

Scripture distinguishes between Antichrists and the Antichrist

There is no neutrality concerning Christ. Jesus said, *“He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who is not gathering with Me is scattering”* (Matthew 12:30). In general, people are either for Christ or they are against Him. Yet there are those who are more than just against Christ. There are those who, either individually or collectively, attack His person and work with great vehemence. Scripture speaks of these as Antichrists and the Antichrist. John made a distinction between them. In regard to Antichrists, he wrote: *“Children, it is the last hour and, as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹ They went out from us but did not belong to us. For, if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. However, they went out that they might be made known, because not all belong to us”* (1 John 2:18-19).

John spoke of the last hour, the time from the coming of the Antichrists to Christ’s second coming. He said that many Antichrists have come. These are the false prophets, the deceivers who have fallen away from the truth while still clinging to an outward connection with the visible church. John also wrote, *“Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This one is the Antichrist: he who denies the Father and the Son. ²³ Everyone who denies the Son does not have the Father either. The one who confesses the Son also has the Father* (1 John 2:22-23). *“For many deceivers, who do not confess that Jesus Christ comes in a human body, have gone out into the world. This is the deceiver and the Antichrist”* (2 John 7). These errorists subvert the teaching of Scripture on Christ and His saving work. They overthrow the teaching of justification by grace through faith. They destroy the foundation of faith.

There have been Antichrists in every period of New Testament church history. In the apostles’ day, there were the Judaizers (cf. Galatians), who overthrew the doctrine of justification by their demands that people keep the Mosaic Law for salvation. There was Cerinthus, who was active at Ephesus around A.D. 100 (cf. John’s Gospel and 1 John). Cerinthus taught that Jesus was just a man upon whom a divine power descended at the time of His baptism and left Him at the time of His crucifixion. Thus he denied the true deity of Christ and His saving work. In the 2nd century, there were the Gnostics, who denied the true deity and the true humanity of Christ as well as His saving work. In the times around the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), there were the Manichaeans (from Mani, ca. 216-277), who taught that salvation came through denying one’s flesh; there were the Arians who denied the true deity of Jesus. In our day there are many who still deny the true deity of Christ and His saving work. All these are the Antichrists of whom John spoke.

Scripture speaks of many forces and powers which are actively hostile to Christ and His Church, and uses the term “Antichrist” with reference to some of them (Daniel 11:36-38; Matthew 24:22-25; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-9; 1 John 2:18-22 - compare the whole passage, 18-23; 1 John 4:1-6; 2 John 7; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, compare also 13-17.)

These and similar passages reveal to the Church that anti-Christian forces will appear in various recurrent forms until the end of time. So when we see these forces attacking the Church today, it really should come as no surprise to us. But we take heart, because Christ Himself has overcome the world (John 16:33). We can be of good cheer because Jesus has won the victory over the world. Jesus has overcome every temptation and every bit of opposition the world brought against Him, and He continues to assure us that He has finished the job of our salvation. His is the one true message of salvation. And what is that message? Because of His death and resurrection, we believe and live. Eternal life belongs to us!