

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

<b>Series:</b>	<b>1 John</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>8</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
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### TRUTH AND ERROR: WHY ORTHODOXY MATTERS

Albert Mohler, professor of theology and president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (Louisville, KY) as well as frequent contributor to *World* magazine, gave this assessment of our present situation: “The church today finds itself assaulted without – and even within – by a culture and worldview of untruth, anti-truth, and postmodern irrationality. In fact, researchers increasingly report that a majority of evangelicals themselves reject the notion of absolute or objective truth. The seductive lure of postmodern relativism has pervaded many evangelical pulpits and countless evangelical pews, often couched as humility, sensitivity, or sophistication. The culture has us in its grip, and many feel no discomfort. The absence of doctrinal precision, and biblical preaching marks the current evangelical age. Doctrine is considered outdated by some and divisive by others. The confessional heritage of the church is neglected and, in some cases, seems even to be an embarrassment to updated evangelicals. Expository preaching – once the hallmark and distinction of the evangelical pulpit – has been replaced in many churches by motivational messages, therapeutic massaging of the self, and formulas for health, prosperity, personal integration, and celestial harmony. Almost a century ago, J. C. Ryle, the great evangelical bishop, warned of such diversions from the truth: ‘I am afraid of an inward disease which appears to be growing and speaking in all the Churches of Christ throughout the world. That disease is a disposition on the part of ministers to abstain from all sharply-cut doctrine, and a distaste on the part of professing Christians for all distinct statements of dogmatic truth.’”<sup>1</sup> I made a very similar observation a few years back, “It should not come as a big surprise that when theology is obviated, churches become preoccupied with other things. Entertainment in the form of drama and comedy skits replaces preaching, which, unless it is entertaining, is often described as boring. More and more stress is placed on music style that attempts to evoke an emotional response simply for its own sake. Most of what passes for preaching on ‘Christian’ television, especially among the so-called Word of faith teachers, is either sub-Christian or just out-and-out heresy, blasphemy, and weirdness. ‘Paganism,’ laments Os Guinness, ‘is growing up in our churches. Speculative Gnosticism is resurgent in our own circles. A horror of great darkness is welling up in our own house.’ Theologian Donald Bloesch soberly warns that ‘a church that does not take theology seriously is unwittingly encouraging understandings of the faith that are warped or unbalanced.’”<sup>2</sup> Another factor in creating “The Perfect Theological Storm” that presently is engulfing Evangelicalism is coming out of the Charismatic renewal, which is an outgrowth of Pentecostalism. One of the major indicators of Biblical and theological ignorance is the widespread acceptance and popularity of “Word-Faith” personalities like Kenneth Hagin, Fred Price, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Benny Hinn, and Jerry Savelle. There are others of this stripe (Joyce Meyers, T. D. Jakes, and Joel Osteen. They do not necessarily agree on all the Word of Faith doctrines – but they share a commitment to the same kind of emphasis on the prosperity theme), but these are the most prominent. Why am I pointing the accusing finger at these people?

The doctrines they teach and promote are not compatible with historic Christianity. At best, they are *sub-Christian*; at worst, they are heretical. The word “heresy” comes from the Greek word *hairesis*, which has for its root meaning, “that which is chosen by, and for oneself.” This in turn highlights the thought of schism or faction (cf. Titus 3:10). A heretic, therefore, is someone who sows error, confusion, and division (1 Cor. 11:19; Gal. 5:20). Michael Horton has aptly written, “In other words, heresy brings with it not only error, but a particular spirit or attitude: arrogance, a rejection of all authority, and self-will.”<sup>3</sup> The New Testament expresses serious concern over this subject. This is seen, not only in its condemnation of false doctrine (1 Tim. 1:3; 6:3), but also in the way it urges the maintenance of sound teaching (1 Cor. 11:2; Gal. 1:8; 2 Tim. 1:13). Do these people teach heresy? Yes, and this is not only my opinion, but is the position of such respected men as the late Walter Martin, John MacArthur, Jr., Mike Horton, and the late R. C. Sproul, to mention only a few.<sup>4</sup> What kind of heresy are we talking about? How serious is it? Well, to begin with, one of the doctrines taught by the Word-Faith people is that Christ did not make atonement on the cross; rather, He had to accept into His own spirit the nature of Satan and be re-born in the pit of Hell. That is heresy. The Word-Faith teachers deny the omnipresence and eternal existence of the pre-incarnate Christ. That is heresy. Another doctrine they advocate is that the believer is actually a “little-god” and, as such, is just as much an incarnation of God as Jesus. That is heresy. Finally, the Word-Faith teachers deny the historic doctrine of the Trinity and reject the Biblical teaching on the Sovereignty of God. That is heresy. Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders to take heed to themselves and to the flock over which God had given them charge because they would be confronted by “savage wolves” who would attack and not spare the flock. Even from among their own number, false teachers would arise, “speaking perverse things” and seeking to draw away disciples (Acts 20:17-35). The Apostle Peter, in his last epistle, wrote of “ignorant and unstable” men who “distort the Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:16). Pastors are expected to feed and protect the flock, and one of the ways this is done is by pointing out false teachers. Paul had no reservation about naming names (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17; 4:14-15). Neither do I. Our churches are full of people who are ignorant of historic Christianity and, as such, are easy prey for false teachers. Simply because they stand up and declare, “The Bible says . . . !” does not mean they are being true to Scripture. Remember, Paul warned the Corinthians about someone preaching “another Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:4). The Jesus of the Word-Faith teachers is *not* the Jesus of historic Christianity. Ignorance is not bliss and all Christians are called to know the faith, which has once and for all been delivered to the saints. Mark the words of Luther: “We are not free from blame if we have a wrong faith and follow false teachers. The fact that we did not know will be of no help to us, for we were warned beforehand. Besides, God has told us to judge what this or that person teaches and to give an account. If we fail to do this, we are lost. Therefore, the soul’s salvation of each person depends on his knowing what is God’s Word and what is false teaching.”<sup>5</sup>

**I. CONFLICT UNAVOIDABLE.** John cites *three* crises that confront his readers. *First* center around the times. It is the *last* hour. Bruce notes: “The ‘last hour’ (*eschatē hōra*) might be regarded as an alternative expression for the ‘last days,’ but more probably it denotes the terminal phase of the ‘last days,’ like the ‘last time’ (*kairos eschatos*) of 1 Pet. 1:5 at which the final salvation is to be revealed. According to Jude 18, the apostles of Christ foretold that scoffers would arise ‘in the last time’ (*ep’ eschatou chronou*); Jude sees the fulfillment of their words in the emergence of the false teachers whom he denounces in his epistle. So John infers from the appearance of the false teachers against whom he warns his readers that the end-time Antichrist is now at hand and that his spirit is active in these teachers; that is how ‘we know that it is the last hour.’”<sup>6</sup> *Second*, the presence of *many* antichrists. Westcott says that an antichrist simply means “one who, assuming the guise of Christ, opposes Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Barclay gives this explanation: “From its derivation *Antichrist* can have two meanings. *Anti* is a Greek preposition which can mean either *against* or *in place of*. *Stratēgos* is the Greek word for a *commander*, and

*antistratēgos* can mean either *the hostile commander* or the *deputy commander*. *Antichrist* can mean either the opponent of Christ or the one who seeks to put himself in the place of Christ. In this case the meaning will come to the same thing, but with this difference. If we take the meaning to be *the one who is opposed to Christ*, the opposition is plain. If we take the meaning to be *the one who seeks to put himself in the place of Christ*, Antichrist can be one who subtly tries to take the place of Christ from within the church and the Christian community. The one will be an open opposition; the other a subtle infiltration. We need not choose between these meanings, for Antichrist can act in either way. The simplest way to think of it is that Christ is the incarnation of God and goodness, and Antichrist is the incarnation of the devil and evil.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, there is the *third* point – the reality of apostasy – “they went out from us because they were really never with us to begin with” (my translation). White says that: “John presses the logic of denial upon a third point which, once said, seems obvious, but which doubtless the seceding party would strongly contest. It seemed a minor matter to dispute the particular terms to be applied to Jesus, to deny Him this or that title as the definition of His person and authority, while holding professedly to all else in spiritual life and experience. So many would argue still. John declares this cannot hold either. For to deny the divine Sonship of Jesus is to surrender our only real clue to the nature of God: if Jesus is not Son, then God is not Father. Here again, not only do the terms themselves carry this implication, being strictly relative: in addition, the only evidence for God’s Fatherhood is Christ’s revealing Sonship. Thus, ‘no one who denies the Son has the Father: he who confesses the Son has the Father also;’ this was the purpose of John’s emphasis that our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son. The argument is but the application of Christ’s own words: ‘No man knows the Father, except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him. . . .’ Christ’s answer to Phillip’s plea, ‘Show us the Father’ was clear: ‘He that hath seen me hath seen the Father . . .’ Far more than some modern ‘Christians’ realize, the whole circle of Christian understanding of God is centered upon the person of Jesus; to doubt His uniqueness, authority, and divine glory, is to doubt all we most readily take for granted in His teaching about God. That is why Unitarianism proves so often the parent of agnosticism. True, this argument had a sharper nuance for John’s readers than for us, in that the alternative to ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ was for them Zeus, Mars, Venus, Bacchus, Dionysius – the whole disreputable tribe of unworshipful deities who claimed the first century’s adoration – or else some philosophic abstraction, some fleeting intellectual gleam charged with hysterical emotion induced by hypnotic rites. Yet it remains true also for us that if Jesus be not the Son, in the bosom of the Father, and so uniquely able to reveal Him, then the Fatherhood of God is a nebulous, sentimental idea, unsupported in nature, history, or much of non-Christian personal experience. If we retain God in our thought at all, it will be in far different terms – as Fate, or malicious Destiny, or the irrational blind Force that defeats our ideals – and with very different moral and social consequences. Much more probably, however, if we surrender the Sonship of Jesus, we shall destroy faith altogether.”<sup>9</sup>

**II. THE CHRISTIAN COMFORT.** John highlights that true believers are distinguished by *two* things. *First*, they have the unction (*chrisma*) from the Holy One. John therefore, “assures his readers at a later date that the ‘anointing’ they have received ‘from the Holy One’ admits them to the true knowledge. Paul had used the same term in relation to the gift of the Spirit: ‘it is God,’ he writes to the Corinthians (coupling them with himself and his colleagues), ‘who . . . has anointed us; he has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee’ (2 Cor. 1:21, 22). Of these three terms by which the bestowal of the Spirit is described – *chrisma*, *sphragis* and *arrabōn* – John employs the first as most appropriate to his purpose of assuring his readers that they

suffer no disadvantage as compared with the ‘inner ring:’ ‘You, no less than they, are among the initiated; this is the gift of the Holy One, and by it you all have knowledge’ (NEB).”<sup>10</sup> The *second* characteristic of all true believers centers on knowing the true Christ. Boice writes: “John also says that those who are truly God’s children ‘know,’ by which, as the next verses show, he means that they know the truth concerning Jesus Christ with all its consequences. The KJV gives an unfortunate translation at this point, being based, as it is, upon what is probably a faulty Greek text. The KJV translators read the Greek word *panta*, which means ‘all things,’ and therefore derived the translation ‘and ye know all things.’ Actually, the word should probably be *pantes*, meaning ‘you all,’ and the translation should therefore be as the RSV, NEB, NIV, and other more modern versions have it, namely, ‘you all know.’ The point is not that Christians know everything. They certainly do not. But rather that all who are Christians at least know the full, absolute, and reliable truth concerning Jesus. Whatever their other doubts may be, they at least have no doubt at the point of Christ’s person. Once again we should notice that John’s purpose in writing is not to impart fresh truth but rather to bring his readers to the point of using more effectively that which they already know.”<sup>11</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Two final points are made by Marshall: “On the one hand, the writer is not saying that anything handed down from the past is true and reliable simply because of its antiquity. He regards the teaching given at the beginning as issuing from the Lord through the apostles and hence bearing the stamp of divine revelation: it is ‘the word of Christ’ which is to ‘dwell in you richly’ (Col. 3:16). On the other hand, while the writer is clearly opposed to new fashions and innovations in doctrine which are false, he would no doubt allow that what has been handed down as ‘truth unchanged, unchanging’ may need to be re-expressed in fresh ways if it is to make the same impact on modern readers as it made on its first readers. The art of translation is to reproduce by means of the receptor language the same impression on the readers as was made by the statement on its original readers in its original language. What is true of different languages is also true of presenting the gospel to people in different ages and cultures.”<sup>12</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Al Mohler Crosswalk Commentary* (July 1, 2005), available at [http://crosswalkmail.com/gtljsep\\_vtbccfcg.html](http://crosswalkmail.com/gtljsep_vtbccfcg.html).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. my “Does Theology Still Matter?” in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Moody, 1996), p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Scott Horton, *Modern Reformation* (Jan.-Feb., 1994), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *The Agony of Deceit: What Some TV Preachers Are Really Teaching*, ed. M. S. Horton (Moody, 1990); John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Zondervan, 1993). Other critics of the Word-Faith teachers include Gordon Fee, *The Disease of Health & Wealth* (Frontline, 1985); D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel* (Hendrickson, 1988). Some might accuse me of having a theological ax to grind against Charismatics, since the Word-Faith teachers are all self-proclaimed Charismatics. More recently, Costi W. Hinn and Anthony G. Wood have written *Defining Deception: Freeing The Church From The Mystical-Miracle Movement* (Southern California Seminary Press, 2018). Costi Hinn is Benny Hinn’s nephew. He traveled around the world with his uncle and saw firsthand the extravagant lifestyle, counterfeit miracles, false prophecies and aberrant teaching of Benny Hinn. He turned his back on all of this and embraced the historic Evangelical faith.

<sup>5</sup> *What Luther Says: An Anthology II*, ed. E. M. Plass (Concordia, 1959), p. 637.

<sup>6</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1970), p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> W. Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude* (Saint Andrews Press, 1974), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> R. E. O. White, *An Open Letter to Evangelicals: A Devotional and Homiletical Commentary on The First Epistle of John* (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce, op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> J. M. Boice, *The Epistles of John* (Zondervan, 1979), p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1978), p. 60.