

How to Identify a False Church

Deuteronomy 13:1–11; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–4

God takes his worship *very* seriously. He *detests* idolatry—the worship of false gods, or the worship of the true God falsely. Idolators will be judged.

Remember Nadab and Abihu? Leviticus 10 records that they “offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them.” The phrase “which he commanded them not” is exceedingly important. One translation has “*contrary* to his command.” But the Hebrew has “which he commanded them not.”¹ The point is this: God did not need to command Nadab and Abihu *not* to offer strange fire. As far as worship is concerned, the fact that God did not command a thing is sufficient reason not to do it. This is what the Reformed call the “regulative principle of worship”: God is not to be worshipped in any way “*not* prescribed in . . . Holy Scripture.”² If God did not teach us to cross ourselves, or kiss an icon, or pressure people to come forward to be prayed for by a counselor, or use theatrics such as fog and smoke machines as part of worship, then the church should not do it. It is idolatry: putting the ideas of man above the revealed will of God.

In our text this morning there is an extreme instance of idolatry: the man of sin, the son of perdition, exalting himself, sitting as God in the midst of the temple, pretending to be God. What is this all about?

I have three points: (1) Christ will come again, (2) Antichrist will come first, (3) A false church will tolerate idolatry. First,

1. Christ will come again.

This is, as one commentator puts it, a “notoriously difficult passage.”³ Paul is going into further detail on a topic that he had previously taught to the Thessalonians in person, and since readers in the twenty-first century were not there in person to hear Paul’s original oral teaching, we are left to fill in the dots from other Scriptures. We should note that there are two important textual differences in our passage this morning: the Byzantine texts (numerous hand-copied manuscripts, which were in use among the Greek-speaking churches) have “the day of Christ” and “the man of sin”), whereas the Alexandrian texts (very few in number, the main two being found in the Vatican library and a wastebasket in the Sinai desert) have “the day of the Lord” and “the man of lawlessness.” Now these are slight variations that do not affect the main teaching represented in our outline this morning, but they do add to the intrigue.

¹ אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֱתָם

² WCF 21.1, https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_21

³ Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 213.

Note that Paul speaks of “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him.” This aspect of the text is fairly easy. The “coming” spoken of here is Christ’s Second Coming, when he will return bodily to earth to consummate history and usher in the eternal state, and all the nations will be gathered before him in judgment.

This is an important doctrine confessed by the whole church worldwide. The Apostles’ Creed says that Christ “sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there *he shall come* to judge the living and the dead.” The Nicene Creed says that Christ “ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and *he shall come again*, with glory, to judge the living and the dead.” In accord with the ancient creeds the Belgic Confession teaches that “our Lord Jesus Christ *will come from heaven*, bodily and visibly, as he ascended, with great glory and majesty.” The Westminster Confession reminds us that we “know not at what hour *the Lord will come*”; and that we ought to be “ever prepared to say, *Come Lord Jesus, come quickly*, Amen.” The whole church worldwide thus confesses that the Lord Jesus Christ will return bodily at the end of the age, to judge the living and the dead—that is, both those who have already died, and those who are alive when he returns.

Now there are other “comings” in Holy Scripture, when the Lord is said to come in judgment on the nations.⁴ Some of these refer to material fire and temporal judgment which prefigure God’s eternal indignation and wrath. Consider Isaiah 30:27, “Behold, the name of the LORD *comes* from afar, burning with His anger, and His burden is heavy; His lips are full of indignation, and His tongue like a devouring fire.” In context, this refers to God’s judgment on the nation of Assyria, *not* the final judgment. The Lord thus comes in temporal judgment on the nations according to his infinite wisdom. But the language of burning anger, indignation and devouring fire prefigures the eternal fires of hell.

Again, when Jesus teaches about the Great Tribulation in Matthew 24, he says, “For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the *coming* of the Son of Man be.” Our Lord uses the word παρουσία, which is used 24 times in the New Testament, and means *coming* or *presence*. He prophesied that the Great Tribulation would take place within a generation. “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (Matt. 24:34). Jesus staked his reputation on the literal fulfillment of this prophecy. Exactly forty years (one biblical generation) later, Jerusalem fell to the Romans and the temple was destroyed, never to be rebuilt—a remarkable fulfillment of prophecy. The Levitical priesthood, animal sacrifices and central sanctuary came to a screeching halt, marking the definitive end of Old Testament Judaism, which can never be revived. What the Jewish leaders feared most—that they would lose their

⁴ Isa. 30:27–28, 30:33, 66:15; Ps. 11:6, 21:9, 50:3, 97:3; Amos 7:4

avored status when the Romans would come to take away their place and their nation—came to pass. Rabbinic Judaism today has no priesthood or sacrificial system, and no assurance of forgiveness of sins. It is a manmade religion, *not* the religion of the Old Testament.

In the language of Scripture the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple was the “coming” (παρουσία) of Lord Jesus—not a *physical* coming but a coming in *proxy* through the agency of the invading Roman armies, who unwittingly carried out the Lord’s threatened judgment on a stiffnecked nation that resolutely refused to recognize Israel’s promised Messiah. As the Jews found out, you cannot make a bargain with the devil to protect you from the wrath of God. If you refuse to embrace Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, you will ultimately experience God’s eternal wrath.

At the time of Christ pious Jews were awaiting the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah had written, “Say to those who are fearful-hearted, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; *He will come and save you.*’ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing” (Isa. 35:4–5). The Messiah would come in person to save his people. He would perform miracles to prove his Messiahship. The personal coming of the long-promised Messiah happened just as prophesied. It was miraculous.

But Old Testament saints did not foresee that the Messiah would come *twice*—a first coming to be born of a virgin and go to the cross to save his people, and a second coming when he will return to judge the living and the dead. The idea of a second coming was not revealed in the Old Testament but was announced by Christ.

In Isaiah 61 we read, “The Spirit of the LORD God is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God. . . .”

Jesus read this Scripture publicly in the synagogue at Nazareth in Luke 4, early in his ministry. He quoted the Greek text of Isaiah 61, stopping after the phrase “to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord,” then announced: “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (v. 21). Our Lord purposely omitted the words “and the day of vengeance of our God,” as that part of the prophecy will be fulfilled at the Second Coming. He had come the first time to preach the good news of the gospel and proclaim the day of salvation. At the end of history, he would come to usher in the day of vengeance of our God. That part of the Isaiah prophecy awaits the Second Coming, which is still future for us.

So in our 2 Thessalonians text we read of “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him.” What Paul is speaking of is the *Second Coming*. The Thessalonian Christians were troubled and disheartened when they heard rumors that the Second Coming had already taken place. They were worried that the Second Coming had already taken place, and they had missed it. “Not true!” says Paul, for

2. Antichrist will come first.

The apostle writes, “for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed.” Who is this “man of sin”? He is identified as “the son of perdition” or “the son of destruction”—apparently a reference to the words of verse 8, which says, “whom the Lord will *consume* with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming.” Here is *the* man of sin, *the* son of destruction (note the definite articles; they are important), whom the Lord, according to his infinite wisdom, allows to afflict his church for a time, but whom he ultimately will destroy.

Why does God allow his people to undergo testings and affliction? He does it to refine us as precious metals heated up in a furnace. As Paul teaches in Romans 5, we “*glory* in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.” We “glory” in tribulations—utterly impossible to do apart from the grace of God in Christ! When the Christian undergoes testing in his life, the Spirit gives him understanding to know that it is for his ultimate good. The loving Heavenly Father has not abandoned him, but is working out his perfect plan for his life, building into him the positive qualities of perseverance, character and hope. God wants the best for his spiritual sons and daughters, and we must all develop the grace of patience. When he has tested us, we shall come forth as gold. And when we see him face to face we shall realize that he always, at every moment, was working out his eternal purpose for our ultimate good. He brought us to faith in himself. He gave us the knowledge of the gospel. He enabled us to see that Christ is the perfect Savior and that we are lost without him. He enabled us to look to him in true faith and receive him as Lord and King. Without him, we, too, would perish, but he graciously gives us saving faith to believe the gospel, the only way of salvation for sinful men.

It seems best to identify the “man of sin” with the “Antichrist.” The apostle John speaks of “Antichrist” (ἀντίχριστος) four times in his epistles, twice as “*the* Antichrist” and twice as “*an* antichrist.”⁵ The word itself means *against Christ* or *in opposition to Christ*. “*The* Antichrist” is “the adversary of the Messiah, to appear in the last days.”⁶ In 1 John 3:18 the apostle writes, “Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that *the* Antichrist is coming, even now *many*

⁵ 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7

⁶ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, ἀντίχριστος (Logos Bible Software)

antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour.” Even at the present time there are many religious leaders—false apostles—who operate in the church, being celebrated as great religious leaders, but working secretly to undermine Christ and deceive God’s people. *The Antichrist* is coming, as John says, but even now, all of us must take care to evaluate everything every religious teacher says in light of Holy Scripture. We are to “prove all things, hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). We are to be like the Bereans, who were commended because they searched the Scriptures daily to verify that the things that the apostle Paul was teaching were true according to the Word of God. Jesus said, “Thy word is truth”—absolute truth. Faithful pastors and elders are to work diligently to protect God’s people from false teachers, but all of us, no matter how long or how recently we have known the Lord, need to develop the gift of discernment, so that we are not taken in by false teachers.

The church awaits the appearance of *the Antichrist*. In keeping with early Reformed teaching the original British version of the Westminster Confession said, “There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof: but is *that* Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God.”⁷ This was generally taken to mean the papacy, as Roman theology teaches that the Pope of Rome is the “vicar,” or personal representative, of Christ on earth, and that when the Pope speaks officially “*ex cathedra*,” from his papal throne, he is infallible, even if such *ex cathedra* pronouncements contradict Holy Scripture. This, to Bible-believing Christians, is intolerable, as no single man on earth can single-handedly speak for Christ. Scripture tells us, “obey *them* that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves” (Heb. 13:17). The plural is important. The Bible nowhere requires God’s people to submit unconditionally to any single human authority except King Jesus. *He* is Lord of all, to whom every knee shall bow. Amen! The church has no authority to set up a papacy.

Over two-hundred years ago American Presbyterians dropped the last clause of Westminster Confession 25.6, leaving it to read: “There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof.” The Pope is not the head of the church; *Christ* is the head of the church!

There are false teachers all over Christendom who seek to usurp the crown rights of King Jesus, and they are to be rejected by God’s people, but *the Antichrist* has yet to appear. I personally believe he *must* appear before the Second Coming of Christ. On the other hand, if the term “*the Antichrist*” refers to an institution such as the papacy, then that aspect of Paul’s prophecy has already been fulfilled. John Calvin held that view, as his comments on this passage reveal. He writes: “Paul . . .

⁷ https://opc.org/documents/WCF_orig.html

does not speak of one individual, but of a kingdom, that was to be taken possession of by Satan, that he might set up a seat of abomination in the midst of God's temple—which we see accomplished in Popery.”

Many evangelicals now hold to the teaching known as dispensationalism, which holds that God has *two* distinct peoples, Israel and the church, and that these two peoples will remain distinct both now and in eternity. This teaching separates the Second Coming into two phases: the rapture of the church and the actual Second Coming. Most dispensationalists believe in a rapture that will occur exactly seven years before the Second Coming—what is called a pretribulational rapture. This view was utterly unknown in the history of the church until the 1830s. The saints who lived before us studied the same Holy Scriptures and never saw such a doctrine. I must emphasize that this is *not* the teaching of the Reformed confessions, and it is not the teaching of this church. The rapture of the church takes place at the Second Coming: the Lord descends from heaven with a shout, and the voice of the archangel, the dead in Christ are raised, and the saints are caught up to meet him and return to earth with him as our glorious Conquerer.

The late dispensationalist and premillennial prophecy teacher John F. Walvoord listed major events that he believed would take place before the Second Coming of Christ, and it is a *long* list: a revival of the Roman Empire in the form of a ten-nation kingdom; the emergence of the Antichrist; “Soviet” Russia launching a sneak attack on Israel in a time of peace, during which Russia and her allies will be “annihilated”; a future Great Tribulation; and the battle of Armageddon.⁸ As we know now, the collapse of the Soviet Union took place in 1991, but Walvoord never repudiated his prediction before he died in 2002. Sadly, many people today still hold this view, but we do well to avoid such dogmatism with regard to the prophecies of Scripture and be content to stick to the basics: Christ will come again, and Antichrist will come first. “Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.” We live with imperfect knowledge of the future, but the Lord knows exactly what he is doing, and we should trust him. Thirdly,

3. A false church will tolerate idolatry.

Paul writes of when “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.” Here is gross idolatry taking place in the church of God. Here is a church demanding that its people believe its dogmas over Holy Scripture. Here are religious leaders demanding worship that belongs solely and exclusively to God himself—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, blessed forever, amen! Brothers and sisters, to give

⁸ <https://bible.org/seriespage/major-events-preceding-second-coming-christ> accessed 8-31-24

such honor to a human leader is gross idolatry and a *dishonoring* of Christ. The fifth commandment—“Honor thy father and mother”—requires, first of all, giving supreme honor to God! Christ is the only King and Head of his church. His law-word is supreme and must be obeyed. We are, each one, to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly with all wisdom. We are to cast down imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God and bring every thought—*every* thought!—captive to the obedience of Christ. This is the duty, not only of ministers and elders, but of *all* Christians.

I began this message by stating that God takes his worship *very* seriously. He *detests* idolatry—the worship of false gods, or the worship of the true God falsely. Idolators will be judged.

A church that tolerates idolatry is a false church. God’s people should rise up against idolatry. Let us, each one, dedicate ourself to God’s truth, and reject all mere humans who claim the honor of God for themselves. Amen.