

The Characteristics of the Antichrist

The epistle for the twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost omits v. 6-12 in 2 Thess. 2. It is the fullest description in the Bible of the characteristics of the Antichrist. The actual term "antichrist" occurs only in the epistles of John (1 Jn 2:18, 22, 4:3; 2 Jn 7). In the broader sense, there are many antichrists. The term covered a wide range of false teachers already at the time of John (1 Jn 4:1-3). However, he also wrote about the one Antichrist who was to come, in whom false teachers would culminate (1 Jn 2:18). We need to be on our guard against the "spirit of antichrist."

There is a good deal of allusive language. Daniel wrote about the little horn that would speak boastfully (7:8; 11:31, 36-39). Jesus regarded the attack on the faith by the Syrian king Epiphanes IV as a prophetic type of the "abomination that causes desolation" (Mt 24:15). Revelation speaks about the beast from the earth that would use the authority of the beast from the sea (13:11-18). It is subject to the dragon, Satan. There is a connection between "the beast" and "the false prophet" (16:13, 19:20).

2 Thessalonians uses the term, "the man of lawlessness." Jesus already had to warn His disciples about ambition to be great (Lk 22:24). Peter warned clergy (elders) at his time not to act as lords over God's heritage. This "mystery of iniquity" was already present when Paul wrote, although there was something that prevented his full manifestation (2 Ths 2:6-7). The power of the Roman Empire and its ten waves of persecution of Christians during the first three centuries prevented extravagant claims of Christian clergy. However, this "man of lawlessness" would continue until Jesus' return (2 Ths 2:8). "Then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of His mouth and make him powerless when He appears at His coming." Therefore, we are not to think of just one individual, but of a succession of such men in office. He would continue in the visible church until the end of time. We should not expect the coming of the Antichrist only shortly before the end of the world. His rise to full form would be gradual (1 Ths 2:7, 1 Jn 4:3).

The coming of antichrist would be associated with a great falling away from the truth (2 Ths 2:3). Although every antichrist teaches falsely, this one would do so on a large scale. He would "oppose and exalt himself above everyone who is called 'God' or that is an object of worship" (2 Ths 2:4). In a series of ways, he is a parallel to Christ. He would even have his own "parousia" or coming (2 Ths 2:9). Because he is called the "mystery of iniquity," he can be expected to work in secret, under the cover of Christ's name. His coming would be "in accordance with the working of Satan, with all kinds of false miracles, signs, and wonders, and with every kind of wicked deception" (2 Ths 2:9-10).

This "man of lawlessness" would appear in a prominent place in Christendom. We should therefore not identify him with secular political figures or one of the many non-Christian religions, which are also enemies of true faith. He would "sit in the temple of God, and proclaim that he himself is God." We should not imagine that he would say, "I am God" in so many words, that that He would arrogate authority and reverence that is due only to God. He would be a serious danger to true faith. He would "oppose and exalt himself above everyone who is called 'God' or that is an object of worship" (2 Ths 2:4). We can therefore expect him to say that he is the vicar of Christ on earth, to claim to be superior to God-ordained rulers, and to claim to be the infallible teacher in matters of faith and morals, and to insist that he must be obeyed by all Christendom as though he were God himself. The deception will be chiefly doctrinal, and we can expect the chief article of the Christian faith, justification through faith in Christ alone, to be corrupted.

The driving force behind this ambitious striving for pre-eminence and primacy in the Church would be Satan himself (2 Ths 2:9-10). Alleged miracles and outward display of power and grandeur and apparent success and the size of his following would deceive people who did not hold fast to the truth of God's Word. Attention to his "primacy" would cause people to ignore Jesus as the Head of the Church.

Few will deny that there was serious moral depravity in the papacy at times during the middle ages. Luther was by no means the first to identify the Antichrist with the papacy and say that it was of the devil. *The Book of Concord* identifies the Antichrist as the papacy (*Smalcald Articles*, II, iv, 10). Its criticisms include the extension of the power of the keys to earthly power by divine right, and the misuse of excommunication for political power. With the Reformers, the issue was not merely wicked living in popes like Alexander VI, and abuse of power, but chiefly wrong teaching. Some of the severest words in the *Book of Concord* dealt with the doctrine of sacrifice in the Mass in the papacy as a human work, which was the source of many abuses (*Smalcald Articles* II, ii). Whereas the Reformers maintained that their churches taught nothing new, but retained true catholic or universal Christian teaching, they criticised the papacy for the introduction of new teachings, changing Christian doctrine and worship, and for its insistence that belief in papal primacy and obedience to it was necessary for salvation. They were well aware of the last words of the papal bull, *Unam Sanctam*, of 1302 AD, "Furthermore, we declare, define, and pronounce that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff." The belief that popes had divine revelation in the shrine of their hearts (a belief that in 1870 was fixed in a declaration that, when popes spoke officially (*ex cathedra*), they were infallible), was criticised by the *Smalcald Articles* as "enthusiasm" (*SA* III, viii, 9). The reason was that "We should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament." To the extent that a church disregards the Word and will of God, and promotes false doctrine, it advances the kingdom of Satan or Antichrist.

In the *Book of Concord* the identification of the Antichrist with the Papacy is made repeatedly in connection with the notion that human works and rites merit justification (*Apology* XV, 18), the doctrine of the church (*Apology* VII and VIII, 24), the claim that Christians cannot be saved except through papal power (*SA* II, iv, 10), regulations about ceremonies, vestments, food, and personnel (*SA* II, iv, 14), the defence of godless, new doctrines (*Tractatus*, 39; *Formula of Concord*, SD X, 20), and allowing human authority to count for more than the Word of God (*Formula of Concord* SD. X, 22).

We may well ask why, when Christians at the time of the Reformation had no difficulty in identifying the Antichrist, so many these days are backing away from this identification. Many Lutherans today have withdrawn the condemnations in the *Book of Concord* as if they had been wrongly applied, or were valid only against abuses, and, in particular, this specific identification of the Antichrist. Clearly, it must be attributed to the ecumenical spirit of our times, which has made many people victims of indifference and deception. We are living in an age when people do not care deeply about what God's Word teaches and cannot find the courage to reject what is false.

In a sermon delivered on 1 Sept 1844, C F W Walther quoted a paragraph from a commentary by Luther on Galatians 1:2. Luther did not include in his identification of the papacy as the Antichrist every Christian who was oppressed by the papacy. We need a reminder that baptism is still administered in that church, the real presence of Christ's body and blood is still affirmed in that church, and the absolution is still pronounced in that church. Since the Word of God is effective, we believe that there will be many faithful and devoted children of God in it. Luther also made it plain what our response to this situation ought to be.

“Therefore the church is holy even where the fanatics are dominant, so long as they do not deny the Word and the Sacraments; if they deny these, they are no longer the church. Wherever the substance of the Word and the sacraments abides, therefore there the holy church is present, even though Antichrist may reign there, for he takes his seat not in a stable of fiends or in a pigpen or in a congregation of unbelievers but in the highest and holiest place possible, namely, in the temple of God (2 Thess. 2:4). From this it is certain and obvious that God's temple must be and remain even under spiritual tyrants who rule and storm. For above all, even under the tyrants, the right faith etc. is found. Therefore a short and easy answer can be given to the question: the church is everywhere in the entire world if only the gospel and the sacraments are there. But the Jews, Turks, enthusiasts and mob spirits or heretics are not the church. For these deny and destroy such things.” (Translation by Mark Nispel, made available in *Cyberbrethren*, by Paul McCain).

We do not know whether the form of the Antichrist will yet take on additional manifestations to what we have seen so far. The identification of the church as visible Christianity in the ranks of the World Council of Churches is little different from the self-identification of the Roman Catholic Church as the only visible church on earth. Can we expect a future One World Church, presided over by Antichrist himself, for example?