

Introduction

How many of you have ever heard it said that cats always land on their feet? The question of course is whether or not that is true. One of the ways to determine that is to test it.

Which is exactly what my cousin Robin and I did years ago when we were boys. His sister told us one day that cats always land on their feet. We had never heard that before and certainly weren't going to be duped by her. We tested it instead. My cousin got a stepladder, carried his cat up it, turned him over on his back, and dropped him – three times. Sure enough, we found it's true. Cats really do always land on their feet.

What my cousin and I did those many years ago, you and I also need to do. We need to test it so we won't be duped. That's what 1 John 4:1-6, teaches us and what I'm going to preach about today.

The Spirits

Look first of all at the words **"spirit"** and **"spirits"** in verses 1, 2, and 3. John is referring to spiritual leaders who prophesy, preach, or teach. We ourselves know what spirits are because we have so many. With modern technologies in fact, we're exposed to the communications of far more spiritual leaders than any Christians ever have been. Think about it. There are the spiritual leaders who staff our local churches, who write innumerable Christian books, and who preach and teach on television and radio.

The result is that most of us listen to, read, or follow at least several spiritual leaders. Let's illustrate this. Do something this week. Sit down and make of list of the spiritual leaders that you listen to, read, or follow with some consistency. I've done that and my list is the following: Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, Oswald Chambers, A.W. Tozer, C.S. Lewis, and Francis Schaeffer. I suggest you do the same because we really do need to know who our **"spirits"** or spiritual leaders are.

Now, there's something we need to know about the spiritual leaders

on our list. They are one of the two things John mentions in verse 6. They are either spirits of truth or spirits of error.

According to verse 1, spirits of truth are from God and do both of two things. First, they address the significant realities and issues that need to be addressed. And second, they speak what is so about them.

According to verse 5, spirits of error are from the world and do one or both of two things. First, they don't address some of the significant realities and issues that need to be addressed. And/or second, they speak what isn't so about some of them that they do address.

A Christian once asked me what I thought about a pastor on television to whom she faithfully listens. I was on the spot, had to answer, and did, **"I think he's a spirit of error who will lead you astray."** She went on to ask why I thought that and I told her. First, he says nothing about some of the vital realities and issues that need to be addressed. He admits, for instance, that he won't talk about sin or the exclusiveness of Jesus because they upset and alienate people. And second, he says things that aren't so about some of the vital realities and issues he does address. **"That makes him a spirit of error,"** I said.

You get the point. We're exposed to an array of spiritual leaders, each of whom is one of two things, a spirit of truth or a spirit of error.

Believe Every Spirit

Now, the opening line in verse 1 shows us one of the ways we can respond to those spiritual leaders. We can **"believe every spirit."** That means we believe without thinking. We mindlessly accept whatever the spiritual leaders say. They say it and we believe it without giving it any critical or even further thought. Christians do that for various reasons, the three most common of which I want to identify and briefly explain.

First, spiritual leaders appeal to their emotions and not their minds. They make them feel so deeply that they don't think.

That's what Adolph Hitler did. He gained power by getting the support of the masses and explained in *Mein Kampf* how he did: **"Since**

the masses have only a poor acquaintance with abstract ideas, their reactions lie more in the domain of feelings. The driving force has never been teaching, but a kind of hysteria which has urged them to action. Whoever wishes to win over the masses must know the key that will open the door to the heart." Hitler knew that the reactions of the masses lie in the domain of feeling, not thought, and took advantage of that.

So do many of our spiritual leaders today. I'm not saying they're Hitler's. I'm just saying they captivate people the same way he did. They appeal to their emotions, not their minds. They make them feel so deeply that they don't think. Those people then believe everything they say no matter how out of touch with reality it is.

A second reason that Christians believe without thinking is that spiritual leaders tell them what they want to hear. All of us are susceptible to this. A spiritual leader says something that we want to be true. So, we mindlessly accept that it is.

One of America's most popular televangelists wrote a best selling book that was published last year. In it, he discusses the incredible potential God has given each of us. He then declares in that regard, **"You can do anything you set your mind to."** I heard him preach that very point on television and the thousands of people in his congregation applauded when he did. I've talked with many Christians over the years who, like his congregation, believe that. It obviously isn't so and yet they believe it is. Why? It's because they want it to be so.

There's a third reason that Christians believe without thinking. It's because spiritual leaders are on television. By its very nature, television brings personalities into our hearts, not abstractions into our minds. The personality always comes across better than his or her message does.

As a result, the televangelist talks about God. But the concreteness and persistence of his image on the screen makes God subordinate to him. The televangelist may not want that to be so but it is. He, not God, becomes the larger than life figure to be believed and obeyed.

Many of you know the slogan, “**God said it; I believe it; that settles it!**” The idea is that we believe it just because God said it. Well, television creates the very same dynamic with those who are on it. John Hagee said it; I believe it; that settles it! Charles Stanley said it; I believe it; that settles it. Joel Osteen said it; I believe it; that settles it. People believe something just because they said it.

Whatever the reason or reasons are, it’s true. Many Christians “**believe every spirit**” as verse 1 says it. They accept what spiritual leaders say without giving it any critical or even further thought.

Test the Spirits

But don’t do that! I challenge you, even plead with you, don’t believe spiritual leaders without thinking. Don’t let your feelings, your desire for something to be so, television, or anything else short circuit critical thought. As John says it in verse 1, test the spirits instead. That’s our call and he reveals how we answer it in verses 2 and 3.

In these two verses, he addresses what verse 1 calls “**false prophets.**” These were a group of heretics called Gnostics. Gnostics taught that all matter is evil. That was one of their foundational tenets. All matter, including flesh or body, is evil.

But notice what John tells Christians to do in verses 2 and 3. Pit what the Gnostics teach against reality, against the way things actually are. The reality to which he points in that regard is the fact that Jesus came in the flesh. That means that flesh or body can’t be evil or Jesus, who is utterly good, wouldn’t have come that way. When pitted against reality, what the Gnostics teach is clearly false.

What John says here shows us how to test the spirits. We pit the ideas and beliefs they teach against reality. We bring the relevant realities to bear upon them. If the ideas or beliefs are consistent with those relevant realities, then they are true. If they’re inconsistent with them, they’re false. It really is as simple as that.

Now, we find the relevant realities in two sources.

The first is God's written word, the Bible. As you know everything that the Bible says and records is true. That is, everything in it is reality. So, the first thing we do is pit the idea or belief in question against what the Bible says and records about it, if anything.

I once heard a pastor preach about the grace of God and explain why we need it. After all, he said, we all know that we sin in word, thought, and deed everyday. That is what most Christians believe – probably because that's what they've heard preached and taught.

But let's pit that idea against the relevant reality. That relevant reality is what the condition or state of friends of Jesus is.

So we turn to the Bible to see if it addresses this relevant reality, and find that it does – in passages like Matthew 5:48; 2 Peter 1:4; and 1 John 2:1 and 1 John 3:4-10. Those passages teach us that friends of Jesus have a divine presence in them – one that empowers them over sin. They are always capable of sinning and on occasion may. But the divine presence in them makes sinning an increasingly exceptional not daily event in their lives.

There are other passages but those are enough to show us. When pitted against the Bible, the preacher's idea, as comforting as it might be to us, is shown to be false. Observation, which I'll explain next, confirms this. So, the preacher's words were a spirit of error. He was well-intentioned, I think, but wrong.

We find the relevant realities to test the ideas and beliefs of spiritual leaders in a second source, observation. Everything in the Bible is true. But not everything that is true is in the Bible. Sometimes, the Bible doesn't contain any relevant realities that address the idea or belief at hand. So, we have to go to our own observation. To observe means to note and analyze what we experience, what others experience, and what happens in the world around us.

This observation must be two things. First, it must be objective. We must not let our biases distort how we analyze reality. We must be as unbiased as we possibly can. And second, it must be thorough. We

must note and analyze specifically not just generally. We must note and analyze in detail.

Let's go back to the idea in the pastor's book that I mentioned before. We can do anything that we set our minds to.

First, we turn to the Bible to see if it contains any relevant realities that we can bring to bear on the idea. I don't know of any. The pastor does cite a verse in support of what he writes – Philippians 4:13, "**I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.**" But as the context of that verse clearly shows, it's utterly irrelevant to what he says. The Bible doesn't address this idea.

So, we turn to our own observation. I've noted, for instance, that I set my mind to play major league baseball but didn't because I wasn't able to. Specifically, I wasn't big enough, fast enough, or strong enough to. I've also noted that my wife would love to sing in the choir but doesn't because she isn't able to. She'd only last one practice because specifically, she's tone deaf and can barely sing a note on key. Analyzing those things and others, I recognize something. Achievement requires three things: intention, commitment, and competence. The pastor's statement takes intention and commitment into account but not competence. We can't do what we're incompetent to do no matter how intentionally or committedly we seek to do it. We can't do anything we set our mind to.

That then is how we test the spirits. Pit what they say against the relevant realities. We find those relevant realities in the Bible and in our own objective observation.

Conclusion

The message in closing is clear. There are many spirits of truth out there from whom we can learn. But even they occasionally say things that aren't true. There are also many spirits of error out there. They consistently say things that aren't true. So don't "**believe every spirit.**" "**Test the spirits**" instead. You won't be duped if you do.