

# The Talmid



**Talmid תלמיד** a Hebrew word that means “a true disciple who desires to be what the Rabbi Jesus is.”

*Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)*

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STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY  
DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15



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## What is the gospel of Jesus Christ? Part 7

### KEEPING THE CROSS AT THE CENTER

At one point in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the hero of the story, Christian, finds himself talking with two sketchy fellows named Formalist and Hypocrisy. Like Christian himself, they insist, they are on their way to the Celestial City, and they’re quite certain they’ll make it because many in their country have gone this way before.

Of course, the names give it away. Formalist and Hypocrisy aren’t going to make it to the city at all.

The first time Christian sees the two men, they are tumbling over the wall that runs alongside the narrow path Christian is on. He of course recognizes that this is problematic, since he knows that the only legitimate way into the narrow path was through the Wicket Gate, which in the story symbolizes repentance and faith in the crucified Christ.

Christian, never afraid to go straight to the point, presses the two men on the matter: “Why came you not in at the gate?” The men quickly explain that the people of their country think the gate is too far away, and so they decided long ago “to make a short-cut of it.” Besides, they argue,

*If we make it onto the path,  
what’s does it matter which way  
we got in? If we are in, we are  
in. You are on the path, and you  
came in at the gate; we are on  
the path, and we climbed over  
the wall. So how are you any  
better off than we are?*

Christian warns the men that the Lord of the city has decreed that everyone who enters the Celestial City must enter the narrow path through the gate, and he shows them a scroll he was given there, which he must present at the gate of the city in order to gain entrance. “I imagine,” Christian says, “that you lack this, because you didn’t come in at the gate.”

Bunyan’s point was to show that the only way to salvation is through the Wicket Gate—that is, through repentance and faith. It’s not enough to be navigating the path of the Christian life. If a

person doesn't come in through that gate, he is not truly a Christian.

### *A Bigger, More Relevant Gospel?*

That's an old story, but it's an even older point that Bunyan was making. Since the very beginning of time, people have been trying to save themselves in ways *that make sense to them*, rather than listening and submitting to God. They have been trying to figure out how to get salvation to work—*how to get the gospel to work*—apart from the Wicket Gate, that is, apart from the cross of Jesus Christ.

That is no less true in our own day. Indeed, I believe one of the greatest dangers the body of Christ faces today is the temptation *to rethink and rearticulate the gospel in a way that makes its center something other than* the death of Jesus on the cross in the place of sinners.

The pressure to do that is enormous, and it seems to come from several directions. One of the main sources of pressure is the increasingly common idea that the gospel of forgiveness of sin through Christ's death is somehow not "**big**" enough—that it doesn't address problems like war, oppression, poverty, and injustice, and really "isn't terribly important," as one writer put it, when it comes to the real problems of this world.

Now, I think that charge is altogether false. All those problems are, at their root, the result of human sin, and it is folly to think that with a little more activism, a little more concern, a little more "living the life that Jesus lived," we can solve those problems. No, it is the cross alone that truly deals once and for all with sin, and it is the cross that makes it possible for humans to be included in God's perfect kingdom at all.

Nevertheless, the pressure to find a "**bigger**," more "**relevant**" gospel seems to have taken hold of a great many people. Again and again, in book after book, we see descriptions of the gospel *that end up relegating the cross to a secondary position*. In its place are declarations that the heart of the gospel is that God is remaking the world, or that he has promised a kingdom that will set everything right, or that he is calling us to join him in transforming our culture. Whatever the specifics, the result is that over and over again, the death of Jesus in the place of sinners is assumed, marginalized, or even (sometimes deliberately) ignored.

### *Three Substitute Gospels*

This decentering of the cross is happening subtly among evangelical Christians, it seems to me, in several different ways. A number of "**bigger and better**" gospels have been advocated in recent years, and each of them seems to be gaining a significant following.

Insofar as these "**bigger**" gospels make their center something other than the cross, however, I would argue that they are really less than the gospel, or no gospel at all. Let me give you three examples of this.

#### **"JESUS IS LORD" IS NOT THE GOSPEL**

**One of the most popular of these "bigger" gospels is the claim that the good news is simply the proclamation that "Jesus is Lord."** Much as a herald might enter a city and declare, "Caesar is Lord," Christians are to herald the good news that it is Jesus who rules, and that he is in the process of reconciling the entire world to himself and bringing it under his reign.

Of course, the declaration that "**Jesus is Lord**" is absolutely, magnificently true! And that declaration of Jesus' lordship is essential to the gospel message. So Paul says in [Romans 10:9](#) that the person who confesses that "**Jesus is Lord**" will be saved, and in [1 Corinthians 12:3](#) he says that it is only by the Spirit of God that someone can affirm that truth.

##### **Romans 10:9 (NASB)**

<sup>9</sup> "That if you confess with your mouth **Jesus as Lord**, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

##### **1 Corinthians 12:3 (NASB)**

<sup>3</sup> "Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "**Jesus is accursed**"; and no one can say, "**Jesus is Lord**," except by the Holy Spirit."

But surely it's not correct to say that the declaration "**Jesus is Lord**" is the whole sum and substance of the Christian good news. We've already seen how the earliest Christians said much more than that when they proclaimed the gospel. Yes, in [Acts 2](#), Peter preached, "**Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified**" ([v. 36](#)).

But before and after that statement is a full explanation of what Jesus' lordship meant. It meant that this Lord had been crucified, buried, and resurrected, and it also meant that his death and resurrection, above all, had accomplished the "forgiveness of sins" for those who would repent and believe in him. Peter

did not just declare that Jesus is Lord. He proclaimed that this Lord had acted on behalf of his people to save them from God's wrath against their sin.

It should be obvious by now that to say simply that **"Jesus is Lord"** is really not good news at all if we don't explain how Jesus is not just Lord but also Savior. Lordship implies the right to judge, and we've already seen that God intends to judge evil.

Therefore, to a sinner in rebellion against God and against his Messiah, the proclamation that Jesus has become Lord is terrible news. It means that your enemy has won the throne and is now about to judge you for your rebellion against him.

For that news to be good and not simply terrifying, it would have to include a way for your rebellion to be forgiven, a way for you to be reconciled to this One who has been made Lord. That's exactly what we see in the New Testament—**not just the proclamation** that Jesus is Lord, **but that this Lord Jesus** has been crucified so that sinners may be forgiven and brought into the joy of his coming kingdom. Apart from that, the declaration that **"Jesus is Lord"** is nothing but a death sentence.

## CREATION-FALL-REDEMPTION-CONSUMMATION IS NOT THE GOSPEL

Many Christians have outlined the story of the Bible using the four words *creation, fall, redemption, consummation*.

Actually that outline is a really good way to summarize the Bible's main story line. God creates the world, man sins, God acts in the Messiah Jesus to redeem a people for himself, and history comes to an end with the final consummation of his glorious kingdom. From [Genesis](#) to [Revelation](#), that's a great way to remember the Bible's basic narrative. In fact, when you understand and articulate it rightly, the creation-fall-redemption-consummation outline provides a good framework for a faithful presentation of the biblical gospel.

The problem, though, is that creation-fall-redemption-consummation has been used wrongly by some as a way to place the emphasis of the gospel on God's promise to renew the world, rather than on the cross. Thus the creation-fall-redemption-consummation **"gospel"** is too often presented as being something like this:

*The gospel is the news that in the beginning God created the world and everything in it. It was originally very good, but human beings rebelled against God's rule and threw the world into chaos. The relationship between humans and God was broken, as were people's relationships with each other, with themselves, and with their world. After the fall, however, God promised to send a King who would redeem a people for himself and reconcile creation to God once again. That promise began to be fulfilled with the coming of Jesus Christ, but it will be finally completed, or consummated, when King Jesus returns.*

Everything in that paragraph, of course, is true. But what I wrote there is not the gospel. Just like the proclamation that **"Jesus is Lord"** is not good news unless there is a way to be forgiven of your rebellion against him, so the fact that God is remaking the world is not good news unless you can be included in that.

Of course it's perfectly fine to use creation-fall-redemption-consummation as a way to explain the good news of Christianity. In fact, the categories **"creation"** and **"fall"** line up almost exactly with our categories of **"God"** and **"man."** The crucial point, though, comes at the category of **"redemption."**

That's where, in order truly to proclaim the gospel, we must carefully explain the death and resurrection of Jesus and the response God requires of sinners. If we say merely that God is redeeming a people and remaking the world, **but do not say how he is doing so** (through the death and resurrection of Jesus) and **how a person can be included in that redemption** (through repentance from sin and faith in Jesus), then we have not proclaimed the good news. We have simply told the narrative of the Bible in broad outline and left sinners with their faces pressed against the window, looking in.

## CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IS NOT THE GOSPEL

The idea of seeing culture transformed through the work of Christians seems lately to have captured the minds of many evangelicals. I think that is a noble goal, and I also think that the effort to resist evil in society, whether personal or systemic, is a biblical one. Paul tells us that we are to **"... do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith"** ([Galatians 6:10 NASB](#)).

Jesus tells us we are to care for our neighbors, which

includes those who are outsiders ([Luke 10:25–37](#)). And he also tells us, “**Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.**” ([Matthew 5:16 NASB](#)).

Many transformationalists go further than that, however, finding the mandate to “**redeem the culture**” in the very fabric of the biblical story. If God is in the business of remaking the world, they argue, then it is our responsibility to join him in that work, to gather the building materials of the kingdom, and to take significant strides toward the establishment of God’s reign in our neighborhoods, our cities, our nations, and our world. “*We must do what we see God doing,*” they say.

Let me go ahead and lay all my thoughts on the table. I have some serious biblical and theological reservations about the cultural transformation paradigm. I’m not convinced that Scripture places efforts at cultural transformation in quite the position of priority that many transformationalists call for. That’s for several reasons. For one thing, I don’t think the cultural mandate in Genesis is given to the people of God as such; I think it’s given to human beings as a whole.

I also don’t think the general trajectory of human culture, either in Scripture or in history, is in a **Godward direction**; instead, I think the trajectory of human culture on the whole, though not in every particular, is **judgment-ward** (see [Revelation 17–19](#)). So I think the optimism of many transformationalists about the possibility of “*changing the world*” is misleading and therefore will prove discouraging.

All that, however, is an enormous biblical-theological discussion, and it’s not my main concern here. I actually think it’s possible to be a committed transformationalist and at the same time be committed to keeping the cross of Jesus at the very center of the biblical story and of the good news. After all, it is the *forgiven* and *redeemed* people of God whom he would use to accomplish the transformation, and forgiveness and redemption take place only through the cross.

My main concern is rather something that I hope my evangelical transformationalist friends would heartily agree with. It is that far too often among some transformationalists, cultural redemption subtly becomes the great promise and point of the gospel—which of course means that the cross, deliber-

ately or not, is pushed out of that position. You can see this happening in book after book calling for a greater emphasis on cultural transformation. The highest excitement and joy are ignited by the promise of a reformed culture rather than by the work of Christ on the cross. The most fervent appeals are for people to join God in his work of changing the world, rather than to repent and believe in Jesus. The Bible’s story line is said to pivot on the remaking of the world rather than on the substitutionary death of Jesus.

And in the process, Christianity becomes less about grace and faith, and more a banal religion of “**Live like this, and we’ll change the world.**” That’s not Christianity; it’s moralism.

### *A Stumbling Block and Foolishness*

At the end of the day, I wonder if the impulse to shove the cross out of the center of the gospel comes from the bare fact that the world just doesn’t like the cross. At best they think it is a ridiculous fairy tale, and at worst, a monstrous lie. Really, that shouldn’t surprise us. Paul told us it would be the case. The message of the cross, he said, **will be a stumbling block to some and foolishness to the rest!**

Add to that the fact that we really *want* the world to be attracted to the gospel, and you create enormous pressure on Christians to find a way not to have to talk about “**bloody cross religion**” quite so much. I mean, we want the world to accept the gospel, not laugh at it, right?

But really, we should just face it. The message of the cross is going to sound like nonsense to the people around us. It’s going to make us Christians sound like fools, and it most certainly is going to undermine our attempts to “**relate**” to non-Christians and prove to them that we’re just as cool and harmless as the next guy. Christians can always get the world to think they are cool—right up to the moment they start talking about being saved by a crucified man. And that’s where coolness evaporates, no matter how carefully you’ve cultivated it.

Even so, Scripture makes it clear that **the cross must remain at the center of the gospel**. We cannot move it to the side, and we cannot replace it with any other truth as the heart, center, and fountainhead of the good news. To do so is to present the world with something that is not saving, and that is therefore not good news at all.



The Bible actually gives us very clear instruction on how we should respond to any pressure to let the cross drift out of the center of the gospel. We are to resist it. Look at what Paul said about this in [1 Corinthians](#). He knew the message of the cross sounded, at best, insane to those around him. He knew they would reject the gospel because of it, that it would be a stench in their nostrils. But even in the face of that sure rejection he said, **“But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness”** ([1 Corinthians 1:23 NASB](#)).

In fact, he resolved to **“know *nothing* among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified”** ([1 Corinthians 2:2 NASB](#)). That’s because, as he put it at the end of the book, the fact that **“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures”** was not just important, and not even just *very* important. It was of **“first importance”** ([1 Corinthians 15:3 NASB](#)).

And what if that brings on the ridicule of the world? What if people respond better to a gospel tilted toward the renewal of the world instead of toward the death of Christ in the place of sinners? What if people laugh at the gospel because it’s about a man dying on a cross? So be it, Paul said. I’m preaching the cross. They may think it’s ridiculous; they may think it’s foolish. But I know **“the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom”** ([1 Corinthians 1:25 NIV](#)).

Paul made sure the cross was the central point of the gospel he preached, and we should do the same. If we let anything else become the center, we might as well be saying, “Here, let me give you a hand jumping over that wall. Trust me. You’ll be fine.”

## CORAM DEO (Before the face of God)

*The New Testament is in the Old concealed;  
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.*  
—Augustine

Please remember that in this study I am concerned with the big picture of Hosea, not the minute details. Our interest is in why and how the parts fit together to advance the revelation of the Christ and the gospel, rather than a technical exegesis to interpret all the specific parts. There are commentaries for that. So while I acknowledge that all the prob-

lems of interpretation may not be resolved, it is my prayer that throughout this study the Lord Jesus Christ will be evidently set forth and that the Holy Spirit will lead into truth by showing Christ and glorifying Him.

## JUST THE FACTS

The Bible did not fall to earth from heaven complete and leather-bound. Different men—all of whom were inspired by the Holy Spirit—wrote the Old Testament over a period of about a thousand years. But each one lived in his own time and place; each one reflected and addressed the specific issues of his day. The truths of the Bible are universally and timelessly relevant, but they were first given to a specific people at a specific time to meet specific needs. The ultimate objective of our Bible study is to understand those universal and timeless truths and to apply them to our specific times and needs. An important part of Bible study is to learn what we can about the author, his times, and his particular circumstances. So here are just some facts about Hosea—the man and the book.

## HOSEA: A MESSIANIC MAN

### HIS PROFESSION

Ironically, notwithstanding the very public nature of Hosea’s home life that provided the main points for his sermons, the Bible reveals very little about who Hosea was. Apart from identifying his father Beerli, the Scripture says nothing more about Hosea’s lineage, unless the Beerli of [Hosea 1:1](#) is to be identified with the Beerah of [1 Chronicles 5:6](#). If those two are the same, Hosea would be of the tribe of Reuben. But that is speculative and ultimately irrelevant apart from confirming his northern roots.

The details of his lineage are immaterial because of his profession: **Hosea was a prophet**. Of the three anointed or messianic occupations—prophet, priest, and king—*only the prophetic office was unrestricted regarding pedigree*. Priests had to trace to Levi; kings (at least those of the southern kingdom) had to trace to Judah, and even more specifically to the family of David. So whereas priests and kings were born to be priests and kings, prophets became prophets only by the special call of God.

Interestingly, whereas priests and kings could not cross over into the spheres of the other’s operation, prophets could be priests, kings, or anything else. For the prophet, everything depended on God’s call. Understanding something about the prophetic profession or office is prerequisite to understanding the significance

of Hosea's ministry. Significantly, understanding something about the prophetic office enhances understanding about how Hosea contributes to the declaration of the gospel. The very fact that Hosea was a prophet points to the Lord Jesus Christ.

### *A Messianic Occupation*

I've already referred to the prophetic office as a messianic occupation. The noun *messiah* is based on a verb meaning "to spread a liquid over." The liquid most often used was olive oil, and the objects were both things and people. Most of the anointed objects had some function in the ceremonies of worship rituals.

For instance, [Exodus 29:36](#) instructs that the altar should be anointed after a sin offering. [Exodus 40:9-11](#) includes, in addition to the altar, the laver and the entire tabernacle with all its vessels for the purpose of sanctifying the objects. Sanctifying refers simply to the separation of those objects from other things; the anointed objects were set apart for a distinct purpose and use. They were consecrated or dedicated to a particular function. The same meaning applies to the people anointed. The people anointed were usually in some leadership role, either civil or religious leadership: the most common were kings ([1 Kings 1:34](#)), priests ([Exodus 28:41](#)), and prophets ([1 Kings 19:16](#)). In each instance, the anointing was a symbolic gesture of setting the person apart for a special work. The commonly acknowledged association between the olive oil and the Holy Spirit is an important element in the ritual that adds to its significance.



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## **Introduction to 1 John**

### **Part A**

This study begins a new overview study of a very doctrinal book – [1 John](#). In beginning, what will be done is to provide the first of several practical introductions to what [1 John](#) is about and how it is actually written and put together. The introductory studies will look first at who the author was and who the recipients were. Secondly, it will be necessary to identify the purpose of why the letter was even being written. Then thirdly, the introductory studies will look at a good number of the prominent characteristics of the letter. Obviously, just by its title, it should be surmised that the letter was written by John the Apostle, but in reality there is nowhere in the letter where it identifies who the author actually is or even who the actual recipients were. It should be apparent that most scholars believe that it is clearly a letter written by John the Apostle and this author would not argue that in any way for a good number of reasons, but suffice it to say that the letter itself never actually identifies who wrote the letter or to whom it was written. Both the historical evidence and the internal evidence point solidly to John as its author, but just to remain true to the text, neither the actual author nor the recipients are actually identified. In going through the study, this writer will refer to John as the author just because of the fairly compelling evidence that he is in reality the author. [Hebrews](#) and [1 John](#) are the only two letters who

do not mention who the author actually is, but whereas in Hebrews there is absolutely no way of telling who wrote that letter, the evidence for John the Apostle being the author of [1 John](#) is fairly overwhelming. Either way, it should not pose an issue in the actual interpretation and exegesis of the letter.

Most good theologians are agreed that there are very significant similarities in style, vocabulary, theological emphases, and the structure between the Gospel of [John](#) and [1 John](#), and that is one of the most compelling arguments for saying that John is the author. For instance, both [John](#) and [1 John](#) present very strong spiritual contrasts without any alternatives. There is light vs. darkness, life vs. death, love vs. hate, truth vs. lies, love of the Father vs. love of the world, children of God vs. children of the devil, being in the world but not of the world, knowing God vs. not knowing God, and having eternal life vs. not having eternal life.

It needs to be understood that with each of the contrasts that John never provides some middle of the road solution. He is not into options and variables and personal preferences. That is what the modern church seems to want – spiritual alternatives and spiritual flexibility vs. biblical absolutes. Christians live in a church age that is characterized by spiritual tolerance and acceptance, and the modern tendency is to minimize spiritual absolutes and to soften what the Word of God actually teaches and declares. Believers like to think of themselves and their churches as being open-minded, accepting, and charitable. The church sees itself as being much more spiritual than it probably is. Unfortunately, believers have created a Christianity that they are comfortable with – and John will make those kind of individuals very, very uncomfortable. John is very dogmatic about every one of the contrasting issues mentioned. He is never apologetic about the truth that he presents. He never hesitates to call someone a “**liar**” or an “**antichrist**”. Just as an example, [1 John 2:4](#) says,

**1Jn 2:4 “He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”**

There is nothing in the middle here. There is no spiritual toleration and acceptance of people that someone might consider to be the “exception” to all of this. John simply says that if someone is not obedient to God’s Word that in reality they are a liar and the truth is not even in them. This is very strong

doctrinal teaching and it will create a high level of tension in anyone who just claims to be a Christian, but is not living for Christ. John will not let his readers off the hook. It simply is not going to happen. In fact, one cannot find anywhere else in Scripture where there is a more pointed declaration of what it truly means to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ than what they find here in [1 John](#). If someone does not like absolutes, then they will not like [1 John](#) – and he does it in the simplest of terms. He only uses a little more than 300 different words from the Greek language, and he keeps repeating the same truths in different, but simple ways.

One of the primary elements that John will provide are certain “tests” to validate the reality of someone’s confession or what someone may be teaching. It is these “spiritual tests” that help to sort people into one of the two contrasts mentioned earlier. He is so adamant about this that he does not want anyone to be deceived about where they might really be spiritually. Every Christian is at some spiritual place in their lives. They are committed or uncommitted. There is no such thing as being half-committed. It would be similar to our example of a husband being faithful to his wife 98% of the time. That is not faithfulness. That is blatant unfaithfulness. Believers are Christlike or they are not Christlike. They are forgiving or they are bitter. They spend time in God’s Word or they do not spend time in His Word. There is no middle of the road here. So, based on how someone takes the various tests, John will dogmatically assert that they are saved or lost, that they know God or they do not know God, that they are walking in the light or they are walking in the darkness. There is no toleration here, no flexibility, and no open-mindedness to what it truly means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. This little five chapter letter will challenge every believer to the very core of their spiritual existence because that is exactly what it is designed to do.

As a teacher, I love these kind of New Testament letters. I love the fact that they know how to make me uncomfortable and spiritually distress me by taking me out of my spiritual comfort zone. Every New Testament book has a certain genre and flavor to it. Every letter has a certain goal and certain perspective from which it is written. For instance, [1 Corinthians](#) is very corrective. [Philemon](#) is making an appeal. [Hebrews](#) exalts Christ like no other book in the New Testament, but it has the strongest warnings possible for those who do not take their Christianity seriously. [1 John](#) is written to challenge, to test, and to confront false ideas about what it means to be a Christian. Not every New Testament book is like this, nor should they be. However, when coming to a book like this, then it is important to make

sure that at a personal level that we be open to letting it do exactly what it is designed to do – shake us out of our spiritual mediocrity, carelessness, and indifference. Be assured that [1 John](#) will do that. In John’s mind, he clearly expected his readers to fully obey and comply with everything that he was writing. This letter is very authoritative and demanding, and John makes no apologies at any time for the way in which it is written.

It appears that John wrote [1 John](#) between 90-95AD and that he wrote the [Gospel of John](#) between 80-90AD. The heresy that John was confronting in his letter was the false doctrine called “Gnosticism”, and it is known that much of that doctrine was developing toward the end of the first century. One of the critical elements that places the letter between 90-95AD was the terrible persecution that broke out under the Emperor Domitian in 95AD. John does not mention any of that in this letter, so it is generally assumed that he had to write before that date.

Secondly, it is not known who the actual recipients of the letter are. The author never says who it is that he is writing to, but what is known from the internal evidence given in the letter is that the recipients seem to know exactly who the author is. John uses several terms of endearment when writing them – terms like “**my little children**” nine times, a term which seems to imply that John was much older than his readers. What is known about the recipients from the letter itself is that they were Christians, they appear to have been well-known to the author (and he to them), and they were facing a very serious threat from false teaching.

It is this threat from false teaching that really sets the stage for John writing this letter. False teaching always creates trouble in the church. [1 John 4:1](#) gives a warning when it says,

**1Jn 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.**

In [1 John 2:18](#) he says that “**many antichrists have come**”. In [1 John 4:1](#) he refers to “**many false prophets**”. Obviously John is deeply concerned with the false teaching that had invaded the churches in Asia Minor over which he had oversight. As someone who is tasked with having a protective

ministry over the church that God has called me to pastor, nothing disturbs me more than false teaching. If a church embraces false teaching, then in reality it does not have the Word of God. Certainly this study will talk about the issue of false teaching and the very critical need to be discerning, but suffice it to say that false teaching cannot be tolerated in a biblical setting. It is imperative to identify false teaching and to remove false teaching within a church setting. The Bible has much more to say about false teachers than it does good teachers. In fact, the most scathing remarks of the New Testament are reserved exclusively for false teachers. Jude speaks about them in [Jude 3-4, 12-13, and 16-19](#).

**Jude 1:3** Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. **4**For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Jude 1:12** These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving *only themselves*. They are clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; **13**raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.

**Jude 1:16** These are grumblers, complainers, walking according to their own lusts; and they mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage. **17**But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: **18**how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts. **19**These are sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit.

[2 Peter 2:1](#) says,

**2Pe 2:1** But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, *and bring on themselves swift destruction*.

Jesus said in [Matthew 7:15](#),



**Mt 7:15** "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves."

It is important to appreciate that the false teaching that was being fueled by these false teachers was in progress. It was not something that had happened in the past or something that might happen in the future, but it was a very real and current threat to John's readers. So, one of the primary purposes of [1 John](#) involves John's attempt to strengthen and encourage the believers against these false teachers. So, he alternates between very pastoral encouragements on the one hand and impassioned defenses directed against the false teachers and their false doctrine on the other hand. The entire letter is built this way.

Every period of church history has certain characteristics associated with it. [Revelation 2 and 3](#), for instance, describe seven church periods that parallel the actual history of the church, and each one of those had certain spiritual or non-spiritual traits that characterized that period of church history. Each one of those seven churches existed in Asia Minor during the time of John writing Revelation, but they also chronologically characterize future church periods. For instance, the Laodicean age of today ([Revelation 3:14-22](#)) is characterized by "lukewarmness" – "neither cold nor hot". Modern believers live in a church age that says "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing" ([Revelation 3:17](#)). The spiritual antidote for that "lukewarmness" is found in [Revelation 3:19](#) which says that the church is to "be zealous and repent". In the church age in which John was writing one of the primary traits was the characteristic of being inclusive and all encompassing. I.e., there was always room in the religious climate for something new, for another religion, and for something novel and unusual. What there was not room for was a religion that was non-tolerant and what would be called "exclusive". It was the period of church history in which many of the "mystery religions" were developed. So, John is writing during a time where there is a smorgasbord of beliefs, philosophies, and novel religious notions. Today's spiritual climate is no different – probably even worse.

The problem, however, was that the church was not exempt from the influence of this melting pot of ideas that was permeating the culture in which they

lived. All of these religious ideologies were competing with one another for supremacy, and they would use any venue and any organization to promote their false doctrines. So, with any surplus of false religious ideas there comes false teachers looking for a place to sell their new ideas, and for many there seemed no better place to do so than the early church. Unfortunately, it seems what John indicates is that many of these false teachers had actually developed within the local churches, had drawn people away, and eventually created divisions and schisms within the body of Christ. In fact, several of the churches mentioned in [Revelation 2 and 3](#) were rebuked by John for their worldliness and toleration of false doctrine. For example, the church at Smyrna was rebuked for holding to the "doctrine of Balaam" which led them into sexual immorality, as well as the "doctrine of the Nicolaitans" ([Revelation 2:14-15](#)).

Now, it is critical that at this point in the Introduction to make the application to the current church age. To make things worse, modern believers live in a very technological and informational age where anyone can promote anything without any level of meaningful biblical scrutiny. There are many false and ludicrous doctrines just saturating the church age. In [Act 20:29-30](#), for instance, Paul had clearly predicted the rise of false teachers that would come upon the church in the day in which he lived.

**Ac 20:29** "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. <sup>30</sup>Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves."

When you add to this the amazing rise of technology and the church's infatuation with that which is novel, it takes little to no effort at all for false teaching to infiltrate the church. Once that happens, and it happens quite often, the church becomes spiritually diseased and eventually spiritually sick.

Lastly, it is important to at least mention that the most prevalent false doctrine during the time that John was writing was what was known as "Gnosticism". It was a very subtle doctrine, but the impact that it had on the church was enormous. The word "Gnosticism" comes from the Greek word "*gnosis*" for knowledge. Just like most all false doctrines, it contained a little bit of everything and not much of anything. It was a mixture and blend of human philosophy, pagan beliefs, and a little bit of Christianity mixed in for good measure. The underlying teaching of Gnosticism was that a person's

body was inherently evil and their spirit was inherently good. Spiritually what the Gnostics taught was a denial of the humanity of Jesus Christ. They denied the Incarnation, or His virgin birth, because they said that He could not take on a human body because it was evil. One sect of the Gnostics were called “Docetists”. That term came from the Greek word “*dokeo*” which meant to seem or to appear. So, they taught that Jesus did not really have a real body, even though it appeared that way. They claimed that He was a phantom. That is one reason why John starts off his letter with these words in [1 John 1:1-3](#),

**<sup>1</sup>Jn 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life-- <sup>2</sup> the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us-- <sup>3</sup> that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.**

What the Gnostics teaching did was to undermine the doctrine of the Incarnation that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man, but it also undermined the doctrine of the Atonement, or the actual death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then, to make things worse, since they believed that the body was evil they became indifferent to moral values. Immorality was rampant among the Gnostics. To them the body was simply a prison where the individual’s spirit was held captive. So, if they committed sin in their body it had no connection to their spirit. It is not difficult to imagine the impact that this doctrine was having within the young church. It was devastating because it was impacting so many of the foundational doctrines, and to make it worse, it was a green light to justify sexual immorality. Once a church age loses its doctrinal moorings and values as well as its moral integrity, the effects are not very difficult to identify.

Look how far mainline denominations have shifted in the past several decades where they openly accept and ordain gay and lesbian pastors into their churches. That is so far off of the biblical chart that it is difficult to even imagine how people could come to that conclusion and then incorporate it into some

theological setting. In the theological circles which many believers might be associated with, the doctrine of pragmatism has taken center stage in the last 30 years, and the negative effect it is having on the contemporary church cannot be measured. The church now has the culture dictating theology, or what do people want in a religious setting. The church has gone from preaching to story-telling. It has gone from sermons on repentance making the lost uncomfortable to non-threatening messages designed to make sinners comfortable. It has substituted personal health and wealth for a demanding call to discipleship and commitment. The Great Commission has become the Great Omission. Monuments to creature comfort mentality have replaced an ongoing and vital support of missionaries. The church has replaced biblical doctrine with cultural preferences and ideas.

Now, all of this is mentioned simply to identify how easily the church can be impacted by subtle doctrinal changes that cater to the whims and wishes of a selfish Christian culture that is more interested in its personal pleasure and comfort than it is the demands of the Christian life. The institutional church has effectively reduced Jesus from Lord to a cosmic genie that is there to meet all of its felt needs. Do not be surprised when [1 John](#) finds a way to make the uncommitted very uncomfortable. That is a very, very good thing!

#### **ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup>Harris, Authorship section, not known (electronic page).
- <sup>2</sup>MacArthur, 3.
- <sup>3</sup>MacArthur, 7.
- <sup>4</sup>Harris, Background section, not known (electronic page).
- <sup>5</sup>Harris, Background section, not known (electronic page).
- <sup>6</sup>MacArthur, 1.
- <sup>7</sup>MacArthur, 2.
- <sup>8</sup>MacArthur, 8.

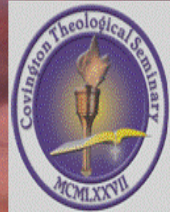
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