

Watch Out for the Deceivers

1 John 2:18-27 Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. 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 they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. ²⁰ But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. ²¹ I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. ²² Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. ²³ Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also. ²⁴ Therefore 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. ²⁵ And this is the promise that He has promised us -- eternal life. ²⁶ ¶ These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you. ²⁷ But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.

Some people have realised that if you want to make money from the Christian book market, then you write a book about the Antichrist. If you title it something like 'Deciphering 666' or 'The Coming World Dictator' you'll sell books, and probably lots of them. If you start identifying the Antichrist for people, you'll sell even more books. There is a fascination with the future, and with Bible prophecy. I suppose that's understandable. There is so much biblical prophecy that has already been fulfilled, it is to be expected that we look to the Bible to know what will happen next. However, very often, this fascination is no longer healthy. It becomes a kind of perpetual distraction. Instead of seeking God Himself, instead of loving the Lord and obeying Him and growing in grace, the study of biblical prophecy becomes the pursuit of life. The heart can be growing quite cold, and there can be little to no fruit of the Spirit evident, but the person goes deeper and deeper into their pursuit of prophecy. At some point, it crosses the line into a kind of divination, wanting secret knowledge, but without a submitted, dependent relationship on God.

John here tells his readers that they have heard that the Antichrist is coming. Writing in around A.D. 90, John says to his readers, you've heard and read about the coming man of sin. We don't know how far Paul's letters had circulated, but if John's readers in Asia had a copy of 2 Thessalonians, they would have read about the man of lawlessness, the Antichrist.

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

John's readers would have been somewhat familiar with this concept. They would have known that Jesus had spoken of 'the abomination of desolation' standing in the Holy Place. They knew, however vaguely, that there was coming some kind of ruler who would act like a Messiah. He would not so much openly oppose Jesus Christ, as much as he would try to supplant him.

Now they knew that, and John does not get them to try to focus on him or identify him or spot him. John does not tell them that they need to be looking for the final Antichrist. His reason is the theme of his next section: there are plenty of little antichrists walking around, that you need to be on the lookout for.

In other words, before the final ruler comes and opposes Christ in the last days before Christ's return, there will be many false prophets, false teachers, seeking to lead people away from the truth.

The New Testament makes this clear again and again:

2 Peter 3:3 Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts,

2 Timothy 4:3-4 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; ⁴ and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

Matthew 24:11 Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many.

Many Christians are looking for the final Antichrist, and they miss the little antichrist right under their noses. John tells us that in the last days, the amount of these little antichrists will multiply:

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour.

It would be a painful thing to allow a rat into your home, and allow it to make havoc in your house, while you stand at the window looking to see if there are any lions about. So here John wants to give a pastoral warning to his 'little children' in the faith about the dangers of these people. To do that, he wants us to be able to identify them. He is going to tell us of their origin, their message and their actions.

I. Their Origin

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 they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

Here John gives us a shocking statement. They emerged from our ranks. They went out from us. They began within the church. They sang the songs. They prayed the prayers. They testified. They read the books. They greeted us kindly. They had us in their homes, and vice-versa. They were the very last people we would have thought would turn out to be a little antichrist. But John is very clear: they came from amongst us.

Paul had the same chilling words to say to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20.

Acts 20:28-31 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰ "Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. ³¹ "Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

It's a strange thing, but proven again and again. The worst heresies are begun by people who first gain recognition as Christian teachers. The worst false teachings are begun by people who emerge from within the church. The worst church splits are begun by people entrenched within the membership, seeking to create discontent. Jesus was betrayed by one of the twelve. Paul was deserted by Demas. Even David spoke of the heartbreak of betrayal from within.

Psalms 55:12-14 or it is not an enemy who reproaches me; Then I could bear it. Nor is it one who hates me who has exalted himself against me; Then I could hide from him. ¹³ But it was you, a man my equal, My companion and my acquaintance. ¹⁴ We took sweet counsel together, And walked to the house of God in the throng.

However, John explains something to us. He tells us that they were never, in fact, of us. Yes, we believed their testimony of salvation, for we had no reason to doubt it at the time. Yes, we rejoiced in their baptism. We accepted their covenanting with us as genuine and sincere. But, in fact, they were never of us. They were never true believers to begin with.

How do we know? John tells us. If they had been of us, they would have continued with us. Had

they been true believers, they would not have forsaken the gospel. They would have continued to profess it with us week after week. Had they been of us, they would not have gone off on a tangent, denying the truth, and trying to harm the church.

One sign of true salvation is holding the truth of the gospel to the very end.

Hebrews 10:23 ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.

Beware of novelty when it comes to the gospel. The gospel has been defended and fought for and clarified for centuries. Beware the man who has a totally new spin on the message of salvation. In the end, their departure verifies their nature. They could not abide the gospel, and had to leave to get away from it and start their own message.

II. Their Message

1 John 2:22-23 Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. ²³ Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

Here comes the message which they teach. They deny that Jesus is the Christ. They deny that He is the divine Messiah. Because they do that, they deny the relationship between the Father and the Son. And to deny the Father is to deny the Son.

Now John says that a person who denies the gospel in such a way is antichrist. He opposes Christ and substitutes something in the place of Christ. He opposes the gospel message, and inserts his own message in its place. Now, notice the severity of the error. The false teacher does not just disagree on a minor point of Christian doctrine. He denies the gospel itself. He denies something that you need to believe to be saved. We know that because elsewhere in this letter, John lists some other fundamental errors.

1 John 4:2-3 By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

Any teaching which would change the gospel itself is a catastrophic error. It is fatal to souls who hear it, which means it is antichrist. It opposes his work of saving people.

I think John has just given us a sample here of what a fatal error is. Others would include: denying that Jesus is God the Son; denying the Trinity; denying the virgin birth and humanity of Jesus; denying the atonement of Jesus on the cross; denying his bodily resurrection; denying the absolute need for man to be saved by grace alone, through faith alone, apart from works.

Now here you see the need to understand the gospel, and to understand it well. There is almost no limit to the amount of variations of false teachings that come up that pervert or twist the gospel. That's why bank tellers are often trained to know genuine bank notes. They are taught to know the look and feel and size and weight of only genuine money. Once they are completely saturated with the knowledge of true banknotes, they are ready to spot the counterfeits.

If there is any part of Christian doctrine you should study before all others, it is the gospel. The gospel is fundamental to Christianity, and if you remove it, you no longer have Christianity. So what you want to do, as a growing Christian, is to understand what the gospel is? What does it mean? What are its components? What truths in Scripture are essential to the gospel? What does the gospel achieve? If you are gospel-centred and gospel-saturated, you will be ready to spot the teaching of the little antichrist. You will hear the sound of the false shepherd, and you will get away

from that teaching.

Now how do you suppose they get their false ideas and divisive ways known?

III. Their Actions

1 John 2:26 These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you.

They are not quiet about their heresy. They want to deceive. In fact, they want to draw people after them. So they do not typically go somewhere else and start a new movement, and advertise. They go where the people already are. They set up camp within the church. Within the church they begin slowly disseminating their error. Raising odd questions here, pointing people to strange literature, obscure websites that support their false ideas, distributing sermons that carry the same false ideas that they do.

And once they are found out, they react with horror that they are being rebuked for their false doctrine. All kinds of mud start to fly: "This church is made up of dictators who won't allow free speech. The pastors are insecure with new ideas. Everything is about control. I'm being censored because I'm challenging their power base. The pastors are trying to shut me down because they won't allow any other opinions but their own." But this is all very disingenuous. After all, when someone becomes a member of our church, they agree with its statement of faith. They state that the reason they are joining is partly because the church's beliefs reflect their own. When they make a formal covenant, they promise to support its doctrine, discipline and God-ordained leadership; so to turn around now and act like the wounded party is just a kind of deception.

Unfortunately, people like this often rattle everyone else's cage. Not infrequently, they draw people over to their cause. People see such a person as a victimised freedom fighter, and the church as a bunch of insecure bullies who just want to hang on to their jobs and traditions. Often, such people draw away a few people to follow them in their heresy and discontent.

So, not only do they deceive with their doctrine, they deceive with their actions once found out. They try to turn the tables and make out as if they are victims. In fact, the Bible is really clear: the ones responsible for disturbing unity are not the ones contending for true doctrine. It is not the shepherds exercising church discipline. The real disturbers of the peace are the false teachers and wolves who seek to rip a chunk out of the church before they go.

So what should the believer's response be to such things? Well, there is firstly a response that has to do with discernment. This is our actual response to the false doctrine we hear. That's detailed in vv 20-27, and we'll examine that the next time we look at this passage. God has built in some discernment into the Christian, so that he or she does not have to be led astray.

Secondly, there is a response we have to the people themselves. Consider a few Scriptures:

1 Timothy 6:3-5 If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, ⁴ he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, ⁵ useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself.

Here we're told to withdraw ourselves from false teachers. Withdraw your ears from them when they teach or preach; withdraw your ears from the phone; withdraw your feet from their company.

Romans 16:17-18 Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. ¹⁸ For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

Here Paul tells us to note them, and then mark them. Identify the false teachers and avoid their heresy.

Titus 3:9-11 But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. ¹⁰ Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, ¹¹ knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.

Here false teachings are connected with divisiveness. There are to be two warnings, followed by rejection.

2 John 1:9-11 Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; ¹¹ for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.

These seem like painful steps to take. But it shows how much God wants us to safeguard the gospel. In I Corinthians he describes sin in the body like yeast that spreads through a whole lump. So it is with those who pervert the gospel.

In 1978, Jim Jones was the leader of a cult California-based known as the People's Temple in Guyana. Later, at Jonestown, Guyana, soldiers were horrified to find hundreds of bodies of cult members who had been shot or committed suicide by drinking cyanide-based Kool Aid. Rev. Jones, 47, lay near the altar with a bullet wound in his head. The death count was 780. A brief report of what happened during those final moments:

"As Jones talked over the loudspeaker on the beauty of death and the certainty that everyone would meet again, several hundred cult members gathered around the pavillion. They were surrounded by armed guards, and a vat of Kool Aid mixed with cyanide was brought out. Most cult members drank it willingly—others were forced to.

"They started with the babies. At least 80 infants and children were fed the deadly potion, and then the adults took it. Everything was calm for a few minutes, and then, as the cyanide-induced convulsions began, it got all out of order. Children were screaming and there was mass confusion. Shortly afterward, everyone was dead."

I realise that not every false teacher ends up producing that kind of physical tragedy. But every false teacher brings moral calamity. That's why it's said that the apostle John once went to the public baths in Ephesus and once inside, he saw the heretic Cerinthus. Cerinthus taught that the divine Christ had come upon the human Jesus temporarily, but denied that Jesus is the Christ. He denied that Jesus was fully God, fully man, two natures, but one person forever combined.

And once John saw that Cerinthus was present, it is said that he rushed out of the bath house, shouting, "Let us flee, lest the bath house fall down! For Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within!" John saw any attack on the gospel as extremely serious, and regarded those who did it as the enemies of the truth, and therefore, the enemies of the human soul.

So should we. Real believers love the gospel, and defend it.