

“Abide” (1 John 2:18–27)

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If you're a Christian, one of the most exciting bits of news that you will ever hear is when someone you know becomes a Christian. If a relative, a friend, a neighbor, or a coworker puts his or her faith in Jesus, you get excited. On the other hand, one of the most distressing things that Christians will experience is seeing someone we thought was a Christian walk away from the church and Jesus. And that's usually how it works. Usually, a person leaves the church, and then that person stops following Jesus altogether. I don't mean that this person leaves one church and becomes a member of another one. That happens, and there are good reasons for moving to a new church. I mean someone quits being a part of any church, and then that walks away from Jesus. He or she may not say they have abandoned Christ, but their life doesn't resemble a Christian one in any discernible way.

We find that not only disturbing and sorrowful, but also confusing. We see people we thought were Christians change, and we wonder why that could ever happen. We wonder if that person “lost their salvation,” or if they had been faking it the whole time. We wonder who might be next, or if that could even happen to us.

Why do some people turn away from Jesus, particularly after they had seemed to follow him? How can we make sure that we don't turn away from Jesus? These are questions that our passage this morning answers. So, let's start by reading 1 John 2:18–27:

¹⁸ Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.
¹⁹ They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. ²⁰ But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. ²¹ I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. ²² Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. ²³ No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. ²⁴ Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵ And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.

²⁶ I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. ²⁷ But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that

anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him.¹

There are three main things in this passage that I want us to see. And they all begin with the letter A: antichrists, anointing, and abiding.

First, let's talk about antichrists. John begins this passage by referring to *the* antichrist. In verse 18, he writes, "Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour." Many people get very worked up about the identity of the antichrist or, as the apostle Paul describes him in 2 Thessalonians, "the man of lawlessness" (2 Thess. 2:3). John is the only one who uses the word "antichrist," which means someone who either is opposed to Jesus or who tries to take the place of Jesus. The Bible indicates that there will be a final person—or perhaps it could be an institution, a movement, or a government—that is opposed to Jesus and will cause trouble for God's people. But notice here that John doesn't encourage his readers to speculate about end-time scenarios. He doesn't encourage us to identify a final antichrist, or to match newspaper headlines with Scripture. His point is that it is already the last hour, and antichrists are already here.

A number of passages in the New Testament indicate that it is already the last hour. We are already living in the end times. This was true in the first century, after Jesus rose from the grave, ascended into heaven, and poured out the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:20; 2 Pet. 3:3; Jude 18) and it's true today. Theologians often talk about this in terms of "already, not yet." The kingdom of God is already here but not yet fully established. We can enter into God's kingdom and live as his servants, but clearly not everyone lives as if Jesus is their King. Satan is already defeated, but not yet fully. And yet, he's at work in the world and will do more before it's all said and done. And, in a similar way, the antichrist is already here, but not yet. The spirit of antichrist is already present, but the final and ultimate manifestation of the antichrist isn't here yet. In 1 John 4:3, John writes, "This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already."

And what does this spirit of antichrist look like? According to that same verse I just quoted, every spirit that doesn't confess Jesus is the spirit of antichrist. John specifically says that every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come *in the flesh* is from God (1 John 4:2). It

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

seems that some people thought that Jesus didn't actually become a man, but that he only seemed to have a real human body. This false teaching would later be known as Docetism.

That's one way to be against Jesus, to deny what the Bible says about him. If we deny that he is both truly God and truly man, we are against Jesus. That's why we can say the Jehovah's Witnesses are antichrists. They don't believe that Jesus is God, as equally divine as the Father. Ironically, Jehovah's Witnesses think that we're antichrists because we believe in the Trinity and that Jesus is God. Their website says that one of the way to identify antichrists is: "They promote false ideas related to Jesus. (Matthew 24:9, 11) For example, those who teach the Trinity or that Jesus is Almighty God actually oppose the teachings of Jesus, who said: 'The Father is greater than I am.'—John 14:28."² But Jesus said other things. Even in John's Gospel, he claims to be "I am," which is a reference back to several passages in the book of Isaiah that are used of God (Isa. 41:4; 43:10, 13, 25; 46:4). And what's interesting is that in those passages in Isaiah, God declares that there is no other God (Isa. 44:8; 45:5, 21; 46:9). The Bible states that there is only one God, and yet the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—we call them three Persons—are all God. To deny what the Bible says about Jesus' identity is to be an antichrist.

Of course, another way to be against Christ is to deny what Jesus did in dying on the cross and to deny what Jesus taught about various subjects. And we see these heresies promoted today, too. Islam denies that Jesus is God's Son and that he died on the cross. And many people deny what Jesus says about sin and salvation. Polycarp, an early Christian theologian, said, "For everyone 'who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is antichrist' [1 John 4:2–3]; and whoever does not acknowledge the testimony of the cross 'is of the devil' [1 John 3:8]; and whoever twists the sayings of the Lord to suit his own sinful desires and claims that there is neither resurrection nor judgment—well, that person is the first-born of Satan."³ Polycarp didn't mince words there.

In this passage, John tells us how we can recognize antichrists. In verse 19, he writes, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." These people, who apparently were teaching false things about Jesus, left the churches that John

² <https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/questions/antichrist>.

³ "The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians," 7, in Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 213–215.

is writing to. Why did they leave? “There were not of us.” That seems to be John’s way of saying that they never were Christians to begin with. They only appeared to be Christians.

We know that these people were not truly Christians because they didn’t receive the anointing that John talks about in verse 20 and also in verse 27. This anointing must be the Holy Spirit. In other words, these antichrists never received the Holy Spirit. They weren’t born again. It’s not as though they had the Holy Spirit and then he left them. It’s not as though they were born again and then somehow became spiritually dead. It’s not as though they had real faith and then lost it. In short, it’s not that they “lost their salvation.” They never had it to begin with.

I can say that confidently for two reasons. One, the Bible talks about false professions of faith. Think of Jesus’ parable of the sower. A man sows seed, which is the word of God, on four different types of soil. One is the path. The seed doesn’t take root at all. The second soil is rocky ground, and the seeds seem to grow. However, those plants wither because “they had no root.” The third soil has thorns, which choke out the growth of the plants. And the fourth soil is good soil, which produces grain that grows. When Jesus explains the rocky soil, he says that it represents “the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.” In other words, it’s someone who appears to have had a real conversion experience, but that person’s faith isn’t enduring. Jesus says that the soil with thorns “is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.” I don’t think either of these soils represent real Christians. (See Matt. 13:1–9, 18–23 for the parable and Jesus’ explanation of it.) Jesus’ point is that not all will receive the word of God. Some appear to receive it but they don’t last. Only the one who bears fruit is really alive.

The second reason I can confidently say that these antichrists were never really Christians is because the Bible says that conversion is an act of God from start to finish, and God’s power guards and keeps those who are truly born again. For example, we can look at 1 Peter 1:3–5:

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Notice that Peter says that the God “has caused us to be born again.” We don’t cause ourselves to be born again. Also, the inheritance we are promised is “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for” us. It is God’s power that guards our salvation. As someone has said, “If we could lose our salvation, we would.” But God guards and keeps it for us. We have to work as Christians, but God is the one who empowers that work (see Phil. 2:12–13).

Another passage is Romans 8:29–30, which shows that God is the one in control of the whole process of salvation:

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

God foreknew people. In other words, he had set his covenant love on them before they even existed. And he predestined them to be conformed to the image of Jesus, to be saved. He called them by sending the gospel message to them through evangelists, preachers, and ordinary Christians like you and me. When they came to faith, they were justified, made right in his eyes. And these people will be glorified, which is another way of saying perfected. They will be resurrected to eternal life in a body that cannot die. Paul views this as such a done deal that he uses the past tense when he says God “also glorified” these people, as if it was already a reality.

The point is that those who are really Christians don’t fall away from Jesus. But the Bible does teach that there are people who can appear to be Christians who fall away. And their falling away shows that they were not “of us.” They were not transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I’ll come back to the implications of that, but for now I want to talk about the anointing that John is referring to. That’s the second thing we see in this passage. In verse 20, John writes, “But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge.” The Holy One is Jesus (cf. John 6:69), and the anointing he gives is of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus gives to his people. Those who receive the Spirit also have real knowledge of Jesus. They know the truth, which is what John says in verse 21: “I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth.” The false teachers probably were teaching that they had some secret, elite, more profound knowledge of Jesus. But John says, “No, don’t believe that. What you were taught when you heard the gospel message is true. That’s the real message about Jesus.”

Think about it this way: In order to come to faith in Jesus, we need to hear the gospel message. We need to know some basic, true things about Jesus. We need to know who he is and what he has done for us. That doesn't mean we must know the whole Bible, or have the most precise theology. But it means we need to know that Jesus is divine, that he alone lived the perfect life and that his death on the cross is the only way our sins can be paid for. In other words, we need to know that Jesus is God and our only hope of being reconciled to God. We should grow in our knowledge of God and his word, but those basic truths remain unchanged. If we hear anything contrary to that message, we must reject it. John's concern was that the false teachers who had departed the churches he was writing to would try to deceive his readers. And he encourages them to cling to the truth.

The reason John is so adamant about rejecting a different message can be found in verses 22 and 23: "Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also." Whoever rejects what the Bible teaches about Jesus doesn't have a right relationship with God. I like what David Jackson writes about this: "If an individual does not believe that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Christ, God's own Son, sent from the Father, then he is (literally) against Christ. This means that he cannot be in a right relationship to God the Father, for he is denying the whole basis on which such a fellowship could exist."⁴

In fact, without the anointing of the Holy Spirit, we all would deny Christ. The only way we can see the kingdom of God and enter into it is if the Holy Spirit causes us to be born again. We wouldn't trust Jesus and know him truly if it were not for the Holy Spirit. In writing to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul said, "I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3).

Not only will the Holy Spirit empower someone to confess faith in Jesus, but the Holy Spirit also empowers people to continue to trust Jesus and live for him. In other words, the Holy Spirit causes us to abide in Christ. And that's the third thing we see in this passage. In verses 24

⁴ David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters: Living in the Love of God*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 69–70.

and 25, John writes, “Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.” Those who are true Christians will stay connected to Jesus. They will rest in him, trusting that he has done all the work necessary for them to be reconciled to the Father. They will follow him, knowing that his is the only path to eternal life. They will obey him because he is King. John encourages them to continue trusting the gospel message that they heard when they first came to faith. The way of a Christian isn’t always easy in this life, but it’s the only way to eternal life. That is the great promise for those who follow Jesus.

In verse 26, John again warns his readers not to be deceived. And in verse 27, he says that they don’t need what the false teachers are peddling, because they have the Spirit’s anointing. Let’s read those verses again: “I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him.”

John’s desire for his readers—and for all Christians—not to be deceived is understandable. If there’s a truth about who Jesus is and what he’s done, and if knowing the true Jesus is the only way to God and the only way to have eternal life, then it’s important that we know the truth and remain committed to it. Verse 27, however, can be misunderstood. John says that his reader “have no need that anyone should teach you.” John can’t mean that they don’t require any teaching at all. If that’s what he meant, then why would he write them a letter which teaches them? It wouldn’t make sense for John to say, “I’m teaching you that you don’t need a teacher” if he means that they don’t need any teaching at all. John probably means that Christians don’t need anyone to teach something different than the gospel they have already heard. As David Jackson puts it, “Every Christian knows the truth because without it he could not be a Christian. But the fact that anyone knows it at all is attributable solely to the gift of God’s grace, in the person and work of the Holy Spirit.”⁵ The false teachers were offering a secret knowledge of Jesus, one different from what the apostles preached. John was saying, in effect, “You don’t need anything else. You already know the real Jesus. The Holy Spirit produced in you real faith in the real Jesus. Don’t be deceived.”

⁵ Ibid., 72.

The truth is that we do need teachers in the church. The apostle Paul says that Jesus gave the church pastors and teachers, which probably means pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11). Pastor-teachers feed Christians the nourishing food that is the word of God. Pastor-teachers protect the flock from false teaching. Pastor-teachers equip the saints for ministry, so that they can be effective in their service and witness. John isn't contradicting Paul. We need to read this passage in context. And we should understand that John is writing to churches. All the "yous" of verse 27 are in the plural. We tend to read the Bible in very individualistic ways, but John wasn't writing to isolated individuals. The Holy Spirit dwells in Christians individually, but also collectively. He is in their midst, in the churches. He has given the spiritual gift of leadership and teaching to some in the church. The church needs them. And the church has the Spirit's word, the Bible. They don't need to hear a different message.

In a way, this is the equivalent of Paul's words to the Galatians, when he writes, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). There is no other news about Jesus that Christians need to embrace.

John's words about not needing another teacher relate to the promise of the new covenant. The new covenant promise is made in the prophets. In Jeremiah, we are told that members of the new covenant would have God's law written on their hearts, that they would know God, and that their sins would be forgiven (Jer. 31:31–34). In Ezekiel, we read that God would cleanse them and give them the Holy Spirit (Ezek. 36:25–27). So, God's law is written on his people's hearts by means of the Holy Spirit. And Jeremiah 31:34 says, "And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD." Every member of the new covenant knows the Lord. They don't need someone to teach them that.

Perhaps this is John's way of saying that there won't be a newer covenant. The new covenant is the only one we need. The covenant is God's terms of dealing with his people. His people are those who trust Jesus, who have been forgiven for all their wrongdoing, and who are led by the Holy Spirit. If anyone comes along claiming they have another covenant, they should be rejected. The word "testament" refers to a covenant. The Mormons claim to have "another testament of Jesus Christ." I believe John would call them antichrists. If anyone says that Jesus

has changed, or that there's new information about Jesus that no one has previously known, that person should be rejected.

So, what does this mean for us? What does this passage teach us and how should we live in light of it?

First, this passage explains, at least in part, why some people who seem to be Christians walk away from the faith. They do so because they were never really Christians to begin with. They did not have the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Still, this is confusing for us. Why would people who appeared to be Christians, who appeared to be sincere and passionate, later turn their backs on Jesus? Personally, I have seen men who have gone to seminary and were part of church plants later renounce what they claimed to believe. Why would they ever go to seminary in the first place?

The answer is that people are attracted to Christianity for different reasons. Some people, and this is true of children, aren't settled in what they believe. That's why some people who grew up in Christian homes, made a profession of faith when they were young, and were baptized don't persevere in the faith. Children are impressionable. They will change when they are adolescents and young adults. That's why there used to be a tradition of baptizing people only after were adults. A number of Baptist pastors in the nineteenth century wouldn't baptize their own children until they were at least 18. This includes Charles Spurgeon.⁶

Still others are attracted to Christianity because they confuse the gospel with something related to Christianity. I have seen people who seemed to be Christians come to Christianity because they like what it says about social justice and peace. They like what it says about loving other people. But those same people are quick to change their views on Jesus and his teachings when the prevailing culture changes. They hang on to Christian views on social justice—at least some forms of social justice—but reject orthodox Christian theology. That's because they never really were passionate about the gospel. They confused a byproduct of the gospel with the gospel itself.

Other people have turned away from Christianity because they assumed that patriotism, politics, and the American dream are inherent to Christianity. When they saw Christians

⁶ See Mark E. Dever, "Baptism in the Context of the Local Church," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible and Theology (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 344–350.

supporting political issues that they objected to, or that they thought were contrary to Christian principles, they were turned off. They thought, “If that’s Christianity, I want no part of it.” This is a real problem, one that Christians in America have contributed to. Whenever we confuse the gospel with other issues, or when we marry Christianity with a political party or a blind and uncritical love of country, we are being poor ambassadors for Christ. We aren’t representing our King well when we do that and, whether we realize it or not, we are communicating a distorted gospel.

That is why it is so important to be clear about the gospel. The good news of Christianity isn’t “join this political party,” or, “if we only get the right person in the White House/Congress/Supreme Court, then we’ll be saved.” The good news of Christianity isn’t “be a nice person” or “just get along with others.” The good news of Christianity is that although we were made to worship and love and serve God, and yet have rebelled against God by ignoring him and rejecting him, God sent his one and only Son into the world to save us. The Son of God became a man, born as Jesus of Nazareth, and he lived the perfect life we don’t live. He always did what was right. He always loved God supremely and loved other people perfectly. Yet he died for our sins. He died to pay the penalty for our rebellion. And whoever puts his or her trust in Jesus, who loves him and follows him, who swears their allegiance to Jesus, not a country or a political party, is reconciled to God. That person is made right in God’s eyes not because of anything they have done, but because of everything Jesus has done. This is a gift given by God, not something we earn. That is the heart of Christianity. Don’t ever confuse the gospel with anything else.

Here is a second issue for us all: Are we truly for or against Jesus? In other words, are we Christians or antichrists? Jesus once said, “Whoever is not with me is against me” (Matt. 12:30; Luke 11:23). We are either for Jesus or against him. There is no neutral ground. Is Jesus our King or not? Is he our Lord, our Master, as well our Savior and Friend? We are either living for him or we are against him. We either have a real relationship with him, which includes true knowledge of his identity and his works, or we don’t.

That leads me to a third issue: We should examine ourselves. Augustine, in a sermon on this passage, said, “each person ought to question his own conscience, whether he be an antichrist.”⁷ You may think that is an odd thing to do, to question whether you are indeed for or

⁷ Augustine of Hippo, “Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John,” 3.4, in *St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. H. Browne and Joseph H. Myers,

against Jesus. But the apostle Paul says the same thing. In 2 Corinthians 13:5, he says, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” I believe the Bible teaches eternal security: “once saved, always saved.” But the question is whether someone has actually been saved in the first place. The question is whether a person has been born again, transformed by God, anointed by the Holy Spirit. We should examine ourselves and ask, “Why am I a Christian? Do I really love Jesus? Do I really believe the gospel? Does my life line up with what I say I believe? Am I moving closer to Jesus or am I drifting away from him?” I would simply ask you, why are you here? Are you here because you know the truth and are grateful? Are you here because you know you need Jesus and his grace? Or are you here thinking you’ve done your religious duty and now God owes you something? These are all questions we should ask of ourselves. Ask God to reveal to you your true spiritual condition. Like David, we should say:

- ²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
²⁴ And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting! (Ps. 139:23–24)

Fourth, and finally, we need to abide in Christ. We need to take our faith seriously. We stay close to Jesus by using God’s regular means of grace, things like reading the Bible, praying, and being part of a local church. If you stop doing these things, it’s spiritually dangerous. And I do think that being a part of a local church—not just showing up for an hour on Sunday, but getting involved as much as you can—is a very important part of abiding in Christ. Those who drift away from Jesus usually drift away from the church first. That is a very dangerous thing to do. If we see someone who has done that, don’t assume that because they once made a profession of faith and were baptized that they’re okay with God. They’re probably not. They may very well be in danger of going to hell. It is completely appropriate to reach out to that person and show concern for their soul. I think that’s why James ends his letter with these words:

¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19–20)

vol. 7, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 476.