

“Antichrist Is Coming”

The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on John’s Epistles

Texts: 1 John 2:18-27; Daniel 12:1-12

It is difficult to find anything in the Bible which has provoked as much unbiblical speculation as has the doctrine of antichrist. The very mention of this mysterious figure sends the Christian imagination off and running. But this is nothing new. The church fathers, by and large, thought the Antichrist would be an apostate Jew who would come to power after the fall of the Roman Empire. The Reformers—and virtually the entire Reformed tradition—have seen the warning about antichrist fulfilled in the Roman papacy. More recently, the dispensationalists have taught that the Antichrist will appear near the time of the end in connection with the rapture of the church. At the beginning of the seven-year tribulation period, dispensationalists tell us the Antichrist will make a seven-year peace treaty with the nation of Israel before turning on God’s ancient people, declaring himself to be God in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Much of this antichrist speculation is so far afield from the way John uses the term “antichrist” in his epistles, it is truly remarkable. For the Apostle John, antichrist is not some dreaded future foe, but a very present threat to those to whom he is writing. John warns his readers in Asia Minor, “Antichrist is coming.”

We are continuing our series on the Epistles of John and we take up John’s warning regarding the antichrist in verses 18-27, the final of the four things in this part of John chapter 2 which John says should characterize all those who walk in the light. The first thing which should characterize Christians, John says, is that they confess their sins (1:5-2:2). The second thing they will do is to strive obey the commandments of God, which are a published revelation of God’s will (2:3-11). Those who walk in darkness have no interest in God’s law. Then, in verses 12-17, John warns us not to love the world. I attempted to make the case last time that John is not referring to the physical world (the universe) when he warns us not to love the world. Rather, John is referring to the fallen world as it is currently under the control of the evil one (cf. 1 John 5:19). John puts this in very stark either/or terms. If we love the fallen world in its opposition to God, we cannot love the Father.

This brings us to verses 18-27 and the fourth characteristic of those who walk in the light—they will oppose the many antichrists who have already gone out into the world. In order to make sense of John’s warning about these antichrists—these arch-enemies of Jesus Christ who is the word made flesh—recall that John is responding to an early form of Gnosticism, which held that reality exists in the form of a dualism between pure spirit (the good) and matter (evil). As we have seen, this conception of the universe makes Christ’s incarnation a metaphysical impossibility because if these proto-Gnostic categories are in fact correct, God (who is pure spirit) cannot take to himself a true human nature (which would be evil). In order to explain the physical appearances of Jesus in the gospels these proto-Gnostics opposed by John were affirming that while Jesus was truly God, he only appeared to be human (or took the form of a human). It is this so-called docetic heresy which John will now label the “spirit of antichrist.” This definition is quite different from the way in which most people use the term.

When it comes to the term “Antichrist,” it is important notice to theologians use the term in two ways. The first is the broad use, which is a reference to the end-time foe of Christ and his church. The second, and narrow use of the term is that of John in this epistle. The broad use (which is far and away the most common) refers to that mysterious end-times figure whom Paul calls the “Man of Sin (2 Thessalonians 2) and whom John calls “the beast” in the Book of Revelation (i.e., Revelation 13). This individual is

usually thought to be the final antichrist in that series of antichrists about which John warns his readers in these epistles. When Christians speak of the “Antichrist,” they are most often referring to that individual who appears at the time of the end and who is a sort of composite photograph which we get when we put all the information from John (the beast, antichrists) and Paul (“Man of Sin”) together.

The second and “narrow” way the term is that used by the Apostle John in his first two epistles. John uses the term “antichrist” as a specific reference to those false teachers who deny that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. For the Apostle John, an antichrist is anyone who embraces the docetic heresy threatening the churches in Asia Minor at the time John writes these epistles. So, when we speak of the Antichrist, we need to keep in mind that the term can be used in these two ways, and that John’s usage of the terms in the these epistles—John, by the way, is the only biblical writer who even uses the term “antichrist”—is vastly different from the way in which most people use the term. In these epistles John is not warning us of future end times foe, but of an ever-present threat to Christ’s church.

So, with that in mind, as we move into our text (verses 18-27 of the second chapter of this epistle), John turns to the subject of eschatology and begins by explaining how we as Christians should understand that period of time (the “last hour”) in which we presently live.

There are a number of important points made by John in verse 18. *“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.”* Once again, John speaks to his audience in the most intimate of terms, calling them “children.” This is a term which conveys both a personal fondness for his audience, as well as a sort of fatherly authority which is the basis for the warning he is about to issue to his readers.¹

Two times in this verse, John announces that the church—remember, John is writing shortly before the end of the first century—has already entered into the last (or “final) hour. Putting things into their proper perspective on the eschatological time-line (the way in which last things will unfold), John reminds his audience that they were already living in the final period of human history. This is consistent with a number of passages in the Old Testament in which Israel’s prophets spoke of the future messianic age as the final period of human history. As we see in Daniel 12:1-3 (part of our Old Testament lesson), *“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”*

In these few verses, Daniel compresses together a time of persecution, salvation, and the final resurrection, a period of time which ends in everlasting life for God’s people—in other words Christ’s first and second advents and everything in between. It is not until Christ has come, suffered, died, was raised from the dead, and only after Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed, that it becomes clear that what the prophet saw at the end was a whole series of events yet to play out. But after Jesus Christ has come, we can now read Daniel’s prophecy through the lens of Christ’s person and work. John’s readers could see (with New Testament hindsight) what the Old Testament saints could not have possibly understood. Jesus Christ will fulfill all of these events through his death, resurrection, and ascension, and through his

¹ Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 95.

second coming at the end of the age. What Daniel saw as one event is now seen as a series of events.

So, when John speaks of the “last hour,” he is speaking of that final period in human history, which began when Jesus rose from the dead and was taken up into heaven, and which runs until Jesus returns on the final day to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. Because Jesus Christ is the word manifest in the flesh, and because he is now in heaven making intercession for all of those for whom he has died, believers must understand that we are living in the final epoch of human history. Jesus Christ will come back on the last day, and when he does human history comes to an end. But until Jesus returns, John says that we are living in the “last hour.” So, while the Bible prophecy pundits are correct to remind us that the New Testament speaks repeatedly about the last days, the fact of the matter is that the last days began with Christ’s ascension, and not with the formation of Israel in 1948! The “last hour,” is John’s way of speaking of the final period of human history as God’s people await the Lord’s return at the end of the age.²

According to John, the sure sign that his readers were already living in the last hour is the presence of many antichrist[s]. Notice the plural! John’s point is that since many antichrists have already come we know that we are living in the last hour. As I mentioned, John is the only writer in all the New Testament to speak of “antichrist.” Many people are surprised when they are informed that the term “antichrist” does not appear at all in the Book of Revelation, which is quite remarkable since I take John the Apostle (the author of this epistle) to be the same John to whom the vision recorded in the Book of Revelation was given. In any case, the presence of “antichrists” is a characteristic of the “last hour.” Therefore, this announcement should not come as a surprise to John’s readers.

There are four passages in 1 and 2 John in which the Apostle speaks of these antichrists. The first is 1 John 1:18, which we just read, and then 1 John 2:22, also in our text this morning, John writes, *“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.”* In 1 John 4:3, John informs us that *“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.”* And then finally, John speaks of antichrist in verse 7 of his second epistle. *“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.”*

Taking the sum of these passages we can assert the following. When John wrote these epistles just before the end of the first century, many antichrists were already present. Although John is writing to warn his audience about these men, they should not be surprised that antichrists have come. The presence of such antichrists is one of the characteristics of the last hour—that final period of human history before Christ returns. Antichrists are those false teachers who deny that Jesus is the Christ (i.e., God manifest in the flesh). These men are liars, John says, who, in denying Christ’s incarnation, deny both the Father and the son. Anyone who teaches such a thing has imbibed from the spirit of antichrist, which is already present in the world. While many deceivers have gone out (from the church) into the world, those who deny that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh are antichrists.

Given John’s clarity about the present reality of these men and the nature of their false teaching, it is a wonder that John’s warning to the churches of Asia Minor about those teaching the docetic heresy has been transmuted into someone like Nicolae Carpathia, the fictional villain of the “Left Behind” novels

² Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 95.

which to date have sold something like fifty million copies. While I do believe that there will be an end-times antichrist, in these epistles John is warning us about a present foe—someone with whom **we** must deal.³ And these individuals are easily identified—we look to their confession about Jesus Christ. Do they confess that Jesus is God in human flesh? If not, we are dealing with an antichrist. Indeed, anyone who denies that Jesus is the word of life manifest in the flesh (i.e., his incarnation and the two natures of Christ, divine and human) is an antichrist. It is as simple as that. And there are many of them out there—for example, the Word of Faith teachers. They have very popular “ministries,” they appear on TBN and Oprah (especially those with new Age leanings—which is closely tied to ancient Gnosticism). They speak at the Christian Bookseller’s Convention. Antichrists are everywhere. You don’t need Hal Lindsey or Jack Van Impe to tell you who they are! We simply look to their confession about Christ. Do they believe that Jesus is the word manifest in the flesh? If not, they possess the spirit of antichrist. This, by the way, is one of most important reasons why our creeds, confessions and catechisms are so important. If we don’t know who Jesus is—the word manifest in the flesh—then we are fair game for these antichrists who, John says, are certain to come.

In verse 19, John tells us that these false teachers troubling the churches are apostates. *“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.”* Although John doesn’t go into the circumstances of how this happened, he is clear that these many antichrists have gone out “from us,” i.e., from the church. Somehow, these people have been taken in by those who claim to have “secret” teaching about Jesus which supposedly reveals that Jesus is not God manifest in the flesh. Having rejected John’s doctrine of the incarnation—Jesus is God manifest in the flesh—those who went out have likewise embraced the docetic heresy—Jesus is fully God, but only appears in human form.

Notice too John’s emphasis upon the fact that those who fell away “went out from us because they were not of us.” John makes plain in these verses what has become the foundation of the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. *“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 passage only makes sense in light of verses 1-2 which opened the chapter. *“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”*

Since Christ dies and intercedes for his people, those who went out “from us” demonstrate that they are not, nor never were, truly Christ’s. In fact, in his high-priestly prayer of John 17, Jesus says *“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”* These are people who for a time profess faith in Christ, but who were never given by the father to Jesus before the foundation of the world. Therefore he did not die for them, nor does he plead for them as their advocate before the Father. In fact, by calling such people “antichrists” John speaks of these people as Christ’s enemies because they deny one of the most fundamental truths of the Christian faith. They are undermining the truth of the gospel and the work of Christ through their deceptive teaching. We also see in this verse biblical support for the visible church, which professes orthodox doctrine, and the invisible church (which is composed of the full number of the elect). A true church defends the faith against antichrist. A true believer will

³ I discuss the evidence for this in my book [Man of Sin](#) (Baker, 2006).

indeed persevere to the end of their lives in faith because Christ intercedes for them.⁴

The notion that those for whom Christ has died and for whom he presently intercedes will persevere to the end of their lives in faith and be saved is made plain in verse 20. *“But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge.”* Notice the contrast—“they” those who went out from us, and “you” who are anointed and who know. Those who are truly Christ’s (those for whom he died, and for whom he presently intercedes) are now said to be “anointed” by the Holy One, and characterized by the fact that they have (true) knowledge. Perhaps John is using a bit of word play here in contrasting God’s people—those who have been anointed by the Holy One⁵ and who have received the Spirit through the word—with those who do not have knowledge, and who have not received this anointing, i.e. those antichrists who have gone out from us. But let us not miss John’s primary point. Those for whom Christ died, and for whom he intercedes, and who are anointed by the Holy One, (BTW—this is the same anointing that Jesus himself possessed),⁶ have knowledge (i.e., knowledge of the word made flesh). If they have knowledge of the word manifest in the flesh, then they have no need of any “secret” or esoteric knowledge which might be taught them by those who deny that Jesus is the word manifest in the flesh.

Thus in verse 21, John can remind his audience, *“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.”* Unlike the proto-Gnostics who have “secrets” about Jesus to reveal, John has nothing new to teach his readers about Jesus, because they already know that Jesus is the word manifest in the flesh. And that truth which they know casts out all falsehoods (lies) about Jesus—such as those being taught by the proto-Gnostics. John’s point then is that those who know that Jesus is the word manifest in the flesh, can now easily distinguish truth from error. Jesus, as the word made flesh, is the truth. Therefore, anyone who denies the incarnation of Christ has embraced a falsehood—the implication being that they do so willingly. This means that Jesus Christ as God manifest in the flesh is the standard of theological truth for all of God’s people.

The consequences for those who deny this are spelled out in verses 22-23. *“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.”* All those who deny the incarnation, John says, are liars. When they claim to be enlightened and that they have risen above their sins, they are lying. When they teach that Jesus was God but not fully human, they lie. When they do either of these things, they are denying the incarnation of Jesus, and are doing the work of antichrist. According to the Apostle John, to deny that Jesus is the Christ is to destroy any relationship they may claim to have with the Father. You cannot embrace the phantom docetic Jesus, without at the same time denying the Father, who sent Jesus to earth as a flesh and blood Savior precisely for the purpose of saving sinners. At the same time, the converse is also true. If you embrace Jesus as word manifest in the flesh through faith, then you are united to the Father.

From the writings of Irenaeus, about eighty years later (180 A.D.), we do know that one of the most famous of the heretics facing the early church was a man named Cerinthus, a Jewish/Gnostic, who taught that a divine emanation (“Christ”) came upon the man Jesus in the form of a dove at the time of his

⁴ Stott, The Epistles of John, 111.

⁵ Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 106-107.

⁶ Stott, The Epistles of John, 111-112.

baptism.⁷ When Jesus was crucified, this divine emanation then departed from Jesus leaving him to die and rise again as a mere man. Cerinthus' heresy clearly denies the incarnation of Christ—Jesus was never anything but a man, who was for a time possessed by “the Christ.” This is different from the docetic heresy which denies the humanity of Christ while affirming his deity. But the presence of Cerinthus in Ephesus, and the tradition from Irenaeus that the Apostle John refused to remain in the same public bathhouse with the arch-heretic, certainly supports the idea that by the end of the first century a number of Christological heresies were being taught in the area around Ephesus, and that the Apostle John identifies them with the spirit of antichrist.

Since John has clearly warned his readers about these antichrists and their denial of our Lord's incarnation, he now closes out this section by giving his readers two safeguards which will protect them from being led astray by deceivers. The first of these safeguards is found in verses 24-25. “*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.*” What Christians have heard from the beginning is the gospel—the word of life. Therefore, John exhorts us to remain (or abide) in the same message (the gospel) which originally gave us life. And as we abide in the gospel, we will abide (remain) in Christ and in the Father. And what has God promised us in that word of life in which we abide? Eternal life! It seems to me that this is about a clear a declaration as one could find which directs Christians to continually focus upon the gospel as a means of driving out error.

In verses 26-27, John issues yet another warning—that those who embrace false doctrine will try to deceive them—before he issues his second safeguard. “*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.*” It should be apparent that false teachers and antichrists will be an ever-constant threat. Not only must we oppose them with the truth, we must remain in the gospel. In verse 27 John speaks of the anointing we have received. This is a reference to our initiation into Christ by the same Holy Spirit whom Jesus promised would come into world, and who abides (or remains in us). Because the Spirit has anointed us, and remains in us, we have no need whatsoever for anyone to teach us some secret about Christ which is not found in the word of God. It is the Spirit then who reveals to us that which is taught in the gospel is true. And since the Spirit teaches all we need to know through the word of life, in Jesus we find the truth, and we must strive to abide (or remain) in him, by striving to remain in his word. Simply put, this is how we walk in the light. We remain in the word of God, where we find the word of life and light, Jesus, who is God manifest in the flesh.

As wrap up then, what is the application we should draw from this passage?

John is crystal clear that there are many antichrists who have already come, because it is the last hour. These men are deceivers and liars who deny that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. We can easily find them—not by looking for a 666 birthmark on their scalp—but through their teaching about the identity of Jesus. If they deny our Lord's true human nature, or his incarnation, then they are antichrists. It is not a question of whether or not they will come, but when.

John's warning to us about these men is also tied to a directive about how to oppose them—abiding in the

⁷ Cf. the discussions of Cerinthus and his influence in: Brown, The Epistles of John, 766-771; Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 111.

truth. But we can't oppose them with the truth, if we don't know what the truth is. If this is not a call for all of us to learn basic Christian doctrine and know our Bibles, I don't know what is. John is, in effect, calling us to be well-catechized. We can't fight off error if we don't know the truth. John calls us to abide in the gospel—the good news that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, who died for our sins turning aside God's wrath, who was raised from the dead, and who then ascended on high where he is now making intercession for us as our advocate before the Father. This is the truth, John says, in which we must remain. This is what we need to know to oppose the antichrists who will go out from us.

This then is why John exhorts us to abide in the God's word. It is here where the Spirit speaks to us and reveals to us the truth about Jesus Christ. It is fair to say that the best way to walk in the light, is to abide (remain) in God's word. For God's word is truth. The light of God's word exposes error and reveals these antichrists to us. Beloved, John's warning applies to us every bit as much as it did to original audience—"Antichrist is coming." Indeed many antichrists have already come because it is the last hour. So let us walk in the light of God's word where we find our Savior and are anointed by his Spirit. Let us walk in the light of God's promise to give us eternal life. Let us walk in the light, because light casts and our error and exposes the spirit of antichrist.