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We are going through the Apostle John's final letters, to people at different stages in their Christian walk, who are journeying into a deeper relationship with God, their Father in Heaven. John encourages them to live the faith they have embraced, but cautioning them of the dangers of living this faith, and offering them ways of being aware of such dangers in order to evade the traps and avoid hurting themselves.

John's counsel is like someone giving directions to go to a "must see" destination, describing what makes that place special, at the same time warning us of speed camera traps along the way, and cautioning us of driving around potholes on mountain roads which might send us to the bottom of the ravine hundreds of feet below. Ignore this advice at your own peril!

John's message is even more poignant, given two events of major significance this past week.

The debate on guns in American society is becoming polarised and very heated, with more individual opinions masquerading as truth and fact.

The other major event this week was the death of a well-known and very well respected Christian leader, Billy Graham, whose life and message stands in stark contrast to the tone of conversation about guns in America.

A few weeks ago we examined John's tests which define the core of our Christian life. The first was the **moral test - Obedience**. If we live our lives in obedience to God's commandments, if we frame our lives in obedience to Jesus' teachings, there is no doubt the life of God is in us, that God is living His life through us.

The second was the **social test - Love**. If we love our neighbour, our fellow human beings, if we live at peace with them, if we care for them as God cares for us, if we bless them the way God blesses us, we are a valuable member in God's Kingdom, doing what every good citizen of The Kingdom should be doing.

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Today we examine the third test, the **Doctrinal test**. Two dangers distort and destroy our relationship with God, and our fellowship with one another. Last Sunday we examined the first danger, which is **the love of the world**. The world's approach to life is poisoned by value systems which are not of God. Those who passionately indulge in pleasure to satisfy the cravings of the body, those who use their eyes to feed their thought life and satisfy the cravings of the mind, and those who puff themselves with the importance of their achievements to satisfy the craving of their ego, God distances Himself from them. Their lifestyle choices clearly state they have no need of God, and God will certainly not impose Himself on them.

Today, we shall examine the second danger, which is false doctrine. Now, **Doctrine** may seem like a big and complicated word, but all it means is, **a belief, or set of beliefs held by and taught by a Church, a political party, or other group.**

Believe it or not, TESCO has a doctrine - *every little helps!*, is a value statement which is based on their belief that helping us save pennies by shopping at TESCO (I am not knocking it!) is somehow very helpful, that's until Aldi came up with **Amazing Specialbuys**, and Lidl came up with **Big on Quality, Lidl on Price!**

If shopping is confusing, imagine the confusion when one group of people explain the Bible, God, Christ and the Holy Spirit in one way, and other groups explain these in a totally different ways. Surely someone has got it right? But how will we know who is right and who is wrong?

John refers to those who teach false doctrine as **antichrists**.

The word itself is the first deception. The **anti**Christ says he is not against Christ! He accepts Jesus, but not as One Divine, who lives in the presence of God in eternity, not as the One who came to take on satan and defeat death. Jesus was an ordinary man, they say, who did good which pleased

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people. This is the **antichrists'** belief, and this is what they want us to believe.¹

But the word **anti** is not restricted only to mean **against**.² There is a deeper meaning of **anti** which is **instead of**. This is in line with Jesus' teaching, **Many false teachers will arise and lead many astray**.³

These antichrists will offer themselves and their doctrines as a substitute for the true Christ. They do not appear to be against Christ, although they will be, but they offer themselves and their doctrines as a substitute for the true Christ.

John reminds his "Dear Children", the battle in our world today, is not just between love and hatred, that is a **social** battle; it is not just a battle between holiness and sin, a **moral** battle; but it is a battle for **doctrine**, it is a battle between truth and error (falsehood). The battle for **doctrine** is the battle for our minds, because obedience and disobedience are wilful decisions which take place in the mind.

There are two brands of *cola*, which appear alike in identical glasses, one of which says, **It's the REAL thing!** I started my career in market research. In blind test after blind test, all over the world, people found it difficult to tell one cola drink from the other. I remember a time when I would buy either cola drink depending on which one was on special offer. On one occasion, a guest in our home said he would only drink one of the two brands, but it was not the brand I had in my fridge that day. As he continued to brag about his ability to distinguish between the two colas, my mischievous side got the better of me and I served him what I had. What else could I do?! He took a sip of it and said, **Thank you for serving me the brand I like! You see, I told you I knew the difference!**

¹ 1 John 2:22(b)

² **anti** as in antibacterial (against bacteria), anti-aircraft guns *etc*

³ Matthew 25

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Don't we all know people who swear by certain brands of eggs, bread, orange juice, etc.

If it is difficult to tell the difference between brands, imagine how much **more** difficult it is to distinguish between falsehood and **Truth**, and how much more difficult it is to distinguish between distorted truth and **Truth**.

John makes an impassioned caution, ***Dear children, we are getting near the end of things. You have heard, I expect, the prophecy about the coming of the anti-Christ. Believe me, there are anti-Christ's about already, which confirms my belief that we are near the end.***⁴

The time is now John says. We don't know exactly when, but if we have bought into the Christian faith, shouldn't we want to be prepared for the eventuality we read will come about?

The **antichrist** has us convinced, we can pick and choose what we believe; you don't really believe, he says, the nonsense about end times and all those things in the book of Revelation? Believe in Christ, but not all the other incredible, unbelievable things about the virgin birth, second coming and all that. This is the deception the **antichrist** offers.

How do we guard against the deception of the antiChrist? Jesus' advice to Nicodemus, a senior person in the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem, was this, **You must be born of God.**

The climax of every Billy Graham crusade was the call to be **born again**. This **new birth** is very important, but it is not simply about making a decision (*although this decision may be the most important in your life*), because this *new birth* is made in Heaven itself.

Similarly, '**deciding to follow Jesus**', as if He was the Pied Piper of Hamelin, is not about blind faith.

This **new birth** starts with the supernatural and spiritual work in our hearts and minds by the Holy Spirit, to let God breathe His life into us as

⁴ 1 John 2:18 (JB Philips)

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He did at Creation, that we may become, once again, the person He Made us to be, and live that life here and now.

The first step in starting this **new birth** is an important one which is baptism, the wilful act of surrendering the self to God.

Having cautioned us of the two danger which destroy our relationship with God and with each other, in the closing verses of chapter 2, John explains **how** we guard ourselves against the deception of the antiChrist. Six times, John uses the word **abide** (i.e. **continuously live in us**), to underscore the points, the first seed (teaching) which brought us into the knowledge of God should be rooted and fed and bring life in us, God's supernatural spiritual anointing should live in us, and His Truth should find residence in us. As the first seed, God's anointing and Truth are doing its work in us, when Christ appears again, says John, we will not shrink from Him in shame, rather recognise Him with confidence.⁵

The question before us today is this: For the seed of the Gospel message, the Truth living in us, and God's anointing, to work God's power in us, we must immerse ourselves, saturate our minds with the Word of God, **even when we don't understand it**. The work of the Holy Spirit is to use the Word of God in us, to discern the message of those who preach and teach Christian doctrine, who teach the principles by which we measure our lives and how we live them.

Will we take a conscious decision to make room in our lives, for the Word of God to saturate us, and help us discern Truth?

AMEN

⁵ 1 John 2:28