

1 JOHN 2.18 -

SERIES ON 1 JOHN
MT ALBERT BAPTIST CHURCH

A SERMON BY STUART MCGREGOR

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Little children, these are the end times, and as you heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen. By this we know that it is the end times. They went out from us, but they didn't belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have continued with us. But they left, that they might be revealed that none of them belong to us.

You have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know the truth. I have not written to you because you don't know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the Antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son, the same doesn't have the Father. He who confesses the Son has the Father also.

Therefore, as for you, let that remain in you which you heard from the beginning. If that which you heard from the beginning remains in you, you also will remain in the Son, and in the Father. This is the promise which he promised us, the eternal life. These things I have written to you concerning those who would lead you astray. As for you, the anointing which you received from him remains in you, and you don't need for anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is no lie, and even as it taught you, you will remain in him.

Now, little children, remain in him, that when he appears, we may have boldness, and not be ashamed before him at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of him.

Doctrine. It's an ugly word. It contains within it the very idea of exclusivity, aloofness, superiority and self-righteousness. It's almost as bad as the word Sin that we looked at a few weeks ago because doctrine is what

defines sin. It is a word that means that we nail our colours to the mast, we affirm that we believe something. And that most importantly that this belief is universal. A doctrine is something that we believe to be true for all people all the time. It is a universal truth.

And one the greatest examples of this, I think, is how we hold our fork at the dinner table. It was a source of division in our house when I was growing up. My mum would be telling me constantly that I should turn my fork the other way. And I could not, no, I would not it didn't seem right. Forks are curved. [show the fork]

I would use it as a scoop for my food. I knew it was uncouth and not pretty but it made sense, why else would the designers of forks make them with scoop-like qualities? So I would use it as a scoop but my mum would constantly tell me to turn my fork the other way. And I would get in trouble about this, and I would end up having to leave the table and being sent to my room. The doctrine of the fork. It was one of the most oppressive doctrines in my childhood, it was almost up there with the doctrine of the tidy room, the doctrine of "don't eat the sugar from the jar." Now that I'm over thirty I've thrown those doctrines out the window. I have triumphed over mum, except when I go round there for dinner . . .

But this is the misconception about doctrine. Doctrine is not how we do things but why. And I think that one of the primary reasons that the church gets divided is not over doctrinal distinctions, but the way we express our doctrine. But it seems that when we start from our basic doctrines things get more and more complex. And this is why there is such an immense academic branch called theology.

Theology is often seen as being dry and aloof. But although at times it can be seen that way, theology is a way of trying to understand the way our doctrines actually work. So when we get a statement like Jesus is the Son of God, there are so many implications from that statement that we can spend forever trying to discern. And it seems from the volumes upon volumes of books that exist on this subject that this is exactly what we have done.

But that "Jesus is the Son of God" is central to our Christian belief. It is something that everyone here, without exception, has some kind of theology on. In fact most people in New Zealand would have a theology on that doctrine. It might be that they disagree, it might be that they include Elvis in that equation. Everyone has an opinion but that doesn't change the doctrine. And this is one of the most annoying things about Christianity to the

post-modern, post-Christian, semi-secular, politically correct, all embracing, all accepting, totally tolerant mind. To Christians, Truth is not negotiable.

And this is the thing that John is talking about in this letter. This is what John means by the word antichrist. It is not some apocalyptic giant super evil dude that features in the end times. Rather it is anyone who is teaching stuff about Jesus that isn't true.

And this is where it gets just a tad tricky. What is true about Jesus? How do we know? More importantly how did they know back then? Which is one of the main reasons that John is writing this letter. It was between 50 and 70 years after the resurrection of Jesus and John was the only disciple left alive. People were starting to express distorted beliefs about Jesus and who he was and this is the group that John is calling the antichrists.

He was hearing stuff and thinking, "nope, that's not right . . .that's not the Jesus I knew." John had experienced Jesus like few ever have. And he was an authority and was wanting to set the record straight.

The specific people John was talking about were not people who rejected Jesus, they were not atheists, they were people who were saying that Jesus didn't really exist as a man because they believed that anything that was physical was evil. So Jesus only appeared to be a man who walked and ate and did what any human would do, but it was an illusion. Jesus was spirit only because no perfect and spiritual thing would lower itself to become a part of the evil physical world. And John was saying "no, no, no, no! I won't have that, I touched the man, I was there when he ate. I was with Jesus the man and I was confused about his uniqueness until after his resurrection. I tell you . . ."

And we read from the opening chapter of his letter, the first few lines that I skipped over when we first began this series in first John 1:

That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we saw, and our hands touched, concerning the Word of life (and the life was revealed, and we have seen, and testify, and declare to you the life, the eternal life, which was with the Father, and was revealed to us); that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us. Yes, and our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ. And we write these things to you, that all of our joy may be fulfilled.

The question is, why was the humanity of Jesus such a big deal? Because it says something about God. It says something about how he chose to connect with us, that he loves us not out of sympathy but with empathy through Jesus,

to give us hope that there is redemption now and not just in the future. That he can conquer physical death, that he can laugh and cry and play and eat and work with us. That he likes humanity, the state of being human is something that God likes. That he can celebrate our humanity and creativity and love, that he can model perfect human existence, that he can demonstrate a life stripped of anything but righteousness, of living as God intended, of being the light of the world, of being a person that the dejected could come to, of being able to talk with the lowlifes without judgement. He was able to stand up for God against a national religious expectation.

The humanity of Christ is not just academic! If Jesus was not human, none of that would make any sense whatsoever. The fact that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine makes a huge difference to our understanding of what it means to be a Christian. This is why John was writing this letter.

Make no mistake, theology does matter because it is the foundation of our lifestyle. Our social religion seems to think that theology is something internal and might work for you but not for me. Our social expectation is that we all need to discover theology for ourselves and independently. And I'll be honest with you. After 20 years of the post-modern enlightenment, it is clear that our experiment has failed and will always fail. Because when we hoist personal happiness over and above social happiness we will have the survival of the fittest thing all over again. Trampling others underfoot to make ourselves happy. It is the doctrine of this western age.

Make no mistake that theology does matter, because it is the foundation of our lifestyle.

The doctrine of self-fulfilment is nice for some people, the 5% of the elite but it is flimsy for society. Well, is it actually nice for the elite? I'm thinking about the divorce rate among celebrities. Society doesn't seem to think about these things in any depth. The theology of wealth and self leaves people wanting. Wealth doesn't answer anything, it just raises more questions.

And we can't let this survival of the fittest mentality shape our church. Individualism has no place in the body of Christ. Individuality yes, but not at the expense of another person.

John hints in this letter about how the Christian life is meant to be lived in a communal environment. He talks about how we fellowship with one another, how when we discover the truth of Jesus we can all be one with one another because he cleanses us from all sin. And there is a staggering statement about how theology and community are tied together.

Look at how in verse 19 he says:

They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us.

They are huge words. With a theology that separated them from the main church they proved that they were not really a part of the church after all. With a theology that made Jesus less than who he is, they showed that they had not grasped the truth at all. John even calls them antichrist.

Think about that in the contemporary Christian church. How do we account for the multitude of divisions that we see?

Catholic, Protestant.

Evangelical, Liberal, Pentecostal.

Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Brethren, Church of Christ.

Charismatic, conservative, fundamentalist, alternative.

Spirit filled, biblically based, reverent and mystical.

Traditional, Contemporary and Youth.

Left and right hand sides of the aisle.

Grace, obedience.

It is clear there is diversity. What isn't so clear is that there is unity. But then perhaps there is a unity there after all. All who confess Jesus as the Son of God who walked on this earth, died on the cross was resurrected from death and ascended to heaven—all for the reason that God loves us and wants to restore interrelationship with him, these people are part of the body of Christ, deny any of that, and you deny the gospel.

To live in the profound knowledge of these things, is to live in the truth, is to abide in Jesus. Because it is from understanding the magnitude of what God has done through Jesus Christ that we can begin to love those around us. When we abide in something it is like we are living in it like someone living in a house. So when we are abiding in Jesus we are immersed in him, we are surrounded by him, he is our home, the place we go for comfort and shelter and refuge. He is the anchor of our context. So denominational differences don't matter as long as they are not grounds for exclusion or prejudice. And that is where the rubber meets the road.

The community of believers is for this reason fundamental for Christian survival. If we are truly based on a foundation that says "Love God and Love people" then how do we justify living as Christians in isolation from community? I hear it all the time, "I don't need church to be a Christian."

Which is true when it comes to definitions from the head. But when it comes to a heart understanding I wonder whether stopping belonging to a church community is in some respects chopping pragmatic spirituality, or a practically outworked faith, off at the knees.

We will find and grasp loving truth in this community, yes, even this community of faith here at Mt Albert. We are the body of Christ, it is here that we encourage and nurture faith, yes, but most importantly we nurture an understanding of living that is drenched in God's love for us and others. If we do not do this we are what Paul describes as all noise no substance. 1 Corinthians 13:1-3:

If I speak with the languages of people and of angels, but don't have love, I have become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but don't have love, I am nothing. If I give out all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but don't have love, it profits me nothing.

It all comes down to love. Love for God and love for people.

Love God, Love people, not just those in church, not just those we like, but all people all the time.

When the antichrists separated themselves from the church, they denied this very fundamental doctrine, not explicitly perhaps, but they stated it with their feet. They left the church because they knew better. They left the church because they 'understood' Jesus better. How ironic is that? Christ is the unity of diversity. Jesus is bigger than our differences.

"Love God and Love people" is not like the doctrine of the fork. It is not open to interpretation when we grow up. But truth be known, as I've gotten older I've modified that command just like with the fork. I can't help it, and I think I hide behind lots of stuff to let it be like that. But the amount of carefully constructed ideas and theology that I have will never make any substitute for practical love!

I might think I have sound doctrine, but when it comes to it, if there is no love in it, what use does it have? In many Christian circles it seems that having sound doctrine is more important than having love for others. And the faith in those circles is dry and uninteresting. If doctrine is not helping to expose how we can be more loving to other people and how we can draw

closer to God, then it is useless and pointless because at the end of the day, being right is not the same as being righteous.

You may be sitting there and saying, “so, so what?” And then I’m meant to somehow tell you what the point of it all is. But the exhortation, the motivating statement from the bible tonight is not something I can give advice on. It’s as simple as this:

Live in the arms of Jesus and love other people. How we go about doing that is probably more obvious and scary than we would like to think, because it’s usually the stuff that we shy away from doing. And that is the hard part. Doing the stuff we don’t think we have the courage to do.

And we come around the table here tonight to celebrate, not doctrinal and theological similarities, though that’s part of it, but instead we are celebrating the unity of diversity.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed he sat with his closest friends who were a doctor, an accountant, a political traitor, a religious fanatic and a few fishermen. If you put them all in a room together before they met Jesus, there would have been a bloody fight. Tonight, they all drank from the same cup and ate from the same loaf. The unity of diversity.

And he was betrayed because one of them didn’t like to see the scales of the social ladder even out. He didn’t like the idea that everyone would be the same and neither did the people who paid him. But Jesus still ate and drank with him.

Even if you think you are the worst follower of Jesus, you are welcome here tonight. Share with us because we are all part of the same Jesus.