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AVOIDING SPIRITUAL DECEPTION (Part 1)

1 John 2:18-23

By

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1 John Lesson 10

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The March, 2006, issue of *Reader's Digest* features a cover story on ten money scams to beware of. It seems that the Internet and other modern technologies have opened many doors of opportunity for con artists who are after your money. To avoid being ripped off you must stay alert.

It's traumatic when thieves steal your identity and your money, but there is something far more traumatic and tragic, namely, when spiritual con artists, who claim to be Christian, deceive the unsuspecting. The stakes are much higher than someone's life savings. The eternal destiny of souls is at risk! Since the days of the New Testament, Satan has planted these deceivers in Christian churches, where they prey on the untaught or on those who are disgruntled. To avoid spiritual deception, you must develop biblical discernment and be vigilant at all times.

But we live in a day when the whole idea of spiritual discernment is minimized because spiritual truth is minimized. The slogan is, "Doctrine divides. Let's set aside our doctrinal differences and come together on the areas where we agree." Another popular mantra is, "Jesus said that they will know that we are His disciples by our *love*, not by our *doctrine*." The implication is, "Set aside your doctrinal views and accept anyone who says that he believes in Jesus." Tolerance, unity, and love are viewed as much more important than doctrinal truth, which often smacks of pride.

I have had my share of unpleasant encounters with those who arrogantly claim to have the truth. They beat you up with it, not showing much grace or kindness. But we should not allow such experiences to cause us to throw out the biblical emphasis on sound doctrine. It is *not* a minor theme in the Bible!

It is highly significant that John, the apostle of love, who has just written that love is an essential mark of the true Christian (2:7-11), now calls these false teachers "antichrists" and "liars"! He doesn't call them "brothers in Christ," who just have different ways

of understanding things. He makes it plain that they were trying to deceive the true Christians and that they were not Christian in any sense of the term. True biblical love is not divorced from an emphasis on biblical truth. To compromise the truth about the person and work of Jesus Christ is to be hateful to the core, because such error results in the eternal damnation of those who embrace it.

In these verses, John applies his third test by which you may evaluate the soundness of a teacher, as well as your own life. He has already given us the moral test of obedience to God's commandments (2:3-6). He has given the relational test of love (2:7-11). Now he gives the doctrinal test of truth about the person and work of Jesus Christ (2:18-27). He says,

To avoid spiritual deception, be discerning
of people and doctrine.

The section (2:18-27) falls into three parts. In 2:18-20, John shows that to avoid spiritual deception, you must develop discernment with regard to people. In 2:21-23, he shows that you must develop discernment with regard to doctrine, especially, the truth about Jesus Christ. In 2:24-27 (which we will study next week), he shows that the means of developing such discernment is to abide in the Word and in the Spirit.

1. To avoid spiritual deception, be discerning of people (2:18-20).

John contrasts the false teachers with true believers. He addresses all of his readers as "children," (see 2:13), implying their vulnerability and the need to be on guard against these unprincipled men who were trying to deceive them (2:26). As a wise spiritual father, John is giving important counsel that will help us avoid being deceived.

He says, "It is the last hour." The way that we know it is the last hour is that "many antichrists have appeared." Some have said that John mistakenly thought that Jesus would return in his lifetime. Such a view undermines the divine inspiration of Scripture. If you buy into it, you cannot trust anything that the apostles wrote. You become the judge of Scripture according to what strikes you as true. This view also impugns the intelligence of the apostles. John had heard Jesus say that no one knows the hour of His com-

ing (Matt. 24:36). It is not reasonable to accuse him of being mistaken here about the time of the second coming.

Rather, John is calling the entire period between Jesus' ascension and His return "the last hour." No one knows how long this period will last, but the phrase, "the last hour," implies a sense of urgency, in that Jesus may come at any moment. Jesus concludes His teaching on the end times with this application to the wise hearer: "Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come" (Mark 13:33).

John says that a distinguishing feature of this age is that antichrist is coming and that even now many antichrists have appeared. John is the only New Testament writer to use this word, and it only occurs five times in four verses (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). But the concept of the antichrist is more frequent. Daniel 7 talks about the horn and Revelation 13 talks about the beast, both of which refer to antichrist. Paul (2 Thess. 2:1-12) mentions the man of lawlessness who will exalt himself and display himself as being God. His coming will be "in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders" (2 Thess. 2:9). He will deceive many, who will perish. When John says that antichrist is coming, he refers to this future evil leader.

But when he says, "even now many antichrists have appeared," he means that the evil spirit that will characterize the final antichrist is already working in these false teachers who have left the churches. The prefix, "anti," can mean either "instead of" or "in opposition to." It may contain both ideas here. The false teachers rise up within the church and present a system that subtly presents something *instead of* Jesus Christ. The false teacher may use the same label, "Jesus Christ," but he will not be the same Jesus that is presented in the Bible. If a gullible person takes the bait, he is led farther away until finally he is in total *opposition* to Christ.

These false teachers, whom John labels antichrists, did not carry pitchforks and wear red suits with horns and a tail, or T-shirts saying, "Warning: I am an antichrist!" Rather, they arose in the churches. Some of them may have been elders or pastors, who for a while had taught the truth. Paul warned the Ephesian elders, "from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). Now

these men were leaving the churches to form new groups, saying, "We have come into a deeper knowledge of the truth. Follow us and we'll let you in on this secret knowledge." John gives three guidelines to watch for:

A. Beware: Satan works in the realm of religion.

False teachers invariably adopt Christian terminology and posture themselves as being Christians, but they are not. They usually begin within the church (2:19) and at first, their teaching is orthodox. They often have attractive personalities and they build a following of people who seem to be helped by their teaching.

But, eventually, they begin subtly to veer from the truth. There may be multiple motives. Sometimes, they fall into immorality, and to justify their sin, they have to deny Scripture. Or, they may love the acclaim of being popular, along with the financial rewards that often go along with a successful ministry. It feels good to be in demand as a speaker, to stay in luxury hotels and speak to large crowds. As a man's popularity grows, he grows in power. He hires a loyal group of lieutenants who carry out his wishes. No one dares to challenge the man's teaching or lifestyle, even though he is preaching heresy and living in disobedience to Scripture. But, in spite of his deviance, he is still trafficking in the realm of religion.

Note, also, that there has never been a perfect church, even in New Testament times while the apostles were still living. We sometimes idealize the early church, thinking that if we could just get back to the New Testament principles, we wouldn't have all of the problems that we constantly battle in the modern church.

But, these early churches had gone through the damage of false teachers in their midst, who now had left the churches to form new groups. Undoubtedly, they took with them people from the churches. Whenever that happens, those who still are in the church are confused and wounded. They wonder, "Why did our friends leave? They claim that they have found the truth now and that we are in the dark. Maybe there are problems here. Maybe we should leave, too." This is how the enemy has worked from the earliest days of the church. Don't be surprised when it happens.

B. Beware of anyone who breaks from the true church to form a new group with new theology.

“They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us” (2:19). John’s words here do not apply to people who get disgruntled in one evangelical church and leave to join or form another evangelical church. While that practice is usually regrettable and sad, it is wrong to label those who left as heretics, unless they also have abandoned core Christian truth.

Heretics not only eventually separate themselves from true Christians to form their own groups, but also, they deviate from orthodox Christian doctrine on major issues. They claim that they have the truth and that others do not, or that they now see things that others do not see. And, invariably they try to recruit others from within the church to join them.

While such situations are painful and unpleasant, John’s words here should prepare us not to be surprised or disheartened when it happens. If it happened to the churches under John’s care, it can and will happen to churches today. But, when it happens, we need to think biblically about some issues.

First, true Christians are born of God. The key issue with these false teachers was, they were not *of us*. They did not share the new life in Christ that brings us into His body, the church. So, they felt free to leave. You can be on the membership list of the church without having experienced the new birth. While I believe that it’s important to join a church, it is far more important to make sure that you’re truly *of* the church through the new birth.

Second, if you truly know Christ, you will persevere with the church. It is imperfect. It contains difficult and irritating people. But, it is *family!* You were born into it through the new birth, and so was everyone else who has truly trusted Christ. While you may not have picked these folks to be in your family, God picked them and you’ve got to learn to get along with them! Although they often grate like sandpaper against your soul, it’s by persevering with them that God smoothes your rough edges. You *will* experience hurt feelings and misunderstandings if you get involved in a local church! Be committed to work through these matters. Don’t bail out on the church!

Third, note that John was more concerned about purity of doctrine than he was about church growth or unity. He never says, "We should go after these dear brothers and bring them back!" Or, "Let's set aside our differences and love these men." Rather, he says in effect, "Their departure shows their true colors. Let them go!" Of course, we need to evaluate the seriousness of the doctrinal matter at hand. Sometimes sincere Christians have to agree to disagree or even to work in separate parts of the Lord's vineyard. But if the doctrinal issue is a core matter of the faith, purity is much more important than unity or church growth. We should not measure a church's success by the numbers who attend, but rather by its faithfulness to the truth of the gospel.

So John says, "Beware, Satan works in the realm of religion. Beware of anyone who breaks from the true church to form a new group with new theology."

C. Beware of anyone who offers "new truth" that others have missed.

The test of orthodoxy is submission and adherence to the apostolic teaching contained in the New Testament. If someone comes up with some new "truth" that no one else has discovered since the days of the apostles, beware! The heretics claimed that they had now been initiated into a deeper level of truth than the average church member had experienced. It always flatters our pride to think that we have some level of truth that others lack, or we have had some special spiritual experience that other poor souls are missing out on. These false teachers were claiming such knowledge and offering it as bait to those who had yet to be enlightened.

This is probably the background to verse 20. There is a textual variant here. The KJV (and New KJV) follows the reading, "you know all things." Most other versions follow the reading (probably original), "you all know." John is telling his readers that spiritual knowledge is not restricted to some elite inner circle. Rather, they *all* know the truth of the gospel because they all have the anointing from the Holy One, which refers to the indwelling Holy Spirit that Jesus, the Holy One, promised to send.

The false teachers may have been using the word "anointing" as a technical term for being initiated into their special gnosis, or

knowledge (John Stott, *The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 107). But John takes their term and uses it of the Holy Spirit. At the moment of the new birth, God's Spirit opens our blind eyes to see the truth about our sinfulness and the all-sufficiency of what Christ did on the cross to pay for our sins. This simple gospel message is what these believers had heard from the beginning (2:24). Rather than moving on from it to some "new truth," they needed to abide in the old gospel truth that they had believed from the start.

So John's first point is that to avoid spiritual deception, be discerning of people. Satan disguises himself as an angel of light and his servants disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:14, 15). But, they are liars and deceivers!

2. To avoid spiritual deception, be discerning of doctrine (2:21-23).

The late philosophy professor Allan Bloom began his 1987 best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind* ([Simon and Schuster], p. 25), "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative." He goes on to say (pp. 25-26), "The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating."

He was right: We live in a day that has rejected the idea of absolute truth, especially in the spiritual realm. It smacks of arrogance to say that you *know* the truth and that others who do not share your view are *wrong*. You're free to have your own spiritual opinions, as long as you don't claim that your view is the *only* true view.

This prevailing tenant of postmodernism has now invaded the church through "the emergent church." This growing movement downplays preaching (what could be more arrogant than for one man to stand up and say that he is proclaiming *the truth?*). And it magnifies sharing personal experiences in an accepting, non-judgmental atmosphere.

Notice how contrary this is to John's statement in 2:20, "you all know," and to 2:21: "I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie

is of the truth." That sure sounds like John believed in absolute truth in the spiritual realm, and that you can know when you're right and others are wrong! There are three implications here, which I can only touch on briefly:

A. Sound doctrine really matters!

John says (2:23), "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father." He goes on to say (2:25) that all of this concerns God's promise to us about eternal life. That's fairly important! If you deny the truth about God's Son as revealed in the New Testament, you do not have the Father and you do not have eternal life!

A popular sentimental, syrupy view goes, "It doesn't matter *what* you believe as long as you're sincere." When you share Christ with someone who buys into this thinking, he will respond, "It's nice that you believe that, but I have my own beliefs." According to this view, sincerity is the main thing; truth doesn't matter. That is utter nonsense! You can sincerely drink poison, believing that it is medicine, but it will kill you just the same. Sound doctrine really matters!

B. Sound doctrine is inextricably linked with a personal relationship with God.

John says that if you deny the Son, you do not *have* the Father. He goes on to talk about abiding in the Son and the Father (2:24). "Abiding" is John's word for fellowship or a close relationship with God. His point is that if you deny cardinal truth about Jesus Christ and yet claim to know God, you are deceiving yourself. This is not to say that a new believer must be able to give precisely correct theological statements about the trinity or the two natures of Christ in order to be truly saved. But it is to say that if someone knowingly makes heretical statements about Christ and is not open to correction, his salvation is suspect. Sound doctrine necessarily goes along with a genuine personal relationship with God.

C. Sound doctrine about the person and work of Christ is absolutely vital.

Most heresies go astray with regard to the person or work of Jesus Christ. John Calvin pointed out that since Christ is the sum of the gospel, heretics especially aim their arrows at Him. The only

way that we can know the Father is through the Son (John 14:6). These false teachers were denying that Jesus is the Christ (2:22). This probably was more than a denial that Jesus was the Old Testament Messiah. The context here, which refers to Jesus as the Son of God and which closely links the Father and the Son, indicates that these false teachers denied the full deity of Jesus Christ. They denied the incarnation, that God took on human flesh in the virgin birth of Jesus. They taught that "the Christ" came upon the human Jesus at His baptism and departed at His crucifixion. John says that they denied both the Father and the Son.

The modern cults all go astray on the person and work of Jesus Christ. They deny His deity and His substitutionary death on the cross. They deny the trinity. Some of them speak in Gnostic fashion of "the Christ within us all." By denying the Son of God, they do not have the Father. In the words of this apostle of love, they are liars, deceivers, and antichrists.

Conclusion

We should be diligent to preserve the unity of the body of Christ, but not at any cost. There is no room for compromise on the core beliefs of Christian orthodoxy, especially the truths about the person of Christ and the gospel.

During World War Two, Neville Chamberlain of Britain tried to keep the peace by appeasing Adolf Hitler. After giving Poland to Hitler, Chamberlain went back to England proclaiming "peace in our times." But Winston Churchill wisely observed, "An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last." Sure enough, Hitler later tried to eat Britain, too.

If we compromise truth to appease a heretic or to keep him in the church, it will lead to our ultimate spiritual demise. To avoid spiritual deception, be discerning of people, especially of religious people who claim to have some new truth. Be discerning of sound doctrine. Know your Bible well. Study systematic theology. Study church history. Most errors today have been around for centuries. Next time we will study John's antidote to heresy, to abide in the Word and in the Spirit.

Application Questions

1. What is the difference (if any) between being discerning and being distrustful? Is it wrong to be distrustful of someone?
2. How do you develop discernment without becoming skeptical of everyone and everything?
3. Since there are so many views of different doctrines, how can you know that you are right? How can you hold to being right without becoming arrogant?
4. How do you determine which doctrines are core doctrines, worth dividing over, and which are more peripheral?

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