

That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life

The Doctrinal Test

1 John 2:18-27

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Scripture

In the First Letter of John, the Apostle John writes to believers in churches around the ancient city of Ephesus. False teaching has entered their churches through false teachers. These false teachers claimed that they had a relationship with God. John's letter addresses this crisis by doing damage control and by addressing the false teaching of the false teachers.

John's letter does not have a linear argument. His style is that of amplification. That is, he repeats himself throughout his letter. John sets out three tests by which one may evaluate whether one has a relationship with God. He has already stated the test of obedience (in 1 John 2:3-6) and the test of love (in 1 John 2:7-11). Then, after a brief digression (in 1 John 2:12-17), he gives the third test, which is the test of doctrine (in 1 John 2:18-27).

We are going to examine the test of doctrine today in 1 John 2:18-27. John gives the doctrinal test in the context of a warning against false teachers or, as he calls them, "anti-christs."

So, with that in mind, let's read about the doctrinal test in 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 John 2:18-27)

Introduction

Around 1980, I was a student at the University of Cape Town when I saw a docudrama movie that stunned me. It was the story of an outstanding man whose preaching dazzled and mesmerized thousands of people. As a young man, he was enamored with communism. He wrote later, “I decided, how can I demonstrate my Marxism? The thought was, infiltrate the church. So I consciously made a decision to look into that prospect.” So he became a preacher, faith healer, and political activist who started his ministry in Indianapolis, IN in 1955. In 1965, he moved his church to San Francisco, CA. He duped thousands of people with fake healings.

Eventually, the IRS started to investigate his financial dealings. The preacher, the Rev. Jim Jones, then moved to

Guyana along with more than 900 members of the Peoples Temple. They followed him to Guyana and settled in a village known as Jonestown.

In November 1978, Congressman Leo Ryan led a fact-finding mission to Jonestown to investigate allegations of human rights abuses. Three days later, on November 18, 1978, Rep. Ryan and several others were killed at the airport as they were leaving. Later that same day, 909 inhabitants of Jonestown, 304 of them children, died of self-inflicted cyanide poisoning in Kool-Aid with the encouragement of Jim Jones. (By the way, this is where the expression “drinking the Kool-Aid” comes from.) This was the greatest single loss of American civilian life through murder and suicide until the attack of September 11, 2001.

The death of 909 people in Jonestown was a great tragedy. Hundreds of people were duped by a theological heretic.

The murder-suicide of hundreds of people in Jonestown is a very graphic and extreme illustration of what happens when false teaching grips a group of people.

The Apostle John was very alert to false teaching in his day. When he saw false teaching enter the churches for which he was responsible, he immediately fired off this first letter. He took action to warn his beloved flock about false teachers. And what he said to them is of great help to us today.

Lesson

First John 2:18-27 warns us about false teachers.

Let's use the following outline:

1. How to Recognize False Teachers (2:18-19, 22-23)
2. How to Refute False Teachers (2:20-21, 24-27)

I. How to Recognize False Teachers (2:18-19, 22-23)

First, let's look at how to recognize false teachers.
There are two ways to recognize false teachers.

A. *Recognize False Teachers by Their Behavior (2:18-19)*

First, you can recognize false teachers by their behavior.

John begins this section by addressing his beloved flock as **“Children”** (2:18a). John is well into his nineties and everyone is as a child to him. Perhaps many of them were his spiritual children as well.

John goes on to say, **“Children, it is the last hour”** (2:18b). John does not mean that there are literally only 60 minutes left before the return of Jesus. He would not even have time to get this letter to the mailman, let alone to the recipients before 60 minutes expired. In Greek, there is no article with **“last hour.”** John is literally saying, **“it is last hour.”** John uses the same anarthrous expression at the end of verse 18, **“Therefore we know that it is last hour.”** I don't think it means the final phase just before the return of Jesus. It cannot, because John is identifying a **“last hour”** at the time of his writing this letter. Therefore, it seems that the **“last hour”** is similar to the “last days” and is the time between Jesus' first and second advents.

John continues and says, **“Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come”** (2:18c). The early church expected that a powerful evil figure would appear at the end of time. Paul calls him “the man of lawlessness” (2 Thessalonians 2:3). John is the only person to use the term **“antichrist”** (cf. also 2:22; 4:3; 2 John 7). But John is not interested in the future

evil individual. He is concerned for his beloved flock who are presently encountering **“many antichrists.”** The Greek word for **“antichrist”** comes from two Greek words: “anti” which means “against” or “instead of” and “christos” which means “Christ.” Without getting into a technical discussion, I take it that John is saying that these false teachers are **“antichrists”** in the sense that they are against Christ. Their teaching is fundamentally opposed to the truth of who Jesus is and what he has done. So the first behavior of false teachers is that they oppose the truth of who Jesus is and what he has done.

The second behavior of false teachers is that they depart from the fellowship. John writes in verse 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.”** The false teachers were part of the church for a while. They were even able to present their teaching. However, when they were challenged with the truth about who Jesus is and what he has done, they left the fellowship.

Now, let me be clear that not everyone who leaves a church is a false teacher. People leave churches for various reasons, such as the music, the youth ministry, the children’s ministry, the pastor’s preaching, and so on. It is always discouraging when people leave a fellowship.

But that is not what John is pointing to here. John is referring to people departing from the fellowship because of false teaching. When the elders of the church discern heresy, it is their duty and responsibility to correct it. If the person is unteachable, then elders must denounce it as false teaching.

Many years ago, I remember confronting a person about false doctrine. This individual would not back down from the false doctrine. I had to insist that the person not propagate that

false view in order to continue attending. Sadly, or happily, depending on your view, that person stopped attending.

So, John teaches us that you can recognize false teachers by their behavior. They oppose the truth. And they depart from the fellowship.

B. *Recognize False Teachers by Their Belief (2:22-23)*

And second, you can recognize false teachers by their belief.

What exactly did the false teachers believe? What did they teach? John does not mince words. In our day, it is considered impolite to say anything unkind to someone else. Not John. He calls them **“liars.”** Moreover, he tells us what is their false belief. He says in verse 22a, **“Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?”** Here is the doctrinal test: *what does a person believe about Jesus?* The false teachers did not believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One. Indeed, they did not believe that he was the Second Person of the Trinity as John writes in verse 23a, **“No one who denies the Son has the Father.”** The false teachers claimed a relationship with God but denied that Jesus was God.

Many people in our culture misunderstand who Jesus is. Some may not even know much about Jesus. They may think of Jesus alongside Mohammed or Buddha. Others may know some basic truths about Jesus’ birth, life, and death. They may believe that he was a moral teacher, perhaps along with others like Socrates or Plato. Then there are those in mainline churches who distort the teaching of Jesus. What they say about Jesus’ teaching sounds similar to what the culture propounds. These are the people that are **“antichrist.”** The first two groups are misinformed but this last group of people has

actually studied the life and ministry of Jesus. Their conclusions put them at odds with God's word. They are trying to align Jesus with our present culture rather than affirm that Jesus came to save sinners. Our understanding of who Jesus is must always come from the teaching given to us in the word of God rather than by looking at culture and trying to have Jesus align with the culture.

So, you can recognize false teachers by their belief. They do not believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

II. How to Refute False Teachers (2:20-21, 24-27)

And second, let's look at how to refute false teachers.

There are two ways to refute false teachers.

A. *Refute False Teachers by Your Belief (2:20-21)*

First, you can refute false teachers by your belief.

John writes to believers in verses 20-21, **“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.”** The **“Holy One”** is an unusual expression. Nevertheless, John is referring to the Holy Spirit. Writing to his beloved flock, John was saying that they have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The result of receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit is that they **“all have knowledge.”** John's point is that the Holy Spirit illumines every believer. There is no such thing as an enlightened elite, as the false teachers claimed.

This is the experience of every believer, especially if you were converted as an adult. Do you remember reading the Bible before your conversion? It did not really make sense to you.

But then you were born again and you were converted to Christ. When you then read your Bible, it made sense! You could understand it in a way you did not understand it before. This is what John is saying here.

When I was a young pastor, I remember a visiting preacher come to town. He somehow got a bunch of pastors together to show us how to reach the community for Christ. He seemed to suggest that he had an anointing and that the Holy Spirit worked through him. His explanation of God's word was dubious at best and dangerous at worst. He organized a meeting in a large meeting facility and there seemed to be a "buzz" for a few nights but nothing stuck. It was sad to see people run after something splashy but empty of truth.

B. Refute False Teachers by Your Behavior (2:24-27)

And second, you can refute false teachers by your behavior.

John says that believers must put two behaviors into practice to refute false teachers.

The first behavior needed to refute false teachers is to abide in the gospel. John says in verse 24a, **"Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you."** What John's beloved flock **"heard from the beginning"** was the good news of the gospel. It was the message of a holy God who sent his only Son Jesus to this earth. Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life. He died to pay the penalty for the sinners as their substitute. They simply had to believe what God had done for them in Jesus, repent of their sins, and then receive forgiveness from God.

John urged his church members to **"abide"** in this truth. The word **"abide"** occurs 24 times in this letter. To **"abide"** means "to rest, trust, or remain in." So long as John's readers

remained in the truth of the gospel, they would also then abide in Jesus and his Father. And they would refute false teaching.

God's message of salvation is at once simple and profound. It is profound in that we will spend all eternity fathoming the depths and heights of the beauty and riches of the good news. But it is also simple in that a child may understand the message of salvation. Even a young child may **"abide"** in the good news of the gospel. We are too easily swayed by the sensational or the novelty. Let us rest firmly in the good news that salvation is found in no other name under heaven given among men, that is, in Jesus.

The second behavior needed to refute false teachers is to abide in the Holy Spirit. John writes in verse 26, **"I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you."** John loves his flock. That is why he is writing to warn them about the false teachers and also to set biblical truth before them. He knows that the false teaching is inconsistent with God's truth. So, he writes to protect his beloved flock from being led astray. That is why he goes on to say in verse 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."** The **"anointing"** is the illumination that comes from the Holy Spirit. John exhorts his readers to remain in the Lord and to follow the teaching that is given by the Holy Spirit.

Pastors are constantly watching out for false teaching that creeps into their midst. Sometimes it comes as a fad. Books or movies or documentaries stir people's imaginations and cause them to question biblical truth. As a pastor, I try to monitor how strongly people are embracing the fiction that is presented. If it appears to be gaining traction with the people I

serve, then I will address it. I don't want believers led astray by false teaching that will deceive.

So, there are two safeguards against false teaching. They are the word of God and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Both are received at conversion. I love the way John Stott expressed it. He wrote, "The Word is an objective safeguard, while the anointing of the Spirit is a subjective experience; but both the apostolic teaching and the heavenly teacher are necessary for continuance in the truth."¹

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the concept of false teachers in 1 John 2:18-27, let us be sure that we hold to the truth.

If you are not a Christian, I urge you to believe that Jesus is the Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through him. There is no other foundation upon which to base your eternal destiny.

And if you are a Christian, I urge you to pay attention to truth, particularly about the person and work of Jesus. John has given us his third test, the doctrinal test. John has given us a moral test (which has to do with righteousness), a social test (which has to do with love), and a doctrinal test (which has to do with belief that Jesus is the Christ). It is possible to find people who are upright and loving. Frankly, the behavior of people in some other religions seems to outstrip us. But, it is this third test, the doctrinal test, that is crucial for Christianity. Let us hold to the truth that Jesus is the Christ and that salvation is found in no other name under heaven. Amen.

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 118.

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develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org