

Main Idea: There are two reasons we need to know the truth about Christmas, according to 1 John 4:1-6.

- I. We have a God-given responsibility (1-3).
 - A. Here’s the exhortation (1).
 1. Don’t believe everything you hear.
 2. Use discernment.
 - B. Here’s the evidence (2-3).
 1. If a teacher is from God, he will teach Jesus’ incarnation.
 2. If a teacher isn’t from God, he won’t.
- II. We have a God-given identity (4-6).
 - A. Here’s what is true of us (4).
 1. We belong to God.
 2. We are overcomers.
 - B. Here’s what is true of false teachers (5).
 1. They belong to the world.
 2. They speak man’s ideas.
 3. Their audience is the world.
 - C. Here’s what is true of biblical teaching (6).
 1. God’s people will pay attention to it.
 2. People who don’t know God won’t.

Challenge: We need to be two things...

1. Be a careful listener.
2. Be a devoted follower.

God sent His only begotten Son into the world.

Those nine words sum up the amazing event that occurred two thousand years ago, an event we’re preparing to celebrate in a couple of weeks. *Christmas*.

But I want to pose a question. Can you show from Scripture what really happened at Christmas? We’re going to learn this morning why this is so vital.

It was somewhere towards the end of the first century A.D. when John, whom many think was Jesus’ first cousin as well as being an apostle and member of Jesus’ inner circle, was living in Ephesus. He’d served the Savior for more than fifty years since the day he saw the Lord return to heaven in a cloud.

Somewhere between 85 and 95 A.D. John wrote a letter to believers living in the province of Asia (in modern day Turkey). It was a pastoral letter. John’s intent was both to encourage and warn these second generation Christians. He encouraged them by talking about the subject of *assurance*. In 1 John he answers the vital question, “How can a person know for sure he is a Christian and possesses eternal life?” We can know, John says, and in 1 John he tells us how (see 5:13).

But another subject was on John’s heart as he penned this epistle. A battle was raging. The enemy wasn’t using spears and swords, but words. And the battlefield wasn’t in some far off land, but right in the church. The church of Jesus Christ was under attack. The opposition had ridden the Trojan horse right inside the camp.

Satan uses two wicked tactics. First, he’s intent on doing all he can to keep people in darkness, to stop the spread of the gospel to new lands. But once he fails at this agenda, once the good news of Christ reaches a new people group and a church is established there, Satan resorts to tactic number two. He attacks the church from within. How? He

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seeks to infiltrate and contaminate local churches with false teaching. If he can't keep people from believing in Jesus, then he pours his energies into confusing the issue of who Jesus is.

That's what was happening in Asia Minor at the end of the first century. And that's the second reason John wrote this epistle. "I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray (2:26)."

By the way, what happened then is exactly what's happening in America today. Satan is working overtime through his deceptive accomplices to get people to buy into twisted ideas about Jesus and the gospel.

Lest you think I'm being melodramatic, consider a couple of examples. In the first edition of his 1990 book, *Good Morning, Holy Spirit*, Benny Hinn wrote: "And let me add this: Had the Holy Spirit not been with Jesus, He *would have sinned*. That's right, it was the Holy Spirit that was the power that kept Him pure. He was not only sent from heaven, but He was called the *Son of Man*—and as such He was capable of sinning.... Without the Holy Ghost, Jesus would have never made it.... Can you imagine Christ headed for the grave, knowing he would remain there forever, if the Holy Ghost would change His mind about raising Him from the dead?"¹

Without the Holy Spirit, Jesus would have sinned? Are we talking about the same Jesus?

Listen to another statement, this one by the influential "Faith" teacher, Kenneth Hagin: "Every man who has been born again is an incarnation and Christianity is a miracle. The believer is as much an incarnation as was Jesus of Nazareth."²

What? Jesus' incarnation isn't unique to Him? What's sad is that these two statements are merely representative of dozens and dozens of others being promoted by popular authors and television preachers and pastors in the name of Christianity.

Satan is sly. Since he knows he can't get rid of Jesus, he simply redefines Him. He knows that belief in a "redefined" Jesus will save no one.

My friends, we need to know the truth about the Christ of Christmas. And John can help us. There are two reasons we need to know the truth about Christmas, according to 1 John 4:1-6.

I. We have a God-given responsibility (1-3).

It's a responsibility that will enable us to stand firm as we're bombarded by the subtle attacks of the Evil One. John puts the responsibility on the table in verse 1.

A. Here's the exhortation (1). "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

Please notice that John isn't merely making a suggestion, but offering a twofold command. There are two things that we as Christians must do. The first is negative, the second positive.

1. Don't believe everything you hear. "Do not believe every spirit," he says. The term "spirit" here refers to those offering a message from God. John has in mind teachers

¹ Benny Hinn, *Good Morning, Holy Spirit*, pp. 135-36. In the seventh printing of this book, certain unannounced changes were made in the text in response to criticism.

² Kenneth Hagin, "The Incarnation," *The Word of Faith* 13, 12 (Dec 1980):14.

who were claiming to have words inspired by the Spirit of God. Later in the verse he calls them “prophets” because technically a prophet is the mouthpiece of some spirit.³

Realize that this was before people carried Bibles to church. Church attenders didn’t have Bibles yet. It wasn’t uncommon in a typical church service for someone to stand and announce, “I have a message from God.” Paul addresses a similar abuse of this practice and offers this charge in 1 Corinthians 14:29, “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.”

Apparently, John’s readers weren’t doing that. They tended to accept every teacher who claimed to be inspired. So John charged them, “Don’t believe everything you hear.”

Does that mean we’re supposed to be cynical towards teaching in the church? No. God commends a teachable heart. He doesn’t commend a gullible heart. You say, “How can we be teachable, yet not gullible?” That’s the second part of the exhortation.

2. *Use discernment.* “Test the spirits,” John explains. “See whether they are from God.”

I have a ham radio. I enjoy scanning the dial, listening for people to talk to from countries around the world. But to be able to enjoy good communication on the radio, you must learn to tune out undesirable signals and background noise. In fact, the radio has special knobs to help you do this, like the RF gain. If I don’t tune out the undesirable signals, I won’t be able to give my attention to the desirable one.

There are a lot of voices out there giving us signals about life’s important questions. They’re on our televisions and our radios. They confront us when we read a book or a newspaper or a billboard or a website. We hear voices when we listen to our music and our teachers.

John says, “Listen carefully to what the voices are saying. Make sure what they’re saying is true. Investigate them. Assess them carefully.” Perhaps it’s more obvious that we need to do that when we go to the secular university, but John says we need to do it when we come to church, too. Don’t leave your mind at home when you enter a place of worship on Sunday.

Quite frankly, that’s what happens far too often. Many people don’t go to church to *learn*, but to *feel* something. In fact, they gauge the success of a church service by how it makes them feel. Who cares what the content of the songs were, who cares whether the sermon was biblical or not, as long as I felt better when I left. John says we’d better care. He commands us to *test the spirits*.

Just why is this testing necessary? According to John, it’s because “many false prophets have gone out into the world.” Not a few, but *many*. Jesus predicted this assault before He left the earth in Matthew 7:15, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing [in clerical garb?], but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them....” To use another of Jesus’ word pictures, Satan loves to plant tares among the wheat. Satan knows he can’t eliminate the message of Christ, so he seeks to distort it, to confuse people, to get them to believe in a different Jesus.

Perhaps you’re wondering, “Well, how can we tell if teachers are from God or not? What’s the basis for how we are to test them?” John answers that for us in verses 2-3.

B. Here’s the evidence (2-3). “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,³ but

³ John Stott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 153.

every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.”

How can you tell whether a pastor or teacher or TV speaker or magazine editorialist is really from God and worth hearing? John says, “Check out what they believe about the Person of Jesus Christ.”

This is bedrock truth. The Bible teaches that Jesus is the true God and the true man.

But not everyone believed that in John's day, nor in ours. One of the most dangerous heresies in the first two centuries of the Church was Gnosticism.⁴ People who believed in gnosticism assumed that the body was evil, and only the spirit is good. For them, salvation is the escape from the body, achieved not by faith in Christ but by special knowledge (the Greek word for "knowledge" is *gnosis*, hence Gnosticism).

Follow carefully. Since the gnostics believed the body was evil, they denied the humanity of Jesus. Some said Jesus only *seemed* to have a body (later called *Docetism*, from the Greek word "to seem"). Others said that the divine Christ joined the human Jesus at his baptism and left him before he died (called *Cerinthianism*, named after its most prominent spokesman, Cerinthus). Gnosticism denied the Incarnation.

Is that a problem? It sure is! That kind of teaching is what prompted John to write this letter. Perhaps you're thinking, "Oh, what difference does it make, as long as you believe in Jesus?" The issue is, *what* Jesus? There's only one Jesus that can save us. It's the historical, God-man that John followed and witnessed for three years.

It's not enough merely to ask someone, "Do you believe in Jesus?" Nearly everyone would answer *yes* to that question. A follow-up question is critical. What do you believe about Jesus? In other words, who is He, and what did He do? John says it boils down to this...

1. *If a teacher is from God, he will teach Jesus' incarnation.* Granted, you won't find the term "incarnation" in the Bible. It comes from the Latin *in carne*, "in flesh." You will certainly find its truth. The second person of the Godhead robed Himself with human flesh. And you will definitely hear it from a teacher who is truly from God. He will confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

That's the message John Himself taught. Listen to the words with which he begins this letter (1:1-3): "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ²The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and *we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.* ³We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

So John says if a teacher is from God, he will teach Jesus' incarnation. On the other hand...

2. *If a teacher isn't from God, he won't.* It's that simple. He won't believe that Jesus of Nazareth was God come in human likeness. He may assert that Jesus was a good man, but not God. Or he may suggest that Jesus was God, but not really a man. He might teach that Jesus was born a man and attained Godhood at a later date, at His baptism when the Holy Spirit came on Him. And if he holds to any of these views—or to any other perversion of the biblical record—John states emphatically, *he is not from God.*

⁴*NIV Study Bible*, p. 1905.

What is he then? John says, “This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.” This is a serious charge. According to John, if a teacher doesn’t believe in the incarnation, he’s not just a “little” off. He’s missed the boat altogether. Not only does he not have the Holy Spirit, what he has is the *spirit of antichrist* (see 2:18). He’s working in cahoots with the devil (see 3:8).

By the way, this isn’t the only test. It just happens to be the one that John’s readers needed to evaluate the kind of false teachers confronting them. There are other biblical tests besides the doctrine of the incarnation for determining whether a teacher is from God or not.

One is the atoning work of Jesus. Did Jesus come merely to show us the way to God, to be our moral example, or did He come to provide a ransom payment for sinners? And just how does a person experience the benefits of the atoning work of Jesus? Do we receive salvation by a combination of faith and human effort, or do we receive it by faith alone? These, too, are fundamental tests for orthodox Christianity, as Paul made clear in the book of Galatians in his response to another type of false teacher—the Judaizer.

I hope it’s becoming clearer why it’s so important what we believe about Christmas.

Listen. Just because someone says he believes in Jesus doesn’t mean he is a genuine, biblical Christian. Just because a preacher says he preaches “Jesus” doesn’t guarantee he’s giving you historic Christianity. Just because someone is popular, or religious, or sincere, or nice, or has degrees on his office wall, or is easy to listen to, doesn’t mean he’s from God. The same goes for musicians and authors and the rest. The question that must be answered, John says, is this: “What Jesus does he believe in?” If he doesn’t believe in the biblical Jesus, don’t listen to him.

Please answer this question. When the Mormon Tabernacle choir sings “Joy to the world, the Lord has come,” just who is the Lord of whom they are singing? Is He the unique God-man presented in the Scriptures? According to well-documented Mormon teaching, the answer is *no*. Whereas Mormons agree that Jesus was human and divine, they do not believe His divinity was unique to Him. Brigham Young wrote, “The Lord created you and me for the purpose of becoming gods like himself. We are created to become gods like unto our father in heaven.”⁵

The false teaching doesn’t stop there. Have you ever wondered why you don’t see too many crosses on Mormon church buildings, and why they use water for communion instead of the fruit of the vine? It’s because they’ve redefined the Cross just as they’ve redefined the identity of Jesus. Yet the Mormon church is one of the fastest growing religious groups in the world. And to complicate matters, just this year they’ve changed their official name in their attempt to portray themselves as mainline Christianity. They no longer want to be called the “Mormon church,” but officially, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.”

If ever we needed to heed our God-given responsibility, it’s today. *Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.*

There’s a second reason we need to know the truth about Christmas...

II. We have a God-given identity (4-6).

Please notice John’s careful use of pronouns in the next section. It’s “you” in verse 4, “they” in verse 5, and “we” in verse 6. He’s going to talk about three identities now.

⁵ *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 10, p. 223; as cited in *Fast Facts on False Teachings*, by Ron Carlson.

A. Here's what is true of us (4). "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

Here are two reasons why we need to exercise great discernment when choosing the voices to whom we'll listen. They have to do with our identity.

1. *We belong to God.* "You, dear children, are from God," John writes. You are "of God," is the KJV rendering. The apostle uses a family term to refer to his congregation. He calls them *children*. How does a child enter a family? He is *born into it*. How does a person get into God's family? He must be born into it.

Elsewhere, in John 1:12-13 the same John wrote, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

Children of God are those who have been born *of God*—and God birthed them into His family because they received His Son. We belong to God, John says.

2. *We are overcomers.* That's battle terminology, from the Greek root word *nikao* (English "Nike"). "You have overcome them," the text reads. Overcome whom? Who is "them?" According to the context, it's the false prophets. It's the spirit of antichrist.

You say, "Wow! Satan is so subtle. How can we ever stand against his deceptive tactics? I'm afraid I won't make it." If you are truly God's child, you will make it! What's the basis of our hope? It's not because we're strong enough or wise enough to stand. John says it's because "the one who is in you [that's the Spirit of Christ Himself] is greater than the one who is in the world [that's the spirit of antichrist]."

I need to point out something at this point. Throughout this section, John's verbs are plural. He's talking to the corporate body of Christ. When he says, "Test the spirits," he's talking to the whole church. When he says, "Greater is the One who is in you," he's again has the whole church in mind. You can't use this text to endorse the "Just Jesus and me, I don't need anybody else" mentality. No one of us can test the spirits and stand on our own, but together, enabled by the One who lives in us, we are overcomers.

A young boy traveling by airplane to visit his grandparents sat beside a man who happened to be a seminary professor. The boy was reading a Sunday school take-home paper when the professor thought he would have some fun with the lad. "Young man," said the professor, "If you can tell me something God can do, I'll give you a big, shiny apple." The boy thought for a moment and then replied, "Mister, if you can tell me something God can't do, I'll give you a whole barrel of apples!"⁶

We belong to God, and we are overcomers. That's our identity, according to John. The same certainly can't be said of the individuals identified in verse 5.

B. Here's what is true of false teachers (5). "They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them." Notice three features of false teachers.

1. *They belong to the world.* We are "from" or "of" God (depending on how you translate it), but they are "from" or "of" the world. That's the origin of false teachers. They don't come from nor belong to God, but *the world*.

⁶ *Today in the Word*, April, 1989, p. 43.

2. *They speak man's ideas.* Since they are from the world, they “speak from the viewpoint of the world.” That is, instead of proclaiming the truth of God as revealed in His Word, they utter human opinions. They water down the truth. They give people a message they want to hear.

3. *Their audience is the world.* John says, “The world listens to them.” Know this. False teachers can get crowds. There's something appealing about man's ideas to the hearts of sinners, just as there is something offensive about God's Word—only true sheep will hear the voice of the Shepherd (John 10:27).

I'd like to make a rather candid observation at this point. Just because a church is growing is no guarantee the growth is from God. John doesn't use numbers as a test of truth and success, as we often do today. To the contrary, we'd better take inventory when the crowds start flocking to us. When a church starts attracting a crowd, it may be because God is sending a revival. But it also may be because we've accommodated our message. *The world listens to them.*

Now I'm for growth. I believe that healthy, living organisms will grow, including the church, the body of Christ. But when church growth is God-sent, there won't just be a crowd that's enamored with man-centered programs and ideas. There will be genuine disciples of Christ who have a hunger to learn and live according to God's Word.

How do I know that? Because of John's explanation in verse 6: “We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.”

Answer this. What happens when a church does teach God's Word? According to John...

C. Here's what is true of biblical teaching (6). Putting it bluntly, two things...

1. *God's people will pay attention to it.* On the other hand...

2. *People who don't know God won't.* That's what John says in verse 6. He says, “We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us.” The “us” refers to the apostles and to those who preach the apostolic message.

Remember, John was an apostle. Jesus chose him to be such, along with eleven other men. And the Lord commissioned John and the others to preach and eventually preserve in writing the gospel message. Through the apostles, we have received the Word of God.

You see, here's a mark of a teacher who truly has a message from God. His message will agree with the apostles' message. His message will be in line with the Scriptures, the Word of God.

Furthermore, he's a mark of a true Christian. He wants to hear the apostolic message. He wants to hear the preaching of God's Word. It's true. One way to tell whether a person is a Christian is whether the person wants to hear and heed God's Word. John says, “Whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.”

Make it personal. Do you delight in learning the Bible? David said that God's Word was more precious to him than gold (Ps 19:10). Can you say that? A person who misses church because he wants to make more money, or enjoy what his money has brought him, can't say that. Only a person who truly knows God can say that.

Elsewhere the psalmist said, “Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked (Ps 84:10).”

People who know God delight in hearing the pure, unadulterated, uncontaminated preaching of the Word of God. They don't look for excuses that will keep them from it. They can't get enough of it.

Several years ago I was walking through the woods at my parent's farm and came across a tragic sight. A dead deer hung in the fence. Upon closer examination it became apparent why. The deer had undoubtedly jumped this spot in the fence many times. But on this particular jump it got lazy. After its front legs cleared, it allowed its back legs to drag. One of the back hooves passed under the top strand of barbed wire, thus pinning the deer's leg between the top two strands of steel. The helpless deer crashed to the ground and hung there for who knows how long, until it finally died.

The deer didn't realize the potential danger of going through the motions. It got lazy, and the price it paid for failing to discern the truth about the fence's height was its life.

Challenge: In light of what we've heard today, we need to be two things...

1. *Be a careful listener.* Make sure you are listening to the truth. Test what you hear and read. If it's not from God, turn from it. Be discerning when you listen to anyone who says he's speaking truth—that includes preachers, musicians, authors, news commentators—anyone who offers ideas.

Listen carefully. It's a life and death matter. Playing with error can cost you your life. Perhaps you've become a lazy listener. Resolve to change today. Determine to be a careful listener, and fill your mind with God's Word. When we listen carefully to God's Word, we gain life. God's Word is life-giving. Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:31-32)."

So be a careful listener. But don't stop there.

2. *Be a devoted follower.* True sheep hear the Shepherd's voice and then they follow the Shepherd. Resolve to follow the Shepherd today. Be a hearer and a doer of His Word.