

Endtime Signs Of Opposition To God - Part 1

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Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Forum:

Today I had a pleasant surprise. While looking for a book at the SDA HERITAGE LIBRARY here at Andrews University, I met the Curator, Jim Ford, who told me that he has placed in the James White Library computer system, the complete series of essays I posted during the past 12 months. By punching the phrase "Endtime Issues" anyone can access immediately the complete text of the Bible studies you have been receiving.

During the past few weeks I have received similar reports from many members of our forum. Some of you have told me that you are sharing these Bible studies with church members, students, and friends. Several of you asked me permission to post these essays in your own web pages or newsletters. Bible teachers in different parts of the world have informed me that they regularly downloading these Bible studies and reformatting them in order to make them available to their students. As a result of these endeavors about 100 new subscribers join our ENDTIME ISSUES FORUM every week.

Words fail to express my gratitude to all of you who have taken the initiative to share my Bible studies and experiences with your friends, students, and Sabbath School members. The awareness that these studies reach beyond the 6000 subscribers to our ENDTIME ISSUES, challenges me to put forth my best efforts in preparing Bible studies that are relevant to the issues we face today.

Some of you have complained that I am sending you too much reading to do by posting a newsletter every week. This reminds me of those students who complain about the lengthy reading assignments. My original intent was to post a Bible study every two or three weeks. This plan was altered when I offered to post comments on the Sabbath School lessons we are studying this quarter, since they deal with THE NATURE OF MAN-the very subject I have examined at considerable length in my book IMMORTALITY OR RESURRECTION? A BIBLICAL STUDY OF HUMAN NATURE AND DESTINY. Many of you have told me that you have come to rely upon my comments for preparing and/or teaching the weekly Sabbath School Lesson. To meet your expectations, I have made extra efforts to post this newsletter weekly. Rest assured that at the end of this quarter, June 25, 1999, I plan to resume posting a Bible study on endtime issues only every two or three weeks. This will relieve me of some of the pressure I am facing now.

A BRIEF EXPERIENCE

Many of you have been greatly encouraged by the report I posted in the previous installments about the recent acceptance of the Sabbath by some Sundaykeeping pastors. May I briefly share with you another brief experience that occurred this past week. Last Monday, May 10, Michael Lawlor, a former Southern Baptist pastor, called me to tell me how much he appreciated my latest book THE SABBATH UNDER CROSSFIRE and the tapes he had ordered. He shared with me a little of his theological and religious background. He graduated at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia, and served as a pastor in a Southern Baptist Church and more recently in an evangelical church known as "Calvary Chapel."

The desire to return to the purity and simplicity of New Testament Christianity, led Pastor Lawlor and his wife to reexamine the principle and practice of seventh-day Sabbathkeeping. When they became convinced of the validity and value of the Sabbath,

they gave notice to their congregation that they were leaving to start their own Sabbathkeeping fellowship, called "The Remnant Home Fellowship."

In an email message from which I am authorized to quote, Pastor Lawlor says: "The Remnant Home Fellowship was formed in January. We have sometimes up to 18 people in my living room. We are of all backgrounds (Baptist, AOG, SDA, Messianic Jew, etc.), but we all desire to worship on the Sabbath. I have never experienced the true rest in my Christian life that I have since becoming Sabbath observant. I look forward to Sabbath with a fervor that I never looked forward to Sunday with. Sunday was always work and a very tiring day. Sabbath is so much different.

I want to thank you for writing such scholarly, yet understandable materials. As an academic and apologist, I enjoy being able to learn the truths regarding the Sabbath that my heart is already experiencing. Thank you, and may the Lord richly bless your soul! Michael Lawlor, 308 Rockwood Drive, Wichita Falls, TX 76301."

If any members of the forum wishes to email a note of encouragement to Pastor Lawlor, his email address is: <REMNANTONE@aol.com> I am sure that he will appreciate hearing from you. It warms my heart to learn every week how the Holy Spirit is bringing conviction about the Sabbath truth in the heart of sincere people everywhere. In the coming weeks I will share similar experiences from overseas.

COMMENTS ON THE SABBATH SCHOOL LESSON: "The Restoration Of Human Nature" - May 8-17

This week lesson focuses on God's plan for the restoration of human nature. The lesson focuses on the Plan of Salvation, especially the promise and fulfillment of Christ's atoning sacrifice. There is no doubt that the restoration of our human nature is made possible through Christ's atoning sacrifice. Yet we must not overlook the role of the Holy Spirit, both in the physical creation and moral recreation of our human nature.

This week lesson largely ignores the role of the Holy Spirit in the restoration of human nature. This may be due to space limitation. Thus, I have decided to share with you three pages from my book IMMORTALITY OR RESURRECTION? where I examine the role of the Holy Spirit in the physical and spiritual aspects of our life. Feel free to contact me if you wish to receive the whole chapter (116K) or even the whole book. We have emailed thousands of copies free of charge to readers around the world.

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ACTIVITY IN HUMANITY

Both the physical and psychical aspects of life need the spirit for their existence, and thus the term reasonably can be applied to both the general principle of physical life and the regenerating principle of moral life. The new nature is certainly a new life principle, but it is an essentially moral-life principle, manifesting itself in a holy disposition or character. It is difficult to establish the exact relationship between the spirit as life principle and the spirit as the regenerating principle of moral life.

For example, some passages in Romans 8 make it difficult to decide whether the term "Spirit" should be written with a capital "S" to designate the Holy Spirit, or with a small "s" to refer to the human spirit redeemed and renewed. Perhaps Paul intended to allow us to read his words either way. Verses 5 and 9 do not lose anything of their profound meaning if this interchange is allowed. "Those who live according to the spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (Rom 8:5). "You are not in the flesh, you are in the spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you" (Rom 8:9).

The connection between the two appears to be found in the fact that the spirit which every person possesses as the animating principle of life enables believers to be receptive and responsive to the working of the Holy Spirit in their life. In other words, it is the spirit as the seat of psychical and rational life (inner self), with which God has endowed every person, that makes it possible for the Spirit of God to dwell in human

beings. W. D. Stacey makes this point, saying: "All men have pneuma [the spirit] from birth, but the Christian pneuma [spirit], in fellowship with the Spirit of God, takes on a new character and a new dignity (Rom 8:10)."28

Human Spirit Capable of Receiving God's Spirit. The human spirit has no power to regenerate itself. It is not a divine spark that can be fanned into a flame. Rather, it is a capacity God has given to every person to experience the regenerative power of His Spirit. When a person has been born again by the Spirit of God, his "natural" (psychikos) nature becomes "spiritual" (pneumatikos) (1 Cor 2:14-15).

The human spirit that is obedient to God experiences the guiding and transforming power of God's Spirit. Fellowship with God is achieved by the human spirit through God's Spirit. Claude Tresmontant describes this function of the spirit-pneuma: "Man's spirit, his pneuma, is that within him which permits an encounter with the Pneuma [Spirit] of God. It is the part of a man that can enter into dialogue with God's Spirit, not as a stranger but as a child: 'The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God' (Rom 8:16)."29

The human spirit enables a person to serve God: "For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit-pneuma in the gospel of his Son . . ." (Rom 1:9). The phrase "serve with my spirit" suggests that the spirit is a mental and volitional capacity that enables a person to serve God. We might say that the human spirit is intended by God to be united with the Holy Spirit. It is because man is spirit-pneuma, meaning a living being animated by the breath of God's Spirit (ruach-pneuma), that he is capable of receiving the Holy Spirit-pneuma and thus of coming into a close living relationship with God.

Henry Barclay Swete explains the human orientation toward the Holy Spirit: "The Holy Spirit does not create the 'spirit' in man; it is potentially present in every man, even if rudimentary and undeveloped. Every human being has affinities with the spiritual and eternal. In each individual of the race the spirit of the man which is in him (1 Cor 2:11) answers to the Spirit of God, in so far as the finite can correspond with the infinite; . . . But though the Spirit of God finds in man a spiritual nature on which it can work, the human spirit is in a so imperfect and depraved a condition that a complete renovation, even re-creation, is necessary (2 Cor 5:17)."30

To allow the Spirit of God to renew and transform our life is not to renounce our own personality but to bring it into submission. In line with the Old Testament, the New Testament sees human nature wholistically, where body, soul, and spirit are integral parts of the same being. The spirit is a force, inseparable from breath and life (Luke 8:55; 23:46) that renews the mind (Eph 4:23) and enables a person to become a new creature, "created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:24).

The Spirit as Spiritual Rebirth. The Spirit of God is the active agent of creation and re-creation. We have seen that in the Old Testament the creation of man is ascribed to the Spirit of God. Man exists as a living soul because of God's breath (Gen 2:7). Re-creation in the moral order is also the work of the Spirit. We are reminded of Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones that came to life through God's Spirit. The dry bones, which represent "the whole house of Israel" (Ez 37:11) in her apostate condition were brought back to life, that is, to spiritual rebirth by God's Spirit: "I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live" (Ez 37:14).

In the New Testament, the moral transformation accomplished by the Holy Spirit is described more fully than in the Old Testament, especially in the writings of John and Paul. The two apostles describe this process in different and yet complementary ways. John conceives of the inner moral transformation as rebirth and Paul as new creation. The two metaphors, as we shall see, are complementary, each designed to help us understand the new life brought about by the Holy Spirit.

In John's Gospel, Jesus compares the moral transformation accomplished by the Holy Spirit to a rebirth. Speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus says: "Truly, truly, I say to you,

unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Being born of the Spirit is contrasted with born of the flesh: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). The physical birth is according to the flesh (kata sarka), placing a person on an horizontal level of natural existence. The spiritual birth is "from above" (John 3:3) by the Spirit, placing a person on a vertical level of living by the enabling power of the Spirit.

On the night of His resurrection, Jesus "breathed on them [the disciples], and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:22). This action, which marked the re-creation of the disciples, is parallel to the first creation of man, when God breathed the breath of life. Creation and recreation, birth and rebirth, are acts of the Spirit, because, as Jesus explained, "It is the Spirit that gives life" (John 6:63). This is true of both the physical and spiritual life.

The Spirit is the immediate source of life that is mediated through Christ. "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:37-39). Christ is the meriting source of the Spirit, because through His atoning sacrifice He can give His life-giving Spirit to the believer. This is why Paul speaks of "the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:2).

Summing up, we can say that although John does not mention the spirit of man as such, he envisions it as fulfilled and realized by the Spirit through whom Christ gives new life, a spiritual rebirth, to the believer. In a sense, the ultimate meaning of God's breath as the source of physical life is revealed and fulfilled in the new life made possible by "the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:2). Nowhere does John identify the life-giving Spirit with an immaterial, immortal soul capable of detaching itself from the body. The function of the spirit is simply to bring about a spiritual rebirth, that is, a moral transformation in the whole person of the believer. There is no dualism in John between a material, mortal body, and a spiritual, immortal soul, because the Spirit brings new life to the whole person.

The Spirit as New Creation. Paul describes the moral transformation accomplished by the Spirit, not as a rebirth, but as a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17; cf. 1 Cor 6:11; Gal 3:27; 6:15; Eph 4:24). The two metaphors essentially convey the same idea. Paul attributes vital importance to the role of the Spirit in the new life of the believer. This is indicated by the fact that in his letters he refers to the spirit 146 times, compared with only 13 references to the soul. Wheeler Robinson rightly affirms that pneuma-spirit is "the most important word in Paul's psychological vocabulary, perhaps in his vocabulary as a whole."³¹ The reason is that Paul is concerned to show that salvation is exclusively a divine gift of grace mediated by "the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:2), and not a natural possession of an immortal soul.

Salvation is not the removal of the spirit or of the soul from the body or from the world in which the body lives, but rather the renewal of the body through the enabling power of the Spirit. Therefore, Paul's description of the Christian life is largely in terms of the empowering of the Spirit for the believer to live according to God's revealed will. The apostle explains that Christ came "in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:4).

To walk according to the Spirit means to set the mind "on the things of the Spirit" (Rom 8:5), that is, to live in conformity with the principles of life that God has revealed, rather than according to the desires of the flesh. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal 5:16). To walk according to the flesh (kata sarka) means to perform "the works of the flesh" such as "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like" (Gal 5:19-20). On the contrary, to walk according to the spirit (kata pneuma) means to produce "the fruit of the Spirit" such as

"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22-23).

The effects of the new creation accomplished in the believer's life by the Holy Spirit are manifested especially in a sonship relationship; in an unshakable faith and hope; in a burning love for the brethren; and in a bold witness for Christ. Through the Spirit, we become members of God's family. "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir" (Gal 4:6).

The Spirit instills in the believer faith and hope in Christ. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Rom 15:13; cf. Gal 3:14; 5:5). The new life of the Spirit is manifested especially in the spirit of brotherly love that flows from Christ into the life of the believer. "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom 5:5; cf. 15:30; Col 1:8; 2 Cor 6:6). The Spirit imparts strength to suffer for Christ's sake. "If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" (1 Pet 4:14).

Finally, the Spirit is the miraculous life-giving force of the third Person of the Godhead which will bring about the resurrection of the body. "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies through the Spirit which dwells in you" (Rom 8:11; cf. 1 Cor 6:14; 2 Cor 3:6; Gal 6:8). As the Spirit was at work in the first creation (Gen 2:7), so He will be at work in the final resurrection. In chapter 4 we see that the Bible nowhere suggests the resurrected body will be reattached to a disembodied soul. Instead, the Bible teaches that this earthly body will be raised into a "spiritual-pneumatikos body" (1 Cor 15:44), that is, a person wholly dominated by the life-force of the divine spirit.

THE ENDTIME SIGNS OF OPPOSITION TO GOD

In ENDTIME ISSUES no. 15 we began examining the endtime signs given by Christ in His prophetic discourse found in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. We noted how the sign of worldwide evangelization is being fulfilled today in an unprecedented way. But while the Spirit of the Lord is leading many to accept the Good News of salvation, the Evil One is attempting to undermine the work of the Holy Spirit by leading many to rebel against God.

Our Bible study this week focuses on two of the signs of opposition to God which are mentioned specifically by Christ in His Olivet Discourse, namely, (1) Messianic Pretenders and (2) the Antichrist. Next week we will examine five other endtime signs given by Christ: (1) The Apostasy, (2) The Evildoer (3) Increased Wickedness, (4) The Age of Appetite, (5) The Age of Sex.

PART ONE: MESSIANIC PRETENDERS

The first sign of the End given by Christ in His Olivet Discourse is the appearance of "false Christs": "Take heed that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray" (Matt 24:4-5; cf. Mark 13:5-6).

The same warning is repeated again later in the same discourse: "Then if any one says to you, 'Lo, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (Matt 24:23-24; cf. Mark 13:21-22). The phrase "false Christs" can be translated as "false messiahs" since the name "Christ" is the Greek rendering ("Christos") of the Hebrew "Mashiah," which means "Messiah, Anointed."

1. First-Century Messiahs

Christ's discourse begins with this warning about the appearance of "false Christs and false prophets" for obvious reasons. At that time there was an intense messianic expectation and Christians as well as Jews were susceptible of being deceived by the self-styled messiahs who frequently appeared, especially until the Barkochba revolt (A.D. 132-135).

The warning of Christ, however, goes beyond the contemporary deception of messianic pretenders, since He speaks of them not only in the context of the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt 24:15-22) but also in connection with the Second Advent (Matt 24:27). In Matthew the description of "the coming of the Son of man" as a shining lightning (24:27) is preceded immediately by the warning about "false Christs and false prophets" (24:24-26). This suggests that the appearance of pseudo-messiahs and pseudo-prophets, who pretend to offer salvation, will occur up to the Return of Christ. In fact, the Scripture predicts an increased manifestation of anti-Christ forces before the End (2 Thess 2:3; Rev 13).

2. Contemporary Messiahs

Prophetic and messianic pretenders have frequently arisen during the Christian era. From Montanism in the second century to Mormonism in the nineteenth century, religious movements have arisen, founded by self-styled prophets who claimed to possess new revelations and new plans of salvation. In our time, however, this specific endtime sign is being witnessed in an unprecedented way. New Eastern and Western cults are proliferating in the Christian world.

New "Messiahs." The "messiahs" and "prophets" of these new religious movements pretend to offer new ways of salvation to their followers. For example, Young Oon Kim, a leading theologian of the well known Unification Church (Moonies), in her book UNIFICATION THEOLOGY, questions the "total sufficiency of Jesus' atoning death on the cross." "Although it is not an explicitly stated doctrine," write Christianity Today, "many Moonies believe the new messiah is Sun Myung Moon."¹

It is noteworthy that several of these contemporary self-appointed prophets come from an evangelical background. Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church (Moonies), was raised in a missionary Presbyterian home. Jim Jones, founder of the People's Temple, was a pastor of an interdenominational charismatic church and of a Disciples of Christ church. Moses David, founder of the Children of God, was associated with the Christian and Missionary Alliance. Paul Wiewille, founder of The Way, was a Reformed pastor.²

The Christian background of the "prophetic" leaders accounts for some of the Biblical elements present in their teachings which attract many persons. Essentially their teachings and practices in most cases represent an open denial of the Christian faith. Jim Jones, for example, forced his followers to seek for salvation in a vat of poisoned punch.

Reasons for Their Success. A factor contributing to the acceptance of certain contemporary pseudo-prophets is their capacity to lead their followers into an artificially stimulated heightened sense of spirituality, uniformity, and identity. For example, the Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, who in 1981 moved his headquarters to a 64,229 acre spread in Oregon, claims to have the power to energize his 250,000 followers. One of his followers, a former Catholic charismatic, interviewed by CHRISTIANITY TODAY, said: "Jesus was my first master, but Bhagwan is a living master. My master is inside myself. Bhagwan is an outer expression of it." Another said: "I had a longing inside that wasn't being fulfilled. Bhagwan is an extension of Christ."³

The Rajneesh Foundation placed advertisements in Newsweek and Time displaying a picture of the guru with this caption: "Jesus is available to all; Jesus is for those who are ready to transform themselves;; Jesus is an art of inner transformation, of rebirth."⁴ This kind of falsification and transformation of Christ from an objective, historical Savior into a subjective experience realized through the guidance of a messianic leader

has an appeal, especially for those contemporary Christians who are more interested in experiencing (charismatic) than in understanding spiritual realities.

This overemphasis on subjective experience may be partly a reaction to the uncertainties created by rationalism and liberalism which have infiltrated particularly certain Protestant churches during this past century. Lacking theological certainty, some seek the assurance of salvation through a kind of personal experience, which, regrettably, in some cases is artificially stimulated by pseudo-messiahs.

3. The Dangers of the New "Messiahs"

The menace posed today by new "messianic" leaders is widely acknowledged. CHRISTIANITY TODAY calls it "a reality that has staggered our imaginations."⁵ To counteract this danger, numerous books have been written such as THE CULT EXPLOSION by Dave Hunt, THE LURE OF THE CULTS by Ronald Enroth, CULT REFERENCE BIBLE by Walter Martin, and BATTLE FOR THE MIND by William Sargent. An organization known as Spiritual Counterfeits Project has been established in Berkeley, California to provide information about cults.⁶

A Widespread Problem. The success of messianic pretenders is not limited to the U.S.A. In an article entitled "Europe's Rising Cults," Newsweek reports that in Britain alone, the followers of Mahrishi Mahesh Yogi, known as the Age of Enlightenment, numbered 94,000, in 1979 and the Scientologists, founded by L. Ron Hubbard, numbered 250,000 at the same time.⁷

In other parts of the world the cult of false messiahs assumes different names and forms but it is equally pervasive. In Brazil, for example, according to the news magazine VEJA OF SAO PAULO "the largest participatory religion in Brazil has become the cult of Umbanda, in which 30 million people are involved."⁸ This cult is an Animist-Christian hybrid which worships a messianic deity called Iemanja. The magazine says that this cult is popular not only among the poor "but has now become vogueish in every social stratum."⁹

A similar phenomenon is present in Venezuela. David Browne writes in EL DIARIO DE CARACAS: "Every oil dollar brings another million to the cult of Maria Lionza," an Indian maid who supposedly fled to the jungle during the Spanish conquest. Browne remarks that the cult reveals a fascinating paradox: "While the country advances . . . millions of Venezuelans find spiritual guidance in the myths and legends of the past."¹⁰ The same phenomenon of the worship of some reputed Savior is present in many other countries.

Impersonal "Messiahs." Christ's prediction about the appearance of "false Christs and false prophets" is fulfilled in our time also in the appearance of impersonal messiahs such as science, technology, politico-economic systems or parties, and mass education. These are viewed by many as capable of ensuring to mankind a better tomorrow.

Impersonal messiahs have caused massive losses to Christianity in the Western and Communist worlds during this CENTURY. For example, according to the WORLD CHRISTIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA, in the Soviet Union Christians have fallen from 83 percent of the population in 1900 to 36 percent today.¹¹ Many of these defectors have accepted Communism as their messianic hope for a better tomorrow. For many, Marx or Lenin plays a messianic role.

In North America and Western Europe almost three million Christians every year give up their Christian faith, accepting instead secularistic, humanistic ideologies which see the only hope for a better tomorrow in the development of material and human resources. Instead of faith in Christ, technology, science, and human progress dominate their thinking. These are some of the impersonal messianic pretenders of our time.

Conclusion. The unprecedented appearance today of both personal and impersonal false messiahs who attract millions of persons worldwide represents a unique fulfillment of Christ's warning about the "false Christs and false prophets" who would arise before His Return. To understand more fully the significance of this important Advent sign, we shall now consider the complementary information provided by other authors of the New Testament.

PART TWO: THE ANTICHRIST

Christ's warning about the appearance of "false Christs" has found its fulfillment not only in past and present arising of messianic pretenders but also in the person of teachers of false doctrines.

1. John and the Antichrist

In two of his three letters, John refers four times specifically to "the antichrist" (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). He is viewed by John as the fulfillment of Christ's prediction about "false Christs," as indicated by his statement, "you have heard that antichrist is coming" (1 John 2:18 cf. 4:3). The phrase "you [or "we"] have heard" is used by John ten times in his two epistles to refer to a teaching of Christ which had been transmitted to the believers.¹²

It is noteworthy that by the time of John's writing (A.D. 90-100), Christians had coined a specific term, "the antichrist," to designate the expected appearance of "false Christs and false prophets." Presumably such a term was yet unknown few decades earlier, since Paul uses other designations: "the man of lawlessness," "the son of perdition" (2 Thess 2:3). The latter, however, as we shall see, differs from John's antichrist in several ways. The variety of names and characterizations of the expected "false Christs and false prophets" indicates how deeply felt this endtime sign was at that time.

Definition of "Antichrist." Linguistically, the term "antichrist" can denote a "substitute" or an "opponent" of Christ since the Greek preposition "anti" can mean either "in the place of" or "against." In John the term is used primarily in the latter sense. The "antichrist" is not a messianic pretender but one who opposes Christ by denying His incarnation and messiahship.

"Who is the liar," writes John, "but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son" (1 John 2:22). "Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist" (1 John 4:2-3).

The genuine incarnation of Christ was denied in John's time by the Gnostics. In their view matter was altogether evil, and consequently they taught that Christ could never have assumed human flesh. His body was not genuinely human but only had a human appearance.

In John's view this teaching was a deadly heresy because it undermined the validity of Christ's atonement. Thus he identifies the propagators of this heresy with "the antichrist": "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist" (2 John 7).

In this passage "the antichrist" is singular and specific (preceded by the article-*ho antichristos*), but it is used to describe not one specific false teacher, but the "many deceivers" who were misleading the believers. In fact, in 1 John 2:18 the plural form is used ("Now many antichrists have come") to describe these false teachers. This indicates that John sees the antichrist not necessarily as an individual person but as a principle of hostility and opposition to God, manifested in the antichristian teachings and

teachers of his time. This principle is designated by John as "the spirit of antichrist" (1 John 4:3).

2. The End-Time Antichrists

The appearance of false teachers who denied the full deity of Christ is also perceived by John eschatologically, that is, as a sign of the imminent End: "Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18).¹³ What believers had heard about the coming of "false Christs and false prophets" was then being fulfilled before them in the form of false teachers. This fulfillment gave John reasons to believe he was living in the "last hour," on the eve of the Lord's Return.

Some may wish to condemn John as a deceiver, since time has proved that it was not the "last hour" for the church. Nineteen centuries have gone by since then. Such a condemnation would fail to recognize the actuality of the endtime signs in every generation. These signs are relevant to believers of every generation.

The signs have nourished the hope of the coming of the Lord by pointing believers to the imminent consummation of redemption and by calling them to constant readiness. The sign of the "antichrist" was unquestionably being fulfilled in John's time with the appearance of false teachers who denied the full deity of Christ. But the "spirit of antichrist" which was "in the world already" (1 John 4:3) in John's time, has had its tentacles in every generation of the church and is especially pervasive today.

3. Contemporary Antichrists

During this century the "spirit of antichrist" has been manifested in different ways. One manifestation can be seen in the rationalistic, liberal movements which have challenged not only the reality of the incarnation, but also other basic historical Christian beliefs such as the infallible authority of the Bible, a fiat creation, the atonement and resurrection of Christ, the occurrence of miracles, the Second Advent, original sin, etc. These and other cardinal Biblical beliefs have been "demythologized" by European and American liberal theologians, in order to reconcile them with a humanistic view of history which excludes supernatural, miraculous activity.

Denial of Christ's Resurrection. Rudolf Bultmann, for example, excludes the credibility of the accounts of Christ's resurrection because, as he plainly states, "a historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable."¹⁴ Harvard theologian Gordon D. Kaufman explains the belief of the earliest Christians in the bodily resurrection of Christ as caused by hallucinatory visions of the risen Christ. Like other liberal theologians, he sees the meaning of the resurrection not in the fate of Jesus' body but in the ongoing divine activity on behalf of believers.¹⁵

This subtle attempt to divorce faith from its historical foundation empties faith of the basis of its assurance. As Paul put it: "If Christ has not been raised . . . your faith is in vain" (1 Cor 15:14). To dematerialize the belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ, reducing it to a symbol of divine activity, means to rob believers of a concrete assurance of their final resurrection and of the renewal of creation (1 Cor 15:12-24).

Denial of the Incarnation. The spirit of the antichrist is also present today, as in John's day, in the denial by some Christian leaders of the incarnation of Christ. Seven English academics produced a symposium, published under the title THE MYTH OF GOD INCARNATE. As indicated by the title, the incarnation of Christ is treated as a myth, allegedly created by Samaritan converts in the fifties of the first century.

Don Cupitt, one of the contributors, defines Christ as "a purely human Jesus, a first-century man of God in the Jewish tradition."¹⁶ When John R. W. Stott asked one of the contributors, "Tell me, do you ever worship Jesus?" "No," came his immediate response, "I don't!"¹⁷ One wonders, Can people who refuse to worship Christ as their

Lord and Savior be rightfully called Christians? In our view John's designation of such persons as "antichrists" is quite appropriate.

Denial of the Second Advent. Another example of the spirit of the antichrist can be seen in those existential theologies which interpret the Second Advent, not as a cosmic event that will occur within history, but as a mythical expression of a timeless truth. To reduce the Second Advent from a future realization of our present expectations to a present experience of the future means to empty present life of its meaning. It deprives believers of the Biblical perspective on the End and of motivation to live responsibly in anticipation of the Parousia.

Denial of the Existence of God. The spirit of antichrist is also visible in the teaching of those radical theologians who some year ago made national news by proclaiming the death of God. Thomas J. Altizer, for example, in his book *RADICAL THEOLOGY AND THE DEATH OF GOD*, contends that "we must realize that God has died in our cosmos, in our history, in our Existenz."¹⁸ He goes on to explain that not only the God of "religion" has died, but also "the God of the historic Christian Church, and beyond the Church of Christendom at large." These radical theologians urge the abandonment of the traditional belief in God and the adoption of a wholly secularized world view.

Secular Humanism. Secular consciousness characterizes today's pervasive secular humanism which embodies in a unique way the spirit of the antichrist. Traditionally, humanism has the merit of having emphasized Christian values such as human dignity, equality, and tolerance. Today, however, secular humanism undergirds the denial of God and promotes evolution and self-indulgence.

Ernest Morgan writes in *THE HUMANIST*, "I have little use for evangelical Christianity. I regard Jesus as a wise and dedicated teacher: very human and strongly influenced by the thinkers of his day."¹⁹ The false teachers of John's time denied the humanity of Christ. The humanists of our time deny His divinity. Both share equally in the spirit of the antichrist, by denying the full personhood of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Morgan recognizes that contemporary men and women need "the ideals and values of traditional Christianity," but argues that "they do not need the archaic theology that encrusts these values." He goes on to say that "to separate the wheat from the chaff . . . is a major challenge of our time."²⁰

One wonders, How is it possible to retain or recover Christian ideals and values while destroying their theological foundations? Does not the Christian value of human dignity and equality derive from the belief in the divine creation, redemption, and final restoration of human beings? Is it really possible to value human beings highly without first recognizing what God has done, is doing, and will do for them? Secular humanism, by denying the existence and saving activities of God, undermines the very foundation of those human values it seeks to promote.

4. The Impact of the Antichrist Spirit

It is impossible to estimate and comprehend the impact of secular, humanistic ideologies upon religious and public education, the Christian faith, governmental policies, the media, and the moral values of our society. The following few examples will serve to illustrate this point.

Theological Education. In an issue of *THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION*, the semiannual publication of the Association of Theological Schools, Edward Farley of Vanderbilt University Divinity School acknowledges with astonishing frankness that the unifying center of "mainline" theological education has fallen out.

A basic reason given by Farley is the negative impact of the critical historical study which has shattered the authority of the Bible. Having no longer an infallible divine guide in the Scripture, there is no longer a coherent Christian message and mission. Each

member of the faculty sounds his own tune, thus creating a cacophonous orchestra where each musician plays a different concert.²¹

Unbelief and Apostasy. The echo of this cacophony produced by liberal theological education is heard especially in "mainline" denominations, where it is causing an alarming decline in membership and an erosion of basic Christian beliefs. A recent survey of the religious attitudes of Canadians, for example, reveals an astonishing decline of the belief in God, and in church membership, especially among the members of the country's largest denomination, the United Church of Canada.

"It seems noteworthy," the survey points out, "that only about 40 percent of actual United church members claim unequivocal belief in God and the divinity of Christ."²² The same United Church of Canada registered a sharp drop in membership from 1,062,006 members in 1966 to 930,226 in 1977. Church attendance also has declined from a high of 61 percent in 1956 to a low of 28 percent for United and 24 percent for Anglican members in 1978.²³

In Europe the problem is even more acute than in North America. In England, for example, "on a typical Sunday, only 2 percent of the 28 million Britons who are self-described members show up for the staid services of the established Anglican Church."²⁴ A BBC poll reported that only 29 percent of the people of Britain believed strongly in the existence of a personal God.²⁵

In other European countries the situation is basically the same. Church attendance in the State churches ranges from 2 to 10 percent of the membership. In his recent Pastoral Letter DIES DOMINI, Pope John Paul II expressed his deep concern over the decline in church attendance which has assumed alarming proportions in recent time. The defection from Christianity among church attendees is equally astonishing. The WORLD CHRISTIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA reports that "every year, some 2,765,100 church attenders in Europe and North America cease to be practicing Christians within the 12-month period, an average loss of 7,600 every day."²⁶

An important cause of this astonishing increase in disbelief and decrease in the membership of "mainline" Protestant churches is the liberal, humanistic orientation of their pastors and religious leaders. When a church chooses to communicate secular humanistic values instead of divinely revealed principles and plans for human life, as aptly stated by Reginald Bibby, it "may well engage in self-liquidation, through finishing a distant second to superior secular competitors."²⁷ The church must communicate beliefs, hopes, and values that transcend those of secular competitors. Only then will people find the church worthy of their commitment, worthy of transmitting it to their children and to others.

Erosion of Moral Values. The spirit of the antichrist manifested in the liberal and humanistic theologies of our time contributes also to the erosion of fundamental moral values. When belief in God and in His revelation is abandoned, all moral values become relative, because there is no longer a normative divine revelation to guide us in distinguishing right from wrong.

The doubts (if not outright denials) communicated by liberal religious leaders about God, the authority of the Scriptures, creation, the incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and Second Coming of Christ, have encouraged the replacement of divine moral imperatives with individual permissiveness.

Human life for many has lost its sanctity, as indicated by the destruction of million of lives every year through abortion, criminal acts, war, and policies of dictatorial regimes. Human relationships also for many are no longer sacred, as evidence by the appalling number of marital contracts which are terminated every year.

Immoral connotations of illicit sexual acts are being eliminated through the introduction of new "softer" terms. Fornication is now referred to as "premarital sex," with the accept on the "pre" rather than on the "marital." Adultery is now called "extramarital

sex," implying an additional experience, like an extra professional activity. Homosexuality has gradually been "softened" from serious perversion through deviation to "gay" variation.

This "softness" extends to literature and entertainment. Immoral films are shown to "mature" audiences. Pornographic books are available in "adult" bookstores. In his book, *Whatever Became of Sin?*, psychiatrist Karl Menninger perceptively points out that many "sins," once forgiven by confession of guilt and repentance, today have evolved into "symptoms" treatable by psychotherapy as illness-with responsibility placed on everything and everyone except the guilty person.²⁷

Conclusion. The End-time sign of the antichrist predicted by John is being fulfilled today in an extraordinary way. In John's time the spirit of the antichrist was at work in those false teachers who denied the incarnation of Christ. Today the spirit of antichrist is at work not only in those who deny Christ's incarnation, but also in those who reject His atonement, resurrection, Second Coming, and other basic Bible beliefs.

The impact of the "spirit of antichrist" is noticeable especially in the increasing disbelief and defection from Christianity in the Western world and in the erosion of Christian moral values. The words of John ring especially true today: "Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18).

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