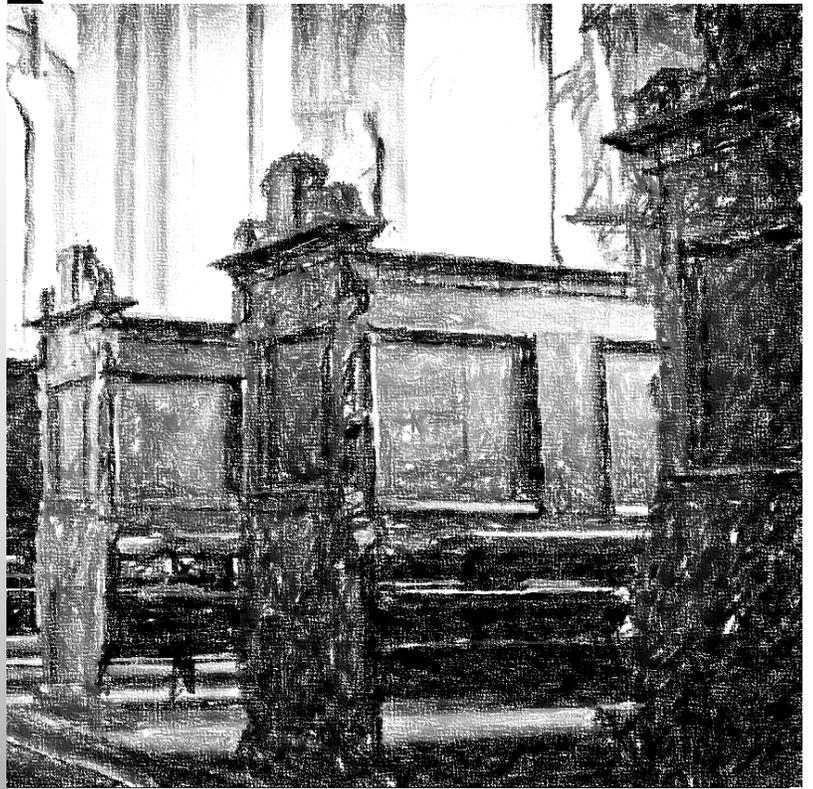




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The Epistle of First John

Responding to Threats Against The Church's One Foundation

1 John 4:1-6

There are two terrible attitudes in the church that are extremely detrimental to the overall health of Christians. First, in the name of love and pious mercy, Christians are many times too gullible. We all know the stereotype – a Christian at a family BBQ has no understanding of the world and is often obtuse in picking up on social cues and worldly puns, resulting in absolutely no ability to discern the threats in the world. Secondly, there is an anti-academic attitude in the Church that attacks individuals who may be critical of false theology. Instead of being frustrated about false theology in the church, certain individuals will express frustration toward the persons who point the false theology out. Those who point out false theology are classified as divisive – given the stereotype of being mean.

However, as we consider 1 John 4:1-6, we hear from John that Christians should not believe every spirit but test. In other words, shame on Christians who resort to being gullible rather than discerning. Shame on Christians who view those who are doctrinally discerning as being bad. Being theologically keen and desiring to test all doctrine

is not only good but Godly – holy. The fact of the matter is this, not everything that seems to represent God really does so. Just because an author claims to be Christian or a book has pretty flowers, and across, it does not mean that they are speaking Truth. There is one Spirit and many spirits. (*Spirit with a capital "S" refers to the Holy Spirit – who is Truth. Spirit with a small 's' can refer to the disposition or influence which fills and governs a person. Simply stated, there is only one Holy Spirit, but many other spirits that come from the world, the devil, and the old Adam.*)

But isn't this the responsibility of the pastor? Yes, it is. However, it is also the responsibility of every Christian in the church as well. Since there are many false prophets representing many false spirits, Christians must be alert and discerning every single day. In fact, there is no such thing as a 'neutral' message. Behind every preacher, teacher, message, commercial, article, etc. is either the spirit of Truth (capital 'S') or another spirit (small 's'). Furthermore, the small 's' spirits are not neatly contained in some

safe corner. No, John tells us that many false prophets have gone out into the world. And so everywhere we look, we see true spirits (*people properly acting, teaching, and functioning under the guidance of the Holy Spirit*) and false spirits (*people improperly acting, teaching, and functioning under the guidance of the spirit from the world, devil, and old Adam*). Thus, in this vale of tears, the Christian must always be alert and discerning.

But this brings up a very interesting question. How is the Christian to discern between the capital 'S' Spirit and the small 's' spirits? John points out that discernment can be found in one's 'confession' about Jesus.

An old professor once said that all theology is Christology. In other words, if we mess up the person and doctrine of Christ, it messes up the rest of our theology. So generally speaking, bad theology can all be traced back to bad Christology. And so the yardstick for measuring the genuine work of the Holy Spirit versus the heretical work of the small 's' spirits is in the confession of who Jesus is.

This is why Jesus asked His disciples the most important question, "Who do people say that I am?" This is why Jesus said that the church would be built upon that rock of confession that, "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Now it's starting to make sense why we, as a church, confess boldly and regularly the Apostles' and Nicene Creed. These Creeds are our confession of Jesus. They are a confession from the Spirit of Truth! Creeds are not dull lipservice. The Creeds are not dry rote. But instead, the Creeds are the church's bold confession of who Jesus is. The Creeds are that which provide us discernment against all the false spirits in the world. (*The word creed comes from the Latin word credo, which means, 'I believe.' Therefore, a creed is a succinct profession of what an individual or church believes.*)

Group Discussion:

- 1) How are the Creeds a succinct summary of the Bible?
- 2) How are the Nicene Creed and Apostles' Creed the same? How are they different?
- 3) How does knowing the teaching of the Creeds help the Christian not be gullible – discern against false spirits?
- 4) How does the rest of the Small Catechism (*i.e., six chief parts*) help discern against false spirits?

