

Who Went Out? Who is Antichrist?

by Joe Holder

Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us. (1Jo 2:18-19)

I do not question that decline among Christians and increased opposition from outside the camp of believers will accompany the last days before Christ's final return. However in a respectful assessment of this passage, along with several of John's other references to "antichrists" of whom he wrote, they existed at the time of his writing. We cannot defer them until the end-times just prior to the Second Coming. He specifically states that many antichrists are already in the world, and he writes this letter in opposition to at least one of the major groups whom he categorized in this way. Here he merely identifies that many antichrists exist, evidence that epochal Bible prophecy had reached the time when the only direct Bible prophecy remaining to be fulfilled relates to the Second Coming. No other prophecy suspended the imminence of the Second Coming.

Some theologians attempt to establish that the first generation of Christians, even the apostles, believed that the Second Coming would occur in their lifetime. It seems more reasonable, and a more rational Biblical interpretation, to hold that they believed in the imminence, not the immediacy, of the Lord's return. In other words they believed He could return at any time, but not that He necessarily was to return immediately.

Every faithful believer should hold to the imminence of the Lord's return. That belief should transform our lives and keep us faithful to our holy calling.

Remember the lesson from Jesus Himself that introduced the corollary between our view of the Second Coming and how we treat each other. The servant who concluded, "My lord delayeth his coming," also began to beat and mistreat his fellow servants. The servant who believed his lord would soon return lived more graciously toward his fellow servants. We see that lesson lived out frequently around us. When otherwise faithful believers begin to mistreat or speak harshly toward other believers, they reveal that they no longer truly accept the doctrine of Christ's imminent return! The believer who holds this doctrine tightly and faithfully will treat others, even those who do not live up to his expectations, as if the Lord might return tomorrow. How forcefully our deep personal belief regarding the Lord's return will appear in our conduct. How do you treat those with whom you disagree? Do you prove to them and to all who witness your conduct that you truly believe in the reality of the Lord's imminent return? Or do you merely give lip service to the idea while your conduct proves that you don't really view the Lord's return seriously?

Perhaps one of the most frequently misinterpreted passages from 1 John appears in our lesson. They went out from us...". How often Christians refer these words to other believers whom they have mistreated and driven from their fellowship? Or they will refer to those with whom they disagree over a non-essential issue in these harsh terms. Such a harsh accusation against someone who differs with us over an insignificant question says far more about us than about the person with whom we disagree. We should reserve this commentary for those who depart from major essential Christian doctrine or conduct. In the case of this letter John has already

focused his opposition against the Docetists who literally denied the whole question of the incarnation, that Jesus was actually God manifest in human flesh. Such a doctrine attacked the very foundations of Christian truth and, if it succeeded, would have altered the whole course of Christianity for all future generations. We should never use such harshness against people who differ with us over minor or non-essential issues.

This whole question imposes a rather energetic task upon us. What do you view as essential Christian doctrine? What do you view as non-essential? Take the time to make a thoughtful list of both items. A word to the wise, your list of essentials should be rather short and thoughtfully constructed. Anyone who rejects, holds to an aberrant view of, one of these doctrines cannot be considered a "Christian." This harmonizes with John's use of the term against the Docetic gnostics. Think back over the last hundred years of our history. Have we at times rejected some from our fellowship who, though following admittedly grave error, were not guilty of such a severe departure as to question their basic Christianity? If so, we may well have imposed an excessively severe judgment against them in light of this passage. Once you cut off any relationship or contact with an erring brother or sister, you lose any hope of influencing them to repent and return to the right path. Before cutting them off so severely and finally, we should exhaust every avenue of contact and influence to win them back to the historic and Biblical view of the faith. We should carefully examine our own assessment of essentials to see if they ring true in light of a long view of history, not merely against our esoteric view and lifetime of experience in the faith. Even if we entered the faith early in life and live to a very old age, what is our lifetime compared with almost two thousand years of history in the faith? My personal experience or my private interpretation of my

experience should never be used as the judge of what is historic and acceptable Christianity.

John didn't say that those who went out merely disagreed with us, but that they were not of us. At least he indicates that they did not share his views of the faith. At most he questioned that they were even saved! He did not view this situation in a trivial manner.

If we encounter areas of lesser disagreement with someone in our fellowship, we should honestly acknowledge the difference and work, kindly and faithfully, to resolve it. We should never break fellowship with anyone over these lesser issues! To do so makes us guilty of Biblical heresy, creating or contributing to a divisive "party spirit." You see heresy in the New Testament does not require that a person hold to a view that contradicts historic New Testament faith. You may be orthodox in every point of your theological beliefs and still, through a harsh schismatic attitude, be a full-fledged heretic! The New Testament does not view breach of fellowship among believers capriciously. Research the definition of the Greek word translated **heresy** in the New Testament. It should instill in us an amazing spirit of reserve in our dealings with those who do not in every point agree with us. We have much to learn in this area of our Christianity.

There may be significance in the fact that John writes, "They went out from us." Could he be referring to the apostolic circle, not to the broader circle of first century churches? If these people had openly departed from the New Testament faith as attested by the apostles, but were still involved in local churches, the gravity of John's warning becomes obvious and fully justified. A favorite tactic of the gnostics was to assert that they had a private revelation from the days of Christ and the apostles, but not the

documented historic revelation contained in Scripture. It was a secret and unwritten source that they claimed to be superior to any written historical chain. Numerous documents appeared early in the second century claiming to be from the pen of an apostle, but containing spurious and obvious errors when compared with the written and known faith of the apostles. Had they already initiated this allegation of a secret non-written source for their ideas, John's comments here are quite revealing. In opposing gnostic heresies Irenaeus clearly defined what he meant by tradition as a reliable source of the church's authority. He rejected recent ideas and defined tradition as the written teachings of the apostles and other recognized authors of New Testament documents, and those teachings faithfully maintained from apostolic times by the church. Thus in one definition he rejected internal esoteric and recent "traditions" as well as the specific claims made by gnostics to a secret non-written source for their major departures from the faith.

How can this lesson instruct us? Be cautious in harshly judging those who may not agree with you in minor points. ***Don't become a heretic in your opposition to heretics.*** Be equally cautious about creating "traditions" of your own brand that fail to find their roots in Scripture and historic church practice. I once encountered a problem in a church (far away from our area) in which one element in this particular church referred to a practice they had initiated less than a year earlier as part of their "tradition." Bible tradition does not grow out of our immediate and private experience but out of Scripture and respect for the faith of Scripture once and for all time delivered to the saints.

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