

The Small but Faithful Church of Christ

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 235-238, emphasis added and English updated.

1 John 4:4-6

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. 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. (NKJ)

4. *Ye are of God.* He had spoken of one antichrist; he now mentions many. But the many were the false prophets who had come forth before the head appeared. But the Apostle's object was to animate the faithful, that they might courageously and boldly resist impostors, for alacrity is weakened when the issue of the contest is doubtful. Besides, it might have caused the good to fear when they saw that hardly the kingdom of Christ had been set up when enemies stood ready to suppress it. Though then they must contend, yet he says that they had conquered, because they would have a successful issue, as though he had said that they were already, though in the middle of the contest, beyond any danger, because they would surely be conquerors.

But this truth ought to be farther extended, for whatever contests we may have with the world and the flesh, a certain victory is to follow. Hard and fierce conflicts indeed await us, and some continually succeed others; but as by Christ's power we fight and are furnished with God's weapons, we even by fighting and striving become conquerors. As to the main subject of this passage, it is a great consolation, that with whatever wiles Satan may assail us, we shall stand through the power of God.

God is our strength!

But we must observe the reason which is immediately added, ***because greater, or stronger, is He who is in you than he who is in the world.*** For such is our infirmity, that we succumb before we engage with an enemy, for we are so immersed in ignorance that we are open to all kinds of fallacies, and Satan is wonderfully artful in deceiving. Were we to hold out for one day, yet a doubt may creep into our minds as to what would be the case tomorrow; we should thus be in a state of perpetual anxiety. Therefore the Apostle reminds us that ***we become strong, not by our own power, but by that of God.*** He hence concludes that we can no more be conquered than God Himself, who has armed us with His own power to the end of the world. But in this whole spiritual warfare this thought ought to dwell in our hearts, that it would be all over with us immediately were we to fight in our own strength; but that as God repels our enemies while we are reposing, victory is certain.

5. *They are of the world.* It is no small consolation that they who dare to assail God in us, have only the world to aid and help them. And by the world the Apostle means that portion of which Satan is the prince. Another consolation is also added, when he says that the world embraces through the false prophets that which it acknowledges as its own. ***We see what great propensity to vanity and falsehood there is in men. Hence false doctrines easily penetrate and spread far and wide.*** The Apostle intimates that there is no reason why we should on this account be disturbed, for it is nothing new or unusual that the world, which is wholly fallacious, should readily hearken to what is false.

6. *We are of God.* Though this really applies to all the godly, yet it refers properly to the faithful ministers of the Gospel; for the Apostle, through the confidence imparted by the Spirit, glories

here that he and his fellow-ministers served God in sincerity, and derived from Him whatever they taught. It happens that false prophets boast of the same thing, for it is their custom to deceive under the mask of God; but faithful ministers differ much from them, who declare nothing of themselves but what they really manifest in their conduct.

The true church is very small.

We ought, however, always to bear in mind the subject which he here handles; ***small was the number of the godly, and unbelief prevailed almost everywhere; few really adhered to the Gospel, the greater part were running headlong into errors.*** Hence was the occasion of stumbling. **John**, in order to obviate this, ***bids us to be content with the fewness of the faithful,*** because all God's children honored him and submitted to his doctrine. For he immediately sets in opposition to this a contrary clause, that they who are *not of God* do not hear the pure doctrine of the Gospel. By these words he intimates that the vast multitude to whom the Gospel is not acceptable, do not hear the faithful and true servants of God, because they are alienated from God Himself. It is then no diminution to the authority of the Gospel that many reject it.

But to this doctrine is added a useful admonition, that ***by the obedience of faith we are to prove ourselves to be of God.*** Nothing is easier than to boast that we are of God; and hence nothing is more common among men, as the case is at this day with the Papists, who proudly vaunt that they are the worshippers of God, and yet they no less proudly reject the word of God. For though they pretend to believe God's word, yet when they are brought to the test, they close their ears and will not hear, and yet ***to revere God's word is the only true evidence that we fear him.*** Nor can the excuse, made by many, have any place here, that they shun the doctrine of the Gospel when proclaimed to them, because they are not fit to form a judgment; for it cannot be but that every one who really fears and obeys God, knows Him in His word.

Were any one to object and say, that many of the elect do not immediately attain faith, nay, that at first they stubbornly resist; to this I answer, that at that time they are not to be regarded, as I think, as God's children; for it is a sign of a reprobate man when the truth is perversely rejected by him. And by the way, it must be observed, that the *hearing* mentioned by the Apostle, is to be understood of the inward and real hearing of the heart, which is done by faith.

Hereby know we. The antecedent to *hereby*, or, by this, is included in the two preceding clauses, as though he had said, "Hence the truth is distinguished from falsehood, because some speak from God, others from the world." But by the *spirit of truth and the spirit of error*, some think that hearers are meant, as though he had said, that those who give themselves up to be deceived by impostors, were born to error, and had in them the seed of falsehood; but that they who obey the word of God show themselves by this *very* fact to be the children of the truth. This view I do not approve of. For as the Apostle takes spirits here metonymically for teachers or prophets, he means, I think, no other thing than that the trial of doctrine must be referred to these two things, whether it be from God or from the world.

However, by thus speaking he seems to say nothing; for all are ready to declare, that they do not speak except from God. So the Papists at this day boast with magisterial gravity, that all their inventions are the oracles of the Spirit. Nor does Mohammed assert that he has drawn his dotages except from heaven. The Egyptians also, in former times, pretended that all their mad absurdities, by which they infatuated themselves and others, had been revealed from above. But, to all this I reply, that we have the word of the Lord, which ought especially to be consulted. **When, therefore, false spirits pretend the name of God, we must inquire from the Scriptures whether things are so. Provided a devout attention be exercised, accompanied with humility and meekness, the spirit of discernment will be given us, who, as a faithful interpreter, will open to us the meaning of what is said in Scripture.**