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PROPHECY MAKES STRANGE BEDFELLOWS: ON THE HISTORY OF IDENTIFYING THE ANTICHRIST

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In the history of American literature, perhaps no two stranger bedfellows exist than Herman Melville's naïve but adventurous Ishmael and the skillful harpooner but strangely tattooed, and, one might add, cannibalistic, Queequeg. Upon barely observing Queequeg's decorated body, the skull he is unable to sell, and the harpoon which never left his side, in the dark of the room, Ishmael, fearing for his life, mutters, "Yes it's just as I thought, he's a terrible bedfellow." That is, no stranger bedfellows, until one considers a particular point of prophetic interpretation, namely, identifying the antichrist. What do the eschatologies of J. Dwight Pentecost and John Calvin have in common? Hal Lindsey and Jonathan Edwards? Increase Mather and Arno C. Gaebelein? On the one hand, the answer is not much. Such different eschatologies, nonetheless, yield a rather surprising connection. All of these, as well as a host of others, identify the Pope as the antichrist.

Not only is this commonality strange given the different theological perspectives and hermeneutics of these figures, it also confounds understanding given the distance—chronological, geographical, and sociological—between them. I suppose one can conclude that in light of the similar exegetical conclusion in spite of such theological, hermeneutical, and other differences, this is a clear case of the text triumphing over tradition, interpretation trumping theology. In other words, if these interpreters understand the antichrist to be the Pope, then, goes the logic, they are right. I might propose a different way to interpret this data. The point is, the whole task of identifying the antichrist, which has a long and cornucopian history indeed, is a misdirected quest. The text never calls upon us to identify the antichrist. In fact, some have argued that to impose such a construct as *the* antichrist upon the text is unwarranted. This isolated issue serves to highlight the danger of allowing sociological factors to govern our understanding of texts in general and prophetic texts in particular. As the Church enters the new millennium perhaps such cautions are especially in order. Below follows a brief and selective survey of the history of identifying the antichrist, with an emphasis on the predominant, sometimes called the Protestant interpretation, *viz.* of the pope as antichrist. Some conclusions

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concerning this enterprise and apocalyptic speculations and prophetic interpretations will be drawn. First, however, a brief examination of the Biblical teaching on antichrist is in order.

I. ANTICHRIST IN SCRIPTURE

Despite the literature on antichrist there is a paucity of explicit references to antichrist in Scripture. Only John in his epistles employs the term, four times in the singular (1 John 2:18; 2:22; 4:3; and 2 John 7) and once in the plural (1 John 2:18). Two elements in these texts encourage the reader not to look for an individual *per se*. First, the use of *antichristoi polloi* in 1 John 2:18 defies the interpretation that antichrist is an individual. Secondly, 1 John 4:3 refers to the interpolated but warranted *to pneuma tou antichristou*, which may very well be understood impersonally and so would be translated as "you have heard that *it* comes, and now it is already in the world," following the NRSV and NAS. The NIV omits the pronoun altogether. So John speaks of a spirit of antichrist already present in the world. Further, John identifies antichrist for the reader as the one(s) who denies the deity of Christ. Thus 2:22 reads, "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." In 4:3 John adds that every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God: "this is the spirit of antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world." 2 John 7 states the matter directly: "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist." John provides a singular criterion for identifying antichrists: a heretical Christology. One could conclude that antichrist in John is no less an individual than it is false teaching; John's audience may well have understood antichrist to be no more than anti-Christian theology.[1] One is just as warranted as identifying false teaching as antichrist as identifying many people as antichrist. So Polycarp writes in his letter to the Philippians, "Everyone who does not confess Jesus Christ to have come in the flesh is antichrist."[2] For Polycarp, and for that matter for John, the docetists were antichrists. The more tenuous conclusion would be to look for one particular individual to fit the bill. Nonetheless, it is this latter interpretation that holds sway. Such an interpretation is essential to naming antichrist because these texts are the linchpin to that whole enterprise.

From the perspective of systematic theology, one would err not to look for connections of John's teaching here to other texts. It would be fallacious, besides, to assume that the absence of the term antichrist elsewhere in Scripture necessarily means the absence of teaching on this subject. Kenneth Grayston challenges such an approach with John's antichrist texts by arguing that it is unwarranted to connect John's teaching here to other texts

[1] C. H. Dodd interprets antichrist as an idea, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946) 50.

[2] Polycarp, "Epistle to the Philippians," ANF 1.34 [Philippians 7].

given John's specificity. Additionally, there is nothing explicitly relating John's material to the other so-called antichrist material.[3] Raymond Brown takes a different approach. While acknowledging the peculiarity of the term antichrist in the Johannine epistles, Brown argues that this teaching "represents a convergence of various background factors in Judaism."[4] He identifies four loci, namely: (1) the sea monster or Leviathan—a reference to the parallels to ANE cosmogenic struggle; (2) Satan or an angelic adversary; (3) a human ruler embodying evil; and (4) the false prophet. Brown probably represents the majority of commentators, and so those wishing to best understand John's point here should look elsewhere. Typically three trajectories are taken. First, one goes back to Christ's teaching, which in turn leads to a few salient OT texts. Secondly, one turns to Paul in 2 Thessalonians. Finally, John's apocalypse, most notably chapter 13, comes into view.

Concerning the Gospels, Christ speaks of both false messiahs—antimessiahs, and, of course, of his adversaries. Christ probably has a false messiah in view when he juxtaposes his rejection for coming in the father's name, while "if another comes in his own name, you will receive him" (John 5:34). Also, Christ warns his disciples that "false christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect" (Matt 24:24). Some interpreters are quick to connect this idea with the reference to the abomination of desolation given just prior in the discourse (Matt 24:15). Once this connection is made, the "little horn" of Daniel 7 or the "prince to come" of Daniel 9 can now be brought into the picture. Of course, this line is not so straight as it appears to be. Christ speaks of false christs in the plural. There is no implicit reference, yet an explicit reference, to the little horn or the prince to come as John's antichrist. These factors mitigate connecting the antichrist to Matthew 24 or, for that matter, to Daniel 7–9.

The other line traces 1 John to 2 Thess 2:3–12. Here Paul speaks of the revelation and activity of the "lawless one."[5] There are some connections to the description here and the description of the little horn of Daniel. Both are anarchistic, blasphemous, and idolatrous to the highest order in that they present themselves as God.[6] The connection to 1 John, however, is not so clear. There is no reference to John's singular criterion of heretical Christology in Paul's description.

This leaves one final line to trace, namely, John's Apocalypse. While one may point to similarities of portions such as chapter 13, to the Olivet Discourse and/or to portions of Daniel, it proves more difficult to make a connection here to 1 John 2 and 4 and 2 John. While the beast does not exhibit

[3] Kenneth Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

[4] Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (New York: Doubleday, 1982) 333.

[5] Some interpreters have pointed out the connection of *anomos* to the *belial* or *beliar* tradition. In 2 Cor. 6:15 Paul is probably equating beliar with Satan, which has the effect of equating the lawless one with Satan. This poses a problem for the naming of the antichrist tradition, which, of course, demands that one distinguish the antichrist from Satan.

[6] See David A. Hubbard, "Antichrist," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Walter Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 56.

orthodox theology or behavior—a classic understatement—there is no reference to a heretical Christology, which is John's singular criterion.

I am not arguing that it is an entirely improbable conclusion that the antichrist, while foreshadowed by antichrists, is nonetheless a yet future singular individual entailing the description and functioning according to Daniel 7–9, Matthew 24, 2 Thessalonians 2, Revelation 13, and 1 John 2, 4, and 2 John. I am arguing, however, that this is not the *prima facie* reading of the text and is a rather tenuous reading of 1 John 2:18 and the other texts. The problem with this interpretation is that it naturally leads to what we see happening very quickly in church history: the quest to name the antichrist. Even if one holds that the best interpretation of "the antichrist" in 1 John 2:18 and other passages is as a future individual, one is hard pressed to find warrant to identify that individual. This is especially the case if one includes 2 Thess 2:3–12. Here Paul tells the Thessalonians that "the lawless one" will reveal himself, as if to impress upon the Thessalonians that identifying him is not *their* task. As we look to a brief survey of identifying antichrist, we see how many have nonetheless taken upon themselves the task of revealing the antichrist.

II. ANTICHRIST IN THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

Mention was made above concerning Polycarp's understanding of John. His connection to John makes his interpretation rather formidable in understanding John's intentions. As recalled from above, Polycarp restricted John's antichrist designation as applying to those espousing docetism, and he applies it in the plural. Tertullian also follows Polycarp to a degree. He does, however, add the notion that while there are antichrists now, they foreshadow the antichrist to come. In Book V of *Contra Marcion*, Tertullian speaks of forerunner antichrists and the antichrist.[7] So do Cyprian and Irenaeus. Two approaches of the Fathers are worthy of detailed examination. First is Augustine. Augustine does identify the fourth king in Daniel's vision (8:15–29) as the antichrist. In several other passages in *City of God* Augustine further identifies the antichrist as an individual (Book 18.52; and various places in Book 20).[8] Yet in his *Homilies on 1 John*, he speaks of many antichrists, even challenging his audience as to whether they themselves might be antichrists.[9] Concerning 1 John 2:18–27 Augustine writes, "John is about to describe and designate the Antichrist: we shall soon see who they are; and everyone must question his own conscience whether he be such."[10] Augustine understands the import of John's teaching as stressing the absolute necessity of an orthodox Christology, while also acknowledging that

[7] Tertullian, "Against Marcion," ANF 3.463–464.

[8] Augustine, *The City of God* (trans. Marcus Dods; New York: Modern Library, 1993).

[9] See Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994) 77.

[10] Augustine, "Homilies on 1 John," *Augustine: Later Works* (ed. John Burnaby; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955) 280.

there is a yet future individual antichrist. Augustine's views here, in keeping with his larger eschatological understanding, however, are inchoate and lack detailed, specific speculations regarding end times events.

The element of Augustine's teaching, however, that rises to the surface in the history of interpretation of the antichrist is the focus on the yet future individual and the reading of the other Biblical material (Daniel, the Olivet Discourse, 2 Thessalonians 2, and Revelation) as interpreting John in the Epistles. It must be noted that Augustine does not seek to identify that individual. Hippolytus (c. 170–236), the second Father given a detailed look here, sees to that aspect of the naming of the antichrist tradition. In the "Treatise on Christ and Antichrist" he lays out all of the elements of the naming of the antichrist tradition. He begins by asking a series of questions concerning the antichrist and then proceeds to answer them. He identifies the antichrist as Jewish. Additionally, he identifies John's two anonymous witnesses in Revelation 11 as Enoch and Elijah. He also offers a detailed accounting of the correlation of the prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of John. The weaving of these texts results in a detailed eschatological scenario that is drawn "*from Scripture itself*."[11] On these areas Hippolytus greatly differs from Augustine.

It is also interesting to note whom Hipploytus identifies as the antichrist. Those labeling the antichrist as Jewish were equaled, in the early church, by those nominating various Roman emperors for the role. In the later Middle Ages, Muslims vied for the distinction. Some attempts at naming the antichrist provided helpful physical descriptions just in case one may perhaps encounter the antichrist. One anonymous description dating from the third century records, "These are the signs of him: his head is as a fiery flame; his right eye shot with blood, his left eye blueblack, and he hath two pupils. His eyelashes are white; and his lower lip is large; but his right thigh slender; his feet broad; his great toe is bruised and flat."[12]

The pope as antichrist tradition finds its genesis in Hilary of Poitiers's teaching that the antichrist would come from within the church. It has a rich history in various disenfranchised groups and individuals throughout the early Middle Ages.[13] Bernard McGinn retells the story of a rather unusual twist in the pope as antichrist tradition. Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250) in conflict with Pope Gregory IX reneged on his promised Crusade on behalf of the Church. Gregory excommunicated him and named him the Imperial Antichrist, the "Beast arising from the sea." Innocent IV, Gregory's successor, continued naming Frederick as the antichrist. Frederick, however, would not idly stand by so he named Innocent as the antichrist, and through the aid of a hired theologian, wrote that the name of Innocent equals "the name of the mark of the beast, that is of the antichrist who is

[11] Hippolytus, "Treatise on Christ and Antichrist," 5.219, original emphasis.

[12] Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Tradition in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) 22.

[13] See Richard K. Emerson, *Antichrist in the Middle Ages: A Study of Medieval Apocalypticism, Art, and Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981).

Pope Innocent [*Innocencius Papa*], equals 666." He then concluded, "There is no doubt that he [Pope Innocent] is the true Antichrist."[14] Perhaps Frederick II was rightly suspicious of Innocent IV's agenda. He sent a party on a 17-month, 3,000-mile journey to inform Kuyuk, the Mongol Khan at the time, that he claimed sovereignty over all the kingdoms of the earth—including the Mongols.[15] The enterprise of naming the pope as antichrist was just getting started; during the Reformation it grew to colossal proportions.

Luther's papal antichrist designations are legendary. In 1518, following the posting of the 95 Theses he wrote a rather chastening letter to Pope Leo X. In this letter he does not, however, call him the antichrist. In fact, while he does despise the Roman Curia and lets Pope Leo know that he is praying for him to see the light on these issues, he speaks respectfully of him. He writes, "I have always been sorry, most excellent Leo, that you were made pope in these times, for you are worthy of being pope in better days."[16] By 1519, Luther changed his tune and posited the pope as antichrist. Following the *Exsurge Domine* in June 1520 Luther wrote in both *Address to the German Nobility* and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* plainly that the pope is antichrist: "The papacy is indeed nothing but the kingdom of Babylon and of the true Antichrist."[17] Roland Bainton distinguishes Luther's motive and basis for naming the pope as antichrist from his precursors. Luther reasoned not on moral grounds, but on theological grounds.[18] Bernard McGinn adds that absent from Luther's context is the sociological element of demonizing one's political enemies by employing the label "antichrist." Luther, McGinn observes, was driven by his understanding of John's Apocalypse, a book of which Luther grew increasingly fond.[19] He interprets the figure in chapter 13 as the papal antichrist and further looks to 2 Thessalonians 2 to add more details about the antichrist's reign. McGinn concludes, "Luther now [in 1530] praises the Apocalypse as an effective warning against the error of those who call the papacy 'the Christian Church,' since it is really the Christian Church's worst enemy."[20] The story of Luther's designation of the pope as antichrist is perhaps best told by the woodcuts—what Bainton refers to as Reformation cartoons—of Lucas Cranach publicizing and adorning Luther's writings. In a depiction of Christ's passion and the antichrist's passions Christ is pictured as cleansing the temple of the moneychangers, thus depicting Christ's passion for the purity of the church. The antichrist, complete in papal trimmings, however, uses the temple to count money, his passion. In another woodcut, monks, priests, and bishops are beating Christ who is barely clothed and crowned by thorns in one panel, while in another they are worshipping the bedecked pope. Luther was not

[14] Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End* 174–176.

[15] For the letters and Kuyuk Khan's response, see Michael Prawdin, *Mongol Empire* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973).

[16] *Luther's Works: Volume 31, Career of the Reformer: 1* (ed. Harold J. Grimm; Concordia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957).

[17] Martin Luther, *Three Treatises: Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

[18] Roland Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon, 1985) 44.

[19] Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist* 202–206.

[20] Ibid. 206.

alone, as the other Reformers joined in naming the pope as antichrist, not to mention the pre-reformers such as Wycliffe, Purvey, and Hus. In his commentary on 1 John, Calvin observes, "Let us remember, that Antichrist has not only been announced by the Spirit of God, but also that the marks by which he may be distinguished have been mentioned." He also notes, "All the marks by which the Spirit of God has pointed out Antichrist, clearly appear in the Pope."[21]

This emphasis on the pope as antichrist also influenced the Puritans in England. The net, of course, was widened to include the bishops of the Anglican church and at times some English monarchs. Given that strains of Puritan thinking perceived that the Anglican Church did not remove herself far enough away from Rome, nevertheless the Roman Catholic church was at the center of antichrist speculations as designations of the pope as antichrist abound. Alexander Leighton's *Sion's Plea Against the Prelacy* (1628), Thomas Brightman's *Revelation of the Apocalypse* (published posthumously in 1640), Joseph Mede's *Apocalyptic Key* (1643), and many other works testify to this burgeoning enterprise among the Puritans.[22] Mede even goes so far as to set dates, predicting the antichrist's defeat in 1686.[23] These works in turn influenced Puritans on the other side of the Atlantic.

Both Increase and Cotton Mather follow suit in naming the pope as antichrist. Increase Mather, following Joseph Mede explicitly, readily identifies the pope as the antichrist. "The Devil still reigns," he warns, "by his Vicar at Rome."[24] He adds, "The Beast has his Seat (which he will needs have it called the *Sedes Apostolica*) in Italy. I am persuaded that the Time is at Hand when some strange Providence will cause the Pope's more particular Territories to be full of darkness." Linda Munk's exposition of Mather's treatise *A Dissertation Concerning the Future Conversion of the Jewish Nation* reveals that Mather uses not only Biblical sources to arrive at his conclusions but draws upon may rabbinical sources. Such sources, however, have been "taken out of their historical context and been sharply turned against the Pope."[25] Cotton Mather followed in his father's steps by also naming the pope as antichrist. Yet, he, as well as his father, could not miss another dimension to the antichrist's manifestation. So he writes that "the story of a Prodigious War, made by the spirits of the Invisible World upon the People of New England, in the year, 1692 . . . made me often think, this inexplicable War some of its Original among the Indians. Through the darkness the enemies flitted like the secret Enemy of Christ." He continues to

[21] *Calvin's Commentaries: Volume XXII* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996 [reprint]) 190 [*ad loc.* 1 John 2:18].

[22] See Christopher Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[23] As cited in Katherine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530–1645* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 174.

[24] Increase Mather, *A Dissertation Concerning the Future Conversion of the Jewish Nation*, 26, as cited in Linda Munk, *The Devil's Mousetrap: Redemption and Colonial American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 66.

[25] Ibid. 67.

liken the Indian attack to the attacks of the Devil.[26] The explicit antichrist nomenclature is absent, as that was reserved for the pope. Nonetheless, the demonizing of the native Americans is explicit.

Jonathan Edwards also named the pope as antichrist. In fact, in his view Rome has constantly plagued the church and only Constantine provides a brief repast, which Edwards hastens to interpret as the half hour space of silence from Rev 8:1. Interestingly, in his commentary from his exegetical notebook, recently published as the volume *Notes on Scripture* in the Yale series of the Works of Jonathan Edwards, Edwards writes of the "power of Roman antichristian," having deleted the words "An Pope of Rome and Roman heirarch."[27] He does not show such restraint in his "Notes on the Apocalypse." Here he states, "Antichrist . . . still acts under the pretense of being Christ's vicar and successor in his kingdom on earth . . . Popery is the deepest contrivance that ever Satan was the author of to uphold his kingdom." He also adds that the church of Rome is the antichristian kingdom.[28]

With the onset of the American Revolution attention turned to naming King George as the antichrist: a trajectory followed in the middle of the nineteenth century during the Civil War. Both Lincoln and Lee alternately made good candidates for the honor of antichrist. The interpretation of the pope as antichrist largely fell out of practice. The "Know-Nothing Party" with its anti-immigration platform and the American Protective Association began turning attention once again, however, to the threat Catholicism posed.[29] Such sociological currents were not to come into fruition for some time as the fundamentalist-modernist controversy produced its own likely targets for the antichrist. With the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible (1909, 1917) and the dissemination of dispensational eschatology, the enterprise of naming the antichrist renewed its vigor. One of the early dispensationalists and a close associate of Scofield's, Arno C. Gaebelein, identified the Pope as antichrist. He notes, "the Babylon of Revelation is Papal Rome."[30] R. A. Torrey also connects Rome to the antichrist, though he stops short of naming the pope explicitly as the antichrist. Torrey, in his *Practical and Perplexing Questions Answered*, views the conflagration of the papacy with anarchistic socialism as the consummate antichrist. He writes, "The papacy, the anarchistic socialism, and rationalism some day will join and be headed by one man whom the Devil will especially gift and in whom he shall dwell, and that man will be the Anti-Christ."[31] Again it is worth noting the way in

[26] As cited in Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600–1860* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973) 73.

[27] *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Volume 15, Notes on Scripture* (ed. Stephen J. Stein; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 254.

[28] *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Volume 5, Apocalyptic Writings* (ed. Stephen J. Stein; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) 117–119.

[29] For elaboration on these developments see Robert Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 88–99.

[30] Arno C. Gaebelein, *Meat in Due Season: Sermons, Discourses, and Expositions of the Word of Prophecy* (New York: n.d.) 171.

[31] R. A. Torrey, *Practical and Perplexing Questions Answered* (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1909) 7.

which Torrey expands beyond theological and ecclesiastical concerns to address politics and economics.

Moving closer to the present day, one finds J. Dwight Pentecost identifying the pope as antichrist. He observes, "Romanism is the great harlot." This is quite precarious, given the end-time scenario of Pentecost's exposition. He states, "According to Revelation 17, this politico-religious system is going to move behind the scenes to cause nations to federate. When this alliance takes place, Rome will be in control, dominating, dictating, and directing." This is all the more telling because of JFK's presence in the White House. Pentecost continues, "In our country we have elevated to our nation's highest office one whose primary allegiance must be to one who resides across the ocean."[32] More recently, Dave Hunt, Chick Publications tracts and comic books, as well as countless prophecy speakers and television programs have promulgated the view that the pope is antichrist.

A review of this list of names suggests that prophecy makes strange bedfellows. An equally informative study is not only the naming of popes as antichrist, but also to examine the various other candidates put forth for the position. The studies of Paul Boyer (*When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992]), Robert Fuller (*Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession*) and Bernard McGinn (*Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*) chronicle the vast range of likely and unlikely suspects including Juan Carlos of Spain, Mussolini, Hitler, Ronald Wilson Reagan (whose name contains three words of six letters each and who almost moved to a 666 street address), Elvis, JFK, FDR, Henry Kissinger, Gorbachev (who has an uncanny birthmark on his forehead), Moshe Dayan, Anwar el-Sadat, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, and Saddam Hussein.

III. CONCLUSION

Naming the antichrist probably reveals more about the person naming than anything. In some instances naming reveals a person's interpretation of texts or theology. In others, the naming has more to do with one's sociological or political views. Was Gorbachev, for instance, an enemy of orthodox Christology as much as he was a threat to Americanism? One might rightly query as to the theological motivations behind naming Henry Kissinger, JFK, and FDR. Robert Fuller observes the tendency to demonize one's enemy and, as his study reveals, the label of antichrist becomes quite a convenient tool. In other words, the quest to identify the antichrist, as is the case with many other aspects of eschatology, acutely suffers from reading Biblical texts through the grid of one's socio-cultural context. This presents a serious challenge to exegetes as they endeavor to overcome their preconceptions and context in approaching eschatological texts and issues. Overcoming what one brings to the text is, as many contemporary writings on

[32] J. Dwight Pentecost, *Prophecy for Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961) 187–188.

hermeneutics conclude, not so easy, if even possible. Nonetheless, a reading of the text that is governed by what we bring to the text as opposed to what we find in the text is likely to lead to a misreading of the text.

This is especially the case in terms of the Johannine epistolary material on antichrists and antichrist. John's emphasis is on orthodox Christology and serves as a perfect vehicle for the teaching of the crucial doctrine of Christ's true humanity. Christ did in fact come "in the flesh." That little phrase opens the gate to a wealth of teaching. The gate, however, gets closed when one ignores the context of 1 and 2 John, jumps right to Daniel and Revelation, and then stops at St. Peter's Basilica. Two popular books concerning the antichrist illustrate this well. John Benson's *Who is the Antichrist?* (Regular Baptist Press, 1978) and Arthur Bloomfield's *How to Recognize the Antichrist* (Bethany, 1975) both miss the opportunity to offer a detailed understanding of the orthodox view of the deity and humanity and then the union of the two natures in the one person, opting instead to stress the little horn's and then the beast's activity.

Eschatological speculation will probably always be more appealing than trinitarian expositions. (A novel on the intrigues of Nicea and Chalcedon will not likely topple LaHaye from the bestseller list any time soon.) Notwithstanding, has the naming of the antichrist caused us to miss John's emphasis and hence misapply his material? This has a bearing not only upon a few texts in 1 and 2 John. As with Hilary of Poitier, naming the antichrist naturally leads to other ventures where the text does not lead, such as naming the two witnesses in Revelation 11, or other detailed speculations regarding end-time events that go beyond the text. Also, naming the antichrist can and usually does lead to naming a particular person, which then necessarily sets a date for the return of Christ. Christ cautioned the disciples against such practices.

All of this highlights the importance of developing and modeling sensitivity to the influence of one's own socio-cultural context in interpreting prophetic material. This study may also serve to illustrate the danger of eschatological speculations trumping the self-imposed limits and boundaries of Biblical texts. Even if one is persuaded that there is a yet future individual antichrist, identifying the figure is not warranted by Scripture. Anthony Hoekema expresses a view of seeing a yet future individual while maintaining caution. He writes:

> The sign of antichrist, like the other signs of the times, is present throughout the history of the church. We may even say that every age will provide its own particular form of antichristian activity. But we look for an intensification of this sign in the appearance of *the* antichrist shortly before Christ's return. This sign, too, does not enable us to date the return of Christ with precision. We simply do not know how the final antichrist will appear or what form his appearance will take.[33]

Perhaps, however, Polycarp, by restricting his understanding of 1 and 2 John to 1 and 2 John and by not linking up this teaching with Daniel 7–9,

[33] Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 162.

Matthew 24, and Revelation 13, captures John's teaching best. Consequently his exhortation regarding 1 John 2:18–25 bears repeating:

> "For whoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is antichrist"; and whosoever does not confess the testimony of the cross, is of the devil; and whosoever perverts the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts, and says that there is neither a resurrection nor a judgment, he is the first-born of Satan. Wherefore forsaking the vanity of many, and their false doctrines, let us return to the word that has been handed down to us from the beginning; "watching unto prayer," and persevering in fasting; beseeching in our supplications the all-seeing God "not to lead us into temptation."[34]

We misread John when we use the word "antichrist" as a launching pad for what amounts to a cottage industry of eschatological speculations. We eclipse a warning to hold fast the Christological (and, hence, trinitarian) traditions. We, as it were, need to stop looking for antichrists in all the wrong places.

[34] Polycarp, "Epistle to the Philippians," 7.