Why We Need the Biblical Concept of "Christian Antichrists" to Address Christianity's Abuses

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Bible First: Politics Conference
March 25, 2025

There's a recurring problem in Christian history, but it is so acute at the present moment as to have reached crisis levels: Christians' abuse of power. Month by month more prominent American Christian leaders (bishops, megachurch pastors, priests, heads of Christian ministries) are exposed as power abusers. Often this abuse—at least that which hits the headlines—is sexual in nature, but the insane levels of sexual predation among name-brand Christian leaders is often accompanied by abuse of authority and financial fraud. How have we so systematically elevated scoundrels?

Even worse, the authoritarianism within the church mirrors a broader Christian-led turn toward authoritarian politics. Christianity has become a cultural bully. Backed by the autocratic rhetoric and enforcement of the current administration, conservative Christian leaders in America have lobbied for and formed an "Anti-Christian Bias Task Force" and they cry "persecution" anytime a Christian is insulted or faces a little opposition. So much for "turn the other cheek;" now it's "pass the ammunition."

These hostile Christians who act like an aggrieved minority while persecuting their perceived enemies fail to mention that we are still a solidly majority-Christian nation (63% of all Americans identify as Christian). They also fail to note that conservative Christians presently hold sway over the presidency, both houses of our Congress, and our Supreme Court, and they also have unified control over more states than their opposition.[1] There is no more politically powerful group in the United States than these supposedly persecuted Christians, yet they install authoritarians and trample the rights of others while presenting themselves as the persecuted ones.

It is unfortunately necessary, therefore, that we say loudly and publicly that this is not what Jesus lived or taught. Jesus did not seek coercive power over others. Even Jesus's concept of the kingdom of God (read closely across all four gospels) is not a dominating or imperial imposition. It comes in secretive nature parables and speaks dignity to broken and ostracized bodies and hearts. The kingdom of God is where "whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 10:44 NIV) and where we take up our crosses in imitation

[1] MultiState, "2025 State Government Trifectas," last modified February 6, 2025, https://www.multistate.us/resources/2025-state-government-trifectas.

of our sacrificial king. In the kingdom of God, we bless our persecutors, we don't sic partisan government task forces on them.

The incarnation (God taking on flesh to be human with us) and the crucifixion (God dying a human death in solidarity with us and on our behalf) carry the promise of an anti-authoritarian God. Jesus could have been born in Caesar's palace and consolidated rule over all the kingdoms of the world in one human lifetime, but instead God was born in a stable, in a backwater corner of Caesar's empire, and God died a merciless colonizing death at the hands of Caesar's soldiers in order to teach us that God is not a tyrant.

The God conveyed to us in Jesus, the very premise of Christianity, identifies with the lowest, the disabled, and the overpowered. The message of the incarnation, from the perspective of the early church, was deeply egalitarian: God has dignified the least among us, humanized us all. Indeed, "to humanize" is a verb that works in both directions: it lifts the lowly and brings the powerful back into the circle of common humanity. As Mary, the mother of Jesus—the Incarnator herself—sings about God's work in the world through her son:

> he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
> He has brought down rulers from their thrones
> but has lifted up the humble.
> He has filled the hungry with good things
> but has sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53 NIV)

Even more, look at the way Jesus lived. His whole life was a regimented campaign of compassion, serving, healing, and dignifying the victims of empire. The people Jesus hung out with and the people he served and blessed were the people whose nationality, healthcare history, skin color, gender, sexual behavior, and religious identification didn't match the Roman (or Jewish) ideal. Jesus defied the tyrants of his day, both Herod and Caesar. He sent a direct message to Herod calling him a fox (Luke 13:32), and Jesus died by execution at the hands of Caesar's army for disrupting the corrupt autocratic order of the Pax Romana.

So how do we reconcile these two realities? 1) Jesus and the early church were profoundly anti-authoritarian, teaching an inverted vision of servanthood and sacrifice, both within their own communities and in relation to the broader empire. Yet 2) countless Christians throughout history and in the present have embraced empire, blessed the naked authoritarian quest for more power, and abused their own power and authority within the church.

Even more perplexing, most of these Christians who abuse power are theologically orthodox in the formal sense—they can say the Nicene Creed without crossing their fingers. They are, by all appearances, quite pious and sincere in their authoritarian faith. Some of them are bestselling authors and respected teachers within the church, popular

preachers and commentators. But their behavior is destroying our churches and our democracy!

Are they just *bad* Christians? Are they just in an adolescent phase of their spiritual development? Must we simply be quiet, have patience, and maintain communion waiting on God to convict and correct such egregiously erring Christians?

This is a place where Christianity is vocabularily impoverished. We have a very good word for people whose theology has become totally corrupt: we call them *heretics*. That is how we have defined the boundary lines of Christianity. Inside the lines (i.e., you say and mean the creeds), means you're orthodox—a Christian. Outside the lines and you're a heretic. But what do we call Christians—who may be formally orthodox and even members in good standing of their churches—whose approach to power has become totally corrupt? They aren't *apostate* in that they have not renounced the faith. Quite the opposite: they declare their total allegiance to Jesus. They commit abuse in Jesus's name, harming their fellow Christians and their non-Christian neighbors alike. They bastardize Jesus as their new Caesar, bringing the gospel of a Pax Christiana, and cast themselves as emissaries of this heavenly tyrant, bringing God's colonizing kingdom to earth.

In this paper, I would like to contend that we actually have the perfect word for power-abusing and authoritarian Christians in our New Testament vocabulary, and it isn't even some obscure Greek word that's going to be hard for most of us to pronounce. No, this is a word that everyone knows, but, unfortunately this very useful word got stuck in an eschatological cul de sac for centuries. The word is *antichrists*. The people who abuse and harm others in Jesus's name are Christian antichrists. At least, that's what the early church called them.

Isolating the Johannine Context

To even invoke the word Antichrist summons a flood of images: Hollywood blockbusters, apocalyptic death cults, hackneyed Christian fiction. But when you actually look at the biblical texts that get bundled together into the standard "the Antichrist is an end-of-the-world tyrant who will come and persecute Christians" narrative, you realize that the connections among these texts are pretty thin. I am not here arguing entirely against this narrative, which many Christians adhere to, but I will make the case that there is much more flexibility to this term in the Bible, particularly when it is used in the plural.

Most of what we think about as "the Antichrist" material in the Bible comes from the book of Revelation, though the word or concept of antichrist is never used there. Instead, the great villains of Revelation are the Beast (an apocalyptically encoded Caesar, particularly signifying Nero) and the Whore Babylon (an apocalyptically encoded Rome, the oppressive empire). Still, century upon century, Christians have appended the title Antichrist to the Beast and all his characteristics.

Another influential text in the standard Antichrist digression is 2 Thessalonians. There we encounter a mysterious character whom Paul elusively refers to as "the man of lawlessness." Specifically, he says that the return of Jesus and our reunification with him cannot happen "unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 NRSV). This sure sounds to me like a slightly veiled Pauline reference to the imperial cult that required all Romans to bow before Caesar as a god (a paradigmatic element of Pax Romana authoritarianism). But I'll not quibble with those who want to understand the man of lawlessness in conjunction with the Beast as some future idolatrous despot. I'll just note that the word *antichrist* doesn't occur anywhere in 2 Thessalonians or anywhere in the Pauline literature.

No, within the whole canon of the Christian Bible, the word *antichrist* only appears in one lonely corner of the New Testament: the epistles of John (1, 2, and 3 John). I'm going to argue that, if we isolate the context of these letters and try to understand the original biblical concept of antichrist(s), it seems to signal something quite different from these eschatological personalities. Still, beginning in the late second century, Christian interpreters have bundled together the Beast, the man of lawlessness, various references from the Book of Daniel, and slapped the label Antichrist into the a culminating figure of human and diabolical evil.

Yet to focus on the original context of the term is to discover a much greater range. These letters of John to an unnamed church have deep vocabulary and theological resonance with the gospel of John, almost certainly coming from the same strain of early Christianity. This is what we awkwardly in English call the Johannine tradition. But the author of the epistles goes unnamed in the texts, and he/she/they merely self identifies as "the elder" in 2 and 3 John. John is the name that tradition has attached to these texts, so I'll just refer to the author hereafter as John the Elder.

Near as we can historically date them, these letters came very late in the New Testament corpus, possibly even into the first decade of the second century (100-110 CE). Here, a couple generations after the apostles passed away, we're beginning to see schisms and sectarian identities emerge within the church. Indeed, the situation of the Johannine epistles is that there has been a fracture within the Johannine community, and a group of Christians (how many is unclear) has broken off. The whole epistle of 1 John appears to be written to help the Johannine community process this amputation, to cauterize the communal wounds. It is these break-away Christians who get called the antichrists.

I suggest that we take an inductive approach to understanding the original meaning of this historically loaded word. This entails looking for contextual clues within the Johannine epistles for why John the Elder and the aggrieved community to which he writes felt comfortable calling some of their fellow Christians antichrists.

Who Gets Called an Antichrist in the Bible?

The context of this recent, painful schism thrums underneath the surface of the whole of 1 John, but the Elder first addresses it directly in the second chapter:

> Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not belong to us, for if they had belonged to us they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. (1 John 2:18-19 NRSV)

Clearly, there is some eschatological resonance to this passage ("it is the last hour"—*eschatē hōra estin*), and we can see easily how this allusion to an imminent threat—"you have heard that antichrist is coming"—could be read as a future prediction. If Christians want to interpret this as a forecasting of the culmination of human history, aligning it with Revelation and 2 Thessalonians, they are welcome to. I'm much more concerned with the second part of the sentence: "so now many antichrists have come." Categorically, *antichrist* is not a set of one within the biblical vocabulary. Even if some of us might want to interpret the singular eschatologically, these verses make clear that the plural, antichrists are a concrete, present reality.

The departure of these antichrists from the Johannine community ("They went out from us") betokens a deeper divide: "by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us." In other words, the departure did not cause the antichrists to become antichrists; it took a deeper schism of belonging and identity and "made it plain."

So what did the antichrists say or do to earn them this severest term of Christian criticism? I'm going to contend that the Johannine community has three major complaints against the antichrists, we might call these the three characteristics whose nexus shapes the category of "Christian antichrists:" they deny the incarnation of Jesus; they claim superiority over fellow Christians; and they harm and abuse others.

First, the antichrists deny the incarnation of Jesus. In fact, this is the recurring theme across all three passages where antichrists are discussed in the Bible. For example, this passage from 1 John 2 continues: "Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also" (1 John 2:22-23 NRSV).

This is echoed in the other explicit passage about antichrists in 1 John, two chapters later, where the Elder instructs the community to "test the spirits," 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 from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the

> spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world… They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. (1 John 4:1-5 NRSV)

These verses suggest a possible bridge between the singular references to "the antichrist" and the plural language of "antichrists": namely, that there is a "spirit of the antichrist" that is "already in the world," animating the plural antichrists and their behavior.

Finally, these themes of deception and denial of the flesh of Jesus are echoed in the lone reference to antichrists in 2 John: "Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist!" (2 John 7 NRSV). We have again this blending of singular ("the antichrist"—*ho antichristos*) and plural ("many deceivers").

What I have just recounted in this section are *all* the instances of the word antichrist—in singular or in plural—in the Bible. The recurring theme across these passages, what we might consider the core criterion that defines the class of the antichrists, is their denial that Jesus is from God and that he has come in the flesh. This direct connection between denying the incarnation and being an antichrist has led many interpreters to simply categorize the Johannine antichrists as a particular breed of heretics (perhaps an early form of Docetism or Gnosticism).

I find this to be a dissatisfying conclusion. This talk of "heresy" and "heretics" in the sense of people departing from settled, consensus Christian doctrines was a later development, really beginning with Irenaeus at least a half century after these texts were composed. Indeed, it's anachronistic to project too many formal creedal sensibilities back on the very early church. This was still the era in which *orthodox* Christianity was being assembled. The very texts of the New Testament canon were still being composed. Plus, if you read the text of 1 John closely, it's evident that this is not merely an abstract theological argument, but it goes to the very core of the Chrisitan faith: the antichrists are not denying the *doctrine* of the incarnation (if such can be said to exist in a formal sense at the time), they are denying the *meaning* of the incarnation.

This brings us to a very important point: The antichrists are—by all observable human qualities— Christians, as in people who profess to follow Jesus. As Christians, we encounter the spirit of antichrist not as some distant eschatological rumbling on the horizon, but everywhere among us. Antichrists are among our coreligionists, our fellow pew-sitters, members of our Christian family. That is what makes the pain of the schism so acute. That is the context of this serious word *antichrists*: it is reserved for people who profess to be our fellow Christians but are deceivers. It's not that they're not *really* Christians. A Christian is someone who professes to follow Jesus. They are deceivers in the sense that they claim Christ while denying him in their every behavior. They do harm in—and, indeed, to—Jesus's name.

So, what does it mean for people who claim to be Christians to "deny that Jesus is the Christ" or to fail to acknowledge that Jesus is God's Son in the flesh? Here we must remember what the incarnation meant to the early church. It was not merely a line in a creed, it was the vital, dignifying, equalizing humanity of God. The mystery of God's self-lowering and self-emptying in Jesus was at the very heart of the Christian faith. Jesus's flesh is what dignifies all of our flesh.

The accusatory language about the antichrists in the Johannine epistles doesn't just remain in the realm of theology or belief or confession. It is the *behavior* of the antichrists that draws the most condemnatory language in the Johannine epistles. Because there's more than one way to deny the incarnation.

Christian Superiority Complexes and Christian Abusers

Threaded through John the Elder's condemnation of the antichrists, are a series of urgently tender exhortations directed the Johannine community:

> But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and *all of you have knowledge*. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because *you know it*, and you know that no lie comes from the truth….
>
> I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, so *you do not need anyone to teach you*. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him. (1 John 2:20-21, 26-27 NRSV, emphasis added)

It is evident that the antichrists had claimed to have some special knowledge or special teaching, and their departure has left the remaining community members deeply insecure: *What if there really is a special track, a superior Christianity, an inner sanctum?* John's exhortations remind them of the fundamental egalitarian meaning of the incarnation: God has dignified all of us. All of us have knowledge. All of us have access to Jesus and can abide in his teachings. There are no hierarchies of human being or human value in the kingdom of God.

What special knowledge did the antichrists imagine they had on offer? We can only speculate. But here we find another characteristic of the antichrists: they seek and claim superiority. They elevate themselves, positioning themselves as a cut above other Christians. If the incarnation brings the truth of human equality before and union with God, denying the incarnation here means deception and building new hierarchies of value within the community of Jesus.

But it's worse than that. When you read 1 John against the backdrop of this schism, you realize how much of the language of reproach is directed at these power-hungry fellow Christians.

> They are "liar[s]" and "the truth is not in [them]" (2:4).
>
> They claim "to be in the light, but [they hate] a brother or sister." So, in reality, they "walk around in darkness... because the darkness has blinded them" (2:9-11).
>
> They are not "God's children" but instead are "of the devil" and are even "children of the devil" because they "do not love their brother or sister" (3:8-10).
>
> They are "like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother" out of hate (3:12).
>
> If they do "not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, [they] cannot love God whom they have not seen" (4:20).

What earned this group the title of "antichrists" was not merely a theological transgression: rejecting the incarnation idea or pretending to have some secret knowledge. It was the combination of their dehumanizing and dominating behavior while claiming to be the true Christians. Antichrists do real harm to people and to God's name. While claiming to be in conformity with him, they are behaviorally the opposite of the Jesus. They abuse power and pretend it is godliness.

Antichrist is a more primal rebuke than *heretic* because it is as much about behavior as it is about beliefs. Antichrists deny the incarnation in word and deed, maligning the character of God in their greedy quest for power. If the Spirit of Christ leads his followers into freedom, love, gentleness, kindness, patience, and generosity (Galatians 5:22-23), the spirit of antichrist leads Christians into the opposite: hatred, sexual predation, abuse, greed, bullying, and authoritarianism.

Conclusion

It's unfortunate that this very useful Christian vocabulary word *antichrists* got stuck in an eschatological cul de sac for hundreds of years, but we don't have to leave it there. Though I find them interesting in their own right, I think we can bracket the debates about who or what is the singular Antichrist and when or whether he is coming. But the passage plainly states that whatever "you have heard that antichrist is coming" means, the reality is that "now many antichrists have come." "[T]he spirit of the antichrist… it is already in the world."

Heretic is the biblical word we have chosen in the Christian tradition to describe those who have so departed from the teachings of the apostles as to be outside of the Christian

circle. *Apostate* is the biblical word we have chosen in the Christian tradition to describe those who have renounced the faith, placing themselves outside of the Christian circle. I would humbly suggest that *antichrist* be the biblical term we use to describe people who are ostensibly within the Christian circle but whose abusive, idolatrous, power-hungry behavior utterly betrays the anti-authoritarian teachings of Jesus and the self-sacrificial way he taught us.

Heretics poison others' theology. Apostates poison others' faith. Antichrists' poison the name of Jesus by perpetrating and justifying horrors in his name.

The reclamation of this term and concept offers us a very different lens on Christian history. What were the Crusades, the Inquisition, Christian colonialism, the enslavement of countless Africans by Christian empires, the Christian conquest of the New World—dehumanizing atrocities done in the name of Christ with the tacit approval of many Christians and churches—but the spirit of the antichrist manifesting? How many of the great "victories" Christianity and expansions of Christendom, were actually just building more earthly kingdoms for antichrists?

Even more salient, this word and concept offers us a line in the sand for the defense of the heart of the Christian faith that is before us at this moment. Our fellow Christians—many of our acclaimed-but-unaccountable leaders—are abusing and destroying countless lives within our churches. Our fellow Christians are blessing authoritarianism, demonizing LGBTQ human beings and migrant human beings. Our fellow Christians are sanctioning atrocities and dehumanizing behavior in Jesus's name. How can those of us who sincerely aim to live and proclaim the way of Christ do so in such an environment without being able to accurately characterize the other side of this intra-Christian argument? It is antichrist.