

# Antichrist and the Apostasy: the Antithesis in Doctrine and Life

## Introduction

The Scriptures speak of the coming of an antichrist and of an apostasy. 1 John 2: “the Antichrist is coming” (vs 18). 2 Thess 2 adds that the Day of Christ will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of sin is revealed (vs 3). Jesus told His disciples to beware of “false Christs” and “false prophets” who would surely come showing great signs and wonders in an attempt to deceive, if possible, even the elect (Mt 24:24f). And John saw in the Revelation shown to him some beasts rise out of the sea to terrorize the earth (Rev 13). What, we wonder, is all this; are we to expect an Antichrist still to appear on the world stage? Or a Man of Sin? Or a false Christ? Or those Beasts? If yes, what is the relation between them all? If no, has the Antichrist appeared already? Or the Man of Sin?

The question is important. There is a new trend in Christian literature that plays with this material. Authors used to write Janet Oke stuff, stories about life-as-we-know-it that sought to portray Christian principles of living – even if some of the theology was somewhat warped (and the stories a bit childish). The newest is futuristic, and uses the Bible as a grab bag for all sorts of wild and weird things that will happen in time to come. Pat Robertson, for example, (he once ran for the American presidency) wrote a book<sup>1</sup> in which a meteor crashes into the Pacific Ocean and the resulting tidal wave wiped out all the people living within so many miles of the Pacific Ocean, be it in North America or South, Japan, China, Indonesia, Australia, etc. It’s an event, he claims, forecasted in the book of Revelation. The disaster turns the whole world order upside down, and in the resulting confusion a certain polished gentleman becomes the new president of the United States – but turns out to be the Antichrist of 1 Jn 2 and the Man of Sin of 2 Thess 2 and the Beast of Rev 13 rolled into one person. This president, of course, sets out to persecute the church of Jesus Christ.... It makes for gripping reading, scary stuff. Before our eyes the Man of Sin and the Antichrist and the Beast grow flesh and skin, real life figures doing real life horrors.... And the future begins to look very uncomfortable....

The same, of course, is true of the material Tim laHaye and Jerry Jenkins crank out in their *Left Behind* series. More than 4 millions copies are in print, I read somewhere, but I’ve not read those books beyond the first 50 pages of the first volume, simply because they distort the word of my God too much and I find that offensive.

With all this interest in such eschatological figures as the Antichrist and the Man of Sin, I thought it would be worthwhile considering with you what the Lord actually says on these subjects.

## Clarification

We need to start with a clarification. The accepted thing to do is to assume that the false prophets of Mt 24 and the Antichrist of 1 Jn 2 and the Man of Sin of 2 Thess 2 and the Beast of Rev 13 are in effect one and the same being. Then it’s said that this evil being is a person with great political power who persecutes the church of Jesus Christ cruelly. This evil being is evil perfected, and since *this* sort of thing hasn’t happened yet it’s obvious that this person is still to come. So you get all the speculation, and the fear of the future, and the conviction that Christ cannot come back tonight....

It’s not just Dispensationalists that think and write in these terms. I read in Dr PHR vanHouwelingen’s new commentary on Thessalonians (and this writer is the new professor of New Testament in the Theological University of our Dutch sister churches) that “toward the end of

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<sup>1</sup> *The End of the Age*.

history an eschatological figure shall arise who openly sets himself up against God and will be able to mislead many people.”<sup>2</sup> Rev Barry Gritters, minister in the Protestant Reformed Church in North America, begins a speech<sup>3</sup> on the Antichrist with these words:

“Scripture teaches Antichrist to be a political, religious, individual, yet to come in the future (as of this writing), who is opposed to God and God’s Christ and God’s church. Although the only places in Scripture the name Antichrist is used are 1 and 2 John (...) the Bible is replete with instruction regarding the reality we call Antichrist. The key passages are Daniel 7,8,11, Matthew 24, 2 Thessalonians 2, and Revelation 13,17 and 18 – where Antichrist is referred to as a beast, a little horn, a false Christ, that wicked one, and the man of sin.”<sup>4</sup>

The confusion, I suggest, results from an age-old habit<sup>5</sup> of super-imposing various passages of Scripture on top of each other as so many transparencies on an overhead projector, and examining the resulting image. Yet we all know that stacking multiple transparencies on an overhead projector produces a most unclear image on the wall. Imagine it: a portrait over your oldest child with a portrait of your second child superimposed over it, and a portrait of your third child superimposed over that..., down to the last child.... Can you make intelligent comment on the resulting image? It’s all become a blur, the individual characteristics gone. So it is with super-imposing the “Man of Sin” from 2 Thess 2 over the Antichrist of 1 Jn 2, the Beasts of Rev 13 and the false Christs of Mt 24. We need to look at one transparency at a time.<sup>6</sup> To take you through all four chapters this morning would be far too much, and so I propose to look only at the Antichrist of 1 Jn 2 and the Man of Sin from 2 Thess 2.<sup>7</sup> That will give us sufficient material from which to draw some clear conclusions.

## Antichrist – 1 John 2

The Bible’s references to the Antichrist appear only in the letters of John (1 John 2:18 (twice), 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). That makes it very easy to identify the first transparency we need to look at.

### Term

First a word about the term. The term ‘antichrist’ is composed of two parts. The first four letters form the Greek word for ‘against’, and describe someone who *opposes* Christ. The Greek word ‘anti’ can also mean ‘in place of’, and so gives the meaning that the Antichrist puts himself *in the place of* Jesus Christ. Either way, the meaning is clear; an Antichrist would push Christ aside, is Christ’s enemy.

One may wonder why the Holy Spirit used the term ‘antichrist’ instead of, say, ‘antijesus’ or ‘antilord’. The question brings us to the heart of what an ‘antichrist’ is. An antichrist opposes Jesus not in His *person* but in His *office*. The term ‘Christ’ means ‘anointed’ (Lord’s Day 12), and so –like the term ‘King’ or ‘Prime Minister’– describes a person’s *office*

<sup>2</sup> PHR vanHouwelingen, *Tessalonicenzen* (Kampen: Kok, 2002), pg 205.

<sup>3</sup> Barry Gritters, *The Antichrist* (Byron Center: Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church, n.d.), pg 5.

<sup>4</sup> For more examples see, I deWolff, *De Laatste Jaren dezer Wereld* (Goes: Oosterbaan & leCointre, 1960), pg 9ff; J deJong, “The Antichrist and the Man of Lawlessness,” *Clarion*, Vol 36, Yearend issue, Vol 37 no 1,2; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), pg 701ff; J vanGenderen, *Beknopte Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: Kok,1992), pg 759ff; FF Bruce, *A Mind for what Matters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pg 181ff; Cornelis Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), pg 175.

<sup>5</sup> The history of the habit goes back at least to the days of Tertullian more than eighteen centuries ago.

<sup>6</sup> See J Francke, *Leven tot in Eeuwigheid* (Enschede: Uitgeverij Boersma, n.d.), pg 220f; BB Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed: John Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), Vol 1, pg 356; Stephen Nichols, “Prophecy Makes Strange Bedfellows: On the History of Identifying the Antichrist,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol 44 no 1, pg 77f.

<sup>7</sup> I have written about Mt 24 in *Una Sancta*, Vol 46, no 6 (19 December 1998), pg 109f. More elaborately in *Una Sancta* in 1987.

and therefore his *task*. Jesus of Nazareth became ‘Christ’ when He was anointed with the Holy Spirit at His baptism to His three-fold office of Prophet, Priest and King (Luke 3:21f). In His office as Prophet, Jesus Christ revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption – a work He continues to do today when He causes His word to be proclaimed in this world. In His office as Priest, Jesus Christ sacrificed Himself for sinners on the cross – a work He continues to build on in heaven today when He intercedes for His people before the Father. In His office as King, Jesus Christ defeated sin and the devil on the cross – a work He continues to apply to us today as He rules all creation from His throne at God’s right hand. Through His work as Prophet, Priest and King Jesus the Christ reconciled sinners to God, and so –in principle– restored the Paradise we ruined in the beginning.

With a passion the evil one hates not just Jesus of Nazareth but the *work* Jesus accomplished in His office as God’s anointed One, as God’s *Christ*. Satan could not devour the Seed of the Woman while He lived on earth, and now that God has snatched Him up to heaven and given Him that place of honor in heaven’s courts, Satan rages on earth against those who benefit from the work of the Anointed One (Rev 12). Peter says on the day of Pentecost that “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36), and so it can be no surprise that Satan –like a true copycat– would come with his alternative, his antichrist, in his diabolical effort still to undo the work Christ accomplished as Prophet, Priest and King.

We turn now to what John says about Antichrist.

### **Antichrist in John**

John writes about Antichrist in three passages. The first is 1 John 2:18-27:

*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. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.*  
*But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth.*  
*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.*  
*Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.*  
*And this is the promise that He has promised us—eternal life.*  
*These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you.*  
*But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.*

The second is a chapter later, 1 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 that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh 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.*

The last is in his second letter (vs 7), presumably written to the same readership as his first letter:

*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**.*

## Analysis

From 2:18 we learn that John's addressees had "heard that the Antichrist is coming." The apostle does not mention where John's readers "heard" this news. Some commentators think that Jesus must have mentioned it somewhere in His teaching (no record of it survived) and somehow John's addressees got to hear of it. Others suggest that John's readers had read Paul's letter to the Thessalonians about the Man of Sin, and claim that that's where John's readers "heard that the Antichrist is coming."<sup>8</sup> The simple fact of the matter is, though, that John does not tell us where his readers heard about a coming Antichrist. As it turns out, where they heard it is not important, for (as I'll show in a moment) John sees need to *correct* his readers' thinking about an antichrist.<sup>9</sup> Significant for us is to understand what corrections, what instruction, the Holy Spirit gives here on the subject of Antichrist.

John's addressees heard that "the Antichrist is coming". We need to note that that phrase contains within itself a number of presuppositions.

- The first is that the actual arrival of Antichrist is something of the *future*. If I say "Bob is coming", you understand very well that Bob is not here yet; his coming is still to happen. So too with the report circulating amongst John's readers; Antichrist is not here yet, he's still to come.
- A second presupposition contained in the phrase 'The Antichrist is coming' is the notion that there is only *one* antichrist. That's the implication of using the pronoun 'the' here, as well as the singular of the word 'antichrist'.
- A third presupposition here is that this antichrist is a *specific person*, an individual you can name.

But the thing is, now, that John *corrects each of these three presuppositions*. Is the coming of the Antichrist a future thing? Says John in vs 18: "even now many antichrists have come." And say not that John is here contrasting the many who *have* come with the one who *will* come, for John makes the same point in 4:3 – only there he does it more forcefully still. For in 4:3 John says concerning the Antichrist that "you have heard [He] was coming" (that's the same report alluded to in 2:18), but John adds that Antichrist "is now already in the world." Notice that John uses the words 'now' and 'already' in the same sentence, and so vigorously corrects the thought that the coming of the antichrist is something of the future. It is not, says John; the Antichrist is "now already in the world". And remember: he wrote this more than nineteen centuries ago!

John also corrects the notion that antichrist is a single individual. The report was that "the Antichrist is coming," to which John replies that "even now many antichrists have come." It is, says John, "the last hour," and the evidence that "it is the last hour" is the appearance of a multitude of antichrists. As an aside: *we* hear the phrase 'the last hour', and our thoughts go to the future, to that relatively short period directly preceding the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. But John wrote this not all that many decades after Pentecost, and says of *his* time that "it is the last hour." That's because in the Bible the whole period of time from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to the return of Christ is called "the last hour" or "the last days" (cf Acts 2:17). *And these last days are characterized by the presence of many antichrists.*

The third presupposition John corrects is the notion that antichrist is a specific individual. Certainly, antichrists are individuals, but what characterizes an antichrist is his particular *teachings*. 2:22: "Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son." 4:3: "every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist..." 2

<sup>8</sup> Bruce, 183; Simon Kistemaker, *James and I-III John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), pg 275; I Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pg 150f.

<sup>9</sup> Warfield, pg 358ff.

John 7: “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.” You see, John distinctly links ‘Antichrist’ with a doctrine, specifically the denial of the doctrine of the Incarnation, Jesus Christ coming in the flesh.

Can we put names and faces to any of these antichrists? John and his readers certainly could! John mentions in 2:18 that “even now many antichrists have come,” and then he adds in vs 19 that “they” –and that’s those antichrists– “went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.” That is, John’s readers have just been through a church split.<sup>10</sup> Persons with whom they’d gone to church for some years now departed from them; “they went out from us.” What was the point of doctrine prompting this exodus from the church? Vs 22: people left because they denied that Jesus was the Christ. That is, they separated Jesus the man from Christ the Savior. The heresy is known as Docetism, and held that Jesus of Nazareth was simply and only human, but the Son of God dwelt in the man Jesus – as glasses in a case. With this conviction these Docetists insisted that Jesus was not really the anointed one of God, sent to earth to save His people from their sins. Of that heresy John writes, “every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is ... the spirit of the Antichrist...” (4:3). No wonder, then, that those who held this error had to come to the point of departing from those who held to the truth. For here the very heart of the Christian faith was denied.

### ***Antichrists Today?***

On the basis of what’s been said, can we conclude that there are antichrists in the world today? Even before we begin a search for antichrists, we need to have it fixed in our minds that we definitely should expect to find antichrists in our day and age. I say this simply because we live in what John calls “the last hour.” Remember, that phrase describes the whole dispensation from Pentecost till Christ’s return, that time characterized by Satan’s diabolical effort to still destroy the work of salvation Jesus the Christ accomplished for us. That Satan will have those who specifically deny that Jesus is the Christ can be no surprise; he would dearly love to put on the pulpits of our land preachers who expressly deny Christ’s saving work – and so starve God’s people of the spiritual nourishment they need.

Is that expectation correct today? There can be no doubt. If I think of our own city, I can mention as an example the Anglican archbishop of Perth, Dr Peter Carnley. He holds that Jesus of Nazareth lived long ago, and died on a cross also, but He denies that Jesus’ death on the cross was an atoning sacrifice for our sins, denies Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead, denies that Jesus ascended into heaven where He today continues His work as our only High Priest, interceding for us before the Father. Carnley denies that Christ rules from heaven today, defending and preserving His people in the redemption He obtained for us. Because he denies that Jesus is the Christ of God is he –according to John’s definition– an antichrist. Yet he comes on the pulpit time and again, and is publicly seen to do so in the name of Jesus Christ. Nor is he the only one in our land who deceives Australians with this heresy. In our land are thousands who preach the same sort of thing. And John would say of them all, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that they are antichrists.

The same, of course, is true for those who follow the heresies of such teachers, as thousands upon thousands of Australians do. By John’s definition, they are antichrists all.<sup>11</sup>

Please note: with all this I am not saying that the future will definitely not bring a teacher of world renown, possibly even a political figure, in the traditional sense of an antichrist. I would only argue that the Lord has not told us in 1 Jn 2 (nor anywhere else in

<sup>10</sup> Doekes, “De Komst van de Antichrist”, *De Reformatie*, Vol 57 no 3, pg 43.

<sup>11</sup> For this reason I am unhappy that the *Westminster Confession* says of the Pope that he is the antichrist (Art 25.6). Say what you will of the Pope, he certainly does not deny that Jesus is the Christ.

Scripture) that this will in fact happen. So we are not allowed to insist that such a figure will still appear.

## Conclusions

John gives us the following information about antichrist:

1. Antichrist is not singular, but a multitude.
2. Antichrist is not future, but present – and has been around since the days of John.
3. Antichrist is not so much a person as a heresy, specifically the teaching that denies that Jesus is the Anointed of God.
4. antichrists are persons who have gone to church, known the goodness of the Lord, and thrown the gospel away.

*Before we move on to the second chapter we need to look at, I suggest we take a little break and sing Ps 12.*

## The Man of Sin – 2 Thessalonians 2

The second transparency I wish to examine with you today is the Man of Sin from 2 Thessalonians 2:3. For our part, we are conditioned to connect the phrase to a single evil person who still has to arrive on the world stage. And when he comes, we think, he will surely oppress the children of God cruelly; then all hell will break out on earth. A good look at this transparency, though, will show that we've got the wrong conclusion.

The passage in question reads, in context, as follows (1-12):

*Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you,  
not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come.  
Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition,  
who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.  
Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?  
And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time.  
For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way.  
And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming.  
The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders,  
and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.  
And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.*

## Context

The chapter begins with a reference to “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him” (vs 1), and so puts the concept of ‘Man of Sin’ directly in the context of Christ’s return. Concerning this return and our gathering to Him, Paul had already given some detail in his first letter. 1 Thess 4: “The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (vss 16f).

It seems that these words from the apostle did not settle all questions amongst the young Christians of Thessalonica about Christ's return. From vs 2 of our chapter we learn that there were those in the church of Thessalonica who insisted that the day of the Lord had already come. That is, they were adamant that the Lord Jesus had already returned, and they claimed some sort of apostolic or divine authority for their conviction (vs 2b). Just how they understood Christ to have come back already (while this life continued its normal course) is not clear. But word was out anyway: the Day of the Lord has already come!

In his second letter to this young congregation, the apostle sets straight this incorrect conclusion. No, he says, the Day of the Lord has not yet come. "For that day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God" (vss 3f).

### ***Principles of Interpretation***

The first thing we need to notice about the verses I just quoted is that Paul uses various phrases to describe various aspects of the same concept. The "falling away" of which the apostle writes here is not something unrelated to the revelation of "the man of sin", or to "the son of perdition". If we recognize that all these phrases are so many facets of the same entity, the matter becomes easier to comprehend.

The second thing we need to notice about these two verses is that the Christians of Thessalonica were familiar with this notion of a falling away and a Man of Sin and a Son of Perdition who exalts himself in the temple of God as if he were God. That's what the apostle writes in vs 5: "do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?" As it is, the Holy Spirit has not left us a record of the instruction Paul gave when he covered this topic in Thessalonica. But that does not mean that we know completely nothing about Paul's teaching. For all Paul's instruction was always based on the revelation of God in the Old Testament and/or the words and work of Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry. Yes, there may be development upon what God revealed in the Old Testament, but Paul's instruction was never new, never novel. As the bud of a flower has the complete flower inside it already, so the Old Testament had God's full revelation caught inside it already. In the work of Jesus Christ the bud of the Old Testament was opened up further, and through Paul (and the other apostles) the Holy Spirit caused that bud to open up further still into the flower of the New Testament, and that is simply to say that what was recorded in somewhat hidden terms the Old Testament was made obvious in the new. That is why, when we seek to understand what the apostle writes about the Man of Sin, we are not to look for clues in secular Greek literature, or in Jewish mythological literature (and yes, there was lots of that), but we are to look in the Old Testament and in the words of the Lord Jesus.<sup>12</sup> And there we certainly find material that forms the bud of the flower that blooms in vss 3 and 4. We will be safe to assume that Paul expounded this material from the Old Testament and/or from Jesus when he first taught the Thessalonians about the bits and pieces described in vss 3 and 4. With this Old Testament material, I refer specifically to the book of Daniel, to which we'll need to turn shortly. And when I speak of Jesus I think of His Olivet Discourse as recorded in Mt 24.

### ***Apostasy***

It's particularly vss 3 & 4, then, that require our attention. In these two verses the first phrase we need to look at is this: "the falling away comes first." The term Paul uses for 'falling away' is literally 'apostasy', a term that describes a rebellious attitude. We taste the flavor of the term, for example, in Dt 32:15. The English reads there: "But Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; ... he forsook God who made him, and *scornfully esteemed* the Rock of his salvation." The thing is: in the desert God taught Israel how dependent they were on Him. But when Moses in Dt 32 looks into the future, he sees that Israel *turns away* from the God they had come to know, they kick against God, spurn Him. That is 'falling away', 'apostasy'. It is not allowed to happen, for it is against God's revealed law, but, says Moses under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this is what is going to happen with God's people-by-covenant: they will

<sup>12</sup> Contra vanHouwelingen, pg 207f.

apostatize, fall away. This falling away, of course, cannot happen to heathens, simply because the term presupposes that one has first turned to God; only one who has tasted the goodness of God can fall away.<sup>13</sup>

The Old Testament is full of examples of Dt 32 being fulfilled, God's children-by-covenant falling away from their God. I think of the book of the Judges, how the people time and again gave themselves to idols. Yes, the Lord gave them numerous deliverers, and with each deliverer repeatedly worked a reformation, but in the course of years the next generation again apostatized. That became a pattern in Old Testament history.

Our Lord Jesus Christ told the parable of the sower. As the gospel of salvation is proclaimed around the world, some seed, He says, falls on rocky soil. "As soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture" (Luke 8:6). Jesus explains that aspect of the parable like this: "the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away" (Luke 8:13). "Fall away": there's the same word. Says Jesus: it will happen in the New Testament dispensation just as it did in the Old Testament, namely, that people will turn to God as Israel did, but in the pressures of life will fall away again.

This 'falling away' will be a pattern that repeats itself time and again in the course of history. That's Paul's point to Timothy: "the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith..." (1 Tim 4:1). "Depart," says our translation, but the Greek has the word 'apostatize'. And to be clear: the phrase 'latter times' does not refer to the final days immediately preceding the Lord's return in glory, but captures instead the entire New Testament dispensation between Christ's ascension on the one hand and His return on the last day on the other (cf Acts 2:17). It is because this 'falling away' characterizes the New Testament dispensation that the author of Hebrews warns his readers so pointedly to "beware ..., lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in *falling away* from the living God" (Heb 3:12).

According to Acts 17, the apostle Paul labored in Thessalonica for but a short while (Acts 17:1-10).<sup>14</sup> His first letter to the Thessalonians was written within a year of his departure from Thessalonica, and his second within months of the first.<sup>15</sup> My point in saying this is that the gospel of Jesus Christ had been sown in Thessalonica only a relatively short time ago. So far there had been much growth in the congregation, both in faith and in love and in hope (cf 1 Thess 1:2f; 2 Thess 1:3f). On the other hand, the congregation had already experienced some tribulation on account of the faith (1 Thess 2:14; 2 Thess 1:4; cf Acts 17:5ff), but so far these young Christians had persevered. That is: so far, none had fallen away – despite the fact that some seed had surely fallen on rocks in Thessalonica also. When the rumor comes to Thessalonica, then, that the day of the Lord has already come, Paul is quick to point out that there has not yet been a falling away in Thessalonica in the year and a half to two years since the gospel was preached in that city, and therefore the believers are not yet to expect the Savior.

But possibly it is too narrow to restrict the falling away simply to the young Christians of Thessalonica. More likely we need to think here instead of the general preaching of the gospel since Pentecost. Over the relatively few years since the disciples had begun bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth, numerous people across the known world of the day had come to faith. But a falling away as occurred time and again in the Old Testament had not happened yet. Yes, there were the odd individuals who made ship-wreck of their faith (I think of Alexander and Hymenaeus in 1 Tim 1:18ff), but that was not general. Either way, the conclusion is this: the falling away had not yet occurred, the pattern outlined in the Old Testament and foreshadowed by the Lord Jesus not yet come about.

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<sup>13</sup> See TDNT, I, pg 513.

<sup>14</sup> Carson, et al, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pg 344.

<sup>15</sup> VanBruggen, *De Brieven aan de Gemeente te Thessalonica*, pg 4 & 27.



That a falling away was to come was surely material Paul had earlier spoken about with the Thessalonians (vs 5). He'd told them the gospel, sowed the seed, and will surely have mentioned that some seed falls on the path and is plucked away (as the converts saw with their own eyes; according to Acts 17:5a various hearers immediately rejected the gospel Paul brought). Other seed falls on good soil, and brings forth fruit (as the converts could see in themselves over the months). But other seed falls on rocky soil, germinates, grows, looks healthy – but in the course of time withers under the pressure of persecution. Paul will surely have told the Thessalonians of this, if only to encourage them to see to it that they themselves did not reject the gospel of life.<sup>16</sup>

I come to Paul's second phrase, the "Man of Sin".

### **Man of Sin**

What happens, now, to those who fall away from the Lord? This: those who have tasted something of the goodness of God in Jesus Christ and then turn their backs to it, can respond with radical hatred against the gospel and so give themselves in a more blatant way than previously to a life of aggressive sin (cf 2 Peter 2:20ff). Here is the point of the term 'the man of sin'.

The term itself describes the person<sup>17</sup> who is characterized by sin, dominated by sin, *sin-personified*. The term comes from the prophecies of Daniel.<sup>18</sup> In Babylon Daniel received a number of visions from God about the things that were going to happen in time to come. One of these visions was that of the four beasts arising from the Great Sea, the first like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard, and the fourth so terrible it defied comparison (Dan 7). The beasts came from the sea, and the sea is a symbol in Scripture of the underworld, the realm of Satan, hell. These beasts from hell are sin-filled and sin-driven. But, says Daniel of the first beast, "it was lifted up from the earth and made to stand on two feet like a man, and a man's heart was given to it" (Dan 7:4). You see: this 'beast of sin' becomes a 'man of sin'. Yet it did not lose its beastly characteristics; this 'man of sin' remained beastly, frightful in its conduct.

So too that fourth beast, the dreadful and terrible one. Daniel saw that "in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking pompous words" (7:8). That is: this beast receives human characteristics; this beast of sin becomes a man of sin – and all the while retains its beastly habits. See there the background to the phrase "Man of Sin".

Let's put the matter into sharper focus. The angel tells Daniel that these four beasts describe four kingdoms (7:17). Traditionally the lion has been understood to describe the kingdom of Babylon, the bear the kingdom of the Medes and Persians, the leopard the kingdom of Greece, and the dreadful and terrible beast the kingdom of Rome. However that may be, these four kingdoms are very *human* kingdoms, yet very evil, each in their own way. Particularly that fourth beast was evil beyond words. Listen to the angel's explanation in 7:23ff:

"Thus he said: 'The fourth beast shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, which shall be different from all other kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, trample it and break it

<sup>16</sup> The temptation is to read this phrase from 2 Thessalonians 2 in the light of Jesus' words in Mt 24:10f. Yet we need to bear in mind that Jesus' words pertained to *the Jews* and speaks of God's covenant wrath (Lev 26 & Dt 28) being poured out on the covenant people who reject the Christ – even though the Holy Spirit has been poured out. The church of Thessalonica, however, consisted primarily of *Greeks* (Acts 17:4).

<sup>17</sup> C vanderWaal, *The Covenantal Gospel* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1990), pg 124 correctly remarks that the pronoun 'the' in the phrase 'the man of sin' describes more than an individual. "We also speak about 'twentieth century man,' although we do not really mean only *one* person."

<sup>18</sup> VanderWaal lists various terms from 2 Thess 2 that appear also in Mt 24, and so argues that Paul bases his instruction in this chapter on Jesus' Olivet Discourse (cf pg 123f). With greater merit one can make a comparison between Dan 7-12 and 2 Thess 2, and find greater overlap than simply words. As it is, the prophecies of Daniel form the background to both Mt 24 as well as 2 Thess 2.

in pieces. The ten horns are ten kings who shall arise from this kingdom. And another shall rise after them; he shall be different from the first ones, and shall subdue three kings. He shall speak pompous words against the Most High, shall persecute the saints of the Most High, and shall intend to change times and law. Then the saints shall be given into his hand for a time and times and half a time.”

You will notice: here are striking parallels with the Man of Sin mentioned in 2 Thess 2. The beast of Daniel is characterized by *sin*, is a *man* and *speaks pompous words* and *persecutes the saints* and intends to *change times and law*. That’s 2 Thess 2:4, where the Man of Sin “opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself to be God.”

Well now, if Paul’s instruction about the Man of Sin is drawn from the prophecies of Daniel, it’s imperative that we taste the precise flavor of Daniel’s material. The distinct flavor of that material is supplied by the *covenant*. For in the visions Daniel saw, the Lord God was continually busy with His people *according to the principles of the covenant*.<sup>19</sup> These beasts-of-sin-become-men-of-sin in chap 7 do not arise out of nowhere; they rather come on the stage of history because God is faithful to the promises of the covenant. He had said He would bless His people’s obedience, and said also that He would curse His people’s disobedience. Israel had been unfaithful to God and His covenant, Israel kept falling away from the Lord (even though, for example, He sends His people into exile!), and *that* is why God let these world powers, these beasts of sin, appear on the stage *to do this or that to His people*.

Look, for example, at chap 8. The “male goat from the west” is the kingdom of Greece under Alexander who came charging east to bowl over the kingdom of the Medes and Persians. (By the way: the notes in the *New Geneva Study Bible* or the *Reformation Study Bible* are very helpful here for explaining which historical details are meant by the various beasts and horns and kings Daniel mentions.) But who is the meat in the sandwich? Positioned strategically between these two warring nations is God’s people Israel! Why must Israel be sandwiched between these two fighting superpowers?<sup>20</sup> The angel gives the explanation in 8:19: “I am making known to you what shall happen in the latter time of the *indignation*.” Indignation: that’s wrath, God’s wrath! And why would the God-of-the-covenant permit His indignation to be felt in Israel? Given all the promises of the covenant outlined in Lev 26 and Dt 28, that can only be because of hardening in sin amongst His own, a falling away from the gospel of God, a refusal to embrace in faith the preaching of the prophets.

It’s not without significance then either that the little horn which grew up after the collapse of the Greek Empire (8:9) could grow strong and invade the Glorious Land –that’s Israel– and exalt himself as high as the Prince of the host, and even stop the daily sacrifices in the temple of Jerusalem. Despite the exile, despite the labors of the prophets after the exile, Israel keeps breaking the covenant, and therefore continues to attract God’s covenant judgment. The sower sows the seed of the gospel to one generation after the other, and sometimes the seed falls on good soil and sometimes on rocky..., so that in the temptations of life the people of God’s covenant fall away..., and thereby –*according to the principles of the covenant*– attract to themselves certain destruction.

And that’s what you see with the Man of Sin of 2 Thess 2. The Christians of Thessalonica heard a rumor that the Day of the Lord had come already. No, says Paul, that can’t be if only because the falling away has to come first, and that requires some time. But when that falling away occurs, some of those who reject the gospel will conduct themselves with such evidence of sin that it will be clear that they are driven by hell, to the hurt of the Christians around them – and that horror has in it something of God’s covenant promises. For

<sup>19</sup> For more elaboration on the principles of the covenant in understanding history, see my paper, “The Role of the Covenant in Understanding History”, *Una Sancta*, Vol 46 No 6 (December 1998), pg 111ff.

<sup>20</sup> The same point is true of the history described in Dan 11. The king of the north and the king of the south keep marching their armies *through Israel* – and so God’s judgment is poured out over His apostate people.

sin breeds sin, sin attracts judgment in the form of worse sin, even to the point where God's name is blasphemed in His own house. *The apostate become men of sin, evil brutes.*

### **The Son of Perdition**

Now we can also understand why Paul describes the Man of Sin as “the Son of Perdition”. The term ‘perdition’ means ruin, destruction. The point here is that this ‘son of perdition’ is characterized by ruin, driven by destruction, driven *to* destruction. Perdition is seen as a parent that at procreation has passed its ruinous tendency to its children so that the son of perdition is driven to self destruction. Judas Iscariot is also called a ‘son of perdition’ (Jn 17:12), and that drive to self-destruct was evident in his betrayal of Jesus and his subsequent suicide. Those who have tasted the goodness of the Lord, and then commit apostasy and let themselves be dominated by sin (in their hatred for the gospel they reject), bring upon themselves destruction (see 2 Peter 2:1); they become ‘sons of perdition’. That pattern is according to the principles of the covenant; sin attracts the wrath and the judgment of God (see also Rom 1:18ff).

### **Mystery of Lawlessness**

Now the phrase ‘mystery of lawlessness’ in vs 7 becomes understandable also. Commentators list a wide range of possible meanings for the phrase, but can come to no agreed conclusion.<sup>21</sup> It seems to me that that's because they do not read Paul's words in this chapter in the light of the Old Testament, and so not in the light of God's covenant promises. In human terms, the motor driving the events of Daniel's visions is *what Israel does* with God's gospel. The people's obedience or disobedience to God's covenant produces predicted responses from God – responses that in turn determine what happens on the stage of world history. As God does not change, and His covenant in the New Testament dispensation is in essence the same as His covenant in the Old Testament dispensation, so the motor driving the events of our dispensation is what God's people do with God's gospel. That is the “mystery of lawlessness” that “is already at work.” Already there are the first ones who depart from the gospel. As time moves on, the temptations and pressures of life will have their effect on the early hearers of the gospel, and more will fall away. And God in turn will respond with His judgments upon those who reject His gospel and give themselves to lawlessness, so that in turn sin is multiplied on the earth. People who hear the gospel do not “receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 Thes 2:10), but instead let themselves be impressed by the workings of Satan through his power and signs and lying wonders – and so God, in covenantal righteousness, sends a strong delusion among these covenant breakers so that they believe more lies (vs 11).

### **Fulfillment**

In the years since Paul wrote his second letter to the Thessalonians, has the Man of Sin been revealed? Most certainly, he has. Repeatedly in the course of church history the gospel God sent to this community and that around the world has been met with faith – and with rejection. Amongst those who rejected the gospel over the centuries are those who first tasted the goodness of the Lord and afterwards spurned it with a passion. Numerous are the people, be they small people or big, who in haughty arrogance have made themselves a god in their Christian home or their church or their town or perchance even their nation in all all-out effort to “change times and law” (Dan 7:25), to strip their domestic or ecclesiastical or national culture of its Christian flavor. Falling away produces men of sin, sons of perdition....

### **Conclusions**

Paul gives us the following information about the Man of Sin:

1. The Man of Sin is not a single individual, but many.

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<sup>21</sup> PHR vanHouwelingen, *Tessalonicenzen* (Kampen: Kok, 2002), pg 198ff lists five options.

2. The Man of Sin is not future, but present – and has been around for centuries.
3. The Man of Sin is he who falls away from the Lord and now kicks so vehemently against God's gospel that he gives himself to radical sin.

*I told you I'd throw a lot at you this morning! I need to tie everything together yet, but let's first again take a little break and sing another psalm: Ps 79:1,2,3*

## **Antithesis in Doctrine and Life**

Let's tie together, now, what we've learned. The general expectation is that the Antichrist and the Man of Sin are in fact the same person, a hell-driven horror who will appear on the stage of history in the days just before Christ can return. A close look at the passages of Scripture where these figures are mentioned shows that this is not the case. The two transparencies produce two different pictures, be it that they have similarities – even as you'll find similarities in the portraits of your children. But you'll agree that superimposing a transparency of your eldest over a transparency of your youngest (and maybe a few in between) produces a confusion you don't want to talk about. So it is here: looking at each transparency separately keeps the two in focus. The fine point of an antichrist is that he denies the doctrine of Christ's incarnation, and therefore His office as Prophet, Priest and King. The fine point of a man of sin is that he freely gives himself to all manner of iniquity. Can one person do both? Certainly. But not necessarily.

What, now, is the lesson for today? In the title for my paper I formulated that lesson with the words "Antithesis in Doctrine and Life". I trust that you see where I'm coming from with that subtitle.

## **Antithesis**

Antithesis: the term describes the fact that all mankind is divided into one of two camps. There are those on God's side, and there are those on Satan's side. By the grace of God, you and I may belong to God's side; in His covenant of grace signified to us at baptism He has claimed us for Himself and we could respond to God's grace by professing the faith.

But: the devil desires nothing more than to tear you away from God and drag you back to his side. He doesn't care whether you're the most upright citizen of the community or the most lawless rag around, as long as you are on his side. He doesn't care either whether you hold to Scriptural doctrines or not, as long as you deny that Jesus is the Christ. For with denying that Jesus comes from God you deny your salvation (Lord's Day 5,6), and so you are on Satan's side. So what does he do? He brings into the world error in doctrine, and error in life.

## **Doctrine**

Doctrine: my reference is to the notion of antichrist, persons who denied that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. These were persons who went to church, confessed the faith – and somewhere along the line gave up the true doctrine.

What do you think: can that happen to you? You have been raised in the faith, have been to catechism class for years and to church much longer. You have professed the faith and sat at the table of the Lord for numerous years. You yourselves have an anointing, says John, and you know the truth. But Satan would love to see you on the other side of the Antithesis, and so would have us think that doctrine isn't so important, especially not the doctrine of Jesus being the Christ of God.

Could you fall for Satan's deceit? Make no mistake: if church-goers broke with the congregation John addressed because they came to deny Jesus as the Christ, the same can happen to us. That's to say that you and I are *not above the possibility of becoming an antichrist!*

I know: it sounds scary. But that's precisely the force of John's writing. He writes about the antichrist, and then concludes with an imperative. "The anointing which you have received from Him abides in you," he says, and so "you will abide in Him" (1 Jn 2:27). But precisely that reality gives the *mandate*: "now, little children, abide in Him" (vs 28). In no way may we cross the divide and become slack in doctrine, for the ultimate consequence may be that one becomes an antichrist. This is the imperative for the church, for men and ladies alike, older and younger: *maintain the antithesis in doctrine*, do not in any way give up a fraction of what the Lord has revealed. Yes, that concerns first of all the doctrine of Jesus Christ being the Son of God, but when all is said and done it refers to all doctrine.

## Life

The same concept is true in relation to life. Man of Sin, Son of Perdition: we baulk at the notions, and certainly don't see ourselves as candidates for such titles. But given what we've learned from 2 Thess 2, we recognize that each and every one has a responsibility to stay close to the Lord – lest we fall away and so God give us over to the sinfulness of our hearts. Hebrews 3: "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing" –literally: apostatizing– "from the living God" (vs 12). And remember: that text was spoken to *Christians*! How strongly our *responsibility* is pointed up!

Can you depart from the living God, fall away and become a Man of Sin, a Son of Perdition who becomes god to himself in his own life? The fact that the Lord has put the instruction of 2 Thess 2 and the warning of Heb 3 in the Bibles He gave us points up that we need to stay alert. That is why I say again: *maintain the antithesis in your lifestyle*! Do not *begin* to cross the line between right and wrong, not even in the slightest.

## Expectation

So I come back to where I began. The latest fad in so-called Christian literature is to portray the years between today and Christ's return as characterized by an evil apparition known as the Man of Sin or the Antichrist. This, simply put, is bad theology, heresy. But the product of such literature is to *dampen* the expectation that Christ might return today; He can't for the falling away has to come first and the man of sin has to appear, that horrible antichrist, the beast from the sea.... So in the evangelical community around us the return of Christ is pushed into the hazy future, and the future we envision is dark and evil. Invariably, this heresy has its impact in our own midst too, and the Savior's return put into the hazy distance.

You do not know the day or hour, said the Lord, and so we have to avoid putting any timetable on Christ's return. He comes as a thief in the night, Paul echoed, and so we need to be watchful all the time.

Will Christ come back this afternoon? Maybe. Will Christ delay another two hundred years? Maybe. Will a great persecution oppress us and our children in time to come? Maybe. *We just do not know!* Christ *can* come back today. You have all locked your cars this morning, and your houses also, because you take seriously that the thief comes totally unannounced, comes any time. In the same way we need to take seriously that Christ can come at any time, totally unannounced. That is why we need to make *daily* preparations, and teach our children to do so too.

That daily preparation includes that we take seriously what the Lord has said about the antichrist and the man of sin. Please, do not seek the fulfillment of these passages of Scripture in some future evil genius (be it a political figure or whatever), but take seriously the admonition of Scripture that *we* can become antichrists and people of sin. So we need to stay alert, and continue to admonish each other to be ready for the Lord's glorious return.

**Questions**

1. Analyze briefly the Left Behind series by Tim laHaye and Jerry Jenkins.
2. What is the difference between an Antichrist and a Man of Sin? Give examples of each from our own communities.
3. Is the antithesis adequately maintained in our circles? Answer the question
  - a. In relation to antichrist and false doctrine.
  - b. In relation to man of sin and ungodly behavior.

In your answer focus not only on the youth but primarily on our own generation – and hence our task as parents and role models.