

Beware the antichrists

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[0 : 00] Well, it's a great joy to be with you here at the Tron again. We've had a glorious week with the Cornhill students. I'm not sure if they would say the same, but I've enjoyed myself enormously.

It's a great pleasure to be in this pulpit again. It seems to have raised by about two or three inches since I was last here, but that's because you will appoint tall ministers, I guess, and I am able, fortunately, to see what I have to say.

1 John 2, verse 26. You probably guessed that we're going to be in this great little letter today, and I want to pass on some of the things that I have learned from it.

1 John 2, verse 26. John tells us why he wrote. Verse 26 of chapter 2. I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you.

I no longer make New Year resolutions for the obvious reasons, but instead I choose a New Testament, or perhaps an Old Testament book, that I will read and study for the following twelve months.

[1 : 11] And this year, the book I chose was John's first epistle. In order to prevent myself from backsliding, I made sure that I had opportunities to teach 1 John in the following spring and summer.

And this was two conferences that gave me this opportunity. One gave me three sessions, so I was able to spread myself, and one gave me only an hour, so I had to concentrate all I learned within about 55 minutes, which was quite a test.

I was quite thankful afterwards when one minister thanked me for what I had said, and reported that 1 John had been to him a lost book.

And I think it had been rather a lost book to me. I'm rather ashamed to say that, when I've been in the ministry of the Gospel for 50 years. But I don't think I really understood this book, as one often doesn't, until you get right down to it and study it.

I came to 1 John with certain presuppositions. I shared, I think, with many, the idea that 1 John continued what John had written in his Gospel.

[2 : 24] He's a very considerate author, as you know, because he goes out of his way to tell us, in case we didn't know, why he took up his pen. Everybody, I suppose, knows why he wrote his Gospel, but just in case there's somebody here who doesn't, and I will read his explanation that comes at the end of John 20.

He writes this. Verse 30 of John 20, Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written, Well, that's very plain, isn't it?

He says, I've given you evidence to bring you to belief in Jesus Christ, and I want you to put your trust in him in order that you may have eternal life. Evidence, belief, life.

That's always the order in evangelism today. We must give people reasons to believe, and we want them to believe in order that they may experience the life of God. What then of his first letter?

Well, the verse that I'd always had in my own mind was 1 John 5.13. Let me read it to you. 1 John 5.13 says this, I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, and otherwise I'm writing to you who are believers, in order that you may know that you have eternal life.

[3 : 54] Now it seems there that this is a pastoral letter from the aged Apostle of Love, which is intended to help young believers and to support their wavering confidence, to give them assurance of their standing before God, through their faith in Jesus Christ.

In other words, to give them Christian assurance. Well, I'm sure there's a good deal of that in this letter. But the trouble is that John actually gives several reasons why he wrote the letter, and we have to read them all if we want to know what is here.

And I've chosen another one, as you see in chapter 2, verse 26. In this case, he says, I write this letter not just to give you assurance, but to warn you. of those who are trying to deceive you.

And that that is very much in his mind and on his heart, he adds again in verse 7 of chapter 3, just at the bottom of the column, little children, let no one deceive you.

Now this puts a very different complexion on his letter. It's not just that there are young and wavering Christians who need assurance. There are many churches that need this warning.

[5 : 12] Apparently, troublemakers are around aiming to seduce the young churches and the Christians to lead them astray from their solid and right faith in Jesus Christ.

No sooner does one become aware of this purpose and realize that John is writing about these troublemakers who are insinuating their message amongst the churches, then, well, their names leap off the pages of one John.

They are given a number of titles and we find them referred to in every chapter and in almost every paragraph. For example, in chapter 4, verse 1, as you will see, they are called false prophets.

Many false prophets have gone out into the world. Well, we're accustomed, I think, to that particular title. It's one that we often use. But the title I want you to notice today that has already been mentioned in church is that of Antichrist.

And you'll find that in chapter 2 and verse 18. And in this version of the Bible, you'll see the heading there, Warning Concerning Antichrists.

[6 : 26] Now, I don't know what you have in your mind with regard to the Antichrist. I think I had vaguely in my mind that at the end of the age, there would be a monstrous figure, an Antichrist, a man of lawlessness, which would aim finally to destroy the work of Christ before his glorious coming.

But John gave me a completely new understanding of Antichrist. Not as one figure, but as many. So look at these verses in chapter 2, verse 18 and 19.

Children, it is the last hour. Ah, well, so the last hour apparently begins long before what we might think were the very last hours of the world.

It is the last hour, and you've heard that Antichrist is coming. So now, many Antichrists have come. Therefore, we know 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 are, they are all, are not of us.

[7 : 37] But you've been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. You're able to recognize them. So let me tell you what he is saying here. First, there are many of them, not one. That's quite startling.

Secondly, they are already present in the first century. So presumably, they are present now in the 21st century. Thirdly, even more alarming, they had been Orthodox members of the Christian churches, or apparently so.

They'd been members of the little apostolic evangelical communities. Fourthly, they'd left these little churches and revealed themselves for what they really were.

They were not satisfied. They left, and what John says is they never really belonged. So I suppose it's true in every congregation, there are those who don't really belong, who don't really share the same beliefs, the same convictions, as the Christians do.

And there's a fourth thing I must say. It's already come out, I think, today. As we read a little further on, we shall find, in verse 22, who is the liar, but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ.

[8 : 48] 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.

So, these Antichrists denied the very central reality of the Christian faith that Jesus is Lord. Which sets us a bit of a problem, doesn't it?

Because you would have thought that they were instantly recognizable. And yet, apparently, so subtle with their propaganda, so curious and deceitful their ways, that they were able to take in the Christians and win many over to their side.

It seems strange, but so it was. Now, once your eyes are open to the fact that this letter is warning about the Antichrist, it has other things to say, but this is one of the main themes of the letter, once your eyes are open to the presence of these men, you'll find them everywhere on every page.

Let me give you some examples very quickly without commenting on them because there isn't time to do so. For example, you'll find three references to them in chapter 1, verse 6, verse 8, and verse 10.

[10 : 07] Verse 1, verse 6, chapter 1, verse 6, if we say we have fellowship with God while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. Well, he's referring there to the Antichrists.

They claim to have a very special fellowship with God, but they walk in darkness, so they're liars. Verse 8, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

These men were deceiving themselves as well as other people. Verse 10, if we say we have not sinned, we make God a liar or Christ a liar and his word is not in us.

Now, these three references, although they're helpful to us, of course, and warn us not to deny our sinfulness, are actually references to the Antichrist.

And you'll notice the very simplicity of John's reaction. He says that in making these claims, they lie, in making these claims, they deceive themselves, and in making these claims, they don't have the word of God, the truth of God, in their hearts and in their lives.

[11 : 17] Which tells me something, and I guess tells you something, that the devil is at work through them because he is the father of lies. And that's how serious it is. You'll find them again at the beginning of chapter 2.

There's a little phrase in the Greek that goes like this, the man who says, and you'll find it in verse 4 of chapter 2, verse 6, verse 9, the man who says, I know him, but does not keep his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

Verse 6, the man who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way as he walked. And verse 9, the man who says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness.

And again, you see, he's referring to these people who are walking around and making precisely these claims. They come to the Christians and they say, I know God, you know, in a way that you don't.

They say, I abide in him, but their claims are false. Again, John is very blunt in his condemnation. In verse 4, he calls them a liar, and in verse 9, he says, they're still in darkness.

[12 : 36] Now, what became clear to me as I came to know and be introduced to these Antichrists in my study, was that 1 John is not just a gentle, gracious, pastoral letter, but a seriously polemical letter.

One scholar has gone as far as to say that 1 John is the most polemical, controversial letter in the New Testament. Personally, I think that's a bit over the top.

When I think of Jude and 2 Peter, for example, I can't imagine any letter being more polemical than they are. They pack an enormous amount, don't they, into a very short compass.

Nevertheless, it is right for us to see that this is not just a gracious, pastoral letter that we have before us, but a letter in which 1 John is firing from the hip.

He is after these false prophets. He wants to nail them to change the metaphor. He wants to show them up and expose them and he wants to warn the young churches.

[13 : 41] So this author, whom we know to be the apostle of love, he is incidentally, I think I'm right, put me right if I'm wrong, I think he's the only one of the 12 disciples who died in his own bed.

The rest met in different ways, violent deaths. Yes, the apostle of love, as we know John to be, is also Mr. Valiant for truth. And by this we come to realize that contending for the truth in our own day is not an unloving practice.

If you truly love people, you want to warn them if they're in danger. And the apostle of love truly loved these churches. It comes out all the way through. My little children, my dear children, he's in earnest about them.

He's concerned for them because they're in such great danger. Now, I know that the old legendary traditions are perhaps to be suspect, but I think it is worth remembering them.

There are two very ancient traditions about the apostle John. One is that he was carried around in old age saying to the Christians, little children love one another.

[14 : 56] Well, we need that word still, don't we? Every church needs that word. Little children love one another. But the other tradition is that when he was in the public bars, a major heretic called Sorinthus also came in and that the apostle John fled from his presence.

He would not acknowledge him or have anything to do with him. And those two legendary tales, I don't know whether they're true or not, seem to point to the fact that this man who was full of love was also full of truth.

that he who loved the brethren wanted to warn them when they faced error. He saw these antichrists as the menace they were and they are today.

Now let's pause for a moment. How does the devil, our great enemy, Christ's enemy, seek to destroy our testimony in the West or indeed in the world?

It seems from the Acts of the Apostles and I learnt this from a great missionary's book, Walker of Tenevele. Some of you may have read his books. He goes through the Acts and he shows that the devil has an alternate strategy.

[16 : 08] First one way and then the other. First, his strategy is persecution from without. And that was the lot of the churches in the first century in many places, not least the Roman Empire.

And it's the lot of many churches in our world today and we should indeed pray for them. Bitter is the opposition of many Christians in China, Malaysia, Sudan and so on.

But the other way which the devil uses to destroy the testimony of the Christian church is to attack from within by false shepherds, by error that corrupts our preaching and our living.

Now, our lot in the West has been for a century not persecution. We've had a fairly soft life. In my 50 or so years in ministry, my nearly 40 years at St. Helens, I don't remember any very serious attacks from without.

But how well the devil has done his work in the West in the second way, by false teaching from within. It has almost brought many of the older denominations in Britain to a very sharp decline, if not worse.

[17 : 29] I was going to say it had brought them to their knees. I wish it had brought them to their knees. Then there might be some hope. Certainly the Church of England in which I serve is in crisis and we may learn from it in Scotland too.

In America, the Episcopal Church is in worse than crisis and I hear nearly every week of churches that are separating themselves from it. Today, there are Christians who think that overt persecution may be the lot of Western Christians in this century.

Is it Melanie Phillips who wrote in the Daily Mail a few weeks ago under this remarkable question, if I was told rightly, will Christianity become a crime?

Yet while persecution often seems to strengthen the churches, subtle error within seems to destroy them. Why? Because they fail to notice it and when they do, they don't deal with it.

In fact, error in the churches can do something infinitely worse than bring them to decline. It can lead them into an idolatrous form of Christianity.

[18 : 47] And this is shown to us if you look at the beginning and end of 1 John. Now, I want you to do this because what John does is what many a New Testament writer does. The position that he states at the beginning of his letter, he brings in at the end of his letter.

I made them smile in the Cornhill class this week by saying that my god sons, when they write to thank me for a Christmas present, do exactly the same. Or they did when they were young.

Now I think most of them are much older. But when they were young, they would write something like this. Dear Uncle Dick, thank you for the check you sent me at Christmas.

Or whatever it was, postal order. They would then run out of steam and not know what more to write. So they would desperately try to think of things at school or college or in the family to say to get them onto the second page.

Then as they got onto the second page, they feel that they can end and so they say, thanks again for the cash. Now we've all, when we were young, written letters like that. You start, Auntie Flare, thank you for the tie, even though I shall never be able to wear it.

[19 : 55] And then at the end you say, thanks Auntie Flare, for the lovely Christmas present. Now John does something rather like that in his letter. And of course on a much more serious level. And I want you to look at how he ends his letter because it is in harmony with how he begins.

And the way he ends his letter has frightened many scholars and commentators because it seems as though it changes the subject rather abruptly. You'll find it in verse 21. But I'll read verse 20 and 21 and then I think it becomes clear.

Here then is the ending of this urgent letter. And we, we Christians, know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true and we are in him who is true in his Son, Jesus Christ.

He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourself from idols. Now, my friends, that can't be an empty warning.

It seems astonishing that he can say verse 20 and then verse 21. Here are churches that know the Son of God, that have eternal life, and yet they are in real danger of going into an idolatrous form of Christianity.

[21 : 15] How would they do that? How could they slip so far? How could they make such a desperate mistake as that? It seems impossible for Christians to become idolaters. Well, if you read the beginning of the letter, you will understand how it could come to pass.

It's a very profound and wonderful beginning, isn't it? In which the apostles state their credentials. Let me read it to you. It's a lovely thing to read and it's a lovely thing I think to hear.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own 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, our apostolic fellowship, is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

Now, I hope you see what he is saying. He is saying, you have to have fellowship with us, the apostolic company. You have to accept our teaching and submit to our rule.

[22 : 39] If you are to have fellowship with us, and that is the only way to have fellowship with the Father and the Son. We come to God, we come to the Father and the Son through the apostolic testimony.

There never has been any other way. Which is why when we want to know God and his Son, Jesus Christ, to love him and follow him, we open the Bible on a Sunday morning and look at the letters of the apostles.

They are the ones that bring us back to the true source of our faith, the true source of the fountain of God's love. So the beginning and the end match, and the warning is quite simple.

If you separate yourself from the apostolic testimony, from the men who were with Jesus from the beginning, from the men who saw him and knew that he was God incarnate, the word was flesh and we beheld his glory, the men who actually touched him at his resurrection and knew that he had risen from the dead and had a resurrection body, these are the men, says John, that you must listen to.

And if you move away from their fellowship, if you leave them behind, if you prefer your own testimony to theirs, then you will slip into an idolatrous form of Christianity.

[23 : 58] The message is very clear. We know him, God, who is true, just as far as we, churches, in this world today, are loyal to the apostolic doctrine.

When we leave that behind, when we no longer measure that as the truth and measure our lives by it, our beliefs and our behavior, Sunday and Monday morning, then we lose fellowship with God and we veer towards not idolatry itself outside the professing churches, but an idolatrous form of Christianity within the professing churches.

Last week, I was with a holiday party in Rome giving one or two talks, mostly older people. There was only one young man, as far as I remember, in the party, a recent convert.

And recent converts have a way of blurring out, don't they, the things that other people feel they ought not to say. This young man went around some of the churches near where we were staying and burst out at one of the meals, isn't this just idolatry?

I think some of the older members of the party were rather shocked. They would prefer to have not said that out loud. It seemed rather discourteous to our hosts in Rome, and yet, what that young man said was very close to the truth, an idolatrous form of Christianity.

[25 : 24] How then shall we, people today, recognize the Antichrist who are working in the professing churches in the ancient denominations?

They are everywhere to be found. There are many of them. Many of them belonged once to our churches but have left. How are we to recognize them amongst the leadership of our denominations in some, indeed, many of our theological seminaries in the West, and in certain prominent pulpits and places that undermine the faithful churches?

Well, let me tell you this morning that John gives us three very simple tests which I want to pass on to you and then I'm done, by which we may recognize them. And so strongly does he feel about this and so strongly do I feel about it that he repeats them three times and we ought to read through the whole letter for ourselves to listen to those repetitions.

Three quite simple tests, they're not difficult, by which anybody who has any Christian maturity at all may look around the scene and recognize the work of these people.

First, they hate the brethren. The brethren means there the faithful Christians in the faithful churches in the first century and indeed in any century. Turn to chapter 2 verse 9 will you please.

[26 : 47] Beloved, I'm writing no new commandment but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you've heard.

At the same time, it is a new commandment that I'm writing to which is true in him and in you because the darkness is passing away and the true light is shining.

Anyone who says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light but whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Now that's a very simple warning but it comes out much more emphatically in chapter 3 verse 11 and I feel I must read this to you as well. Will you follow it please as I read it?

Chapter 3 verse 11 Now you see the title in the Bible says love one another. He's not just saying love people. That obviously is a Christian message. He's saying love your Christian brother or sister.

[27 : 53] For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. Why did he murder him?

Because his own deeds were evil and his brothers righteous. Don't be surprised brothers that the world hates you. We know we passed out of death into life because we love our brothers, our Christian brothers, and sisters.

Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. Now this latter passage means that Antichrist opposes Christ's true believers, his true church.

They would, if they could, like to get rid of them altogether. Verse 13 is significant.

It shows that these Antichrists who still profess themselves to be Christians are actually worldly. They're in league, if you like, with the world that is at enmity with the true church of Christ.

[28 : 59] And there isn't time to illustrate this, but one thinks in history and in our own time of state churches that persecuted the little evangelical churches. many years ago I was in Greece and discovered that, that the big orthodox state church persecuted the evangelical churches.

It's one good thing you can say for the European Union that they're no longer allowed to do that and get away with it. So the first mark of the Antichrist, I must leave you to apply it and to recognize it, is that these men who've left the little orthodox evangelical communities hate the people they have left behind.

They hate what they stand for, they oppose them, they would be rid of them. The second test is that they aspire lawlessness. Chapter 3, verse 7.

He describes sin as lawlessness in verse 4. And in verse 7 it says, Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous as he is righteous.

Whoever makes a practice of lawlessness, which is what he means by sinning, is of the devil. Now this does not mean that these men who professed to be Christians still intended to promote wickedness.

[30 : 18] But many of you will remember the numerality of a few years back that was recommended by an Anglican bishop. What that numerality said was I think very like what these people were probably saying in the first century.

They said, God's law is no longer a guide to behavior. We cannot be guided by an external law. We can only be guided in our behavior on Monday morning by inward love.

That alone justifies how we behave. If it seems to us to be loving, then that is all right in the sight of God. That is your way of life and we respect it. John would not have agreed.

You may not know the little second and third letter, but if you turn to the second letter just for a moment, you will see a remarkable answer of the Apostle John to the numerality of a few years back.

Just turn over the page to the second letter and look at verse 5 and 6. Now I ask you, dear lady, this is the church, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we had from the beginning, that we love one another.

[31 : 26] So what is the law of God? What is God's commandment? What is his external rule? That we love one another. Verse 6, and this is love, that we walk according to his commandments.

Is that not striking? I go to the law and I say, law, tell me, how am I to behave? And the law says you are to love one another. I go to love and I say, love, tell me how I am to behave?

And love says you are to obey the law. You are to keep God's standards. The fact is that all the New Testament words for sin imply an external standard.

I'm sure you've noticed that. All the great words that are used are words like this, missing the mark, falling short of a standard, trespassing over a boundary. You notice the objective standard, the mark, the standard, the boundary, that God has written down for us?

Love does not cause us to fall short of that standard or trespass over that boundary. thirdly, and here is my last test, they opposed not only God's people, hating them, they neglected God's law under very specious grounds that love alone was enough.

[32 : 45] Thirdly, they denied God's Son. Chapter 4, verses 1 to 3. And this is only one of the things that John says as he's more and more concerned and warms to his task, but it's a very powerful paragraph.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, how gullible many young Christians are, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God. By this you know the Spirit of God.

Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. And every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of Antichrist.

This does not mean, I think, that these men had abandoned the language of Christian Orthodoxy. But what it means is that they had quietly evacuated that language of its apostolic content.

So a friend of mine went to a group discussion with some modernistic and liberal theologians who seemed to want to evacuate the Christian faith of all its content. They had a very frustrating morning.

[33 : 52] They couldn't get hold of the enemy, so to speak. They couldn't get them to confess that they did not believe the creeds as Christians do. One in particular was an ordained clergyman in the Church of England and known to be, by what he taught his students, very much a heretic.

And yet, the Orthodox people could not get him to say so. But it happened at lunch at the cafeteria. this friend of mine was just behind him as they put out their plates to have food served on it.

And as this was happening, he turned to this man and he said, do you worship Jesus? I suppose the man was caught off his guard as he was taking his fish and chips or whatever it was, and he said immediately, of course not.

So the whole morning's work was done. Do you worship Jesus? The answer, of course not. My own guess is that the Antichrists of John's days were much subtler than that.

And one clue is that John puts a great deal of emphasis on the atoning death of Christ and the blood of Jesus, and it may well be that it was in that area that the Antichrist denied the faith in the first century.

[35 : 07] Well, I think I've said enough. I hope I've introduced to this letter that I've come to love in the last eight or nine months. I hope it will be a letter that you love and read and live by all your life.

It's a letter that's for us in the 21st century as it was in the first century. It tells us that ranging around in the churches that we love are those who would attack God's faithful people, attack God's law, yes, and even attack God's Son and His precious blood.

Very subtly, in a way that many people don't even recognize, which is why John writes his letter. I write these things to you. You need to listen to what I have to say, for there are those who are trying to deceive you.

So, little children, verse 28, remain in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. We shall indeed be ashamed if we listen to the Antichrist.

shall we pray. Amen. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for the apostles and their testimony.

[36 : 15] We pray that this church and every church that we know may be rooted and chained to that testimony with joy, so that we may find liberation and love from that apostolic truth.

And we pray that you will awaken young Christians everywhere to the deceptive words that are heard on every hand. And we pray that those who hate your people, deny your son, neglect your law, we pray that they may repent and you may have mercy upon them.

And we ask these things through our Lord Jesus Christ today. Amen.