

ON THE ANTICHRIST

Who or What Is the Antichrist?

A Confessional Reading Against the Prophecy Charts

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Ask most Christians who the Antichrist is and you will get a remarkably consistent answer, though it is not one they learned from the Bible. He is a single, charismatic, sinister figure—a coming world-ruler who will rise near the end of history, broker a false peace, demand universal worship, and preside over a great tribulation before Christ returns to defeat him. He has a number, 666, and a mark, and a starring role in a genre of novels and films that has shaped the popular Christian imagination more than any catechism ever did. There is just one problem with this portrait: it is largely constructed by stitching together scattered images from Daniel, Thessalonians, and Revelation into a timeline that none of those texts actually draws. When you go back to the passages that use the word *antichrist*, you find something both broader and far more unsettling than a future dictator on a prophetic clock.

The Only Places the Word Appears

The word *antichrist* occurs in exactly four verses in all of Scripture, and every one of them is in the letters of John. That fact alone should slow us down, because the popular Antichrist is built mostly from books that never use the term. So let us actually read John.

Children, it is the last hour, he writes, 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). Read that twice. John's readers had heard that *an* antichrist was coming, singular, in the future—and John corrects them. Not one, but many; not later, but already here. He goes on to define exactly who they are: the antichrist is the one who denies the Father and the Son, who denies that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22). And again, in the next chapter, the spirit of antichrist is the spirit that does not confess Jesus—*this is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already* (1 John 4:3). John says the very same thing in his second letter: many deceivers have gone out into the world, and *any one of them* is the deceiver and the antichrist (2 John 7).

Whatever else we say about the last things, we cannot say less than John says. The antichrist, in the only book that names him, is not primarily a solitary future tyrant. He is a spirit, a teaching, a pattern of denial—present already in John's day, present in every age since, wearing many faces. Antichrist is anything and anyone that stands *anti*, against and in place of, Christ: that denies Him, displaces Him, or offers a counterfeit in His name.

The Man of Lawlessness

But there is a second strand, and honesty requires us to hold it alongside the first. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, who were rattled by rumors that the Day of the Lord had already come, and he tells them it cannot come until the rebellion comes first and *the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God* (2 Thessalonians 2:3–4). Here the language does seem more concentrated—a definite figure, a definite self-exaltation.

Two details deserve close attention, because the prophecy charts race past them. First, Paul says the mystery of lawlessness *is already at work* (2:7). The thing is not merely future; its engine is already running, restrained for now but operating. Second, and more striking, this lawless one takes his seat *in the temple of God*. He does not attack the church from outside, like a pagan emperor; he installs himself *within* it, in the very seat of God, claiming a place that belongs to God alone. The deepest danger Paul describes is not a hostile world-conqueror but a corruption at the heart of the professing church—a power that opposes Christ not by denying Him openly but by usurping His place while wearing His name.

That distinction is everything, and it is precisely what the popular schemes miss. They are always looking outward and forward, scanning the horizon for a political monster. Paul teaches us to look inward and around, at the ever-present temptation of the church to exalt something in the place of Christ.

What the Lutheran Confessions Say

The Lutheran Confessions read these texts soberly and drew a conclusion that still startles modern readers. In the Smalcald Articles and in the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, the Reformers identified the papal office of their day—not this or that man, but the office as it then claimed to function—as the Antichrist Paul described: a power that had seated itself in the church and set its own authority over the Gospel, requiring that salvation be found through submission to it.

It is important to state precisely what this claim was and was not. It was not a bit of name-calling, and it was not aimed at Roman Catholic believers, most of whom the Reformers regarded as fellow sinners deceived rather than enemies to be reviled. It was a theological judgment about an *office* and its *claims*—specifically, the claim to a spiritual supremacy that bound consciences, and a system that, in the Reformers' reading, obscured the free forgiveness of sins in Christ by making grace conditional on the church's mediation. The

test Paul gives—*opposes and exalts itself... takes its seat in the temple of God*—is a test about displacing Christ's gospel from within, and the Reformers applied it to the institution they saw doing exactly that.

Confessional Lutherans today do not all hold this identification in the same way. Some maintain it in full force, reading the papal office as *the* historical embodiment of the anti-christic principle. Others treat the Confessions' identification as a true and courageous application to a particular institution at a particular time, while insisting that the anti-christic *pattern* Paul and John describe is larger than any single office and recurs wherever Christ is displaced—in liberal churches that hollow out the faith, in prosperity preachers who sell a counterfeit gospel, in any authority that requires souls to look somewhere other than the crucified Christ for their standing before God. What no confessional Lutheran does is convert the Antichrist into a lone dictator awaiting his cue at the far end of a prophetic timeline. Both John and Paul rule that out: the thing is already at work, and it works chiefly inside the visible church.

Against the Prophecy Charts

This is why the confessional reading stands so squarely against dispensational prophecy systems, and why the topic is worth an essay of its own. The chart-makers push the Antichrist entirely into the future and entirely outside the church—a coming political ruler tied to a rebuilt temple, a seven-year clock, a secret rapture that removes the church before the real drama begins. The effect, whether intended or not, is to let the present-day church off the hook. If the Antichrist is a tyrant who has not yet appeared, then the church need not examine herself now; she need only watch the news for the villain's arrival.

Scripture will not permit this comfort. Jesus warned that *false christs and false prophets will arise* throughout the age, performing signs to lead astray, and told His disciples not to chase after the ones who cry *here he is* or *there he is* (Matthew 24:23–24). John says the spirit of antichrist is *already in the world*. Paul says the mystery of lawlessness is *already at work*. The Antichrist is not a suspense we await; he is a danger we resist, and the front line of that resistance runs through the church herself, wherever anything or anyone is set up in the place that belongs to Christ alone.

So the honest answer to *who or what is the Antichrist* is not a name we can circle on a calendar. It is a spirit John already saw at work, a lawlessness Paul already saw operating, an ever-present temptation of the church to trade her crucified Lord for a substitute—and, the Reformers dared to say, an institution that had done exactly that on the grandest scale. The point of the doctrine was never to fuel speculation. It was to keep the church

clinging to Christ and Him alone, refusing every rival that would seat itself where He belongs. Read that way, the doctrine of the Antichrist is not a horror story about the future. It is a summons to vigilance in the present, and a mercy: a warning to test the spirits, hold fast to the true gospel, and let nothing displace the Lamb who was slain.