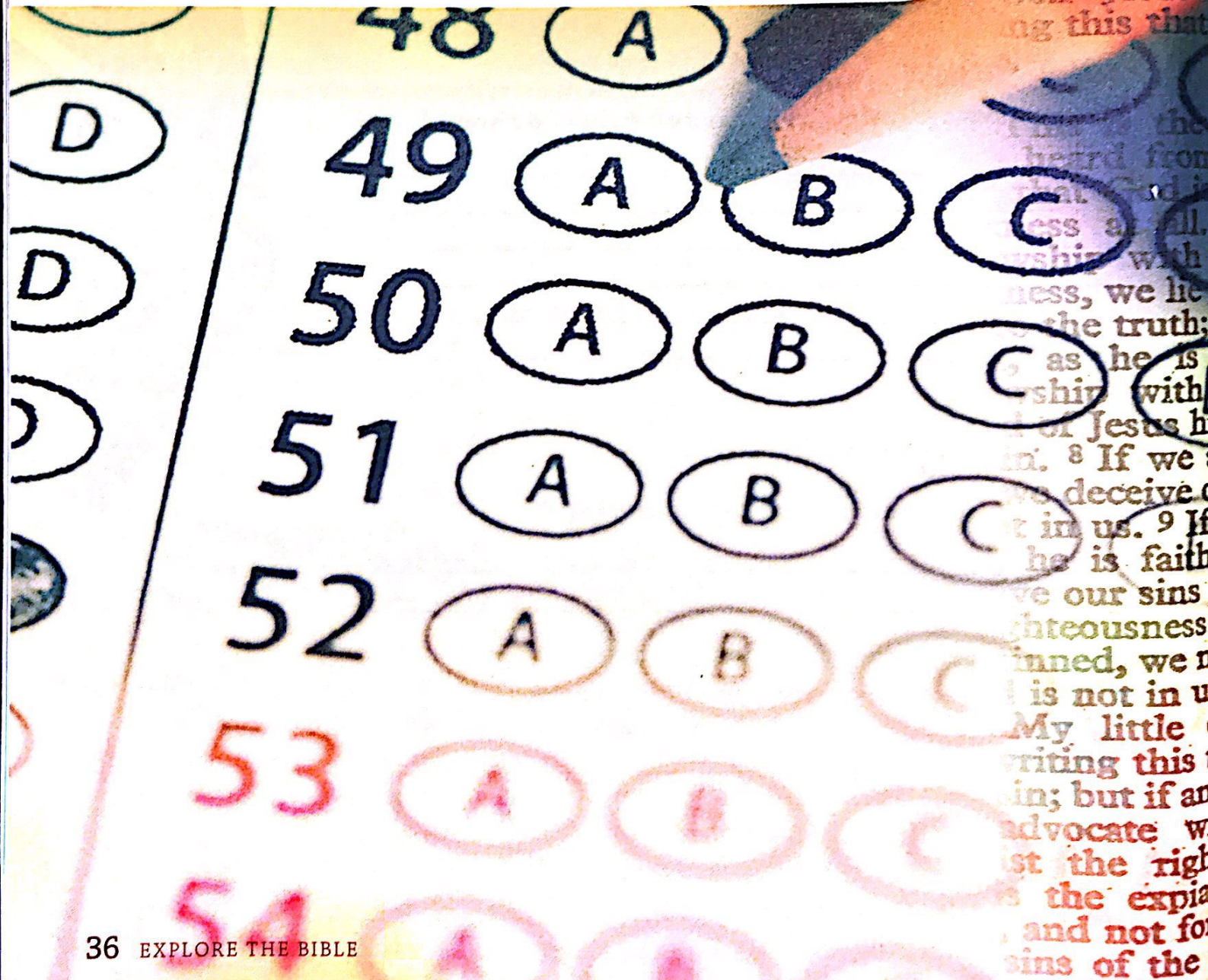


# IS THIS OF GOD?

Christ followers must be ready to test and affirm what's truly from God by examining the doctrine and practice of those who claim to know the truth.



## ➤ UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

USE THE FOLLOWING PAGES TO PREPARE FOR YOUR GROUP TIME.

Evaluations are a routine part of our lives. Teachers judge students' progress, coaches appraise players' performances, and employers evaluate employees to determine whether they deserve promotions and pay increases. If people's assessments aren't based on measurable, objective standards, they'll be highly subjective and potentially wrong. Similarly, people must also evaluate matters of truth. The Letter of 1 John provides standards for helping believers practice correct discernment in the realm of spiritual truth.

John was concerned about the spiritual welfare of his readers. Exposed to numerous false teachings, they had difficulty determining truth from falsehood. Rather than leaving them to subjective speculation about matters of spiritual importance, John set forth objective standards by which Christians could determine whether teachers and teachings were from God. John warned his readers not to be deceived by those who profess to be believers but who actually teach and practice deviations from biblical truth. John recorded instruction on the importance of living in spiritual truth not only in 1 John but also in 2 and 3 John.

False prophets threatened the growth of the church and the fruitful living of many first-century believers. Antichrists had gone out into the world attempting to distort spiritual truth. John insisted that authentic spiritual teachings would align with the biblical truth that Jesus is God's one and only Son (see John 3:16). Any teaching that doesn't confess Jesus as Lord can't possibly be from God, since God never contradicts Himself. Therefore, false teachings come from none other than the spirit of the antichrist, who opposes God.

John reassured his readers that they could live confidently, knowing they were abiding in Christ and Christ's Spirit was abiding in them. Moreover, Christ's Spirit is greater than the spirit of the antichrist. People who received John's teachings were to be considered fellow believers, while people who rejected them should be considered enemies of the gospel.

"THERE ARE TWO WAYS  
TO BE FOOLED. ONE IS  
TO BELIEVE WHAT ISN'T  
TRUE; THE OTHER IS TO  
REFUSE TO BELIEVE WHAT  
IS TRUE."

—Søren Kierkegaard

## ➤ 1 JOHN 3:7-10; 4:1-6

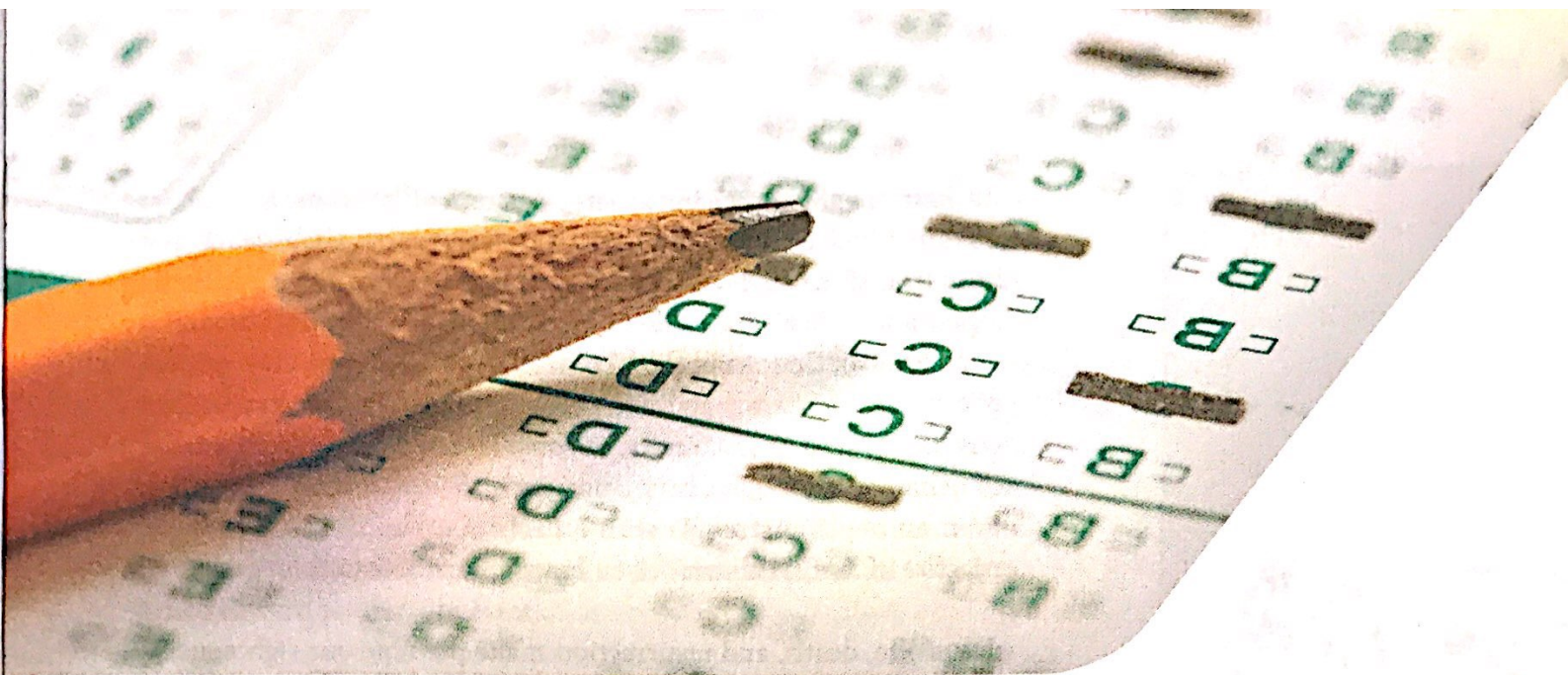
### Think About It

*Circle the criteria a person should use to "test the spirits" (4:1) in determining whether they're from God.*

*According to 1 John 4:1, why is it important for a person to know whether a spirit or teaching is from God?*

**3:7** Little children, let no one deceive you! The one who does what is right is righteous, just as He is righteous. **8** The one who commits sin is of the Devil, for the Devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the Devil's works. **9** Everyone who has been born of God does not sin, because His seed remains in him; he is not able to sin, because he has been born of God. **10** This is how God's children—and the Devil's children—are made evident. Whoever does not do what is right is not of God, especially the one who does not love his brother.

**4:1** Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to determine if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. **2** This is how you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. **3** But every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist; you have heard that he is coming, and he is already in the world now. **4** You are from God, little children, and you have conquered them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. **5** They are from the world. Therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. **6** We are from God. Anyone who knows God listens to us; anyone who is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception.




## ➤ EXPLORE THE TEXT

### CONSIDER THE EVIDENCE (*1 John 3:7-10*)

<sup>7</sup> Little children, let no one deceive you! The one who does what is right is righteous, just as He is righteous. <sup>8</sup> The one who commits sin is of the Devil, for the Devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the Devil's works. <sup>9</sup> Everyone who has been born of God does not sin, because His seed remains in him; he is not able to sin, because he has been born of God. <sup>10</sup> This is how God's children—and the Devil's children—are made evident. Whoever does not do what is right is not of God, especially the one who does not love his brother.

John drew a stark contrast between two groups of people: children of God and children of the Devil. He intended this distinction to be shocking and sobering. Here John was speaking primarily in regard to false teachers, warning against being deceived by them. The warnings in these verses apply both to the content of false teaching—that a person can indulge sinful behavior without spiritual consequence—and to the character of false teachers (see Rom. 1:18-21, 28-32). Children will look like their fathers—either God in righteousness or the Devil in sin. Any person who encourages beliefs and behaviors contrary to the holy character of Christ is of the Devil and has the spirit of the antichrist.



As John taught earlier in the letter, genuine Christians still sin (see 1 John 1:9; 2:1), but their repentance proves that their hearts have been transformed by the love of God. Righteousness—including repentance—is visible evidence of the invisible reality of our identity as children of God. A life characterized by unrepentant sin is evidence of a rebellious heart that doesn't belong to our Heavenly Father but to our Enemy. The characteristic to consider in each case is the pattern of behavior; although Christians may have isolated instances of sin, even an ongoing struggle with a particular sin, they won't make a practice of sinful behavior or embrace an unrepentant lifestyle.

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection make possible our righteousness and our relationship with God. He conquered the Devil on the cross (see John 12:31-33). Christians should be careful to protect themselves from anyone promoting teachings other than the content of the gospel and the character of Christ.

***What sinful behaviors do people—even people who claim to be Christians—accept or even encourage?***

## ***BE DISCERNING (1 John 4:1)***

**<sup>1</sup> Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to determine if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.**

John deeply cared about his readers, so he was concerned with their spiritual well-being. He issued a warning emphasizing that within every teaching is the presence of a spirit, but not every spirit is of God. John desired for his readers to exercise wisdom as Christian disciples rather than accepting everything they were taught as true. Before placing their faith and confidence in a particular teaching, they should be sure about the origin of the teaching.

***List some popular, modern-day teachings that Christ followers need to examine closely before accepting them as truth.***

In the first century itinerant teachers commonly traveled from place to place seeking to speak a message in various churches. Instead of receiving anyone and everyone as a true messenger of God, John exhorted Christ followers to put these messengers to the test (see 2 John 10) by comparing their teachings to those of John and his contemporaries. The apostle Paul likewise urged the Corinthian believers not to ascribe to God every teaching but to evaluate what was said to determine whether it was from God (see 1 Cor. 12:1-3; 14:29). John was dealing with a similar problem in Asia Minor when he wrote 1 John, and his language in 4:1 indicates that all believers are to discern truth from error.

#### KEY DOCTRINE

##### *Education*

The freedom of a Christian teacher is limited by the preeminence of Jesus Christ and by the authoritative nature of the Scriptures.

## **TEST THE MESSAGE (1 John 4:2-3)**

**<sup>2</sup> This is how you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.**

John set forth the chief question for testing various teachings: What do the teachings reveal about the person and work of Jesus Christ? In the first century a false teaching arose that attacked both the divinity and humanity of Jesus. Some false teachers believed Jesus wasn't really the Son of God, while other heretics didn't believe Jesus, as God's Son, could embody a human form. Both of these teachings were in error because each attempted to distort the reality of who Jesus Christ truly was.

Authentic Christianity teaches that Jesus came to earth fully God yet fully man, a truth revealed by the Spirit of God (see 2 John 7,9-11). Teachers were to be judged by their confession about Jesus and the content of their message. John stressed the importance of someone's confession in relation to Christ. The word *confesses* in verse 2 points to a person's outward confession of his or her true beliefs. An authentic Christian teacher must acknowledge that Jesus Christ is both human and Deity without compromising either belief.

***In what ways are modern-day distortions about Jesus similar to the false teachings addressed by John?***

### BIBLE SKILL

Create a contrast chart to study a passage.

On one side of a vertical line, list all the words and phrases from 1 John 4:1-6 that describe teachers and teaching from God. On the other side of the line, note words and phrases that describe teachers and teachings that aren't from God. Use the chart to develop ways you can discern truth from deception in teachings and teachers today.

**<sup>3</sup> But every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist; you have heard that he is coming, and he is already in the world now.**

John clearly indicated how to discern whether someone is following the teachings of the antichrist: "every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God." The spirit of the antichrist is focused on denying Jesus as God's Son, the Savior of the world. The false teachers of John's day couldn't confess Jesus as Lord because they were led by a spirit opposed to Christ. John had previously warned his readers that the spirit of the antichrist was lurking in their midst, attempting to deceive them and rob them of their faith in God. Some religions today teach that Jesus was a good man or a prophet but not God's Son. John's instructions to first-century believers still apply to Christ followers today: reject any teaching that doesn't honor Jesus as Lord.

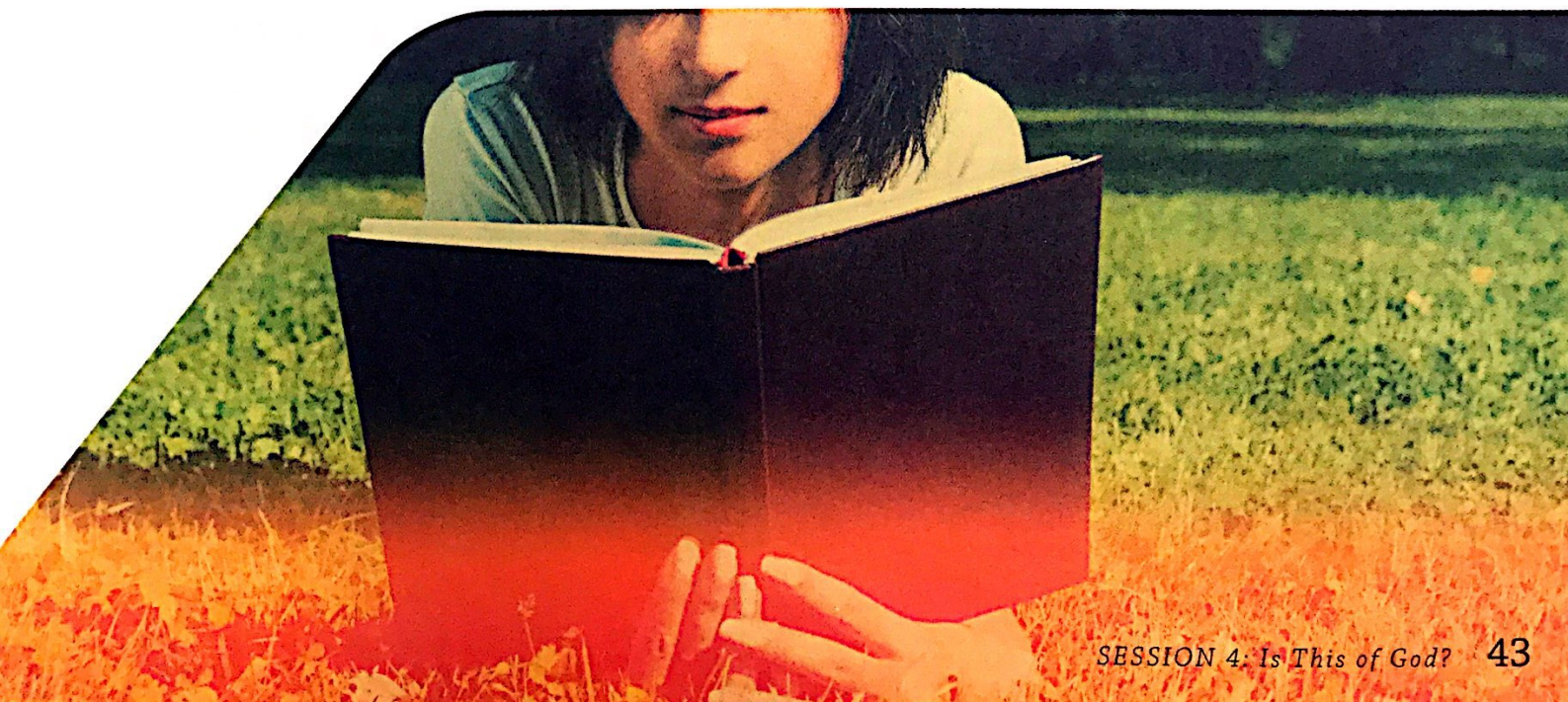
### **OBSERVE THE AUDIENCE (1 John 4:4-6)**

**<sup>4</sup> You are from God, little children, and you have conquered them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. <sup>5</sup> They are from the world. Therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. <sup>6</sup> We are from God. Anyone who knows God listens to us; anyone who is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception.**

Again, John addressed his readers as little children, showing His affection for them. He went on to underscore that they had already experienced victory over the forces of evil because of their connection to Jesus. John reminded them of the true source and secret of their victory over evil: the indwelling Spirit of God. The phrase "the One who is in you" is a direct reference to the Holy Spirit given to every believer at the moment of salvation (see John 14:16-17). Christ has overcome the world and its opposition to the gospel. His victory has become our victory because He abides in us (see 16:33).

John emphasized that false teachers speak from a worldly perspective, and their message confirms their source: the Devil. Because false teachers promote worldly values, the world listens to them. The audience of a teacher reveals a great deal about his message; an audience dominated by worldly individuals indicates questionable teaching. People who are spiritually dead aren't naturally attracted to Christian teachings, because they can neither understand nor accept them (see 1 Cor. 2:14).

In contrast to false teachers, John affirmed that the teachings promoted by genuine Christ followers will be attractive to those who seriously seek to follow God's commands. Just as false doctrines are embraced by those who are hostile to God, valid Christian teachings will be joyfully received by those who delight in the Lord. The simple reality that people cling to either false doctrines or true Christian teachings is a key indicator of spiritual maturity. By examining a teacher's audience, we can better determine whether that teacher is a genuine believer or a spiritual impostor, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can discern truth from error. This is why it's important to observe the audience that accepts a teacher's message.





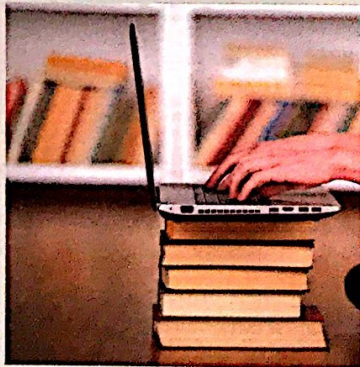
## ➤ OBEY THE TEXT

Believers must be discerning about the teachers and teachings they follow. Teachers of the truth affirm Jesus' deity and humanity. Teachers of the truth attract believers in Christ, while false teachers attract people who don't reflect a godly, biblical lifestyle. Christ followers have a responsibility to know, practice, and teach God's truths.

*Consider your responsibility regarding teachings that are presented as spiritual truth. List specific actions you will take to test others' teachings.*

*Define the beliefs about Jesus that are essential to the Christian faith. With whom can you share these essential beliefs in the next few days?*

*List some ways you can identify and stand up to false teachings today. Determine actions your Bible-study group will take to encourage one another to remain faithful to the teachings of the gospel.*



### MEMORIZE

"Every spirit who does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist; you have heard that he is coming, and he is already in the world now." 1 John 4:3

Use the space provided to make observations and record prayer requests during the group experience for this session.

## MY THOUGHTS

Record insights and questions from the group experience.

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## MY RESPONSE

Note specific ways you will put into practice the truth explored this week.

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## MY PRAYERS

List specific prayer needs and answers to remember this week.

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