

3. After reaffirming for his children in the faith who they are in the Messiah, John proceeded to exhort them to authentically live out their new identity in the present age. His first exhortation was a call to reorder their minds according to the truth of the new creational pattern that Jesus inaugurated in Himself; they were to stop loving the *world* – i.e., the natural, fallen order of human existence Jesus condemned and put to death (2:15-17). John’s second exhortation is closely related: They were to guard themselves against the influence of the *world’s ruler* (2:18-27). This exhortation takes the form of a warning, and John introduced it by stating the reason for it, namely the present reality of “antichrist” and the threat it posed to his readers (and so the wider Christian community).
- a. He began by announcing to them the presence of the *last hour*, indicated by the presence of “antichrist” influences in the world (2:18). The phrase, “last hour,” is unique to this passage and occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, so that John’s meaning must be determined from the context and his overall perspective in his writings. Two views are most common and most plausible.
- The first is that John was referring to the time immediately preceding Jesus’ appearing (*parousia*) at the end of the age (cf. 2:28 with Acts 1:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 2:19, 3:13, 5:23; Titus 2:11-13; cf. also 1 Peter 1:20-21). One obvious difficulty with this view is that it has John expecting the Lord’s immediate return in glory, which clearly didn’t happen. But other early Christians, including Paul, seemed to have shared this expectation (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Hebrews 10:23-25, 36-48; James 5:8; 1 Peter 4:7), which suggests that Jesus left His followers with the hope that He would return soon (ref. Matthew 24:1-35; Revelation 22:20).
  - The second view holds that this expression is effectively synonymous with the parallel phrase, “*last days*,” which refers in the New Testament to the present age extending from Jesus’ inauguration of the new-creational kingdom until its consummation at His appearing at the end of the age (cf. Acts 2:17; 2 Timothy 3:1; Hebrews 1:1-2; James 5:3; 2 Peter 3:3-13; cf. also 1 Peter 1:20-21; Jude 3-21). Because John often used the noun “hour” to denote an indefinite period of time (ref. John 4:21-23, 5:25, 28, 7:30, 16:2-4, 25), his phrase could indeed correspond to the expression, “last days,” especially since he didn’t use this expression in his writings.

Another important consideration is the fact that John omitted the definite article (“the”) in both occurrences of the phrase, which some insist proves that he wasn’t specifying any particular time or era (i.e., “*a last hour*”). This is certainly possible, but John’s overall statement seems to indicate otherwise; it shows that he was thinking of an expected “hour” that he recognized as having already arrived at the time of his writing. This suggests he had in mind a particular time, whether the extended “hour” that is the entire “last days” inter-advental era, or the time immediately preceding Jesus’ return. (The latter reflects the apostles’ and early Church’s hope of Jesus’ imminent return and the consummation of the inaugurated kingdom, a hope that John seems to have shared.)

- b. The most important thing about John’s statement is that he regarded this “hour” as already present in his day, *and the proof for him was the presence and influence of numerous “antichrist” figures*. He didn’t explain his thinking, but the New Testament writings show that the apostles and early Christians believed that the days preceding Jesus’ return would see deceivers arise within the churches (ref. 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-9; 1 Peter 3:1-4). Indeed, Jesus Himself implanted this belief in His disciples and they passed it along to those who came to faith through their witness (cf. Matthew 7:15-23, 24:1-27 with Acts 20:17-31; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; 2 Peter 2:1-3; Jude 17-19).

Like the phrase, *last hour*, the term *antichrist* is unique to John’s writings (ref. 2:22, 4:3; 2 John 7). This is surprising to some, particularly because the concept of antichrist is very much in the forefront of contemporary Christian doctrine and concern. The widespread interest in this subject leaves the impression that it is a major scriptural topic, but it is not. Theological traditions have connected various figures mentioned in the Scriptures (ref. Daniel 7-11; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4; Revelation 13:1-10; etc.) with an expected future antichrist, but only John uses the term, and then only four times in two epistles.

And John’s treatment shows that he viewed the concept of antichrist as first denoting a *principle* rather than a specific person. Whereas present-day Christian theology focuses on *the* antichrist, John spoke of numerous antichrists, even in his own generation. He also indicated that a doctrine of antichrist was part of the early Church’s understanding: “*You have heard that antichrist is coming...*” His statement seems to suggest a particular individual, but the fact that he omitted the definite article leaves open the possibility that he didn’t have any one person in mind. The parallel statements in 4:2-3 certainly point in that direction; there John spoke of an antichrist “spirit” that was coming – a spirit that was already at work in the world, even as he penned his letter.

This is not to say that the New Testament gives no indication of a specific, future antichrist figure. Paul’s “man of lawlessness” certainly seems to fit the bill (ref. again 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4). So also the Old Testament scriptures – especially the book of Daniel – create such an expectation with their emphasis on a future individual characterized by singular opposition to God and His worship (cf. 7:7-8, 24-25, 8:23-25, 9:26-27, 11:31-39). Scholars recognize that the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes was the referent of many of these contexts, and that Daniel 9 predicts the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. by the Roman general Titus.

At the same time, many throughout Church history have believed that those historical fulfillments anticipate another greater, ultimate fulfillment involving a superlative Antichrist. Among other scriptural passages (including Jesus’ teaching in the Olivet Discourse), 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 is commonly cited in support of this view. Contemporary American Christians tend to conceive this antichrist figure in terms of the dispensational “end-times” scheme popularized in books and movies, but many of the early Protestants saw the Antichrist in the Papacy.

This papal view continues in some Reformed circles, while other non-dispensational Christians believe a final antichrist figure will indeed arise prior to Jesus' Parousia, but not as part of the dispensational "seven-year tribulation" scheme. Hoekema's position is representative: *"In the Olivet Discourse Jesus refers both to the impending destruction of Jerusalem and to the end of the age, the former being a type of the latter. We may therefore expect that there will be a third major fulfillment of the 'abomination that makes desolate'... This final fulfillment will come at the end of the age, and will involve the antichrist..."*

Whatever one may believe about an "end times" Antichrist, John stressed the fact that the "antichrist" designation points to a person's relation to "the Christ" – that is, Jesus the Messiah. In general terms, the Greek preposition *anti* indicates either opposition or substitution. These two ideas are closely related in that substitution is a form of opposition: A thing is effectively opposed when it is supplanted or replaced by something else. In John's usage, the emphasis is on substitution by means of *redefinition*; "antichrist" designates those who redefine the Christ (Messiah). There are any number of ways a person can redefine the Messiah, but John focused on one that was prominent in his day, namely the denial that the flesh and blood man, Jesus of Nazareth, is the Christ (cf. 2:23, 4:3; 2 John 7).

This focus suggests that John was specifically addressing the *Gnostic* influences that were already infiltrating the Christian community. Again, the absolute distinction between the material and immaterial realms is fundamental to all forms of Gnosticism. That which is material is imperfect and transient; perfection and eternity are properties of the immaterial. With respect to human beings, this principle teaches that the goal of human existence is the soul's perfection, which begins with its liberation from the body at death.

This Gnostic distinction between "flesh" and "spirit" discovered an apparent ally in the emerging Christian community and its doctrine. For, Christians, following their Lord's lead (ref. Matthew 26:41; John 3:5, 6:63), also spoke of flesh and spirit and drew certain distinctions between them. Even more, Christian doctrine seemed to agree with the Gnostics that the flesh is the seat of uncleanness and imperfection, whereas the spirit – and life according to the spirit – is the way of perfection and eternal life (cf. Romans 8:1-13; 1 Corinthians 5:4-5; Galatians 3:3, 4:22-31, 5:16-17, 6:8; Philippians 3:1-11; 1 Peter 4:6; etc.).

Thus Gnosticism found an easy path into the Christian community and it immediately began to color and reshape Christian doctrine in significant ways. With respect to the issue at hand, Gnostic doctrine precluded the possibility that the "Christ" could be characterized by "flesh." The Gnostic conception of the material and immaterial rendered absurd the notion that a person who embodies human perfection can possess imperfect flesh. Thus the Christian Gnostics tended to teach either that the "Christ spirit" indwelt the physical man Jesus for a season (the Cerinthians), or that Jesus, who is the Christ, only appeared to possess a physical human body (the Docetists).

John was aware of the growing Gnostic influence in the Christian community and he confronted it as *antichrist* – a denial of the truth of Jesus the Messiah by redefining Him in Gnostic terms. He didn't reserve this designation for a particular individual, but ultimately for anyone and everyone who redefined the Messiah in whatever way or to whatever extent: *Whoever denies that the actual physical human being Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ is "antichrist."* This denial implicates Jesus' earthly existence, but also His death and resurrection. So also it implicates the very definition of humanness and the goal of human existence.

- For the Gnostics (and Gnostic Christians), there could be no death for the "Christ" – how can the immortal, eternal "Christ spirit" perish on a cross? So Cerinthus and his followers taught that the "Christ spirit" descended on the man Jesus at His baptism and then departed prior to His death. The Docetists went further, arguing that Jesus, being the Christ, did not have a physical body at all; He simply appeared to be a flesh and blood man.
- The Christ could not be put to death, but neither could He experience bodily resurrection. Nor would He ever *desire* such a thing; the goal of human existence is the soul's liberation from the body and the body's destruction, not its resurrection. For Christian Gnostics who acknowledged Jesus' death (the Docetists didn't), Christ's life beyond the grave wasn't a matter of bodily resurrection, but of the undying spirit's separation from the flesh. Calvary simply occasioned the liberation of the "Christ spirit."
- And as the Christ is the exemplar for His followers, Gnostic redefinition of Him extended to the matters of human identity and destiny. Contrary to the Scriptures, man is not, *in his essence*, body and spirit. Rather, man is spirit who, for a season, must endure the bondage and corruption of the flesh. He attains his human perfection by sharing in Jesus' "life out of death," but as He is glorified *spirit*, not the Last Adam. For the Gnostic Christians, the cross saw the liberation of Jesus' spirit, not the resurrection of His body and spirit as the first-fruit of God's new creation whose goal is the renewal of the entire material order (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:24ff).

These considerations only scratch the surface of the impact of Gnostic influence in the early Church, but they're adequate to show why John viewed it so severely. However insignificant a certain shading or redefining of the Messiah might appear, all alterations have profound effects. John recognized that any departure from the truth of the Messiah effectively replaces Him with a counterfeit; this principle of *antichrist* has been pervasive from the very beginning because it reflects and expresses the mind of the dark power that holds sway over the human world (1 John 5:19). This is the power that Jesus exposed, condemned and conquered, and which His disciples have also overcome in Him. Sharing in His death and resurrection life, they have triumphed over the satanic spirit behind the antichrist deception, and so they must also expose and oppose every manifestation of antichrist, whether in doctrines or persons (cf. 2:13-14 with 4:1-4).