

“True Believers Remain in the True Church”
(1 John 2:18-19)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. John has shown us that believers and unbelievers are polar opposites in everything that has to do with God:
 - a. The believer loves God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit; believes Son came in the flesh), His truth (doctrine, ethics, obedience, in response to disobedience), the brethren (loves them); and he is averse to the evil one (overcomes him, loves not the world).
 - b. The unbeliever, on the other hand, hates God, His truth, believers; but is attracted to the evil one and the world.
 - c. They are light and darkness; good and evil.
2. It shouldn't surprise us then that we are not compatible with them:
 - a. It might seem like we're not that far apart when we first come to Christ, but the more we grow in Christ, the more we understand God's holiness and the sin of those around us, the more we see how true it is.
 - b. We should be surprised if we find the world seeking us out.
 - (i) This means something is going on in our hearts that shouldn't be.
 - (ii) Unbelievers hate the light of God's truth and holiness; if that light shines from us, they should find us distasteful as well (John 3:36).

B. Preview.

1. This evening, we'll consider the last mark John gives us of genuine conversion: true believers remain within the fellowship of the true church.
 - a. This is really the culmination of all the marks.
 - (i) Where is it that all these things reach their pinnacle?
 - (ii) Where is it that Christ reveals Himself and heaven is pictured for us more than any other place?
 - (iii) It is in the church, in its worship and fellowship.
 - b. This is why true believers will love the fellowship of the true church.
 - c. But this is also why the unconverted will not.
2. Again we find believers and unbelievers on opposite sides of the fence. Tonight, we'll consider two things:
 - a. True believers love the fellowship of the true church and desire to remain in it.
 - b. Unbelievers do not the desire the fellowship of church and so depart.

II. Sermon.

- A. True believers love the fellowship of the church and desire to remain in it.

1. John tells his readers of a segment of the congregation that had left the church.
 - a. His readers were in the last days – more than this, the last hour.
 - (i) It's hard to see how we could be living in the last days now, if they were living in the last hour then.
 - (ii) But that is the topic of another sermon.
 - b. His readers knew the antichrist was coming, but even now there were many antichrists: this is how they knew it was the last hour.
 - (i) Where had they come from? From the church. They were false teachers who denied fundamental truths about Jesus Christ.
 - (ii) But they were no longer there. They had left the fellowship of believers perhaps to gather a following to themselves.
 - (iii) John points to this as one of the indicators that they were not sincere: “if they had been of us, they would have remained with us.”
 - (iv) If they had loved the truth, if they had loved the true Lord Jesus who laid His life down for His church, if they had loved the fellowship of true believers, they never would have left: they would have remained.
 - (v) But the fact they couldn't bear it any longer was testimony to the condition of their hearts. “They were not *really* of us.”
2. The point is that if they had been true believers, they would they would have remained in the fellowship of the true church, because this is what believers love.
 - a. Of course, the church must be a “true” church.
 - (i) Anyone can find a church that suits them. Unbelievers can and do join with churches that are not true.
 - (ii) The same was true in John's day.
 - (a) Then to leave the true church was to leave the fellowship of believers to enter the company of idolaters, heretics and antichrists.
 - (b) Things are not so different today:
 - (1) Those who leave a true church and pursue religion enter the company of those who worship false gods, believe soul destroying doctrines and follow men who take Christ's place as the center of devotion.
 - (2) Those who leave the true church and no longer pursue religion enter the company of atheists and agnostics – whose rebellious hearts will not allow themselves to accept the truth that is all around them.
 - (ii) But believers can't do this – the Spirit won't let them – they will only settle in true churches.
 - (a) A true church is one that holds to the fundamentals of the faith; that preaches the true Gospel:
 - (1) They hold to the infallibility and inerrancy of God's Word.
 - (2) They believe in the Triune God.
 - (3) They believe in the two natures of Christ.

- (4) They believe in the Virgin Birth.
- (5) They hold to the vicarious life and atoning death of Christ.
- (6) And they believe that justification is a free gift of God, given by His grace, received by faith alone, and is evidenced by a life of increasing holiness.

(b) The right administration of the sacraments and church discipline are also important, but more for the well-being of the church than for its being.

(c) A true believer will try to find the purest church he can and join its fellowship because his heart draws him to do so; and he won't leave unless he is absolutely compelled by Scripture.

- b. Believers may even fall away from the church for a while, but not fully and finally: The love of God will bring them back.
 - (i) His love for them.
 - (ii) Their love for Him.
 - (iii) If we truly love God, the brethren, and the truth, how could we possibly endure to leave His people, His worship, the body of Christ?
 - (iv) If this is what's in our hearts, we are true believers.

B. Unbelievers, on the other hand, do not the desire the fellowship of church and so depart.

- 1. The believer will not depart from the true church, but the unbeliever will.
 - a. He prefers moral darkness to light, hates God, His Son and those who are being recreated in His image, he hates the truth and will not accept it.
 - b. It shouldn't seem strange then that he would not long remain in the fellowship of the true church – this is the reason no unholy man really wants to go to heaven: if he doesn't enjoy these things on earth – which are just a shadow of the reality – he won't enjoy the reality.
 - c. “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*, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us” (2:19).
 - d. An unbeliever may be in the fellowship of a local congregation for a time, especially if that congregation has degenerated doctrinally and spiritually; but he will not long remain in the fellowship of a pure church, because God's righteousness will offend him.
 - e. Once he loses whatever he hoped to gain by being there, he will no longer have any reason to remain.
 - (i) Hiebert writes, “The clause ‘they went out’ (ἐξῆλθαι) implies not that they were excommunicated but that they voluntarily withdrew. Clark suggests that perhaps ‘they were psychologically incapable of bearing up under strong orthodox teachings.’ Clearly the orthodox majority refused to accept their views. Their withdrawal was not simply a matter of leaving one church to join another. Rather, their ‘departure, like Judas’s going out

from the community of disciples, pointed to betrayal, denial of faith, and separation from God's grace" ("1 John 2:18-28," 80-81).

- (ii) R. A. Peterson writes, "John instructs his readers in order to protect them from potential despair. They should not be dismayed when the false teachers separate from them, because this separation serves to distinguish true believers from false. The apostates left because they did not really belong to God's people. If they had, they would have remained. John here correlates the doctrines of perseverance and apostasy." "Apostacy," *Presbyterian* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 30.
- (iii) If we cannot endure sound doctrine, if holiness offends us, if we prefer fellowship with unbelievers over that of the saints, or leave Christ to follow some spiritual leader, then we are unconverted.

2. Conclusion.

- a. We have seen that John's purpose for this letter was to give to his readers the assurance that they were the Lord's, as over against the teachings of the proto-gnostic heretics that had infiltrated the church.
- b. He didn't simply declare they were converted, as though the Spirit of God had given him the ability to discern the true condition of their hearts. Rather, he pointed them to a series of subjective and objective marks by which *they* could make this determination.
- c. These included several positive, as well as negative marks. If we possess *all* of the positive marks – if our lives are *characterized* by them – then we can know that we possess the blessings of salvation through union with Christ.
- d. But if our lives are characterized by the negative marks – by even one of them – then our claim to sonship is void, and our profession is false.
 - (i) Of course as believers we will struggle with sin until the day we reach perfection in heaven.
 - (ii) But our lives will be free from the dominion of sin, so that we will not entirely give ourselves over to any vice.
- e. Nor does this mean that the unbeliever will not be able to maintain at least a veneer of godliness at times.
 - (i) There are many things that may motivate an unbeliever to play the part of a Christian, not the least of which is to convince himself that he is safe from God's wrath.
 - (ii) But he will never possess any of the true characteristics of grace in *any* measure.
 - (iii) Only those who are true believer have these marks.
 - (iv) May God grant that we may find them in our hearts. Amen.