

## Deceivers And Antichrists

David C. Grabbe

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By the time the apostle John penned his gospel and epistles, he had witnessed the ministry of Jesus Christ, the crucifixion, the resurrected Messiah, and the founding of the church of God. He preached the gospel and made disciples, and he observed the differing responses to God's truth among those hearing it. Moreover, he also saw turmoil in the young church, and the effects of false ministers and false doctrines on the brethren that he loved. And so in his gospel, and even more in his letters, it becomes clear that a major purpose in his writing is to counter the false teachings and teachers which were corrupting the faith.

John's epistles are unique in that they are the only place the term *antichrist* is used. This word has taken on a life of its own, especially within Evangelical Protestantism, and today we typically hear it only in reference to the end-time ruler known as "the beast." However, that really was not John's main focus when he used the term antichrist. If you look at the original Greek, none of the five places he uses it has the definite article "the." In other words, John used the term antichrist as a general description of a spirit which was opposed to God. While we know that the beast will certainly be the epitome of this, John's warning reaches far beyond just the last few years of this age.

There is one description of antichrist which seems to attract the least attention, and yet which may actually have the greatest relevance for us right now. But before we hone in on that reference, we are going to look briefly at the better-known antichrist references, in order to be reminded of what John was warning against.

**I John 2:18** Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour.

The *New King James Version* is one of the few translations that says “the antichrist,” and yet it also has a footnote that says that the definite article is not in the original. John is saying that just as they had been warned about something that was against Christ, even at that time, there were many antichrists. There were many who were opposed in some way to Christ—the Messiah, or the Anointed One.

It is essential to remember that even though John is referring to people, the real problem was a spirit. There was an unholy spirit which was influencing people toward beliefs and thus practices that were completely against the Savior. The people who were led astray by this spirit had been fellowshiping with the brethren, but there had been a separation, as verse 19 shows. The unholy spirit was at odds with the Spirit of God, and it led these antichrists to “go out.” But even with that separation, John still continued to warn because the antichrist spirit could still deceive those who remained.

The fact that the antichrists went out is only one of the characteristics John gives, so we will continue a few verses down:

**I John 2:22-23** Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

The issue here is either the denial, or acceptance, of Jesus as the Messiah. There is much that could be said about what it means to deny the Son, but for now, notice that, of the three so-called “Abrahamic faiths,” this one criterion automatically excludes Judaism and Islam. Judaism does not accept Jesus as the Christ, while Islam regards Him only as a prophet, and less than its primary “prophet,” at that.

Nominal Christianity holds belief in Jesus as the Christ as its cornerstone, and so—on the surface—it appears to pass this particular test. And yet in the Olivet Prophecy, the very first sign that Jesus gave is that many would come in His name, and proclaim that He is the Christ, and deceive many. So while it is true that denying Jesus as the Messiah is a clear marker of antichrist, coming in His name is still not an absolute guarantee of true belief.

To further clarify this, John gets even more specific in chapter 4:

**I John 4:1-3** 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. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

Verse 1 basically equates the false prophets with the deceiving spirits, and this shows that the principal factor is not the man who is speaking, but the spirit which is motivating him. John says that we have to test the spirit behind the man. We have to judge whether what is said lines up with scripture, and we also have to evaluate the intent behind the message—both why the message is given, as well as what the message is motivating its audience toward.

Then in verses 2-3, John gives another concrete criterion, and that is whether the spirit, speaking through the man, will confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. John states this because a large part of what he had to counter was Gnosticism, which had attached itself to the true Way. In particular, there was a gnostic belief called *Docetism*, which held that Jesus was a physical man, but that there was a separate spiritual entity—the Christ—which entered into Jesus when He was baptized, but left again before He was crucified.

The Gnostics considered material things, like flesh, as defiled and sinful, while the spirit was pure. They used this Greek philosophy to interpret the gospel, rather than measuring their beliefs against the standard of the gospel. It did not make sense to them that God would come in the flesh, or that God could die, or that He would die. The idea that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” was nonsense to them. The Gnostics could agree with a great deal of the truth, and yet every flavor of Gnosticism somehow corrupted the true nature of Jesus Christ. And so John makes it clear that anyone who does not believe in the incarnation of God into human flesh is anti-Christ—he is against the whole purpose for the Messiah’s ministry and death.

Now, with this background, we can look at the final description of antichrist:

**II John 6-7** This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it. For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.

At first glance, this verse looks almost identical to what we just saw in I John 4:2. That verse warns against those who do not confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. It looks like John just copied and pasted the same statement into this 2<sup>nd</sup> letter. And yet there is a difference in the verb tense which is quite significant. I John 4:2 seems to be in the past tense, but it is actually written in the *perfect tense*. The perfect tense indicates an action that took place in the past, but the effects of it are continuing in the present. In other words, the Messiah appeared in human flesh, and the effects of that incarnation were still reverberating when John wrote, and the effects are continuing even now.

But II John 7 is not written in the past or the perfect tense, but rather in the *present tense*. John says that those who do not confess that Jesus Christ *is coming* in the flesh—or *is appearing* in flesh; or *is entering* flesh—in the *present*—are deceivers and antichrists.

The various translators and commentators do not know what to make of this, if they even take note of it at all. The footnotes in the *New English Translation* say, “It is not clear why the author changed from a perfect participle in I John 4:2 to a present participle here. The perfect participle suggests a reference to the incarnation (past). The present participle could be a reference to the (future) second advent, but based on the similarity to I John 4:2 it is probably best to take it as referring to the incarnation.” The notes in the *Companion Bible* say that it is a reference to Christ’s second coming. But we know that cannot be correct, because the Bible says He is returning with the brightness of His glory, and not in flesh.

This puzzle becomes clear when we remember that there *is* flesh in which Jesus Christ is appearing, or entering, right now: it is *yours* and *mine* . We are going to follow this though, but first take note of the fact that verse 7 follows a verse about walking in the commandments. There is a concrete link between the indwelling of Jesus Christ and the keeping of the commandments, as we will continue to see.

This same apostle records Christ's explanation of His indwelling, which He gave during His final Passover. In John 14:15-21, Jesus promised that a Helper would be sent to dwell in them, and He was referring to His being in His disciples by means of His Spirit. In those same verses, the indwelling of the Father and the Son are tied to keeping God's commandments, and keeping His words. Out of His own mouth, His indwelling is dependent on keeping His commandments.

In John 15:4, Jesus explains that His presence in us is the source of spiritual fruit. In John 16:3-4, it is implied that persecution arises because the persecutors do not know the Father or the Son who are dwelling in us. In John 16:13, it says His indwelling will lead us into all truth. In John 17:23, in His prayer there, He says that the presence of the Father in Him, and His presence in His disciples—and this includes us—leads to the disciples being made perfect in one. This is the *mystery*, as Paul says, which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but which now has been revealed to the saints. Paul says in Colossians 1:27, “To [the saints] God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*”

The presence of Jesus Christ in us gives us the hope of His glory, and results in our being made perfect in the resurrection. It also causes something in the present: as John says in I John 3:3, “everyone who has this hope in Him *purifies himself*, just as He is pure.” The hope that comes from the indwelling results in a specific action.

It has been said that “the goal determines the preparations.” If one's hope or goal is to become a neurosurgeon, then one is going to discipline oneself, and turn one's whole life toward that end through study, and other focused preparations. If one's goal is to become a world-class athlete, one will

discipline oneself, and give up those things which would distract from the all-consuming preparation which that hope demands.

But if one's hope is in becoming another glorified son of God, then one's preparation revolves around *purifying* oneself. It is another way of saying overcoming—overcoming that which defiles, or that which makes us impure. It is the same basic idea as “perfecting holiness in the fear of God,” as Paul says.

This is why John keeps on linking the indwelling of Jesus Christ with the keeping of the commandments—because they give us the basic standard against which to measure ourselves. Along the same lines, Christ in us is also linked with love, because His presence in us makes it possible to treat people just like He does. If our hope is to see the indescribable end-result of having the very Creator living within us, then we will be divinely motivated to purify ourselves through removing those elements of our lives that are not in alignment with that end.

As we read on, it is clear that what John has in mind is more than just Christ's first coming:

**II John 8-9** Look to yourselves, that you do not lose those things we worked for, but that you may receive a full reward. Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ [the doctrine of His indwelling by His Spirit] does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.

Verse 9 fits right in with the indwelling of the Son, because there is work involved in purifying oneself, and it is certainly possible to fall away and become disqualified from a full reward. Whoever does not abide in this doctrine of the indwelling of Christ does not have God, but whoever does abide in this doctrine has both the Father and the Son. As Jesus says in John 14:23, those who love Him will keep His word, and the Father and the Son will make Their home with him. The whole context here is a present activity rather than the historical fact of the incarnation.

And so, thinking back to what we read in **I John**, even though nominal Christians profess that Jesus is the Christ, in works they deny Him, as Paul says. They cannot be bothered to do things like keep the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment, because they do not yet have the hope of glory. Their hope is simply in going to heaven, and their trust is in false doctrines like “once saved, always saved.” This is because they are not being led by the same Spirit which is motivating us to purify ourselves in preparation for becoming God-beings.

Along the same lines, the Father and Son are One, and where They dwell there is going to be a similar inclination toward unity. But where there is continual animosity toward others, and recurring disharmony in relationships, it shows that the spirit involved is not the holy one, but one that is contrary to the indwelling of the Prince of Peace—it is a *spirit* that is antichrist.

In looking at John’s warnings concerning the antichrist spirit, we can see that there are several indicators which will help us in discerning what is of Christ and what is not. John’s letter to the elect lady contains just a few words, and yet when we grasp his meaning, this final description of antichrist cuts to the quick.

The people of this world do not understand our divine destiny, and so they do not understand the mystery of Christ in us, and our hope for glory. Where this belief—this faith; this hope—is alive and growing, there will also be growth toward that pure standard, because *the Creator is creating*. But if someone comes to us without this doctrine and practice, John says, he is a deceiver and an antichrist.