

The Last Great Idolatry

Surely you have heard about "The Antichrist." This is a word found in scripture that has been made very popular in our Christian world today.

The word is frequently used to designate a man who will supposedly be born into our midst at the very end of time who will rule over the world and bring great opposition against the Christian church and the cause of Jesus Christ. Some say he will even be fathered by the devil.

This idea has enjoyed popularity within the Christian community for a long time. Now in recent decades, the concept has grown beyond all previous proportions through the making of a large number of books and movies on the subject.

Perhaps you may remember the movie, *Rosemary's Baby*, and the book, *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. Those are two of the oldies. There are newer works being added to the list constantly, and some of them are even bestsellers.

Throughout the Christian age there have been varying opinions about who "the" antichrist might be. Early in the Christian Age the Emperor Nero was designated as the culprit because of the magnitude of his evil deeds against Christians. Later, other emperors were accused, and a few centuries after that Mohammed was seen as "The Antichrist." Then, as time passed, various ones of the Catholic Popes were accused of filling that office, especially during the times of the Protestant Reformation.

With all of these shifting opinions one might wonder, "So what's the difference? Why should we even care or be concerned about this?" Well, there is a reason. God gave us the warnings in scripture about antichrists so we would be able to understand the workings of Satan and his deceptions in opposing Christ and the church in our times. If we just ignore it all, we will be the losers.

The Bible Record

The word "antichrist" is found in the books of First and Second John in the Bible. There, it is clearly used to designate any persons or forces that oppose the real identity of Jesus Christ as being the actual Son of God especially when the deception comes from within our Christian ranks. And the word can even be used in the plural.

Today I believe these scriptures should be applied mainly to that large segment of liberal Christianity which denies Jesus Christ's virgin birth and all the miraculous things in the Bible. Yes, these people do exist. Many conservative Christians don't know they exist since they are very clever at keeping their unbelief secret. If they did not, they would lose a substantial portion of their followers.

But there is another scripture not in John's letters that seems to describe an end time individual who would do all these things and more. It is found in Second Thessalonians, chapter 2. Here are verses 1 through 4:

"Now we beseech you, brothers, by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto Him, that you be not soon shaken in mind or be troubled, neither by spirit nor by word nor by letter as (if) from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand.

"Let no man deceive you by any means, for that day shall not come except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped so that he as God sits in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God."

This is probably the main scripture that is used for supporting the argument for an end time individual antichrist. And this certainly does seem to designate events of the end time, does it not? Everything fits. For one thing, there has indeed been a falling away. The old lands of Christianity on the European continent have largely fallen away from their Christian faith. Church attendance in England is something like four percent now. In other countries it is even worse even while the church is exploding with growth in the Southern Hemisphere. This large scale falling away from the faith is one of many indicators that we may be living in the very end times, and it sets the stage for the revelation of a "man of sin," as Paul calls him.

Now, what many good Christian folks do at this point is to tie this "man of sin" to some of the Old Testament prophecies about conquerors that God sent against Old Israel thus coming up with a world conqueror who has his throne in a newly rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. But why do that? Those prophecies are far better explained when they are applied to the times of the Old Testament, when successive waves of invasions were sent against Israel because of their sins.

Not a World Ruler

This latter day man of sin that Paul writes about is not necessarily a conqueror or even a ruler. This passage in II Thessalonians does not present him as such. Rather, he is described as someone who skillfully convinces people that he is God, and does this by doing things that God normally does which includes signs and wonders. He is essentially an idol, although a human one that is set up in the place of God. He exists in the place of God even today; we are not even aware of it.

Now we all know about idols. We read about a lot of them in the Old Testament. Men used to claim that the idols they made were gods too, and they worshipped them as such. In our modern time this is rarely ever done. Science and education have brought us to the point of understanding that an image that we make with our own hands cannot be a god. That makes sense to us.

OK, then what is an idol, and what is a "god?" And why did people used to believe in them? Plainly to all of us, this world is a dangerous and precarious place in which to live. We can all suffer or die very quickly if something goes badly wrong. Man has always wanted and needed a source of deliverance and prosperity that is beyond what his own hands can muster.

But times have changed. As we all know, we live in a secular world today. We stopped believing in idols at the same time we stopped believing in ghosts and goblins. The blessings of applied science have

taught us how to take care of our own selves without appealing to the power of an idol or even the power of the real God Himself for that matter. We can do it all ourselves now, thank you very much. Multiple gods used to be useful tools, but now we have other tools.

Man has become his own god. Everything that a god used to supply, we supply. We heal ourselves, protect ourselves, insure ourselves and do everything else that an idol was supposed to do even to the point of actually amazing ourselves ("signs and wonders"). So who needs an idol? Man has come to be recognized as the highest power in the universe, displacing all other gods and even the very God Himself.

Humanism and secularism provide the driving force behind the present efforts to remove all recognition of God and religion from government, education and public life. And why not? There is simply no apparent need for the supernatural anymore. And without any supernatural being, who does that leave in charge of our world? Man himself, who is the next smartest and most powerful being that we know anything about. So we are, according to some modern philosophers, living in a "post-Christian" age.

How Did We Get Here?

We could ask ourselves how we even got to this point. Apparently the problem originated in the church itself. If we had stood our ground through the past 20th century as we should have done it would not have happened. But we became intimidated by intellectuals inside the church who taught us that science replaces faith and that "higher criticism" replaces the Bible as we used to know it. Like the man of sin in Paul's statement, we have exalted man above all that is called God.

Why did Paul use the expression "man of sin?" Because that is exactly what generic man is without God. He is the man of sin. Paul made it abundantly clear in the third chapter of Romans that man is depraved (read it), and only a miraculous new birth can change that. So those of us who are born again have two natures that battle with each other for the rest of our lives. The rest of the population has only the depraved nature, and the struggle for them is to keep it covered up so they can function in a society.

And man is very good at disguising his built-in human depravity, so much so that usually we can't tell the sheep from the goats. That is why the Old Testament ended with the warning that God was going to make these distinctions all plain when Christ and the gospel came upon the scene about 2,000 years ago (See Malachi 3:18, John 8:43-47.)

Today the evidence about who people really are – sheep or goats – is still there, but we usually choose not to use it, assuming that all people who are not convicted criminals and such are just all good folks. And that's a good attitude to have as far as personal friendships are concerned, but in operating in the kingdom of God it can get you into big trouble.

Many unbelievers (goats) are highly moral and respectable people, very much like the political party of the Pharisees in Jesus Christ's time. But in that day these respectable religious folks fully rejected the Son of Man. In our own time they reject any mention of God at all in the public arena and give only lip

service to Him behind the closed doors of churches. Thank God, of course, for the Christians (sheep) who are not that way.

OK, who is this man of sin that Paul wrote about? It's us. Man is his own worst enemy, and if not restrained, man becomes his own god. These are the times we are living in.

- Loren Wilson (This article may be copied freely.)