

The Subtle Spirit of Antichrist

Many have been concerned about the spiritual state of America and America's Church. There is a real reason to be concerned. Consider these statements from researchers about recent developments in the U.S.

"Over 90% of adults and teens say that 'they and nobody else determine what is and isn't moral in their lives.'" --Josephson Institute of Ethics

"North America is the only continent where Christianity is not growing." --George Gallop Church in the World Today

"This supposed Christian nation leads the world in every category of violent and domestic crime, excluding kidnapping."--Eddie Rentz, National Youth Department Director

"Nearly 50% of non-Christians believe all good people will go to heaven whether they have accepted Christ as Savior or not; 30 % of born again Christians agree!"
--George Barna Research Group

"During the last 10 years the combined communicant membership of all Protestant denominations has declined by 9.5% while the national population has

increased by 11%. What's more, not one county in the U.S. has a higher percentage of church people than it did 10 years ago." --Charles Arn, Institute of Church Growth

"In the U.S. conversions to Islam are estimated at 25,000 per year." --Zwimmer Institute

"Half of all churches last year did not add one new member through conversion growth". --American Society for Church Growth

"Approximately 70 to 80% of all church growth in America can be attributed to the movement of Christians from one church to another." --George Barna Research Group

"How many people does it take the average church to lead one person to Christ? It depends on how old the church is!! Church Age 1-3 years old: 3 people for every one salvation; Church age 4-7 years old; 7 people for every one salvation. Church age 10 years or older; 85 (yes, 85) people for every one salvation."
--Fuller Theological Seminary study

"Evangelical churches (this includes charismatic, full gospel, apostolic/prophetic, etc) have failed to gain an additional 2% of the American population in the past 50 years. In other words, we are not even reaching our own children." --American Society for Church Growth.

"A Snapshot of the U.S. Church" from the McAlvany Intelligence Report, November 1998. (A few items are repetitions of the above information but are worth repeating.)

1. 4,000 Churches close each year in the U.S.
2. 3500 people leave the Church each year committed not to return.
3. 85% of churches in the U.S. have are not growing or are decreasing in membership.
4. 12% of churches are growing but only by way of transfer growth from other churches.
5. Only 3% are growing by conversion growth.
6. One-half of all churches failed to add one person to the membership by conversion.
7. One-half of all ministry students are out of the ministry within five years of graduation.
8. 167 to 187 million non-Christians live in America making us the fourth largest mission field in the world.
9. The Church is growing on every continent except North America.

What is the problem and what does this have to do with the spirit of antichrist? Let me list what the problem is NOT before addressing the real problem:

Lack of Worship and Praise

There has been a strong emphasis on praise and worship in American Churches since the mid-seventies. Along with this emphasis came the message that if Jesus was lifted up properly in worship, then our churches would see lots of unsaved people come to

Christ. It has not happened and will not happen for this reason.

Many of our churches have great worship today but few lost persons are being saved in those congregations. Few congregations in America have not seen improved worship due to this widespread emphasis. However, the ability to reach the lost has actually declined in these same churches.

This emphasis has so affected our churches that evangelical/charismatic youth groups when surveyed about what they believe to be the most important Christian ministry list "worship leader" as most important. This is an unhealthy change from the past. Until the 1990's Christian youth groups in America listed "missionary" as the most important Christian calling.

Lack of Intercession/Spiritual Warfare

The popular message today about intercession and spiritual warfare claims that it will eventually produce revival. Today, there is more understanding of intercession and emphasis on this kind of prayer than anytime in history of this nation and yet not much is happening to reach the lost in most of the churches that are strong in intercession. This emphasis is now over a decade old and not much is happening in North America where the movement is the strongest. In fact, some recent research has shown that churches that teach on intercession and spiritual warfare are no more effective in reaching the lost than churches that do not teach on this. Yet other places in the world have not

had the spiritual warfare and intercession emphases are reaching the lost.

The Great Awakening, a revival that transformed the American nation in the 1700's, had little knowledge of this kind of prayer and yet tens of thousands of unsaved people were swept into the kingdom of God during the duration of these revivals. Whole cities were transformed in other historical revivals and these revivals were not based primarily on intercession but all of them actually had the same emphasis.

Lack of apostolic/prophetic church government.

The current emphasis of the restoration of apostolic and prophetic ministries is making the same sort of claims. The idea being presented is that if the Church is reformed governmentally in an apostolic/prophetic way then the other things like reaching the lost will happen automatically. Proper government is an important truth like intercession, spiritual warfare, prophecy, praise and worship. However, having proper government in the Church will also fail to accomplish revival.

A number of churches and fellowship of churches in America have been walking in these truths of proper government for a season and few of them are reaching the lost in any significant way. Many apostolic and prophetic ministers speak eloquently about strategies of world evangelism and church growth but are failing to reach the lost in their own communities.

The lost will not be reached automatically when churches have an apostolic/prophetic foundation and government. Likewise, past revivals knew little about apostles, prophets, and proper church government and yet tens of thousands were converted to Christ.

There many other things are offered for the reason why there is little happening in America. Some of these are:

- Disunity in the Church. Unity will not produce a revival that reaches the lost in America.
- Feminism or Chauvinism in the Church. Everyone having the right view of women will not produce a revival that reaches the lost in America.
- Improper doctrine. Teaching, no matter how wise, will not produce a revival that reaches the lost in America.
- No Revelation of the Church. Seeing the Church, "discerning the body of Christ" will not produce a revival that reaches the lost in America.
- Spiritual Fathering. Mentoring relationships between individuals in the Church are wonderful but they will not produce a revival that reaches the lost in America.
- No Covenants. Everyone may eventually accept or reject the idea that the New Covenant existing between believers is not enough and additional covenants should be made between Christian people. However, more or less covenants between individuals will not produce a revival that reaches the lost in America.

- No Revival Message and Revival Phenomena. A focus on revival and preaching revival will not produce a great revival that reaches the lost in America. The current revivals have not reached the lost significantly in their own cities even a few blocks away from the churches.
- Small Groups. Cell groups are wonderful but will not produce a revival that reaches the lost in America.
- The Problems of the Family. The American family needs great help. However, strong Christian families will not produce a great revival that reaches the lost.
- An unrighteous U.S. government. Righteousness in American civil government will be wonderful but will not produce a revival that reaches the lost in America. Restoration of constitutional government will not produce a revival either.

Probably many other things could be listed here. Many truths have been declared as the truth that will eventually reach the lost. There is only one thing that the Bible declares that works to reach the lost. It is the gospel. The gospel is the thing most taken for granted and therefore most overlooked and misunderstood.

So what is the problem? Why are we failing to reach the lost and failing to transform American society. The real problem is the unrecognized "spirit of antichrist" working in the Church. Before someone reacts to this statement, please note that "antichrist" is being defined

differently that what is commonly understood in the Church in America.

The Spirit of Antichrist

If the reader will allow a few paragraphs explaining just what "the spirit of antichrist" is, a clear solution to the problems that have been outlined will be revealed. In defining "the spirit of antichrist", the focus is not on what might happen at the end of the age but rather what the phrase means in the original language of Greek.

The English word "antichrist" is a transliteration directly from Greek. The Greek word is "antichristos". The prefix (preposition) "anti" of "antichrist" is the real focus since what it commonly means in English is very different than what it means in Greek.

In English, the prefix "anti" in almost every use means "against" or "opposed". In other words, if I said someone was "anti-Semitic", I would be saying that they were "against" or "opposed" to Jewish people. In Greek, however, this is not the primary way to understand the prefix (preposition) "anti". Bauer's Greek/English Lexicon of the New Testament, 2nd Edition, page 73 says this about "anti":

- 1. In order to indicate that one person or thing is, or is to be, replaced by another. (Other ways to translate "anti") Instead of, in place of.*
- 2. In order to indicate that one thing is equivalent to another.*

In light of these common Greek meanings of "anti", we can formulate a better understanding of what "antichrist" means. The New Testament phrase "the spirit of antichrist" then would mean this:

"The spirit of antichrist is the satanic and worldly influence that subtly seeks to REPLACE JESUS CHRIST in His Church with some spiritual thing or truth that deceptively is declared to be equal or the same."

In other words, the spirit of antichrist is religious by nature. It subtly influences Christian doctrinal emphasis, attitudes and practices by removing Christ. It often succeeds in replacing Jesus Christ with some other good and true spiritual thing. Ministers affected by this spirit will seldom deny that Jesus Christ is extremely important. They think of Christ as the door into salvation but fail to note His centrality to all truth and ministry to Christians. As the content of their public ministries is considered, by emphasis they are really declaring indirectly that something else, some good spiritual thing other than Jesus Christ, will be the salvation of the Church and the world.

An alert and discerning person can spot a ministry that has been affected by the spirit of antichrist. These ministries will seldom relate and explain how Christ is involved in the spiritual truth that they are proclaiming. In other words, their message will not be "Christ-centered". The message will not be the gospel of Christ nor contain much gospel emphasis. In fact, the only gospel in their message may be in the few

minutes at the end where an altar call is given. There will be little reference to the centrality of Christ and His cross. They may preach an hour or more and be truthful and biblical but fail to mention Christ in any significant way and do this message after message for months and for years. The hearers adjust to this and do not generally know that the message that they are hearing is not the gospel.

Hurricane Doctrinal Winds

It is highly interesting that the apostle Paul warns about "winds of doctrine". It is notable that he does not say "false doctrine". Here are his words:

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service,... As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ... Ephesians 4:11a, 14 (edited for brevity)

What is evident here is that the function of the "five-fold" ministry should doctrinally "wind-proof" the Church so that the Church can grow up in all aspects into Christ. The "five-fold" ministry should prevent a doctrinal wind from blowing a believer off-course from "Christ-centeredness". The beginning and end of true ministry is all about Christ. To fail to keep Christ

central and in the forefront in any ministry is to be do false ministry and to fail in ministry.

What exactly is a "wind of doctrine"? A wind of doctrine is a truthful doctrine of Scripture that is taught to be the entire answer to the Church's or an individual's problems. It is a "disconnected truth". It is disconnected from Christ Himself. These doctrines are often found in popular movements and are expressed by excellent speakers that convince the unwary that this truth or movement is the answer that they seek.

After decades of following those proclaiming this particular truth and waiting for this truth to produce the effect promised, many people discover that the message that they embraced was not the gospel after all and the particular truth did not bring them the blessings promised. Some survive this revelation, others are shipwrecked by the discovery.

While some movements, such as the Reformation, recovered truths about our relationship with Christ and His work at the cross, other Church movements have been "antichrist". Repeatedly throughout the history of the Church, many individuals have build reputations, accumulated influence and financial fortunes by exploiting a truth of Scripture and organizing a movement around that particular truth. Some of the ancient and medieval "antichrist" movements in the church are not well known today by most believers because they normally do not survive long, sometimes only a few decades, because of being discredited by excesses and bad fruit in the lives of the people of

God. The history of the Church records those who embrace them as "sects" and now with the more modern term "cults".

The momentary popularity of a movement is certainly no validation that what the movement claims is entirely true. A movement must be evaluated on its message's "Christ-centeredness" or many people will suffer "shipwrecks" before the movement's true nature is clearly seen. Some movements begin "Christ-centered" but do not end that way. A movement needs to be evaluated finally on its long-term fruit. Is this movement actually increasing the kingdom? Are the lost being reached as a result of the movement? Are new churches full of new converts being established?

The early Church experienced movements, such as the Christian Gnostics. Gnosticism was extremely popular and extremely wrong. The apostle John's four verses that speak of "antichrist" were probably a result of him seeing how Christ had been replaced in the Christian Gnostics and him consequently trying to prevent Christian people from becoming "shipwrecked" by losing their "Christ-centeredness".

Some historians believe that the Christian Gnostics actually outnumbered the more orthodox and biblical Christians by two to one at the beginning of the Second Century. However, the more orthodox Christians produced great fruit and evangelized the ancient world. This was not true of the movement of the Christian Gnostics. They ceased to exist within several generations. The movements that exist today

will also cease to exist if they allow Christ to be subtly replaced by another similar truth and emphasis.

How do you spot an exploitation of a truth? How do you spot a truth that is replacing Christ? Normally, one can spot this kind of exploitation or replacement by the subtle claim that this truth will be the *salvation* of the church and the world *sometime in the future*. In other words, the truth does not really work in the present time very well.

Many sincere Christian people are misled by a bold proclamation of something that is obviously a truth of Scripture. They come to believe that the proclaimed truth is the Truth. If the "truth" fails to set them free in a reasonable amount of time, it is probably not really the truth. On the other hand, Christ declared that the Kingdom was "at hand". This means simply that the power of Kingdom of God is "present now". When the Gospel of Christ is preached properly, Jesus the King saves, heals and delivers believers in the present. "Doctrinal postponements" of spiritual blessings are a clue that the message is not really the Gospel and that particular ministry is not getting much attestation and validation from God.

The Bible gives credit to only one thing that produces the conversion of the lost. It does not credit proper government, praise and worship, or even intercessory prayer for conversion of the lost. While intercessory prayer is extremely important, the Bible does not even credit prayer with the direct salvation of the lost despite a widespread belief that it does.

There is only one reference in the New Testament that says anything about praying for the lost. The references about prayer in the New Testament are not concerned with the preparation of the lost but the preparation of the worker to reach the lost. Jesus said the fields are "white with harvest". Christ said for us to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send laborers into the harvest. In other words, the thrust of the New Testament's teaching on prayer is that the lost are not the problem, unprepared believers are! When Paul asks for prayer in the New Testament, he asks that he would have opportunity (open doors), that he would be prepared, and be bold with the gospel. He never asks for prayer for the lost to be prepared to hear the gospel or for the gospel to have an effect. The gospel is not the problem. It has power to convert when properly delivered. Unprepared and unequipped believers are the problem.

Obviously, Paul believed the Gospel to be the answer to reaching the lost. He wrote:

"I am not ashamed of the Gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...." Romans 1:16a NASV

A re-translation of this that expands the words into their fuller meaning would be:

"I am not ashamed of the Gospel, the Good News about Jesus Christ as crucified and risen Savior, Healer and Deliverer, because the Gospel is the

power, the dynamic ability, of God to produce salvation, healing and deliverance in everyone who believes the Gospel.

Every historical revival in history has had a preacher or a number of preachers who proclaimed a simple but powerful message about Christ and His cross to believers and unbelievers. This will also be true in the last great harvest of souls. America's real problem is that its pulpits are proclaiming many other things and neglecting the gospel of Christ.

The Bible credits the bold proclamation of the gospel of Christ with healing, miracles and signs for mass conversions. The word "gospel" is used in the NASV New Testament 101 times and translators have used "good news" another 7 times. Obviously, this is an important and quickly overlooked reason that we are not reaching the lost. There is only one "thing" that is the salvation of the Church and the world and that is Christ Himself presented in bold preaching.

Much of the ministry of the Church today is not "Christ-centered" in its approach, because they were schooled in trendy Churches and organizations that did not preach the Gospel of Christ consistently. A whole generation of ministers in America has only been exposed to trendy biblical teaching. Many have never really preached the Gospel of Christ at all in this country. Many of them really do not know what the Gospel is or think that Christians should be hearing something else. They may even think that the Gospel is only for unbelievers. This kind of ministry produces

churches full of unfruitful Christians who do not know much of anything about Christ and what His cross means but have lots of religious information on apostles and prophets and other trendy subjects.

Because the leaders of the churches preach messages with little "Christ-content", the people of God do not think that "sharing Christ" is very important either. You can watch Christian television for hours without hearing the gospel of Christ or even hearing Christ mentioned in any meaningful way. Likewise, there is little emphasis in most churches on equipping believers to reach the lost. This is not seen as being very important or spiritual in some churches.

Most "charismatic" believers in America have never shared the Gospel with their unbelieving friends and would not know how to go about do this. Instead, they and their leaders are convinced that some trendy truth of restoration, other than the gospel, will eventually reach these lost people. They think great worship or spiritual warfare or intercession or church government or prophets and apostles will somehow produce an supernatural effect to reach these people. When? Nobody really knows. In many cases, the simple gospel that Christ saves, heals and delivers would reach them now but no one says anything because they are waiting on something else to happen. If the seed of the gospel was planted, God could water it. However, we pray for spiritual "rain" but very little seed has been planted in the lives of unbelievers to produce a harvest.

Conversions are seldom seen in trendy churches. If these churches grow, they mostly grow by transfer growth. Often transfer growth is the entire emphasis. They may only attempt to get Christians in the door of their meetings. This focus is revealed by where they advertise. They use Christian publications, Christian mailing lists and Christian radio and Television stations rather than using something that would reach unbelievers.

Typically, trendy churches get their growth from the smaller "Christ-centered" churches around them who are actually getting people saved. A common scenario is the Baptist Church down the street preaches a simple message about Jesus on Sunday mornings and has people saved regularly. However, after getting them baptized, the charismatic work that has better teaching and worship eventually gets these saved people in its door because it seems to have more to offer. This must change. While the Baptist church often needs what the charismatic church offers, the charismatic church is in more need to return to the foundation of Jesus Christ in its public ministry.

The church in America will not reach the lost in any significant way until there is a reformation of what happens on Sunday mornings. When the messages on Sunday morning consistently declare that Jesus saves, heals and delivers then the lost will again appear in our churches and be saved, healed and delivered. God will convict sinners and lead them to places where the average believer is prepared to share the Gospel. When Christ the Savior, Healer and Deliverer is proclaimed

in every message, our churches will cease to be filled with Christians who are physically and emotionally sick and who need deliverance. When we return to a bold proclamation that about Christ, then the quality of life in the Church will greatly improve and testimony of Christ's grace will abound. Christians then will gladly share what Christ is doing for them with their unsaved neighbors. Any Bible teaching then, will have the proper foundation and trends of restoration will be noted and embraced without those biblical truths blowing us off course. We will be standing on the Rock!

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