

1 John 4:2-6

In our previous study we took seriously John's stirring and timely challenge in verse 1 to 'test the spirits.' The reason why is fairly obvious for John informs us 'many false prophets have gone out into the world.' In other words, you don't take people at face value, you don't believe all that you hear, you put it to the test of scripture! You place it under the microscope and expose it to the searchlight of scripture! The thought behind the word 'test' is to prove. In Bible days the word was used with reference to putting metals to the test to see if they were genuine. There is a tremendous need today for us to vet those who stand in our pulpits, it is most imperative that we examine the teaching of many throughout our nation. We need to be vigilant lest the enemy creeps in unawares. No matter how articulate a brother or sister may be, no matter how plausible they may appear, no matter how sincere they are, no matter how convincing they sound, no matter what his academic abilities are and irrespective of who he is accredited with, the acid test is: are they genuine, is there a ring of authenticity to them? John moves on in verses 2 and 3 to clearly advise us as to how we can recognise that which is real and how we can discern that which is spurious. The old apostle writes in his usual lucid style: 'This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but 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.' The best way to handle the prevailing problem which John is confronting here is to have a firm grasp of the great doctrines of the faith as outlined in the word of God. There is no substitute for knowing the truth of scripture. The application of God's word to the situation in hand is essential, that's what John advocates in verse 2. The ministry of the Holy Spirit in the situation is equally important for he is the one who shines the main beam on Jesus, and that's when many of the false teachers are left squirming

in discomfort. They don't like to see Jesus take centre stage, they fail to appreciate who He really is, they haven't recognised that the Lord of all glory is God manifest in flesh! They are busy proclaiming 'a' Christ, even a Christ with a small 'c' instead of 'the true' Christ. Basically, according to John's frank analysis, they are antichrist in their sentiments. And, let's remember, as someone has said, the antichrist is not necessarily an insidious bureaucrat working for the United Nations. The Greek word 'anti' means 'instead of.' You see, to believe in the wrong Christ, one who is less than the God-man of history and the Bible, is to sell your soul to antichrist. The fact is, to believe in the wrong Christ is to ultimately perish. At the end of the day, you can't hedge your bets, you can't sit on the fence, for the person of Christ becomes the touchstone of truth or error. The question, what do you think of Christ, is as relevant in this context as it was in the days when it was first uttered in Pilate's hearing. A man's understanding of 'who Jesus is' makes a vast difference to his outlook on life and to his eternal destiny. It's interesting to note that Paul is on the same wavelength as John when he adopted a similar strategy for detecting error in the early church when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:3, 'No-one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no-one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.' The influence of the Holy Spirit in the heart and life of a real believer should not be under-estimated, his presence is paramount, for he is the one who has ultimate responsibility to lead us into a full and deeper understanding of truth. You see, there are many well-meaning individuals who will ring your door bell and talk openly and freely about Jesus and a host of other things, there are many groups operating around the world in a vast array of challenging situations who pay lip service to the teaching of Jesus and to the brilliant example he set, but all their charm offensive cuts no ice with the apostle John. He's not overly impressed, he's not that gullible, he's not fooled! He is looking for more! He's looking for reality! He's looking for truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! The bottom line is, if we are to be

biblically positive about Christ, we have no option, we have no alternative but to be negative about error. This is not an incentive to indulge in theological witch-hunts, but to plainly recognise where the scriptures draw the lines between truth and error, and to draw them there ourselves. It's amazing and yet, it shouldn't really surprise us, two millennia have come and gone and times haven't changed, the battles they gallantly fought in the first century continue to be fought in the twenty-first! It seems to me, the person and work of Jesus Christ is not only the central question for all our outreach and evangelism, it is by virtue of that fact, the central test of Christian orthodoxy. Let's recap for a moment, John's emphasis in verses 1-3 is primarily focused on the message of these pseudo preachers, we are to check on the content of what they say, or in some cases, what they leave unsaid! We have discovered already in John's epistle that what a man believes generally influences the kind of life that he lives, his personal values impact his behaviour. That explains why John expands his thinking in the manner he does in verses 4-6. I find it fascinating to realise that each of these verses begins with a different pronoun, in verse 4 he writes 'you' – in verse 5 he says 'they' – and in verse 6 he commences with 'we.' Why the difference, you may be wondering; well, the simple explanation is, he is addressing different groups of people. The 'you' in verse 4 refers to all those who make up the global family of God, this is an exclusively Christian company; the 'they' in verse 5 is appropriate to the non-Christian false prophets who seek to lead the people of God astray; and the 'we' in verse 6 is relevant to the apostles and true teachers who labour in the Word and doctrine. John progresses his argument with some incisive and illuminating snapshots of these heady individuals. For example, he says in verse 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.' Isn't it lovely the way John speaks to these battered and bewildered saints, this man has a tender touch even when writing on tough subjects. He is at pains to point out that they

belong to the Lord Jesus, they find their roots in Him, they have by his grace been born and brought into the worldwide family of God. He commends them for their victorious life in that they have not fallen foul of the tactics of the enemy, nice and all as he may have been! They have not caved in even though they have been placed under enormous pressure, they have not capitulated, they have remained loyal and faithful to the Word of God. They were not over-awed nor were they intimidated with the super-spiritual jibes from these men in pin-stripe suits. Theirs has been a difficult path, it's been incredibly tough for them, and John is quick to acknowledge that; at the same time, he's the first to congratulate them for their overcoming spirit. Pastor John is profoundly thankful to God for two main reasons: number one, their faith was not destroyed; and, number two, their Saviour was not denied. You see, it didn't matter one iota how astute and powerful the enemy was, it didn't even matter for a single minute how innovative and creative the adversary was, these good folk outwitted him every time because the Lord was on their side. They were on the winning team! The truth is, when the Lord is with us, and the Holy Spirit is in us, losing is never on God's agenda! The enemy has nothing to depend on, the enemy has no-one to whom they can turn; we have, we have Jesus, and on top of that, we have all the resources of heaven placed at our disposal. We have the power of God, we have that inner dynamic of the Holy Spirit, we have the assurance of his presence in a dog-eat-dog world where the puppies don't survive and, by childlike faith and trust, we can draw upon his limitless resources at any time and in every place. Paul hit the nail on the head when he wrote in Romans 8:37 that 'we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.' I think this is a truth which is so great, it is sublime, it is absolutely and deliriously thrilling, it warms the cockles of my heart. Oh yes, let's shout it from the rooftops, it's headline news, the Lord is greater, sure He is, he's the one who successfully routed the enemy at Calvary, he's the one who roundly defeated Satan at the cross, he's the one who landed a

double whammy on sin for he dealt with it effectively and efficiently, he's the one who rose triumphant from the dead and today, he is alive for evermore! Jesus is enthroned on high, he is exalted far above all; yes, we join hands with the redeemed down through the ages and we declare unequivocally that the Lord is greater than the devil, there's no question about that! If you like, that's the end of the argument, and John moves on to talk about something else!

There's a marked contrast between the true people of God in verse 4 and the false teachers who are propagating all kinds of falsehood in verse 5. John describes them thus: 'They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.' Well, you don't have to be a New Testament scholar to make sense of that verse, do you! There's one word which appears no fewer than three times and that word is the master key which opens the door to a clear understanding of the kind of men we are confronting here. That word is the word 'world.' It highlights their origin for it tells us where they have come from, they are earthy individuals, they are earth bound and earth oriented, their roots go down a long way in the soil of planet earth; the text pulls the carpet from under their feet for it exposes a definite slant and bias to their teaching and instruction by informing us that it is governed by the latest fad to hit the high street, they spend their time delivering lectures and homilies on current affairs and they present themselves as God's answer to the big questions engulfing humanity, the fact is, because they are so immersed in the things of time they have nothing worthwhile to say about the issues of eternity; and, inevitably, if you are bold enough to stand on a soapbox on any street corner and shout at the top of your voice, you will always gather a crowd, you are guaranteed a hearing and probably a fair bit of heckling as well, and that's what has happened to them! It's true, you know it as well as I do, the empty can makes the most noise! It all sounds very appealing, it's all so enticing and

cajoling, there are many allurements, there's something attractive about the show that's presently in town; whenever these impostors are around there's an air of congeniality which permeates the atmosphere, there's a nice feel to it, it has a certain ambience associated with it. That's why so many well-meaning people are sucked into it, most of them unwittingly and unintentionally; with the best will in the world, they didn't plan to get involved; it just happened, for it seemed the proper thing to do at the time! The pressure was applied ever so subtly, and before they knew it, and before they could back off, they were enmeshed in the web. In other words, the popular preacher isn't always right, the popular preacher isn't always proclaiming the truth of scripture, the popular preacher may have a crowd gathered around him, but that doesn't mean very much, for he's only as good as his last sermon; a crowd can be very fickle and before he knows it they could be gone – it's equally true to say, popular preachers don't often stick around too long and before the crowd know it, he could be gone! I reckon John knows what he is talking about, he's been around for a very long time, he's seen it all before, that puts him in the ideal position to warn us lest history repeats itself in the third millennium. John then switches gear in verse 6 when he puts the spotlight on faithful preachers of the word of God. He says: '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 recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.' The contrast between the men of the world in verse 5 and the men of the Word in verse 6 is mind-blowing, it is quite incredible. The glaringly obvious difference is in our origin for we are said to be from God! We have the Lord living within us, we have heaven in our hearts, we have eternity graven on our minds, we have a hope beyond death etched into our thinking. Our life in the here and now is different, our life in the there and then is significantly different. Genuine servants of God will place themselves under the authority of scripture, and they are happy to do that. Those members who comprise the body of Christ are most

blessed when they sit under the anointed preaching of Christ and Him crucified. The gospel of sovereign grace has warmed their hearts, it has touched their lives, it has transformed their outlook; to all such, an ear for the word of God is the most natural thing in all the world. There is an affinity of heart between the true believer in Christ and the true servant of the cross. They may not know one another by name, they may never have met before, but there's an immediate bond because they have something in common. There's an instant link-up between them for they share the joys of God's full salvation. They discovered the undiluted wonder of sins forgiven when they knelt before the cross of Jesus, and now, in him and because of him, they are brothers. That's an extra special relationship, and I can tell you, it is something staggeringly unique to the people of God, for it doesn't happen anywhere else, it doesn't happen to any other group. On the other hand, John pulls no punches when he advises us that the non-believer has little or no interest in the things of God, they don't have a heart to absorb the teaching of truth as it is in the Bible, they don't have a mind that is stirred with the solid preaching of God's word, they don't have an ear that is tuned to listen attentively to the ministry of scripture. Oh yes, they may be in the congregation on a Sunday morning, they may go through the worship rigmarole week after week, they may exchange all the usual pleasantries that you normally associate with a centre of evangelical witness, they may even open the pew bibles and follow the scripture reading, but when it comes to the proclamation of the truth of God's word, it goes in one ear and straight out the other. That is immensely sad, it causes many of us enormous concern, it is a serious and urgent matter for prayer; at the end of the day though, John is spot on when he says what he does, for only God can open blind eyes, only God can unstop deaf ears! The parting shot in this opening paragraph of chapter 4 is found in the final sentence where John more or less formulates his conclusion. To him, it's as clear as crystal, there are no ifs or maybes or any other shades of grey, there are two groups of people;

category number one, the man with a heart for the Lord is someone in whom the Holy Spirit of truth is actively working, category number two, the man who shows no real interest in the doctrines of grace and glory is an individual in a sad and sorry state for he has operating in him the spirit of error. So far as John is concerned, it's as simple as that, he doesn't beat about the bush, you are either one or the other, you can't be both, you are either on the side of truth, and if you are, that's great, that's tremendous, that's wonderful, John offers you the right hand of fellowship and he says, welcome to the global family of God; if you're not, you're still on the side of falsehood and that's tragic for it will drag you down and down and down, until one day when it's too late, you will come to a point where you will end up spending eternity banished from the presence of God. When that day comes and your eyes open on the other side of death in hell itself, then the penny will drop, the chances are, you'll wish you had followed Jesus, 'the way, the truth, and the life.'