

1 John 4

“¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

In the first century, demonic activity was certainly at a fever pitch. In the Gospel we read of many encounters between Christ and evil spirits. They were fully aware that the Son of God had taken on humanity, and was on an earthly mission to rescue His creatures.

They were also aware that, as part of that rescue mission, He would conquer them, rob them of much of their power over humans, and would ultimately imprison them all in hell.

“And suddenly they cried out, saying, “What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?” (Matthew 8:29)

A common tactic of Satan and his demons is to deceive people to their destruction. In the Garden of Eden, Satan deceived Adam and Eve:

“And he [Satan] said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden’?”

And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’

Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 2:1-5).

When 1 John was being written, demonic activity was still common. It says,

“¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

There were many false prophets who were animated by evil spirits spreading their lethal lies. Do you think that those false prophets under the influence of lying demons are still active today?

How do we know the difference between true prophets and false prophets?

“² By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God.”

In its original context, John was likely referring to the first cult to arise in Christianity – the Gnostics. We have seen them before in John’s writings. They were a movement that

mixed Christianity with some Greek philosophical beliefs. Christianity believed in one omnipotent God who created the physical Universe and called it good. Gnostics believed in a good god that created the spiritual universe, and another evil god named Demiurge who created the physical universe. That physical universe was evil. Because the human body was part of that physical universe, the Gnostics considered the human body to be evil. Therefore, they rejected that “*Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.*” John is saying that the Gnostics were “*not of God,*” were part of a demonic delusion, and Christians should have nothing to do with them.

The Gnostics were the first pseudo-Christian cult that denied the essential Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, but they were by no means the last. “*And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.*”

There have been many pseudo-Christian cults that deny that God has become human, all the way up to today. For example, the Jehovah’s Witness website says, “*The Bible says that Jesus “was put to death in the flesh but made alive [resurrected] in the spirit. ”Jesus’ own words showed that he would not be resurrected with his flesh-and-blood body.*”

<https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/questions/jesus-body/>

Denial of the Incarnation used to be a feature of small groups clearly outside the mainstream of Christianity. Sadly, denying the Incarnation of God in Christ has become rampant in once-Christian churches. In the 1970’s, Thomas J. Altizer was a professor of Bible and Religion at Emory Seminary here in Atlanta. He was the founder of the “God is Dead” movement, which made the front page of Time magazine:



“*There is an inevitable incompatibility between the primordial Christian God and an incarnate or kenotic Christ; so long as the Christian God continues to be known as transcendent, he cannot appear in his uniquely Christian form as the Incarnate Word and kenotic Christ.*” <http://strongreading.blogspot.com/2010/06/altizer-gospel-of-christian-atheism.html>

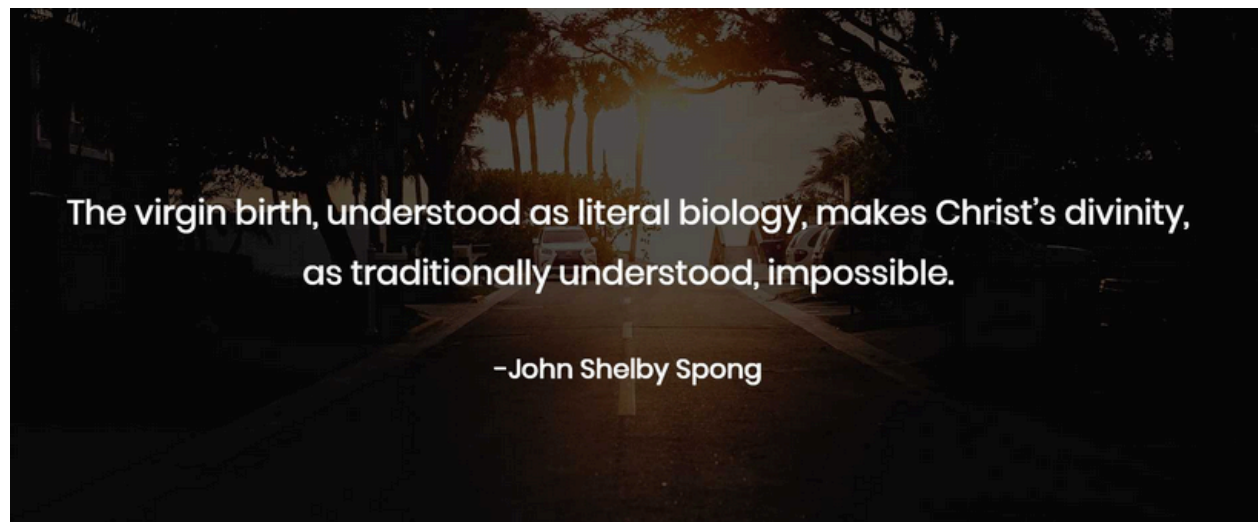
Altizer remained a seminary professor of theology for the rest of his life.

John Spong was a prominent bishop in the Episcopal Church in good standing his entire life. He wrote his own “Twelve Theses” of his version of Christianity. Of the Incarnation, he wrote:

2. Jesus – the Christ.

“If God can no longer be thought of in theistic terms, then conceiving of Jesus as “the incarnation of the theistic deity” has also become a bankrupt concept.”

<https://progressivechristianity.org/resources/charting-the-new-reformation-part-iii-the-twelve-theses/>



The Apostle John is warning us that denial of the Incarnation of Christ is a demonic deception. This true no matter who proclaims it, ancient or modern.

“⁴ You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

Little children are weak, lack knowledge, and are largely helpless. Yet Jesus calls all of us, including adults, to be like them.

“Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:13).

Simple, weak children are normally easy prey for the strong and the cunning. Yet the text says that they are victorious over the demons and their false prophets. The devil and his demons are frighteningly powerful, far more than any human abilities.

“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).

Yet the text says little children, and adult Christians with similar childlike faith, *“have overcome them.”* The Greek word used here, *νενικήκατε (nenikēkate)*, is in the perfect tense, which means the overcoming is a completed action. Why are we, who are simple and weak, already victorious over the evil forces in the Universe? The text says, *“...because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”* Put another way, it’s not our feeble strength, but the strength of Who is in us.

We receive this mighty presence of God, which defeats the demons at our baptisms. That service begins with a series of exorcisms and renunciations of the devil:

“Come forth, and depart from the sealed and newly-enlisted soldier of Christ our God; for I adjure you by Him that rides upon the wings of the winds, Who makes His Angels spirits and His Ministers a flame of fire. Come forth, and from this creature which He fashioned depart with all your power and might...”

“Come out! Depart from him/her who is now being made ready for Holy Illumination; I adjure you by the saving Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, by His Precious Blood and All-Pure Body, and by His terrible Coming Again for He shall come and not tarry, to judge all the earth, and shall punish you and your cooperating might in the Gehenna of fire, consigning you to the outer darkness where the worm dies not and the fire is not quenched...”

“⁵ They are of the world. Therefore, they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. ⁶ We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

This text describes an “us/we” vs “he/they,” separation between the two God’s kingdom and the world. That separation between the two kingdoms is made explicitly intentional in the baptismal service. Right after the rebukes of the devil and the demons, the candidate and/or the sponsors make the following vows:

“Priest: ‘Do you renounce Satan, and all his works, and all his worship, and all his angels, and all his pomp?’

Catechumen and sponsor: ‘I do renounce him. (x3)’”

The catechumen and the sponsors then *“blow and spit on him.”* You cannot make Satan and the demons more of an emphatic “they” than that!

Now the candidate and sponsors vow to become part of the “we”:

“Priest: ‘Do you join Christ?’

Catechumen and sponsor: ‘I do join Him. (x3)’”

The opposite spitting at the devil, the candidate and the sponsors say: ***“I believe in Him as King and as God”*** and express that belief by reciting the Creed. The separation of the “us” and “they” is made forever.

Now the text returns to the recurring theme that God is love and that we love God by loving others:

“⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

Now the text applies an Old Testament concept of the invisibility of God.

“¹² No one has seen God at any time.”

The Jews were ridiculed by the pagan nations around them because they were the only nation that had no idols. God was spirit and invisible. The entire Universe could not contain him, much less depictions of him in wood and stone. The Jews knew that He could not be perceived in His infinite essence, but He could be perceived in His revealed energies.

To Moses He said,

“Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen” (Exodus 33:21-23).

To Elijah He said,

“Go out, and stand on the mountain before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice” (1 Kings 19:11-12).

In his Gospel, John teaches that the invisibility of God came to an end with the appearance of Christ:

“No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (John 1:18).

In his Gospel, John is saying, if you want to see God, look at Jesus Christ. That's what God looks like. Now, in his first Epistle, John takes the concept of "seeing God" in the Incarnate Christ even further. We see God not only in the Person of Christ, we see God in the love that flows from Him to us. And not only to us, but through us to each other:

"If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him."

Now John is saying, if you want to see God, look at how it He lives in His followers. When we truly love one another, that is its own form of Incarnation.