



THAT YOU MAY KNOW: A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

LESSON 7: “Assurance and the Persistence in Truth”

TEXT: 1 John 2:18–27

One of the lesser-known associates of the apostle Paul is a man named **Hymenaeus**. Not much is known about him. He is only mentioned by Paul in two texts: **1 Timothy 1:18–20** (written c. AD 64, during Paul’s 4th missionary journey); and **2 Timothy 2:16–18** (written c. AD 66, during Paul’s 2nd Roman imprisonment). Both of these texts appear in letters addressed to Timothy, who at the time was serving as Paul’s delegate in the church at Ephesus. And both of these texts describe Hymenaeus in the worst possible terms. He was *an apostate*.

The name “Hymenaeus” was derived from the name of the Greek god of marriage, indicating that he was brought up in a pagan home. Since he is mentioned exclusively in reference to Ephesus, it is likely that he was a resident of that city. Though we cannot be certain, it is possible that Hymenaeus had formerly served as one of the elders at the church in Ephesus—specifically because of Paul’s prophecy in Acts 20 that “from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things” (v. 30). When we examine what Paul specifically states about Hymenaeus later in 1 and 2 Timothy, we find that Hymenaeus fits this description exactly.

If this connection can be made, then it is probable that Hymenaeus was one of the enthusiastic young men who showed potential as an elder when Paul first planted the church in Ephesus and trained disciples for gospel ministry (Acts 19:9–10; AD 52–55). If this is the case, we can assume that Hymenaeus was marked by a passion for theology and a penchant for teaching. He had the great apostle Paul as his own mentor. He had tremendous potential for gospel purposes.

But a decade later, that potential for good had entirely vanished. At some point before Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy (c. AD 64), a significant change had occurred in Hymenaeus’s life. He earns no commendation from Paul. In fact, when he writes about him, Paul describes him as *excommunicated from the church*. What happened? He abandoned the truth. He denied Christ. And he deliberately sought to entangle others in his false faith.

How are we to understand *apostasy*? How does a *shipwreck in regard to faith* relate to *the assurance of salvation*? The apostle John provides important insight into these questions in 1 John 2:18–27.

1 John 2:18–27 – “Assurance and the Persistence in Truth”

The apostle John writes 1 John to provide *assurance* to his readers that they were indeed saved: “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). John believed that Christians can and should know that they have had their sins forgiven and have entered eternal life. To do this, John provides various signs from which his readers were to draw certainty—signs which provide standards by which all who profess to be Christians should examine their lives.

By this time in his letter, John has provided *six* of these standards by which to draw comfort (or concern):

- 1) **1 John 1:1–4 – “Assurance and the Historicity of Christ”**—*Do you believe that the biblical testimony about Jesus Christ is true?*
- 2) **1 John 1:5–10 – “Assurance and the Confession of Sin”**—*Are you deeply aware of your sin and do you acknowledge it to God?*
- 3) **1 John 2:1–2 – “Assurance and the Sufficiency of Christ”**—*Do you believe that the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient for your sin?*
- 4) **1 John 2:3–6 – “Assurance and the Obedience of God’s Commands”**—*Are you zealous to obey God’s revealed will for your life?*
- 5) **1 John 2:7–11 – “Assurance and the Love of One’s Brother”**—*Do you give yourself sacrificially for the benefit of other believers?*
- 6) **1 John 2:12–17 – “Assurance and the Hatred of Evil”**—*Do you loathe the things that are contrary to God and His ways?*

John now provides a *seventh standard*: the professor's relationship to and persistence in *the truth*.

"Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie is of the truth. 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. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life. These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you. As for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for 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, you abide in Him."
—1 John 2:18–27

Bible translations and commentators divide this text into paragraphs in different ways, but the overall emphasis is clear: **John expresses confidence in his readers' identity as genuine believers because of their persistence in truth, contrasting them with those who had departed from the faith while exhorting them to be vigilant and remain faithful.** To examine John's purpose in this text, we can organize our observations around three headings.

I. The Characteristic of Our Age (2:18)

Verse 18 stands as the introductory statement for the entire section, and these first words here are words of *warning*. He begins by addressing his readers as "**Children.**" Although John's tone is quickly going to become polemical, he nonetheless begins with another address of affection and assurance (see also 2:1, 7, 12, 13). He wanted his readers again to know what he thought about their spiritual state. He had *confidence* in them.

The rest of the sentence is constructed in the form of a *chiasm*—a kind of parallelism of the parts of the sentence that draw attention to its center:

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| <p>A. it is the last hour;
 B. and just as you heard that antichrist is coming,
 B¹. even now many antichrists have appeared;
 A¹. from this we know that it is the last hour.</p> | <p>} ←</p> |
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John's focus is on the reality of *apostacy*. He wants his readers to understand that *the shipwreck of others' faith* was not something that was surprising. Rather, it was to be expected. He reminds his readers that they are in "**the last hour,**" a description that appears at the beginning and end of the sentence. Although the phrases "last days" or "last times" appear elsewhere in Scripture, this particular description is unique to John. The expression reminds his audience that they exist in the era in which *Christ's coming is imminent*, a topic to which he will turn in the very next passage (see 1 John 2:28–3:3).

But this truth was not new. John describes it as something his readers had already "**heard.**" John emphasizes the fixed, unchanging nature of the apostolic message. Jesus Himself had predicted false teachers (e.g., Matt 24:4–5, 24–25), and so did His apostles (e.g., 2 Thess 2:1–12; 2 Pet 2:1–22).

Consistent with apostolic teaching, John emphasized two things. First, John taught there would be an ultimate "**Antichrist,**" and that he "**is coming**"—i.e., he is *on his way* and his arrival is *sure*. Although John is the first one to use this title (ἀντί [*anti*, "instead of/against"] + χριστός [*Christos*, "Christ"] = *Antichrist*, "one opposed to Christ"), he is referring to the same one Jesus referred to as "the abomination of desolation" (Matt 24:15), Paul referred to as "the lawless one" (2 Thess 2:8), and John himself later refers to as "the beast" (Rev 13:1–18).

Second, John taught that in the meantime, "**many antichrists**" preceded the Antichrist's arrival. There were *already* many who opposed Christ who were active in the world. This instruction was not to come as a surprise but was to affirm to John's readers that counterfeit claims were, sadly, common. These challenges were part of the church age. These false teachers were expected forerunners; they foreshadowed the coming of the end.

Why was this important? John wanted his readers *to expect impostors from within and without the church*. The reality of apostasy was not to show that salvation, somehow, doesn't always stick. Rather, it was to show that there will be many who *pretend* to be saved, when in reality they are deceived or deceiving.

II. The Characteristics of the Counterfeits (2:19, 22–23, 26)

In the passage that then follows, John provides three principal characteristics of these counterfeit Christians.

A. They abandon the teaching of the apostles (v. 19).

John states **“they went out.”** This decisive act—a figurative departure from the church—is one of the primary evidences of counterfeit faith. In fact, John repeats the phrase **“from us”** or **“of us”** (the same phrase in the original Greek) four times in this verse—obviously revealing what was forefront on John's mind. Although the **“us”** could be taken as a reference to specific Christian churches, it is best to understand it as a specific reference *to the apostles and their teaching* (the “we” of 1 John 1:1–4). In other words, the departure of these counterfeits was a departure from *apostolic teaching*.

Thus, John points to an important fact: counterfeit faith is often not recognized at the beginning. Pseudo-Christians become members of churches, make strong professions of faith, and even engage in sacrificial acts of service. All of this conceals their true identity. Perhaps they themselves are deceived, or perhaps they are deceiving the Christians around them. But with time, the truth will come out. **The fact that they don't persist in the truth is proof they were never saved.** (For teaching on this from Jesus, see His parable of the wheat and tares in Matt 13:24–30.)

B. They reject the person of Jesus (vv. 22–23).

John next calls the counterfeit Christian a **“liar”** (v. 22). He once made the good confession of Jesus Christ, but with time, his true state as a child of the father of lies (see John 8:44, 54–55) becomes apparent. At this stage, the counterfeit **“denies”** (“to repudiate, disown”) Jesus—not in an isolated moment (as in the case of Peter in Matt 26:70, 72), but as an ongoing conviction. Specifically, he denies **“that Jesus is the Christ.”**

The central issue of Christianity is the identity of Jesus: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16:15–16). The central tenant of the Christian faith is the correct profession of Jesus: that He is **“the Christ, the Son of God”** (John 20:31); **“the Lord . . . whom God raised from the dead”** (Rom 10:9); God **“in the flesh”** (2 John 7). But to disown Him as such, to reject the apostolic teaching about Him, is to become an **“antichrist.”** In fact, the one who rejects this teaching about **“the Son”** clearly indicates that he knows not **“the Father.”** Despite the grandest assertions of religious sincerity or spiritual insight, one cannot deny the apostolic about Jesus Christ (as recorded in the New Testament) and still claim to be a child of God (see John 14:6; 17:3).

C. They seek the corruption of believers (v. 26).

As the third characteristic of these counterfeits, John points to their effort **“to deceive.”** In addition to departing from apostolic teaching, false Christians commonly seek to bring others along their same path and convert them to their religious views. Despite their rejection of New Testament teaching, they seek to influence over other Christians, propagating their doubt, and denial. They claim a special authority—based on their own experience—to bring correction to the church. In our time, this tendency is particularly evident among those who claim to be “deconstructing.”

III. The Characteristics of the Redeemed (2:20–21, 24–25, 27)

John also gives three characteristics of genuine faith.

A. They possess spiritual understanding (vv. 20–21).

John draws a sharp distinction between the counterfeits and his audience with the emphatic, **“But you”** that begins v. 20. Crucial to this distinction is his audience's possession of **“an anointing of the Holy One.”** The

term “anointing” occurs only here and in v. 27 in the New Testament. Although various interpretations have been offered, it is best to understand it as a reference to *Spirit-wrought understanding, enlightenment, or illumination* (see 1 Cor 2:14–15). As Hiebert states, “It is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit that establishes believers in their faith and enables them to understand God’s truth” (*Epistles of John*, 112).

Because of the Spirit’s ministry of illumination, “all” genuine believers “**know the truth**”—that is, they all believe and affirm the fundamental truths about Jesus Christ, the person the counterfeits never truly understood. Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 16:13), what He teaches never gives way to lies, and what He teaches never leads astray, “**because no lie is of the truth.**”

B. They persist in timeless truth (vv. 24–25).

John again draws a sharp distinction with the emphatic, “**As for you**” at the beginning of v. 24. The focus of his second characteristic of genuine believers in these verses is that they “**abide**” in the truth. He uses the verb *three times* in v. 24 to make his point. First he states it in the form of a command, “**let that abide**”; then he stated it in the form of a condition, “**if [the truth] . . . abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.**” John’s language does not suggest he is unsure of their salvation. Instead, John recognizes that commands, warnings, prohibitions, and admonitions are *means* for preserving the saved, and he recognizes that genuine believers must—and will—recognize their responsibility in the matter. They must “work out their salvation,” but they must also remember that “it is God who is at work within” (Phil 2:12–13).

In fact, John reassures his audience in v. 25 that the eternal life is always a matter of God’s promise, and not human merit or the ability to preserve oneself (see also John 1:12–13; 3:16; 10:28–30).

C. They enjoy permanent presence (v. 27).

As his final description of genuine faith in this passage, John again draws a sharp distinction with the emphatic, “**As for you**” (v. 27). He returns to the concept of “**the anointing**”—that special ministry of the Holy Spirit in all genuine believers, giving them real understanding of spiritual truth. Here he states that it is this ministry of the Spirit that “**abides in you.**” As much as his audience was to apply effort to abiding in truth, John encouraged his readers that the Spirit of truth has already taken up His permanent residency inside of them.

For Discussion

1. Do you know anyone who started off strong in the Christian faith, only to fall away? Should this really shock you? In light of John’s teaching, how should we understand the profession of these “believers”?
2. How does John’s warning about apostates and antichrists serve to motivate and preserve genuine believers?
3. Review Matthew 16:16–17 and John 20:31 carefully. What are the basic elements of a correct confession of Jesus Christ? What other texts from Scripture provide answers? Do you affirm these truths wholeheartedly?
4. Can you say that you are “abiding” in the truth, as John commands it (1 John 2:24–25)? How does this look in your life? How can you improve?
5. How does the assurance of “the anointing of the Holy One” (1 John 2:20, 27) encourage you?

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 2:24.
2. **Read and meditate upon** Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:24–30. What does Jesus teach us in this parable about *counterfeit believers*?
3. **Listen to** two sermons by John MacArthur: “Christian Deconstruction, Part 1” and “Christian Deconstruction Part 2”, accessible here: <https://www.gty.org/sermons/81-143/christian-deconstruction-part-1> and <https://www.gty.org/sermons/81-144/christian-deconstruction-part-2>.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: Men of the Word Annual Fall Fellowship, December 3, 6pm (Family Center)