

Sermon File # 1045

Scripture Text: 1 John 2:18-27

Sermon Title: *Standing Firm in Confusing Times*

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On Sunday Morning 26 February 2012

At International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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Standing Firm in Confusing Times

Introduction:

We continue our series from the First Letter of John, the apostle who 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 (Yarbrough, 139). John gives basically three tests that recur throughout this letter, with the hoped-for result of assurance of the gift of eternal life (5:13). These are the ethical (righteous behavior), social (love for one another) and doctrinal (right belief about Jesus) tests, and today we'll look at the doctrinal one as found in today's text (Stott, 103).

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.

Last Sunday we considered godly living in an ungodly world (2:12-17) as we took an ethical/behavioral test, and today we'll take the doctrinal truth test found in the following verses: Follow as I read **1 John 2:18-27**.

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" (Wiersbe, 90).

Although this sounds incredibly ridiculous and humorous, it's not all that farfetched even two and a half centuries later. In fact, many members of so-called Bible-believing and teaching churches 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 we need to have a right belief about Jesus Christ. 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 articulate their beliefs 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 Christian 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 their (*sic*) own set of teachings that are contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ."

The writer of this site went on to say that even professing, practicing Christians are vulnerable to false teaching, relating that he "saw a documentary recently on three Wheaton University (*sic*) students, each of whom was an evangelical Christian. They each joined what they believed was 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 is particularly scary to me, realizing our son is a Wheaton College grad!)

The website continues: "Failing to recognize the characteristics of a false teacher, these three Bible-reading, Jesus-loving Christians, joined a cult. Eventually, each student would abandon the group, the last one leaving after four years, most of which was spent in the man's basement. Each student, in turn, moved into a recovery house where they received Christian counseling and each is doing well today." But the writer of this website concluded that tragically "not every story like

this has a happy ending.” <http://www.theomegaobserver.com/2010/03/false-teachers-part-1-everyone-is.html>.

John’s concern in giving this doctrinal test was to avert unhappy endings of believer’s faith falling into falsehood and spiritual destruction. His “main concern is with the rise of a group of opponents of the Christian faith. They need to be exposed for what they really are, and the readers need to be warned against their teaching, although if in fact they are being taught by God they should have the spiritual discernment not to be led astray” (Marshall, 148).

As Harold OJ Brown pointed out in his definitive book on heresies, 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. This heretics threatened to do, and therefore they were regarded with the utmost loathing” (Brown, 3). Christians in our day are far too tolerant and indifferent, if not simply ignorant of the dangers posed by false teachers and their teaching. .

To pass this doctrinal test of the authenticity of our faith, we must stand firm in these confusing times in which we live, which requires first of all that we be...

Aware of antichrists (18-19)

Again John uses the affectionate address, “dear children,” 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 profession of faith in Christ. And he reminds them and us that we are all...

Living in these last days

Our text reads “this 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 (Morris, 1264). 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, the church has believed we have been in the last days before Christ’s return (Marshall, 148).

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, and “we must allow any hour to be a kairos hour” (Ogilvie, 57). 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 are 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 (Matthew 26: 41; Mark 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” and the Apostle John, continues Calvin, warns that “no more remained but for Christ to appear for the redemption of the world” (255).

We are living in these last days, and this is our hour to respond to the challenge before us, John says, to be aware through...

Identifying the antichrists

John says we, as the first century churches in Asia Minor, have heard that the antichrist is coming (18). The final antichrist was prophesied in Daniel (11:31; 12:11), a prophecy that Jesus referred to (Mark 13:14). And the Apostle Paul describes an outbreak of evil sacrilege led by the Man of Lawlessness preceding the end of history (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). The Revelation also prophesies this final antichrist (13:1-10). Apparently before the return of Christ to bring final judgment to unbelievers and consummated salvation to the converted, there will be the final antichrist, the ultimate embodiment of evil. But this final antichrist will be preceded, since the first century into the present time by many antichrists (Stott, 104).

Antichrist literally means “instead of Christ” (“*Anti* can mean substitution or opposition.” Robertson, 215) 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 (Comfort, 2143). Certainly our generation is susceptible to the deceiving influence of antichrists, with the loss of regard for biblical revelation and absolute truth. In fact, in this post-modern, pluralistic age the only truth that is acceptable as absolute is the absolute denial that there is any absolute truth! The only intolerance that is tolerated is the intolerance of anything that is in disagreement with those who claim to be tolerant! We are seeing the rise of intolerance against and persecution of followers of Christ, not only in the Islamic world, but also here in the western world, with an increasingly aggressive secularism and militant atheism.

The antichrists that surround us are not just the well-known heretical sects of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Freemasonry and Mormons (Latter Day Saints), which are easily identified because of their lack of Trinitarian theology and biblical bases, but also the more subtle-evangelical-appearing 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.” “Their departure was their unmasking” (Stott, 105). 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 Corinthians 11:13-15).

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. And they prey on people within the church who are ungrounded in the faith. My Baptist denomination in the US has been a favorite hunting ground for heretical cults, claiming from this large denomination a sizable number of their converts. This is because my denomination has been zealous to get evangelistic results and “decisions for Christ,” but has been weak in discipleship, in rooting people in the faith. As Wiersbe says “Satan is not an originator; he is a counterfeiter. He imitates the work of God,” and has counterfeit ministers (2 Corinthians 11:13ff), who preach a counterfeit “gospel” (Galatians 1:6-9), that produces counterfeit Christians (John 8:43f), who depend on a counterfeit righteousness (Romans 10:1-10. See Wiersbe, 92).

Standing firm in confusing times requires also that we are...

Anointed by the Holy Spirit (20-23)

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 (Exodus 40:15), and Samuel anointed David as king (1 Samuel 16:13), so all who belong to Christ Jesus are anointed, which is another way of saying we have received the Holy Spirit (Morris, 1264). 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 “unction (*chrisma*) from the Holy One, the latter title designating either God (e.g. Hab. iii.3) or Christ (e.g. John vi. 69). There seems to be here a deliberate play on words.

Protection against the ‘antichrist’ is the ‘chrism’ they have received” (Stott, 106). The words “anointing” (*chrisma*) and “antichrist” (*antichristos*) are both connected with the name “Christ” (*Christos*). “These are all derived from the Greek verb *chrío*, ‘to anoint,’ and ‘anointing’ means the substance (oil) used to anoint somebody....Paul describes the work of God in the believer: ‘He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come’ (2 Corinthians 1:21f, Marshall, 153).

John is alluding to Gnostics and other false teachers and antichrists who “laid claim to a special anointing not shared by other Christians” (Marshall, 154). John says that *all* his readers have the same knowledge (*gnosis*) because they have all received the same *chrisma*, the Spirit of truth (Colossians 1: 28). “You, no less than they, are among the initiated” (*NEB*, Stott, 107). There are “no enlightened elite on whom all others depend” (Morris, 1264). Every believer is given the Holy Spirit who enables us to understand spiritual teaching, giving us “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16).

As one pastor wisely comments on verse 20, “Chrisma comes before charisma” (Ogilvie, 70). First century false teachers boasted of certain spiritual gifts they thought set them apart as spiritually elite and superior to ordinary believers, so today there are those who place their spiritual gifts, their “charismata,” their charismatic gifts of ecstatic tongues, or prophecies, or even of healing power, above chrisma. But this chrisma, the anointing, makes all believers equally spiritual.

The Apostle Paul inserted his great Love Chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, in the midst of his discussion on the charismatic gifts of the church (chapters 12 & 14), essentially to put the gifts (charismata) in their proper place in a congregation where some members expected an exalted position and status because of their particular spiritual gifts and had forgotten the primacy of love. All in the church have the same anointing, and at least one gift God will use, as we serve one another in humility and love.

As Jesus promised, all his followers have been given the Holy Spirit, who will teach us all things (John 14:26)...

Giving the knowledge of the truth

The Holy Spirit gives us the ability to understand and to recognize spiritual truth. Those with the Spirit (and all true believers have the Holy Spirit: Romans 8:9) know the truth about the Father and Son and can detect what doesn’t accord with the apostle’s (Scripture’s) teaching. John minces no words in calling these antichrist false teachers liars for denying Jesus is the Christ, Son of God and unique revealer of the Father (Comfort, 2143).

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 abandoned the faith of Scripture.

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 their relationship with the Father. Ask them to explain about Jesus as the only way of salvation by grace through faith alone and you’re likely to have a very short conversation. Those who are true to biblical faith have only the highest view of Christ and his full deity as well as his full humanity and his unity with the Father.

As John says, the relationship of the unity of the Father and the Son is unique, inextricable and indispensable (22-23). To deny this relationship is to reveal yourself as the offspring of the Liar-in-Chief (John 8:42-47). As for extended discussions with those who teach false doctrine, John advises in his second letter that we not invite such a person into our home “or give any kind of encouragement” (2 John 10, *NLT*).

Finally, standing firm requires our...

Abiding in the Father and the Son (24-27)

Verse 24 is one of the best and clearest statements for the reason we should be conservative evangelicals! Notice, my fellow Americans, there’s nothing in this statement that requires a certain, right-wing political position! We must stick with, conserve, only the good news and message of Jesus Christ.

The late John Stott sagely advised: “Christians should always be ‘conservative’ in their theology. To have ‘itching ears,’ ever running after new teachers, listening to anybody and never arriving at the knowledge of the truth, is a characteristic of the ‘perilous times’ which shall come ‘in the last days’ (2 Tim. iii.1,7, iv.3). The continuous obsession for ‘some new thing’ is a mark of the Athenian not the Christian” (Acts xvii.21. P.113). Abiding or remaining in the Father and Son is...

An ongoing challenge

This verb “to abide/remain” (*meno*) appears 24 times in 1 John (5 in these closing verses) and in these closing verses John speaks of the truth that abides in us as we also seek to abide in Christ. The Word abides in believers, who are challenged to let it abide in them increasingly. “The Holy Spirit also abides in them, but they are also to abide in Him or Christ” (Boice, 92).

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 (Luke 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. We need to cultivate the practice of listening prayer, seeking to hear God's voice to us, and then make sure we seek to do what it says (James 1:19-25). The more we live in and by the Word, the more confident we are in its power, as the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17) to ward off any challenge the devil and his representatives throw our way.

As Paul admonished the church, "Let the word of Christ ("message about Christ," *NLT*) dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom...." (Colossians 3:16a). Our challenge is to hold one another accountable in our remaining faithful to the message of Christ and his saving work which we receive by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8f).

To abide in Jesus and for him to abide in us is to live a cruciform life, one of saying "no" to self-centered desires and saying "yes" to the way of the cross (Matthew 10:38; 16:24). If Christ is within us, we must let him have his way of sacrificial love and selfless obedience (John 15:1-17). The danger which seems to have overtaken the church in Ephesus is the hardening of and strict adherence to theological orthodoxy at the expense of their first love (Revelation 2:1-7). We must never forget the primacy of love.

John notes that as followers of Christ acknowledge the message of Christ is within them, passing the doctrinal/truth test, they have assurance of...

A dependable relationship

Of course we know that the Lord will remain with us forever. He remains faithful to his covenant people. "The Lord knows those who are his" (Numbers 16:5; 2 Timothy 2:19). But our responsibility is to cultivate and continue a faithful love relationship with him. The tense in this verse suggests we are to keep on abiding in him (Robertson, 219).

Some of our newer translations read "remain" in him as the Word and the Spirit "remain" in us. But the word "remain" can have a rather empty connotation, meaning to just stay in the same place," continuing unchanged and unmoved. I prefer the word "abide," although some may think it a bit archaic sounding. To abide can carry the meaning of ongoing stability in a relationship, even to continue in a sojourn with and to bear with someone. It's a bit more personal to say "Christ is abiding with me and I am abiding in him." Abiding is not informational, intellectual or even doctrinal, but is relational. When John speaks of abiding, he doubtless connects this relationship with Jesus' words about abiding in his love (John 15:1-10). Driving home this idea of abiding in the love of Christ, John uses the verb "to love" 46 times in the 105 verses of his first letter.

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.”

John is likely referring to these false teachers and their aggressive proselyting when he says they don’t need anyone to teach them (27, Yarbrough, 167). False teachers who minimize Christ and his saving work and the sufficiency of faith in him alone are not the kind of teachers we need.

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 in the fellowship of the church, committed to the truth of Christ, we have assurance of eternal life (John 3:15, 36; 6:40, 47, 57; 17: 2f, Comfort, 2143).

Not only do we not need to fear false teaching, but we can and should confront it with the Spirit of Christ in us. Paul said that the Lord’s servant must not quarrel with his opponents, but be able in kindness to teach them the truth. He goes on to say,

“Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:25f).

We are to “be merciful to those who doubt” (Jude 22), and those who have not yet defected from the faith of Christ must be encouraged to hold to the truth, which is a matter of eternal life and death.

Conclusion:

When we abide in Christ and his presence and Word abide in us, we have the confidence we have passed the doctrinal test. 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 then can even confront error and seek to win the errant back to the faith (James 5:19f).

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 Peter 3:15). As God’s “approved workers,” we need to correctly handle the Word of truth (2 Timothy 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.

Remember, no one is your spiritual superior who claims to have a special anointing, a more important gift, or an elitist level of understanding. With the Word of God in your heart and mind, and seeking the continuous infilling of the Holy Spirit, you can live up to your high calling as a child and servant of God.

Let's keep on growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:15). He's the one who is able to keep us from falling (Jude 24) and will use us to disciple and teach others as we obey the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19f). Let's help one another in the Body of Christ to pass this doctrinal test that gives us assurance that we're in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). Let's stand firm together in these confusing times.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Do you know of former professing Christians who were led into false teaching? What do you think was the main reason for their straying from the truth?
2. Harold OJ Brown noted that the early Christians were more fearful of false teachers than of persecutors. Why do you think this was true and why might it be true today?
3. How would you describe the current times as a "last hour," a crisis time when we should expect the soon return of the Lord (e.g. 1 Timothy 4:1ff)?
4. What are some of the current antichrists that you have observed (those against or "instead" of Christ)?
5. What assurance does John give that every believer is capable of detecting error and remaining true to Christ?
6. What do you think is meant by the believer's anointing, and do you have this anointing? When did you receive it? What difference does the Spirit's anointing make in your life?

7. Reflect on the idea of remaining (better, *abiding*) in Christ and in the Father, and what this means to you and also your responsibility in your love relationship with the Triune God? How can you grow in your abiding relationship with God?

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