 (read)
  - Deut. 18:20-22 (read)
  - 2 Cor. 11:1-4 (read)
- × There is a tendency to ascribe any unusual phenomenon to God. Such a lack of discernment opens the door for false teaching and provides an opportunity for demonic activity to invade the church. Remember: spiritual or religious activity is not necessarily godly activity! Watch and wait. Look and listen. Evaluate the message and the messenger by the Word of God. False prophets are deceptive in their message.
- × Jesus warned us (Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 14; Mark 13:21-23).  
Paul warned us (Acts 20:28-30).  
Peter warned us (2 Peter 2:1-22).  
Jude warned us (Jude 4-19).
- × You cannot say, “I was never warned.” Where there is truth, error will be lurking in the background. There are those who are deceptive by their message. Be on the lookout.

3) **They will depart on their mission.**

- × World (6x, vs. 1-5) – here that evil system under Satan’s control and in opposition to God. They have a mission field and a message to share, and they are faithful in their assignment.
- × They are on T.V., radio, in magazines and periodicals. They operate as cultists, occultists, New Agers, theological liberals, skeptics and various world religions. The world is their stage and ... Jesus is not the Lord nor the Savior of the World in their eyes.

**Transition**

We know them by examination, but careful examination reveals something of crucial importance.

II. **Know them by their confession. 4:2-3**

- × In Matthew 16:13 Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” Here is the million-dollar question, the inescapable question, the question every person who has ever lived must answer. John says you can basically divide all of humanity into 2 categories: those who get it right and those who get it wrong.

**1. Faithful prophets (persons) declare the truth about Jesus. 4:2**

By these you know (cont.) recognize, come to understand the Spirit of God.

Every spirit – it is comprehensive.

That confesses (*homologe*, cont.) – it is confessional.

Jesus Christ in the flesh (*en sarki*) has come (W.A.R.) – it is Christological

Of God is – it is conclusive.

- × John uses the phrase “Jesus Christ” 8 times in his letters. By it he emp., and especially here, the genuine reality and permanent union of the incarnation.
- × On the truth of God’s Son becoming flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, Christianity stands or falls. The truth is not optional, it is essential.
- × The Spirit of God always honors Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus said in John 16:14 concerning the Spirit, “He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.”
- × Amazingly even demons got it right and recognized the deity of Jesus while He walked on earth (Mark 1:24; 3:4; 5:7-8). Tragically some demons have a better theology than do some pastors, teachers and theologians.

**2. False prophets deny the truth about Jesus. 4:3**

- × When it comes to what people believe about Jesus, the 1<sup>st</sup> century was a lot like the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Already there were people who refused to believe the truth about God sending His Son as the Savior of the World.
- × Verse 3 is the antithesis of verse 2. Those who deny the truth of the incarnation of the Son of God: 1) are not of God and 2) are of the Antichrist.
- × Docetists said Jesus was a phantom or ghostly spirit who only appeared to be human. A man named Cerenthus said the Spirit of God’s Christ empowered the human Jesus at His baptism but left Him before the crucifixion. Bottom line: they denied the genuine reality of the incarnation and the wedding of deity and humanity in the person of Jesus.
- × Antichrist here means “against Christ” (cf. 2:18, 22; 2 John 7). John says you hear he was coming (and he is), and he (his devilish spirit) is now already in the world. He was active in John’s day, he is active in our day, and he will remain active until the day that Jesus comes again.
- × What one thinks about Jesus has enormous consequences. Tell me what you think about Jesus and I will tell you 95% of the rest of your theology. He is the center, the hub of all theology. All of it radiates out from Him.
- × On June 14, 2000 Southern Baptists adopted as their Confession the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*. What do we confess about Jesus?

**God the Son**

Christ is the eternal Son of God. In His incarnation as Jesus Christ He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying Himself completely with mankind yet without sin. He honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross. He made provision for the redemption

of men from sin. He was raised from the dead with a glorified body and appeared to His disciples as the person who was with them before His crucifixion. He ascended into heaven and is now exalted at the right hand of God where He is the One Mediator, fully God, fully man, in whose Person is effected the reconciliation between God and man. He will return in power and glory to judge the world and to consummate His redemptive mission. He now dwells in all believers as the living and ever present Lord.

I. Howard Marshall says it well, “If a person claims to believe in Jesus, it is proper to ask, ‘Is your Jesus the real Jesus?’” (p. 207).

### III. **Know them by their identification. 4:4-5**

× John is again tender in his words, “little children” (*teknia*). He is also encouraging, telling them they are victorious and have overcome the lying prophets and their spirit of antichrist. The victory, however, was not because of them. The victory, as always, is because of Him! You see:

#### 1. **Faithful prophets have a foundation in God. 4:4**

- × You are of God (You is emphatic) – a strong contrast with verse 3. Here is the source of our strength and comfort, our confidence and our security. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13), including withstanding the attacks and assaults of false teachers.
- × Have overcome (W.A.R.) – to triumph, conquer, be victorious “faith in the biblical Christ is the victory!” And why?
- × The one in me is greater... Satan, Antichrist, and the false prophets are no match for God and His Christ. On our own we would not stand a chance. However, we do not wage war in our strength, but in His!
- × “Believers should be aware and alert to false teaching, but not afraid” (MacArthur). A true believer is saved, safe and secure by God’s spirit. We are as safe as God is strong!

#### 2. **False prophets have a congregation of the world. 4:5**

- × They (in contrast to us), the false teachers are of the world (24X in John’s letters) – here again it refers to Satan’s domain.
- × They speak as of the world. They speak a Satan sermon.
- × The world hears them.  
There is a difference in origin, message and audience. Their message (anti-christ in content) reveals their source. Their message is attractive to those who think like the world system thinks. “The world listens to those who speak its own language” (Hiebert). What does such preaching sound like?
  - All roads lead to God.
  - All religions are the same.
  - Jesus is a good way but not the only way.
  - Muslims don’t need to be evangelized.
  - Buddhists don’t need to be evangelized.
  - Jews don’t need to be evangelized (as the Catholic Church recently declared).

- One way religion is an intolerant religion.
- One way religion is an evil religion.
- The world hears, nods and applauds when they hear this kind of message. It may be politically correct and popular, but it is spiritually corrupt and deadly. Watch where people line up concerning Jesus as the only Savior. You will know them by their identification.

#### IV. **Know them by their corruption. 4:6**

In John 8:47 Jesus said, “He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God.” John’s teaching in this verse is reflective of our Lord’s warning to the extremely religious of His day.

##### 1. **Faithful people hear God’s Word and listen to that which is true.**

We (emphatic; a ref. to all Christians with true teachers leading the way) are of God (cf. v. 4).

The one knowing God will listen/hear us not the false teachers of Antichrist / world / Satan. Such a one welcomes the Word of God and what it teaches about Jesus. Here is the Spirit of truth (cf. John 14:17; 16:13; 15:26).

##### 2. **False prophets hate God’s word and listen to that which is false.**

Not of God (lost, unregenerate, unbelieving) does not hear (believe, welcome, appreciate, receive) us. Here is the spirit of error (wandering from the truth). False prophets wander away from Jesus. They hang around Him for awhile, but they don’t stay.

The Bible says He is God – they wander away.

The Bible says He is sinless – they wander away.

The Bible says He did miracles – they wander away.

The Bible says He is the only Savior – they wander away.

The Bible says He died on the cross for our sins – they wander away.

The Bible says He rose bodily from the dead – they wander away.

The Bible says He ascended into heaven as Lord – they wander away.

The Bible says He is coming again – they wander away.

The Bible says He will judge us all – they wander away.

Today it is all about Jesus. As those who call Him Lord, we must stand up and speak up. Martin Luther lays the challenge before us beautifully,

*If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ.*

*Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.* – Martin Luther

## Conclusion

Who is Jesus? Jaroslav Pelikan points in the right direction when he writes,

*There was a great teacher, and gathered around him was a small group of faithful followers. They listened to his message and were transformed by it. But the message alienated the power structure of his time, which finally put him to death but did not succeed in eradicating his message, which is stronger now than ever. That description would apply equally to Jesus and Socrates. But nobody's ever built a cathedral in honor of Socrates. Socrates called upon people to think straight, but with Jesus there's more than just "teaching," there's a transcendent dimension, beyond the here and now, as a source of hope and meaning.*

Jaroslav Pelikan, Professor of History at Yale University,  
author of *Jesus Through the Centuries*

*Christ is the way. These are his own words; so it certainly must be the truth. And the way is narrow. These are his own words; so it certainly must be the truth. Indeed, even if he had not said it, it would still be the truth.*

Soren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*

*The Bible is the fundamental way to view him: There was a virgin birth. Jesus was born all-powerful. He was brought here to save him. He was God made flesh, God walking the earth. He was man and God.*

Richard Miller, spokesperson for the  
Brethren in Christ World Missions