

Christians, Test Your Teachers! A Sermon Study on I John 4:1–3

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[This is the eleventh in a series of sermon studies on the 12 articles of the Formula of Concord. The Synod's Formula of Concord Anniversary Committee proposed the series to the homiletics department of the Seminary as a part of its planned observance of the anniversaries of the Formula of Concord and of the Book of Concord.]

The final article of the Formula of Concord, “Of Other Factions and Sects Which Never Embraced the Augsburg Confession,” is a kind of appendix to the Confession. It does not treat in a positive way of any “great doctrine” of Scripture. When Calvinists and crypto-Calvinists, papists and those with Romanizing tendencies, sacramentarians and other errorists were dealt with in the first eleven articles, the positive teaching of the gospel was always set forth in an exhaustive and explicit manner. But Article XII's expression is merely negative and is limited to a simple enumeration: “In order that such (heresies and sects) may not be silently ascribed to us, because in the preceding explanation we have made no mention of them, we intend at the end simply to enumerate the mere articles wherein they err and teach contrary to our Christian faith and confession to which we have often referred” (FC, Epit., XII,1).

And yet, much positive teaching of the Lutheran confession can be deduced from what Article XII rejects. Moreover, there can be no doubt that the article was written with the wholesome and constructive purpose of keeping God's gospel truth unmixed and pure.

The factions and sects are named: Anabaptists, Schwenkfeldians, New Arians, and Anti-Trinitarians. The article can understand why the originators of these sects and their adherents were vulnerable and open to the sectarian spirit. They were “poor simple men who could not help but feel the manifest idolatry and false faith of the Papacy...(and) embraced whatever was called Gospel and was not papistic” (FC,SD, XII,8).

We know that simple Christians in our churches today are assailed by factions and sects which are the spiritual descendants of the heretics mentioned in this article. Our people are also sometimes attracted by formal adherence to the principle of *sola Scriptura*, anti-evolutionary teaching, a generally “conservative” outlook, a high moral tone. These can blind the uninformed or the unwary to the fact that justification has been perverted, the efficacy of the means of grace denied, or the doctrine of the incarnation subtly vitiated.

At the heart of the factions and sects of the Reformation Century and of our own time are the old legalism and the old anthropocentricity which had found such an unchallenged place of importance in the institutional church of the Middle Ages. The authors of the Formula summed that up in this “Article that cannot be tolerated in the Church: That our righteousness before God consists not in the sole merit of Christ alone, but in renewal; and hence in our own godliness in which we walk. This is based in great part upon one's own special, self-chosen spirituality, and in fact is nothing else than a new sort of monkery” (FC,Epit., XII,5).

This was written for the gospel's sake and for the care of souls. And so were the words of the Apostle of Love in 1 John 4:1–3. At the end of chapter 3 John had emphasized the positive, “that we should trust in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and that we should love each other...” (1 Jn 3:23). But then he writes about false prophets and the spirit of Antichrist; and he emphasizes the negative: “Do not trust every spirit.”

Ἀγαπητοί, μὴ παντὶ πνεύματι πιστεύετε. Because they were beloved by God and by him, they must be warned; and he may expect that they will heed the warning. The apostle immediately gets beyond personalities, appearances, and organizational forms to the spirit which motivates. There are motivating spirits which are ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ (v 1) and some which are not. In their daily contacts the beloved people of God will meet both kinds.

They will encounter them in those who present themselves as prophets, that is, proclaimers of God's truth. Christians dare not give heed to all prophets without discrimination. Ἀλλὰ δοκιμάζετε τὰ πνεύματα εἰ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν. It is assumed here that the ἀγαπητοί can do this, that each Christian can exercise this responsibility. In this connection it is worth noting that in another discussion of the Antichrist, by another apostle, it is stated that only those who prefer falsehood are deceived by falsehood (2 Th 2:9–12).

John states why it is necessary for Christians to exercise a healthy skepticism and to test the origin of those who claim to be spiritual and from God: ὅτι πολλοὶ ψευδοπροφῆται ἐξεληλύθασιν εἰς τὸν κόσμον. Jesus had warned about the false prophets who would arise and “show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Mt 24:24). And now it has happened. They have gone out and are still there, zealous and active. That is the force of the perfect ἐξεληλύθασιν.

Now these pseudoprophets are quite evidently not from God. And yet, there is no false prophet who does not *claim* to have the Spirit of God. Luther mentions Ebionites, Cerinthians, and Nicolaitanes with whom the churches in Asia Minor had to contend.¹ He and the other Reformers of the Sixteenth Century had to contend with enthusiasts who claimed the Spirit of God for themselves apart from the Spirit’s Word and contrary to the Spirit’s truth. We cannot help thinking of the “spirituals” and enthusiasts of our own time, the “charismatics.” While we mention them, we do not limit the appellation ψευδοπροφῆται to them.

In verse 2 the apostle provides the criterion whereby God’s beloved will recognize the presence, motivation and influence of the Holy Ghost. Πᾶν πνεῦμα ὃ (neuter) ὁμολογεῖ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἔστιν. It will not be necessary to attempt to assess the faith in anyone’s heart. There is an objective basis for that judgment: the confession of the prophet. Ὁμολογεῖν involves the understanding of a claim, and agreement in that claim, and a candid declaration of that claim.² The declaration (confession) involved here is that Jesus is the Christ who has come in the flesh.

We prefer to read Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν as a double accusative object, rendered in English “Jesus *as* Christ.” Then the confession is that the eternal and divine Christ became incarnate in time in the historical person Jesus. It also states that the incarnation remains in effect, for the perfect participle ἐληλυθότα indicates a continuing state. To read Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν as a single object would simply assert that there was an historical personage by that name. It would not involve a confession of His deity or of His saving office. But His “coming” involves His preexistence, and His coming as “Christ” involved our salvation. Only God could provide the perfect satisfaction for the sins of the world which is provided by the living and the dying of the *God-man* Jesus.

John’s statement here directly confronts the contention of Cerinthus that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary to whom the Christ came at His Baptism and from whom the Christ departed at His passion. That separation of the divine and human in Jesus is as old as that, as damaging as Article XII insists it is, and as modern as the latest liberal answer to the question, “Whose Son is He?” It is the function of God’s Spirit to honor God’s Son (Jn 15:26; 16:13–15; I Cor 12:3), and *only* the Spirit (spirit) that confesses Jesus as Christ come in the flesh is from God.

John’s sentence here is *one* way of summarizing the gospel. That certainly does not mean that here the apostle gives *the* fundamental doctrine by which all prophets are to be judged, while relegating all other Scripture truths to some secondary, non-fundamental and indifferent status. All Scripture testifies of Him; all doctrine centers in Him; all the testimony of the Old and New Testaments find a focus and summary in the confession which John posits here. And so all the teaching of a prophet who is from God will accord with all the teaching of all Scripture. It is unthinkable that the prophets or God’s beloved should regard any part of Christ’s teaching or the teaching about Christ as an indifferent matter. All will concur in the whole revelation and all will abhor any alteration.

Verse 3 begins, καὶ πᾶν πνεῦμα ὃ (neuter) μὴ ὁμολογεῖ τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν. A number of variants try to “complete” the thought for John by repeating the Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα of verse 2. The words do not need repeating. Their substance is implicit in the single word Ἰησοῦν here. Another variant of more interest (though not necessarily of more validity) is the reading λύει instead of μὴ ὁμολογεῖ. Some commentators have read into λύει the significance of separating the two natures of Christ. Thus λύει (loosing) would connote the dissolution of His divine-human Person. That is what many Gnostics did and that happens to be what Cerinthus did. However to read λύει here as “separate” or “dissolve” is not good linguistics, even though it helps us to review good Christology. Even if we do not agree with Grundmann’s discounting of *any* antithesis to Gnosticism in 1 John, we can accept his view that λύειν is simply the opposite of ὁμολογεῖν. We

¹ *Luther’s Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), 30, 284.

² *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, G. Kittel, ed., trans. by G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), V, 210.

can also appreciate that λύειν (as a synonym of μὴ ὁμολογεῖν) “is to dismiss Jesus as an object of Christian confession, so that He is just one among many figures of the past and there can be no question of faith in Him.”³

Luther related this first part of verse 3 to the sacramentarians, who formally acknowledged the incarnation but rejected its implications for the Lord’s Supper and Holy Baptism.⁴ Those who will not accept the union of the earthly and the divine in the sacraments and in the written Word cannot clearly confess the incarnation and its absolute necessity for our salvation. And so they will prate of “the Spirit” without means of grace. And in our day they will concentrate on “the Spirit’s gifts” instead of on the Son’s saving work. The Reformer also saw a connection between this verse and the great apostasy of the papacy: “The pope confesses the statement that Christ came into the flesh, but he denies its fruits... For Christ’s coming in the flesh did not take place in order that He might be made man for His own sake; it took place in order that He might save us... In his bulls the pope condemns the article that we are justified solely by the righteousness of Christ. Yet this is the effect of His incarnation.”⁵

The πνεῦμα which μὴ ὁμολογεῖ is now more fully identified: καὶ τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ τοῦ ἀντιχρίστου. Πνεῦμα is supplied with τό as the anaphoric τοῦτο has brought the concept πνεῦμα into this sentence. The spirit of antichrist is not an individual person but a particular spirit which can inhabit any number of persons, concurrently or consecutively. We cannot on the basis of Johannine usage attach special significance to the article with ἀντιχρίστου, as though only one specific antichrist would deny Jesus as Christ come in the flesh. John himself had written in the previous chapter: “...even now are there many antichrists...” (2:18).

Luther takes note of these considerations and acknowledges that “the rest of the heretics are antichrists in part.” But he identified the papacy as antichrist κατ’ ἐξοχήν: “...The spirit of the pope is the subtlest. He acknowledges the coming of Christ and keeps the apostolic words and sermons; but he has removed the kernel, namely, that Christ came to save sinners... Skill and guile are needed... to say that Christ suffered for us and yet to teach at the same time that we render satisfaction. All the rest of the heretics are antichrists in part but he who is against the whole Christ is the only true Antichrist.”⁶

John continues: “With respect to which (spirit—ὅ—neuter) you have heard that it was coming.” We render ἔρχεται “was coming” because of what follows immediately upon it: καὶ νῦν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἐστὶν ἤδη. The hearing (ἀκηκόατε) occurred in some earlier instruction. It may have been John’s preaching and teaching. It may be that they learned from Paul’s Second Letter to the Thessalonians. It may have been from some other apostle’s teaching, for there is no reason to suppose that this instruction was peculiar to Paul and John. It is interesting, at least, to note the close parallel between John’s thought here, καὶ νῦν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἐστὶν ἤδη, and Paul’s thought in 2 Thessalonians 2:7, τὸ γὰρ μυστήριον ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται τῆς ἀνομίας.

This last clause emphasizes once again the necessity and the possibility of identifying the spirits that are not from God, the false prophets, the Antichrist. Article XII of the Formula of Concord does not deal with the papacy as Antichrist. The Smalcald Articles had done that and the point was not at issue in 1577. But Article XII does describe some of the lesser antichrists (without using the term). And that makes the Article of great practical use to us.

It reminds us that “Lutheran” means far more than simply “anti-Catholic.” It reminds us that “conservative evangelicals” can be destructive legalists when they lack a full appreciation of the incarnation and of the means of grace. It reminds us that not everyone who says “*sola Scriptura*” really has the teaching of Scripture. It reminds us that a heretic, factional, sectarian, antichristian old man lurks in the heart of every pastor. And so it calls us to renewed alertness to recognize legalistic tendencies in ourselves as well as in other Christians. Any legalism in us can be an effective denial of the blessed significance of the person and work of Jesus the Christ who came in the flesh.

The thoughts of the text and of the article may be combined in a sermon outline with the theme:

³ *Ibid.*, IV, 336.

⁴ *Luther’s Works*, 30, 286.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 30, 285.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30, 287.

Christians, Test Your Teachers!

- I. There is a need for this testing.
 - A. Because many false prophets have gone out into the world,
 1. as Jesus warned, Mt 24:24,
 2. claiming to have God's Spirit and His truth,
 3. still active and increasingly so as the end of the age draws on;
 - B. Because the spirit of antichrist is in the world,
 1. causing the false prophets to claim God's truth and Spirit,
 2. causing them to oppose Christ by trying to undo His work.
 - C. Therefore do not believe every spirit.
 1. Christians must exercise a healthy skepticism
 2. because they meet those spirits that are from God and those whose origin is not from God.
 3. As God's beloved they must be warned and will heed the warning.
 - D. Test the spirits whether they are from God.
 1. This goes behind and beyond personalities; the appearance of success, zeal, morality; organizational form.
 2. It assigns responsibility to every Christian.

Transition: Does each Christian have the capability to carry out this responsibility? In 2 Thessalonians 2:9–12 Paul says that only those who prefer the falsehood are deceived by falsehood. Here John says γινώσκετε: you recognize.

- II. There are means for this testing.
 - A. The spirit that confesses Jesus as Christ come in the flesh is from God.
 1. The preexistent Son of God became man to accomplish our salvation, and in Him man has eternal life with God.
 2. Only that spirit which honors Jesus as Savior-God is from the Holy Spirit (Jn 15:26; 16:13–15; I Cor 12:3).
 3. When this confession is made and when teaching and practice accord with it, then it is from God.
 - B. The spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.
 1. This is not the uncharitable judging of hearts but the judgment of God's Word.
 2. Any denial of His truth is in some way a denial of Him, even where a *formal* confession is adhered to.
 - C. The spirit of denial is the spirit of Antichrist, active in the world.
 1. There are many antichrists (cf. 1 Jn 2:18), the factions and sects of the article and their spiritual descendants today.
 2. There is an Antichrist par excellence: "...He (the pope) has removed the kernel, namely, that Christ came to save sinners...Skill and guile are needed...to say that Christ suffered for us and yet to teach at the same time that we render satisfaction" (Luther).
 3. Our old man has the potential to be an antichrist or to be misled by an antichrist.

Conclusion: We Christians need to carry on the necessary and possible assignment of testing the teachers. The ability to discern, the only antidote and preservative, comes from and is improved by the gospel.