

Warning against Antichrists

¹⁸Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. ²⁰But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge.^[a] ²¹I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth. ²²Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?^[b] This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. ²³No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also. ²⁴Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵And this is what he has promised us,^[c] eternal life.

²⁶I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. ²⁷As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.^[d]

²⁸And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.

4 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus^[a] is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. ⁴Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

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Not Christ

1 John 2:18-28; 1 John 4: 1-6

It's been awhile. It's been awhile since I've preached about Antichrist, the rapture, and dispensationalism. Even in 2016 when I preached a different post-Easter series on the book of Revelation, there were, I thought, many more interesting themes to consider other than trying to interpret it as a prophetic text with implications for today's politics. No, the last time I talked about these things was at the height of the popular "Left Behind" series of books that were released in the late 90's and early 2,000's. Back then, the turn of the millennium had folks thinking about epochs of time which is part of the idea of dispensationalism, that God has dispensed certain time periods to attain particular goals or dish out the inevitable consequences before the next era begins. That series turned the rapture into a pop-culture phenomenon and highlighted the possibility of one particular Antichrist coming in our lifetimes to usher in a new season of persecution for the masses and bring about glory for the faithful.

This greater attention toward the end times that is popular in some branches of Christianity, doesn't typically get the same attention in Presbyterian-land. There are a number of reasons for that. Some would say that it's because we don't put enough emphasis on the Bible, but I would say that's not quite so. The apocalyptic texts and references that get plucked out and put together to create these imaginative stories about an unknown end time are few and far between. In fact, the only two books of the 66 books of the Bible that use the constructed word "Anti-Christ" are first and second John. That's it. The other texts are the few references that get made to the Second Coming of Christ, and a few references to beasts and evil messengers of

Satan sprinkled throughout scripture. A whole lot more is said about love, and belief, and general good practices toward your neighbor. We tend to put our biblical focus on those things and on Jesus' stories and teaching, and it makes sense I think, because that's the bulk of the Bible, and the center of the Gospels. However, it's also true that there are inherent practical dangers in an over-focus on end-times theology. If you think the world is about to end, long-term solutions don't matter and ethical concerns can go by the wayside. Social justice gives way to individual righteousness seeking, and the actual Biblical prophets warned against that time and again, about every time they claimed to speak on God's behalf. And in the way that these handful of scriptural texts have been interpreted, cultural decay becomes a sign that God's reign is about to come, so some celebrate a strange satisfaction when the world seems to be falling apart. Now, I believe that God created the world good and asks us to take care of it, not uses it's ruin as signs of what's to come. (some notes from Michael Maudlin, **Christianity Today**, "Obsessed with the End Times," 1998)

The end times theology that we are familiar with today takes these texts and has given them a cohesive story that has been actively promoted to stoke fear and obedience to the church. Our particular American brand of this thinking was stoked by Puritan preachers in the 18th century who put together the idea of a "rapture," and then it really took off after the Civil War in a beaten up American culture. It takes feeling particularly bad about the world for this type of theology to have any long term staying power. But it is a way of delaying or denying any responsibility for the concerns of this world. If you are dreaming about what could be God's glory about to be revealed, you might not have to dig into the problems of whatever current time happens to be giving us or set your own sights on the trouble of being more loving. It's telling too that a number of American presidents and leaders of nations opposed to American ideology

have been accused of being not AN antichrist, but THE Antichrist. Powerful people, Obama and Trump, Hussein and Stalin and Hitler have been painted with that brush. Occasionally for some Catholic bashing – whoever is Pope at the time gets thrown into the list. There’s something about having someone important to hate that makes this system of thinking work. The end MUST be near if this person or that person is in charge. Then to fuel that hatred even more, every marginalized group at one time or another has been thought to be in conspiracy with the Antichrist. The more signs you can point to of those associations, the more you can tell your Christian peers that Jesus must be getting ready to come back and wrest control from our wicked world. It eases the Christian mind as being among the saved – but I can’t say it eases my mind to think of who God has to punish to make this worldview work.

It’s fascinating stuff. But it’s also frightening stuff. I couldn’t get solid numbers on how many folks embrace such apocalyptic thinking with the belief that the Antichrist is already here or about to come back soon – but any internet search of the word “Antichrist” will yield you some interesting theories and plenty of YouTube videos!

But it isn’t enough for me to just say what I don’t like about that theological view. What is in scripture merits our attention and the time it takes to allow those voices to speak. So, let’s turn back to first John and think about what else we might be able to learn from these passages about Antichrist. What do we have if we put aside the imagination of the “Left Behind” series? Probably something far less theatrical than what usually think gets made from these texts. If the apocalypse is another word for an uncovering of the truth, if the language of the Books of Daniel and Revelation were written as imaginative metaphor for those who received them early on rather than being future predictions of our contemporary age, then what about the antichrists? And John does use the word in plural form in this letter. Scholars say it’s probably even his own

made-up word. What does it mean to be not-Christ, or not-in-Christ? Who exactly is he calling out, and why?

These letters by design are meant to affirm the status of his own community and point out the error of other Christian groups. It is an editorial on who's in and who's out. We do this frequently in religious communities. It's happening all throughout scripture, and through the interpretive lens of scripture, and it continues today – whether we vote on our choices, or use persuasive arguments or sermons, or trust in a particular church authority like a Bishop to tell us what's what. What aligns us with Christ? What separates us from Christ? How do we discern which is which? We are constantly coming up against these questions, and with any luck we will be hesitant to think too highly of our answers as being correct for all times and places. *The Scots Confession* in our own **Presbyterian Book of Confessions** gets it right on that count by acknowledging right up front that councils designed to understand and confirm correct doctrine can get things wrong. It says, “As we do not rashly condemn what good men, assembled together in general councils lawfully gathered, have set before us; so we do not receive uncritically whatever has been declared to men under the name of the general councils, for it is plain that, being human, some of them have manifestly erred, and that in matters of great weight and importance. So far then as the council confirms its decrees by the plain Word of God, so far do we reverence and embrace them. But if men, under the name of a council, pretend to forge for us new articles of faith, or to make decisions contrary to the Word of God, then we must utterly deny them as the doctrine of devils,…”

Doctrine of devils... Following Antichrists... We are inclined to take it a bit far in naming that with which we do not agree. Perhaps it's better just to say that we all make mistakes and adjustments in our beliefs and understandings. It's called spiritual maturity – and without it –

we'd barely make it beyond the theological understanding of a three-year-old. Good thing Jesus was OK with children inheriting the Kingdom of God.

Whether you would prefer the ease of certainty or relish the dynamics of spiritual seeking, it is nevertheless a challenge to the human being to be constantly chasing religious truth and justifying community boundaries. Sometimes our differences of opinion are only that. Is blue or red the better church carpet color? Such things can be divisive, but not so much weight is placed on them in any kind of theological way. It gets harder when we are disciplining the faithful. Does hating your brother or sister exclude you from community? It may depend on how that hate manifests itself. If you only say snarky comments about that person in certain company, you may get away with it. If you murder him or her, probably not. Then there are doctrinal divisions that get messy as well. What do you believe about Jesus? Was he a spiritual teacher to be emulated, or the Son of God to be worshipped? Emphasizing one over the other was splitting the early church into factions. How you believed in Jesus carried the weight of authenticity, or not. Would you have unknowingly cast your lot in with the antichrists who were steering people away from what John thought to be the true faith? Is that even a fair assessment for the group in power to make?

Obviously, I'm coming up with way more questions than answers here. But personally, that's how I think we ought to think about the antichrists situation. It's in giving the Antichrist a name, or an ethnicity, or a political worldview where we start to get into the trouble that comes with certainty. I'm actually pleased that the antichrists in this letter remain somewhat vague to us. The letter writer even gives us the hint that we should know who they are without giving them a name. "I write to you," he says, "not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth." Of course, as we have seen before, this

writer continues to make the case for love as a guiding principle, but he also gets into doctrinal messiness here. Do you believe in Jesus as the Christ, as the Messiah? Those who deny this truth, he says, are not of Christ, or not Christian, antichrist. This author is willing to separate those who confess Jesus from those who don't, and that troubles me a bit because I have friends, dear friends, who are steeped in the love of God, and live for the love of neighbor, but who believe differently than I do about these theological confessions regarding Jesus. I myself have been dismissed as placing too much emphasis on Jesus' humanity, and not enough on his divinity to keep me in the orthodoxy of the "in crowd." It can be tough to hold both in just the right amount of tension to keep everyone happy.

But there's something about this letter that is truly interesting and incredibly suitable to our own time and place of global recognition of a multitude of religious faiths. This letter is written about the conflict between various factions of the followers of Christ, not about the differences we have with Buddhists, and Jews, and Muslims, or any other faith. There are Christians and Antichristians. Apparently, the policing that John was willing to do about the faith I see more as an internal matter than as a blanket condemnation of all those who do not recognize the Messiah in the life, death, and resurrection of a particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth.

Again, councils have made grave mistakes. As a pastor, I could be getting this all wrong. Maybe my job IS to decry those who do not believe in Jesus as eternally doomed. But from what ELSE I read in the Bible, I don't think that's the case. God is love and those who abide in love abide in God. (Period) First John says that too. And yet, my hunch is that we are to continue to wrestle, as Christians with other Christians, with what it means to follow, and learn from, and hold holy the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. It is our job to affirm what is absolutely in the line of Jesus' teaching and life example. It may also be our job to condemn that which is called

“Christian” but stands in the way of the loving affirmation that Jesus came to proclaim about God.

Getting back to where I started, there are those Christians who are anti-Christ, who specifically go against Jesus’ teaching about love and forgiveness, in spinning a tall tale about eternal punishment and violent condemnation that doesn’t sound all that much like Jesus to me. The more hatred that gets spun up in the name of Christ, the more we who are about love need to push back, and say more, and act for justice and good faith regardless of whether we are in the majority or not. And if you are going to be the one calling out some self-identified “Christians” behavior as not being like Christ, being humble and loving about it is of utmost importance. Probably 90% or more of this short letter is about love and how to demonstrate and improve upon that love in Christian community. The small percentage that says that there are those who call themselves followers of Christ, but deny and betray who he is, is not the main focus here, nor should it be. The sorting out of who’s in or out of religious sync with God ultimately isn’t ours to complete. We are to learn and grow, to live in love, to protect and promote the blessed community, and then let God be both judge and redeemer for those things we cannot fully know about another person and his or her faith. That’s where Presbyterian-land has staked out a pretty good claim for itself. God alone is judge – of everything. So, our ability to judge other people is sketchy at best. Christ alone – was sent to save the whole of this good world. Therefore, our job is love, and gratitude, and continuing to do those things that bring joy and justice into the world that God already loves and continues to love. Relax. Remember that the world is blessed – even when all we seem to see is the mess. And let us live and love into the community we continue to make and remake as we follow Jesus. Amen.

