

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN 1 JOHN

by
Donald W. Mills*

INTRODUCTION

The pneumatology of 1 John has not received the same degree of scholarly attention as that of the fourth gospel.¹ This lack of attention is due in part to the view that the author of 1 John de-emphasizes the prominence and role of the Spirit. For example, it is argued that the doctrine of the Spirit “is not a key theme, and little is said about it.”² Consequently, every reference to the Spirit should be understood with a lower case, hence “spirit.”³

However, a careful consideration of key texts of the epistle demonstrates that the Holy Spirit does occupy a vital place. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit *is* a fundamental concern for 1 John.⁴ Any dealing with this epistle *must*, therefore, reckon with the person and work of the Spirit.

THE BACKGROUND: PNEUMATOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY

Scholars commonly believe that, between the writing of the gospel

*Dr. Mills is Associate Professor of New Testament at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Virginia Beach, VA.

¹A recent work by Gary Burge on the Holy Spirit in the Johannine writings (*The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987]) masterfully treats this subject. However, only a few pages (pp. 171–78) are devoted to the Spirit in 1 John.

²J. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1991), p. 45.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 45–49.

⁴R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 138–44; Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Johannine Commandments: 1 John and the Struggle for the Johannine Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990); Rudolf Schnackenburg, “Die Johanneische Gemeinde und Ihre Geisterfahrung,” in *Die Kirche Des Anfangs: Für Heinz Schürmann*, ed. R. Schnackenburg, J. Ernst, and J. Wanke (Freiburg: Herder, 1978), pp. 282–83; Burge, *Community*, pp. 171–73.

of John and 1 John, a group of heretics had misinterpreted various passages in John regarding the Spirit and had seceded from the orthodox group of believers.⁵ This secessionist group later merged into that large and varied movement known as second-century Gnosticism. A major reason for the departure of the heretics (2:19) stemmed from their conviction that they alone possessed the “anointing,” i.e., that they were the true recipients and guardians of Spirit-inspired truth (2:20). This can be seen not only in the way the apostle John refers to the activity of teaching in connection with the true “anointing” (as opposed to a false “anointing,” 2:27) but also in his solemn warning about false prophets (4:1) who perceived themselves as speaking under the Spirit’s guidance or in the name of God (as the expression “prophet” would imply).⁶ Thus the major crisis facing the churches in John’s community was pneumatological.⁷

John combats this faulty pneumatology in two broad areas. First, he shows the significant role of the Holy Spirit in Christ’s earthly life, for, in the viewpoint of the heretics, His life was not considered to be of salvific importance.⁸ In contrast to this view, the Holy Spirit Himself bears witness to the historical Jesus, including the latter’s baptism and sacrificial death (5:6). Second, John shows the important role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Apart from the Spirit, the true believer *cannot* (1) have the new birth and bear the fruit that evidences it (3:9–10), (2) have assurance of salvation (3:24; 4:13), (3) remain in the truth (2:20, 27), and (4) distinguish truth and error (4:1–6). These are the vital marks of authentic pneumatology in 1 John and are addressed below.

THE SPIRIT AND CHRIST: “THE SPIRIT BEARS WITNESS” (1 JOHN 5:6–8)

John combats the faulty pneumatology of the heretics by showing the importance of the Spirit as a witness to the earthly life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, for, as far as the heretics were concerned, Jesus’ life was not considered to be very significant for either salvation or daily experience.

Verses 6–8 occur in a unit (5:5–12) where John is calling forth

⁵Brown, *Community*, pp. 138–44; von Wahlde, *Johannine Commandments*, pp. 5, 105. For purposes of this article, the terms “heretic,” “antichrist,” “false prophet,” “apostate,” and “deceiver” all refer to this one group.

⁶Brown, *Community*, p. 138.

⁷See especially Burge, *Community*, p. 224.

⁸Brown, *Community*, pp. 116–20.

various witnesses to the truth that Jesus Christ is the Son of God whose earthly ministry culminated in His saving work on the cross. Among the more difficult verses is 1 John 5:6. The main viewpoints on the meaning of this verse are three. The first affirms that the "water and blood" refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper.⁹ The main problem for this view is that John is not defending these ordinances but the coming of the Son of God into history; otherwise he is defending the incarnation in a rather indirect way. The second view refers to the incident recorded in John 19:34–35, where blood and water poured from the side of our Lord after he was thrust with a spear.¹⁰ A primary argument for this viewpoint is that John is defending the crucifixion against those who would deny the blood of Christ as necessary for cleansing from sin (cf. 1:7).¹¹ Thus, John is affirming that the crucifixion is the crucial saving act of the Savior's earthly life, not baptism. The problem with this view is threefold: (1) two different referents for "water" are required in the one clause, i.e., to His baptism ("not by water only") and then to His death ("water and blood"), (2) the order is reversed from John 19:34, and (3) John is not saying "Christ came not in water, but in water and blood." He rather is saying "not *only* water, but water *and* blood."¹² According to the third view, "water" is a picture of Jesus' baptism, and "blood" speaks of His crucifixion. This view, then, understands John as defending two important and closely related truths: (1) the human Jesus cannot be ontologically separated from the divine Christ, for they are one person, the Son of God, and (2) the same person who was baptized was also crucified, Jesus Christ. Thus, "this one person, Jesus Christ, came *through* both the baptism and the death."¹³ He was officially identified as the "Son of God" at His baptism, having received the Spirit without measure (1:32; 3:34b) and was glorified at His death (John 7:39; 12:23–33). This viewpoint becomes all the more plausible if John is writing to refute Cerinthianism, an ancient heresy stating that the divine Christ came upon the human Jesus at His baptism and left Him before His death. Quite the contrary, the Spirit bears witness to the historicity of these events (John

⁹For a list of interpreters who support this position, see D. A. Carson, "The Three Witnesses and the Eschatology of 1 John," in *To Tell the Mystery: Essays on New Testament Eschatology in Honor of Robert H. Gundry*, ed. T. E. Schmidt and M. Silva, JSNTSup, no. 100 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), p. 220.

¹⁰This is supported by M. M. Thompson, *1–3 John*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 132–33; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1982), p. 578.

¹¹Thompson, *1–3 John*, p. 134.

¹²Carson, "Three Witnesses," p. 222.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 226.

1:32–34; 7:39; 15:26). When combined with the testimony of the Spirit (1 John 5:8), the other two expressions (“water” and “blood”) unequivocally affirm that Jesus is the Son of God and refute opponents who would deny this.

From this passage emerge some vital principles.¹⁴ First, according to 1 John the blood of Christ is the central doctrine to which the Spirit testifies, for Christ came not only by water, but by water *and blood*. Any view of pneumatology that de-emphasizes the propitiatory work of Christ on the cross is suspect. Second, the Holy Spirit is the custodian and guarantor of the truth. He does not do this by subjective feeling, intuition, or experience; but He bears witness to the person and work of Christ. According to 1 John, the Holy Spirit is not an innovator. In fact, doctrinal progressives lack eternal life (2 John 9). The Spirit keeps bringing believers back to what they have heard “from the beginning” (1 John 1:1). Third, no spirituality is valid if it undermines what God has clearly said about His Son (1 John 5:9–10). Any attempt to “modernize” or “update” the person, teachings, and work of the Lord Jesus Christ regardless of its sincerity, spiritual fervency, or vigor is pernicious. This was a matter of grave concern to the apostle as teachers and prophets were propagating a different Christ. Fourth, no scholarship is trustworthy that attempts to separate the “Jesus of history” from the “Christ of faith,” notwithstanding the many protracted efforts to do so during the last two centuries. The Spirit exposes such efforts as futile and worthless.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE LIFE OF THE BELIEVER

John refutes the faulty pneumatology of the heretics by showing his readers the vital role of the Spirit in the Christian life, especially in four areas: (1) the new birth (regeneration) and its fruit, (2) assurance of eternal life, (3) remaining in the truth, (4) discernment of truth and error.

The Spirit, the New Birth, and the Evidence of New Birth (1 John 3:9–10a)

According to these verses, the Holy Spirit is the agent of the new birth as well as the practical evidence of it. It is granted that the concept of the Spirit’s work of regeneration may not seem all that apparent in 1 John 3:9, especially since this verse is notoriously difficult to interpret.¹⁵

¹⁴The first three are adapted from G. Burge, *The Letters of John*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 208–10.

¹⁵It is beyond the scope of this paper to address this difficult topic. For one of the more helpful discussions of this verse, see Sakae Kubo, “1 John 3:9: Absolute or Habitual?” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 7 (January 1969): 47–56. The context of this

The issue of the place of the Spirit turns on the significance of the phrase “born of God” as well as the referent for “seed.” A glance at the structure of the verse should help:

1. Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ
Everyone who is born of God

2. ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ
sin does not commit

3. ὅτι σπέρμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ
because His seed abides in him

2.1 καὶ οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν
and he is not able to sin

1.1 ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται
because of God he is born

We suggest that the verse is a chiasm with lines 1 and 1.1 forming a mini-*inclusio* that frames the verse: it begins and ends with γεννᾶν with the prepositional phrase reversed (line 1, γεγεννημένος ἐκ...; line 1.1, ἐκ...γεγέννηται). It is apparent from the chiasm that “born of God” and “seed” are very closely related; however, the identification of the “seed” has for centuries been the subject of much discussion. One very common view is to see it as a reference to the Word of God (2:24; cf. Jas 1:18, 21, 23; 1 Pet 1:23–25).¹⁶ However, to support this view one has to look outside the Johannine corpus to such passages as James 1:18 and 1 Peter 1:23. Moreover, James 1:18 uses different vocabulary for begetting, and the “word” is λόγος. The 1 Peter passage uses a different word for “seed” (σπορά).¹⁷ Although the “word” (“message” or “truth”) plays a very important role in the life of the believer, as can be seen in a number of Johannine texts (1 John 1:10; 2:14, 24, 27; 2 John 1–2; John

verse indicates that John is drawing a sharp distinction between the children of God and the children of the devil. The latter group believe that righteousness is a matter of indifference for the spiritual life (3:7), but the former group demonstrate, by their righteousness, true kinship to the Father (3:1, 10).

¹⁶C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, Moffatt NT Commentary (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946), pp. 58–64; Martin Luther, “Lectures on the First Epistle of John,” in *Luther’s Works: The Catholic Epistles* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), p. 273; B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of John* (London: MacMillan, 1883), p. 108. For a summary of the views, see Brown, *Epistles*, pp. 408–11; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1984), pp. 172–74.

¹⁷J. Dunn (*Baptism in the Spirit* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970], p. 197) even argues that the σπορά in 1 Pet 1:23 is the Spirit.

8:31–32; 15:2–3, 7), attempts to argue that the “seed” is the Word from these passages fail because none of them is directly associated with the begetting of the Christian.¹⁸ Another view is held by Wesley, who regards the “seed” as “loving, conquering faith.”¹⁹ Others see a more general usage as referring to a new life-principle.²⁰

However, from the standpoint of Johannine theology, the “seed” must refer to the Holy Spirit, for two important reasons. First, John’s original readers would have been very familiar with the foundational “born of God” passages in the gospel of John (John 1:12; 3:3–6).²¹ No one reading the phrase “born of God” would have missed the association with the Holy Spirit (John 3:5). Indeed, from the Johannine standpoint, “the Spirit is the starting point of Christian experience (3:3, 5)....”²² Brown adds: “In Johannine thought they alone are children of God who believe in Jesus (i 12) and are begotten by the Spirit (iii 5).”²³ The idea of the Spirit’s role in giving life is also given clear expression by our Lord in this programmatic statement: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing” (John 6:63).²⁴ Second, the pericope in which this verse is located (1 John 2:28–3:12) is introduced by the phrase “born of Him” (1 John 2:29), which is the first time this idea occurs in the epistle but then appears several places thereafter (3:9 [2x]; 4:7; 5:1; 5:4; 5:18). In view of this, the regeneration of the children of God (3:9; 5:18) must be understood in light of their relationship to the Spirit. Consequently, *the Spirit* is the seed in view in 3:9. Burge writes:

...the immediate context suggests that σπέρμα...is simply a part of John’s now familiar divine birth terminology: γεννᾶν ἐκ θεοῦ (2 times in 3:9). Divine birth employing God’s σπέρμα echoes John 3:3ff., where such birth is also discussed in terms of the Spirit. Therefore σπέρμα in 1 John 3:9 is a symbol of the Spirit in a crude though legitimate application of the

¹⁸Brown, *Epistles*, p. 410.

¹⁹John Wesley, “Christian Perfection,” in *Wesley’s Standard Sermons*, ed. H. Sugden (London: Epworth, 1921), p. 309.

²⁰R. Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), p. 389.

²¹Of course, this is based upon the premise that the gospel of John was written first, a viewpoint that most scholars accept.

²²Burge, *Community*, p. 158.

²³Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 2:1016.

²⁴Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible* (1973).

regeneration metaphor.²⁵

Use of the word “seed” (σπέρμα) is not found anywhere else in John’s writings, but carries an important idea. The term portrays reproduction, for it bears the life principle and transfers the paternal characteristics.²⁶ In this context, the Father is the ultimate origin of the children of God (1 John 3:1–2), an origin initiated and effected by the Spirit, the effective agent in this process (John 6:63).²⁷ The point of the image is that the true children of God will be like their Father. Moreover, the seed “abides in” (μένειν ἐν) the believer, an expression that speaks of the believer’s union and fellowship with God, which, ultimately, signifies the possession of eternal life. Brown adds: “the imagery of begetting is the corollary of the Johannine emphasis on the Christian’s possessing God’s eternal life, an image carried to the point of speaking of God’s seed.”²⁸

The internal, regenerating work of the Spirit of God (3:9)²⁹ also effects two important and visible evidences of the new birth (3:10). These two evidences, righteousness and love, serve as criteria for distinguishing the children of God from the children of the devil. These two important virtues are developed in vv. 11–12 and the unit that follows, and are found in other places in the epistle (for righteousness, cf. 2:29; 5:18; for love, cf. 4:7, 12, 17–18; 5:1, 2). In referring to them, John refutes the notion that was held by the heretics that practical righteousness and love for fellow believers were not important elements of the spiritual life (cf. 1 John 3:7, 14).³⁰ Therefore, according to 1 John, no one whose life is

²⁵Burge, *Community*, p. 176. In my view the word “vivid” is a better term than “crude” to describe the metaphor. Other scholars who see the “seed” as the Holy Spirit include John Calvin, *The First Epistle of John*, in *The Gospel According to John and the First Epistle of John*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 272; A. E. Brooke, *The Johannine Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912), p. 89; Brown, *Epistles*, p. 411; R. Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: A Commentary*, trans. R. and I. Fuller (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 175.

²⁶C. Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), p. 247.

²⁷In this verse (1 John 3:9), the Spirit is described as both the agent of regeneration (John 3:3, 5) and the one who indwells the believer (John 14:16–17).

²⁸Brown, *Epistles*, p. 422. Perhaps lurking in the background is the heretical notion of “seed” among the opponents, in which each of the elect bears the “seeds of divinity” so to speak, a notion John refutes here (Schnackenburg, *Epistles*, p. 175, also n. 179).

²⁹Cf. Ezek 11:9; 36:26–27; Jer 24:7; 32:40.

³⁰M. Hengel (*The Johannine Question* [London: SCM Press, 1989], p. 65) notes: “This saying [3:7] probably refers to the opponents who in their enthusiasm—perhaps based on a false understanding of Paul—believed that they were already in possession of a ‘righteousness’ which no longer committed them to obedient action (cf. 1 Cor. 6.11).”

characterized by unrighteousness and hatred can validly claim to possess God's Spirit.

The Spirit and Assurance (3:24; 4:13)

The pneumatology of 1 John is presented in light of a larger epistolary purpose, which is to offer assurance to the readers that they are the true possessors of eternal life. These two verses (3:24; 4:13) describe the work of the Spirit in this matter of assurance.

An analysis of the structure of the Greek text reveals that 3:24 constitutes the macrostructure of the book, i.e., it concisely summarizes its main idea.³¹ Verse 24 points in two directions: (1) backwards to the context dealing with fear of judgment (3:19–20) and (2) forward to the passage on the two spirits (4:1–6) with “Spirit” as a catchword. In a related way, 4:13 is part of a lengthy ethical unit (4:7–21) and expands upon what was said in 4:7–10. Both these verses and their contexts (see below) bear remarkable correspondences. Notice particularly the similarity in wording in the original text:

3:24b καὶ ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκουμεν ὅτι μένει ἐν ἡμῖν, ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος οὗ ἡμῖν ἔδωκεν.

“And we know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit which He has given us.”

4:13 Ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκουμεν ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ μένομεν καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν ἡμῖν, ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος αὐτοῦ δέδωκεν ἡμῖν.

“By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.”

According to these verses, the Spirit's presence in the believer mediates (1) fellowship with God (3:24b; 4:13), (2) the truth of the incarnation of Christ, which leads to confession of Him (4:2–3; 4:9–10, 14–15), and (3) confidence regarding judgment day (3:19–21; 4:17–18).

We note, first, the Spirit's role in mediating fellowship with God, which is synonymous with eternal life.³² In fact, both of our texts refer

³¹R. Longacre, “Towards an Exegesis of 1 John Based on the Discourse Analysis of the Greek Text,” in *Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Discourse Analysis*, ed. D.A. Black (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 280.

³²G. Strecker (*The Johannine Letters*, ed. Harold Attridge, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], p. 158) writes: “the πνεῦμα... is the true basis for Christian knowledge.” He adds (p. 158): “This kind of ‘knowing’ (γινώσκειν) cannot be separated from ‘believing,’ ‘acknowledging,’ and ‘realizing,’ for it is the eschatological reality in which and from which Christians know themselves to be abidingly united with God....”

to this same basic idea with slightly different emphases. The former text emphasizes the Spirit's role in mediating *Christ's abiding* in the believer and uses the aorist tense for δίδωμι. The latter text focuses on the *mutual abiding of God and believer*, uses the perfect tense for δίδωμι, and employs a slightly different construction (ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος αὐτοῦ δέδωκεν).³³ According to both of them, the indwelling Holy Spirit is the possession of true believers and stands out as "the hallmark of fellowship with God."³⁴ The gift of the Spirit's presence causes believers to be aware of their union with God³⁵ and grants a twofold assurance, that: (1) they are the present possessors of the life of God, and (2) they can enjoy "a sense of confidence that they are identified as being in Christ."³⁶ The "sense of awareness" is not a subjective feeling, as if one can associate the presence of the Spirit with feelings that come and go. Rather, it has to do with the *knowledge and personal appropriation of God's word and truth* regarding the spiritual reality of this relationship. Moreover, the assurance of the Spirit does not operate in a vacuum apart from the other evidences of life touched upon above (righteousness and love). Rather, He works in and through them to bring assurance to the believer.

Because we have already discussed the second observation in an earlier section, we mention it only briefly here: in both contexts the Spirit witnesses to the reality of Christ's coming into the world. Closely associated with this is the Spirit's work in the believer that brings about confession of Christ (4:2–3; 4:9–10, 14–15; cf. 5:6–8; John 15:26–27; 19:35; cf. 1 Cor 12:3).³⁷ Indeed, a major corrective to the false pneumatology of the heretics was the apostle's insistence that the Spirit bore

³³There is little difference in meaning between the two verses. See R. A. Berg, "Pneumatology and the History of the Johannine Community: Insights from the Farewell Discourses and the First Epistle (John)" (Ph.D. dissertation; Drew University, 1988), pp. 242–43.

³⁴Schnackenburg, *Epistles*, p. 191. The language of these verses is reminiscent of such paraclete passages as John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7.

³⁵As in the gospel, so in 1 John, "the Holy Spirit mediates our communion with Jesus, with the Father, and with each other" (E. J. Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant: A Study of "Einai en" and "Menein en" in the First Letter of Saint John* [Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978], p. 304).

³⁶Burge, *Community*, p. 174. Malatesta (*Interiority*, pp. 281–82) sees the indwelling of the Spirit as echoing the New Covenant theme of communion with God as part of the larger picture (3:11–24) that includes faith in Christ and brotherly love according to Christ's example.

³⁷J. Heise writes: "The Spirit is active as the subject of the confessing" (*Bleiben. Meinen in der Johanneischen Schriften* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1967], p. 163).

witness to the reality of Christ's coming in the flesh,³⁸ which all true believers acknowledge (4:15).

Third, both passages indicate that the Spirit provides the believer with confidence in view of judgment day (3:19–21; 4:17–18). Malatesta writes: “just as in 3,24 the Spirit is the ultimate source of peace of heart (3,19–24) and the answering of our petitions (3,22), so in 4,13 the same Spirit is the source of our confidence on the day of judgment (4,17) and of the absence of fear (18).”³⁹ As the believer faces the prospect of judgment day, he bases his confidence neither upon outward profession nor upon moralistic or fleshly-generated acts of righteousness and love, but upon the ministry of the Spirit who effects these virtues.

To summarize, the proof of abiding is the presence of Christ effected by the Spirit (4:13). The Spirit helps the believer know that he belongs to God (cf. Rom. 8:16). He enables the believer to adhere to an orthodox confession of faith (4:14–15). Finally, the believer has confidence regarding the day of judgment, not because of his own efforts, but because of the work of the Spirit (4:17b).

The Spirit and Remaining in the Truth (1 John 2:20, 27)

John portrays the Spirit's ministry of safeguarding the believer against apostasy under the vivid imagery of “anointing.” This particular ministry of the Spirit occurs in a context introduced by a reference to the “last hour,” the final time immediately before Christ's return and the end of the world.⁴⁰ The “last hour” is connected with the arriving of “many antichrists.” They embody the mood or spirit of that future personality who comes on the scene in the Tribulation period. Elsewhere called the “beast” (Rev 13:1–10) and the “man of lawlessness” (2 Thess 2:3ff), he opposes God and counterfeits Christ. Originally belonging to the churches, these “little antichrists” have revealed their true colors by their apostasy from the church (1 John 2:18–19). Their activities can be summarized in three ways: (1) their departure, (2:19), (2) their denial (2:22–23), and (3) their deception (2:26).

Their “departure” showed they were “not of us.” To be “of” something (εἶναι ἐκ) is one of the writer's stock expressions found especially in dualistic contexts (2:16, 19, 21; 3:8, 10, 12; 4:1–6 [7 times]). Its use sometimes indicates the general concept of origin, whether literal or

³⁸von Wahlde, *Johannine Commandments*, pp. 143–44.

³⁹Malatesta, *Interiority*, p. 303.

⁴⁰Burdick, *Letters*, pp. 193, 211; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 95. The author of 1 John reflects the general mood among NT writers that he, like they, were already living in the last days (Acts 2:16–17; Heb 1:2; 9:26; 1 Pet 1:20; 2 Tim 3:1; 1 Cor 10:11c).

spiritual (John 4:22; 7:17, 22, 52). Most of the time it is found in contexts where antitheses are set forth. The expression “indicates a spiritual belonging to a person or to a group, a bond of communion”⁴¹ as in 2:19. However, the concept involves more than just a spiritual belonging; it also identifies one’s ultimate character. Therefore, to be “of God” (5:19) denotes likeness to Him and stands in sharp contrast to those who are “of the devil,” i.e., who share his characteristics (3:8, 12). Origin, character, and communion are all involved in the expression to be “of” someone or something.

Their denial that Jesus is the Christ is “a rejection of the Messiah, of the Son of God, and his entire work of salvation.”⁴² More specifically, the heretics deny that the human Jesus is the divine Christ.⁴³ Because they are devoid of the truth, they have neither the Father nor the Son—which is another way of saying that they do not possess eternal life (2:25).

Their “deception” is set forth in 2:26. In this age of iniquity and unbelief, the “antichrists” carry out the scheme of leading men astray from the truth of the gospel. As Satan’s operatives they perpetrate the lie, an activity of deception clearly bound up with the Christological heresy mentioned in 2:22–23.

With regard to the “anointing,” three basic views have been expressed as to its identity,⁴⁴ but the most common and best supported is that which relates the anointing to the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵ John’s readers

⁴¹Malatesta, *Interiority*, p. 200.

⁴²Ignace de La Potterie, “Sin is Iniquity,” in *The Christian Lives by the Spirit*, ed. I. de la Potterie and S. Lyonnet (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1971), p. 52. See also Matthew Vellanickal, *The Divine Sonship of Christians in the Johannine Writings* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977), p. 259.

⁴³Burdick, *Letters*, p. 200. Burdick suggests that they were influenced by Cerinthian Gnosticism (see above).

⁴⁴The three views are summarized as follows: (1) the Word of God (Dodd, *Epistles*, pp. 58–64) or the kerygma (G. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962], pp. 233–36); (2) the Holy Spirit (espoused by the great majority of interpreters including Brown, *Epistles*, pp. 347, 369; Schnackenburg, *Epistles*, p. 141; W. Nauck, *Die Tradition und der Charakter Des Ersten Johannesbriefes* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1957], pp. 94–95); (3) the Word of God interiorized in the heart of the believer by the Spirit (La Potterie, “Anointing of the Christian by Faith,” *The Christian Lives by the Spirit*, pp. 103–9; Malatesta, *Interiority*, p. 204; Vellanickal, *Sonship*, pp. 274–75). For a helpful summary of the issues pertaining to the “anointing” see Brown, *Epistles*, pp. 342–48.

⁴⁵Burge, *Community*, pp. 174–75; 219–20. We also reject links with baptism (in agreement with Dunn, *Baptism*, p. 198). Burge concurs: “As in John 3, the stress in these texts points to the believer’s identification in the Spirit, not in baptism” (Burge, *Community*, p. 175).

would have recognized this, for the gospel of John associates the Spirit's sending with Jesus (John 14:16, 26; 15:26) who is the "Holy One" (John 6:69),⁴⁶ and believers are recipients of the Spirit (John 14:16). Both the gospel of John and 1 John share the same perspective of the Spirit in His role as the one who abides in believers (John 14:17; 1 John 3:24), teaches them truth (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:6), and enables them to continue in Jesus' word and confess Him as the Christ (John 6:60–71; 1 John 3:24–4:2, 6). In light of this Johannine background, particularly in terms of the Spirit's indwelling,⁴⁷ the identity of the Spirit with anointing (2:20, 27) is inescapable.⁴⁸ It is best, therefore, to understand the "anointing" as primarily a reference to the Holy Spirit while acknowledging the close associations between Word and Spirit in Johannine thought.

In our passage, the abiding presence of the anointing (2:20, 27) assures John's readers of discernment in their struggle with the legion of antichrists (2:18).⁴⁹ In their apostasy from the true fellowship (2:19), their propagating of the "lie" (2:22), and their attempts to deceive (2:26), these "little antichrists" partake of the very spirit of that future Antichrist (2:19) and the devil who operates in the background (cf. 3:8). In sharp contrast, the anointing (2:20, 27), which is available to all believers (2:20), preserves them in the truth about Christ (2:20–21), i.e., what was heard from the beginning (v. 24). Standing in sharp contrast to the "counterfeit" work (ψευδος, 2:27) of the antichrists (2:18), this "true anointing" safeguards believers (2:27) against the liars and deceivers (2:22–23) who would lead them astray (2:26) from eternal life (2:25) by the many false assertions about Christ (2:22–23; cf. 4:1–6).⁵⁰

⁴⁶In John 6:69 Peter calls Jesus ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ ("the Holy One of God") in a context that deals with flesh and spirit.

⁴⁷Burge (*Community*, p. 175) writes: "One of the chief arguments against the interpretation that sees this anointing as only the word of God or the orthodox kerygma [contra Dodd, *Epistles*, pp. 58–64; Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, pp. 233–36] is that this anointing dwells within the believer (τὸ χρίσμα μένει ἐν ὑμῖν, 2:27)." Brown (*Epistles*, p. 346) summarizes: "Thus I John uses the same language of the *chrisma* that GJohn uses of the Paraclete/Spirit." Moreover, no NT passage associates anointing with the "word."

⁴⁸Outside the Johannine corpus we mention 2 Cor 1:21–22 where the act of anointing is closely related to the earnest of the Spirit. See also Isa 61:1 and 1 Sam 16:13 where Spirit and anointing are related.

⁴⁹The believer's anointing (2:20) is set off against those who apostatized (2:19) by an adversative καί ("but"). These "antichrists" were trying to promote their false doctrine among true believers (2:26). Note the similarity in thought between 2:19–20 and 2:26–27: 1 John 2:20 is contrasted with 2:19 and 2:27 with 2:26. Both 2:20 and 2:27 are introduced with the phrase καὶ ὑμεῖς ("and you").

⁵⁰Malatesta, *Interiority*, p. 225.

By way of summary and conclusion, the presence of the Spirit is perceived under the image of the "anointing." This anointing (1) vividly describes the Spirit's teaching function and (2) abides in all believers, protecting them from apostasy and spiritual seduction, two phenomena characteristic of the last days. For this reason the true believer "does not need anyone to teach" him. This does not mean that human teachers are unnecessary (after all, John was "teaching" them in this very passage!).⁵¹ However, the Spirit's ministry of anointing does two things. First, the anointing enables the believer to know God, for ultimately, the Spirit alone can mediate the knowledge of God (John 6:45; 14:16–18; 15:26; 16:13; cf. Isa 54:13; Jer 31:34; esp. 1 Cor. 2:11ff). Second, the anointing invalidates the authority of the false teachers,⁵² for they were claiming that without their special insight into Jesus Christ (2:23), true knowledge of God was not possible. Furthermore, any professed "anointing" of the "Spirit" that distorts the doctrine of Christ, no matter how many believe it and are propagating it, is no true anointing at all!⁵³ Authentic, Spirit-anointed Christians remain *in* the truth (2:27), but the heretics go *beyond* it (2 John 9).⁵⁴ Moreover, opposing systems of "truth" cannot both come from the Holy Spirit. One or both may be false, but both cannot simultaneously be true. Finally, attempts to pray for a special anointing of the Spirit, no matter how sincere, are wide of the mark from the standpoint of 1 John. Rather, the anointing of the Holy Spirit is an established fact for *every* believer.

The Spirit and Discernment (1 John 4:1–6)

In this unit John warns his readers not to believe every spirit as if he were the Spirit of God (3:24).⁵⁵ Believers dare not be indiscriminate and accept anyone who claims that his teaching is directed by the Holy Spirit. The passage can be divided into two equal parts (vv. 1–3; 4–6). In the first half the focus is upon the content of the teaching, the second upon the character of the audience.⁵⁶ The main point of this unit is the

⁵¹As Smalley (*1, 2, 3 John*, p. 125) observes, "this absolute declaration about the dispensability of earthly teachers appears in the course of a document which is heavily didactic...."

⁵²Burge, *Letters*, p. 132. See also 1 Tim 4:1 where the Holy Spirit is the one who warns about false doctrine.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Burdick, *Letters*, p. 206.

⁵⁵Brown, *Epistles*, p. 486.

⁵⁶J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: IVP, 1964), pp. 152, 156.

identification of the supernatural being behind the scenes who is exerting the influence on the human agents: is it the Spirit of God or the Evil One?

The Exhortation and Its Rationale

The author exhorts believers to “test (δοκιμάζειν) the spirits.”⁵⁷ Use of “spirit” in this unit (4:1–6) is quite comprehensive and will be unpacked as we move through the pericope. For the meaning of “spirit” in 4:1 and 2b, the answer comes from the second half of 4:1, “many (πολλοί) false prophets....” The issue John raises is this: “Who is operating behind the human prophet?” Accordingly, Smalley writes: “The term πνεῦμα...signifies a human person who is inspired by the spirit of truth or the spirit of error.”⁵⁸ The prophet, whether false or true, is the mouthpiece of some spirit.⁵⁹ Believers are to test whether the spokesman is from God. Is he true or false?⁶⁰ The urgency of the command is seen in the sheer number: “*Many* false prophets have gone out into the world.”⁶¹

The First Test to be Applied: Who is Jesus Christ?

The test is confessional in nature. The way one can identify the genuine influence of the Spirit of God (in 4:2a “Spirit” is clearly the Holy Spirit) is what that person (or “prophet”) says about Jesus Christ. One who confesses Christ’s incarnation is “of God”⁶² and reflects the

⁵⁷John’s call to test the spirits is no doubt reflecting the concern in the OT for testing the prophets (Deut 13:1–5; 18:15–22). The connection to the Deuteronomy 13 passage is of note, for we read later of John’s command to avoid idols (5:21), which in the context of 1 John refers to the idolatry of false teaching. The connection to the Deuteronomy 18 passage is also significant, for we read in 1 John 4:5–6 about the issue of who listens to whom. In Deuteronomy it has to do with what one says about God; in 1 John it has to do with what one says about Jesus Christ. For more on this, see Brown, *Epistles*, p. 488. A passage that closely resembles this one is 1 Thess 5:19–22. See possibly 1 Cor 12:10.

⁵⁸Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 218.

⁵⁹Burge, *Letters*, p. 173; Stott, *Epistles*, p. 153.

⁶⁰The relationship between the Spirit and prophecy is a widely known biblical concept, both in the OT (2 Chr 15:1; Ezek 2:2; Mic 3:8; Joel 2:28) and the NT (Luke 1:15, 67; Acts 2:17; 11:27–28; 21:10–11; 2 Pet 1:20–21). For negative examples, see 1 Kgs 22:22–24; Rev 13:11–18; 16:13.

⁶¹For an OT example see 1 Kgs 22:6–12; for a NT one see Acts 13:6. False prophets will run rampant during the Tribulation period (Matt 24:24), and the False Prophet will appear (Rev 13:11ff; 19:20). Here in 1 John the heretics claimed to be pneumatic, i.e., that their words were inspired by the Holy Spirit (Burge, *Letters*, p. 173).

⁶²See above under our discussion of the “anointing” for the significance of the

Spirit who belongs to God (2 John 7; cf. 1 Tim 3:16). Thus “spirit” in 4:2b refers to an orthodox prophet, someone under the direction of the Holy Spirit. The nature of the confession, “Jesus Christ come in the flesh,” is debated, but the point of the confession seems to be that the true Spirit-inspired prophet is one who affirms the historicity of the appearance of the second person of the Trinity, i.e., His incarnation. More precisely, the confession concerns His humanity together with its salvific importance. God actually came to earth, permanently taking upon Himself human nature (John 1:14; 6:51–55).⁶³

Conversely, the one who does not confess Jesus is not from God. That John intends a parallelism between 4:2b and 4:3a is understood by most interpreters.⁶⁴ The “spirit” in 4:3a refers to a heretical prophet, someone ultimately under the direction of Satan. In 4:3b the word “spirit” has to be supplied (καὶ τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ τοῦ ἀντιχρίστου). Here the understood “spirit” refers either to the *Zeitgeist* of the evil age or more likely to the Evil One himself, Satan, who is embodied by that future individual, the “Antichrist.” This “Antichrist” will come on the world scene in the Tribulation period under Satan’s dominance (cf. Rev 13:4). The appearance of the “many false prophets” in John’s day partakes of the same character as that satanically-inspired individual of the future who will lead many astray (cf. 2 Thess 2:9). Moreover, it is very likely that John identifies the heretics of 2:18–19 with these latter-day false prophets, for they deceive many (Matt 24:11) and, in so doing, manifest their true character (1 John 2:26).⁶⁵

To summarize to this point: we see an ultimate contrast between the Divine Spirit and the diabolic spirit (i.e., the Devil, or the Evil One), who “manifest themselves in human behavior, and specifically manifest themselves in true and false confessions of faith.”⁶⁶ These operate and exert their influence, respectively, behind the children of God and the

Johannine expression to be “of....”

⁶³The clause is deliberately ambiguous, meaning (1) that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, and (2) that He is in the flesh, i.e., possesses human nature. Thus we have in this clause both the act of incarnation and its continuing result (as seen in use of the perfect tense for ἐρχομαι, “to come”).

⁶⁴In the scribal tradition of the Majority Text, the phrase in 4:3a is actually supplied in order to round out the parallelism: “and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus *Christ has come in the flesh* is not of God” (NKJV). Compare that with the NASB: “and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.”

⁶⁵In 2:18–27 the heretics are described as engaged in the activity of teaching (cf. 2:27). Here they are described as false prophets. Both prophet and teacher in the NT are closely linked (Acts 13:1; 1 Cor 12:28; 2 Pet 2:1). That both passages refer to one group is suggested by 2 John 7.

⁶⁶Brown, *Epistles*, p. 486. See John 8:44; 16:7, 11; Eph 2:2–3.

children of the devil.⁶⁷

The Status of the True Believer Versus the False Prophet (4:4–5a)

In sharp contrast (seen in the emphatic “you” in the original text), true believers belong to God (ὁμῶς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστε; see above for John’s use of the expression “of...”) and have “overcome them.” By their firm adherence to the faith, they have gained the victory over the teaching of the false prophets, for the one who is in them is greater than the one who is in the world. Interpreters are divided over which member of the Trinity is in view in the clause “He who is in you.” The context, however, indicates that it refers to the Holy Spirit. The point of the unit is to contrast the workings of the Spirit of God with the spirit of the Antichrist. Also, the concept of “in you” more likely points to the Holy Spirit. “He who is in the world” refers to the “spirit of the Antichrist,” i.e., the Evil One. That “Satan” is in view is supported by the gospel of John, where he is referred to as the “Prince of this World” (16:11; cf. 12:31; 14:30). True believers can be victorious over false prophets because of the indwelling Spirit who is greater than the spirit operating in the false prophets.

The Second Test to be Applied: Who Listens to Whom? (4:5b–6)

The language of these two verses echoes the fourth gospel, for there the Lord tells His disciples that they do not belong to the world (John 15:19; cf. 17:14,16). The false prophets (=heretics) of the first epistle are compared with the unbelieving Jews of the gospel of John (John 8:23), and there is a polarization between believers and heretics. The heretics align themselves with the world and speak the language of the world as evidenced by their denial of Christ. This is something the world would approve. For this reason the message of the heretics gains ready acceptance, for “it originates in its own circle.”⁶⁸

As with 4:4, John draws an emphatic distinction between this group and the church (they are of the world, but *we* are of God). This test, then, demonstrates that not only is the content of the confession (or denial) important, revealing the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of the speaker; the *response* to that confession (or denial) is also a vital indicator, revealing the true character of the listener. Ideas that are closely parallel are found in the gospel. In our Lord’s debate with the Jews (John 8), He

⁶⁷The thought that two spirits exerted influence upon the entire human race is also reflected in Qumran (1QS 3–4) and *T.Jud.* 20:1–2. This does not imply that John was borrowing these ideas from these sources, but it undoubtedly suggests that this general idea had a measure of circulation in the first century and earlier.

⁶⁸Stott, *Epistles*, p. 157.

identifies the main thing that separates Him from them—they cannot understand what He is saying because they cannot “hear” Him (vv. 43–44).⁶⁹ This is expressed also in 8:47: “He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God” (see also 10:26–27; 18:37). The apostle then applies this dictum to the group of churches under his care. To paraphrase, he writes: “those who know God (John 17:3), that is, those who are truly indwelt by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13), listen to us.” Indispensable evidence that one truly knows God is acceptance of the apostolic message, which was so foundational to the faith (cf. 1 John 1:1–4). Conversely, those who do not know God (cf. 1 John 2:4; 3:1) do not listen to the message-bearers.

The larger, cosmic picture is now given in 4:6b. Moving beyond the human agents to the larger perspective, John pulls the curtain back so we can see the “spirits” exercising their respective influence. “Spirit of Truth” is another name for the Holy Spirit in Johannine thought (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; cf. 1 John 5:6—“the Spirit is the truth”). The “spirit of error” (πλάνη, deceit) refers to the Evil One, Satan. Although he is nowhere else designated as such in the NT, this is an appropriate and accurate description of his character and activity (see, for example, John 8:44; Acts 13:10; 2 Cor 11:3,14; Rev 12:9; 2 Thess 2:9–11, etc.).⁷⁰

To summarize, in this pericope (4:1–6) both the content of the message (4:2–3) and the response of the listeners to that message (4:5–6) serve as inextricably related tests to establish the authenticity or spuriousness of claims to possess the Spirit of God. Beyond the human realm operate two opposing spirits, the Spirit of Truth and the spirit of error, who exert their influence on the two respective groups—the children of God and those who are of the world.⁷¹

In a day marked by religious confusion, false doctrine, and the proliferation of cults that dot the spiritual landscape, John’s directives to “test the spirits” could not be more appropriate. As in the apostle’s day,

⁶⁹As H. Ridderbos (*The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], p. 314) writes: “They did not hear with faith in their hearts (cf. 5:24). And for that reason they could not understand his word in its true meaning. It was for them like a strange language because the world from which and the Father from whom Jesus spoke were not theirs.”

⁷⁰For a remarkably similar idea in intertestamental Judaism, see *T. Jud.* 20:1: “two spirits wait upon man—the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit (or error).” A few chapters later (25:3) we find that the spirit of deceit is associated with Beliar (Satan) who stands in opposition to God. John is not necessarily depending upon this source for the epistle, but the idea is not foreign to first century Jewish thought.

⁷¹The epistle of John clearly sets forth a cosmic dualism. However, the kind of dualism described is *not* an absolute dualism of eternally opposing forces (as in Zoroastrianism) but is always seen within a monotheistic context of God’s sovereign rule. 1 John 4:4 makes this clear, “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

so now, the failsafe method of distinguishing authentic workings of the Spirit of God from counterfeit manifestations is to evaluate them in the light of “that which was from the beginning” (1 John 1:1; 2:24). The Christological test that John applies to the heresy of his day is but one example of applying the test of orthodoxy to claims of extraordinary workings and manifestations of the Spirit. Nonetheless, we have confidence that the victory is ours in the battle for truth because the One who indwells us is the almighty, omnipotent Spirit of God.

One final thought for this section: outward success is not a reliable guide for determining whether something is “of God.” The false prophets of John’s day were, apparently, enjoying considerable influence with the world. They may well have outnumbered the true believers. Their message was popular and appealing to many. Our responsibility is to remain true to the apostolic faith despite the siren calls to adjust our message to suit the world.

CONCLUSION

The larger contexts (2:18–27; 2:28–3:24; 4:1–13) of each of the verses we have studied indicate that there is a relationship between the invisible workings of the Spirit and the visible fruit He produces. In 2:18–27 the anointing (2:20, 27) produces the fruit of perseverance, both in the message (vs. apostasy, 2:19) and in the orthodox confession (2:23). In 2:28–3:24 the seed (3:9) effects the invisible realities of new birth (2:29; 3:9) which in turn produce the visible fruits of righteousness and love (3:10). In 4:1–6 the inner presence of the Spirit (4:2a) produces the fruit of orthodox confession and the ability to discern truth from error (4:2b, 6b). In a similar way the indwelling of the Spirit is mentioned in a context of love (4:12) and confession of Christ (4:14–15). This pattern is discernible in other places in the epistle as well.⁷²

We have seen that the epistle of 1 John contributes much to our understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit and stands as a vital corrective to much of today’s pop spirituality.

⁷²See 1 John 4:13. This idea of the invisible and visible is adapted in part from Vellanickal (*Sonship*, pp. 231–32, 242) and Lieu (*Theology*, pp. 65–66).