

1

I remember playing a card game years ago called “I Doubt It.” After each player received some cards, the first player would place a card on the table face down, so the other players could not see the identity of the card, and announce its identity. Then the other players had to lay down the same type of card, say a 5, face down on the pile. If you didn’t have the card you could pass, or you could lay down a different card and bluff your way through. As long as no one challenged you, you could lay down any card. The object of the game was to get rid of all your cards first, so you didn’t want to have to pass too often, meaning that sometimes you had to bluff. If someone challenged you by saying, “I doubt it,” you would have to turn over the card. If you were bluffing, you had to take all the cards in the stack. If you were telling the truth, the player who challenged you had to take the cards.

I recall not liking the game very much, for I didn’t like bluffing my way through the game, and I was never quite sure when to challenge someone

else about the card they played. As an adult, I’m still not very good at calling a bluff, for when I hear a story from someone, I want to believe it, but I’ve also learned that approach does not always work. Sometimes I must test what I hear, gathering information from other sources to test the truth of statements.

Have you ever run into that situation, where you’re not quite sure what or who to believe?

Maybe you’ve received a phone call: “Hello, grandma, this is your grandson, and I’m in jail. Could you send me bail money? Please don’t call dad and tell him, for I will get into trouble. Just send the money to this account.”

If you decided to test the truthfulness of the phone call by contacting family members, you’ll likely discover the request is a scam.

Recently I received two phone calls notifying me that I will be taken into custody by the local police since there are four serious allegations against me. The message included a phone number, to which I imagine if I called they would request my credit card

2

number to pay the fees for defending me. I didn't need to test the truthfulness of the calls, for I had read earlier that week about this latest phone scam.

We may think we're the first ones to deal with testing the truth when making a decision, but it appears from 1 John that the early church also faced the same problem. The author wrote, "My dear friends, don't believe everything you hear. Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God."¹

It appears that some people had been teaching that Jesus was not human, that he was just a spirit. Some taught that Jesus' body was an illusion—since God lacked a body, these people stated that Jesus didn't have one either. The author of 1 John suggested they test the spirits of those who teach this idea, see if they are genuine and trustworthy, examine the essential nature of their lives. Do their lives appear to reflect the teachings of Jesus? Do they show love? Or are they scam artists?

The author suggested the way to discern their truth by warning: "Many false prophets have already

gone out into the world, ² and you can know which ones come from God. His Spirit says that Jesus Christ had a truly human body. ³ But when someone doesn't say this about Jesus, you know that person has a spirit that doesn't come from God and is the enemy of Christ."²

How do you test the truth of someone? In the case of those in the early church, the author suggested you ask them questions about Jesus. Did Jesus have a body? Those who answered "no" wanted a spiritual-only Jesus, but not the Jesus who suffered and died on a cross. They don't have the full story about Jesus. They heard about a disembodied Jesus and did not understand the incarnation, that God was took human form in the humanity of Jesus. They wanted to be spiritual only.

It's like some today who profess to be spiritual but not religious, which is about one quarter of the American population according to a recent survey.³ They explain that they have no need for the institutional church, that worshiping with others is not important, for they can pray to God alone. They

3

may have had a negative experience in a church, for when conflicts occur in a church, some feel as though they got burned and choose to walk away. They still have a spiritual connection to God, but their faith is not embodied in a community of faith; it's detached from gathering with others in the body of Christ. Yes, I agree that one can be spiritual alone and in relationship with God by oneself, but the spiritual-but-not-religious person is cut off from the body of Christ. One's faith is only partial when it's alone; it's not complete.

Earlier in the letter of 1 John, the author emphasized the importance of community, of being with others:

¹¹ From the beginning you were told that we must love each other...¹⁸ Children, you show love for others by truly helping them, and not merely by talking about it. ¹⁹ When we love others, we know that we belong to the truth, and we feel at ease in the presence of God. ²⁰ But even if we don't feel at ease, God is greater than our feelings, and he knows everything.⁴

It's through a community of faith that we care for one another, we demonstrate our love for others through our outreach into the community, and we feel the presence of God among us. Even on a day when you may not feel uplifted and spiritual, gathering in this community of faith can offer hope as we worship together.

I know it would sometimes seem easier to just stay home, to offer a prayer or two and get on with our day, but there's something missing when one is not part of a community of faith, for by ourselves the energy is just not the same, as a member of a certain church learned who had stopped attending worship at his church.

After a few weeks, the pastor decided to visit him. It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire.

Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a big chair near the fireplace and waited. The pastor made himself comfortable but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the play of the flames around the burning logs.

After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet fascination.

As the one lone ember's flame diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and "dead as a doornail."

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting.

Just before the pastor was ready to leave, he picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

As the pastor reached the door to leave, his host said, "Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I shall be back in church next Sunday."⁵

Each of us will face those times in life when our fires burn low, when we wonder if it's worth

gathering for worship with our community of faith. We may face doubts as we hear voices that tell us to focus our lives elsewhere, but it's through this community of faith that we find reassurance in the midst of doubt; we find the hope that keeps our fires burning; we find the courage to continue loving God and one another even on the difficult days, for as the writer of 1 John reminds us: "When we love others, we know that we belong to the truth, and we feel at ease in the presence of God."²⁰ But even if we don't feel at ease, God is greater than our feelings."

Some in the early church asked, "Was Jesus only spiritual?" I doubt it, for we need Jesus' humanity *and* spirit to be whole, just as today we need our spiritual individuality and religious community to be whole today, for in this church we experience God's love.

¹ 1 John 4:1, *The Message Bible*.

² 1 John 4:2-3, CEV.

³ www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/

⁴ 1 John 2:11, 18-20, CEV.

⁵ Anonymous.