

## 1 JOHN 2:26, 27 ABLE TO LEARN

“I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. 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, just as it has taught you—abide in him.”<sup>1</sup>

**T**his promotion of a distorted theology necessitated pastoral intervention. Nevertheless, he vigorously defended his aberrant position despite exposure of his errant thinking. His rejoinder when he was privately confronted was astonishing. “You teach ‘soul compete-ancy.’ I don’t need no teacher; I can think for myself.” He had the King James Bible and a copy of Strong’s concordance, and that was all he needed (so he thought) to formulate doctrine. It was but an additional egregious error to add to his already astounding catalogue of errors. This man’s arrogance was breathtaking and his defence of the indefensible amazing.

Indeed, John does make the bold assertion, “The anointing that you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you” [1 JOHN 2:27]. Unquestionably, his statement is an argument presenting soul competency of the believer. However, the old rule of biblical interpretation applies here, as it does in every instance: *any text out of context is pretext*. To properly understand and apply John’s teaching, it is necessary to understand the context.

The context of John’s teaching is that the Apostle of Love is cautioning believers to be aware of their susceptibility to error. John is neither rejecting teachers who have been gifted by the Spirit of God and appointed for the benefit of the people of God, nor is he discounting sound theology, nor advocating that we jettison the accumulated wisdom of godly people from past millennia; John is teaching all who follow the Master to rely on the Spirit of Christ to direct our thinking process and to guide us so that we avoid errant teachers and aberrant theology—we don’t need new or novel theologies.

Just as there are evil people in our world who seek to extirpate freedoms we take for granted, so there are evil people among the churches that are determined to destroy the freedom we enjoy in Christ. The unwary may be snared, but if they stumble, it is despite red flags raised by the Spirit of God. As we continue exploring our Baptist foundations, today we are considering application of the doctrine commonly referred to as “soul competency.” Tragically, this teaching of competency in matters of the Faith is often misunderstood; or perhaps it is more accurate to state that it is frequently distorted to fit the preconceived notions of individuals who are intent on gaining their own desires.

Nevertheless, the Word is quite clear that each Christian has received an “anointing,” or “unction.” The consequence of that “anointing” is that Christians are competent to recognise truth, and they are equipped to recognise error. That Christians succumb to the siren allure of error is less a testimony to the tenacity of those promulgating error than it is to the lack of caution among the saints and their naïve character when they accept the philosophy of democratic government within the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

**EVIL DOES EXIST** — Too many of the professed saints of the Most High are naïve at best, and woefully ignorant at worst. Too many of God’s holy people assume that evil people really mean them no harm. The tragic truth is that many “nice” people are spiritual predators. There are people in the world who are intent on harming us just because we “claim to be Christians,” and there are people who are determined to prey on our innocence. I do not advocate that we cease to be trusting in our approach to people; but I do encourage us as Christians to be aware of danger.

I know that many of the professed saints of God do not wish to hear about evil, and apparently, they are uncomfortable when evil is exposed. A sizeable segment of Christendom has imbibed of the polluted waters drawn from post-modern wells of “tolerance,” and they feel it is wrong to detail openly the existence of spiritual error or to speak of the dangers that arise when we ignore error. These individuals seem to be persuaded that if only Christians will make “nice,” and if they will avoid giving offence, they will fulfil an unspecified mandate of scriptural “niceness.” It seems as if there is a far greater fear of what people may think than there is a fear of offending Holy God.

Consequently, churches tolerate some incredibly strange and aberrant teachings. One example is witnessed in the recent actions of a major old-line denomination in the United States that decided that the biblical doctrine of the Triune God was overly exclusive. Recently, they voted to change references to the Trinity to include such novel terms as “Mother, Beloved Child and Life-Giving Womb,” or “Lover, Beloved and Love.”<sup>2</sup> What a strange way to treat the One who is Master of the Church!

John, the Beloved Disciple, held God in awe, and he obviously feared the Lord more than he feared censure from any mere mortal. As a precursor to the encouragement found in our text, John wrote: “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. 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. 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. 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. 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. And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life” [1 JOHN 2:18-25].

At this early stage of development of the Faith, John attested that wicked men had infiltrated the churches and were even accepted as religious leaders among the churches! These wicked men were intent on injuring the cause of Christ. For this reason, John calls them “antichrists.” This assessment accords with the strong statement that Jude makes that “certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” [JUDE 4].

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ gets a makeover, The San Mateo Daily Journal, June 20, 2006, [http://www.smdailyjournal.com/article\\_preview.php?type=wnews&id=60309](http://www.smdailyjournal.com/article_preview.php?type=wnews&id=60309), accessed 12 September 2011

This should not have been a great surprise to the people of God if they were familiar with the warnings either of Peter or of Paul. Peter, in his second letter, warned, “False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep” [2 PETER 2:1-3].

In his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, Paul had warned, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” [ACTS 20:29, 30].

And in his final missive to Timothy, the young theologian of Ephesus, Paul wrote, “Before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom, I solemnly charge you: proclaim the message; persist in it whether convenient or not; rebuke, correct, and encourage with great patience and teaching. For the time will come when they will not tolerate sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, will accumulate teachers for themselves because they have an itch to hear something new. They will turn away from hearing the truth and will turn aside to myths” [2 TIMOTHY 4:1-4].<sup>3</sup>

Before Peter, Paul or John had written these warnings, the Master Himself warned that “false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect” [MARK 13:22]. Knowing that false christs were coming, Jesus warned His disciples, “Be on guard.” What Jesus warned of, and what the Apostles amplified, was already beginning to plague the churches even as John wrote.

The passage of time, and our distance from the events recorded in the Word of God should not be taken to mean that attempts (often successful) to infiltrate surreptitiously the Body of Christ have ceased. Neither should we imagine that evil has become less insidious. If anything, threats to the Body of Christ may be greater today than at anytime since the Day of Pentecost. I consider that one of the gravest threats to contemporary churches is the general tendency to accommodate the spirit of the age.

To a disturbing extent, modern believers seek immunization from the consequences of sin, but they are not particularly eager to avoid sin. They want to be able to play with sin, but they don’t want to experience any negative repercussions. The warnings of the Word sound strange to our ears. It is not at all evident that we believe the Apostle Paul when he cautions, “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” [2 TIMOTHY 3:12]. The preacher who dares to warn fledgling Christians that it is only “through many tribulations [that] we must enter the Kingdom of God” [ACTS 14:22] is generally considered to be overly harsh by contemporary church-goers.

A significant truth that must be acknowledged is that evil does exist. Moreover, individuals intent on deceiving the children of the Lord do infiltrate the churches. The issue is not that the people of God are untaught, but that they can become unwary and thus susceptible to stumbling into error. Whenever we begin to tolerate just a little bit of error, we are on the road to embracing that very error that at first appeared so appalling.

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<sup>3</sup> **Holman Christian Standard Bible** (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2003)

**EQUIPPED TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL** — The contemporary world has redefined evil in the process usurping God's position as final arbiter of sin. Examples of moral schizophrenia abound in a review of modern society. Consider that contemporary society demonises smoking while at the same time legitimatising the activity through collecting taxes on tobacco products. Society considers it evil for anyone to contend openly that homosexuality is contrary to the laws of nature or to say that homosexual acts are against biblical morality; however, the same social standard does not apply when those refusing to salute the rainbow flag are compelled to accept this redefined morality. Contemporary social standards conclude that it is evil to deny that all religions are morally equivalent; yet, it is not evil to oppress or ridicule worship of Christ Jesus.

Though as Christians we are commanded to respect government leaders, and though we are taught to seek peace with all people, we are honour bound to be very clear that God alone is able to declare what is good and what is evil. Christians are responsible to "obey God rather than men" [ACTS 5:29]. Because we seek to honour God, we are responsible to know the will of God for our lives and to walk according to that will. We are responsible to distinguish good from evil, doing what is good and eschewing evil.

Sin can be ever so subtle. Most Christians agree that God condemns certain actions because they are sinful. For instance, Paul specifically affirms that individuals "who strike their fathers and mothers ... murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars [and] perjurers" [1 TIMOTHY 1:9, 10], are sinful. What is too often overlooked is the plethora of sins that are otherwise unnamed under the broad heading, "whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine." It is the inclusive condition embraced by contemporary churches, the attitude that ignores the summary statement included at the conclusion of this dark list of sinful behaviours that permits a disturbing susceptibility to sin within the Community of Faith.

Intuitively, we know that some actions are sinful, but we tolerate them all the same. We use a variety of subterfuges, but we are still uncomfortable with the wrong. According to John, "sin is lawlessness" [1 JOHN 3:4]. Any action or teaching that ignores the leadership of the Holy Spirit, or that disregards the instruction of God's Word, is sinful. There is no such thing as "a little bit of sin." All sin is violation of the will of God, and as such is an offence to His Holy Name.

For this reason, I insist that anything that threatens the unity of the Body, any action that threatens the purity of the Faith, or any teaching that threatens the reign of Christ over His church, is sinful. Divisiveness and arrogance are every bit as wicked as are murder and immorality. Tolerating errant teaching, or perpetuating error through false teaching or false actions, is as wicked as theft or blasphemy. Exaltation of self—self-love—is as wicked as greed.

Certain actions are clearly wrong, but other actions have lost their sinfulness in our estimate. As society in general has defined deviancy down, so the Christian community has removed the sting from what was once sinful. Consequently, gossip may be an annoyance today, but in the view of many of Christ's saints it is no longer a threat to the fellowship of believers. Grumbling is no longer sinful in the estimate of many of the people of God. Arrogance has morphed into self-confidence; and bitterness harboured against another is simply recast as righteous indignation. Insubordination and disobedience are now seen as asserting one's own rights.

Though public drunkenness or drug abuse is seldom tolerated among the people of God, insolence is quite acceptable. We are quite prepared to put up with haughtiness and pugnacity, though most of us would not think of condoning paedophilia. Even adultery is permissible in the modern church, so long as we are not forced to confront the sinner—we do not want to hurt anyone's feelings.

Contemporary churches have become theologically flaccid and morally insipid; a major contributor to this condition is our unwillingness to hold one another accountable for how we live. The absence of congregation discipline reveals our contempt for Christ. We must again recognise sin as the serious threat to purity and ultimately as the threat to the continued existence of the church that it actually is.

Why do we tolerate sinful behaviour? Perhaps we believe that we are not qualified to differentiate between good and evil. However, we are taught that our first parents ate of the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" [GENESIS 2:9; 3:3, 22], and in their disobedience to God, they plunged the race into ruin. We rush so quickly over that account that we sometimes neglect to recognise that since that time, each individual born into this world has the inherent capacity to differentiate between good and evil.

John takes this knowledge a step beyond what is commonly accepted to remind us that we have both the teaching of the Word and the presence of the Holy Spirit to equip us both to know good and evil, and to supply the power to do what is good. It is true that the Holy Spirit teaches us all things [see JOHN 14:26], but it is often forgotten that He does so through human teachers. When John writes "you have no need that anyone should teach you," he does not mean that we have never needed teachers. John instructs everyone who will read this particular letter! He is reminding us who are Christians that we do not need "new" or "novel" teaching about Christ or about how to please Him!

Secessionists, self-seeking individuals who had an exaggerated opinion of their own importance, were trying to introduce division among the disciples. The appeal John makes in this letter is for the community, guided by the Holy Spirit, to test the message of the dissenters by holding it up to the "Word of life" [1 JOHN 1:1]. This was the same Word they had initially received, and they had been instructed in it; now, the Apostle insists that all teaching and every action must be held to the standard of the life-giving Word.

Writing the Galatian churches, Paul addressed the same issue, except he was confronting Christians that had already turned from godliness to embrace wickedness. "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh" [GALATIANS 3:1-3]?

I can assure you that conflict and disagreements will come into the life of the congregation. When such issues arise, you are not permitted to be neutral; doing nothing is not an option. When forced by events to decide between right and wrong, are you able to make a decision concerning the proper course to pursue? I still recall a conflict in a church I briefly pastored. One of the deacons, the chair of a major mission organisation, bemoaned, "Pastor, what you advocate is right; but it would mean going against ol' Frank. I've known him a long time." This miserable plea for accommodation from a church leader as he accepted a course that denied the Bible is not as unusual as you might suspect. Associations trump truth in most instances, either because the people of God are ignorant of the teaching of the Word or because they lack moral courage.

Are there rules for distinguishing good and evil? Yes; but they do require obedience. First, we need to **ask whether an action will preserve the unity of the Body**. Will adopting a particular course of action make the church stronger in the end; will this action permit growth as the people of God work together? Will a given attitude, if accepted, maintain the peace of the church, or does it merely buy a temporary truce?

If tolerating a particular attitude ensures continued conflict, you may be certain that neither the attitude nor the toleration of that attitude is of the Spirit. The Spirit of God seeks unity among the people of God. If a given action deters conscientious saints from continued service to the cause of Christ, you may be assured that the action does not enjoy the blessing of God. The Spirit of God will not lead us as a congregation to do anything that jeopardises the unity of the Body. That which continually riles the hearts of God's people is evil; that which comforts His flock and gives them confidence is good.

It is a tragic necessity for me to point out that there are among the saints some who seem to be stuck in attack mode. These dear saints are against any proposal if it did not originate with them. Whatever leadership proposes to the congregation, these saints respond, not with thoughtful consideration, but with immediate attack. It would be bad enough if such people spoke openly and strongly against various proposals, but they insist upon politicising every issue, trying to gather a majority to vote the "right way." Such efforts do not unify the Body, but rather they divide the Body. The Spirit of Christ will lead His people prayerfully to seek the mind of the Spirit and carefully do what pleases Him; the spirit of self will try to ensure that a vote goes the "right way."

I propose a second question to assist in guiding us in decision-making; we must **ask whether agreement with a given action or acceptance of a particular attitude will maintain the purity of the Faith**. Does a particular action or attitude fit with Scripture? If there is not a specific teaching that can be applied to the question at hand, is there a general precept that fits with the course advocated? This one concept, if applied, would undoubtedly resolve the majority of questions that precipitate conflict among the saints. In the heat of our passion to have our own way or to advance our own agenda, we cease asking what impact our actions will have on congregational purity. We become so focused on obtaining what we want that we cease asking what God would have us do. Prayer ceases to be a mechanism to seek the mind of the Master, becoming instead a means to attack those with whom we disagree. At this point, we need to pause to determine how our action—much less our attitude—maintains the purity of the Faith.

While it is true that God has not given us specific instruction on every question that may arise, He has provided us a comprehensive guide that provides principles for life. We are responsible to obey fully where God has clearly spoken; and we are equally responsible to encourage and practise liberty in matters where He has remained silent. Above all else, we are responsible to know the will of God and to do the will of God. Perhaps the major reason we fail to maintain the purity of the Faith is because we are ignorant of the revealed will of God.

For example, throughout Christendom are seen a growing number of churches that are deliberate in appointing women to serve as elders among the churches. This is done, not because we are instructed to do so, but in defiance of clear biblical teaching [e.g. **EPHESIANS 2:12-14**]. Increasing numbers of professed believers ignore Scripture in an effort to be relevant to contemporary attitudes, jettisoning doctrinal purity in the process.

Likewise, an increasing number of churches appear to be rushing to redefine marriage in order to catch up with the world and to show their broad tolerance of that which is clearly condemned as immoral in Scripture. I suggest that these actions are taken in great measure because of the ignorance of the people of God. Their condition is the result of deliberate disobedience by people promoting themselves as leaders, thus fulfilling the warning of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesian elders. “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” [ACTS 20:29, 30].

A third question that we need to ask is **whether a teaching under consideration threatens the reign of Christ over His church**. Does He have the right to appoint whom He wills to lead His people? Or do we elect whom we want? Does His Word direct our walk? Or do we seek licence to do as we will, according to the majority?

These three questions—Does an action preserve the unity of the Body? Does an attitude promote doctrinal purity? Does a particular act exalt Christ as Head of the Body?—serve as a guide for distinguishing right and wrong, for distinguishing good and evil. While a congregation is collectively the expression of individuals, we know that when the people of the church make every effort to “walk by the Spirit” [GALATIANS 5:16], the church will likely know the mind of the Spirit and do what honours God.

**ABIDE IN HIM** — The elder appeals to the congregation to rely upon the inherent ability to discern good from evil—with the aid of the community and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. An informed Christian community is vital to doing what is right. A thoughtful understanding of the teaching of the Word is foundational for godliness, and it is crucial for congregation health. So, John asserts that Christians “abide in Him.”

What is important to see is that those opposed to Christ have no staying power. Evil does persist for a time, but when exposed and resisted, the opponents of the Faith choose to depart rather than remain in fellowship with the community. This withdrawal from the fellowship demonstrates conclusively to the author that they never really belonged to that community at all (in spite of what they were claiming). Why do I stress commitment in my appeal to those watching the church? It is in great measure because I am concerned that the people of God ally themselves to that that is true.

**1 JOHN 2:19** indicates that the departure of the dissenters was apparently the opponents’ own decision rather than the result of being thrown out or excommunicated. The conclusion appears to be that they were confronted with the truth, and they grew uncomfortable in the light of the Word. However, in John’s estimate, if they had been genuine believers, they would have remained in fellowship. Now, they have gone out into the world, where they belong [cf. **1 JOHN 4:5**].

John continues by commending those who remain within the assembly. He reminds his readers, “you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge” [**1 JOHN 2:20**]. Paul has taught that the child of God has “the mind of Christ” [**1 CORINTHIANS 2:16**]; consequently, when the truth is declared, it resonates within the believer’s heart and mind. He inwardly acknowledges truth when he hears it declared; and he is discomforted by the declaration of error. Though he may momentarily stifle the disquieting sense that something is not quite right when error is promoted, the sense that evil is evil prevails and he cannot be comfortable in accepting what is clearly errant.

The anointing, the unction of the Spirit, is not sold over any cosmetic counter. Simon Magus tried to buy it, but it was not for sale. It is not compounded by any apothecary; it is not put together by chemistry. A preacher may be wrapped in robes of learning, and his study walls may be decked with diplomas. His home may be filled with travel souvenirs from many lands, and he may wear all the trappings of ecclesiastical prestige and pageantry. But he cannot function without unction.

The child of God enjoys competency of the soul because of the anointing of God. **The anointing Christians have received is sufficient for knowing the will of God.** According to the Apostle of love, this divine unction gives instruction about all things. This does not mean that because we are Christians that we are omniscient, but it does mean that *we have all the knowledge necessary to know the reality of Christ's salvation*. Because we are redeemed, we know enough to tell another individual of His sacrificial death because of our sin. We can speak authoritatively of His burial and His resurrection that has secured our justification. This is the reason we do not need “new” teaching concerning Christ or concerning His will. We need to apply what we already know!

**The teaching we have received is reliable.** The truth of the Gospel is not a lie! Peter asserts concerning the message of life that we have received and which we declare, “We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” [2 PETER 1:16-19]. No Christian need wonder whether the Word of life is questionable; she is assured that what has been delivered is true. No child of God need wonder whether the account of Christ's loving sacrifice and His conquest of death is real—the believer has the testimony of the Spirit within.

John began this missive with the testimony of the truth concerning Christ as Master over life. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” [1 JOHN 1:1-3].

**We may be confident that we shall remain in Christ.** There is some question whether the verb translated “abide” is indicative or imperative. In other words, is John commanding Christians to continue to abide in Christ, or is he telling us that because of the anointing we have received we will continue to abide in Christ? Though the translation I use translates the verb as an imperative, as though John were issuing a command, I am confident that he intends for the verb to be understood as indicative, as translated by the NET Bible, “Just as [the Spirit's anointing] has taught you, you reside in him.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Biblical Studies Press, **The NET Bible First Edition** (Biblical Studies Press, 2006)



## HOW TO RECOGNISE DECEPTION

The same verb is used in the following verse, and there it is clearly imperative: “And now, little children, abide in him” [1 JOHN 2:28]. However, John has been writing to encourage and instruct, not to exhort to this point. Therefore, I understand that he is making a statement intended to encourage the people of God concerning their security. The child of God may rest secure in the knowledge that God has already equipped him or her to know the will of God, to discern the truth, and God will not permit His child to stray far from the truth he has already received.

Are you a Christian? Is the evidence of your faith obvious? Do you have a love for the teaching of the Word and for the Community of Faith? Do you seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit and rejoice in the purity of the truth of God? Do you seek God’s glory above all else? If you have received Christ as Lord you received the anointing of His Spirit and you possess sufficient knowledge to honour Him in the church.

If you have never received Christ as Lord, do hear this message now. The Word is quite clear in declaring, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Believe this message and be saved today. Amen.