"MANY ANTICHRISTS HAVE COME"

In last week's passage, we were warned about the danger of loving the world. John told us that those who love the world, by which he meant the world-system that stands opposed to God and his kingdom, do not have the love of the Father in them. You cannot love the world and love God. These two loves stand diametrically opposed to each other, so that each one strives to expel the other from our hearts. As one author has expressed it, there is an "expulsive power in all true affection." The love of the world and the love of God are jealous loves; they will not tolerate the presence of any rivals.

The other reason that John gave for why we must not love the world is that the world is already passing away. We can see how this connects with the passage that we are studying today, which begins with the statement, "Children, it is the last hour." Here we find one of the clearest examples of what is sometimes described as inaugurated eschatology, a doctrine that teaches that the 'end times' are not exclusively about things that will take place in the future, but also about things that are taking place right now, in the time in between Christ's first and second comings. This doctrine is supported by the fact that most of the New Testament's references to the "last days" do not refer exclusively to future events. In the words of New Testament scholar Gregory Beale,

> "[T]he apostles understood eschatology not merely as futurology but as redemptive-historical psychology for the present. They understood that they were already living in the end times and that they were to understand their present

> salvation in Christ to be already an end-time reality." [*Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, 163]

This is clearly John's perspective in the passage that we are studying today. The appearance of the antichrist was one of the signs of the end times, and John tells us that many antichrists have already come. And his purpose in writing about this is not to satisfy our curiosity, but to help us avoid falling prey to the false teaching that is promoted by the many antichrists who are already among us. Here, then, is another of John's tests of true Christianity: the doctrinal test.

Our passage begins with John's statement that it is already "the last hour." We might wonder about this. After all, if it was the last hour back when John wrote this letter, which was nearly 2,000 years ago, then this must be an awfully long 'hour' given the fact that we are still waiting for the return of Christ. Some have even contended that this demonstrates that John expected Jesus to return sometime very soon after he wrote these words. If this is right, then John was obviously mistaken, which would present a serious problem for our belief in the inerrancy of Scripture. But when we understand the biblical teaching about inaugurated eschatology, we see that it really was the last hour when John first penned these words, and it is still the last hour today. The life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ constitute the climactic act in the story of the world. However, as in most good stories, there are still several chapters to go after the plot reaches its climax. We see this in Tolkien's books *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*,

where there are still a number of pages left after we read of the defeat of the dragon or the destruction of the Ring. Or, to give an example from history, while it is generally agreed that the success of the Allied forces on D-Day was the beginning of the end for Nazi Germany, there was still a lot of fighting in the days following June 6, 1944. Well, the same sort of thing is true in redemptive history. Christ has won the war, but his people still have to fight the fight of faith. The story has reached its climax, but it has yet to reach its end. The reason why we can characterize this period in between Christ's two comings as "the last hour" is because there is only one thing that remains before the last curtain falls on world history. The only thing that we are waiting for is the return of Christ to judge the living and the dead.

As I said earlier, the appearance of the antichrist is one of the signs of the end times. While the name "antichrist" only appears in John's letters, the idea is present in a number of biblical passages. In the Old Testament, the expectation of the antichrist is most clearly set forth in the prophecy of Daniel. In the New Testament, the antichrist is the same figure as the "man of lawlessness" that Paul describes in 2 Thessalonians 2, the "beast" that John writes about in Revelation, and the "abomination of desolation" that Jesus speaks of in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. When we put all of the information that the Bible provides about the antichrist together, we come up with the following general picture. The antichrist is a human figure who opposes the true worship of God and demands worship of himself. He leads in the persecution of God's people and seeks

to advance his agenda through deceptive works of power and false teaching. But when Christ returns, he will be overthrown and defeated once and for all.

John's teaching about the antichrist is consistent with all of this, but there is one other thing that he adds to this picture: while there will be an individual antichrist at the end of history, there are also many forerunners of this figure in the time leading up to the end. In the words of theologian Anthony Hoekema, "though there is to be a climactic antichrist at the end of time, there can be precursors or anticipations of the antichrist before he appears." [*The Bible and the Future*, 156] There are a number of figures throughout world history who have set themselves up as opponents and rivals of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the spirit of antichrist at work.

In verse 19, John tells us a bit more about the individuals that he has in mind when he speaks of these many antichrists. He says that they are people who used to be a part of the covenant community, people who used to belong to the Christian church. But now they have gone out from the church, and John says that this proves that they were never truly a part of the church to begin with. In John's words, "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." There are several important lessons for us in this verse. First of all, it speaks to the doctrine of perseverance. The fact that these individuals left the church proved that they were never really Christians in the first place. True Christians remain a part of the body of Christ and

remain committed to sound doctrine and practice. Christian endurance, or perseverance, is an essential mark of saving faith. Failure to persevere is a sign of false faith.

Another thing that this verse teaches us has to do with the doctrine of the church. Here is one passage where we see the distinction between the visible church and the invisible church, or the church as we see it and the church as the total number of the elect. It is possible, as was the case for the people John is talking about here, for a person to be a part of the visible church and not be a part of the invisible church. In other words, it is possible for a person to profess to be a Christian but not be truly born again.

While this is certainly true, it does not mean that we should have a low view of the visible church. The fact that there can be false Christians in the visible church should not lead us to conclude that being a part of the visible church is not really that important. That would go directly against what John is saying here. John says that the way we can know that these antichrists are not "of us" is because of the fact that they "went out" from us. John sees their rejection of the visible church as a sign of unbelief. This shows us that it is not a good sign when people renounce the institutional church and retreat into an enclave of privatized faith.

Of course, there are other biblical considerations that we have to take into account when we think about the question of leaving a church. There are times, such as the period of the Reformation, when loyalty to the gospel may require a person to leave a church that has turned away from that gospel. We need to remember that the apostolic

church is identified not merely by its claim to be apostolic, but by its adherence to the apostolic gospel.

That being said, it would be a mistake to conclude that the only time when it is okay for a person to leave a church is when they honestly believe that the church they are leaving has turned away from the gospel. We need to acknowledge that true Christians can have disagreements over matters that, though important, cannot always be resolved. At such times, it may be necessary for believers to part ways. We find a biblical example of this sort of thing in Acts 15, where Paul and Barnabas ended their missionary partnership because of their disagreement over whether Mark should accompany them on their next journey.

These are important qualifications. I would not mention them if I did not think so. And more could certainly be said on this matter. However, we need to be careful lest the point of this passage be made to die the death of a thousand qualifications. This passage clearly tells us that antichrists are exposed by their decision to leave the apostolic church. This is a message that needs to be taken to heart, especially in our present cultural context.

In verse 20, John shows how genuine Christians are distinct from the heretics that he describes in verse 19. He says that we "have been anointed by the Holy One" and have knowledge of the truth. The idea of anointing is found in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, being anointed with oil was an outward sign of being set apart for God's service by the working of the Holy Spirit. Israel's priests and kings

were anointed with oil. Also, the term "Messiah," along with its Greek translation "Christ," literally means "Anointed One." In the Gospels, Jesus said that he was anointed by the Spirit of God to proclaim the message of salvation. [see Lk. 4:18] And he also said that he would give the same Spirit to his people so that we might know the truth. Listen to his words in John 16:

> "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you." [vv. 13-14]

Jesus is saying that the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit enables us to know the truth of the gospel and to embrace it in faith. This is what John is talking about when he says that we have been anointed by the Holy One. The Spirit of God has given us eyes to see the truth.

Antichrists stand in contrast to genuine believers by the fact that they deny the very things that we profess. The most basic doctrinal test is a person's view of Jesus, and the people that John is talking about in verses 22 and 23 failed this test. They denied that Jesus is the Christ. This does not mean, however, that they had nothing to say about Jesus. On the contrary, like many false teachers, they were preaching a different Jesus, a Jesus other than the One who is proclaimed in the apostolic gospel. Many of those who

deny Jesus still have nice things to say about him. But, as Calvin reminds us, "Christ is denied, whenever those things which particularly belong to him, are taken away from him." This is the reason why we cannot consider Unitarians, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses to be true Christians. Each of these groups denies things that particularly belong to Jesus Christ, most notably his identity as the eternal Son of God.

Closely related to this is the idea that false doctrine is often seen more by what it does not say than by what it says. This is especially evident in liberal Christianity. Jesus is certainly talked about in liberal churches, but there are many things that you will never hear a liberal church say about Jesus. And one of these things is what John says in verse 23. Liberal Christians are not willing to say that those who deny Jesus Christ have no possibility of knowing God, no possibility of salvation. But that is what the Bible says. You cannot come to God apart from Jesus Christ. He is the way and the truth and the life.

In the last section of our passage, verses 24-27, John tells us two things that we need to do in order to avoid the snare of false teaching. First, he tells us to abide in the truth of the gospel. He says: "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." The way to abide in the Son and in the Father is to keep the truth of the gospel abiding in you. This testifies to the importance of sound doctrine. Let no one say that theology is not important for the Christian life. It is of vital importance.

The second way for us to avoid false teaching is to understand that the anointing that we have received teaches us about everything, so that we do not need anyone to teach us.

Now this is a statement that we need to handle with care, especially in our highly democratized culture. John is not speaking against the importance of the church's teaching ministry. He is not saying that Christians do not need to go to church and hear the Word of God preached. There are plenty of biblical passages that assert the necessity and legitimacy of the church's teaching and ruling offices. Furthermore, if John really meant that Christians do not need any teaching at all, then he would not have written this letter. After all, there is a lot of teaching in this letter. Instead, what John has in mind here is the fact is that Christians do not need some new, secret knowledge that we can only find by going to those who offer something other than the apostolic gospel. This was precisely the sort of thing that these false teachers, the antichrists, were saying. They claimed to have a higher sort of knowledge, much like the people in our day who claim to have secret insight into the afterlife due to an experience in which they were purportedly dead for a brief period of time and then came back to life. John tells us that we do not need that sort of thing. We have already received everything that we need in the gospel. The only thing that remains is for us to persevere and grow up in the gospel.

Notice also that John not only talks about the importance of having the doctrinal truth of the gospel abiding in us, but also about the importance of abiding in Christ. This reminds us that the truth of the gospel needs to pass into our hearts and into our daily living, transforming us into Christ's likeness. Doctrinal knowledge alone is not enough to save us. The sound doctrine that we profess to believe needs to have its effect upon our lives. When the gospel truly abides in a person, it produces fruit.

This passage testifies to the centrality of Christ for the Christian life. This might seem self-evident, but it needs to be said. It is all too easy for us to place a Jesus of our own imagining at the center of our faith. And this should be very sobering to us in light of John's teaching in this passage. It is the antichrist who denies that Jesus is who the Scriptures declare him to be. We always need to remember that the Jesus in whom we must abide is the Jesus who is proclaimed in the apostolic gospel. As Calvin once put it,

> "there is no intercourse with Christ save for those who have perceived the right understanding of Christ from the gospel" [*Institutes*, 3.6.4]