

SESSION SEVEN

Test the Spirits

1 John 4:1-6

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: Participants discover that discernment is a command, not a suspicion problem: every spirit must be tested, the test is the incarnate Christ confessed, and the touchstone is apostolic ("whoever knows God listens to us"). The antichrist thread from Session Four develops, and the group leaves with the Church's actual tools for telling the spirit of truth from the spirit of error.

Catholic Touchstone: Discernment of spirits within the rule of faith. Private testing and the apostolic touchstone are one gift, not rivals: the believer tests everything, and the test itself, incarnational confession heard in the apostolic Church, is Christ's provision against deception (CCC 801; 67; 84-86).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The passage opens with a command that startles pious ears: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit" (4:1). Credulity is not a virtue in John. The community that just learned it possesses the Spirit (3:24) is immediately told that the spiritual realm is contested: "many false prophets have gone out into the world," the same "went out" as the secessionists of 2:19. Openness to the supernatural without discernment is not faith; it is an unlocked door.

The test John gives is doctrinal and specific: "every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God" (4:2-3). The battle line is the Incarnation, exactly where the letter began (1:1-3, the heard, seen, touched Word) and exactly where the secessionists broke: a Christ too spiritual for flesh. Notice the wording: not merely "came into flesh" as a costume, but "has come in the flesh," the perfect tense of an abiding reality. The spirit of antichrist, planted in Session Four, here becomes a present atmosphere: "the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already." The thread's resolution waits for 2 John 7 in Session Eleven; develop, do not resolve.

Verse 4 is the passage's consolation and one of the most quoted lines in the letter: "Little children, you are of God, and have overcome them; for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." The tense matters: have overcome, already. Discernment is not conducted from anxiety but from victory: the indwelling Spirit outweighs every counterfeit. Christians test spirits the way a bank teller spots forgeries, by long familiarity with the genuine article, not by anxious cataloging of every possible fake.

Verse 6 adds the second criterion, and it is the one modern readers skip: "We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." The "us" is the apostolic witness, the same "we" that heard, saw, and touched in 1:1-3. John gives two tests that are really one: the content test (the incarnate Christ confessed) and the communion test (the apostolic teaching heeded). A spirit that confesses orthodox words while leading souls away from the apostolic Church fails the second test; a community that claims apostolic loyalty while denying the Incarnation fails the first. The Catechism's teaching that discernment of charisms belongs to the Church's shepherds (CCC 801) and that the faithful test everything against the deposit (CCC 67; 84-86) is verse 6 in institutional form.

This session is intensely practical for young adults swimming in spiritualities: manifestation culture, astrology, witchcraft aesthetics, AI oracles, prosperity preaching, apparition enthusiasm, and podcast prophets. Do not turn the night into a heresy catalog; give them the two tests and the Church's classical wisdom instead. The Ignatian rules for discernment (consolation and desolation, the enemy's tactics) and John of the Cross's severe caution about private revelations are the tradition's mature toolkit; both appear in the Voices. Note the Church's own practice with reported apparitions: patient investigation, the doctrinal test first, and even approved apparitions commanding only human credence, never the assent of divine faith. The Church is Johannine about the supernatural: neither credulous nor cynical.

One caution: some participants will have genuinely occult history (ouija, tarot, spells) or wounds from spiritual abuse (a manipulating "prophet," a controlling leader). Handle testimonies with care, avoid sensationalism, and know your referral: anything beyond ordinary pastoral scope goes to the pastor, not the small group.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Deuteronomy 13:1-5. The Torah's stunning prophet test: even if the sign or wonder *comes true*, a prophet who leads toward other gods is false, and the test was a test of Israel's love. Signs do not validate content; content judges signs. Tonight's key live discovery.

Deuteronomy 18:21-22. The companion test: the presumptuous prophet exposed by failed predictions. Israel was commanded to discernment millennia before John; God's people have never been permitted credulity.

Jeremiah 28. Hananiah versus Jeremiah: two prophets, both invoking the LORD's name, one message flattering and false, one costly and true. The false prophet was the more encouraging one. Leader background for the perennial pattern: the spirit of error usually sounds nicer.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Polycarp of Smyrna *Letter to the Philippians, 7*

Polycarp, disciple of John himself, quotes tonight's test almost verbatim within a generation: everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is antichrist, and whoever

does not confess the testimony of the cross is of the devil. The apostle's own student, applying the apostle's own test, shows the criterion working exactly as designed: handed on, and used.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Ignatius of Loyola *Spiritual Exercises, Rules for Discernment*

Ignatius mapped the interior weather John commands us to test: the good spirit consoles, strengthens, and moves toward faith, hope, and love, while the enemy disturbs, discourages, and proposes shortcuts; and the enemy, Ignatius warns, can appear as an angel of light, beginning with holy thoughts and bending them slowly toward ruin. His counsel is Johannine to the core: watch the whole trajectory, test the tail of the serpent, and never renegotiate in desolation what was resolved in consolation.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John of the Cross *Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book II*

John of the Cross, Doctor of the Church and no stranger to mystical experience, is severest exactly where enthusiasts are loosest: visions, voices, and private revelations, even genuine ones, are not to be sought or leaned upon, for the appetite for them opens the soul to deception, and everything necessary has already been spoken in God's one Word, his Son. His rule protects what 4:2 protects: the sufficiency of Christ come in the flesh over every private supplement.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 801 places discernment where verse 6 places it: no charism is exempt from being referred to the Church's shepherds, whose office is not to quench the Spirit but to test everything and hold fast what is good.

CCC 84-86 names the measure: the deposit of faith, entrusted to the whole Church and authentically interpreted by the Magisterium alone, against which teachings and spirits are tested. CCC 67 applies the measure to claimed revelations: they do not belong to the deposit of faith, and Christian faith cannot accept revelations that claim to surpass or correct the Revelation of which Christ is the fulfillment. CCC 89 keeps the dogmas as lights along the path of faith, illuminating and securing it.

CCC 675 (callback) keeps the antichrist thread honest: the supreme religious deception will offer men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth; the spirit of antichrist rehearses that bargain in every age.

THREAD WATCH

The Abiding and Antichrist thread develops tonight, resolves Session Eleven. "The spirit of antichrist... is in the world already" (4:3) advances Session Four's planting; the definition sharpens at 2 John 7. Say only that the letter's little sisters, 2 and 3 John, will finish this thread; reveal nothing of 2 John's wording.

The God Is thread: one week out, maximum security. Next session opens the second fold. Tonight ends with a deliberate tease (see Build 8's closing note): tell the group to bring their sealed sheets next week without fail, and confirm nothing else.

The Knowing thread sharpens into criteria. "By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (4:6): the letter's knowing is now explicitly ecclesial, knowing by listening to the apostolic we. Underline it; it will matter for the steelman.

SESSION GOALS

1.

Establish discernment as commanded, not optional: do not believe every spirit.

2.

Discover Deuteronomy 13 live: signs do not validate content; content judges signs.

3.

Extract John's two tests, incarnational confession and apostolic listening, and show they are one gift.

4.

Equip the group with the tradition's practical toolkit (Ignatian rules, John of the Cross's caution, the Church's apparition discipline) for the spiritualities they actually encounter.

TIME NOTE

75 to 90 minutes. If time runs short, compress Build 7 and cut the Dig Deeper. Protect Build 3, the Deuteronomy discovery, and Build 5, the verse 6 communion test; they are the doctrinal cargo. Leave two minutes for the sealed-sheet reminder at the end, without fail.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, Spirit of truth: the world is loud with voices claiming your name. Give us tonight the gift the apostle commands: discernment without cynicism, openness without credulity. He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. Let us test everything from that victory. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

1.

Where do you encounter "spiritual" content in your actual week: feeds, podcasts, friends, apps? What is the strangest spiritual claim the algorithm has served you lately?

2.

Have you ever trusted a voice, a leader, a teacher, an online personality, that later proved false? Looking back, was there a signal you ignored?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

1.

Read 1 John 4:1. The apostle of love opens with a prohibition: "do not believe every spirit." Why is that command surprising after 3:24 ("the Spirit which he has given us"), and what does John assume about the spiritual world that our culture tends to deny?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

It is surprising because John has just assured believers they possess the Spirit; the very next sentence warns that spirit-language is contested territory: "many false prophets have gone out into the world," the same "went out" as the secessionists of 2:19. Possessing the Spirit and being deceivable are, apparently, compatible conditions, which is why testing is commanded, *dokimazete*, assay them, the metallurgist's word for testing coinage.

And John assumes what our culture denies in two opposite directions: against materialism, that the spiritual realm is real; against the "all spirituality is good" mood, that it is contested. "Spiritual" is a realm, not a compliment. Openness without discernment is not faith; it is an unlocked door, and John, who leaned on the Lord's breast, is the last man alive to be accused of closed-hearted skepticism.

2.

Read 4:2-3. John gives the test, and it is oddly specific. What exactly must a spirit confess, and why is *that* the test rather than, say, morality, miracles, or warm feelings? Connect it to where this letter began.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God." The test is the Incarnation: not Jesus admired, quoted, or felt, but the eternal Christ come, and abidingly come (the perfect tense), in real flesh, the flesh of 1:1-3 that was heard, seen, and touched, of the cross that bled, of the Eucharist that is eaten. The letter's first paragraph was already the test; the secessionists broke exactly here, keeping a spiritual Christ and dropping the body.

Why this test? Because every deception ultimately negotiates against the Incarnation: a Christ-idea instead of a Christ-body costs nothing, demands nothing, judges nothing, and saves nothing. Morality can be counterfeited, feelings manufactured, and, as we are about to discover, even miracles are not self-validating. The confession of the enfleshed Christ is the one coin the spirit of error cannot mint, because it is the one truth that spirit exists to deny: "this is the spirit of antichrist... in the world already" (4:3),

Session Four's thread, now an atmosphere.

3.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Someone find and read Deuteronomy 13:1-5 slowly, and brace yourselves for verse 2. Under the Torah, if a prophet's sign or wonder actually *comes true*, is he thereby validated? What is the real test, and what does verse 3 say God is doing through the whole affair?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

No. "If a prophet arises among you... and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods'... you shall not listen to the words of that prophet." A fulfilled wonder in the service of a false god is still false. Signs do not validate content; content judges signs. Israel's test was never "is it impressive?" but "where does it lead?"

And verse 3's astonishing aside: "for the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart." The false prophet's success is itself permitted as a test of love. That reframes every dazzling deception since: the question under the question is always whether we love God more than wonders. Jesus warned the same: false christs will show "great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24). Discernment is a form of fidelity, which is why John addresses it to the "beloved."

4.

Read 4:4, the consolation: "you are of God, and have overcome them; for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." What tense is the victory, and what difference does it make whether discernment is practiced from anxiety or from victory?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Have overcome: perfect tense, already accomplished. The Christian does not test spirits as a nervous contestant hoping to survive, but as one already on the winning side, indwelt by Someone greater than every counterfeit combined. Fear-driven discernment sees demons in every shadow and becomes its own bondage; victory-driven discernment is calm, unhurried, and hard to stampede.

The bank-teller principle belongs here: tellers spot counterfeit bills not by studying every possible fake but by long, daily handling of the genuine. Deep familiarity with the real Christ, in Scripture, the sacraments, and the Church's rule of faith, is the primary discernment training. The catalog of errors changes every decade; the genuine article does not.

5.

Read 4:6, the verse modern readers skip, and read it twice: "We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us... By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." Who is the "us," and what second test does this add to the confession test of 4:2? Why does John need both?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The "us" is the apostolic we of the whole letter, the same we that heard, saw, and touched in 1:1-3 and proclaimed so that "you may have fellowship with us" (1:3). John's second criterion is communion: the

spirit of truth is heard among those who listen to the apostles; the spirit of error is marked by refusing that hearing. Content test and communion test, and they interlock: a spirit mouthing orthodox words while pulling souls away from the apostolic Church fails the second; a community waving the apostolic flag while denying the enfleshed Christ fails the first.

This is why the Church, then and now, refers every charism to the discernment of the shepherds who hold the apostolic teaching (CCC 801), and measures every claimed revelation against the deposit of faith under the Magisterium's guidance (CCC 67; 84-86). Not because the hierarchy monopolizes the Spirit, Session Four of this study already settled that, but because Christ provided a public touchstone precisely so that discernment would not collapse into every believer's private resonance. "Whoever knows God listens to us" is 1:3's fellowship, now doing its protective work.

6.

Steelman chain. A friend says: "4:1 says test the spirits, addressed to every believer. That is private judgment, straight from Scripture: I test everything myself, and no church gets a veto over what the Spirit shows me." Give it full strength, then press with the passage's own frame.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Its strength is genuine: the command is plural and universal, addressed to the beloved, not forwarded to a committee; every believer is on duty. The anointing of 2:20 and 2:27 means the whole body of the faithful really can smell novelty, and history honors laypeople who resisted heretical bishops. Any account of discernment that reduces the baptized to passive consumers of rulings has lost John's verse, and Catholics should concede that loudly.

Now the press, from inside the same six verses. With what instrument does the individual test? John supplies it: a fixed, public, doctrinal confession (4:2) that the individual received, not invented, the faith heard "from the beginning" (2:24). And against what touchstone? "Whoever knows God listens to us" (4:6): the apostolic teaching, alive in the apostolic community. So John's tester is every believer, but John's test is thoroughly ecclesial: received creed, apostolic communion. Private judgment in the strong sense, my resonance as final arbiter, fails John's own second criterion the moment it stops listening. The Catholic synthesis is simply the passage's own shape: all test, with the Church's rule, under the shepherds' final discernment, one Spirit in the anointing and in the office, as we said in Session Four. And the seventeenth-century warning stands: a test with no touchstone eventually validates everything, which is how "led by the Spirit" became history's most versatile permission slip.

7.

Make it practical, because your week is full of applicants. Run the tradition's toolkit over the spiritualities young adults actually meet, manifestation and astrology content, witchy aesthetics, prosperity prophets, apparition enthusiasm, algorithmic gurus. What do John's two tests plus the saints' rules ask of each?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The two tests first. Confession: does this voice confess, or quietly replace, Jesus Christ come in the flesh? Manifestation culture and astrology fail before the question finishes: they route power and meaning through technique and stars, not through the enfleshed Christ; they are other-gods territory under

Deuteronomy 13, however soft the packaging. Communion: does this voice make me hungrier for the sacraments, Scripture, and the Church, or does it isolate me from them into a private channel? Prosperity prophets and personality-cult gurus fail here even when their vocabulary is churchy: watch where the sheep end up.

Then the saints' instruments. St. Ignatius: track the trajectory, not the opening; the enemy begins as an angel of light and bends slowly, so test the tail of the serpent, and never renegotiate in desolation what was resolved in consolation. St. John of the Cross: do not seek or lean on private revelations, even possibly genuine ones; the appetite for them is itself the vulnerability, and everything necessary was already said in the Son. And the Church's own apparition discipline models the balance: patient investigation, doctrine first, and even approved apparitions asking only human credence, never the faith owed to the Gospel. Neither credulous nor cynical: Johannine.

DIG DEEPER · Two spirits, two directions

"By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (4:6) gave the tradition a lasting map: from the Didache's two ways, through the desert fathers reading thoughts by their fruits, to Ignatius's two standards, the discernment question is always directional: toward the incarnate Christ and his Body, or away under spiritual cover. Note also whom Jesus calls "the spirit of truth": the Paraclete himself, who "will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13), promised to the same apostolic circle whose "us" anchors verse 6. The Spirit of truth and the apostolic witness were never two authorities; they were one gift with an inside and an outside.

8.

Last one, and end on the victory, not the vigilance. "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (4:4). Where in your life right now do you most need that sentence to be true, and what would testing-from-victory rather than testing-from-fear change about how you face it this week?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Let the group carry it personally: the anxiety spiral at 2 a.m., the intimidating workplace, the family conflict, the habit that whispers it owns you, the cultural noise that makes faith feel outnumbered. Verse 4 does not say the world's spirit is weak; it says the One indwelling you is greater, and the victory tense is already past.

Testing-from-victory walks into the same rooms with a different posture: unhurried, unafraid to name error, uninterested in panic, quick to return to the genuine article. And leaders, the closing note, delivered with a grin: next week, the letter completes a sentence it has been holding since chapter one, and there is a sealed sheet with two folds in everyone's Bible. Bring it. Do not open it. One more week.

SEND · TAKING IT WITH US

1.

Which voice in your feed or your life most needs John's two tests run on it honestly, and what will you do if it fails?

2.

Where has fear been running your discernment, seeing threats everywhere or afraid to test a voice you like? What does 4:4 give you permission to do?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1.

Run the two tests, confession and communion, on one spiritual voice you follow (a podcast, an account, an author), on paper, this week. Keep what passes; unfollow what fails. Tell one group member the result.

2.

Memorize 1 John 4:4 and pray it aloud at your most anxious recurring moment this week: he who is in you is greater.

3.

Spend fifteen minutes with the genuine article daily this week, the Gospel of John, one chapter a day, as bank-teller training: familiarity with the real Christ is the best counterfeit detection there is.

Closing Prayer:

Spirit of truth, you have marked your work forever: Jesus Christ, come in the flesh. Tune our ears to the apostles' voice, steady our hearts against every angel of light, and keep us testing from victory, for he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse: "Little children, you are of God, and have overcome them; for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." (1 John 4:4, RSV2CE)

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in Session Seven, in order of use. All references RSV2CE.

PASSAGE WHERE IT IS USED

Main text, read in sections through the Build

Deuteronomy 13:1-5

Live discovery, Build 3: signs do not validate content

Deuteronomy 18:21-22

Leader background: the failed-prediction test

Jeremiah 28

Leader background: Hananiah, the nicer-sounding prophet

Matthew 24:24

Build 3: wonders that would deceive even the elect

1 John 1:1-3; 2:19, 24

Builds 2, 5, 6: the letter's own frame for both tests

John 16:13

Dig Deeper: the Spirit of truth and the apostolic circle

CCC 801; 67; 84-89; 675

Catechism Connection