

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 John 2:18-27 *"Anointed Truth"*

Opposition to the gospel is a fact of life in a fallen world. Certainly Jesus faced it; so did the early church, as the book of Acts records; so did the late 1st C. church that John is writing to; so has the church through history; so does the church today. We saw last week John's depiction of "the world, the flesh and the devil" as opponents of the gospel; in this passage we meet the "antichrists." John's concern for the Christians is that they should not be surprised, scared, discouraged, or – most of all – misled by these opponents, because they have greater resources at their command.

1) *The Spirit Of Antichrist*

Who or what were the "antichrists"? Jewish history and apocalyptic writings in the so-called Second Temple period – from the 300s BC to 70AD, centered on the Temple rebuilt under Ezra and Nehemiah but destroyed by the Romans – in this period of Jewish dispersion and frequent conquests of the land of Israel, the idea emerged that tyrants would periodically rise up against God and his people. After the Persians defeated the Babylonians – Iran over Iraq in modern terms – and were subsequently routed by the Greeks under Alexander the Great, the most prominent example of the foreign tyrant was Antiochus Epiphanes, a Syrian who around

170 BC desecrated the Temple by erecting an altar to Zeus and sacrificing pigs there (he was finally defeated by the famous Maccabee family, a victory still remembered in the Jewish feast of Hanukah).

In the Christian era, two streams of thought about such people began to coalesce. On the one hand was the tyrannical ruler who oppressed God's people; on the other was a false teacher who led them astray. Jesus warned especially against the "false prophets" and "false messiahs" that would arise (e.g. Mark 13) in "the last days" that his coming had inaugurated. In John's letter, the false teachers are called "antichrists" – those who oppose in fundamental ways the gospel of Jesus Christ. John sees coming the figure of "the Antichrist," whom later in the 1st C. the book of *Revelation* will depict as both tyrant and misleader.

Identification of "the Antichrist" has of course exercised many Christians then and since. The earliest candidates were Roman emperors of the mid-1st C like Caligula and especially Nero. Through the centuries there have been many others; those of you raised Roman Catholic may be shocked to know that several Popes have been considered "antichrists," especially among fringe Protestant groups. Today, for millions who

have read LaHaye and Jenkins' fictional *Left Behind* series, Antichrist is an eastern European president who rises to become Premier of the Global Community.

John's letter is concerned with the false teachers of his day whom he views as led by what we might call "the spirit of antichrist" – he calls them "antichrists." They are people who have left the church he is writing to in order to teach what John or Paul or others of the early Apostolic community would call "another gospel." John calls them "liars" – as you know, John never fails to call issues in black and white language! – and we learn that the issue that divided their teachings from his was whether "Jesus was the Christ" (2:22), or more precisely, whether "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1Jn 4:2, 2 Jn 7).

This, for John, was the true test of Christian belief. Not only was "Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah of Israel, the Christ, the Son of God and Savior" – which is the main theme of John's Gospel, over against those who did not believe Jesus was the *Christ*; but also "Jesus the Christ truly came among us in flesh and blood," the theme of John's Letter, over against those who did not believe that he was truly *human*. We typically find only the first question intelligible (was Jesus divine?), but in the early centuries of Christianity where "gods disguised as people" were commonplace figures of Greek and Roman mythology, the argument was over the Christ's humanity, and the earliest contentions were with those that said he was not human, but only "*seemed to be*" human.

Some late 1st C. and early 2nd C. groups claimed "the Christ" was a spiritual presence who descended on Jesus at his baptism, and left again before his suffering and crucifixion. They were sure they were only being logical: in their world-view, no supernatural or spiritual being could actually die, so it was only "the man Jesus" who

hung on the cross; the "spiritual Christ" had left by then! This was the view of Cerinthus, this was the view of the Docetists; so began the first big battles over a true understanding of who Jesus was. John sees this battle now beginning through the work of the "antichrists" who have deserted the churches in Asia that he his writing to.

2) *The Anointing*

Against these false teachers, John invokes two things that the confused and disturbed Christians already have, and need to hold on to. First is what he calls "*an anointing*." He mentions it four times in a few sentences. What is it?

You will recall that in the OT, pouring oil over the head of a person, called "anointing," was always a symbol of the coming of the Spirit of God in power upon a person whom God had called to some special task. So priests were anointed, so were prophets, so were kings. It was prophesied that one day the "true man of God," God's champion, would arise to defeat God's enemies and rescue Israel; he would be "*the anointed one*," "the one on whom the Spirit rests." In Hebrew the "anointed one" was called *moshiac* – Messiah – in Greek, "*Christos*."

So when Jesus began his public ministry in his home synagogue in Nazareth, he quoted in his first sermon from Isaiah 61: "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor..." (Luke 4:18). So when John writes to the late 1st C. Christians that "they have an anointing from the Holy One," he is referring to the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit who came upon the Christians at Pentecost, and thereafter whenever people confessed "Jesus is Lord." You have the Holy Spirit upon you, says John, and you do not need to be disturbed by, or misled by, the "antichrists."

Why? Because secondly the Holy Spirit is the "*Spirit of truth*," as Jesus had said of him (John 15:26, 16:12). He is the one who "teaches you all things" (John 14:26). Because you have the Spirit on you and in you; because you have my words and my gospel, Jesus had said, you will be guided into all truth. John simply repeats Jesus' message: you have *the Spirit*, and you have the teachings of and about Jesus through the Apostles. So you know what you need to know, you have all *the truth* you need on this topic. Not that you know everything, but you know enough: Jesus the Christ suffered and died and rose again in a real body. He was divine and he was human, both fully real. That is why he was the unique mediator between God and man, why he alone could redeem fallen humans and reconcile them to a holy God; that is why it was (and is) a matter of fundamental Christian faith that the Incarnation was *real*, that Jesus was and is the Son of God, while also fully human.

3) *Don't Be Misled*

So, says John to his readers, and down across the centuries and continents to us, don't be misled. You know enough to be able to discern spiritually between true teaching and false. You know enough - especially now that you have "the Word written" to tell you about "the Word incarnate." God has given you all you need to keep you steady, to defend yourself and your church against false teachers. You have the Spirit and you have the Word; from them learn the truth, and defend the truth.

Is this still an issue today? I think so. There are people on the world scene who claim to be "the messiah" - Sun Myung Moon, for example, who has said that he is "humanity's Savior, Messiah, Returning Lord and True Parent." He and others have shown themselves capable of misleading many people, including scientists, politicians and

journalists, and some people who are Christians. Are there other "false prophets" and "false messiahs"? Undoubtedly. Are there tyrants who oppress God's people? Certainly.

Are we still confused over whether Jesus was man and God? The last summer I was in science, I was at conference in New Hampshire where one day, walking back from lunch, I was questioned by a senior British academic who knew I was about to enter pastoral ministry. Did I consider Unitarians to be Christians, he asked? It was a matter of more than academic interest to him, because as Master of a Cambridge college he had at times to take part in installing ministers in parishes whose "livings" had for hundreds of years been owned by the college - and he had therefore been drawn into the issue of the theological suitability of some of the candidates.

I answered indirectly, telling him that my experience of Unitarians in the US was that although in the early 1800s they proclaimed themselves to be *the* true Christians, today they did not want to be thought of as Christians; they did not see themselves as Christians. Rather they now wanted to be seen as an open, non-creedal, community that welcomed all kinds of beliefs or lack of beliefs. That is, at least, honest.

Groups that deny the most fundamental beliefs of Christianity - among them, that the Incarnation of the Son of God gave us Jesus, "fully God and fully man" as the oldest creeds say - cannot reasonably expect to be called Christians as some kind of honorary title. Does that mean you must believe certain things about Jesus before you can enter a Christian church? No, of course not - churches are and have always been composed of people at all kinds of levels of belief and unbelief. What ought to unite all churches is a common desire to learn more of

the truth of Jesus Christ, which the Word and Spirit are there to provide.

So, says John to them and to us, “abide” or “remain” in what you have already learned; hold on the truth you know, let the Spirit who has come upon you guide you. Do not be misled. Abide in Christ. *“Let nothing disturb you; Let nothing frighten you”* (Teresa of Avila’s 1582 “Bookmark” prayer). By the power of the Spirit and the Word, hold on to the truth you know.

Let us pray...