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We Are from God

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I John 4:1-6

{Testing the Spirits}

4 *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. ⁴ Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*

To disassemble the gospel is to disarm it. To remove the human Jesus from our faith and from our life together in Christ is to sterilize the gospel of the very purpose and power for which the gospel exists.

A new word: docetism – disbelief in the full humanity of Jesus, though people of this mind, or whatever variation of it, likely don't define themselves or their faith in the negative. Docetism is Christology, a belief in Christ, in which Jesus is only divine. Different from us, different from this life of ours. And it is not necessary to label oneself *docetic* to act out a docetic faith, a faith removed from the flesh-and-blood-and-bone Jesus of the gospel narrative. Long before it had a name, docetism showed up in 1st John, chapter 4, verses 2-3.

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.

Three *spirits* in two verses:

- *Spirit* with a capital “S” – the *Spirit of God*, as in *Holy Spirit*;
- *every spirit among you* – *spirit* written in the lower case, NOT the Holy Spirit; and

- *spirit of the antichrist*, also lower case, also not the Holy Spirit.

Spirits, John says here, that must be tested by believers, tested against what we already know of Christ. Then he does one of those things parents do, which is instruct their kids to figure out the right thing to do and then immediately tell them what they better figure out is the right thing to do.

Test the spirits, he says. The right answer: *Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*. No nuance. Either Jesus was or he wasn't human. And *the spirit among you* testifies to the truth. You believe it or you don't. Believing it (or not) you are (or are not) from God. You agree with us, or you don't. Agree, you are right. Don't, you are wrong.

It's the most stressful part of the text for me. Smells like fundamentalism: "either"/"or." And usually I hate that, because things are rarely either/or. Often two opposing thoughts/feelings/realities can both be true. But if some things *are* either/or, is this? i.e., how we think/ behave/ believe regarding the full humanity of Jesus Christ?

John calls this one either/or, and I agree. He, along with Paul the Apostle, convinces me. Because, again, it comes to the purpose and the power of the gospel itself – the gospel for which we, the church, exist. No gospel, no church. It doesn't mean we can't gather, have a budget and a program to tell a story that we all agree is true. It's just that that doesn't make us church. No gospel, No church.

What John here calls *the spirit of the anti-Christ* – any guesses where else the word *anti-Christ* appears in the Bible? In other parts of 1st John and 2nd John. But weirdly, not in Revelation, except in our minds, because of the preachers who drilled into us what John "*meant to say*" when he was writing about all the *beasts coming to torment the world*. And now, the word *anti-Christ* has a life all its own. If you truly have nothing else to read, google it sometime. You cannot imagine the internet rabbit holes into which you might fall.

When the kids were young they watched a stupid television show about a dinosaur family, in which the baby dinosaur always referred to the daddy dinosaur as *not-the-mommy, not-the-mommy*. My kids thought this was positively hilarious, so for weeks they would yell for Carl by saying, "*Not-the-mommy! Not-the-mommy!*" But being *not-the-mommy* is not at all the same as being *anti-mommy*, right? They don't mean the same thing. *Not-the-Christ* is actually a better translation, meaning-wise, of *anti-Christ*. But it translates terribly; it is way too awkward. Sometimes, translators choose a fluent passage over an accurate word.

Raymond Brown, the scholar who knows more about the writings of John than anyone, regards the better translation of verse 3 as, "*every spirit that **annuls** Jesus is not from God.*" "*Does not confess*" is significantly more passive than "*annuls.*" *Annul* is to *cancel, abolish, invalidate, obliterate, to reduce to nothing, to make what is as if it never was*. John speaks in either/or: either you confess Jesus Christ in the flesh or you don't, and the

spirit among you testifies to it. But the rest of chapter 4 makes clear which spirit he finds in and among them.

We, University Baptist Church, have a spirit among us. Usually newcomers have a better sense of it than people who've been on the inside for a while. You know how other people's houses have a certain smell, but your own house doesn't? Yeah, it does; you just can't smell it anymore. Sometimes this house smells, but it always has its own spirit. And John's test for that spirit, as we will see more clearly next week, isn't theological – *what we say we believe about God* – but rather, *how we behave toward one another and our neighbors*.

That behavior, regardless of what I preach or what we say about ourselves on our website or in our literature, *testifies* to our faith in the fullness – human AND divine – of Jesus Christ and, likewise, our possession – or dispossession – of the gospel, our power and purpose for being.

So, knowing you'd be nearly asleep by now, because I am boring myself so far, I thought we'd have a little Q and A. I'm Q. You're A.

Q: If Jesus wasn't human, **what can be taken off our To-Do List of Faith?**

A:

- serving our neighbors: the poor, the immigrant, the prisoner, (all that time-sucking work!);
- loving your enemies;
- turning the other cheek;
- not fearing death;
- resurrection;
- hope.

Q: If Jesus wasn't human, **what stays on the list?**

A:

- studying and talking about theology: scholarship, doctrine;
- art, lots and lots of art: cathedrals, stained glass, music, liturgy, sculpture, paintings, tapestries;
- tradition and religious infrastructure; an enormous tourist industry therein.

Q: **Finally**, if Jesus wasn't human, **what gets added to the list?**

A: Well, we'd need a new mechanism for salvation, because without full humanity, there could be no death; and with no death, no resurrection; no resurrection equals a reason to be afraid. Because without his walking, talking, living, breathing Self, we don't get to hear Jesus say "Don't be afraid" on every page of the scripture. We don't get to see his eating, drinking, sleeping, scratching, party-loving Self turn water into so much wine; and we don't get to watch his grown-man-size Self stand silent before a tyrant, and be

sentenced to death without passing out from fear. Because the words *don't be afraid* don't mean a thing, if we don't get to watch him walk through the terror of this world, in bodies, families, communities and Empires just like now.

Never human means *never dying*. Death proves his humanity, his flesh and bone humus-ness. If there was no death, there was no resurrection. “No death” plus “no resurrection” annuls the gospel, does it not? I John preaches the necessity, *the necessity*, of a gospel fully armed with both *Jesus* the human and *Christ* the risen, omniscient, divine, living Holy Spirit.

To disassemble the gospel is to disarm it. To remove the human Jesus from our faith and our life together in Christ is to sterilize the gospel of the very purpose and power for which the gospel exists. And the test, John says, isn't doctrine. It isn't theology. Oh, no. The test is kindness. Walking, talking, breathing, sweating, scratching, ever-graceful Kindness. Between us, and towards our neighbors. Where we will begin again next week.

Would you pray with me?