

The Real Jesus: Discerning the Truth from Lies (1 John 2:18–27)

Why He Came: Advent in 1 John

Zionsville Fellowship | December 14, 2025 | Drew Hunter

This Advent we're looking at four sections in 1 John that tell us why Jesus came. These four texts explain the meaning of the incarnation. This morning we're looking at 1 John 2:18–27.

Jesus is the most famous person in history. Yet there are many different explanations of who he is.

- There's the Jesus of Judaism, who was a moral teacher, but not the Messiah. He was not divine, did not die for our sins, and did not rise again.
- There's the Jesus of Islam, who was a great prophet—but who was not the divine Son, and he was not crucified, and is not our savior.
- There's the Jesus of Mormonism, who was created as spirit-child of a heavenly father and mother. He's a god in some sense, but not truly God.
- There's the Jesus of Jehovah's Witnesses. Jesus was the first and highest of God's creatures, but he's not divine and eternal. And so he is not worthy of worship.
- There's the Jesus of mainline liberal Christianity. This Jesus was an ethics teacher who lived as a good example. The resurrection was spiritual or a metaphor for his enduring legacy.

How do we distinguish between true and error? How can we ensure that we know the real Jesus?

Many Christians do know the real Jesus, but they lack confidence in their understanding. They aren't quite sure how to identify when someone is teaching something wrong.

Others believe the real Jesus, but they don't think it's important if people get this wrong. They hear other views on Jesus, and they think we should downplay the differences. As long as we are all following Jesus, they say, we're fine.

But the question is: Which Jesus are we following? What views on Jesus are so wrong that you don't actually know the real Jesus?

John is writing to Christians who have just been confronted with false teaching.

He shows us that there will always be false teaching about Jesus. And some errors are so fundamental that, to believe them, means you don't know the real Jesus.

This text is here to give us confidence in the truth about Jesus's identity. It is here to help us hold fast to the truth about Jesus in contrast to any false teaching we hear.

[Read 1 John 2:18–27]

This is what John wrote to these early Christians. And it is just as relevant for us today. So, we'll walk through this text in three movements: We'll see the danger of antichrists. The provision of anointing. And the necessity of abiding.

1. The Danger of Antichrists (2:18–23)

First, the danger of antichrists.

The word “antichrist” is one of the most misunderstood terms among modern Christians. Many people think of a single figure who will appear right before Jesus returns. He will rise to power and dominate the world.

But John says there is not just one antichrist, but many. And they are not just going to show up right before Jesus returns, but will be with us through every generation. And though we do not actually need to be afraid of them; they are a real danger. But maybe not for the reasons we think. So, who are antichrists, and what is the real danger? Let’s think this through.

Look with me at verse 18 again, where he introduces us to these people: “Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.”

First of all, notice that John refers to antichrists coming in “the last hour.”

That sounds to many people like he’s referring to the time right before Jesus returns. But do you notice when he said the last hour takes place? He says, “it *is* the last hour.” John viewed his own time in the first century as “the last hour.”

In the past few generations, we’ve seen a popular teaching rise that focuses on “the end times.” It often leads people to think that we are in the last few years before Jesus returns. It says we’re in the last hour, the last days, the end times.

But this view misses that the New Testament says the whole church age is the end times. Over and over, it refers to the “end times” or “last days” as beginning in the first century.

We hear these terms and think, “the few years right before Jesus returns.” But John and the apostles used it to refer to the time in which *they* lived. And it would remain “the last days” all the way until Jesus returns. So, the church has always been living in the last days.

And John says that in this “last hour” there will be antichrists. They had heard that one singular antichrist will come. But John says, “Yes, there is a greater antichrist coming, but there are many already here.” And these are the ones John focuses on.

And who are they?

They were professing believers in Jesus. They were part of the local church community.

But they are called antichrists because their teaching about Jesus is not true. Their explanation of the identity of Jesus was contrary to the real Jesus. So they are anti-Christ, or against the real Jesus. They were professing Christians, but they were false teachers.

What did they teach about Jesus that made them antichrists?

John tells us in verses 22–23. Notice how he emphasizes their false teaching about the core identity of Christ: “Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also.”

John says they deny that Jesus is the Christ. And they therefore deny the Father and the Son. When John wrote this, the term “Christ” probably carried a sense of his divine nature. So in denying that Jesus is the Christ, they are denying that he is the divine Son.ⁱ

We don’t know exactly what they taught. But John restates this a few ways. Look at chapter 4, for example. In verse 1, he refers to antichrists simply as “false prophets.” They are false teachers. And then in verses 2–4, he says what they deny. He says, “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit *that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh* is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.”ⁱⁱ He says the same thing in 2 John 7, “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.” Other verses show they are probably also denying the significance of Jesus’s death for us.

So, it seems that John uses this term to refer to those who teach against the real Jesus. An antichrist is someone who denies the core identity of Jesus. They try to get people to embrace false teaching about Jesus. We talk about theological triage a lot here—there are the most important, top-shelf doctrines and practices; there are secondary doctrines on the second shelf, then there is the third shelf. John is referring to the top-shelf doctrines.

And what happened to these particular antichrists among the church John wrote to?

They didn’t win the church over. They tried to deceive the believers, but they failed. So they left the church. And notice how John explained what happened to them in verse 19: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” They were among the Christians. They were professing believers. But then they taught falsely about Jesus, and they left the community.

And notice the way John described them. John doesn't say, "they were of us, but now they are not." No, he says that their going out proves that they were *never* among us. The church may have thought these were true Christians, but John says they weren't.

I think this helps us interpret the true spiritual state of people who abandon the faith. John says that if they abandon Jesus and the church—then it proves they were not *truly* part of us in the first place. Look at verse 19 again: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us."

This is similar to the way Jesus described false teachers at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 7, he said, "[On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'](#)" (Matt. 7:22–23). He doesn't say, "I knew you, but you rejected me, so now I no longer know you." He said, "I *never* knew you..."

John is saying the same thing here. They professed to know Christ, but the fact that they left proves that they never did.

John is talking about false teachers, but I think this also helps us understand professing Christians who leave the faith. I think this verse helps us to interpret what happened. It's not that they were saved, and then they lost their salvation. It's that they were never saved in the first place; they were never truly a part of God's people. Because if they were, they would have held fast to the truth of Jesus. Salvation is only founding trusting the real Jesus—and continuing to trust him.

Why is John focusing on this?

He is not trying to scare this church by mentioning antichrists. He is actually reassuring true believers. He's saying that the people who left were wrong. And they were never real believers in the first place. But you, *you who know the real Jesus, and don't deny his true identity*, are real. You have eternal life. Don't be surprised by false teaching; of course it will come. You just keep holding fast. That's John's encouragement.

So, what does this mean for us today?

It means we should not be surprised by false teaching about Jesus. And the reason we should not be surprised is for the reason John said: Because it is "the last hour," and "many antichrists" will come. And this "last hour" is not a sign of the last few years before Jesus returns. It's the whole church age. This whole past 2,000 years has been the last hour. And many antichrists have led people astray.

So, we should not be surprised if people infiltrate the church and teach a false Jesus. And we should recognize this danger, because the stakes are high. If people believe the wrong Jesus, they will not be saved in the end. Only the real Jesus saves. So, we need to be clear about who Jesus really is, and who is teaching a false Jesus.

The way to avoid false teaching isn't first to focus on false teaching.

It's to simply make sure you know the real Jesus. Those who can spot counterfeit money don't do this just by learning about counterfeits. They do it first by knowing what the real thing looks like.

Historically, Christians have affirmed a few core aspects of Jesus's identity.

If you want to get clear about Jesus's identity, just remember the numbers one and two: Jesus is one person with two natures. He is one person, with a divine nature and a human nature.

Theologians refer to this as the *hypostatic union*—the union of two natures in one person.

And this is what we remember at Advent and Christmas. We remember that the eternal divine Son added to himself a human nature. He is truly God and truly human.

All orthodox Christians affirm this. Various errors and antichrists taught false Jesuses in the first centuries. So this was a major focus of Christians. They eventually articulated and clarified the real Jesus. They did this in the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian definition of faith. You can find these on our beliefs page on our website.

In John's time, the false teachers would infiltrate the church and teach among Christians.

That can still happen today. But more often now the teaching spreads through books. Through social media. Through youtube videos. Through podcasts.

They don't announce that they are teaching something different. Very often they use the same language as Christians. Or they emphasize all that they have in common. But then over time, they will eventually explain a different Jesus. But they'll do it in a way that you may hardly even notice at first. Many people are slowly led astray by this.

So, how do we prevent being led astray? How do we have confidence that we know the real Jesus?

2. The Provision of Anointing (2:20–21, 27)

God gave us a provision to lead us to know and hold fast to the truth. This is the second point, the provision of anointing.

If you are a true Christian, do you know what you have? Do you know that God gives you something that keeps you from being led astray? He gives you a provision to help you reject false teaching. John calls it the anointing. It refers to one of the ministries of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

This is in verses 20–21. He just described the antichrists who teach false doctrine. Then he turns to these Christians and encourages them. And this is true for every believer. He says, “But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth.”

He doesn’t say, “good job. You held fast to the truth. Congratulations.” No, he encourages them by explaining why it is that they didn’t believe the false teaching. He says they didn’t believe it because they have an anointing.

And you have this too—if you are united to Jesus by faith, you have this anointing. Every single Christian receives the Holy Spirit when they are converted. The Holy Spirit is the one who helps us know and embrace the truth about him. And he helps us sniff out false teaching about him.

Notice the connection between being anointed, and having true knowledge about Jesus.

John says this over and over. This is the point.

- Notice verse 20: “But you have been *anointed* by the Holy One, and *you all have knowledge*.”
- Then verse 21, “I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because *you know it*, and because no lie is of the truth.”
- And then verse 27 picks this up again: “But the *anointing* that you received from him abides in you, and *you have no need that anyone should teach you*. But as *his anointing teaches you* about everything, and is true, and is no lie.”

This is his point: Christian, you do not need to be scared of false teaching. Why? Because you have the Holy Spirit. And his job is to help you understand, know, and hold fast to the truth. He helps you recognize and reject false teaching.

Now, this doesn't mean that we don't need any teachers at all. Didn't it sound like that at first? He said in verse 27 that "you have no need that anyone should teach you." But of course, John is teaching them right now. And the Bible is clear that one of the gifts of the Spirit *is* the gift of teaching.

Here's what he's saying. When you hear the true message of Jesus, the Spirit opens your mind to understand it. He opens your heart to accept it. He gives you assurance that it is true. He gives you the gift of gospel-discernment, so you can sort truth from error.

This is actually one of the greatest promises in the Bible.

John is probably drawing on the promise of the New Covenant from Jeremiah. Jeremiah promised that one day God would make a New Covenant with his people.

Listen to how Jeremiah contrasted the Old Covenant with the New Covenant. Pay attention to the gift of the Spirit and how this leads us to knowing the true God, and therefore not needing a certain kind of teaching. This is Jeremiah 31: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (vv. 33–34).

The Old Covenant was with the nation of Israel. And most of the people in that covenant didn't really know the Lord. This is why people had to teach one another to know the Lord. But in the New Covenant, every single person in this covenant has the Holy Spirit. Every single person in this covenant knows the Lord. Every person in this covenant is therefore taught by the Spirit to know the Lord.

This is why we believe in what's called "regenerate church membership." The church is the community of people who are in this new covenant. We are those who have the Spirit, who trust Christ, and who don't need to evangelize each other. And we have the Spirit to help us discern truth from error about Jesus.

So, Christians, do you know why you aren't over at the Mormon temple today? Do you know why you're not learning about Jesus from the Quran? Do you know why when you listen to the Jehovah's Witnesses at your door, you can tell it's wrong? Because you have the Bible, and you have the Holy Spirit. He convinces you about the truth of Jesus.

So, very practically, here's what this means:

If you are a Christian, the Spirit has given you gospel-discernment. You can sniff out heresy. You can tell that something is off when you hear it.

This does not mean you cannot be led astray for a time. It means the Spirit who led you to know the real Jesus, will keep you knowing the real Jesus.

So, don't be scared of false teaching.

Be discerning. Be on guard. But don't be frightened.

Think about your own story. Maybe you've been led astray for a time, but now you're back. Or maybe you have been open to some false teaching, and you sense it's not quite right. Let this morning be an encouragement to reject it and help others do the same.

3. The Necessity of Abiding (2:24–27)

This is where John leads us in the end here—with third, the response of abiding.

Just because we have the Spirit's anointing doesn't mean we don't have to do anything. The Spirit leads us into truth, and we also have to be diligent to hold fast to the truth.

The main exhortation of the text is here in verse 24: "Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. 25 And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life."

He says the word "abide" several times here. We don't use that word in ordinary conversation today. What does it mean? It sounds overly-spiritual and archaic, but it really just means to "remain." Read verse 24 again, but let's just use the word "remain": "Let what you heard from the beginning *remain* in you. If what you heard from the beginning *remains* in you, then you too will *remain* in the Son and in the Father."

What are we to let remain in us?

John says, "what you heard from the beginning." This is the central truths of Jesus and salvation. It is the apostolic gospel—the good news that Jesus commissioned his apostles to spread, and which we have here in the New Testament.

If you want a summary, you can read the gospel of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Or see how this message was proclaimed and spread in the book of Acts. Or see Paul's summary expositions in Romans or Ephesians or Galatians.

And an essential part of this message is what we are celebrating at Advent. It's what John is so eager for these Christians to hold fast to. It is the truth of the incarnation. Jesus is the eternal, divine Son, and he became a human being. And he did this so that he could be our savior—he offered himself as a perfect sacrifice on the cross for our sins. He then rose again and sends his Spirit to lead us to embrace the truth about him, and to receive his salvation.

If you are not yet trusting the real Jesus, you can do that today. The Spirit can teach you the truth—he can open your mind and heart to follow Christ. Confess your sins and your need, and trust him for salvation.

Implications

Let's wrap up with a few final implications for us.

First, don't be surprised by false teaching.

I've heard many Christians lament all the different churches and views on Jesus. And they say we should just agree to disagree. And not let our different understanding divide us.

But that's not at all John's perspective here. He is saying there is one true Jesus—and there will of course be many anti-Christ false teachers. He said we should expect this because it's the last hour. One of Satan's subtle strategies is to introduce different versions of Jesus. The false teachers seem smart, seem nice, and claim to be believers. They are maybe powerful teachers, compelling writers, and charismatic leaders.

And wouldn't Satan's strategy be to get Christians to think this isn't a big deal? As long as people say they are following Jesus, that's fine, right? Why be divided. And this is how Satan can get people to leave the real Jesus for a made-up one. It's subtle and deceptive.

So, let's not be surprised by all sorts of views on Jesus. Of course they will be here. Our job is to distinguish truth from error.

Second, let's not grow tired of the real Jesus.

One way to discern error is to know and love the truth. Use this season of Advent to get clear on the identity of Jesus. Read through the birth narratives with your small group, or friends, or as a family. Read through a collection of Bible texts on the coming of Christ.

Third, let's help others not be led astray.

In order to do this, we have to know true doctrine. And we have to be willing to bring this up when someone is in error.

So, maybe your mom is reading a book that is filled with error. Maybe your neighbor is starting to listen to the Jehovah's witnesses or Mormons. Maybe your friend just moved away, is looking for a church, and is thinking about a liberal one. And you can tell by the website that they aren't taking the true Jesus seriously. Maybe someone in your small group is excited about oneness Pentecostal or health and wealth preacher—that proclaims a different Jesus and a different gospel.

We need to do what John is doing—and speak to them to clarify the real Jesus. And pray that the Spirit will lead them to discern the truth. And if they are not yet saved, then they would receive the anointing of the Spirit to know the truth of Christ.

In the end...

This is not just about truth and error. It is not just about historic debates. It is about the joy of knowing Jesus himself.

Christians are not just trying to get truth right. We want to know God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We want to enjoy Jesus as a real person. We want to embrace and be secure in our eternal salvation. We want the everlasting joy he promises.

And in the end, we either know him personally or we don't. And we either want others to know the real Jesus, or we don't care.

The incarnation of Jesus at advent is God's great gift to the world. God came to us in the flesh. Jesus Christ came so that he could dwell among us, die for us, give us the anointing, and welcome us into his family.

So, let's enjoy the real Jesus, and help others do the same.

ⁱ For John, to deny that Jesus is the "Christ," not just a denial that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. We know this because of other things he connects to this in his letter. Karen Jobes makes the point that by the time John wrote this, and to a congregation with many Gentiles, the title of "Christ," would have surpassed its previous sense in Second Temple Judaism of merely messiah. I would have expressed Jesus's divine nature as well, "enveloping and transforming those previous expectations." Karen Jobes, *1, 2, & 3 John*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 129.

ⁱⁱ Colin Kruse notes that John mentions their errors at various points in the letter. Sometimes he just references part of their error, and it is a shorthand reference for the whole. Putting them all together, Kruse summarizes their issue: "their Christology involved a denial that Jesus is the Messiah, God's Son come in the flesh, whose death was real and vicarious (4:2–3, 15; 5:1, 6-8)." Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 114.