

‘Living in the Light’

A teaching series in 1 John by Rev. Robert Griffith

Part 9: Antichrists in the Church

“Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist - he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.” (1 John 2:18-23)

The end of the world has always been a fascinating theme. Recently there has been the release of a number of disaster movies, some of which have to do with the end of the world. Two box office hits were *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*, both involved a threat of the earth being destroyed by giant asteroids. Of course, the reason why these movies were made is because the producers knew people would flock to see them.

The idea of the end of the world really happening is a fascinating one. Speculation over how the world would end and when it would occur has captivated the minds of every generation. During the time of the Cold War and the escalation of the Arms Race with the proliferation of nuclear weapons, it even seemed probable for a few years.

Every Christian knows that the end of the world is inevitable. The Bible teaches that there will come a time when this world as we now know it will cease to be. In fact, the Bible gives certain signs of the times that signal the end. The Bible also encourages us Christians to be aware that the end is coming. And so Christians have been studying the end times for years – some a little too much!

Because of this, Christians have been speculating about the end time for years as well. There have been many date-setters over the years. I remember seeing a book many years ago from one of these date setters entitled *Eighty-Eight Reasons Why Jesus Will Return In 1988*. But He didn't. In September 1992 the man who headed up a radio show in Oakland, California published a book he entitled *1994?* The clear message of the book was that Jesus would return in that year. But He didn't – in spite of the thousands of people who believed that He would.

I remember reading an article from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on September 1, 1994 which had as its headline: *"They say the world ends this month – End Timers say Bible tells them so."* The story highlighted the predictions of Harold Camping, the man who wrote the book *1994?* The paper pointed out one Philadelphia man, Reggie Wiggins, who was so sure that Jesus was returning on September 6th that he quit his job in order to prepare. The paper also reported that *"At a conference in the placid hillside community of Mount Bethel, in Northampton County, Wiggins and 1,000 other Bible-clutching end-timers continued their countdown to God's final judgement."*

I have often wondered what happened to Reggie Wiggins when Jesus didn't come. I wonder what happened to his faith. I'm not sure. I sure hope they let him get his old job back.

This kind of thing illustrates, however, just how interested we are in the end. But it also illustrates that we need to be very careful who and what we believe. Our text today reminds us that there is not only an end time but also a lot of deception that will surround it. If we understand what the Bible has to say concerning these things, we will be better prepared to face those who would deceive us and lead us astray.

Living in 'the last hour'

The first realization we must have is that we are living in the last hour. This is what John refers to in verse 18: "*Dear children, this is the last hour.*" Throughout the New Testament, the Biblical writers make reference to the last days. This time is called various things; the last days, the last time, and the last hour. We speak of it as the end times. We are referring to that period in history that will lead up to the ultimate consummation of all things. It will end in the return of Jesus Christ and the judgement of the world. It will mark the transition from the world as we know it to a new world order governed by Jesus Christ Himself.

Now, there is no doubt that the Biblical writers believed that they were living in the last days. Paul, for instance, writes in Romans 13:11: "*And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.*" Paul believed that he was living in the last time and that the return of Jesus Christ could come at any moment. Other Biblical writers felt the same way. And because of that many people have come to the conclusion that the Biblical writers were wrong. Since Jesus has not yet returned, some have assumed that we are not really living in the last time.

However, this shows an incorrect understanding of the last times. You see, the correct view is that the last days began with Jesus. Jesus' first coming inaugurated a phase of history which will culminate in His Second Coming. This whole age is known as the last days. During this time things will move progressively toward that point in history when Jesus will call all things as we know them to a close. Events will accelerate toward that point. And there are signs or markers along the way to indicate that we are proceeding on course toward the ultimate end of things as we know them.

Jesus Himself gave us certain signs of the times. Jesus told His disciples about the end times in what is known as the Olivet Discourse, found recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Listen to some of the things he says. Jesus mentions "*wars and rumours of wars*" (Mark 13:7). He indicates that "*nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom — there will be earthquakes in various places, and famines..*" (Mark 13:8). But even though there will be this global turmoil, these things do not signal that the end has arrived yet. They are signs of the sick and decaying society in which we live. Jesus says that "*.. these are the beginning of birth pains..*" (Mark 13:8). Like a woman in labour, the first pains only signal the beginning of a whole process.

So when we see the events described by Jesus beginning to take place with increasing frequency, we know the countdown has started. We just do not know how long it will be before the end and if we were meant to know, God would have told us! It could be thousands of years away or it could come before we die. We just don't know.

Jesus goes on to speak of many more signs in the Olivet Discourse, but I would like for us to focus on just one more. It is the sign that John speaks of in our text today. Jesus indicates that in the last days *many will come in my name, claiming, "I am he," and will deceive many* (Mark 13:6). He goes on to say that *false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect — if that were possible* (Mark 13:22). What Jesus refers to is what John is referring to – antichrists. One of the signs of the end times is the appearance of antichrists.

We Must Be Aware of the Antichrists Around Us.

John teaches that these antichrists are deceivers. They are people who have come out of the true church of Jesus Christ and are now teaching deceptive and deadly doctrine. Notice I said they have come out of the true Church of which Jesus is building. I did not say they have some out of the institutional church we have been building. In fact, **many of these antichrists are right under our noses within established congregations and denominations.** Many are leaders and preachers, but they are heretics also. They are leading people astray. Jesus warned about being led astray by these false teachers, claiming to stand in the place of Christ. Jesus Himself said, "*Watch out that no one deceives you.*" (Mark 13:5).

One Jewish Christian Scholar, Dr. Charles Feinberg, has noted that from the time of Christ over sixty-four individuals have appeared claiming to be the Messiah. This is to the Jews alone. When you add all the people claiming to be God's unique spokesman, the number increases dramatically. I remember watching Ted Koppel interview Elizabeth Claire Prophet, who was a New Age cult leader. She, like many leaders in this movement, claimed to be in contact with the ascended masters, of whom Jesus is only one, along with Buddha and Merlin the Magician. She had a following in Montana who had sold their possessions and were building fallout shelters in anticipation of a nuclear holocaust which she foresaw. She stood in the place of Jesus for them. She was an antichrist. So some of these deceivers are crazy enough to claim they are the Christ and their influence is only short-lived because most people write them off as fanatics or insane. But there are many more who "stand in the place of Christ" without claiming to be Christ. These antichrists are the most prolific and the most dangerous. They infiltrate our pulpits, our leadership structures and they slowly but surely lead people away from the crucified, risen and reigning Christ in our midst towards something or someone else. Their teaching is subtle, appealing to many, but it's toxic to the Body of Christ.

The Apostle Paul issued a spine-tingling warning to young Timothy when he warned that in the last days there would be "*doctrines taught by demons.*" (1 Tim. 4:1) His warning to the Corinthian Church was even more chilling: "*For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness.*" (2 Cor. 11:13-15) These infiltrators are the antichrists John is warning us about.

The term *anti* can have two meanings. It can mean "in opposition to" or "instead of." So an antichrist is either one who stands in opposition to Christ or one who stands in the place of Christ. They really all boil down to the same thing in the end. But those who stand in the place of Christ, claiming to be Christ, are in this sense antichrists. This kind of thing is increasing as we approach the end. Several years ago, people in over twenty major cities around the globe awoke to find an interesting and bold full-page ad in their newspaper. It began by saying, "*The world has had enough ... of hunger, injustice, war. In answer to our call for help, as world teacher for all humanity, THE CHRIST IS NOW HERE.*" The advertisement continued to answer in vague terms the following questions: *How will we recognize Him?, Who is the Christ?, What is He saying?, When will we see Him?* Under the question, *Who is the Christ?*, appeared the following explanation:

Throughout history, humanity's evolution has been guided by a group of enlightened men, the Master's of Wisdom. They have remained largely in the remote desert and mountain places of earth, working mainly through their disciples who live openly in the world. This message of the Christ's reappearance has been given primarily by such a disciple trained for his task for over 20 years. At the centre of this "Spiritual Hierarchy" stands the World Teacher, *Lord Maitreya* known by Christians as the *Christ*. And as Christians await the Second Coming, so the Jews await the *Messiah*, the Buddhists the fifth *Buddha*, the Moslems the *Imam Mahdi*, and the Hindus await *Krishna*. These are all names for one individual.

This advert was sponsored by the Tara Foundation under the leadership of a man named Benjamin Creme. The Tara Foundation is part of what's known by the New Age Movement, networks of individuals and organizations dedicated to ushering in the New Age, or Age of Aquarius. But this is precisely the kind of thing Jesus was talking about. This is the kind of thing John is talking about. The proliferation of antichrists is a sign of the end times. And many of them have their beginnings in the Church itself.

John tells us that many antichrists have come. He also tells us that they went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. Many false teachers begin in the church and then leave to promote their false teaching because they are no longer in step with sound teaching. Unfortunately, in the process they lead many people astray.

We Must Focus on the Truth

If we are going to be prepared to meet the increasing challenges of the end times, we must focus on the truth. It will be the truth that enables us to discern false teaching and false teachers. John says concerning true Christians that you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. The challenge for the church today is to become so thoroughly acquainted with the truth concerning God and His Son Jesus Christ that we immediately spot the deceptive false teachings which abound today. Those imposters who claim to be standing in the place of Christ and those who are intent on leading us away from Christ will be identified quickly and easily.

There are a number of things we can do to be prepared. The first is that we must have a clear definition of Jesus Christ. John says in verses 22-23: *"Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also."* A key issue in identifying false teaching and teachers is their definition of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus gathered His disciples around Him and inquired what people were saying about Him, He made it a point to find out what or who the disciples thought He was. He asked, *"Who do you say that I am?"* He could just as well be emphasizing that question today to us. It is important who we believe Jesus is. Our definition of Jesus Christ needs to be one that is biblical, not some subjective fantasy based on sentimentality or popular thinking. If Jesus is not God the Son, the perfect sacrifice for our sins; the Saviour of the world, who died on the Cross in our place bearing the punishment for our sins; if He did not rise from the dead and thereby prove He was who He said He was, then we are believing a fantasy, are still lost in our sins, and are without hope. But Jesus is all these things and more. He is *"the way the truth and the life."* He is the only way to God. He is the *"only name given among men whereby we may be saved."* No one comes to the Father but by Him.

We must therefore have a thorough understanding of the Bible, God's revealed Word. It is important that we come to an understanding of the great doctrines of the Bible. Doctrines like the deity of Christ, the inspiration of Scripture, the sinfulness of humanity, the vicarious atonement of Christ, the efficacy of saving grace, and the certainty of judgement are topics which must be studied until you gain an understanding of what the Lord says about them. Only when you are armed with what is true - can you spot what is counterfeit.

Jesus said that knowing the truth would set us free. The ultimate truth is Jesus. If we know Him, the Jesus revealed in the Bible, then He will lead us into all truth and keep us firmly grounded in that truth all our lives. We are living in the last days my friends, so be alert, be aware and be prepared to take a stand against the deception and false teaching which is finding its way into the Church more than ever.