

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“The Spirit in You: Proclaimer”

Dr. Jay Howell

May 23, 2021

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. 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. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. *1 John 4:1-8*

Just over a week ago, our son Harry was rolling around on the floor, and he managed to grab a book lying under the coffee table in the living room. That book was none other than a little storybook Bible, which in fact was a gift from Bob and Barbara Eldridge when he was born. Obviously, I was swelling with pride. Preacher's kid, rolling around on the floor, going straight for the Bible. That's my boy. But then he flipped open the Bible, sunk his teeth into one of the pages, and with a turn of his head and a swipe of his arm, ripped that page clean out of the Bible. It just so happened that the page he ripped out was the page about Pentecost. Pure coincidence? Yeah probably. Or a tactic to make sure that we didn't get distracted by all this Pentecost talk today and instead place all focus on him for his baptism? Who's to say?

But whatever the reason, this is the page my son ripped out of the storybook Bible, and this is what it said on it: “The Holy Spirit came to them / Just as Jesus said. / He came with flames of fire / That landed on each head. / From that day on they told the world / The news about God's Son / And how he came to give new life / To each and every one!”

We continue our series today “The Spirit in You,” focusing on, as you might have guessed, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, that probably neglected, mysterious, maybe even frightening being we proclaim and worship as God. This is actually our second to last week in this series; we'll wrap up next week; and then the week after that we'll start a series in the Book of Revelation. More to come on that later. This week, though, especially as we speak about the Spirit on Pentecost Sunday, we look at his role as one who proclaims, who makes known the good news of Jesus, who empowers the faithful to speak and bear witness to this gospel. A proclaimer, the Spirit of God, but rarely in the way we'd expect, and certainly not in the same way everywhere. How then, are we to tell the difference? Let's go to God's Word.

[Read passage.] Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I would guess that some of your ears perked up at the mention in this passage of “antichrist.” That was in verse 3. “And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.” A lot of opinions out there about the antichrist. What the word is supposed to mean? Is it an actual person?

If you find yourself intrigued or even unsettled by such talk, maybe check in with us in two weeks’ time as we start a look in the Book of Revelation. For now, though, if you find yourself concerned especially about this “antichrist,” don’t worry, because I found him. His name is Frank Gehry, and he’s an architect.

The reason I suspect that Frank Gehry is the antichrist is because as an architect he has had a track record of boldly ignoring what the engineers would try to tell him. Let me explain. For example, Frank was commissioned to design the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, a sleek building of stainless-steel panels all along the outside, with curved walls converging into the stark edges and points. But again, ultimately Frank didn’t seem to listen to the engineers along the way, because if he did, he might have been told that having stainless steel panels on curved walls in sunny Los Angeles can cause some issues with sunlight.

Lo and behold, when it was built, complaints started coming in about how the curved, reflective edges of the building caused bright glare to shine directly into the face of traffic, and then, like a magnifying glass on a sunny day, would even concentrate sunlight on some of the neighboring buildings and homes, leading to skyrocketing AC bills and temperatures on sidewalks nearby as high as 140 degrees. All of that could have been avoided if he had taken a note from the engineers, because they might have told him that if he built walls like that, he’d end up blinding traffic and cooking the neighbors, but he didn’t.

I’m picking on Frank Gehry of course. No, he’s not the antichrist. He’s actually a pretty accomplished architect with some flawed experimentations, but the reason I bring him up in that kind of light is because this passage in 1 John is talking about how we, how the church, are to “discern the spirits” or “test the spirits,” which is another way of asking, “Is this from God, or is this a false teaching?” And it’s in that vein that I’m indebted to a friend in ministry who offered this analogy when it comes to “discerning the spirits,” to asking “Is this from God, or is this a false teaching?” Teachers are like architects: drawing up designs, sometimes pushing the boundaries, sometimes even experimenting; but inevitably all those designs are tested by the engineers, who look at the design in terms of whether what is drawn out is actually physically possible to construct. Will the structure support its weight? Will this design cause mold problems? Will that design cook the neighbors? Those sorts of questions. Does this design actually represent something viable? Or is it only lines on paper that, if ever built, would crumble on top of itself?

Those are the sorts of questions facing this early Christian community to which John is writing: not about construction, but about whether some new teaching, some new thought was actually something viable, and the warning that this letter offers is: don’t believe everything. Starting in verse 1: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” This is speaking to the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the church in discerning what teachings are from God, and which ones are not, and that was a pretty big deal, a big problem for this community, and from what we can tell, a big problem within the early Christian church.

It makes you wonder, where are all these false prophets coming from? Well, most likely just other traveling preachers, just like Paul had been, or others within the early church. The church then wasn't some sophisticated system of fellowship, worship, and study. It was more a loose network of congregations, with only the beginnings of some kind of structure starting to emerge. There wasn't a whole process for things like ordination or seminaries, so people could just come into town and teach. And sometimes that teaching would make a whole mess of things, and other teachers like Paul would hear about it, have to come back, and set things straight.

But then you might ask, even if there were these "false prophets" running around, why don't these churches just go to the Bible to check them? Well, the main reason is that there wasn't the Bible—at least not as we know it. What these churches considered to be Scripture was what we know as the Old Testament. But everything in the New Testament, the Gospels, the letters, etc., was just different documents being spread and shared. Some churches might have a copy of one or two of Paul's letters. Other churches might have one of Peter's letters. Some churches might have a copy of the Gospel of Luke. Others might have a copy of the Gospel of Matthew. They were spread and shared and read in community, but it would be a little while longer before they were all gathered together and a decision was made regarding what was the authoritative Scripture for the Christian Church, and that's still not entirely settled. So as far as just checking these false prophets against the word of Scripture, it was a bit of a hodgepodge as to just what Scripture actually was.

It begs the question: how were these early churches supposed to discern what teaching was from God, and what teaching was not? The answer that John gives is, the Holy Spirit. Over the course of this series we've talked about the Spirit as one who abides, comforts, raises, rejuvenates, but we haven't talked as much about the Spirit's role as a guide, as a teacher, in particular how he guides the church in how it in turn bears and proclaims the good news of Jesus.

Frustratingly, though, the Spirit sometimes doesn't just up and say, "Here I am! And here's the right way to think." Often more subtle than that. Often takes a much longer time than that. But John gives us some guidelines to discern: like an engineer assessing an architect's blueprints. And in this particular passage, there are two, as in, these are things that help us know whether something is of the Spirit, or not.

First, does it confess Jesus? Verse 2 read, "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." Seems straightforward, but it's surprising how easily we can get away from that. One early movement that really gave the church some trouble was called Docetism. Main point of Docetism was the claim that Jesus wasn't actually a physical human being, but a purely spiritual presence on the earth. Resolves a lot of issues to say that: things like, how could Jesus be fully God while walking around as a human? Well, there's no issue if you just say that he wasn't actually a human being walking around, just looked like one. But then imagine how different the good news of Jesus would sound if ultimately it said, "But he was never actually here, not physically at least." Took a long time for the church to work through that one. But one guiding thought throughout was, does it confess that Jesus has come in the flesh? And in that case the answer was decidedly no.

Church history is peppered with examples like these, of the church guarding against and discerning false teachings. But then on the other side of that coin are the teachings that the church discerns the Spirit is leading us to newly adopt, to embrace, even though it goes against what thinking had been. For example, for centuries,

the teaching of the church, drawn from Scripture, was that the earth was the center of creation, and the sun, moon, and stars all circled around the earth. They knew this because there are a handful of verses in the Bible that state as much, and because when they looked up, they saw the stars start on this side and go over to that side. Therefore, they must be circling the earth. So, when someone like Galileo came along and said, no actually it's the earth that's circling around the sun, and the reason it looks like it's circling us is because we are actually spinning, he was put under house arrest, for teachings that were deemed subversive and against Scripture. Took a while for the church to come around on that one, but it did. Meant that Scripture had to be interpreted differently. Church history's peppered with examples like that too.

If you're hearing that, you might be thinking, "Preacher, all that just sounds pretty subjective and relative then." How can we possibly say anything about the Spirit or about a new teaching with any authority or confidence? That's a valid point. And you know what it means for the church? It means we should come to this listening, to this testing of the spirits, as John puts it, with a lot more humility and charity that perhaps we often do.

And that brings us to the second thing that John tells us should guide how we discern whether a teaching is true. Verse 6 reads: "From this we know the spirit of truth and spirit of error. Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." Even in testing the spirits, in discerning whether a teaching is from God, are we loving each other? I don't think we have to think too long to imagine a scenario in which Christians may disagree with each other and jettison the whole "love each other" part of it.

So how do we know if a teaching is true? Does it proclaim Jesus? Is it loving? That's not the worst place to start. And who knows what the Spirit might show us if we hold to those two things?

Over 500 years ago, construction was ongoing on the cathedral in Florence, Italy. The hallmark of this cathedral was meant to be a magnificent dome, and one of the lead architects was named Filippo Brunelleschi. The dome was to be made out of bricks, which meant mortar, which meant scaffolding to hold up the bricks while the mortar was still wet, which meant massive amounts of wooden supports to hold up the dome while it was under construction. Trouble was, there weren't enough trees in all of Tuscany to build enough support to hold up this dome—and that was just one of the challenges. So, when Brunelleschi proposed the design of the dome, the engineers (or the equivalent of them) came around and said, "This cannot be done. It goes against the laws of physics and gravity. Impossible."

But Brunelleschi thought different. Developing techniques and designs that revolutionized construction then, the dome was built, and is still up today, defying gravity as it were.

Friends, this Pentecost Sunday, when the church was empowered and sent out in languages it had not spoken before, imagine what new things these followers of Christ were led by the Spirit to embrace. Who knows what the Spirit might be saying now?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.