

The Spirit of Antichrist

by: Ronald L. Dart

If I say the word Antichrist, most people will immediately have an idea of what I'm talking about. Funny thing is, they all will not think the same thing. I think the most common idea is that of an evil 'end time' strong man that dominates much of the world and persecutes the people of God.

Some will point to the one that Paul describes as the 'man of sin.' Paul had confused the Thessalonians with his first letter to them, and in the second letter, he clarifies this by saying this about the 'man of sin,' this is in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 and verse 3, "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 worshiped, so that he as God sits in the Temple of God, showing himself that he is God."

It's hard to see this man as a Muslim, and there are a few people who think that it is, but a Muslim would reject anyone who would make that claim. Others would point to the vision of John in Revelation, where John describes what he calls a beast, who seems similar to the man of sin, but who may be something entirely different. Neither matches any Muslim regime because of the idolatry involved.

In general, the Antichrist, calls to mind something to do with an evil power in the last days and frankly, that's the way I have explained it for years.

A Problem with Antichrist

But here's the problem, none of these descriptions in Paul writings or in Revelation identifies this person as the Antichrist. In fact, there's only one New Testament writer who uses that term, and he only uses it in his letters. His name is John and his letters are first and second John.

Now here's the problem I'm wrestling with, since John is the only one who uses the term, what if he isn't talking about the same thing? Here's how John introduced the term Antichrist, it is in 1 John chapter 2, verse 21, "I have not written unto you because you don't know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. Who is a liar but he that denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is Antichrist, that denies the Father and the Son. Whosoever denies the Son, the same has not the Father, but he that acknowledges the Son has the Father also. Let that therefore abide in you, which you have heard from the

beginning. If that which you have heard from the beginning remains in you, you will continue in the Son, and in the Father."

Divinity of Jesus

Now you should know this about John. Of all the gospel writers, John presents the strongest view of the divinity of Jesus, not that the others deny it in any way, but they apparently, I think, had not encountered some of the ideas that had confronted John and John comes down hard on this issue.

From the opening of the gospel of John, we find that Christ existed from the beginning and was the active agent in the creation of the universe, and it's evident throughout John's gospel that he holds the highest view of Christ. We find the same spirit in Paul's epistles and the epistle to the Hebrews. The divinity and the eternal nature of Christ are strongly set forth in all these places.

So when that Christology, the belief in Christ that Paul and John particularly espoused, began to encounter opposition, then we would expect a strong response from John and Paul. We got that from Paul in the book of Galatians and we get it from John in his letters. We have it in his gospel too, but primarily in his letters.

Where Did The Opposition Come From?

Where did the opposition come from? Well it arose from among the first Jewish Christians who may understandably have had a hard time accepting Jesus' preexistence as creator and His identity as the Son of God, because in their eyes that implied divinity on Jesus' part, that He was the Son of God and that He was God. That's the way the Jews interpreted it when Jesus spoke of Himself as the Son of God.

No Word Processors

Now to understand where John is coming from, we need context. When you read any New Testament letter or document, it is helpful to put yourself in the shoes of the writer. These fellows had no word processors. There's no hint that they had worked from an outline. In some cases we learned that they dictated their work to a scribe. Now consequently, they sometimes repeated themselves, sometimes their ideas run together, and sometimes they leave out things they thought they included. I feel reasonably sure that this is true, because if you've ever written letters by hand, very much, as I wrote a lot of my original love letters to my wife by hand, this was before the day of word processors, well, you know, you drop things out, you leave things out, you say some things the way you didn't intend to say it, but you don't want rewrite the whole page so you leave it in.

Christology

Now what you want to listen for in John's letters is his Christology and his response to the objections to that Christology.

John's first letter is almost poetic in its structure. It is striking. When I studied New Testament Greek, my final exam in my course was that I had to translate the book of John. It was fairly easy because I was familiar with the book of John, but nevertheless I had to do it.

John begins in first John one verse one, "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, of the Word of life."

Now I may be wrong, but I think this letter was written sometime after his gospel, and he assumes his readers recognize the illusions that he is making here, so he doesn't have to go back and rewrite his gospel.

The 'Word of life' was not only something that he and the others had heard, they had seen it, they looked upon it, and their hands had handled it. Three senses were involved, seeing, hearing, and touching, and not only that, but the Word of life was from the beginning and when he uses the term this way, the only way you can possibly understand it, is the beginning of time, the beginning of everything, from the beginning.

In his gospel, John has already established that the 'Word' is none other than Jesus, who became flesh, so he could be heard, seen and touched.

John begins his gospel this way, John one and verse one, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men, and the light shines in darkness, and the darkness didn't get it."

Unless you miss it, later in verse 14, he goes on to nail it down, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

Assenting Believers

John was up against those who did not believe that Jesus existed before his human birth. It's kind of hard to miss this. There were a lot of Jews who came into the Christian belief, as it were, as what we might call assenting believers. They really had not bought into everything wholeheartedly. They just couldn't deny Jesus' teaching. They couldn't deny His power of healing. They couldn't deny His resurrection, but they hadn't gotten to the place where they could really deal with the fact that in view of all the Scriptures in the Old Testament that

says that God is one, only one (Deuteronomy 6:4). They just couldn't make it from here to there.

Some Doctrines Deny Jesus

Now if you're not familiar with this, a wide variety of doctrines existed and still do, that deny what John is saying here. They deny that Jesus is the creator. They deny that He preexisted His human birth and they deny His divinity in some cases. Some of them say Jesus did not exist in any form before his birth from Mary. Another one says that Jesus is not God, but the son of God. Still another may believe that Jesus was a created being, along with the Angels. One thing they all have in common is a diminishing of the identity and role of Jesus Christ, and consequently a bias against both John and Paul, and that holds true to this day. This soon turns into a diminishing of the importance and inspiration of the New Testament and has even led some Christians to convert to Judaism, but that's another story for another day.

Show Us the Father

First John 1 and verse 1 begins this way, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard and seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life, for the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show you eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us."

Now here is how Jesus describes Himself and only John records this particular conversation. You'll find it in John 14 and verse 6, "Jesus said to Thomas," He had been questioned about how they knew the way He was going and they didn't know and Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man comes to the father, but by me. If you had known me, you would've known my Father also: and from henceforth, you know him, and have seen him. Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it will suffice us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long time with you, and you have not known me Philip? He that has seen me has seen the Father, and how do you say, show us the Father?"

Now it's not hard to imagine how some Jewish believers in Jesus would have trouble with this. The Jewish religion is the first great monotheistic religion in the world. How are they supposed to take it? Well, it's how Jesus described it Himself. You have to either take it or leave it, and it hearkens back to something that C.S. Lewis once said, "You can't just say that Jesus was a great teacher, you can't just say that He was a fine rabbi, you have to realize He was either what He said He was, the Son of God, come from God, and one with the Father, or else he was a madman, or worse. Take it or leave it."

Jesus is the Propitiation For Our Sins

First John 2 and verse 1, "My little children, these things write I to you, that you sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sin: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

This whole thing was foreign to a lot of Jewish thought, not necessarily all, but way down the line. The conversion of the whole world was just beyond the horizon of many. Nobody would ever have imagined a man being the sacrifice for sins, or forgiver of sins, in that way. They came to believe in Jesus because they couldn't deny His resurrection, but they weren't ready to absorb all the implications of it. There was a group, like this, that provoked the Jerusalem conference as described in chapter 15 of the book of Acts. Later in verse 8 we get a little insight into the effect that this conflict was having on the Christian community.

First John 2 and verse 8, "Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in him and in you: because the darkness has passed, and the true light, now shines. He that says that he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loves his brother abides in the light, and there's no occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hates his brother is in darkness, and walks in darkness, and doesn't know where he's going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes."

Now you need to sit there and think that through because he's actually talking about real people here, who have fallen into an attitude of hating their brother, and they're in a completely wrong spirit.

Antichrist Shall Come

It is in this context that we arrive at verse 18 of 1 John 2, "Little children, it is the last time, and as you have heard that Antichrist shall come, even now there are many Antichrists, whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us, but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us."

Now, you read that and you have to realize that there comes a point in time where people can no longer hang together and these guys apparently got angry, came to hate their brothers, got up and left, and he says, hey, they continued with this for a little while, but they were not one of us.

What Have We Learned?

Now, what have we learned from this idea of Antichrist? Four important things. One, it is not a single person, but many. It is not an 'end time' person, it was present and was present in the 60s A.D., and maybe a little before that. Actually it was present for a time inside the community of the saints, and goes out from that community. This was not some person who never was a Christian. It wasn't a high-powered highfalutin Emperor, that persecuted the Christian church. It is a totally different thing from that. Now it's important to realize that John does not identify the idea of Antichrist with people who never believed.

Jews today, who don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah, is not what John is talking about when he spoke of Antichrist.

Now, we still have some big questions.

Definition of Antichrist

Reading on in 1 John 2 verse 21, "I have not written to you because you don't know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. Who is a liar but he that denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is Antichrist, that denies the Father and the Son." You can't deny one without the other. This is very plain from what John is saying.

So now we have a concrete definition of Antichrist as John saw it. But there are still some questions. How does one deny Christ? It seems unlikely that John would apply the term Antichrist to an Orthodox Jew who simply didn't believe. It sounds more like one in active opposition in some way. Now remember these Antichrists were in the community and went out of it.

Verse 23, "Whosoever denies the Son, has not the Father. He that acknowledges the Son has the Father also." You cannot divide these two, one from another. Jesus made that clear enough at the Last Supper, when he said, "If you have seen me, you have seen the father, I and the father are one" (John 14:9, 17:21-22). More than that, it implies that there was an attempt to accept the Father, while rejecting the Son.

He continues in verse 24, "Let that therefore abide in you, which you have heard from the beginning. If that which you have heard from the beginning, shall remain in you, you will continue in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that He has promised us, even eternal life."

This harkens back to chapter 6 of John where Jesus describes Himself as the bread of life, of which a man may eat and live forever.

In verse 26. John said, "These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you." What a sharp contrast from those who would, as some Jews might, persecute them. Persecutors don't try to seduce you, they try to kill you. These people were insiders, and sneaky insiders at that.

Continuing in verse 27, "The anointing which you have received of him abides in you, and you need not that any man teach you, but as the same anointing teaches you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it has taught you, you shall abide in him. And now, little children, abide in him, stay in him, and when he appears we may have confidence and not be ashamed before him at his coming."

We Shall Become Sons of God

John then opens the third chapter of 1 John with a stunning statement. He says, "Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God, therefore the world knows us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the

sons of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we will see him as he is."

I think scriptures like this led C.S. Lewis to conclude that the Father intends to make every one of us into a God, a glorious creature, just like Him.

In verse 4 John goes on to say, "Whoever commits sin transgresses the law, for sin is the transgression of the law. And you know that he was manifested to take away our sins, and in him there is no sin."

I have to say, not just any man born of a woman, can take away our sins. This statement, along with others like it is decisive.

There's yet more on the subject of Antichrist.

The Spirit of Antichrist

First John 4 and verse 1 begins, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God, because many false prophets are gone out into the world." False prophets is kind of a broad statement, it would include false teachers and a variety of people.

Verse two, "Hereby know you the Spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God. And every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God, and this is the spirit of Antichrist, whereof you have heard that it should come, and even now already is in the world. You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world."

Now we learn that there is a spirit of Antichrist, which is not surprising, and it opens up also the idea that this spirit is going to be hard to defeat. And in fact it wasn't defeated, it is still around. It is connected to false prophets and false teachers. The issue here is reduced to the necessary confession that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. Notice that John didn't say you don't have to confess that Jesus Christ was flesh. He had to confess that He came in the flesh, which in itself implies preexistence.

Diminution of Christ

Now I suppose we could conclude that diminution (diminishing) of Christ could arise from the spirit of Antichrist.

An example of this was a man named Arius, who lived in the late third century who believed that Christ was a created being, like the angels. He didn't deny the preexistence of Jesus Christ. He said that He had not been there forever. I don't think John means to imply that a spirit can lie and say these words he mentions here, but I think what he's doing is identifying an existing doctrine that was bedeviling that church at that place and that those people would say that. I think that's the reason why this is put this way.

Now John goes on to say in 1 John 4 and verse 13, "Here's how we know that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he has given us his Spirit, and we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world." Not just the Jews, not just one nation, but everybody. "Whoever will confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwells in Him, and He in God." This is pretty suggestive that somebody was trying to suggest that He was not the Son of God.

Verse 16, "We have known and believed the love that God has to us. God is love, and he that dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him."

Problem of Love

Now here we are back to this problem of love. It may not actually be a problem, but it is a problem for the people with the spirit of Antichrist because that's what is missing. John says in 1 John 4 and verse 16, "He that dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect that we may have boldness in the day of judgment because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, because fear has torment. He that fears is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us. If a man say, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he that loves not his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?"

You know, this is another insight into the conditions on the ground and the people in the church, to whom he wrote. Sometimes attitudes go way South, and it happens like that, and it's an identifier. When you see a person, who on the basis of some doctrinal issue or administrative issue has come to hate his brother, he's in the wrong place at the wrong time and if there's anything having to do with Christology involved in it, you can strongly suspect you have got the spirit of Antichrist, which has come into your midst.

John mentions this spirit of Antichrist one time in his second letter. In 2 John 1 and verse 6, "This is love, that we walk after his commandments. This is the commandment, that, as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it. For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and of Antichrist."

Now, it's hard to figure, how in the world can a person claim to be a Christian and be a part of the Christian community, and actually say I am a Christian and not confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh? Well, John identifies this as the spirit of Antichrist.

Now, you know, it's not just John, who goes in this direction. Peter does so in his second letter. Second Peter 2 and verse 1, he says, "There were false prophets among the people in old times, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their pernicious ways, by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of." Now mind you, he's not talking about people so far

removed, and so remote from the church that nobody would ever make the connection. These people were seen to be a part of the community of faith and because they denied Jesus, they went in the wrong direction and brought disrepute on the church.

Jude, wrote of it also, in verse four, "For there were certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice that this denying of Christ is not merely a matter of denying that He existed. It is not merely the denying of Him as the Messiah. It is the denial of his divinity. The denial of his preexistence, the denial of his relationship with God, a denial that he was uncreated.

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