

SERIES: Authentic Christian Community/1 John, Wk. 3

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Let's imagine that you owe me \$100. If you try to pay me in Monopoly money, I think I'd figure that out. But if you passed to me a really good counterfeit, I probably wouldn't know the difference. I'd take it, think it was real, and pass it along. It's estimated somewhere around \$250,000 worth of counterfeit currency rolls through our system every day. It seems like a lot; it's actually less than one percent of the currency, but it still seems like a lot to me. The problem with counterfeit is, it's so identical to the original, and unless you really know what you're doing, it's really hard to tell.

That's John's concern. There is a counterfeit Christianity that is so similar to the real thing that unless you really scrutinize, it's very easy to get led astray. You might think of the world religions kind of like the Monopoly money, in the sense that it's fairly obvious that there's a difference between Christianity and Buddhism, and Hinduism, and Islam — that's fairly obvious. John's concern is with counterfeit Christianity, that sounds like, seems like the same thing, but it's not. As a matter of fact, it reflects a cosmic war between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of the antichrist.

That's what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 John, Chapter 4. If you're new with us, we've been talking about *Authentic Christian Community* and we've been using John's letter to have this discussion. One of the things we've learned is that one of the essential ingredients to authentic Christian community is truth. Truth is what brings us together. He talked about it in Chapter 2. He talked about the concern related to antichrist, and now, in typical John fashion, he's gone on and he's talked about some other things. He's circled back to this discussion again, and wants to expand it.

And we pick it up, then, in Chapter 4, Verse 1:

Beloved, 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. (*NASB, 1 John 4:1)

Now grammatically, the opening line could read, "*Beloved, stop believing every spirit.*" There does seem to be some concern that they are starting to listen to the false teachers. At the very least, it's causing confusion. That's why John is so concerned. The issue has to do with this idea of the **spirit**. The Bible teaches that when you trust Jesus as Savior, you receive the indwelling Spirit of God and, from the beginning, this theology has always created a certain amount of risk — because it can always be abused. The apostles were coming, saying they were filled with the Spirit of truth and declaring, "Thus sayeth the Lord." But the false teachers were saying, "Well, we too have the spirit and *this* is what God says." That's always been a problem in the Church. Since there is this truth that the Spirit of God dwells within us, there's always the potential for people to abuse that and say, "Well God told me *this* and God told me *that* and this is a message from God." And people end up trying to sort it out, "Is this from God or isn't it?"

Well that's the point that John is trying to make. The false teachers have come along and said, "We have a message from God; we've been enlightened....thus sayeth the Lord." And it's creating all kinds of confusion, and what John is saying is, "Just because some people say this comes from the Spirit of God doesn't mean it's so. You have to **test the spirits.**" Now I do find it interesting that he says...**many prophets have come.** Now just think about this: This is well within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses to the events recorded in the Gospels. This is well within the lifetime of the apostles. So there are those who sat at the feet of Jesus, heard Jesus speak directly through the Spirit of God, are relaying that message — that's what John is doing — and yet, even in a context where the apostles were still alive, you had people coming forth saying, "This is what the Spirit of God says." False prophets, false teachers — if that's going to happen within the lifetime of the apostles themselves, then certainly we should expect it two thousand years later. This has always been a problem in the Church and the reason is because it's not just the confusion; it's not just agreeing to disagree. The root of this problem is there is a Spirit of truth and there is a spirit of deception. There is a cosmic war going on and this is the strategy of the enemy — to deceive people away from the truth.

Now what John says is we need to **...test the spirits.** The word **test** is an interesting word. In the First Century, this Greek word was used a couple of different ways. One way was to test the currency. In our day we think of paper money. In the First Century, it would have been coins. But wherever there's been money, there's been counterfeit. It was a big problem in the First Century — there were counterfeit coins — and so this word was used to describe *looking for counterfeits*— testing a coin to make sure it was legitimate or not. That meant you had to scrutinize the coin — the counterfeits were very good. The other way this term was used, was in relationship to politicians. As long as there has been government, there have been politicians. As long as there have been politicians, there has been frustration. The temptation of the politician is to tell a particular audience what they want to hear —and they can become very good at that. So you find yourself wondering, "What do they really believe? What are their convictions and values — or are they just telling us what we want to hear?"

Now if you take that idea of *test the politicians*, "Is this really what they believe, or are they just saying what people want to hear?" if you bring that into this arena of counterfeit Christianity, it's very helpful, because part of the confusion is that these groups become very good at saying the right things to the right people. They sound very legitimate; they use the same words; they use the same phrases. You ask them, "Do you believe Jesus is God?" They say, "Yes." "Do you believe in the Resurrection?" They say, "Yes." "Do you believe in Salvation by grace through faith?" They say, "Yes." And it isn't until you start to kind of pick apart, "What do you mean by your terms? What do you exactly mean by that?" that you start to realize, "Wow, we're miles apart on how we're defining those words and phrases." And so it's the idea that the *spirit of error* is very strategic, and knows what to say in order to create massive confusion. So all of that leads us to say, "Wow, that seems overwhelming; that seems so complicated; I wouldn't even know where to start." John's going to help with two simple tests.

Verse 2:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the *spirit* of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. (Vs. 2-3)

John says the place you start has to do with the person and work of Jesus. The First Century false teachers, which this particular church was dealing with, held a view that they believed in the concept of a Christ, but they did not believe Jesus was the Christ. They believed that Jesus

was a man and, at some point in time, the Spirit of God came upon Him, empowered Him to do some miracles, then departed from Him, and He died — no resurrection. What John is saying is, “If they’re teaching that Jesus Christ has not come in the flesh, that is the spirit of error.”

Now the fundamental point has to do with the core of Christianity — the fundamental of our faith. There are certain areas for which churches disagree. That’s okay. We might disagree about whether you should *baptize* babies or *dedicate* babies. We might disagree about what the *End Times* are going to look like. We might disagree about the best *church government*. That doesn’t mean these churches are counterfeit Christians. It just means the Bible isn’t as clear on some of these subjects as we’d like it to be. And frankly, I don’t think any church has it exactly right. We’re all trying to figure this out — there are certain secondary issues that we are sorting out. But, at the core, there are certain foundational, fundamental beliefs, that must be in place for a church to be a Christian church — and there is no doctrine more fundamental than the doctrine on the person and work of Christ. If your doctrine on Christ is wrong, you do not have a Christian church. The Christian church is named after the Christ. You have to get that one right.

When we talk about the person and work of Jesus, we’re talking about both *who He is* and *what He did*. In its simplest form, we believe the Bible teaches that Jesus is fully God — the eternal God, the member of the Trinity God. He is the Yahweh and the Elohim and the Jehovah of the Old Testament. This is really important to understand, because a lot of groups will say, “Jesus is God,” but you find out what they mean by that is: at some point Jesus became a god, like we can become a god. Or at some point Jesus and Satan were brothers, and Jesus eventually became God, or Jesus had a start; he isn’t an eternal god, but he started; he was born of God and then became a god. So it’s really important we are talking about Jesus as the eternal Yahweh, the Elohim, the creator God, the eternal God of the Universe — that at a point in time became a man — fully man, born of a virgin, lived a perfect life, and ultimately was nailed to a cross for the sins of the world, that those who believe that Jesus died for me, by faith receive God’s gift of Salvation — Salvation by grace through faith alone.

There are a lot of groups that would say, “I believe that.” But it’s not Salvation by grace, through faith alone. It’s Jesus *plus* a lot of religious stuff. The Bible is very clear on this. We believe that Jesus was buried; three days later He literally, physically, bodily rose from the dead. There are a lot of groups that say we believe in the Resurrection, but what they mean is some sort of a *spiritual* resurrection. The Bible teaches Jesus literally, physically, bodily rose from the dead. He could talk; He could eat; He could drink; He could be recognized — He literally, physically rose from the dead. He ascended to the Father and He is coming again. That’s the basic doctrine on the person and work of Jesus. Any church that does not rightly affirm the basic doctrine of Jesus cannot be a Christian church. This is as basic and as fundamental as it gets. So even though the testing may seem overwhelming, one hundred percent of the time, the place to start is: “What do you believe about Jesus?” And often it takes a series of questions to finally get at: what is the core belief?

When we talk about the person and work of Jesus, there are a couple of things that you might find helpful. One is: it is helpful to understand, when we’re talking about this core fundamental belief, we’re not talking about some vision that somebody had in a cave that can’t be scrutinized or in some way affirmed. We’re talking about a message that is rooted in human history. This is one of the things that makes Christianity unique. It can be scrutinized; it can be challenged; it can be investigated — because the core doctrine of our faith is rooted in human history. And for two thousand years, people have, over and over, tried to discredit, or, in some way demonstrate,

the message is not true. And yet the message is as credible today as it was two thousand years ago. On this truth we stand!

Second of all, you often hear people say that all these Christian churches use the same Bible, yet they all believe something different and it's so confusing; how do you know? You know — like flip a coin and choose one? But that isn't really correct. For two thousand years, the Church of Jesus Christ has been remarkably united around the fundamental doctrines of the faith. There are always going to be secondary issues that the Bible is not that clear about — where we disagree — but around the fundamentals — for two thousand years — the Church has been remarkably consolidated together in our belief on the fundamentals of the faith.

It is possible to misrepresent the Bible. You can practice a *junk theology* and make it say anything you want. Use an analogy with science. In our culture today, there's a lot of *junk science*. There's a lot of science that isn't really science at all. It's pushing an agenda. Just because there's junk science, doesn't mean that there isn't also legitimate science that is based on legitimate principles. In the same way, just because there's junk theology, doesn't mean there isn't the possibility for legitimate theology. If you use basic principles of interpretation for interpreting the Scripture, for two thousand years, the Church has been unimaginably united and together on the fundamentals of the faith -

-so much so that it leads John to say in Verse 4:

You are from God, little children, and have overcome them (meaning the false teachers); **because greater is He who is in you** (that would be the Spirit of truth) **than he who is in the world** (which would be the spirit of error).

That word **overcome** is a Greek word that would be used in some sort of a battle. There's been a battle; there's been a war; and they have emerged as the victors. It reminds us this isn't just agreeing to disagree; this isn't just some confusion. This is a cosmic war. The enemy has a very clear strategy, driven by the spirit of error — to lead people away from the Spirit of truth. And sometimes it feels like everything is kind of up for grabs and we're not sure who's going to win the battle. And that's the way these believers were. There's a sense in which the false teachers are very convincing; they're getting a following. "I'm not sure the truth is going to prevail." And so John comes along and says, "Whoa, you have the truth from God and **greater is He that is in you** — the Spirit of truth — **than he that is in the world** — the spirit of error. What you believe is *true truth!* Hang on to it; stand on it; because, at the end of the day, the real truth emerges as true.

Francis Schaeffer is the one that used to talk about *true truth*. There are all these truth-claims in the world but, at the end of the day, there's truth which is true, and that ultimately prevails. Think of it this way: let's imagine that I fade into the sunset and you get a new preacher, and the new preacher convinces you that you can fly — very compelling, very charismatic — and convinces the majority you can fly. The majority sincerely believes this is true — but you aren't convinced. You're saying, "You know, it seems like everybody believes this, but I don't think it's true," and you start to feel very insecure. At some point in time, we all have to go up on the roof, and somebody has to step off the roof. At that moment, *true truth* prevails. No matter how sincere you were; no matter what the majority believed; at the end of the day, there is truth which is true — and it ultimately prevails. And what John is saying, is that **there is a Spirit of truth that is within us as believers**, and, ultimately truth prevails. **Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world.**

If counterfeit Christianity was a problem within the lifetime of the apostles, then certainly 2000 years later, it is today. You know, I think one major source of misinformation today is the internet. Anyone can say anything on the internet, whether it's true or not, and what I've learned is, people will construct a theology to fit their morality. I can find someone on the internet that will tell me, how I want to live is okay with God. So I start with how I want to live. Then I find a preacher to tell me it's okay, but, like the illustration at the end of the message of believing you can fly at the end, the truth still wins out. Counterfeit Christianity tickles people's ears and it tells them what they want to hear, but that doesn't make it true. **As John tells us, the key to recognizing the counterfeit is to be genuinely seeking the truth, not the truth as you wish it was, but the truth as it is.** We'll talk more about that tomorrow.