

The Call to Perseverance
1 John 2:18–25
May 7, 2017

We behave according to what we believe. The things we hold to be true and foundational inform the mind, will, and emotions. They powerfully drive the engine of life toward particular actions, ethics, and behavior.

So, if little thought is given to the details of the gospel then it shows up in behavior—but not in a good way.

Which means, when the mind, will, and emotions centers life in the world and not in Christ (i.e. 1 John 2:15-17), we may shift our belief system to accommodate our behavior. We may not reject *everything* about God so that we embrace atheism. But more subtly, we subtract the essentials of the faith while leaving a *vague* semblance of Christianity to pursue desires contrary to the holy life of Christ-followers. All the while, we maintain the respectable air of being Christian. We claim Jesus but bear no resemblance to Him. That's not true Christianity.

John Stott points out that up to this point, the Apostle John has focused on two major issues that gives evidence that a person belongs to Christ: obeying Christ's commandments and loving Christ's people (2:3–11). Now, in our text, after making an application by explaining that only two possible loves exist—loving God or loving the world (see Matt's sermon, "Do Not Love the World," 4/23/17), John explains that *holding particular doctrine* in the face of opposition bears evidence to true faith in Christ [John Stott, *TDNT: The Epistles of John*, 103]. But I would go further in clarifying what the apostle teaches. It is not just passing a doctrinal test that qualifies a person as a true Christian (that was certainly not Stott's implication). Rather John insists on doctrine that leads to perseverance bearing witness to one's faith in Christ. Believing affects behavior and builds perseverance.

Some who had associated with the Ephesian church had abandoned the fellowship of the body to embrace another doctrine—that denied Jesus as the Christ—and a different life—that loved the world more than the Father. With that kind of strong influence in the wrong direction, what would keep others from doing the same? Only one thing can keep us in the faith. *The indwelling Spirit keeps us persevering in Christ.* But how?

1. Perseverance despite opposition

Perseverance implies continuation or sticking with something even when difficult and costly. A runner perseveres until she reaches the finish line even when her legs feel like Jell-o. A soldier continues in battle even when dangers and difficulties intensify. A worker perseveres on the job, pushing past tiredness and challenges to finish the task. Perseverance is part of life.

But a student pulled from the classroom wearing street shoes that hasn't practiced probably won't finish the race. A mercenary who has no sense of patriotism and loyalty to the fellow soldiers and the nation bails out when trouble comes. A worker that has no commitment to his job quits when things get rough. *So perseverance is not just about gutting it out.* Rather, in the biblical sense, perseverance depends on the inward disposition of the heart. Apart from the regenerating work of the Spirit, one who might have professed Christ at some point turns away from faithfully living as Jesus' follower.

The congregation at Ephesus had been bombarded with false teaching. Opponents belittled the cherished doctrines of Christ's two natures in one person. They made fun of those holding to the solitary work of Christ at the cross as the only way to God. John calls these opponents "antichrists." The evidence proved that some among them had not persevered.

"Children, it is the last hour," he wrote. By that, he didn't necessarily mean that Jesus' return was about to happen. Instead, the New Testament writers considered that period from the cross and resurrection that awaited the final, climatic return of Christ as **"the last hour."** Peter called this period "the last days" (Acts 2:17; so did James, James 5:3 and the writer of Hebrews 1:2). Paul called it "later times" (1 Tim 4:1). Stott helpfully points out that John "was not thereby dogmatizing that the end was imminent. He was expressing a theological truth rather than making a chronological reference" [108]. So he was not making a prediction but stating a theological reality: we're living in the period that awaits the return of Jesus Christ and the final judgment. So persevere in Christ.

In that period opposition mounts. **"And just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared."** That term means 'one[s] who is against Christ.' While John anticipates without specifying timeframe a single personality who embodies global opposition to Jesus Christ and the gospel of the cross and resurrection, until that time, **"many antichrists have appeared."** In other words, the prelude to **"antichrist"** is **"many antichrists."** Instead of the world becoming more accepting of the gospel it increases in opposition. That opposition may take the form of what you see in Saudi Arabia and other places where it is illegal, under penalty of death, to worship Christ or to openly talk about the gospel. Many Christians remain in prisons throughout the world, not for crimes against humanity but for the testimony of the grace of God in Christ. Others live each day feeling the weightiness of opposition leading to arrest or harassment or loss.

Opposition also takes more subtle forms. It's the popular kid at school who ridicules those who seek to live as Christians. It's the co-worker or employer that makes fun of you bowing your head to give thanks before a meal. It's the relative that stirs up trouble against you by speaking falsely about you because you devote your life to Christ. It's the social and political groups that make you out as a bigot and racist because you refuse to commend their sinful practices.

"From this we know that it is the last hour." Antichrists abound, making their voices heard in multiple ways that display their opposition to Christ and all who belong to Him. John tells us, that's just a reminder that we are living in that stretch from the resurrection to the second coming. So be faithful, steadfast, and unrelenting in living as Christians. Persevere despite the opposition. You can and you will because of what Jesus Christ has put in you by His grace. Perseverance in the faith exposes a true faith in Christ.

2. Perseverance evident by commitment to the body

How did John and the rest of the church realize who the antichrists were in their community? Here he makes the startling statement: **"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."** The *Christian Standard Version* uses the word "belong" in place of "of us." "They did not belong to us." John infers that these he named "antichrists," previously had some kind of

relationship to the church in Ephesus. Were they members of the church? Did they serve in some capacity? Were they at the center of church life? He doesn't tell us. But here's what he wants us to know. *They did not persevere in the fellowship of the church because they did not belong to the redeemed of the Lord.* Belonging to the body leads to perseverance.

That presses two matters. *First, we must see the centrality of the local church in the work of Christ.* When Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel in Derbe, Luke writes, they “made many disciples” (Acts 14:21). That's Acts' code word for believers gathered into local fellowships of believers. Neither they nor the other NT Christians simply sought to get decisions from the unevangelized. They preached Christ and gathered those who believed the gospel into local fellowships so that they might be a display of Christ's saving grace and future glory. That's why Jesus prayed so passionately for the church in John 17. He prayed for the church's unity so that the world might know—by seeing the church's life—that God indeed sent Jesus as the Savior of the world (John 17:23). Even the Great Commission as the marching orders for the church into the world *cannot* be fulfilled without establishing churches to baptize and teach disciples (Matt 28:18–20). The book of Revelation peels back the curtains in heaven to show the church as the focus of Christ's eternal affections (Rev 21:9–14).

Second, we must see the certainty that believers belong to one another. That's why the repeated phrase “**of us**” or “belong to us” speaks so clearly. We're not just getting together occasionally to do a few religious things. Rather we belong to one another, signified by common confession of the gospel, covenanting together in membership, serving one another, praying for one another, loving one another, showing kindness to one another, and learning to live with one another in the unity of the Spirit.

“The way we live together in our churches,” writes Ray Ortlund Jr., “grows out of what we believe together” [*The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ*, 39]. But even with right belief that kind of life is not always easy. Our personalities and idiosyncrasies sometime get in the way. So do our backgrounds and traditions. Misunderstandings, careless words, neglected service, and stubbornness sometimes challenges our unity and faithfulness to each other. So we must persevere in what we believe and how we behave toward one another. The indwelling Spirit gives grace to do so. That gives evidence that we not only belong to one another but we belong to Christ. That's the fruit of what John intended by the statement, “The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause of stumbling in him” (2:10) and “By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, *nor the one who does not love his brother*” (3:10).

So when our love fades we go back to the cross and double our efforts to serve one another. When our speech wounds, we humbly confess to the offended. When stubbornness and pride throw a wedge in our unity, we repent and live selflessly at the cross with one another.

Those who bailed out for a different kind of fellowship shrouded in darkness and a different doctrine that turned from Jesus as the Messiah proved to be unbelievers. Despite their professions or even continued claims, their attitude and actions toward the local church unmasked them as false disciples. They did not last. They couldn't. They lacked the life of Christ. True followers of Jesus persevere in the fellowship of the local church.

3. Perseverance sustained by the Spirit

Perseverance in the faith, while expending mental, emotional, and physical strength, does not happen by our power. If it is merely our power then we will bail out. It is, as Tom Nettles explains, “the perfect confluence of divine sovereignty in preserving us and human initiative, work and energy in pursuing holiness” [*By His Grace and For His Glory*, 367]. By the indwelling Spirit, God gives us what we need to persevere.

“But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know.” John counters the prevailing antichristian philosophy affecting this church. The words **“anointing”** and **“know,”** in particular, may be adopted from some of their lingo. While Gnosticism as a philosophical system came into full development in the next century, at that stage in late 1st century it budded into heretical teaching. Second century Gnostics spoke boastfully of a special anointing that they had and that others didn’t, that gave them special knowledge. While we’re not positive of its developments in John’s day, it seems likely that John’s language counters some belief or practice going on in Ephesus [see I.H. Marshall, *NICNT: The Epistles of John*, 153–154 and Curtis Vaughan, *FSGC: 1,2,3 John*, 66]. This anointing by the pre-gnostics, they claimed, gave them a special *knowledge* or *gnosis* that distinguished their superior spirituality from others. So John counters the belief of these antichristians by declaring that believers did indeed have **“an anointing”**—but unlike theirs—and that it was from none other than **“the Holy One,”** Jesus Christ, and not through mysterious cultic initiations. Due to that anointing, Christians had the true knowledge of the gospel of Jesus unto eternal life. The Spirit opened the mind and heart to **“know”** and believe and abide in the gospel. That anointing enables perseverance.

That term **“anointing”** has its roots in “anoint,” which is also the root for “Christ” or “Anointed One.” Jesus is the One anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Christ (Isa 61:1–3; Luke 4:16–21). So our anointing is received from the Anointed One, Jesus Christ. His anointing by the Spirit is the key to abiding in Christ (see v. 27). Paul explained that without the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, we do not belong to Christ, regardless of our religious profession and practice (Rom 8:9). It is the Holy Spirit who reveals the things of God to us through the gospel (1 Cor 2:9–10). The same Holy Spirit affects our worship and relationships (Eph 5:18–21). Jesus tells us that it is the Holy Spirit who brings us “into all truth” (John 16:13). John later writes, “We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (3:24). The Holy Spirit enables us to **“know”** the truth of the gospel and all that Christ has promised through it. This knowledge of what Christ has done in His work to reconcile us to God enables us to persevere (Rom 5:10–11). Without that certainty of Christ having accomplished salvation for us through His death and resurrection, now declared in the gospel, we have no strength to continue in a faith that’s not really a faith. The Holy Spirit sustains perseverance in the faith.

4. Perseverance shown by the abiding confession

As Ray Ortlund Jr. explains, “So the test of a gospel-centered church is its doctrine on paper *plus* its culture in practice” [*The Gospel*, 18]. While the first three points in this study looks at the church’s culture in practice, it cannot happen without “doctrine on paper.” Here is where the antichrists opposing the Ephesian church showed their true colors. John writes, **“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.”** He sets the stage for exposing the deceitful errors being taught. The Holy Spirit, as the Christians’ anointing,

sets off the inward alarms when someone attempts to parade a lie as the truth of the gospel. I recall standing at a graveside funeral for a man kin to some people in the church where I pastored. A middle-aged man spoke very warmly at the funeral. But right in the middle of his talk, the alarms went off inwardly. I realized that he didn't believe the gospel of Christ but taught another gospel, one channeled through his church's teachings. The anointing of the Spirit sounded the alarm so that I might warn those around me.

John's alarm sounded: **"Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ [the Anointed One]? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son."** At the heart of the false teaching in Ephesus is a denial concerning the person and/or work of Jesus Christ. In this case, they denied that Jesus is the Messiah. John calls this **"the antichrist."** In other words, what will come to global fruition in the antichrist is already happening in those that deny that Jesus is the Christ.

What does that denial entail? **"The Christ"** or the Messiah is the promised one who fulfills the centuries of Old Testament prophecies in God coming to man to reconcile sinners to Himself. So that means to deny Jesus as God or to deny that He actually came in the flesh to die on the cross and to be raised from the dead or to deny that His redemptive work accomplished what God promised Adam, Abraham, David, and others in the OT, is to embrace the mind and practice of **"the antichrist."** In other words, we cannot shortchange some aspect of the doctrine of Jesus Christ and still have a Messiah who saves sinners. The Holy Spirit keeps these truths close for all that Christ saves.

John continues. **"Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also."** So one cannot know God as Father without first knowing Jesus as the eternal Son sent by the Father to endure the cross to save sinners. God cannot be known apart from His Trinitarian revelation. That's why we make a big deal of the Trinity when talking about the gospel. Apart from the truth of Christ as the eternal, infinite God we're relying upon merely a man to satisfy God's justice for us at the cross. But that Man at the cross is God Himself in the flesh. We abide in that truth.

What does this have to do with the abiding confession? **"As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning."** John uses that phrase to refer to the gospel as the foundation of our lives (1:1–3; 2:7). So let the truths of the gospel *abide* in you. **If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.** That which you heard from the beginning is your *confession of faith*. It's the gospel that you heard and believed. You don't grow past the gospel. You might learn more of it and understand it more fully but you never grow past it. You let it abide in you, so you intentionally ponder it, meditate upon it, study it, discuss it, listen to it, fellowship in it, and see it worked out into the details of your life. That's *abiding* in it. And that remains the key to abiding **"in the Son and in the Father."** Your fellowship with God depends on persevering in the confession of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

5. Perseverance rests upon the promise

Connected to what John has explained both negatively—by those who denied that Jesus is the Christ—and positively—by those confessing the Son, is the promise that Jesus has made to us. **"This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life."** You cannot persevere in Christ apart from His promise in the gospel. Otherwise, you have nothing to persevere in. You have no aim for your life. You have no future hope that lifts

your spirits in the midst of life's most difficult days. But when you have the promise of eternal life from Christ Himself, then you persevere despite the challenges.

The One who created the world made the promise to restore us in His image (Eph 4:24; Gal 4:19). The One who gave the Law that none of us has been able to keep also made the promise to satisfy the Law on our behalf (Rom 10:4). The One who never sinned became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him—that's His promise (2 Cor 5:21). The One who is Himself the Life has promised us eternal life in Him (John 1:4; 1 John 5:12).

If you've not believed and received the promise that Jesus made by repenting and trusting Him, then you have nothing to rest upon toward perseverance. Your attempts at persevering rely on your imagination—and that cannot take you far. But when you believe the promise of the gospel made and accomplished by Jesus Himself, then you have the certainty that whether tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword, nothing can separate you from His love, and in all these things you “overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us” (Rom 8:35–37).

Christ has given us His promise, His life, His body, and His Spirit so that we might keep on keeping on in living out the confession of our faith in Him. Those who do, give evidence that they belong to Jesus Christ.