

WHO IS THE LIAR?

by Steve Zeisler

I recently read an advertisement from a travel agency urging people to make their plans for New Year's Eve 1999, because this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to celebrate not only a new century, but indeed a new millennium, was nearly upon us. Interestingly, the ad highlighted opportunities to go to religious sites for the occasion-the pyramids in Egypt, temples in Bali and the Yucatan, and other similar locations.

During the next five years we should expect a period of millennium fever with religious interest and talk in the air, much of it very wrong-headed. The Bible doesn't, of course, discuss our bringing about the 1000 year reign of Christ on earth or indicate that a year given a number that ends in zeroes is to be paid special attention. But we should expect a time of upheaval and apocalyptic ferment as this century comes to an end.

With this in mind, let's turn to a section in 1 John where the apostle talks about antichrist, the last hour, and the anointing of the Spirit. Hopefully his insights can prepare us to minister during a period of millennium fever.

To deny the reality of the Son, is to deny the Father, and have nothing of the Spirit. It is to have rejected the Bible.

As we've seen, this letter says much about unmasking error, telling the truth in place of lies, insisting on depth rather than shallowness. In the first chapter John spoke to the fleshly tendency in each of us to mask our sin. We were reminded that "if we claim to have fellowship with [God, who is light] yet walk in the darkness, we lie...." Again, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." And further, "If we claim we have not sinned, we make [God] out to be a liar...."

In the last study we considered the world: "Do not love not the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." You cannot have both love for the world and love for the Father. Both our flesh and the world are enemies of faith.

Now in 1 John 2:18-29 we will meet deliberately religious antagonists to the truth:

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.

See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us-even eternal life.

I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not

counterfeit-just as it has taught you, remain in him.

There are a number of religious terms here. You don't often run into them except in the context of talking about spiritual things. The term antichrist, for instance, is one you don't run into every day. But it's one that we need to understand. The last hour-what does John mean by that? He wrote this nineteen hundred years ago. How can he have been anything but mistaken in using the term, 'last hour'? We read here of the anointing of the Holy One. What does this mean?

We need to be knowledgeable about false prophets and spiritual deceivers. At times we are going to be directly in the path of their influence, and people we love are going to succumb to their lies. As millennium fever grows in intensity, this passage may be a helpful guide.

Antichrist and the last hour

Let's define some of these terms before we look at John's argument. How is it possible that John can say this is the last hour? Technically, the Greek phrase is without an article in front of it. It can reasonably be translated "the last hour," but it can also reasonably be translated "a last hour," and in this case the latter is better. John is quite clear that the antichrist is coming, but that there are also many antichrists that will precede him. There is an end to history that has been predicted by the prophets, Jesus, and his apostles, but there are many days similar to the end of history that will occur in cycles anticipating the end.

Both Jesus and Paul used the same language to talk about the course of evil-that there are times when evil will be in the ascendancy and it will do its worst, and then that season will pass, by the grace of God. This cycle will occur repeatedly. What John is saying is that these times are each in their own way a "last hour." Each of these opponents of Christ is in his own way an antichrist, all of them anticipating the antichrist, the last hour when history will end.

Jesus said there would be false Christs and false apostles, wars and rumors of wars, and claims that Jesus was here and there throughout the church age. We should expect that to happen. But Jesus also said that there was a day coming when one would set up "the abomination of desolation" in the holy place, and then the end would come. Paul talked about the mystery of lawlessness that would characterize the church age. Lawlessness will do its worst, ascending at times to horrific proportions, and then, by the grace of God, we may be allowed a time of respite. But there is a man of lawlessness, one individual who will lead the last assault against the cause of Christ.

What characterizes the sort of opposition that will occur in a "last hour?" John tells us: "This is how we know it is a 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." The term antichrist is identifying people who have left the Christian community specifically to oppose the Lord. This term is not identifying those who just drift away, nor those who have some argument with other Christians and march off in an angry huff, nor even those who disagree over some point of theology. The term antichrist refers to teachers and doctrines that are at war against the Lord himself, that are specifically attempting to undermine the cause of Christ and what the Bible teaches about him in particular, that would take away his majesty and would ultimately replace him with some other lord. The point is, again, that Jesus specifically is the target, the truth about Jesus is what is at stake.

Anointing from the holy one

Another term that we need to define is the anointing from the Holy One. Verse 20 says, "But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth." The Holy One is the Messiah, God's anointed-the Lord Jesus. And Jesus has offered an anointing to his followers. John says that all of us who are Christians have been given a gift, an outpouring from him. He is hearkening back to the following passages, among others: John 15:26: "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me." Jesus said that he would give us a replacement for himself, that he would pour out from the presence of God in heaven his influence and his life in the person of Another. He would anoint us in the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit himself. John 16:13: "But

when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you."

You are anointed with the person of the Holy Spirit as a gift from our Lord. You and I are the home where the Spirit of God lives on this earth. He has come into the world to speak of and glorify Christ. He is the pro-Christ who answers an antichrist. He promotes the words and work and person of Christ. He reminds us of the power of the cross and the certainty of the resurrection, and everything else we need to live vital Christian lives.

Let's see if we can trace John's argument in 1 John 2:18-29. It is very clear that there is a "them" camp and an "us" camp. John refuses to allow a blending of ideas that are to be separated from one another. There is a line drawn, a chasm fixed. Those who "went out from us" have characteristics we can identify and describe. There are those who would oppose and replace Christ. And we in the other camp have characteristics of which we must be reminded.

Antichrists---denying the triune God

What is characteristic of those who have left, who are antichrists? First of all, he says, "They went out from us...." John is using the word "us" here in the same way that he used "we" at the beginning at chapter 1 when he said, "We touched him and heard him" and so on. Being the last of the apostles, John is speaking for the apostolic community here, representing all those who were given responsibility to faithfully teach the words of Jesus. What he is saying in effect is that the antichrists have left behind the Scriptures, or denied the witness of the apostles. They have left biblical religion and have set up their own theology based on themselves and their explanation of how things ought to be done. (Again, don't read this as saying that every time Christians have a disagreement, somebody is denying the Lord. Christians disagree about all kinds of things. Although we may make fools of ourselves, that doesn't mean that we are rejecting biblical religion.)

So John argues, "you are anointed by the Spirit" (and they are not); they do not know the Spirit of God. They have denied the Son. And denying the Son, they have denied the Father. They have no relationship with the triune God. They have set themselves up in opposition to those who are biblical and who worship God the Father, Son, and Spirit.

It's worth noting in passing that people who have left Christian fellowships in order to establish cults (for example, Jim Jones, Joseph Smith, or Gene Scott) have knowledge of the feelings of Christians; they know the lingo and can play on our emotions. So they are among the most dangerous. They will say, "I used to feel the way you do and have the same beliefs you do. I understand exactly how you feel in your infancy, but now I've moved on to something more profound. I've advanced, I'm on the cutting edge now." Precisely because they can identify with some of the things that you and I care about, they are more able to deceive, and that's why the warning in verse 26 comes: "I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray."

What does it mean that they "deny Jesus is the Christ" and "deny the Father and the Son" in terms of their teaching? First, it means they deny that Jesus is unique. They say, "Of course Jesus is a Christ, but I'm a Christ and you're a Christ, too. Everyone is. There's nothing unique about him." They deny the divinity of Christ. He was just a man—a good, powerful, interesting, and energetic man, and a thoughtful teacher; but a sinful, ordinary man nonetheless. He was nothing more than that.

They may also deny the humanity of Christ, saying that he was only an idea, or that there is a Christ notion or a cosmic spirit that periodically appears to have life, but it is nothing more than an appearance.

They may deny that Jesus was raised from the dead. Paul said that if the resurrection is not true, we of all people are most to be pitied (see 1 Corinthians 15:19). They say, "He died. It was a great experiment that held a lot of hope, but they killed him and put him in a grave. He remains dead to this day. Too bad."

They may deny that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the hopes, all the prophecies, all the teachings of the Old

Testament. All of these were pointing to something, and to say that Jesus is not the fulfillment of those prophecies is to deny him. They deny that he is the hope for this world, that this is the direction that human history is headed. There is no Savior to come, no one who will return for us.

The Scriptures tell us that God became human, both to display true humanity and supremely as our Savior; he died on the cross for us and was raised again by his Father, and is the One who will return. To take these crucial doctrines and say, "I know better than that, listen to me instead," is to deny Christ and ultimately to be antichrist. To deny the Son is to deny the Father, to have nothing of the Spirit. It is to have rejected the Bible.

What makes such teaching attractive? Why was anyone in the Waco compound of the Branch Davidians? What makes people vulnerable to being sucked into these things? Essentially, the offer is to walk by sight, not by faith; to have now what God tells us to wait for; to be given a spokesman who looks a great deal like us as the representative of God on earth, so that we can begin to dream of ourselves as God on earth. These figures appeal to people with deep needs with a false promise to meet those needs.

A lonely man or woman may be offered an alternative to loneliness: an enforced relationship in a very tight circle filled with gossip and relational ill-health. A powerless man or woman may believe that to join the cult with its call for revolution and its caches of guns and its plan to take over the world gives them power that they've never had before. A person who has never been free to acknowledge that they have sexuality, let alone express it in a loving marriage, may be attracted to a cult in which sexual perversity is tied to religious expression. A man or woman whose life seems endlessly dreary may love the notion of religion that speaks of a Star-Wars type of experience, a fantasy or science-fiction adventure. One who hates himself or herself may want very much to join a group that has an inner ring that gives them significance, laughing at all who have not attained to their stature. Perhaps it's mere boredom that can be answered by intensity of any kind, any idea that has enthusiasm and energy behind it. But all of the promises are lies. The payoffs will never come.

Those who remain---taught by the spirit

What is the alternative? John also has a great deal to say about us, those who have remained in fellowship with the apostles, who have been anointed with the Spirit, who honor the Son and therefore honor the Father. The first word to take seriously is this anointing. We have been anointed with the Spirit of God as a gift from Jesus, and therefore we know the truth. Verse 21 says, "I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it...." John isn't writing in the same way that the antichrists were preaching. They were saying things like, "Come hear what you've never heard before. Come join the new cutting-edge religion." In contrast, John is saying, "All I'm doing is telling you to think about what you have, not gain something that you've never thought of before. I'm teaching as a reminder, not as an originator."

In verse 27 he speaks further of the teaching ministry of the Spirit: "As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you...his anointing teaches you about all things and...that anointing is real...." Because God lives in us we do not need to depend on another human being to know the truth, to follow the Lord, to hear his voice, to be reassured inside. We should be very concerned if we find ourselves completely dependent on the voice or the word of another, whether it's a leader of this church or any church, a best-selling author in the Christian bookstore, or whoever. It is the Spirit who will teach us.

Now, teachers do have value, of course. They put difficult concepts into words, and speak of elements of truth that have been encountered by particular students. A good teacher can present information thoughtfully and logically. But truth that penetrates the heart, that is life-changing, is ultimately the activity of God, causing information we have received to become real in our experience, giving it what some have called the ring of truth, "That's right! Of course!" What you hear resonates because there is Someone inside you who has already prepared your heart to believe what is true.

We have the Lord God himself in the person of the Holy Spirit given to us by the Son, and he will teach us. That ought to make us excited about Bible study, about learning to think God's thoughts after him, to penetrate the world with the mind of Christ. We are free to spend hours a day, if we choose to, in the word of God, having the Spirit illuminate it to us. We are free to go among the people of God who care for his word, and

share with them our insights and receive their insights in return. Do you realize what a privilege this is? Everywhere you go you have the living God as near to your heart as its beating, and he will teach you. You have no need to be taught. "[The Spirit] brings glory to me," Jesus said. What a privilege!

John says further that the truth that is being illuminated to us by God is eternal, unchanging truth. Verse 24: "See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us—even eternal life." That is the alternative to all the lies promised by false teachers, antichrists, and bogus prophets. It is the old truth that we cling to. The old truth is about eternal life that exists now and fills all our experience. We cannot be given more than that. So John says, "Stay where you are as regards truth. Hold tight to what does not change. Don't be seduced, or let anyone you know, as far as it depends on you, be seduced by the latest spokesperson, by this day's cult, by that opportunity from a phony spokesman."

Calvin and Hobbes is a comic strip about a six-year-old boy and his toy tiger. In one episode last week the irrepressible Calvin says, "I am a great believer in the value of novelty. I say anything new is good by definition. It can shock, insult, or offend me as long as it doesn't bore me. If you can't give me something new then repackage the old stuff so it looks new. Novelty is all that matters. I won't pay attention if it's not fresh and different."

Hobbes, looking on reflectively, says, "I can see why timeless truth doesn't sell well."

Calvin: "Give me a good flash in the pan any day."

The mentality of saying, "I'm bored, and what I require is something new just for the sheer novelty of it," may be appropriate for a six-year-old. But it is not appropriate for grownups. "A good flash in the pan any day" is a destructive way to live. John says, "Remain, stand firm, abide." The news about Christ and his life on earth, his death, his resurrection, and his return, is familiar to us who have heard the truth taught. Yet it is revolutionizingly new in its influence, in the joy it brings, in the facets that we haven't seen yet as the Spirit teaches us to understand and apply it in marvelous new ways.

I want to close with the lyrics of an old song, *I Love to Tell the Story*:

I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love;
I love to tell the story because I know 'tis true,
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.

Refrain:

I love to tell the story!
'Twill be my theme in glory-
To tell the old, old story
Of Jesus and His love.

I love to tell the story---'tis pleasant to repeat
What seems, each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet;
I love to tell the story, for some have never heard
The message of salvation from God's own holy word.

I love to tell the story, for those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest;
And when in scenes of glory I sing the new, new song,
'Twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long.

Millennium fever will give new impetus to false religion. And yet we know a story of Jesus and his love that is life-giving every time it's spoken.

Catalog No. 4436
1 John 2:18-29
Sixth Message
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May 28, 1995

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