

The Authentic Christian and the Last Days

**Rich Nathan
October 28 & 29, 2017
The Authentic Christian
1 John 2:18-3:3**

This past week, I sat down with a political scientist who has been teaching about elections at Ohio State for the past 30 years. So I said, “Tell me about your work.” And he said that he completed a study of the elections of 50 nations across the world recently, including among other things, the degree to which the country was split politically, how divided and partisan the country was in its elections.

I said, “Gosh, that sounds fascinating. Where does the United States rank currently in terms of the political divisions that exist in our country? How big is the partisan divide in America compared to what you’re seeing around the world?”

He said the United States currently expresses the greatest level of partisan divide of any nation he has ever surveyed other than Mozambique following their Civil War. So, other than a country that just went through a Civil War, the United States is the most politically divided nation according to this Ohio State political scientist. His surveys say that people who identify themselves as Republicans or as Democrats not only strongly support their candidate, but more tellingly, they don’t just disagree with the other side, they despise the other side.

This political scientist told me that the middle has dropped out of American politics. In the last election, record numbers of those who are moderates, who considered or who view themselves as independent, either chose not to vote or did not vote for the top of the ticket.

If you are someone who consumes a lot of news, it ought to be apparent to you that we live in crazy, stress-inducing times where people are just screaming at each other, talking past one another, not listening, not respecting opposing viewpoints, mocking and putting each other down. It's impossible to watch the evening news for very long without feeling stressed. The middle has dropped out of contemporary politics.

Moderation and compromise are seen as weakness. People don't just disagree with the other side, they despise the other side.

Chapman University has been surveying Americans regarding their top fears for the past several years. There has been a major shift in the top fears haunting Americans this year. In fact, most of the top 10 fears in 2017 did show up anywhere near the top in prior years. Here are five of the top fears that Americans have in 2017:

The fear of:

- World War III – up 17 points
- North Korean nukes – not on last year's list
- Water pollution – up 25 points

- Air pollution – up 24 points
- Government corruption – up 14 points

Those percentage changes are compared to just last year’s survey of American’s top fears.

The Apostle John in his little New Testament letter that we call 1 John, tells us that we can successfully navigate challenging and stressful times (whether we’re in the first century or the 21st century) by correctly answering two questions:

The first question is:

What time is it?

The second question is:

Who are you?

What time is it and who are you? We’re going to find that these two basic questions are not nearly as easy to answer as this might seem. I’ve been doing this series in 1 John called “The Authentic Christian”. John repeatedly asked the question, “How do you know if you’re a real deal Christian and not a fake or fraud?” How do we distinguish a

real Christian from someone who just claims to be a Christian, but has no spiritual reality in their lives? As we continue this series on “The Authentic Christian”, I’ve called today’s talk “The Authentic Christian and the Last Days”.

1 John 2:18-23

¹⁸ Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. ¹⁹ They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

²⁰ But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. ²¹ I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. ²² Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. ²³ No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

Let’s stop here for now. So, in these stressful, challenging times, let’s tackle the two questions that I mentioned in my introduction in turn.

First, What time is it?

John writes this in 1 John 2:18:

1 John 2:18

Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.

The New Testament speaks a lot about what time it is. It tries to assist Christians to understand the time we're living in. Sometimes the times we're living in are called "the last days" or the last times.

I don't think the Bible draws a distinction between the last hour, the last days, and the last times. I think they are all referring to the entire period of time between the first coming of Christ and his second coming. During Christ's first coming he inaugurated the new age, the age to come. Here at Vineyard, our theology is centered in this view that the future age to come that the Bible calls the Kingdom of God, where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, the age to come broke in to this age through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension and gift of the Holy Spirit. When Messiah Jesus came into this world, he brought with him a piece of the coming kingdom. That's why in these last days, that period of time between the first coming of Christ and his return, we see signs of the future kingdom.

Right now, we can experience a measure of physical healing. Right now, we can experience a measure of emotional healing. Right now, we can experience a measure of marital healing. Right now, we can experience a measure of racial reconciliation. Right now, we ought to see some justice. Right now, we ought to see something of what we will see fully when Jesus returns – when there will be no more sickness, no more mental illness, no more divorce, no more death, no more poverty.

But there is a question that we have to honestly pose to the writers of the New Testament and the question is simply this: were the writers of the New Testament wrong? Did they expect Jesus to return very soon? Here we are nearly 2,000 years later and he still hasn't returned. Did they, in fact, believe that the return of Christ could happen in their generation or their children's generation and now we're 100 generations later and still no Messiah? Was John wrong when he said that this is the last hour?

I think we need to understand how time works according to the Lord. According to the Lord, the time on the clock is always one minute until midnight. The minute hand could strike very quickly for this age and for this world. Let me explain what I mean. Imagine that you had a ball and you rolled it to the edge of the table – one inch from the edge. The table is very, very long. You might ask, "How close to the edge of the table is the ball?" It's always one inch from the edge. The ball could keep rolling for 30 feet if the

table is 30 feet long, but it's only one inch from the edge. Just a little push would knock it over the edge.

That's the way it is with history. History is always one inch or one moment from the end. We always live a minute before midnight. With any pressure coming from the Lord, history could end and we could be entered into the new age. We don't know how long the table will be. It might go on for another 50 years or 100 years or 1,000 years, but we're always near to the end.

Or if you picture a river running along the edge of a cliff. That river could run for miles and miles along the edge of the cliff, but suddenly it goes tumbling over the cliff in a giant waterfall. That is a biblical picture of time. We're right on the edge of the cliff. It could all suddenly break. We could go tumbling over the edge.

The New Testament tells us that there are two things that need to happen before the end comes. These two things can happen quickly. The first thing that needs to happen before the Lord returns and this age comes to an end is found in Matthew:

Matthew 24:14

¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

The message regarding Jesus Christ and his death for sin must be taken out and witnessed to every nation, every people group on earth. And then Christ will return. That's one reason why global missions is so important. It hastens the return of the Lord.

There is one other great sign of the very last days. That is the appearance of antichrist.

The sign of the last days: antichrist

Here's what we read in 1 John:

1 John 2:18

¹⁸ Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.

People have forever tried to identify the antichrist. Every recent President has been identified by somebody or some group as the antichrist. Ronald Reagan was accused of being the antichrist because his first, middle and last names all have six letters in them.

Ronald Wilson Reagan = 666

I've gone online and there are a few websites devoted to claiming that President Trump is the antichrist. One of the proofs that he is is that his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, owns the famous property on Fifth Avenue, 666 Fifth Avenue.

Every time there is some new leader that someone opposes, they are called the antichrist.

John suggests that while there is going to be an ultimate embodiment in one person of the spirit of antichrist, there are many manifestations of antichrist throughout the entire period that we call the last days or the last hour. Let's look again at 1 John.

1 John 2:18

¹⁸ Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.

In other words, in every era we experience:

The current presence of antichrist

If you want to know why life in this world is so stressful, in part, John says, it's because right now many antichrists are at work. There will be a future, ultimate antichrist who

will oppose God and persecute Christians, but right now many antichrists have already come, John says. In 1 John 4 we read this:

1 John 4:3

³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

Just as the kingdom of God has an already and a not yet aspect to it, in other words, the new age has broken in but it's not fully here so it is that one day there will be an ultimate manifestation of antichrist but even now there are partial manifestations of antichrist that we see in lots of places.

Friends, let me ask you a question. Do you see the spirit of antichrist at work right now?

How would we know? John gives us several clues regarding the antichrist that are already at work in the world. First of all, the name antichrist suggests someone in opposition to Christ. Literally, this is a person whose name means "against Christ", he's an adversary of Christ, an opponent of Christ. Wherever we find opposition to Christ, hatred of Christ, mocking or cursing of Christ there is the spirit of antichrist. There's something else about the character of the antichrist and it's not only opposition, but it's also separation.

Let's look at verse 19:

1 John 2:19

¹⁹ They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

How do we know if someone is a real deal authentic Christian or a fake, a fraud, simply occupying space in the church, going through church rituals? John says one of the ways to know an authentic Christian is that they continue on in the faith. It says this in Mark:

Mark 13:13

¹³ Everyone will hate you because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Continual persevering in the faith is the ultimate test of whether you were ever in Christ to begin with.

Hebrews 3:14

¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.

John is distinguishing between those who used to be visibly with us for a time but were never real Christians and those who stay with us who are real Christians. Historically, people in the Reformation tradition (we'll be celebrating the 500th anniversary next week) have distinguished between the visible church and the invisible church. Signing your name on a church membership roll is not the same thing as having your name written in the Lamb's Book of Life. You can sign a church membership roll and yet not have eternal life. You can be part of the visible church but never be part of the invisible church who will be gathered to the Lord in the end. The question is have you really yielded management of your life to Jesus? Have you surrendered control in the control center of your will to Jesus as your Lord and trusted in him to save you? Are you continuing on in your faith? Are you persevering to the end or do you quit along the way?

One of the characteristics of antichrist is opposition to Christ. A second characteristic is separation from the church. And the third characteristic of antichrist is deception. Look at verse 20:

1 John 2:20-22, 26

²⁰ But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. ²¹ I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. ²² Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son.

²⁶ I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.

John says that one of the ways that antichrist is always with you is that antichrist is a liar. Jesus says this about Satan in John 8:44:

John 8:44

⁴⁴ You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Why is lying the ultimate characteristic of Satan in the Bible and of the many antichrists who are at work in the world today? What's really wrong with being a liar? To put it slightly differently, where do you rank lying in the hierarchy of sins? How terrible is lying? Do you think to yourself, "You know, this person, this boss, this spouse, this politician who lies and lies and lies, they are sharing the character of the devil."

If you want to know how bad lying is consider how you feel when you find out that you've been deceived about something that is really a big deal. Let's say you discover that you've been lied to your whole life about the identity of your parents – who your father is. Or you have been repeatedly deceived regarding the faithfulness of your spouse or the trustworthiness of your accountant, or a partner you've trusted in your business.

How do you feel when you discover that a close friend or relative has repeatedly lied to your face? Genuine intimate relationship is not possible when someone repeatedly lies.

In contrast to having a leader or boss or friend who turns out to be a liar, the people we generally admire the most are the people who are known for telling the truth. There was a study done about the traits people most admire in leaders. Do you know what number one was? Of all the traits someone wants in a leader, number one was trustworthiness. This leader is someone I can trust because they consistently tell the truth.

The person consistently ranked as our greatest president is who? Abraham Lincoln who we call "Honest Abe". Leonard Swett was a close friend of Abe Lincoln and he wrote this firsthand account. He said:

"He believed in the great laws of truth, the right discharge of duty, his accountability to God, the ultimate triumph of the right, and the overthrow of wrong."

Listen to Lincoln's own words about honesty:

"Resolve to be honest in all events: and if, in your own judgment, you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer."

Choose some other occupation. What powerful counsel to any of us who are being pushed to compromise or cut corners or lie at our jobs. If I can't be an honest person and work for this company, then I resolve to be honest without working for this company. If you can't be an honest politician and succeed, then resolve to be honest while looking for some occupation other than politics to succeed in.

We've looked at the character of antichrist – opposition to Christ, separation from the church, and the deception of believers. What is the content of antichrist teaching?

The content of antichrist teaching

1 John 2:22-23

²² Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. ²³ No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

The content of the teaching is what I spoke about in the first of these messages in 1 John, the message titled “The Authentic Christian and the incarnation”. The false teachers were known as Docetics and these antichrists taught that Jesus was born and died as a mere man, but the Christ was only a spirit that was on Jesus during his public ministry. Christ descended on Jesus in his baptism and left him before the cross. So,

these false teachers denied that Jesus was or is the second person of the Trinity, God the Son. To them he was a mere man invested for a little while with divine powers, but Jesus Christ was never part of the Godhead. In other words, they denied that Jesus is the Son.

If we step back from this text for a moment, think about the two biggest issues that people today, especially Millennials, raise regarding church and Christianity. The major objection Millennials have regarding church and Christianity, what would the two biggest issues be?

The first objection Millennials have is how the church relates to LGBT persons. The church is bigoted, the church is hypocritical when it comes to LGBT persons. If you want to know where I'm coming from and where Vineyard Columbus is coming from regarding how we think about the relationship between Christianity and LGBT persons, I just read a fantastic book that is available in the bookstore that's called *Single Gay Christian* and I would recommend that book for any of you who are readers.

But I think there is something very true and right about the Millennial critique of the church as it pertains to LGBT persons. In many churches, I hope not here at Vineyard Columbus, but in many churches people who are involved in practices that seem to be condemned by the Bible – practices like heterosexual sex outside of marriage or divorce without biblical grounds or greed or pride – those folks get a pass from the church. It's

ok if you're involved in all these other things so long as you don't have same sex relations. In some churches there does seem to be an obsession, a hyper-focus, on certain behaviors and certain kinds of sins that feels selective and hypocritical.

But I want to look at the second major objection to Christianity that Millennials have. These verses in 1 John underline this objection. That's the exclusivity of Christ. Let's look again at verses 22-23:

1 John 2:22-23

²² Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. ²³ No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

Now, this is really a startling claim that John is making. Do you understand what he's saying? If you deny the Son, you don't have God. Why in the world would Christians assert this? It seems to be a really arrogant claim. It's certainly an exclusive claim. If you deny Jesus you will miss a saving relationship with God. How can there be one true faith? Don't you think it's arrogant to claim that your religion is superior to other religions? Surely, every religion is equally right. How can you say that if you don't have Jesus you don't have an eternal, saving relationship with God?

Some Millennials might add, “Your exclusive claim to truth is not only arrogant, it’s positively dangerous. This is the reason why there’s so much strife and warfare in the world. It’s only if we all drop this claim of having the truth that the world will ever find any peace.”

Do you share some of those feelings? Some of you surely must share these feelings. Let me suggest a few possible responses. First of all, it can’t be the case that all religions are equally right about everything they say because religions contradict each other, especially about crucial matters. Let’s just take the person of Jesus. Jews and Muslims deny that Jesus is God. They say that to attribute divinity to this man, Jesus, is idolatry. We can respect Jesus as a good teacher just don’t call him God. Christians, on the other hand, say that the man, Jesus, was divine. We should worship him. Which is it?

If Jews and Muslims are right, Christians are wrong. If Christians are right about Jesus, then at this crucial point, Jews and Muslims are wrong. You can’t hold on to this idea that all religions are equally right. They don’t all teach the same thing.

What about this notion that it’s arrogant to say that you have the truth? Is it arrogant to claim you have the truth? We might respond and say, if that’s the case, then everyone on earth is guilty of arrogance because even the person who denies all religions is taking the exclusivist perspective that all religion is baloney and I hold this as my truth.

Of course, we Christians have lots of reasons why we believe our truth is in fact true truth. We follow the only person in history who ever was raised from the dead. Only the founder of our faith was raised from the dead. Muhammad wasn't raised from the dead. He died and stayed dead. Moses wasn't raised from the dead. The Buddha wasn't raised from the dead. Jesus alone was raised from the dead. And only Jesus of all the founders of the world's great religions claimed to be God. Muhammad never claimed to be God. Neither Moses nor Buddha or any of the other founders of the world's great religions ever claimed to be God – only Jesus.

But let me try to respond to the most serious objection that people have, to the exclusivity of Christ – this idea that if you don't have Jesus, you don't have God – at least you don't have a personal eternal, saving relationship with God. You may believe in God. You may know something about God. You may pray to God, but you're not in an eternal saving relationship with God unless you have Jesus. The most serious objection to the exclusive claims of Christ is that this is dangerous. That view leads to war. You'll end up on a slippery slope. You'll end up beheading people who disagree with you. You'll inevitably end up engaging in crusades. To that assertion, I would say that is indeed a slippery slope. Claiming to have the truth can in fact be a very dangerous thing.

But as a Christian, here's how I would respond: again, everyone in the world claims to have the exclusive truth – atheists, agnostics, religious people of various types, but the safest of the exclusive truths to believe in and trust in is Christianity because only we Christians are following a man who did not persecute his enemies, he died for his enemies. Only we Christians are following a man who taught us to forgive people who disagree with us. To turn the other cheek. To love our enemies. To pray for them. If we are real followers of Jesus, we could never wage war or persecute or in any way harm those who disagree with us, even about who we claim Jesus is. We called to pray and we're called to love.

Yes, we claim that in the person of Jesus we have found the truth – but only he is safe enough for us to label as the truth.

I want to quickly close with the second question. We spent a lot of time on answering “what time is it?” We live in a time, right now, when many antichrists are present. We need to be aware of this, in touch, so we can know how to respond to all of the lies and all the deceptions that are leading so many people astray.

Here's the second question. It's an identity question.

Who are you?

Let me ask you a question as we close today. How do you find out who you are? How do you discover your identity? The New Testament regularly tells us that knowing your identity is a key to living life well, especially in a stressful time, an anxiety-filled time, reminding ourselves who we are. How do we know who we are? How do we find ourselves?

Here's what one student wrote:

I was born in Switzerland

I lived in Spain, Sweden, and Brazil

My dad is Swiss

My mom's American

I'm not Brazilian, Swiss, American, Spanish

I'm eighteen

I'm lost!

How does this young person find themselves? How do they know who they are? How do you know who you are or teach your children who they are? One way to figure out who you are is:

Let others define you

Just listen to what other people say about you and that's who you are. Let your mom define you. Let your dad define you. Let teachers and friends define you. Let your spouse or ex-spouse, your boyfriend or girlfriend define you. Let your enemies define you. That's sure an uncertain basis for figuring out who we are. To listen to everyone else? What they say about us may be incredibly hurtful and wounding. "You'll never amount to anything. You're just like your father. You're just like your mother. You'll be a loser just like them!"

John says:

1 John 3:1

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

The world can't tell us who we are. Because it doesn't know God, the world doesn't know God's children. It can't see the child of God you truly are. The world doesn't know why you do what you do. What motivates you? The world doesn't hear your prayers. The world doesn't understand your intentions.

If we don't let others define us maybe we should just define ourselves.

Define yourself

Forget what everybody else says, just look inside. You know what, if you look inside yourself, you're probably going to find inside your heart what I find inside my heart which is a bunch of contradictory impulses. I see myself wanting what's right, but I also see inside myself that I want what's wrong. I want to love others, but I also want to get ahead of others. I want to give, but I want to hold on. I want to love, but I also find in me anger and envy and lust. So, who am I? Who are you? Which impulses inside of your heart should you cultivate and express and which impulses should you suppress? We can't discover our true identity by ourselves any more than we can lift ourselves up by our own hair.

We don't want others to define us, and we can't define ourselves. So how can we discover ourselves? How can we find our true identity? John, along with the other New Testament writers, says let God define you.

Let God define you

1 John 3:1

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones, a missionary and a doctor in India for many years said this:

One does not know who he is until he knows whose he is.

The only way, friend, you are ever going to know who you are is by discovering whose you are. If you belong to God, then listen to what God says is his relationship to you.

God says, "If you belong to me, I am your loving father and you are my beloved child."

Do you know that's true of you, friend?

Let's pray.

The Authentic Christian and the Last Days

Rich Nathan
October 28 & 29, 2017
The Authentic Christian
1 John 2:18-3:3

I. What time is it?

- A. The sign of the last days: antichrist
 - a. The current presence of antichrist
 - b. The character of antichrist
 - c. The content of antichrist
 - d. The protection of antichrist

II. Who are you?

- A. Let others define you
- B. Define yourself
- C. Let God define you