

Standing Firm in Confusing Times

The Apostle John writes to the churches of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) with a pastoral concern to protect them from false teachers that threatened to divide the churches as well as to create doubt as to the validity of their salvation. Evidently there was already a schism, a division created in the churches by false teachers who had once been members of the church but had gone astray in their beliefs. Not only had they left the fellowship of the church; but they were also seeking to find adherents who would follow them in this defection from the true message of Christ. What John teaches in this passage is the need to stand firm in confusing times.

Follow as I read **1 John 2:18-27**:

¹⁸ Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹ They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. ²⁰ But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. ²¹ I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth. ²² Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. ²³ No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who 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 will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵ And this is what he has promised us, eternal life. ²⁶ I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. ²⁷ As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.

George Whitefield, the famous British evangelist during the Great Awakening of the 18th Century, “was speaking to a man about his soul. He asked the man, ‘Sir, what do you believe?’

‘I believe what my church believes,’ the man replied respectfully.

‘And what does your church believe?’

‘The same thing I believe.’

‘And what do *both* of you believe?’ the preacher inquired again.

‘We both believe the same thing!’ was the only reply he could get” (W Wiersbe).

Although this sounds incredibly ridiculous and humorous, it’s not all that farfetched even two and a half centuries later. In fact, many church members would be hard pressed to give a more definitive answer. John was writing to the churches to say that to have assurance of eternal life our faith must rest upon the truth of Christ, the Son of God, and upon the message about his death and resurrection as the provision for our salvation. Those who could not affirm this truth would be unable to

detect false teaching from the true message of Christ and would be vulnerable to being led astray from the true faith.

A website reports that every 48 hours there is a new distinct and organized religion somewhere in the world. In 1800, there were 700 distinct and organized religions; by 2025 it's estimated that there will be 15,000. Each of these religions has its own set of teachings contrary to the message of faith in Christ.

The writer of this site went on to say that even faithful church people are vulnerable to false teaching, relating a documentary on three Wheaton College students, each of whom was a professing Christian. They joined an off-campus prayer group led by a man unaffiliated with the school. Steadily, the students were permeated with this man's false teachings, accompanied by physical abuse. The man convinced these well-meaning students to drop out of school and shun their families, all in the name of God. This report got my attention because both my son and my bride are graduates of Wheaton, which has long been considered a solid Christian institution. This story has a happy ending, with these students being eventually restored to faith and safety with their families. But the Apostle John's concern was to avoid unhappy endings of believer's falling into falsehood and spiritual destruction.

The early church endured centuries of persecution, often martyrdom, but they considered more dangerous than their persecutors those within their churches who "wanted to question or change their faith....The persecutors could—and frequently did—put Christians to death, but could not deprive them of eternal life, nor of the confidence they had in eternal life," which heretics threatened to do. (H Brown).

John uses the affectionate address, "dear children" (NIV), as he urges the church to be aware of the antichrists, who sadly enough, were former members of the churches who had shared the same initial profession of faith in Christ. And he reminds them and us that we are all living in these last days. Our text reads "It is the last hour," but there is no article with "hour" in the Greek manuscript. It would more accurately read, "This is *a* last hour," not *the* last hour of history, certainly, but a "passing of another era of history," and a "last crisis hour" through which we are now passing (L Morris). Scripture teaches that history is moving toward the final apocalyptic day, as Jesus himself taught us (Mark 13, etc.), but since the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, we've been in these last days.

The Greeks have a word for sequential time (*chronos*), but another word for a crisis time, a critical and opportune moment in time (*kairos*). John says this is the *kairos* moment of time in these last days. In these critically important last days, we can expect, as Paul wrote, that there will be a defection from the faith as former adherents of the gospel "follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons" (1 Timothy 4:1ff). This has been true of the last days since the church in the first century and is true still today, the day of our *kairos* hour of testing.

We're moving toward the final Day of history, and are to live in these days with the same urgency and watchfulness that Jesus urged upon the first disciples (Matt. 26: 41; Mk. 13:23ff). As John Calvin wrote, "Christ is not far away. So let us look attentively for Him, lest He should suddenly take us by surprise." When Satan brings confusion and disturbance to the church, he says, "These are the signs of the last time."

Antichrist literally means "instead of Christ," and every generation has those who pose as substitutes for Christ, and who in fact also deny Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, and deny he is God's Son and God in the flesh. Certainly our generation is susceptible to the deceiving influence of antichrists, with the loss of regard for biblical truth. In fact, in this post-modern, pluralistic age the only truth that's acceptable as absolute is the absolute denial that there is any absolute truth!

The antichrists that surround us are not just the well-known heretical sects that offer their false teaching door to door, but also the more subtle Bible-quoting antichrists. Television preachers, pseudo-evangelists and faith healers, who offer a distorted message that promises immediate health and material prosperity, are drawing a cult-like following of those who support them financially, even though these false teachers are financially unaccountable to anyone and continue to exploit their naïve followers. They demand a following and loyalty and dole out empty promises that put them "instead of Christ," i.e. in the place which should be reserved for Christ Jesus alone.

The antichrists that John warned about eventually left the churches, showing their true colors. They were great pretenders, "attempting to destroy the faith from within" (Boice, 86). Paul also warned about false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder," Paul continues, "for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve" (2 Cor. 11:13-15, NIV). Also modern-day antichrists are dangerously deceptive because, just like the devil himself, they know how to quote Scripture and use all the spiritual, pious-sounding jargon.

John assures us that we can stand firm because we have an anointing from the Holy One and we know the truth (20). The word for anointing (*chrisma*) is found only here in our text (20 & 27) and nowhere else in the New Testament. Just as Moses anointed Aaron and his sons with fine olive oil in the Old Testament to prepare them for priestly service (Ex. 40:15), and Samuel anointed David as king (1 Sam. 16:13), so all who belong to Christ Jesus are anointed, which is another way of saying we have received the Holy Spirit.

This anointing is given to all believers. God's people can stand firm against the defecting false teachers and remain true to the faith and the fellowship of God's people because they are given this "anointing" (*chrisma*) from the Holy One. False

teachers and antichrists “laid claim to a special anointing not shared by other Christians” (Marshall). But John says that *all* his readers have the same knowledge (*gnosis*) because they have all received the same *chrisma*, the Spirit of truth (Col. 1: 28). Every believer is given the Holy Spirit who enables us to understand spiritual teaching, giving us “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). The Holy Spirit gives us the ability to understand and to recognize spiritual truth. Any believer, sincerely seeking to understand the message of Christ as revealed in the Scriptures, can know the truth and can grow in spiritual understanding and maturity. And any teaching or theories that come our way from any sources of heresies, false teaching and simple unbelief, will be clearly detected and will be rejected as part of the vast network of lies being promulgated in our world today, whether from door-to-door “witnesses” or “missionaries” or from televised pulpits or the pulpits of churches and clergypersons who have distorted God’s truth.

The next time you’re engaged in a conversation with so-called witnesses or missionaries from a cult, any breakaway-from-the-true-faith group, ask them to tell you what they believe about Jesus Christ and his relationship with the Father. As John says, the relationship of the unity of the Father and the Son is essential truth (22-23). Our standing firm in faith requires our abiding in the Father and the Son in a love and trust relationship (24-27). Our challenge is to see to it that the message and truth of Christ abides/remains in us, praying that the seed of the Word will take root, grow and fruitfully flourish in our hearts that are receptive to the Word (Lk. 8:4-15). This requires that we keep on hearing but also obeying the Word that we hear preached and taught and that we study in our daily, personal readings of Scripture. The more we live in and by the Word, the more confident we are in its power, as the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17) to ward off any challenge the devil and his representatives throw our way.

Some of our newer translations read “remain” in him as the Word and the Spirit “remain” in us. An unloving spouse can remain with his or her spouse out of a sense of mere duty to children or out of fear of financial loss or even damage to reputation. But only a loving husband or wife can abide, to live in an intimate, absolutely faithful, loving, giving relationship, “in sickness and in health, in poverty and in wealth, till death do us part.”

We live in the strength of a love relationship with Christ that is eternal and absolutely dependable. With that kind of abiding relationship we don’t need to fear those who are trying to influence us away from Christ and his teaching (26). The anointing of the Spirit and the sufficient, clear instruction of the Word are sufficient to keep us abiding in Christ. As we remain committed to the truth of Christ, we have assurance of eternal life. Not only do we not need to fear false teaching, but we can and should confront it with the Spirit of Christ in us.

When we abide in Christ and his presence and Word abides in us, we're ready to live in these confusing times with our feet squarely planted in the truth of God's Word and assured of his promise of eternal life (25).

We should always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have, and do so with gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15). As God's "approved workers," we need to correctly handle the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). So, when someone asks you what you believe, or even when they tell you what they believe and thus what you should believe, you can tell them about your love relationship with Christ, who has made himself known to you through the trustworthy and inspired Word of God. And you'll do so in the power of the Spirit of Jesus, who abides in you.

A few years ago, popular television personality Opra Winfrey addressed the graduates of Harvard University, giving the keys to living successfully. She admonished these brilliant young academic achievers to "follow the GPS within" themselves. This inner guidance system will lead them to achieve success and happiness, she opined. Our text refers to a much more reliable "global positioning system," i.e. the Holy Spirit within us, who will lead us in the way of truth in these confusing times.