

# Counterfeit Christianity

1 JOHN 2:18-29; 1 JOHN 4:1-6

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Madison, Wisconsin  
January 15, 2017



We live in a world where people always seem to be running various scams, constantly making false claims and basically cheating to get ahead financially. Several days ago, I did something slightly risky to try to illustrate this point – I wandered into the junk mail folder in three of my email accounts. The spam folder can be a dark and dangerous place, but without clicking on any links and while allowing the various email services to block everything but the text, I poked around a little bit and found an interesting message from the “United Nations Compensation Commission,” and this message gave their address as “United Nations Plaza, Room DC1-1330,” in New York City (very official-looking)! The Subject line said, “RE: Your Long Overdue Compensation Fund,” and the message said,

Dear Beneficiary, we received a report from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in conjunction with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) demanding explanations for the delay of your overdue compensation fund payment approved by the United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC) and we have investigated this case only to find that you’ve been ignorantly having illegal financial dealings with some online perpetrators who have taken advantage of your legitimate transaction in our custody in order to siphon your hard earned money.

They go on to explain that they are now holding \$7.5 million of my money, and then they say that “...in order to avoid any form of jeopardy in your compensation fund release process, rest assured that you are now dealing with the rightful authorities.” They say they already have all of my information in their database, but just to verify that what they have is accurate, they need me to provide my full name, gender, nationality, occupation, address, telephone number, marital status, age, alternate email, and a copy of my ID. And they need all of this right away, they say, “to enable us to serve you better.” The message is then signed by Michael Moller, the Director General of the United Nations. If you are online at all, you know that these messages come in all day, every day, and for some, they present a real danger.

Sometimes scams are more local. Maybe you have seen some of the stories lately, about an increase in counterfeit bills being used here in Madison. Just a few days ago, several were passed at West Towne Mall as well as a gas station over on Watts Road, and on this side of town at two different Walgreen’s over on East Wash.

But although these scams are a real hassle financially, this morning I want us to turn our attention to spiritual matters, because there are all kinds of frauds and counterfeits out there who are more than willing to take advantage of the Christian faith, and the consequences are often eternal. There are those who teach what is not right, and they often do it for financial gain. And the challenge of distinguishing between God's truth and a lie goes back almost to the very beginning. Last week we touched on that interaction between Satan and Eve, as Satan presented what appeared to be a much more pleasant (but spiritually dangerous) alternative to God's command. There were false prophets throughout the Old Testament, and by the time we get to the New Testament, we find that every single author in the New Testament warns about the danger of false teaching. We see it in all four Gospel accounts as the warnings come from Jesus himself. We then see similar warnings in the letters from Paul, Peter, James, Jude, and as we will see this morning, in the writing of John as well.

This morning, we return to our study of 1 John with a strong warning from John, a warning concerning those who dared to change the gospel message. And this morning we actually look at two passages in this book – the last part of 1 John 2 as well as the opening verses of Chapter 4. And as we are about to see, John is very concerned. As the last living apostle, John is giving what will end up being one of the last inspired warnings about the danger of changing God's message. If you will, please look with me first at 1 John 2:18-29,

***<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. <sup>24</sup> 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.***

***<sup>25</sup> This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life. <sup>26</sup> These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. <sup>29</sup> If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.***

For a somewhat similar message, we turn over to 1 John 4 – notice, please, 1 John 4:1-6,

***<sup>1</sup> Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. <sup>2</sup> By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; <sup>3</sup> and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. <sup>4</sup> You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. <sup>5</sup> They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world***

***listens to them.*** <sup>6</sup> ***We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.***

I realize we have a lot of material here, so to condense it in a way we can make sense of it in the time we have left, I'd like to divide our study into two thoughts: First of all, how do we identify those who are counterfeit? And then secondly, this morning, I want us look at John's inspired advice concerning how we need to react. So, first of all: What are we looking for? And secondly: What do we do about it?

- I. **First of all, though, what are the CHARACTERISTICS of those who would try to deceive us spiritually?**

What do we need to know about these people?

- A. **As we go back to 1 John 2, we find in verse 18 that the problem is WIDESPREAD as John tells us that *"many antichrists have appeared."***

And right there, we have some major panic from many people as we are introduced to a new word, ***"antichrist."*** Some time ago, I got a promotional DVD-type game in the mail, "Left Behind: Rise of the Antichrist," "Based on the New York Times Bestselling Book Series," it says...

People have the idea that the ***"antichrist"*** is this terrifying creature, seen by many as being equivalent to the "666" in the book of Revelation, and there is all kinds of speculation as to who it might be – various world leaders, maybe even a president – and depending on your political affiliation, it's either the one we have now or the one we're getting next week. On and on, people speculate. I was reading something last week that said if you take a particular name and remove the first and fourth letters, add an extra "a" on the end, switch the second and fifth letters, turn the name into a number and then divide by 7.5, the name equals "666." Somebody turned one of these theories around and came up with "Purple Dancing Dinosaur," and so Barney is apparently the antichrist. Well, obviously, all of this is ridiculous!

First of all, there is no connection between this and the book of Revelation. As far as I can tell, this word is only used in the book of 1 John! But secondly, all we really need to do is to look at the word itself and how John uses it. The word ***"antichrist"*** literally means "against Christ," and John defines it in verse 22 – the antichrist is anyone who denies the Father and the Son. Beyond this, we find in verse 18 that there isn't just one, but there are ***"many."*** We think back to some of the background of this book: The gnostics were just starting to come in with their super-secret special knowledge and were starting to claim that Jesus wasn't really the son of God. What John is saying here, then, isn't that we need a game about some terrible creature, but he's saying, first of all: Watch out! There are many people out there who claim to be religious, but they are actually "against Jesus," they are ***"anti-Christ."*** The idea, then is: Do not get discouraged, do not panic, but realize that there are many people out there who are actively working to destroy the Christian faith.

- B. **There is a second aspect of these people we need to be aware of according to John, and that is: These who are against Christ actually started out with us, but they LEFT.**

As John says in verse 19, ***"They went out from us."*** In other words, these are not outsiders – this isn't the world making a frontal assault on the church, but this is what we might call "an inside job." These are defectors. These are deserters who have turned against us. They have betrayed us. We think of Demas, that man who was a close associate of Paul, the one who fell in love with this world and deserted Paul. And so this

is very personal. We think of Paul warning the elders from Ephesus in Acts 20:30 and warning that, “...**from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.**” As John says, “**They went out from us.**” In other words, the threat John is addressing here is not from strangers, but it is from “**us.**” And to me, it seems that John tells us this for a reason, because when it happens, when people leave and turn against us, it is so personal. These are people we know and love. Perhaps we’ve been in each other’s homes. Perhaps our children have grown up together, and so on. But according to John, we need to be prepared for it.

- C. **There is a third concept John wants us to know in this passage, and that is: There is some DECEPTION involved here – we see this in verse 26 as John says that he is writing this letter as a warning “concerning those who are trying to deceive you.”**

And so, there are those who will actually lie – religious people who are not just mistaken, but they are out to deceive or “**seduce**” as some translations put it. Like those who will send you an email asking for your social security number or like those who would photocopy a \$100 bill and try to spend it, there are religious people who are so desperate for a following that they will literally make stuff up. They will lie and deceive, using the Christian faith as a cover, using the Christian faith as a disguise.

There’s so much more we could say about these people, but we get the picture – there are many people who will leave the Christian faith but will continue using that faith (or a slightly twisted version of it) to deceive those who are left behind.

- II. **So the question we face now is: WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT THIS? In light of this information, in light of the warning, WHAT DOES JOHN WANT US TO DO?**
- A. **And again, we don’t have time to dig into this passage word by word, but I want us to get more of a big picture here, and the first and one of the most critical pieces of advice John gives us here is that when it comes to our faith in God, WE ARE NOT TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING WE HEAR; but, WE ARE TO COMPARE WHAT WE HEAR TO WHAT THE WORD OF GOD ACTUALLY SAYS. And this comes across in a few different ways in these two passages, but the clearest command actually comes in Chapter 4:1 as John says that we are to “TEST THE SPIRITS.”**

*“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”* One paraphrase of this passage puts it this way, *“My dear friends, don’t believe everything you hear. Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God. There are a lot of lying preachers loose in the world.”* That is exactly it! And so the idea is: Test! We are not to believe everything we hear, but we are to compare what we hear to the word of God. We need to study the word, we need to know the word, and whenever we hear something new in a sermon, in a class, or even from a friend, we need to compare it to what we already know from the word of God.

In this case (with the Gnostics), the test was whether they taught that Jesus actually came in the flesh. Now, some have taken this passage to mean that as long as somebody says, “Jesus is from God,” that it doesn’t really matter what else they say. But that is not the point here. In this case, the issue was Jesus and whether Jesus was from God. For us, it might be something else. But the key is that we evaluate what we hear, and that we compare what we hear to the word of God.

And really, this is the same as what John says back in 2:24, ***“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.”*** In other words, in a time when people were coming in saying that they had new and late-breaking news from God, John says, “No! Go back to what you heard from the beginning! Stay with what you know. Check it out. Do not just take somebody’s word for it!” [paraphrased].

We are to have the attitude of the Bereans in Acts 17:11. They heard this new guy named Paul come through, and the Bible tells us, ***“Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.”*** And we would encourage the same attitude here. Don’t just go believing stuff because it is said from this pulpit, but check it out. We are to compare what we hear to the word of God. We are to ***“test,”*** John says. Be on guard.

Some of us had the privilege of knowing Katherine Bordson, a woman who had been a part of the church here in Madison going back to the 1940’s or 50’s. After we survived one rather interesting false teaching that tried to make it’s way into the church here, Katherine pulled me aside and said something like, “You know, every false doctrine known to man seems to make it’s way through Madison.” And her words were, in a sense, comforting – a reminder that we need to just keep on keeping on. But in a sense, those words were a warning, a warning to stay on the alert.

There are some who have mastered the art of deception. I think of a woman who came here looking for financial help last summer. We got her some food from the church pantry (as I remember it), and then my dad and I dropped her off at a local hotel. She wanted us to pay for a few nights at that hotel. But as we talked with this woman, the story was too perfect. Looking back on it, she was probably a part of this traveling band of people who camp out at big intersections taking advantage of decent, good-hearted people. But her story had obviously been honed over many years, it was very emotional, and yet there was no possible way to verify the details. So our decision was: Here is some food, but that is all we can do. And looking back on it, I am still rather impressed with the skill she had in setting up the scenario for us. And we need to be careful, because false teachers have a way of doing the same thing – traveling from church to church, wreaking havoc, and leaving behind a trail of spiritual death and destruction. John, then, says, ***“Test the spirits!”*** We can’t make a decision based on how we feel or based on how successful a particular ministry seems to be, but we are to test everything by the word of God.

- B. As we go back to these two passages, there is a second reaction we need to have when we come up against teaching that is false, and that is: We are to BE STRONG! We are to put our faith in God’s power!**

And we find this in 4:4, where John says, ***“You are from God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.”*** To me, it seems John knows (probably from personal experience) that when we face off with somebody who is teaching something that is wrong, we as Christians might have the tendency to be a little soft, maybe second-guessing ourselves, perhaps even hedging a little bit. The reminder here, though, is: This is not a time to wimp out or back down! But as Christians, we have the truth of God’s word, and if somebody comes to us with something different, if somebody tries to pull a counterfeit on us, we have every right to be strong!

This doesn’t mean that we can be hateful or mean, but we have every right to be firm, to push back. Some of you know that we’ve been doing a real tree for Christmas the past few years. For years, we had a Norfolk Island Pine in a pot, and we had it until it got too big for the house and we had to sell it. So a few years ago we

started getting a real tree from the place down in front of HyVee near our house on the southwest side of Madison. And every year, the story is the same. The big sign out front says, “6-8 foot tall Christmas trees,” and then down at the bottom of the sign, in fine print, it says, “Starting at \$19.95.” Every year, I’ll go in there and ask for the \$19.95 trees, and every year, the nice guy will say something like, “Well, we have some great trees over here for only \$54.99,” or whatever. But every time, I have to be firm, “The sign says \$19.95. I want to see one of those.” This year, he said, “Well, those haven’t been opened up yet. They’re in that pile over there.” And I said, “I’ll take one! Don’t even open it up. I’ll take it.” We got it home, by the way, and it was the largest, nicest tree we have ever had – close to 8 feet tall, absolutely perfect! I figure that taking a \$19.95 tree allows me to tip the nice man an extra \$10 (that is our tradition, at least). But there is no shame in pushing back on something if we are the ones in the right.

Again, we don’t need to yell or be rude, but if somebody tries to pass me a counterfeit bill or steal our identity online, we have every right to be strong. And that seems to be what John is saying here: Do not back down on this! Test the spirits, and then stay strong! And the reason is: As God’s people, we are standing in a position of great strength. This strength allows us to keep calm. This strength allows us to stand firm.

Those who teach what is false may blow us away in terms of their education and experience. They might have the ability to intimidate. They might have huge financial resources. But John says, ***“Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.”***

- C. **As we go back to our text, there is one more action step John gives us here, it comes in the last two verses of Chapter 2, as John tells us TO LIVE WITH THE END IN VIEW.**

Or, as he puts it, we are to abide in Him, ***“...so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.”*** Remember: This comes right in the middle of this book where John is telling these people to stand firm against various false teachings. When things get tough at church, the reminder is: Do not get discouraged, but live with the end in view. Keep your eyes on the prize!

I think of that scene at the end of John 6 where people are leaving Jesus left and right. He had said some rather tough things, and people were walking away. At that point, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, ***“You do not want to go away also, do you?”*** And in John 6:68 Simon Peter answered Him and said, ***“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life.”*** Things were getting tough, but Peter had his eyes on what was coming next. And that seems to be what John is saying here: Hang in there! Live in a way so that we can have confidence in the end.

### **Conclusion:**

And this is where we end this morning. There are some dangerous counterfeits out there. And sometimes, unfortunately, it starts in here. In response, John tells us to compare everything we hear to what we know to be true from the word of God. We do this from a position of great strength, living with the end in view.

In the Bible, God demands that we repent and be baptized. In baptism, we reenact the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. If you haven’t done this yet, we would love to talk with you about that. Or maybe there’s something we need to be praying about as a congregation. Either way, if there is some way we can encourage your walk with God or your obedience to the good news about Jesus, we hope you will let us know after the service or right now as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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