

INTRODUCTION

I once took a lady who was in her 80's and very unwell to the funeral service of her relation. Half way during the funeral service the elderly lady nudged me and said this is not my relative that he is talking about. O we did have the right funeral but what the Vicar said about the deceased man was not what the elderly lady knew about her relative. The Vicar the deceased mad was in heaven with Jesus when the man had no interest in religion at all.

A Pastor came to see me one day and told me that the Lord had told him through a vision that The Lord was going to pour out his blessing upon all the churches in the town where I lived and he would do it within the next two years.

Did it happen? Well it is enough to tell you that the Pastor moved on within three years and the church where he ministered closed down within 5 years. What are we to make of such people? The Vicar was clearer telling the congregation at the funeral that this deceased man was in heaven and the Charismatic Pastor told me that the Lord had showed him what would happen within my town. There were people who were taken in by the claims of both these preachers but what are we to think about them. Well according to this passage in John's Epistle John would call them false prophets (v 1) That is exactly what they are they both believed that what they were saying was true yet they both proclaimed what God had not said.

Well as we know by now John is writing to a number of churches that were under pressure from false teachers. A number had left the church that John is writing to and they were claiming that their message came from God and they proclaimed that they had a special; knowledge of God which they received through the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Their teaching was disturbing the true church and many were having doubts about whether they were really Christians after all.

John writes to assure the church of their salvation he has given the church a number of tests in order to know whether one belongs to Christ or not, whether one is truly a believer or is only counterfeit. One test given in chapter three is the test of love for one another (3:11-20). Another test is the one of obedience (3:24) and the inner witness of the Spirit (3:24).

But that raises another problem; for these false teachers believed that they did possess the Holy Spirit in fact they proclaimed that it was through a special anointing of the Spirit that they received special knowledge of God. They said they spoke for God. So did that Pastor who told me that God had told him what was going to happen. So John tells the true church that they are not to take people's word for it but are to test the spirits to see whether they are from God (4:1).

So having given you a very long but I think important introduction let me turn you to this passage. Notice first of all:

1. THE FACT OF FALSE TEACHING (v 1)

Now there are no true prophets today because prophets together with apostles constitute the foundation of the church (Ephesus 2:20). Therefore anyone who claims to be a prophet today in this sense can be safely rejected. However we still need to heed the biblical warnings about false teachers. All through the Scriptures we are given warnings about false teachers (Deut 13:1-3; 18:19-20; Mathew 24:24) that they are not to be heeded. What matters is truth.

Now false teachers come in all different guises. There is the Vicar or Minister who tells his congregation exactly what they want to hear. He assures the congregation of heaven and encourages them to do good works in order to attain it. Then there is the Roman Catholic Priest

who tells his congregation that as long as they remain Catholic they will get to heaven, do your best, listen to the church, accept the authority of the Pope and God will be pleased with you. Then there is the preacher who promises his congregation that good will come to them if they give their money to the church. Others will preach a gospel of health and wealth, come to Jesus and you will have good health and will be blessed with wealth.

Then we have all the cults who will tell us that if we go their way then God will be pleased and we have a sure and blessed future. Some of these preachers might even confirm their words with signs and wonders, which will impress. But its not the impressiveness of any preacher or the miracles that he might appear to perform that is to be our judge we are to ask; is what he says truthful? If it is not then he is a false teacher and ought not to be listened too.

All of these people and churches will use the bible like true Christian churches, they will claim that what they are saying is biblical but John tells us not to be gullible we are to tests the spirits to see if they are from God. So churches must not be accepted as true churches including our own without testing them to see if they are from God. If they pass the test we are to welcome them, if not we are to reject them as false teachers and false churches.

So the truth is we must not blindly accept all that passes for Christian teaching today. We always have and always will have false teachers who say they are Christians but who clearly are not as their teaching so clearly demonstrates. Our society treats those who claim to be Christian, as Christian but the church must not be tempted to do likewise. We have the Spirit of God therefore we ought to be discerning, we ought to test the spirits to see if they are from God. But what tests should we apply to teachers and churches?

2. LOOK AT WHAT THEY TEACH (vs. 2-3)

Now John just picks up one teaching because that was the particular teaching that was relevant to these false teachers who had left the church. The issue of the incarnation is still very much a test for most of our cults today who do not believe that Jesus is God come in human flesh. If someone comes knocking at your door and does not believe in the incarnation of Jesus Christ then that person is a false teacher and must be rejected.

However John is not saying that if they pass this test then they must be considered Christian. No his point is that if people do not teach orthodox truth, truth that can be verified by a right use of the Scriptures then such people must be rejected. So that Vicar who told the congregation at that funeral that everyone goes to heaven must be rejected and seen as a false teacher. That Pastor who claimed God had told him he was going to bless all the churches within my town in 2 years must be rejected as false as indeed time has proven. Likewise churches that do not preach the gospel of salvation must be rejected and seen as false. John conclusion is very clear (v 3). Such teachers are not from God for they are actually opposed to Christ and in that sense are antichrists.

Now I am not saying that every Christian has to agree with this church or me on every point of doctrine for us to accept them as Christian. But they must accept the fundamental truths of the scriptures and they must accept the truth of Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation and accept all his teaching on the Christian life. So now in your mind examine those preachers and teachers you know whether they be Vicars, Priests Ministers Pastors or whatever.

Ask yourself do they preach the gospel? Do they tell people they need to be saved, that they are sinners on the way to hell? Do they teach that everyone deserves hell and our only hope in not found in our good works and ourselves but in Jesus Christ and his work on the cross for sinners? If they do then they are off God if they don't then they are antichrist and so are their churches for allowing such men into their pulpit. This is so important, for we do not think today as much as we should about this issue. We can be so gullible and take what people say at face value even those who might be considered evangelical tend to accept far too much at face value.

I know of a Pastor who moved to a new church and immediately was asked if his church would like to join with the other churches in the town for ecumenical services. The Pastor asked what was the criterion used for inviting churches. He asked what gospel was going to be preached and you know the Ministers that he asked were astonished that anyone would even think to ask such questions or would even question the orthodoxy of long established churches in that town. That Pastor was just being biblical he was just testing the spirits.

Now who is it that listens to such false teachers and preachers? If they are antichrist why do people go to their churches why do they get a following? John gives the answer in verse 5.

Such false teachers are from the world and they speak from a worldly perspective they believe and live like people of the world. As a result because the people of the world like what they hear they listen to such people. They love to be told what they want to hear and they approve of such teaching. Whether the teaching is true or not is not important to the people of the world as long as they think it is that is all that matters. They don't want to be told about sin and judgement or grace and mercy. They want to be assured that they are good and that God approves of such people. They want to follow preachers who talk about signs and wonders and power and excitement but don't want to know about holiness, perseverance and discipline. Therefore the size of someone's church is not a sign that it's teaching the truth for the people of the world will always want to listen to worldly antichristian teaching.

But this talk about false teachers raises another question in the minds of John's hearers and hopefully it will in our own minds as we think this through. The question is this.

3. HOW DO WE KNOW WE ARE TEACHING THE TRUTH OR ARE A TRUE CHURCH (vs. 4, 6)

The false teachers claimed that they were speaking for God that they were teaching the truth and that it was the church that had got it wrong that they were deceived and are antichrist. Therefore John assures the church that they are true believers that their teaching is true. He gives them two tests in which they can measure themselves.

a) Do they adhere to the apostolic word (v 6)? John says that you recognise the Spirit of truth from the spirit of error by the way a church holds to the truth as it has been given to them by the apostles. At the beginning of this letter John said he and the other apostles received their message from Jesus Christ. They saw him, heard him and touched him and they have passed on this message to the churches that he is writing too (1:1-4). This truth about Jesus was received from Jesus the apostles wrote it down for us and did so under the influence of the Holy Spirit. That word along with the word of the Old Testament prophets is God's revealed word to mankind of every generation.

It is true and it is reliable therefore if any church adheres to the word of God it is proving itself to have the Spirit of truth. There are people in our own society and in our churches who think that they know better than the word of God. They think that the apostles got it wrong about the way of salvation and therefore proclaim another way and in their view is a better way. But in doing so they are proving to be false and to have the spirit of falsehood.

People believe they know better than the bible when it comes to teaching on hell and as a result deny its existence and proclaim what they consider a better way. Such people are proving themselves to be false. Those Ministers and Vicars and Priests who promote gay marriage and gay relationships are claiming to know more than the bible, the apostles and even God himself and in doing so they are proving themselves to be false prophets. Yes I did say false for we don't hear that from many people today do we concerning such people. But churches that test themselves and their teaching against the word of God can be assured that they have the Spirit of truth and are from God (v 6).

b) Do they cave in to false teaching (v 4) – Here is the second test to prove that they are from God. Have they given in to the false teaching that comes from the false teachers? The answer is no for we read that they have overcome them. Now this simply means that they have not caved in to the pressure of the false teachers, they have not accepted their teaching. That proves that they have the Spirit of God for the one in the Christian (Holy Spirit) is greater than the one who is in the world.

The Holy Spirit enables the true believer and the true church to stand up against the various false teachers and teaching that is presented to it. So gospel churches can be assured that they are true churches and that they teach the truth if they adhere to the apostolic word and if they resist the temptation to follow the latest false teaching and teacher.

But let us not apply these tests to others churches and other people without applying them to ourselves. Do we adhere to the apostolic teaching, which is given to us in the scriptures? Do we? Our teaching and our practise will be able to answer that for us. Do we resist false teachers and teachers do we denounce the various false teachers and teaching that is rift within the church and society today?

If so then we can be confident that we are from God, that is not being arrogant but simply truthful. If we are from God then we must also accept all other Christians and churches that pass these same tests for we can be sure that they are from God. However if churches and individuals fail these tests then we must reject them as antichrists and of the world and as a result false teachers and false churches.

May God grant us wisdom, discernment and courage in these days to apply these tests within our own church and within our society in general?

Amen