REMAIN IN HIM

1 John 2:18–27

Key Verse: 2:24

“As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.”

We tend to have our own preconceptions about church. Some think of it as a building, or “organized religion.” Some think of it as ethnically based or associate it with their families. But 1 John teaches a radically different idea. Church, John says, is really a fellowship. And it’s not at all based on race, culture, interests or social class; in fact it binds very different people in an unusual closeness. The word “fellowship” really means to participate or share in. John says our fellowship begins vertically, with God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, as we receive the forgiveness of sins and learn the Father’s love. Rooted in this, and growing out of it, we grow in fellowship with other believers. 1 John challenges us all: if our fellowship with other believers is rather superficial, we should take a long, hard look at the quality of our fellowship with God.

In today’s passage John writes about something devastating to Christian fellowship: when people leave. Certain people leaving the fellowship seems to be a serious problem in the back of John’s mind from the beginning of this letter until now. Of course some people leave a Christian fellowship for good reasons—they’re actually called to serve the Lord elsewhere. But often people leave for bad reasons—they’ve got personal problems, they’re burned out, or hurt. 1 John deals with probably the worst reason—these people actually turned against the Christian faith and were trying to take others with them. In the midst of this John encourages believers to “remain.” John is speaking to an extreme case, but we can learn some important spiritual lessons in this passage. Mainly we want to think about two questions: What does it really mean to “remain”? And how and why should we do this? May God speak to us through his word today.

Look at verse 18. Throughout this chapter John has been calling believers “children” (1,12,13,14). Now he again calls them “dear children.” We know how much people love their own children or grandchildren. But John addresses believers as “dear children,” with an affection most people reserve only for their own. This is how he sees these believers, and it’s from this kind of love that he’s teaching them. He tells them that it’s “the last hour.” Basically, he means that the time is getting really dark, just as Jesus predicted it would before he comes again. He’s calling them to wake up spiritually and see how dark the times they’re living in are. How could John say this about those times? He says, “…and as you have heard the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.” John is the only Biblical author who uses the term “antichrist.” Paul uses the term “man of lawlessness” (2Th2:3,4ff.). Jesus himself warned his disciples that a sign of the end of the age would be the appearing of false messiahs and false prophets who will try to deceive many (Mt24:4,5,11,24; Mk13:5,6,22). Later in this letter, John says it’s not necessarily a person but “the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world” (4:3). This spirit opposes who Jesus is, what he came to do, all he stood for, as well as sincere followers of Jesus, and it works to lead us astray from him. So it’s not just a scary figure of a diabolical person at the very end of the world, but a spirit we have to contend with in our lives in this real world every day. We need to know that we’re living in a kind of “slow jam” of the last hour, ever since Jesus died and rose again. Spiritually speaking, we’re living in “enemy territory,” and the time is urgent (Ro13:11).

Then John gives us some evidence of this. Read verse 19. The “they” he mentions here seems to be the “many antichrists” in verse 18 who “have come.” It’s shocking and painful that these people used to be in the Christian fellowship. It was pretty disorienting and confusing for the believers who remained. John explains that their leaving shows “that none of them belonged to us.” It’s as if God used their leaving to unmask who they really were. Actually Jesus predicted that among his followers, some would be like sheep and others like goats; some would be like wheat and others like weeds (Mt25:31–33; 13:25–30). Once, when many pseudo-disciples decided to leave, he taught that the only ones who could really follow him were people that God the Father had “enabled” (Jn6:37,44,45, 65). Later, he told a group of hostile Jews who seemed to believe in him, “Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God” (Jn8:47). In light of verse 19, first and foremost we need to belong to God. What determines that we belong to God? Jesus said it’s as we listen to God, learn from him and let him lead us (Jn6:45; 8:47). Mostly, we belong to God when we personally receive Jesus who died and rose again, and then receive the Holy Spirit (Ro7:4; 8:9).

And in light of verse 19, when we belong to God, we also “belong” to other believers. It’s a powerful word: “belong.” What does it mean? In a general sense, it means to identify with all believers everywhere. But it has a more powerful and specific sense as well. Paul wrote in Romans 12:4,5: “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” In our Christian fellowship, we belong to one another in the same way that we belong to Christ himself. This means we should rethink our association in our local church. Many keep this participation at a safe, convenient distance. But that doesn’t seem to be what the Bible is saying about it. It’s saying that if we’re real Christians, we need to “belong” to one another.

Now let’s read verses 20,21. In these verses John says what distinguishes those who remain in the Christian fellowship is that they “know the truth.” How could John be so sure that they knew the truth? He says that all of them “have an anointing from the Holy One.” It means they’d been baptized by the Holy Spirit. Jesus repeatedly called him “the Spirit of truth” (Jn14:17; 15:26; 16:13). He told his disciples, “If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you” (Jn14:16,17). He said that “…the Advocate, the Holy Spirit…will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (Jn14:26). And he said, “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (Jn16:13a). But in verses 20,21 why does John emphasize that all believers know the truth? It’s because those who left the fellowship were trying to teach them, as if they had a fuller knowledge of truth. They were using their supposed superior knowledge to try to draw people out of the fellowship. John is saying here that it’s not just a few, elite, select people who are privileged to know the truth; all believers already know the truth, not through their own superior brain power but through the help of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth. He gives us discernment to detect deception.

Then John exposes what these defectors were really believing and teaching. Read verses 22,23. John directly calls them “liars” and “antichrists.” Actually, John has already been mentioning in various ways how these people had been lying. They were claiming to have fellowship with God but were walking in darkness (1:6). They were claiming to be without sin (1:8,10). They were saying, “I know him,” but were not obeying his commands (2:4). They were harboring hatred in their hearts toward Christian brothers and sisters (2:9,11). Now John adds that they did not believe that Jesus is the Christ, and this is what they were telling others also.

But what does it really mean that “Jesus is the Christ”? Later, John says it means to “acknowledge” Jesus (4:3). And in 2 John verse 7 he writes plainly: “I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.” To believe that Jesus is the Christ means to believe that he is God the Son who became flesh and lived for awhile among us (Jn1:14). His becoming flesh ultimately points to his becoming the Lamb of God on the cross (Jn1:29). John said back in verse 2, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” Among Christians there are many ideas and practices that we can call “secondary.” They may be the way we conduct our services or the way we do ministry. But there are also essential Christian beliefs, which are really “non negotiable.” Once we no longer believe them, we can no longer really be called a Christian. At the core of these beliefs is the truth about who Jesus really is. Why is this so crucial? It’s because when we accept and confess the truth about Jesus, we are saved (Ro10:9). This truth about Jesus is the ultimate truth from which all the other truths flow. When we believe that Jesus gave his body and shed his blood for our sins, we experience God’s light and forgiveness, and we can love and forgive anyone and live as real Christians. It was this truth about Jesus that those who left the fellowship didn’t want to believe anymore. They were still claiming that they had fellowship with the Father, but when they denied his Son, they revealed that it was all a lie (23).

Let’s read verse 24. In this verse, in Greek the word “remain” is repeated three times. It tells us that it’s more than just physically being present in a local body of believers. Even goats and weeds can do that. Here, what is important is *what* we are to remain in. What is it? John says we are to remain in “what you have heard from the beginning.” What did he mean? He said back in verse 7 that we have had a “command…since the beginning.” It was the command to “love one another,” to “walk in love” (Jn13:34,35; 2Jn5,6). How can we “remain” in this command to love? Jesus told his disciples, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (Jn13:34b). We can remain in his command as we remember how Jesus loved. How did Jesus love? Jesus loved first, when we were incapable of loving him back. Jesus always took the initiative in loving. He loved us when we were not really lovable, when we were sick and ugly, dirty and smelly in our sins. He loved us when we were proud and unworthy to receive his love, even when we were twisted, crooked and manipulative. We need to remain in this amazing love of Jesus; it needs to be a part of our lives every day.

The word “remain” in verse 24 reminds us of Jesus’ famous words in John 15. He said, “Remain in me, as I also remain in you…I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” He added, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love” (Jn 15:4,5,9,10). Then he repeated, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command” (Jn15:12–14). Remaining in his love enables us to keep on loving. In our own strength we’ll reach our limitations, get fed up and burn out. But as we remain in him, his love enables us to keep on loving, no matter what. Even in the midst of painful experiences and discouragement, we can keep on loving when we remain in his love.

Read verses 24,25. These words help us understand further what it means to “remain.” It means to remain in fellowship with the Son, and through the Son, in fellowship with the Father. We remain in or maintain this fellowship as we continue to obey his command to love. But if we stop obeying this command, we break this fellowship with the Father and the Son. It's a very serious matter. If we remain in this fellowship to the very end, we are promised eternal life. We need to remain in this fellowship both personally, and together as a community. So Hebrews 3:12,13 reads, “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (cf. Heb10:19–25).

Read verse 26. Here John plainly states that those who’d left the fellowship were now trying to lead them astray. So he repeats his admonishment. Read verse 27. He repeats about their anointing by the Holy Spirit, which is real and which teaches believers all the things we need to know about Jesus, but the main point here is the same as in verse 24: "Remain in him."

Through this passage we thought about what it really means to remain in Christian fellowship, and how and why we should do so. We all have to live in this real world, where the spirit of the world, and even people sometimes, try to lead us astray. Sometimes we can get really discouraged and confused. May God help us to remain in the forgiving grace and love of Jesus, who gave himself for our sins, especially by obeying his command to love.