

THE NATURE OF HERESY

by Ray C. Stedman

This is the first of a new series on a new subject in First John: *Maintaining Truth*. Of recent weeks, the attention of the Christian world has been captured by certain attempts to bring heresy charges against Bishop Pike because of his public denials of such important doctrines as the virgin birth of Christ, the Trinitarian character of the Godhead, and other headline-catching statements which he makes from time to time. Such attempts at heresy trials are not new in the Christian church. In every century there have been ecclesiastical leaders who have been charged with heresy. Such charges point up the concern of the church for maintaining the truth of God for which it has been put in the world.

I know there are many who feel a sense of sympathy with Bishop Pike, feeling that he is being unjustly persecuted, that he is an honest, rather gentle man, who is unjustly charged with dereliction from the faith. There are those who feel that the church has no right to make such charges as these, or to harass a man like this, and that the whole idea of heresy trials is ridiculous since every man must be allowed the right to his own opinion. I agree that we may well feel sympathy for Bishop Pike. I do myself. He is a rather pathetic figure. He is obviously attempting to be an authority in a realm in which he has had no real experience -- that of Christian faith. Thus he fulfills that description the Lord used for certain religious leaders of his own day, "blind leaders of the blind."

But there is no question that a charge of heresy is justified against ecclesiastical leaders who renounce the faith, and it is an exceedingly serious charge. We tend to discount its seriousness because ours is an age when we have made an idol of tolerance. We are told it does not really matter what anyone believes; it is what they do that counts. But it does matter what people believe, if only because action invariably follows belief. It is belief which produces action, and, therefore, belief is supremely important. This is why the practical sections of the epistles of the New Testament always come second. There is invariably a doctrinal division first. Each practical section begins with the word *therefore*, for action must follow belief. Belief, therefore, is a supremely important matter.

Now, as we have seen in these studies in First John, the Apostle John was called to be a mender, mending that which is broken. Toward the close of the 1st century, when John writes this letter, Christian truth had already come under severe attack and heresies had come into the church. John's function as an apostle is to call these early Christians back to fundamental issues, back to the essentials. That is why he centers upon this theme of maintaining truth. It is introduced to us in two verses, 18 and 19, in Chapter 2:

Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us. {1 Jn 2:18-19 RSV}

This whole passage, which continues on to the end of the chapter, is a tremendous study on how to recognize a heresy when you hear one. I suggest that there is nothing more needed today, in this age of abounding confusion in this area. The whole passage is a foundational study on the difference between truth and error. John begins by setting forth certain characteristics of heresy.

First, he indicates that heresy makes its appearance in certain repetitive cycles in the Christian era, cycles which mark the possibility of the coming again of Jesus Christ. This is what he means by his

phrase, "the last hour." We will look at that more closely in a moment, but the very phrase has in view what James Russell Lowell has called "that one, far-off, Divine event toward which the whole creation moves," the second coming of Jesus Christ. Of course, the poet calls it "far-off" because some 1900 years had gone by in the Christian era before he wrote these words. But, in a sense, this event has never been far-off -- even in the 1st century.

John, of course, was present when our Lord himself said to his own disciples, speaking of his coming again, "of that day and hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son [i.e., himself, as a man], but the Father only," {Matt 24:36 RSV}. John was present also when, after the resurrection, our Lord gathered with his disciples and said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority," {Acts 1:7 RSV}. And he was present again, on that first occasion, when our Lord added these words, "Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near," {Luke 21:28 RSV}. These passages indicate that there were to be certain portents of the coming of Christ, but the exact hour and day and time no one would know. Our text says here, "Children, it is the last hour." But that is exactly the thing John did not say. He did not call it "*the* last hour." Here the translators have inserted an article when it does not appear in the original language. What John said was, "Children, it is *a* last hour," and it is very important to note that distinction.

Read through the prophetic writings of the New Testament and you will note that the whole time between the comings of Christ, his first coming in the flesh, and his second coming in glory, is called "the last days." Contrary to the popular view, this term does not refer to the end immediately preceding his coming. The whole period, running now well over 1900 years, is called "the last days." Even in this letter the apostle has said the age to come has already dawned, the darkness is passing away. Twice he has reminded us that the world is passing away, the darkness of it is disappearing, the last days have already come, and we are moving toward the end of them.

Also, as you read these prophetic passages, it is apparent that the movement of the last days is in a constantly descending spiral of repetitive events. There will be cycles of events repeating themselves through these last days, moving at last to the coming again of the Son of God to earth. Paul describes these cycles very clearly and accurately in Second Timothy which, by the way, was the last writing from his hand. He says, in Chapter 3, "But understand this, that in the last days there will be times of stress," {2 Tim 3:1 RSV}. Now he does not mean these "times of stress" will occur only at the end, just before the coming of the Lord, but these will be characteristic of the whole period of the last days, some 1900 years as we know now. There will come, during these days, repetitive times of stress, times when men will be "lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God," {2 Tim 3:2b-4 RSV}. Then he notes this in particular: "holding the form of religion but denying the power of it," {2 Tim 3:5a RSV}. Again, that is not something which characterizes only the end; that occurs repeatedly through this whole time. History confirms this, for there have been repeated times like this, times of stress coming in cycles, when men are characterized by these things and especially when they hold a form of religion but deny the power of it. Now John says these are "last hours."

There was such an outbreak of heresies, as we see here, in the very 1st century itself. John says, "you have heard that antichrist [the man of sin -- the man who will be in control of the world before the return of Christ], is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is a last hour." There came another special attempt to twist and distort Christian doctrine during the 4th century at the time of the great doctrinal struggles over the nature of God. These were settled by the great councils of the church, such as the Council of Nicea, from which we get the Nicene Creed. Another outbreak of heresies, another cycle of heretical ideas, broke out again in the 7th century with the rise of

Mohammedanism and the pretentious claims of the Bishop of Rome to supremacy over all of Christendom. Again in the 9th century, as you trace historical events, there is the rise of strange and deceiving doctrines within Christian circles. During this century there was a widespread false expectation of the return of Christ which for almost a hundred years nearly paralyzed the economy of Europe.

Quite falsely, and contrary to the very thing that Jesus had said -- that no one could know the day or the hour of his return -- men were expecting him at the year 1000. For the entire year preceding, the economy of the world was paralyzed because people simply neglected everything. In the 11th century, history records that the Crusades began an heretical fomenting of zeal for a false religious objective which captured the attentions of men and turned them from the things God wanted them to know. For several centuries these Crusades dominated the thought of Europe. In the 13th century an outbreak of heretical concepts came in again, as the papacy consolidated its power over the ecclesiastical world. Then began the terrible days of the Inquisition with its persecution of the Waldenses and the Albigenses, those people hidden away in the valleys of Italy, and the Alps. In the 15th century we can trace another outbreak, a heretical cycle, when "the papal antichrist," as Martin Luther termed him, reigned unchallenged in his power. This was answered by the outbreak of the Reformation and the stirring days of Martin Luther, whose great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, we sang this morning.

Then again in the 18th century came the rise of German rationalism which simply undermined the supernatural characteristics of the gospel, and reduced the whole Christian message to nothing but an appeal to the intellect, leaving it dull, drab, and lifeless. In the 19th century there was another outbreak. Think of the cults which exist today. How many of them began in the last century? To our shame, they bear the label "Made in America" -- Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Science, Unity, etc. These all began in the 19th century. See how these cycles are narrowing, coming faster and faster. Now in the 20th century we are facing such an outbreak in the "Death of God" theology, the demythologizing of the Scriptures, and the goals of the ecumenical movement to establish one worldwide church, wielding vast political power. These are the issues of the hour.

All these, John says, are "last hours" when it looked, from the standpoint of the individual who lived through these days, as it looks to us now, that it was an hour when Christ could come. He himself had predicted that the days before his return would be marked by false christs, false prophets, and false teachers who would teach heresies in the name of Jesus Christ. We must remember, as Dr. Blaiklock has put it, that "nothing is so damaging in the study of New Testament prophecy as to imagine that the eternal God, who stands above and outside of time, is bound by the clocks and the calendars of men." This is why our Lord warned that the factor of time, in predictive matters, would be very, very difficult to establish, in fact, it would be impossible.

But we can note certain things. We can see that, as the centuries roll by, the pace of events is picking up speed. Things move with frightening rapidity today. The pace has been accelerating and the spiral has been widening so that now it involves the entire earth. We are linked together as one people in these present times of crisis, this "last hour" which now appears in human history. All this suggests that we are rapidly moving closer to that very "last hour" which will occur before Christ's return. That cyclical character is fundamentally characteristic of heresies in their historic appearance.

Now note the second thing John has to say about heresy. In Versenbsp;19 he continues a rather general description of heresies which is true in any age. The second thing he indicates is that they all begin within the Christian family:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they are not of us. {1 Jn 2:19 RSV}

The implication is clear that the beginning of heresy was within the circle of Christian truth and doctrine. That is where heresies have their root. That is what the word "antichrist" suggests. We often take the term to mean someone who is against Christ, much like the attitude we see in Communism, where there is a blatant denial of God and Christ. But that is not the thought here. It is true that the eventual outcome of any antichrist is that he is against Christ, but the word really means "instead of Christ." It is someone who comes in Christ's name, someone who declares that he is a Christian and is declaring the truth of Christianity. Yet, as we analyze his teaching it is contrary to what God, in Christ, has said. This is antichrist.

It is what our Lord himself predicted in the parable of the wheat and the tares {see Matt 13:3-9, 13:18-23}. He said (speaking of himself) that a sower went forth to sow, sowing the good seed of the Word of God, in human history. But, he said, an enemy came at night and sowed evil seeds as well "among the wheat," that is, in the midst of the wheat, and the two grew up together -- the wheat and the tares. They looked so alike at first that it was very difficult to distinguish between them. Our Lord said that as they grew men would become concerned about these things and say to the Lord of the harvest, "What shall we do about them? Shall we go in and root them out? And his word is, "No, let them grow together until the harvest." To try to root them out, he said, would also root up the wheat along with the tares. How often this has been fulfilled in human history by zealous attempts to purify the church in false ways. The Apostle Paul also recognizes the fact that heresies will arise within the church. In Acts 20, his farewell to the Ephesian elders, he says,

"I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves [i.e., from among the elders of the church, the bishops, if you like] will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." {Acts 20:29-30 RSV}

All this is foretold. It is well-known. Therefore let us not be surprised by the Pikes, the Tillichs, and the Bultmanns of our own day, who arise within the Christian circle and say false things. It has always been so. Notice the third thing the apostle indicates as a mark of heresy. He suggests that heretics adopt Christian terminology for their errors. That is, they begin within Christian circles and at first they sound truly Christian. You cannot tell what they are until they begin to break away. Their terminology is correct, but they substitute another meaning for the words. How widespread this is in our own day.

Perhaps the classic illustration of this is the book by the founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy. Though she uses perfectly normal Christian words she invests them with an entirely different meaning, and, in order to explain that meaning, she must publish a glossary of terms at the end of her book. Words, which in the dictionary are universally taken to mean one thing, in her book are given a specialized meaning which is a departure from essential Christian doctrine. That is common practice everywhere today.

Take, for instance, the way the word "resurrection" is being widely used among so-called Christian leaders. They say, "We believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ; we believe in the resurrection of the believer." But what do they mean by that? They mean that the soul survives death some way, that the spirit of Jesus somehow survived the experience of death and his spirit is abroad today, though his body lies rotting in the grave. They do not believe what the New Testament states as the meaning of the resurrection -- the raising of the body of Jesus. It was his body which came from the grave. Paul hinges the whole of the Christian faith upon this doctrine, and says that if it did not happen our faith is in vain and we are yet in our sins.

Take, also, the use of the term "evangelism." We hear much about evangelism, and many talk about the need for evangelizing to the uttermost parts of the earth. But in many circles that has a different meaning than we ordinarily understand. To many it means engaging in social work, doing helpful things,

beneficial things in foreign countries. Such ministry is called "evangelizing," preaching the gospel. But it is a far cry from what the New Testament means by evangelism, helpful as these things may be, and necessary as they may be.

Take, too, the use of the word, "prayer":. People use the term so glibly today. You can hear programs on the radio about prayer and many articles about it are being published in Christian magazines. But analyze their meaning and prayer is often only the thinking of helpful thoughts. People talk about gathering together in a room and praying for someone, and all they mean by that is to think beneficial things about that individual. What a far cry all this is from the Christian use of these terms! One of the marks of heresy is that it evacuates the meaning of biblical words and substitutes another meaning in its place. Or, perhaps, such heretics may simply give a different emphasis to certain aspects of the Christian message from that in the New Testament.

Take, for instance, the purpose of the church and the reason for the preaching of the gospel. What is it? Why, it is to change men from death unto life. The purpose of the gospel is to give men the gift of life. That is its supreme thrust. Without that it is not the gospel. Now, along with that there come other wonderful benefits -- peace of heart, even health of body, a sense of guidance through life, etc. But heresy is to seize upon these secondary benefits and make them primary, and to offer the gospel only as a means of producing peace of mind. This is the Positive Thinking cult of our day of which you hear so much. They say men are after peace of mind, freedom from anxiety and troubled thoughts, freedom from the pressures and problems of life, and if you just think right, the gospel is a great release. They talk about the need to believe the gospel as a way to think right, to think properly, as though this were the major purpose of the gospel. But this is where heresy comes in, for, the truth is, none of these things are permanently possible except there first be an imparting of life by Jesus Christ. Therefore, do not be misled into secondary issues, that is what the apostle is saying.

Notice that the fourth mark of an antichrist is that he will finally break away from the New Testament Christianity. All such invariably do. And when they do they will insist that they are the true mainstream of Christian truth and that we are living in the backwaters of Christian doctrine. John puts this very plainly, does he not? "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us." That is the mark of genuineness -- continuity in the truth, continuance in true faith. What does he mean by us? Surely not Christendom in general. He means, of course, as he makes clear in the context of this whole letter, those who love the Word of God and who possess the Spirit of God, those who seek to obey the Word in the power of the Spirit. This is the emphasis he has been making all along. Those who share the life of Christ, by the Word of God, in the power of the Spirit of God. Heretics will invariably cut themselves off from these people.

If you love the Scriptures and seek to study them and open them up, or to gather together to study them, if you suggest it to these who are involved in heresy, you will immediately feel their scorn of the Scriptures, their dislike of the Word of God. If they read it at all they cull out certain portions, carefully edit them, omitting the parts they do not like, and then they say, "Yes, we'll study the Scriptures right along with you." But if you read what they are studying you find it to be emasculated of essential truth. We need not fear heresy if we find someone who wishes to study the Scriptures as they are. There are many people today who are utterly ignorant of the Scriptures, who do not know anything about them, and perhaps have very peculiar viewpoints about them, but they are quite willing to learn. They want to study, they want to know what the Bible says. Then do not worry about the fact they are way off about a lot of things now. Get them into the Scriptures. The Word of God has a marvelous ability, in the hands of the Spirit of God, to correct error and to channel interests into vital matters. They will soon be brought into line with the great, marvelous, glorious, all-pervasive truth of God, these tremendous themes which grip the hearts of men wherever they are set forth in power.

What a defense this has been against error through the centuries. Through the Christian centuries there have been cyclical outbreaks of heresy arising within Christian circles to twist, distort, and pervert the truth. They bear always the same characteristics. Read church history and go right back through twenty centuries and you will see how invariably they have these same characteristics. That is the remarkable thing about the Word of God. It traces out and marks out this flowing stream of heresy through the centuries, as well as to mark out the flowing stream of God's truth. These are both exactly the same today.

We see the confluence of these in our own generation and day. Again these things are coming into conflict one with another and we will be disturbed and confused unless we view them in the light of the revelation of the truth of God. What a wonder this word is, which has been given to us that we might understand what is happening to us, understand the world in which we live, and thus be made to know what is going on. We can thus realize that history is utterly in the control of God and is moving exactly the way he planned. Our own individual lives can be brought into line with this to produce not that which is transient and ephemeral, as John spoke last time of the world passing away and the lust thereof, but to be engaged in that which abides, that which will end up at last fulfilling the purpose of God in history, moving to the last consummation that he has in view. That is what he calls us to. How important these themes are. Let us give ourselves to careful study, that we might know the word of truth which is able to build us up and to give us an inheritance among them which are sanctified.

Prayer:

Our Father, our hearts have been moved anew as we have seen what is happening in our own day in the blazing light of these amazing Scriptures. God grant to us that we may act on this basis and that we not only know, but do. Let us not be hearers of thy word only, but doers. Thou hast said that he who hears the word and does it not is like a man who looks in a mirror and goes away and forgets what kind of man he was. But he who does the word and looks into the perfect law of liberty will be blessed in his doing. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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