

THE SPIRIT OF ANTICHRIST: DECOUPLING JESUS FROM THE CHR- IST*

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*Editor's Note: This article is a slightly condensed form of a message given at the 2001 annual GES conference in Dallas. In light of events that have occurred in the intervening 6+ years, the challenges and warnings given in this article have proved prescient.

I. INTRODUCTION

Recently, as I was discussing the Lordship Salvation controversy with a fellow grace person, I was asked an interesting question. The question was: "Are we winning?"

The essence of my answer was: "Absolutely."

Of course, I was not talking in terms of popularity polls. Head counting is irrelevant here.

Unfortunately many grace people are not aware of the tremendous impact that the grace movement has had and continues to have. What I have heard and seen over the last few years is enormously encouraging.

Fundamentally, God has been at work with His truth. The number of people who have been liberated from false gospels is very large as far as I can tell. The reason we are winning, however, is because we are being led by an all-conquering Captain—our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. All the true victories of grace truth are His victories, and not really ours at all. He is accomplishing His own purposes.

But having said this, we must also admit that the grace movement faces some significant dangers. Let's think about these for a few minutes.

II. THE DANGER OF NOT BEING OPEN TO GOD'S WORD

It may seem strange to say it, but the grace movement must face the danger of not being open to God's Word.

Most grace people probably feel that openness to God's Word is a hallmark of the grace movement. After all, we are prepared to let the Scriptures speak even if they clearly contradict long-held traditional interpretations. The doctrine of rewards is one such area where the grace movement seems prepared to let the Scriptures speak.

I agree that this has been a strong point of the grace movement up until now. I hope it will continue to be. But there are some warning flags.

A. THE DOCTRINE OF REPENTANCE

One of the central issues in the Lordship debate has been over the doctrine of repentance. This doctrine obviously occupies a critical place in the whole discussion.

I am concerned that the grace movement should not allow itself to become vulnerable by maintaining a position on repentance that cannot be sustained from Scripture.

Lordship people do not tire of telling us that, in the NT, repentance is basically repentance from sin. It does not mean merely a change of mind from unbelief to faith. And they are absolutely right. There is not even one clear passage in the NT where repentance does not refer to repentance from sin. By contrast there are many clear passages where it does.

I have confessed before, and I do so again, that I myself once held the "change-of-mind" view. But I have changed my mind about repentance meaning simply a change of mind. My views on the whole subject are presented in the book, *Harmony with God: A Fresh Look at Repentance*.

But the question is this. Can grace people still search the Scriptures honestly when some traditional view of their own is called into question? Are we open to the Word of God whether it agrees with us or not?

B. FUDGING ON THE SIMPLICITY OF FAITH

There is another area where we need complete openness to God's Word. That area involves the amazing simplicity of Biblical faith.

I am convinced that some committed grace people are still a little scared by the simplicity of believing in Christ. They are eager to avoid the charge that we teach mere intellectual assent. It is hard for people like this to agree that faith and salvation occur when the core message of the Gospel is simply accepted as true.

Instead they wish to hedge this position with the requirement that faith must include some personal element like trust. Or that I must make some personal appropriation of the saving offer. This is the perspective that rapidly leads to urging, or even requiring, a prayer of faith.

I have argued elsewhere that trust can often be used as a synonym for faith. But when trust is seen as an improvement on the word *faith* (or, on the word *believe*) the door to confusion is open. What often results is a two-step view of faith: Step 1: believe the facts; Step 2: trust Christ for eternal life. The Bible knows no such distinction as this.

At the conclusion of John 9, the Lord Jesus says to the former blind man: “Do you believe in the Son of God?” The man replies, “Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?” Jesus’ response is majestic: “You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking to you.” Then the former blind man says, “Lord, I believe.”

This is an impressive passage. The issue of concern is in no way what “believe” might mean. Rather, the former blind man feels only a need for information. The term “Son of God,” of course, was a functional equivalent of the term “Christ,” as John 20:30-31 shows. The former blind man understood that Jesus must be telling him that the Christ was present somewhere. His confidence in Jesus is so high that he needs only to find out who Jesus is referring to. Jesus informs him that He is referring to Himself.

So the man believes. That is, he believes that Jesus is the Christ and is thus born of God in conformity with John 20:30-31 and 1 John 5:1.

But if this former blind man had been a 21st century Evangelical, he might have said: “Lord, what do you mean by believe?” “Do you mean personal trust?” “Do you mean intellectual assent?” “Do you mean commitment of the whole person?”

I hope you see that, in the context of John 9, such statements are actually theological nonsense. They are the result of failing to take the Biblical treatment of faith at face value. When it comes to believing something, the Bible does not contradict normal usage or common sense. Theologians have been known to do both!

We have no excuse, really, not to see the extreme simplicity of Biblical belief. The question is, however, whether we are open to this aspect of the Biblical testimony about faith. Or will we continue to hedge our view of faith with alternate expressions and unbiblical provisos?

C. SUMMARY

The issues I have just discussed are examples only. They are intended to remind us that the grace movement must bring all of its convictions to the bar of Scripture. And we must be prepared to revise these convictions however God's Word requires. No movement can remain vital which no longer examines itself in the light of Scripture.

When such examination of our convictions ceases, tradition and dead orthodoxy are not far down the road.

III. THE DANGER OF LOSING THE HISTORICITY OF THE GOSPEL

Now we come to the major burden of my talk today. A second danger that confronts the grace movement is the loss of the historicity of the gospel message.

My reference to the former blind man in John 9 was definitely not a throw-away illustration. It happens to impinge directly on my chief concern.

Did you notice that when Jesus said, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" the blind man did not say something like, "Well, of course I do?" Instead the blind man said (and I admit I'm paraphrasing): "Well, I'd love to believe in Him but before I can do that, I'll have to know who He is"! Are you impressed by that? I certainly am.

You see, it is sometimes suggested that a heathen person in some far-away land can get saved just by trusting the Creator God to save him. Acting on the light of nature he puts his eternal destiny in the hands of his Maker and is born again. Without knowing it, he has believed in God's provision through Jesus Christ.

I'm sorry. It's a beautiful scenario, but very contrary to the Scripture. What it does in fact is this. It denies the essential historicity of the gospel. It does this by denying that the gospel is inseparable from the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth.

If the truth which men must believe to be eternally saved is separated from Jesus, it is also separated from history. This separation in turn re-

sults in a separation from the Biblical revelation itself and from the Messiahship of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

A. BACK TO THE DESERTED ISLAND

Several years ago I created a deserted island scenario that some of you may remember. The man who is marooned on that island gets a fragment of the Gospel of John that has washed up on the beach. That fragment contains the opening words of John 6:43, “Jesus therefore answered and said to them” and everything is unreadable until we reach the words of John 6:47, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.”

My question was, “Is that enough information for the man to get saved?” My answer, of course, was “yes.” But now I want to offer you a variation on my deserted island scenario. Suppose the portion of John 6:43 containing, “Jesus answered and said to them,” was missing. Does the man still have enough information to get saved?

This time my answer is, “no.”

Note well, that even though the entirety of John 6:47 is legible for our marooned man, he does not know who the “I” or the “Me” refer to. He would have to enquire about the identity of the “I” and the “Me” of this verse, just as the former blind man enquired about the identity of the Son of God.

Let me state this issue in terms of the purpose of the Gospel of John. According to John 20: 30-31, the book was written that “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ.” Please notice that it was not written simply that we might believe in the Christ. No, instead, it was written that we might believe that “*Jesus is the Christ.*”

Think about this for a moment. We are not being called to believe that the Christ will give us eternal life. Rather we are called to believe that Jesus gives us eternal life because *Jesus is the Christ.*

Or take 1 John 5:1. “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” Did you notice something? It is not, “whoever believes in the Christ for eternal life is born of God.” But once again, the issue is Jesus. If we believe that Jesus is the Christ, then—but only then—do we have a promise of eternal life.

The NT offers eternal life exclusively to those who believe in Jesus for it. There is no other offer of eternal life in the NT. None. Zero. Zip. Nada.

Jesus is man's only way to God. He Himself says so. In words familiar to all of us, Jesus said to Thomas, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). No one gets to the Father apart from Jesus. In the context of the Gospel of John, this *does not mean* that men may come to God and not know that they come by means of Jesus.

On the contrary, John is always at pains to point the believer to the historical Jesus as the Object of His faith.

B. FAITH IN JESUS SAVES

As you can see, the Gospel of John teaches that people are saved by believing in Jesus. Not by believing in God. Not by believing in an unknown Messiah. But by believing in Jesus. Regardless of how people were saved in the OT, this is how they are saved now.

This is certainly not contradicted by John 5:24. We are used to reading that verse this way: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears my word *and believes in Him who sent Me* has everlasting life" (emphasis added). But the first thing we must notice is that there is nothing in the Greek to correspond to the word "in."

So we really should read the verse like this: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word *and believes Him who sent Me* has everlasting life." Notice carefully: the believer hears Jesus' word and, when he believes it, he is believing the God who sent Jesus. The point is, of course, that Jesus' word is God's word. To believe Jesus' word is to believe what God says.

This is an important point for John. Take, for example, John 12:48-50. Jesus says:

He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak.

Or again, in John 8:28, we read:

When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, so I speak these things.

As my former Greek students will all know (I hope!), John's characteristic phrase for the faith that brings eternal life is *pisteuō eis*. This is usually rendered by our English versions as "believe in" or "believe on." But *pisteuō eis* is not found in John 5:24. (Instead we find *pisteuōn tō*) It was a mistake for the translators to use the words "believe in" (or, *on*: KJV) in John 5:24. John *never* makes God the Father the Object of *pisteuō eis*.

John's point is *not* that we can "believe in" God for eternal life just like we do when we "believe in" Jesus for that. On the contrary, his point is that when we believe Jesus' word we are, in fact, believing something God Himself is saying to us.

And of course, faith in Jesus' word is still faith in Jesus. But obviously, the saving experience of John 5:24 cannot come to someone who has never heard Jesus' word. No matter what he believes about the Creator, the heathen person still needs to hear the message brought by the Savior whom the Creator has sent. And note well: when the unsaved person believes the word of Jesus, he is not simply believing God, but he is believing the God *who sent Jesus!*

To put it plainly, *God apart from Jesus* is never the Object of the faith that brings eternal life.

Of similar significance is the way the Samaritan woman of John 4 is led to faith in a specific historical person. Jesus first draws her attention to the water of life that He can give to her. Then as the exchange between her and the Son of God draws to its climax, the woman states: "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When He comes, He will tell us all things."

As you already know, the climax of this unforgettable interview comes when our Lord announces: "I who speak to you am He." Like the blind man of John 9, she places her faith in the person of Jesus.

Someone may wish to haggle here and raise the question, Did she know His name was Jesus? To this we may say two things: (1) it would be surprising if she did not. After all, this is a mere fragment of the total conversation. Would they not have introduced themselves to each other at some point? But (2) it doesn't really matter. It was the historical person called Jesus that she believed in. Who is the Christ? "You're looking at Him," says Jesus.

I am reminded also of the statement Jesus makes in John 6:40: "And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who *sees the Son* and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the

last day.” Once again, identification of the historical person is the issue. Of course, an individual can be saved without seeing Him as John 20:29 makes clear. But if someone sees Him and believes in Him, he has obviously believed in a particular historical person. The Gospel of John is completely adamant that the historical person of Jesus must be the focus of our faith if we are to have eternal life.

As the apostle Paul has put it, God is “just and the justifier of the one who has *faith in Jesus*” (Romans 3:26).

There is no salvation for anyone outside of faith in the historical person of Jesus Christ. The NT promise of eternal life is made exclusively to believers in the historical Jesus. Nothing else has even a shred of Biblical evidence.

If the grace movement should ever lose its grip on this simple fact, it would have subverted the gospel and subverted the worldwide evangelistic enterprise. Just as grievously, it would have failed to properly honor the name that God has placed above every name. Someday, every knee will bow to that name, and every tongue will confess, the exalted name of Jesus to the glory of God the Father. God has ordained that the name of Jesus should be the one and only name in the universe that is a source of eternal salvation.

If the grace movement ever loses all this, it would richly deserve to die.

C. THE SPIRIT OF THE ANTICHRIST

In the light of all we have just said, we can better appreciate the subtle wickedness of the spirit of the Antichrist.

As John informs us in his First Epistle, there are already many antichrists in the world. His words are familiar:

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 it is the last hour.

Shortly afterwards, he adds,

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?

In chapter 4, the Apostle also says:

. . . and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in 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 [see 1 John 2:18, 21-22; 4:3].

Please observe. The spirit of the Antichrist is revealed by denying that Jesus is the Christ, or by denying the historical manifestation of the Christ who came in the flesh and blood of Jesus.

Let me stress that the spirit of the Antichrist is not defined by denying that there *is* a Christ. Nor is this spirit even defined by denying the *salvific significance* of the Christ.

He is defined instead by the denial that the historical Jesus—the Jesus who had flesh and blood—is indeed the Christ.

Even more precisely, this spirit is defined by a *failure to confess* this truth. Listen to 1 John 4:3 again: *every spirit which does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist . . .*” (underlining added).

Needless to say, the Satanic assault is targeted at the person of Jesus for the precise reason that there is no salvation apart from faith in Jesus. One can actually articulate a gospel that even sounds theologically correct, but without Jesus it is not the gospel at all.

For example, I might say: *salvation is by grace alone through faith in Christ*. But if the hearer does not know that the Christ is the historical Jesus, he does not yet know how to be saved. Like the blind man of John 9, he will have to ask, “Who is the Christ that I might believe in Him?”

And if Jesus is totally subtracted from my message, so that there is no witness to Him as God’s Christ, my message is not merely inadequate. It is also perfectly acceptable to the spirit of the Antichrist.

IV. CONCLUSION

There is no question in my mind that God has raised up the grace movement and is using it widely. On the other hand, we live in a very confused world. And our world is headed for even greater confusion as the end of the age approaches.

We ought therefore to feel a new sense of urgency to keep the Scriptures as our guide as we navigate through the shadows and twilight that are rapidly gathering. In addition to the old forms of confusion about the

gospel, we must also face the rise of new forms of error like contemplative spirituality.

I am reminded of the solemn words of Jesus as He spoke about the end of the age. His warning was grim: “For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Matt 24:24).

Unless the grace movement holds firmly to the uniqueness of the Biblical gospel and to the indispensability of the name of Jesus for salvation, it cannot hope to accomplish what it ought to accomplish for God. Indeed if it does not do these things, it may be buried under an ocean of false theology. It may be washed away by the experience-based religion that is all too rapidly rising to prominence, as our world hurtles toward divine judgment.

So what’s my final word today? Here it is: *Stay awake; it’s later than you think!*