

Who Is the Antichrist? #1
Daniel 11:36; 1 John 2:18-22
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In Scripture, we hear the Holy Spirit warn the Church of Christ (through the prophets and the apostles) concerning the Antichrist who would come, usurping the titles and rights of Christ, and leading an apostasy within the Church against Christ and His truth.

The historic Protestant view of the identity of Antichrist (which was the consensus of Protestants from the 16th to almost the 20th century) is summarized for us in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* of 1647 (25:6):

There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof; but is that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God.

This is not just the statement of one faithful teacher here and there. Let the historical significance of this clear declaration weigh heavily upon you, for this was a statement of faith so clear to three kingdoms and churches that they together with other Reformed nations and churches until the 20th century have professed this to be the teaching of Scripture. Why did our forefathers in the faith with near unanimity declare the Papacy to be the Antichrist? That is what we hope to answer as we seek to understand from the New Testament who “the king” is that is revealed in Daniel 11:36ff to be both a political and ecclesiastical king. We have considered what the Apostle Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 2 concerning “the man of sin” and “son of perdition” who like “the king” in Daniel 11:36 usurps authority above all earthly rulers and even usurps the authority of Christ over His Church upon earth (as does the Papacy, claiming to be head of the Universal Church). Since “the man of sin” and “the son of perdition” in 2 Thessalonians 2 is identified with the Antichrist (whether one is a Preterist, Futurist, or Historicist), let’s consider the only place in Scripture where “Antichrist” is used—in 1 John and 2 John.

This is part one of a two-part sermon: (1) What Does “Antichrist” Mean? And next Lord’s Day, (2) How Does Antichrist Deny Christ?

I. What Does “Antichrist” Mean?

A. Preliminary Remarks

1. In these inspired letters written by the Apostle John, he writes to encourage Christians to remain steadfast in the doctrine which was delivered to them by Christ through His Apostles; for true fellowship with Jesus Christ is a fellowship that is based upon the light of Scriptural truth and not upon the darkness of false teachers and false prophets (1 John 1:6-7). False teachers and false prophets at that time were leading Christians from this fellowship with Christ and were especially deceptive because they professed Christ and even had been numbered as members of the Church (1 John 2:19). Thus, John warns Christians (and so should we) to test those claiming to be teachers and ministers within the Church by embracing and practicing biblical doctrine/holiness/love.

2. As the Apostle John issues his warnings, he is led by the Spirit of God to address not only the false teachers that were troubling the faithful Church at that time (“antichrists”), but to address a particular false teacher that was not yet manifested in history, but was yet to come, whom John calls “the Antichrist” (1 John 2:18).

3. John informs his beloved brethren (and us) that one of the identifying marks that they were living in “the last time” (literally, the last hour) was the manifestation of such antichrists and would be the manifestation of “the Antichrist” (“whereby we know that it is the last time” 1 John 2:18). “The last time” (or “hour”) refers to the Messianic age (the time between the First Coming and Second Coming of Christ—

Hebrews 1:2; 1 Peter 1:20; Hebrews 9:26). This age of fulfillment was the age in which the Apostle John lived (as evidenced by the prophesied antichrists, who had come), and the age of fulfillment is the age in which we live (as evidenced by the prophesied Antichrist, who has come).

4. The Apostle John states that the coming of the Antichrist had already been prophesied to come before John penned this Letter (“and as ye have heard that [the] antichrist shall come” 1 John 2:18). Where is this prophecy found? Just as the Apostle John speaks of the coming of the Antichrist, so the Apostle Paul speaks of the coming of the Man of Sin or the Son of Perdition (2 Thessalonians 2). Different names may be used, but as we examine both passages, it will become clear that both John and Paul are speaking of the same wicked person (or office of persons) that usurps the place of Christ and misleads those within the professing Church to yield obedience to him and to follow him.

B. Let us now consider our first question: What does “Antichrist” mean in 1 John 2:18?

1. Most people would likely answer that antichrist means “against Christ”, and they would be right. This Man of Sin and Son of Perdition is “against Christ”. “Antichrist” is a compound word, consisting of two parts: the Greek preposition, *anti*, and the Greek noun, *Christos*, forming the word, *antichristos*.

2. Though the Greek preposition *anti* does mean “against” or “opposed to”, it also has the meaning of “in place of”, or “substitution” for another (according to *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, p.72; *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Joseph H. Thayer, pp.49,50—cp. Matthew 2:22).

3. Both meanings of the Greek preposition *anti* may be used to interpret “Antichrist”. The Antichrist will deceptively claim to be in the place of Christ as Christ’s substitute on earth, and in so doing, he will actually oppose and be against Christ (just as someone who claims to come in your place as the parent of your children would be opposing you). New Testament commentator, B. F. Westcott proposed this very interpretation for Antichrist as the “one who, assuming the guise of Christ, opposes Christ” (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, pp.64,65). Therefore, I submit that an accurate interpretation of the name, Antichrist, is not merely the one who is against Christ, but is the one who claims to be in the place of Christ as Christ’s substitute, and in doing so, he opposes Christ.

4. Interestingly, even the Roman Catholic Church uses a similar name with *anti* in it to mean in the place of: it is the word “antipope”. The antipopes were those who claimed to be in popes (though later they were declared to be no popes at all).

C. From our text, we have the same Greek preposition, *anti*, used in the plural for “antichrists”, *antichristoi* (1 John 2:18). Did those, who were called antichrists and who led a falling away within the Church from Christ and His truth at the time of John, publicly profess themselves to be opposed to Christ and the enemies of Christ, or rather did they make a pretense to represent Christ, so as to deceive and mislead Christians within the Church of Christ?

1. New Testament scholars believe that these antichrists were forerunners of Gnosticism (who came into their full colors later on in the second century). “Gnosticism” comes from the Greek noun, *gnosis*, which means knowledge. This was a heretical branch that departed from the faithful Church, claiming to follow Christ, but departing from God’s truth. They were a syncretistic Greek philosophy-Christian religion.

2. One of their core beliefs was that the material world was evil (matter), whereas the spiritual world (spirit) was good. Thus, many of these Gnostics that claimed to be Christians denied that Christ had an actual human body of flesh (because a body of flesh is evil, but since Christ was not evil, he did not have a body of flesh), but rather they said that Christ only appeared to have a body of flesh (Christ’s body was a phantom body). Therefore, there could be no real atonement/mediator.

3. They also believed that salvation did not come from the sole redemption of Christ and His imputed righteousness, but came from various mediators to whom they looked for knowledge and enlightenment. It was this special knowledge gained through their mediators that brought salvation, rather than through the pure gospel in God’s infallible Word.

4. But these Gnostic Christians did profess a belief in Jesus Christ, but they added their own false doctrines concerning Christ and salvation and in so doing, John says they denied Christ (1 John 2:22).

5. From this brief description of Gnostic Christians (whom John calls antichrists), it becomes clear that the word "Antichrist" (as used by John) does not simply mean one opposes Christ or is an enemy of Christ (as did Nero or as some future political ruler shall allegedly do). To the contrary, these "antichrists" claimed to be Christians and representatives of Christ (not enemies of Christ), but it is clear that they actually held heretical views in regard to the nature, work, and offices of Christ, and were therefore against Christ and opposed Christ.

6. John describes these Gnostic Christians ("antichrists") as having been at one time a part of the assembly of the faithful Church, but left the faithful Church due to their heresies (1 John 2:19).

7. Thus, if "antichrists" (in the plural) refers to those who professed to be representatives of Christ, and who identified themselves with the Christian Church, but fell away into various heresies concerning Christ (and in so doing actually opposed Christ), then I submit that when the Apostle John refers to "the Antichrist" (in the singular and with the definite article, as he does in 1 John 2:18), he likewise refers to one who publicly professes to be the representative of Christ as Christ's substitute upon earth, and yet is fallen away from the faithful Church and from Christ through false teaching (and actually opposes Christ).

D. The Lexical Definition of "Vicar of Christ"

1. I submit there is a clear connection between the name "Antichrist" (one who claims to be in the place of Christ as Christ's substitute upon earth), and the name given by the Roman Catholic Church to the Pope: Vicar of Christ. The Vicar of Christ (or *Vicarius Christi*) refers in an official way to the Papacy and literally means "the Substitute of Christ" or one who is in the place of Christ (*vicarius* means "substitute", and is derived from *vicis* which means, "in place of"). Thus, Antichrist and Vicar of Christ mean essentially the same thing (in the place of Christ), and refer to the same immoral, ecclesiastical office of the Papacy prophesied by the Apostle John to come in 1 John 2:18.

2. Since about 1200, Popes have consistently used this title, Vicar of Christ. Occasionally, Popes (like Nicholas III) also used "Vicar of God" as an equivalent title. Thus, when the Apostle John prophesies the coming of "the Antichrist" (1 John 2:18), he is prophesying that the Papacy would come from within the Church and be established in the place of Christ as the substitute for Christ upon earth (which is what the Papacy claims, namely, to be the head of the Universal Church on earth in the place of Christ).

E. Application

1. True warnings are not issued out of hate, but out of love (as John does here). Warnings are a necessary duty of the calling of faithful shepherds of the sheep. Warnings in today's culture (both secular and ecclesiastical) are usually viewed as being divisive, hateful, and arrogant. Is it hateful for a parent to warn a child about the pain of touching a hot stove? If a shepherd does not warn the sheep about wolves in sheep's clothing (as Scripture warns us), how can it be said that he truly loves the sheep, cares for the sheep, and protects the sheep? If John was warning Christians (then and now) about the Antichrist who would come from within the Church and lead in a falling away from Christ and His truth, should we not do so, now that such a person who claims to be the Vicar of Christ in an ecclesiastical office has come, and do so out of love for those who have been deceived by the Papal Antichrist?

2. Let us beware of any popish tendency in us that hates to be corrected or instructed by others (James 3:17). We can make our conscience an infallible pope if it is not submitted to Christ and His infallible Word. The way of life is humbly to receive correction from parents, elders, and one another when God's truth is brought to us.