

# Sermon 19, The Teaching of Christ – and Antichrist, 1 John 2:19-21

**Proposition:** John calls false teachers “antichrists” but insists that we true Christians have the truth of God’s word and Spirit.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the verse before us is a rather tricky one. My whole life, I’ve regarded it simply as a statement about apostasy. Some people fall away from the church and from the faith. I’m sure you know some of those people. People who were members in good standing of this church when I arrived four years ago now no longer attend church and haven’t for years. I think we all know at least a few people who have publicly left the faith altogether and no longer claim to have the slightest belief in God or the Bible. This verse, then, seems to be talking about people like that and saying “The reason they left is ultimately that they were never really Christians at all.” And I still think that’s true. However, this verse is talking about a more specific situation: Itinerant missionaries or teachers who came from the apostles in a geographical sense but whose teaching is not apostolic. We’ll talk more about that in just a minute, because I know it’s not a common interpretation of this verse. But there is good reason to believe it’s correct. What we’ll see is that John calls false teachers “antichrists,” but insists that we true Christians have the truth.

### I. Antichrists Are False Teachers, v. 19

The controversial claim I’ll be making to you this morning is that antichrists are false teachers. I can almost guarantee that you’ve never thought of it that way. I hadn’t either until I read Peter Leithart’s commentary on this passage. But now that I’ve seen it, I can’t un-see it. The text is not talking about apostasy in general, though its lessons are ultimately applicable to that subject. No, the text is talking about a particular set of false teachers that John has dubbed “antichrists” because their teaching is so directly opposed to Christ.

### **A. Their Spatial Origin Was Apostolic, v. 19a**

First of all, notice with me the opening phrase here: “They went out from us.” These people went out from the apostles. Now, where else does this language occur? That’s right. Only in 3 John.

Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, because they went forth for His name’s sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. (3Jo 1:5-7 NKJ)

Did you catch that? John is referencing a situation that was prevalent in the church of his day. Missionaries would go out to other churches. They were “brethren” — that is, fellow Christians — but they were also strangers. They would bear witness before the church and then go on their way. Why did they go? They went out for the sake of the Name. They weren’t supported by non-Christians, but only by Christians.

Well, this seems to be the same kind of situation that John is referencing in our passage in 1 John. Again, we have some people who go out. They did go out *from* the apostles — from, I believe, in a geographical sense but not in an ideological or official sense.

Let me put it this way. My brother is going to college near Washington, D.C. He will return in a few weeks for Christmas break. Now, when he comes back I would be perfectly accurate in introducing him as a man who just arrived from Washington, D.C. I could dwell on his residence there, his departure from Dulles Airport, and all the rest of it. And, in a geographical sense, it would all be true. Abel really would be just arrived from Washington. But none of that would make him an authorized Federal agent. Geographically, he’s here from our nation’s capital. But officially, he is no such thing.

Well, I believe that this is what John is talking about here. The itinerant teachers went out from the apostles (the “us” who were speaking in the first five verses of ch. 1, contrasted with the “you” of all believers — notice 2:20, where the “we” of v. 19 address the “you” that is every Christian). But they were not official emissaries of the apostles, or really connected with the apostles in any sense except that they had been in physical proximity. Abel is no more a federal agent than I am; these antichrists were no more apostolic teachers than the Buddha was. But they admittedly came from the same location where the apostles were to be found.

Today, it would be like saying in your local Catholic parish “Did you hear what the fellow from Rome said?” That way of putting it suggests that you’re referring to someone highly placed in the hierarchy. But actually, of course, almost a million people in today’s city of Rome aren’t even Catholics. He might not be an official of the Roman Catholic Church — he may only be from the same geographical area as the Roman Catholic Church.

So, the geographical origin of these antichrists was close to the apostles.

### **B. Their Real Origin Was Non-Apostolic, v. 19b-c**

But their real origin was definitely and distinctly non-apostolic. John is at some pains to rehearse this point, which he mentions over and over. These antichrists are not just apostates in general,

not just any people who left or who leave the church. In particular, these antichrists are traveling teachers who go from church to church bringing a message. They went out.

### **1. Proof 1: They Left the Apostles, v. 19b**

But the fact that they went out — something common, of course, to all itinerant teachers, who by definition travel from place to place — really shows that they were not apostolic in their origin. They didn't leave with John's blessing or approval. Their teaching is not correct. Their doctrine is false, and their teaching illegitimate. If they had really been apostolic teachers, they would have remained with the apostles.

I think there's reason to believe that John is equivocating. To "remain with the apostles" means more than just physically being with them. It means abiding in their teaching. It means learning from them and doing it like they do it and believing it like they teach it and repeating it like they say it. That's what it means to remain with the apostles. John is talking about physical presence with but also about ideological or spiritual sympathy with. They left — physically — which is a sign of departing from the apostles ideologically and spiritually. In other words, not everyone who claims to be speaking apostolic truth is speaking apostolic truth. Not everyone who claims apostolic origin is actually from the apostles. That doesn't seem very odd when you put it like that, of course. But John is saying effectively that some who seem to be from the apostles are genuine; some are valid — the good ones that he mentions in 3 John. But many are not good; many are not valid; many do not teach apostolic truths. Is not this exactly the situation we behold today? A plethora of apparently Christian teachers fills the airwaves, talks on television, blankets the world wide web — and yet how do we know whether their doctrine is really what the 12 apostles were teaching? What if it is something else, from somewhere else?

### **2. Proof 2: Their Departure Showed their true Origin, v. 19c**

Well, John tells us how we know. Their departure from the apostles is both literal and symbolic. It's a literal departure, a leaving of Ephesus or Jerusalem and traveling through the Imperial hinterland and beyond, proclaiming a message about Jesus and salvation and God and all the other things the Bible talks about. But on another level, insofar as these teachers have left the truth behind, it's a figurative departure, a walking away from apostolic truth even while retaining the apostolic name. Yes, this happened in the New Testament church and it still happens today. Remember what Paul talks about in Galatians, how some came from James and when they did, Peter left the Gentile table at the potluck and went back to eating exclusively with the Jews? That was people who "went out" from an apostle but who didn't want to see Jews and Gentiles mixing, even though the Gospel taught that Jews and Gentiles are members of the same family of God with the same rights and privileges and the same need for table fellowship with one another. And so it goes today. We have people who claim to be teaching what Paul taught who end up eviscerating humanity and making God the author of evil by their hyper-Calvinism. We have people who claim to be teaching what Peter taught who end up telling us that a man in a white hat is the one and only guarantee of Christian unity and truth. (If you can find that for me in the New Testament, I'll eat one of the Pope's hats.) We have people who claim to be teaching what

John taught who say that we ought to affirm LGBTQ+ sexuality in the church because love knows no boundaries and we are supposed to love one another. And so it goes! But insofar as these people depart from apostolic teaching, it doesn't matter geographically where they originated. They could have grown up right here in this church with you. They could have grown up in a noted center of theological learning — a faculty kid at Bob Jones University, at The Master's College, at my own alma mater, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. And yet wherever they started from, their departure from the content of apostolic teaching makes them false teachers and thus antichrists. Their departure makes that only too clear.

This is what John is saying. Yes, ultimately, we can use this verse to affirm that those who leave the faith were never really Christian, however formal and hollow that affirmation is in the face of the deadly sin of apostasy. But first and foremost, the original point here is that teachers claiming the mantle of the apostles aren't necessarily telling the truth. If what they're teaching diverges from what the apostles taught, then they aren't apostolic. Period.

## **II. You Are Taught the Truth, vv. 20-21**

But John contrasts the rise and progress of antichrists with the anointing that you and I have as believers. This anointing ultimately is the thing that protects and preserves our knowledge of the truth.

### **A. Christ Has Anointed You with His Holy Spirit, v. 20a**

What is the anointing? Though John does not say so in so many words, virtually every commentator relates this anointing to the anointing which was on Jesus. That anointing, of course, is the person of the Holy Spirit. The anointing with oil signified the presence of the Spirit in the OT economy. Indeed, in 1 Samuel after David is anointed to be king the Spirit rushes upon Him. John tells us in his gospel that God did not give the Spirit to Christ by measure; instead, Christ received an immeasurable amount of the Spirit, the infinitude of the Spirit! And so you, too, have an anointing, and that anointing is a gift from Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God who purchased the Spirit's presence in your life through His life, death, and resurrection. Christ has anointed you with His Spirit. This is the same thing Paul is talking about when He calls the Spirit a down payment, or says that to be a Christian is to have the Spirit. Christ has given you the Spirit to dwell with you and in you.

So what's the solution to the problem of false teachers, aka antichrists, as John calls them? The primary factor in the solution is the presence of the Holy Spirit. What do you need to stand against antichrist? The answer is not, in the first place, more study. It's not buying and reading more books. There's nothing wrong with that. But first and foremost to stand against antichrists you need the Holy Spirit in your life. You need to be anointed with Him. If you have Him, you can stand against the false claims of the antichrists.

### **B. The Spirit's Presence Grants You Knowledge, v. 20b**

But the Spirit does not magically work to preserve you from sin; indeed, His very presence grants you knowledge. Some manuscripts read "You know all things;" others read "You all have knowledge." It's hard to know which reading is correct. Certainly, either way, the Spirit's

presence grants you knowledge. This is not knowledge of everything under the sun, from how to climb rocks to the meaning of an obscure Japanese word for “swordfish.” It is knowledge of what you need to know to fend off the false teaching of antichrists. It is knowledge that the Son is truly God and that He has sent His Spirit to bring you to the Father through Him. If you’re experiencing that, as every true Christian does, then the blandishments of antichrists can’t ultimately sway you. Their lies are exposed by the reality in which you live every day. It would be like coming to believe that Gillette is actually in Western China. You just can’t be persuaded of it; you know otherwise based on what you’ve seen with your own two eyes and experienced through your whole life.

The Spirit, in other words, makes you the best kind of theologian — not necessarily someone who knows all the big words and can argue about them, but rather, someone who knows the big God and trusts Him implicitly. Brothers and sisters, that person is a true theologian.

### **C. The Word of God Presupposes the Spirit’s Gift of Knowledge, v. 21a-b**

John goes on to explain that the word of God without the presence of the Spirit of God is pointless. If these people had not known the truth, that is, if they had not had the anointing from the Spirit that taught them, then John would not have written to them. He isn’t writing to the spiritually dead to give them life, though the word of God does indeed give life. He is writing to the spiritually alive, to those who already know the truth. And that’s who I’m preaching to as well.

Now, the spirit is not absolutely prior to the word; rather, the Spirit is prior to the word in the fight against antichrists and false teaching, and, of course, in the sense that He wrote the word. You have an anointing, and that anointing is what teaches you (see v. 27). The Spirit’s presence is what allows you to understand the truth.

### **D. No Lie Is Compatible with the Word and Spirit of Truth, v. 21c**

Ultimately, though, the word and the Spirit work together to combat falsehood. John tells us that antichrists and liars are the same group. It’s just two different names for the same crowd of people. No lie, though, comes from the truth. No lie proceeds from the word and the Spirit.

This means lies about yourself. Notice how John is returning to the theme of walking in the light, but applying it this time to the question of belief as well. To be in the light means to be filled with the Spirit of light. When you are, you can’t retain theological lies, particularly first-order falsehoods like “Jesus is not the Christ or the Son of God.” Nor can you retain lies about your own sin. You will repent of sin; you will turn away from sin; you will hate and flee from sin, when the word and Spirit of truth are shining their lights on you.

So come, and welcome, to Jesus Christ. Pray for the Spirit’s anointing to deliver you from sin and to deliver you from the false teachings of the antichrists, who are as numerous in our day as they were in John’s.

In a nutshell: Seek the Holy Spirit if you want to be protected from damnable heresies! How do you get Him? Through the word and prayer. You get Him from Jesus!

The Spirit is the one who protects you. He is the one who delivers you. He is the one who will keep you from believing the lie. When you are of Him, things that aren't of Him (like lies and sins) will not be at home in your heart. So do you want to avoid wrong belief? Yes, study. Yes, read up on the truth. But above all, pursue the Spirit. Pray for Him to come and fill your mind with the truth of God. Then you will be safe from antichrist. Amen.