

The Doctrinal Test: Renters or Residents?

1 John 2:20-27

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After a few weeks' hiatus, we are back in our study of 1 John. This letter from the Apostle John was written to his church suffering from a split led by false teachers who didn't at all agree with John or the gospel John proclaimed. This left the good people remaining in the church very confused. These people left us? What does that mean? Is their teaching right? Are they Christians? Are we? How do we know?

To this John tells them and us that we can know but we have to make sure we are looking to the right indicators. We've seen two tests already: the social test – Do I love? and the moral test – Do I directionally obey? John doesn't say love and obedience are the basis for our salvation; rather, they are indicators of God's work of salvation in us.

Today we see the third test of 1 John. This test is presented in a fairly challenging section of 1 John. I'll read it in a second. The language is a bit hard to follow and to teach. Here at Bethel we most often are teaching through books of the Bible. This means we don't duck the harder passages and this weekend we've got one of those. To help, let's read the last clause of 2:27, abide in Him. That is the theme of these verses. It's repeated over and over. Abide in Him. This passage is about how we do and why some people don't.

But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. 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. 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. 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. 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. (1 John 2:20-27 ESV)

I told you it's a bit confusing. Yet in this pedantic language is a call to faithfulness to the one true gospel. That is very much needed.

All one has to do is look across the pond to Europe and see what happens when we don't abide in the gospel. At one time, Europe was alive with gospel ministry and the Reformation shaped western civilization. Today, the churches are empty and Europe is less than 5% Christian. What happened?

Or look at churches who at one time were flourishing and Christ was proclaimed and people were reached for Christ. Now they are a shadow of their former selves. Why? Or think of homes that at one time were spiritually alive and prayers were heard and Bibles were open and ministry was happening. Most of us know homes like that...and now? I don't want to oversimplify this and there many factors and many circumstances, but one thing that is always true is that they are NOT abiding.

What does the Apostle have to say? It is this one word—abide. It's used six times in this section. It means to take up a permanent address or settle in a permanent home. It means to put down roots. It's buying the house and calling it home. Making it your address. It doesn't mean to rent. I didn't buy my first house until I was 32. Up to that point I lived more like a vagrant, renting here and there. My family struggled to know where to send things to because I was often moving. They had to write my address in pencil. In my single years, I didn't care too much about where I lived as long as it had a microwave. That is the opposite of this word. Abide means I bought the house and this is home. Non-abiding is a short term renter who is here until something more interesting comes along.

Let the clear theme help in the less than clear language. This is about doctrinal gospel abiding that puts its permanent house of faith on the one true gospel and isn't going to move.

Let's talk about the non-abiding first, the gospel renters.

The Doctrinal Renters – Jesus is the Christ...Wait...No He's Not

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. (1 John 2:22-23)

John draws this contrast between truth and lies. When John speaks of truth he does it in what is offensive to our modern sensibilities; he means truth that is absolutely true. It's not simply how he feels about something; it's not part of his personal journey, and it's not his spiritual language or conversation. He means truth that is true no matter what, for all time, transcendent and ultimate truth. Everything that flows from transcendent truth is true. Anything that isn't consistent with that truth is a lie and the person proposing it is a liar.

If there is one central truth upon which the whole of the Christian faith rises or falls, it is the person and work of Christ. All the major heresies of history fiddle around with something related to Christ. To use our word picture, they move their doctrinal address down the street and sometimes, to another ZIP code altogether.

We now see that Christ is denied whenever the things that belong to him are taken from him. And as Christ is the end of the Law and the Gospel and has within himself all the treasures of wisdom and understanding, so also is he the mark at which all heretics aim and direct their arrows. Therefore, the apostle has good reason to make those who fight against Christ the leading liars, since the full truth is exhibited to us in him. (John Calvin as quoted in *The Epistles of John*, James Montgomery Boice, p. 72).

What had these false teachers taught? Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? (1 John 2:22) Somehow they had denied Jesus as the Christ of God. We don't know exactly what they had taught. At its root they denied Jesus was the Christ. They were persuasive enough to draw members of this church away even from the Apostle John. Verse 26 indicates that they were still trying to get them to leave John's church. You might think, Who would follow such rubbish? I would never deny Christ! Down through history, millions have done just that, although they didn't think they were doing so; they thought they were right on. That's pastorally what I want you to realize. False teaching isn't typically a bold-faced heresy but a subtle one just like a counterfeit bill is only very slightly different than the real thing.

Here are some examples of historical counterfeits:

- Adoptionism - God granted Jesus powers and then adopted him as a Son.
- Apollinarianism – Jesus' divine will overshadowed and replaced his human mind.
- Arianism - Jesus was a lesser, created being.
- Docetism - Jesus was divine, but only seemed to be human.
- Kenosis - Jesus gave up some divine attributes while on earth.
- Modalism - God is one person in three modes.
- Nestorianism - Jesus was two persons.
- Socinianism - Denial of the Trinity. Jesus is a deified man.
- Subordinationism - The Son is lesser than the Father in essence and or attributes.
- Tritheism - the Trinity is really three separate gods.

These all have scary names but if you put somebody in the pulpit and they have the right academic credentials or have credibility for some other reason, or they are winsome, they could subtly teach something and people would say, So and so said it so it must be true. False teachers never get up and say, "Hi, I'm a false teacher and I'm here to lead you to hell by distorting a biblical Christology." No. It's always presented persuasively and as the real truth or the new secret way or a new discovery of some kind. Well-meaning folks in the church can easily nod their heads in agreement. Before long a whole congregation has shown themselves not to be gospel residents but gospel renters, only now their rental address is a different gospel and a different Christ—one that sadly doesn't save.



John calls anyone who denies the truth about Jesus an "antichrist." He is a liar because he does not speak Christological truth.

Doctrinal Residents – Same Gospel, Same Christ, Same Address

In contrast to the doctrinal renters and squatters, John urges his people to abide. The text is a bit wordy, but essentially John urges them to stay put. Those that left the faith showed

they were never in truly in it. How does God keep his children in the faith? How do we abide?

The indwelling Holy Spirit

- But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. 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. (1 John 2:20-21)
- 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 John 2:27)

What John calls “anointing,” Paul calls the more familiar term to us “indwelling.” Both words describe the work of the Holy Spirit. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. (2 Corinthians 1:21-22)

This is the third person of the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit, who upon salvation comes spiritually and dwells within us. This indwelling means many things: our bodies are temples of God; God’s presence is with his people; power for life and ministry; gifts and enablements. John’s concern here is how true Christians remain faithful to the true gospel. One way this happens is the active role of the Holy Spirit within us to help us understand the truth. Theologians call this illumination. The Spirit within us gives us spiritual understanding.

John says you don’t need anyone to teach you. He doesn’t mean that teaching is not needed otherwise why would he write this letter? What he means is that they already knew the gospel and they had the Holy Spirit; they didn’t need a new or different teaching. They already had the truth. You don’t need these other teachers and you certainly don’t need what they’re teaching. The Spirit within us helps us identify lies and falsehoods by helping us understand the truth. He indwells us – presence. He illuminates us – understanding.

The Word of God/gospel

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. (1 John 2:24)

What you “heard” – they heard the saving message of Jesus. They heard the Word of God. If that abides in you, you will abide in it. If you stay faithful in your personal belief in the true gospel, you will abide in the Son and the Father.

Christianity is creedal. True Christianity is confessional. There are objective truths that it holds to, the tenets or fundamentals of the faith. These are what we are called to abide in. If we don’t abide in them, if we change our doctrinal address on the core truths, we can call ourselves Christians but we are not.

Before he died, the famous atheist Christopher Hitchens was interviewed by the Unitarian Marilyn Sewell. Ironically the atheist Hitchens calls out the Unitarian Sewell who calls herself a Christian and he says, you may call yourself a Christian, but you are not.

Sewell: "When you speak of religion in your book...it seems to be that you are generally referring to fundamentalist faith of various kinds. I'm a liberal Christian, and I don't take the stories from the Scripture literally. And I don't believe in the doctrine of atonement—that Jesus died for our sins, for example. Do you make a distinction between fundamentalist faith and liberal religion?"

Hitchens: "Well,...I would say that if you don't believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, in other words, the Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and that by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you are really not in any meaningful sense a Christian." (You may listen to a larger portion of the interview here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fp1XqK49XOY>)

We couldn't say it any better ourselves. "Christian" in our culture is such a slogan and label that to say you are a Christian means almost nothing anymore. What do you mean? Do you believe in the historic gospel of Jesus as fully God and man who died on the cross bearing the real guilt of our sin? Do you believe he died and on the third day rose again? Do you believe he ascended to heaven and will come again someday? Do you believe that the Bible is God's Word and perfectly tells us God's will? Do you believe Jesus is coming again and that there is a future resurrection for all who believe in him? Do you believe salvation is by faith and not by anything we do or earn? We could go on.

To abide means we plant our faith in the historic gospel of Jesus and we don't go anywhere. We don't follow doctrinal fads. We aren't easy prey for the folks that knock on our door with white shirts and ties. We don't hear something new and novel and think, I'll go there. Why? God keeps all his children living at the same address. He keeps us there not by locking us in some prison but by placing in our hearts the desire to stay there, by his Spirit and by his Word.

Word and Spirit. The Word is the objective, the Spirit is the subjective. The Word propositionally says things that draw lines of distinction. This is true and this is not. This will save and this will not. It says these are the boundary lines of the gospel address. Stay in the boundary lines and stay in true salvation. Cross this line and you believe a gospel, it is just not a saving one.

The Spirit is the subjective. He works in our hearts and our minds so that we understand God's Word and want God's will. Isn't it wonderful that God gives us his Spirit to keep us believing the truth? Is this not another reason to praise him? Is this not another reason to see that all of salvation is of God?

Together they keep our minds and our hearts tethered to the true gospel. Or as John writes, they keep us abiding. The Spirit and the Word abide in us which keeps us abiding in salvation.

Conclusion

So why is this important? Look at the promise for all who abide. Verse 25, And this is the promise that he made to us – eternal life. God promises abiding, eternal life. There we live by his power just like we live by his power now, only then fully and eternally face to face.

That's all the more reason not to doctrinally move across town no matter how nice it might seem there. Eternal life is for all who abide.

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