

1 John 4:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.

Analysis

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Following chapter 3's conclusion about the Spirit, John warns believers to test spiritual claims. "Beloved" (*agapētoi*) introduces urgent pastoral counsel. "Believe not every spirit" (*mē panti pneumati pisteuete*)—the present imperative prohibits ongoing, indiscriminate belief. Not every supernatural manifestation or teaching claiming divine authority originates with God.

"But try the spirits whether they are of God" (*alla dokimazete ta pneumata ei ek tou theou estin*). *Dokimazō* (δοκιμάζω) means to test, examine, or prove. Believers must discern true from false spiritual teaching. The criterion is whether it's "of God" (*ek tou theou*)—originating from and consistent with God's revealed truth. This testing is a command, not optional—spiritual discernment is every believer's responsibility.

"Because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (*hoti polloi pseudoprophētai exelēlythasin eis ton kosmon*). The perfect tense indicates completed action with continuing results—false prophets have gone out and remain active. These weren't hypothetical threats but real dangers infiltrating the church. The qualifier "many" underscores the severity—deception wasn't rare but prevalent. This warning echoes Jesus's prediction of false prophets (Matthew 7:15, 24:11, 24) and Paul's warnings (Acts 20:29-30, 2 Timothy 4:3-4).

Historical Context

First-century Christianity faced numerous false teachers. Gnostic teachers claimed special revelations and secret knowledge. Judaizers insisted Gentile Christians must keep Mosaic law. Docetists denied Christ's true humanity. The criterion for testing spirits—confession of Jesus Christ come in flesh (v. 2-3)—addressed specifically the docetic heresy prevalent in the Johannine community.

Jewish tradition emphasized testing prophetic claims by consistency with Torah (Deuteronomy 13:1-5, 18:20-22). The early church applied similar rigor, testing teaching by apostolic doctrine (Acts 17:11, Galatians 1:8-9). The proliferation of false teaching in church history validates John's warning—every generation must exercise discernment, testing teaching against Scripture.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How do you currently test spiritual teaching or supernatural claims to determine whether they're from God?
2. What biblical criteria can you use to discern true from false prophets in contemporary Christianity?
3. Why is spiritual discernment a responsibility for all believers, not just church leaders?

Interlinear Text

Ἄγαπητοί, μὴ παντὶ πνεύματα πιστεύετε ἀλλὰ

Beloved not every spirit believe but
G27 G3361 G3956 G4151 G4100 G235

δοκιμάζετε τὰ πνεύματα εἰ ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἔστιν

try G3588 spirit whether of G3588 God they are
G1381 G4151 G1487 G1537 G2316 G2076

ὅτι πολλοὶ ψευδοπροφῆται ἐξεληλύθασιν εἰς τὸν

because many false prophets are gone out into G3588
G3754 G4183 G5578 G1831 G1519

κόσμον

the world

G2889

Additional Cross-References

1 Thessalonians 5:21 (Parallel theme): Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

2 Peter 2:1 (Prophecy): But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.

1 Timothy 4:1 (Faith): Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;

2 John 1:7 (Parallel theme): For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.

Proverbs 14:15 (Faith): The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looketh well to his going.

1 John 2:18 (Parallel theme): Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.

1 Corinthians 14:29 (Prophecy): Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge.

Luke 12:57 (Parallel theme): Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?

2 Timothy 3:13 (Parallel theme): But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.

Acts 20:29 (Parallel theme): For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.