

## When Unbelief is Right

by Ray C. Stedman

Anyone who knows anything at all about Christianity knows that it puts great stress upon believing. Not believing myths and legends, as many seem to think, but believing facts. Faith is not a way of convincing yourself that something is true when you know it is not, as someone has defined it, but faith is believing something that is true. In order to be a Christian you must be a believer, because from faith comes life, strength, peace, and joy, and all else that the Christian life offers.

But, that being true, it is equally true that every Christian is also called to be an unbeliever. There is a time when unbelief is the right thing and the only right thing. The very same Scriptures which encourage us to believe likewise urge us not to believe. In fact, they not only urge us, they command us not to believe. This is no contradiction, any more than to say that in order to live it is necessary both to inhale and to exhale. These are contradictory things: You cannot inhale and exhale at the same time, but both are absolutely necessary to maintaining life. You cannot inhale unless you exhale, and you cannot exhale unless you have inhaled.

It is the same with this matter of belief and unbelief. You cannot believe truth without rejecting error. You cannot love righteousness unless you are ready to hate sin. You cannot accept Christ without rejecting self. "If any man come after me," Jesus says, "let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me," {cf, Matt 16:24, Mark 8:34}. You cannot follow good unless you are ready to flee from evil. So it is not surprising, therefore, that the Scriptures tell us we are not to believe, as well as to believe. This is what John declares in the first three verses of Chapter 4:

**Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: 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. This is the spirit of anti-christ, of which you have heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already. {1 Jn 4:1-3 RSV}**

This section, you will notice, comes as a parenthesis in the discourse on love. It grows out of the word which we looked at last time, the last verse of Chapter 3, Verse 24: "All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given to us." It is the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life that makes manifest the qualities of truth and love which reassure us that we are in Christ and "of the truth." It is that presence of the Holy Spirit which makes all the difference. But John says not to believe every spirit. There is one true Spirit, but there are also other spirits as well, false spirits, deceiving spirits that have gone out into the world.

It is significant that this warning comes in the midst of John's discourse about love, because it is rather evident that the false spirits which are abroad make a great deal of the subject of love.

It is significant and striking that every cult, every deviant group, every movement of our day that seeks to solicit support, religiously speaking, does so in the name of love. As we have already commented, this word is used in a thousand different ways to describe a thousand different reactions and impulses. Love means one thing to a hippie in Haight-Ashbury; love means quite something else

when it is used by a psychologist in his counseling room. Love is still something different on the lips of a movie-struck teenager; love is different yet when used with reference to the relationship of nations. There is no word, perhaps, in our language, that is capable of being stretched in so many directions as this word, *love*. Yet so many people seem utterly gullible about it. If someone comes talking about love, this to them is the earmark they must be of God, they must be “of the truth,” despite the fact that the oldest trick in Satan’s bag is to show a spirit of friendly concern and to appear to offer the fulfillment of love and desire.

Is that not what you see in the Garden of Eden? The devil comes to Eve and says, “Is it really true that God is so harsh, so difficult, so unloving toward you that he has forbidden you to eat certain fruit of a tree? Why, I think more of you than that. I’d never do anything like that to you. Could God actually say a thing like that and be God of love?” That is the implication of his argument, is it not? “Why,” says the devil, “if you take of this fruit you will discover wonderful things. You will become as gods. You will enter a wonderful world that you’ve never dreamed of before. You will discover the thing you were made for, and which God is trying to keep you from. As your friend, as your counselor, I suggest you hold back no longer. Take of the fruit and eat it,” {cf, Gen 3:1-5}. Is that not his approach? Does that not sound familiar? That is exactly the line of approach that cults, ’isms, and schisms are using today, everywhere. “If you really want to *live*, try what we have in stock.”

But the Scriptures warn us that the mark of childish immaturity is to be caught up and taken in by that kind of approach, “to be tossed about by every wind of doctrine” {Eph 4:14}, every new teaching that comes along. It is childish to gullibly swallow every slick line and go along with it. It is quite true, therefore, that a mark of maturity is unbelief, as well as belief.

It is as important that you do not believe certain things as it is that you do believe others, and John is making that clear.

Notice, he indicates that this is a widespread problem. “Many false prophets,” he says, “have gone out into the world.” In Matthew’s Gospel, the Lord Jesus warned of this: “beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves,” {Matt 7:15}. Wolves in sheep’s clothing – outwardly appearing

to be loving, tender, and concerned, but inwardly desiring only to wreck and ravish and to ruin. There are many false prophets, says John. Here again we have underlined for us the fact that we live in a world of deceit. We live, in many respects, in a hostile environment in which falsehoods are widely accepted, and we are greatly pressured to conform to these things.

In John’s day, in the 1st century, there were teachers going about doing certain signs, perhaps giving predictions of things to come, or manifesting tongues, miracles and other such things.

It is of this that John writes and says, “Do not believe these spirits – until you have tested them.” First test them. Don’t be a sucker, don’t believe anyone who comes along. It is important to note that there is here a very clear recognition of what the Bible teaches all the way through – that behind the false prophet or false teacher is an evil spirit. Men simply do not speak out of their own intellectual attainments. Quite unconscious to themselves they are being guided – and misguided – by an evil spirit, a “spirit of error” John calls it, an anti-Christian spirit which is behind these false prophets and teachers. There is a true Spirit, the Holy Spirit of truth, the Spirit of love, and just as he speaks through men, so evil spirits, false spirits, the spirits of error, also speak through men. When you hear men and women talking about religious things or values, do not gullibly swallow everything they say, especially if they appear to be attractively setting forth something about love and sweetness and light and concern for others. Especially test that line, for it is the usual approach of error. Recognize that behind the individual may be a spirit of error.

We moderns are in much greater danger than the ancients, for in the world of John and Paul’s day, the 1st century, there was a widespread recognition of the existence of invisible spirits, the invisible realities behind the scenes of life. Everywhere the ancient world recognized these as gods and goddesses, and bowed down to them. Though they seriously deformed and twisted these realities, making them into mythological and legendary figures and worshipping them as demigods, nevertheless there was a widespread recognition that man does not exist in the universe by himself; there are superior beings who influence the thinking and attitudes of men everywhere. This kind of teaching was, therefore, much easier to accept in the 1st century than it is in our day. In the 20th cen-

ture, we pride ourselves upon the fact that we have grown beyond this, we have come of age. Man is intellectually unable to accept this kind of thing today. As a result we expose ourselves without my defense at all to the control of these evil spirits.

But if we are going to follow the words of Jesus Christ we must accept what he says is the explanation of the power behind evil in the world. He makes clear that it comes from a host of evil spirits. We have seen this before, in Paul. "We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, wicked spirits in high places" {Eph 6:12 KJV}, against the very headquarters of evil that is at work, affecting the minds of men. Part of the blindness of our generation, resulting in chaos and anarchy that is increasing on every side today, is a direct result of man in his arrogance and pride saying, "I reject the whole concept of evil spirits and demons. It is intellectually unacceptable to me." The blindness of that attitude precludes any defense against it. If we are going to be Christians we must look at the world as Christ sees it, we must understand it from his point of view. We must recognize that the pronouncements of men in this field of religion and spiritual teaching, no matter whether they be professors in seminaries or colleges, or whether they be pastors behind pulpits, or whatever they may be, are not a result of their keen logic or their academic training or their perceptive thinking, alone. These men are oftentimes unaware of the twist that is given to their thinking by the activity of evil spirits, spirits of error. The premises they adopt, which they never seem to examine, are often totally wrong, and in their blindness they base logical deductions upon illogical premises. But we so often seem to be unaware of this.

You must remember that you can never recognize this kind of error by listening and reading the arguments. I am not saying it is wrong to read the arguments, but you will not see the error in them that way. For if you read these books, and listen to the messages, they always sound clear, convincing and logical, taken by themselves. That is the way error makes its approach to us. The only way to discover it is to do as John says – test it. Test these spirits, try them. Lay them alongside a measuring stick, and if they do not match, throw them out.

Well, what is the test?

**By this you know the Spirit of God: 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. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already. {1 Jn 4:2-3 RSV}**

There is the test: Two things.

1. First, the acknowledgment of the historical incarnation of the Son of God, his appearance in history as a man in the flesh. I think almost all Biblical scholars are agreed that this, Verse 2, should read this way:

**... every spirit which confesses that Jesus is Christ, come in the flesh, is of God ... {1 Jn 4:2b RSV}**

Jesus is his human name. He never was called Jesus when he was the eternal Son of God, before the incarnation. It was only when he was born as a babe in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth that he bore the human name of Jesus; Jesus of Nazareth. But the whole teaching of Scripture is that this Jesus of Nazareth, this historical Jesus, this man who grew up and lived and ate and slept and walked with men, who prayed and talked and taught them, is the Messiah of the Old Testament, the predicted One, the Son of God who was to come, the eternal One, God himself, who would come into human history – they are one and the same. This is the Spirit of truth. Jesus is the Christ, come in the flesh. Jesus of Nazareth is identical with and indivisible from that promised Messiah of the Old Testament.

Have you noticed that Jesus makes this claim about himself? In John 10, he says of certain who have gone before him,

**"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber [i.e., if someone comes to you by another process than the predicted way, the way that has been announced, he is a thief and a robber; he is a false prophet, he is a false Christ, he is an antichrist]; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper**

**opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out,” {John 10:1-3 RSV}.**

Then he says, “I am that good shepherd. I came in the predicted way, the way the prophets announced. I was born in the right place, at the right time, in the right way. I came exactly as it was announced. I am the door; I am the shepherd of the sheep,” {cf, John 10:14 ff}.

Now any teacher of spiritual matters who confesses this, John says, is of the truth, is of God. But any teacher who stands up and professes to teach men about God but who does not confess this, is not of God. Do not listen to him, pay no attention to him. Regardless of how beautifully he talks, he is not of God. He is of the spirit of error, the spirit of antichrist, that has already gone out into the world.

Plain language, is it not? It is amazing how we have forgotten and neglected it. This is the paramount doctrine which can never be compromised, the divine-human person of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the one thing that is basic and fundamental to all Christian faith. He appeared in the flesh, he came as a man, humbled himself, and became obedient unto the death of the cross.

2. Now the second thing that John brings out here is that this must not only be acknowledged as a historical fact, but it must be confessed by the one who teaches it. There must be a commitment of the life to this truth. This is what the word *confess* means here. It is more than a mere acknowledgment or a profession that this is true; it is a commitment. It means to actually trust this great declared fact and this great historic person. Anyone who does not actually trust it, and live by it, do not listen to them either. They may acknowledge it, but they must also *confess* it, that is the important thing.

Remember that back in the Gospel accounts there were demons that acknowledged the deity of the Lord Jesus? When he appeared before them they said, “We know who you are, the Holy One of God,” {cf, Mark 1:24, Luke 4:34}. They acknowledged what the Jews were too blind to see, the full deity of Jesus Christ, as well as his humanity. But, though demons acknowledged this, they never *confessed* it.

They never trusted him. They did not commit themselves to him, they did not live by this truth.

Through the course of history there have been many religious leaders, popes, priests, and many others, Protestant and Catholic alike, who have acknowledged the deity of the Lord Jesus and his humanity, but they have never trusted it, they have never committed themselves to it, they have never confessed it. Therefore, even though acknowledgment is there, there is failure, and it is the spirit of error that prevails.

Now, there you have the fundamental questions that we must ask every group, or any teacher of religion today:

- Do you acknowledge the entrance into history of the Son of God as Jesus of Nazareth, the man who labored and loved and died and rose again from the dead?
- Do you acknowledge the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ? – that he who was with God from the beginning, and was God, became man and lived among us?
- Do you acknowledge that? That question ought to be asked of every religious teacher, everywhere.

Then:

- Do you follow him?
- Do you live by this? Are you committed to him – is he your Lord, your strength, and everything you need?

How many would fail if we gave that test? How many fail, even at the first question? Just test in your mind some of the voices that speak today in the name of Christ:

There are those who style themselves liberals who say that the Jesus of history is not important to us; that his virgin birth, his miracles, his resurrection, even his crucifixion are but myths, legends

gathered about the figure of the man, Jesus, highly exaggerated ideas that the churches added to the facts. They tell us that these things are not important and it does not make any difference if he rose from the dead, or if he died on the cross, or if he was born in a manger, of a virgin. These do not make any difference, the great thing is the truth he taught, the things that he said – those are the important things. But John says if they do not confess that Jesus is the Christ, come in the flesh, this is the spirit of error, of antichrist.

In the current issue of the *Christian Digest* is a very interesting story of a young man who grew up in a godly home and became a Christian through the influence of his family. When he went away to college, his faith was undermined by the clever presentations of teachers who challenged him to think for himself. Now there is nothing wrong with that, but what was omitted was a standard of thinking, a measurement by which human thought could be evaluated. When that is omitted the result is always that the individual himself becomes the final measuring stick, the standard. This young man fell into that trap. He began to measure everything by what he thought, including the gospel and the Bible and all the things that are in it. Little by little he drifted off into liberalism, or modernism, or whatever term you might call it. He became a minister of a liberal church, involved in social crusades, declaring nothing of the gospel, the Word of God, the life-changing message that Christ came to give. But there was an increasing emptiness in his heart and life. Gradually he found his ministry crumbling, and he was unable to accomplish the things he wanted to. Sincere, earnest, dedicated, but increasingly hungry for something real. Finally a word from his wife, which irritated him immensely when he first heard it, struck a note of fire in his heart, and the Lord used it to wake him up to the great and saving truth that Jesus Christ alone can change the hearts of men. No social revolution is worth the snap of your finger if it does not rest upon that. He began to preach this and soon his church was changed. His congregation began to come back, the pews began to fill up, and his church became a living force in his community.

Now, measure some of these voices today:

- Here is the Christian Scientist, who says that Jesus – as a man upon whom the Spirit of

Christ came – the Spirit of Christ is the eternal One and he came upon Jesus at his baptism and left him again before he died upon the cross. Jesus, therefore, was born as a mere man and died as a mere man, and the only part of his ministry that is worth anything to us is his public ministry of teaching when he was influenced by the Spirit of Christ. That is not what John says. John says that the spirit which confesses that Jesus is the Christ, that the two are identical, one and the same, never to be separated – that is the Spirit which is of God. Anything else is the spirit of error and of antichrist.

- Take the gospel of the Mormons. They say that Jesus never was the eternal unchangeable God, but he was a man who became God and came to show us how we, too, might become gods some day. Is that the gospel? Of course not. It is the spirit of error, of antichrist.
- Take some of these modern cults to which our young people are giving such close attention these days. And who can blame them, when their hungry hearts are so earnestly desirous of seeing something real in life? Dr. Timothy Leary, the high priest of the psychedelic cult, is constantly urging young people to try LSD. He calls his organization, using the letters *LSD*, “League of Spiritual Discovery.” What is the hope that is set forth in it? Why, that LSD can open your eyes to the world of reality about God and about life, and show you wonderful things that you never could have known otherwise and make your life rich and full and vibrant. Echoes of Eden, are they not? He has reversed the famous words of Karl Marx, “Religion is the opiate of the people.” Dr. Leary says, “Opiates are the religion of the people.” And what does this apostle of pot have to say about the Lord Jesus? Why, that he was a man who was “turned on” by psychedelic drugs, and that is why he spoke in such an amazing way. He, too, was a user of LSD, in some form or another. Is that the gospel? Can that lead to life and liberty and joy and peace? No, no! It is the spirit of error and the spirit of antichrist, which is abroad in the world.

- There are even many who are orthodox in doctrine and who say, “Yes, of course we believe Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh. We have that in our creed, we can show it to you. It is written in our hymn books. We confess it every Sunday morning when we stand up in church, ‘We believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord.’” But do they confess him, do they live by him? Have they committed themselves to this One in whom they profess to believe?

This is the searching question John asks. If they do not confess him, if they do not live by him, then do not follow them, their error is as deadly as those who deny that he came in the flesh. Many young people are finding today that dead orthodoxy has no more power to deliver than heresy and apostasy has. It is those who live by him, follow him, obey him, live by his life – these are the ones to follow. If you do not do that you can never be my teacher. I do not want to listen to any voice that professes to talk about the inner things of man’s life and his relationship to an eternal God, which does not confess that Jesus is Christ come in the flesh, or who does not demonstrate in his life that he lives by that principle. Test it.

“What think you of Christ?” is the test  
To try both your state and your scheme.  
You can never think right of the rest  
Until you think highly of him.

That is where we must begin. The gospel, the good news, stands or falls by faith in Jesus Christ come in the flesh, and by the availability of his life to us now – by which to live and move and have our being. God help us to be unbelievers, as well as believers.

### Prayer:

We are always amazed, our Father, at the searching quality of thy word which so clearly exposes reality to us, if we will but heed it. Help us then to acknowledge that we do live in a hostile world in many ways set against the things of faith, the things of true life. Teach us not to be gullible, and credible, swallowing every line that comes along. But help us to test each on the basis of this One who came and proved himself to be the truth, by doing what no man could ever do, rising again from the dead, thus solving the deepest problem of human life, and who manifested his love toward us, love unchangeable. Lord, we pray that we might trust the One who truly loves us, and recognize him as the good shepherd of the sheep who loves, and who cares for his own, and not like the hireling who fleeces the sheep and runs away leaving them battered and bleeding and wounded by the side of the road. We pray that our trust in the Lord Jesus may be renewed now. In His name we ask it, Amen.