

Fireworks!

The Many Faces of Evil – Part VIII

Revelation 13:13-15

Introduction

J. I. Packer, in his book on the word of God, provided a mirror for the church of today by which to look at itself – and the reflection is not very attractive, to say the least. He writes,

Unlike the first-century Christians who in three centuries [reached] the Roman world [with the gospel] and those later Christians who pioneered the Reformation and the Puritan awakening and the evangelical revival and the great missionary movement of the [eighteenth] century, we [today] lack certainty. . . . Certainty about the great issues of Christian faith and conduct is lacking all along the line. The outside observer sees us as staggering on from gimmick to gimmick and stunt to stunt like so many drunks in a fog, not knowing at all where we are or which way we should be going. Preaching is hazy. Heads are muddled, hearts fret, doubts drain strength, uncertainty paralyzes action.

Why? It is because we lack certainty about the great issues of the Christian faith.ⁱ

I would agree with one author that . . .

. . . the reason we lack certainty is because we have a sinful view of Scripture. [The church at large no] longer seems to believe that the Bible is sufficient for the life and conduct of the church. That is a sin . . . of monstrous proportions . . . to deny the sufficiency of the Word of God.ⁱⁱ

This is the reason the dragon has never ceased his attack on the authority, sufficiency, and clarity of scripture.

His very first act of temptation was to Eve, and came in the form of a challenge to the clarity of God's word – "Has God said? Did He really say all that? Are you sure you heard Him right? Here's what I think He really meant!"

Satan's temptation to the second Adam, Jesus Christ, who had come to bring forth a new race of redeemed believers, was to immediately distort the words of scripture. Jesus Christ responded with the

correct use of scripture with three quotations from the book of Deuteronomy (Matthew 4).

Paul wrote to Timothy, a young pastor, encouraging him to cling to the word and preach the word. Paul reminded him that from the time he was a young child,

. . . you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. (II Timothy 3:15)

Timothy had the prophets and the testimony of the apostles – he knew enough to come to saving faith in Jesus Christ alone.

This is the sticking point of the Bible, is it not? It is this Bible-only stuff that makes it pretty clear that it is Jesus Christ only – and that really rattles everyone's cage, right? It is this talk of "Christianity is the only way to God" (John 14:6) that upsets people. The fact that God has spoken and that His word is authoritative for what we believe and how we behave is really not all that welcome.

This has been illustrated for the church in recent days. President Obama played into the religious confusion and pluralism of our day when he attempted to compensate for having an evangelical pray at his inauguration. There was such an incredible backlash over it. One *New York Times* article I read reported that Obama compensated by asking Gene Robinson to pray at another inaugural event.

Robinson happens to be the first active homosexual elected to the high position of bishop in the Episcopal Church. His appointment, in 2003, sparked a rift that has become an international chasm.

So Gene Robinson stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and prayed.

Further in this article, Robinson talked about his difficulty in deciding what to pray. In a telephone interview with the *Times*, he said he had been reading inaugural prayers through history to get an idea of what was said and he was, "horrified at how specifically and aggressively Christian these [prayers] were."

He should study a little more history.

However, Robinson, in this interview, went on to reassure the public, “I am very clear that this will not be a Christian prayer, and I won’t be quoting scripture or anything like that.”

In other words, “Don’t worry about me getting up and referencing the Bible or, for goodness sake, quoting from it. That would ruin a prayer, wouldn’t it?”

Robinson concluded the interview by saying that he might address the prayer to “the God of our many understandings”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Has this thinking led to certainty? No – greater confusion. The fog only increases. Humanity staggers around from one religious gimmick to yet another gimmick. It is up to everyone to determine their own salvation; it is anyone’s guess about right and wrong.

The moment we go beyond “sola scriptura” – the scriptures alone – any objective basis or foundation for wisdom from God is gone. There might be the creation of religions, but there is no basis for a relationship with God.

“Timothy, you knew the scriptures which made you wise unto salvation in Christ Jesus.”

[Saving] faith comes from hearing . . . the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17)

In our last session we introduced the next step in the lie of Satan against the truth of God with the introduction of the third person in his trio. Turn again to Revelation chapter 13.

During the Tribulation there is the control of “those who dwell on the earth” – a term for those who do not believe the gospel but follow the antichrist. The earth dwellers, or unbelievers, will be controlled by three faces of evil. These are: the dragon, or Satan, who counterfeits God the Father; the antichrist, controlled and empowered by Satan to counterfeit Jesus Christ; another beast of a man that we are introduced to and whose partnership with the first two will empower him to do all kinds of amazing things – the false prophet (Revelation chapter 19).

So there is this unholy trinity – Satan, antichrist, and the false prophet.

This partnership allows the false prophet to move forward with his one passion – his priority. Notice it again in the last part of verse 12,

. . . And he makes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast [the antichrist] whose fatal wound was healed.

The false prophet will succeed where every other false prophet has failed. He will forge the world into one global religion. And he will use the thinking of our own culture – that every religion is acceptable; that every religion is, in fact, really saying the same thing, so, “Why don’t we just forget our differences?”

This is the universalism of the emergent church – the newest form of evangelical apostasy. One of its leading spokesmen, Brian McLaren, said that Jesus really had a secret message which, by the way, McLaren is able to discern. This is the secret message: “Jesus’ secret message in word and deed makes clear that the kingdom of God will be radically and scandalously inclusive.”

In other words, “Everyone gets into heaven.”

Why will this be scandalous? McLarin will explain, along with other emergent leaders, that it is scandalous because Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims and every liberal Protestant, who never bought into the idea of a literal resurrection or a literal hell or a sufficient atonement for those who believe in Christ alone – guess what? – will all be saved by Christ in the end anyway.

I read in one article with this view that even atheists get in – they will come kicking and screaming, but they get in too.

This is classic universalism and it is becoming the religion of our world.

In the most recent National Prayer Breakfast, the speaker, who in times past has been evangelical, was Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of Great Britain.

I was sent a transcript of Blair’s speech from a church member who was born in England, which I appreciated. His speech fit well within the context of pluralism and universalism. It was one more speech that put into words that which we have seen on the bumper sticker that has all the religious icons being used to create letters that spell the word “coexist”.

This was basically Blair’s message, but it was more. Listen carefully to his words that further, if not naively set the table for a one-world religion.

Blair said, “There are a million good deeds done every day by people of faith. . . . What inspires such people? Ritual or doctrine or the finer points of theology? No. . . . [It is] the unconditional nature of God’s love.”

In other words, “God loves everyone, regardless of what they believe about Him.”

Then Blair gives a rather warm-hearted illustration that has undiscerning people saying, “Isn’t that nice and it makes a lot of sense.”

Tony Blair said, “I remember my first spiritual awakening. I was ten years old. . . . My father . . . had suffered a serious stroke. My mother, to keep some sense of normality in the crisis, sent me to school. My teacher knelt and prayed with me. Now my father was a militant atheist. Before we prayed, I [told her], ‘I’m afraid my father doesn’t believe in God.’ . . . ‘That doesn’t matter,’ my teacher replied, ‘God believes in him. He loves him without demanding . . . love in return.’”^{iv}

In other words, “You can deny the existence of God and not love Him, but you are still in no danger of anything but love.”

The apostle Paul preached to the pluralists of his day these striking words,

. . . God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will . . .

. . . not include everyone in heaven, by the way... . . . judge the world in righteousness . . . (Acts 17:30-31)

The apostle Peter wrote,

. . . by [God’s] word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and the destruction of ungodly men. (II Peter 3:7)

Jude speaks in his short epistle of those who are...

. . . marked out for . . . condemnation . . .

Why? Because these are the ones . . .

. . . who . . . deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 4)

Blair went on to say essentially that all the prophets throughout human history have said basically the same thing. He quoted from Hindu writings and Buddhist writings on moral platitudes that sounded just like the golden rule.

However, Blair then said, “The global community . . . is upon us. Into it steps religious faith.”^v

In other words, “This is what will bring it cohesion and peace.”

All of our quotes from our last study and this study – from Muslim leaders to emergent

philosophers to church bishops and even a former Prime Minister – are all saying the same thing, “We are really all one anyway and we’re just trying to follow our own version of truth.”

This may very well be readying the world for the false prophet of Revelation 13. And what a perfect platform it is.

This is the genius, yet simplicity of Satan’s plan revealed. He will one day say, “You’ve been right all along. You have heard from many prophets and scriptures and religions throughout the history of mankind and they’ve all said basically the same thing. They were all speaking for God. Now, let me introduce to you the next prophet in line!”

However, Satan will not introduce you to an invisible God . . . he will introduce you to God who is now visible!

John sees the world following this anti-spirit – the false prophet – who comes to glorify the antichrist as the true Messiah.

However, let us ask the question, “How will people believe he is the true prophet?” We have seen his partnership; we know all about his passionate purpose, but what will cause the world to believe he is really a prophet from God?

The Anti-Spirit’s Performance

I want to answer this question by showing some fireworks. Notice the anti-spirit’s performance in Revelation 13, verse 13.

He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men.

John answers the question, “Why will the world follow him?” Look at the anti-spirit’s performance – “great signs”.

The word for “signs” in this verse, “*semeia*” (σημεία), is the same word that is used for the miracles performed by the apostles in Acts chapter 5, where Luke writes,

At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people... (Acts 5:12)

It is interesting to me that John adds the word “mega” (μεγαλλας) in connection with the false prophet’s signs. He will perform “mega signs”. And the people will flock to him.

When we consider how the crowds flock to the so-called faith healers and miracle workers of our generation, we can imagine the influx of followers

here. However, this prophet is not just healing high blood pressure, bad knees, arthritis, and bad credit. He is doing something that has biblical precedent and proof of a genuine prophet.

Notice verse 13b again,

. . . he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men.

This reminds us of whom? The great Old Testament prophet Elijah, does it not? And even more remarkable in its deception is the context of Elijah's contest with whom? False prophets of Baal. They prayed all morning and could not bring down fire from heaven – only the true prophet of God could. Following the prayer of Elijah, a ball of fire fell from heaven and consumed the sacrifice, and a national revival began with all the people saying, "The Lord, He is God" (I Kings 18:39).

Thus, Elijah had their undivided attention and introduced his generation of idolaters to the true and living God.

In the same way, this false prophet will mimic the great Elijah, with satanic power, designated and delegated by God to bring about His promise that all unbelievers will eventually believe the lie of Satan and follow the antichrist. This prophet will call down fire from heaven, proving to them that he is the true prophet of God and the God he follows is the one true God.

By comparing Elijah with this false prophet, it also struck me that Elijah prayed to God before the fire fell. This prophet did not even pray – which made him all the more remarkable.

The false prophets of today require the faith of people wanting to be healed. If they do not get healed, then they did not have enough faith – which is a wonderfully convenient disclaimer. They would never call for such a visible demonstration of their authenticity, but not this false prophet!

This is no sleight of hand . . . this is not smoke and mirrors and hocus pocus. This is literal fire hurtling downward from outer space!^{vi}

What a performance. The tense of the verb reveals that this is something he actually does whenever he wants.^{vii}

This dramatic present tense informs us, in fact, that it is the false prophet's habitual practice to call down fire throughout the course of his pseudo-ministry.

Who can argue with this? Who is going to defy him? Surely he is the true prophet and the antichrist

he points to is indeed the true and living God incarnate!

Perhaps the false prophet will mimic the miracle of Pentecost when tongues of fire descended from heaven and rested on the apostles. This allowed them to speak in unlearned languages and thus, inaugurated the age of the church. Perhaps the false prophet will do something similar to try to prove that he has come to form a new people of God.

It will be amazing. These fireworks will be breathtaking! Every newscast will carry the sights and sounds of fire falling from heaven at the command of this prophet.

Make no mistake – the Mormons will put away the writings of their prophet Joseph Smith; the Muslims will forget about Mohammed; the Hindus will say, "Krishna is old news."

The people of the world will raise their collective voice and say of this false prophet, "You are indeed the next prophet in line – you are truly empowered by God!"

Now remember, the false prophet is not soliciting worship for himself. He will point people to the antichrist – the world leader; the one miraculously risen from the dead; the peace giver – and lead people to worship him – he is the true God.

The apostle Paul has already warned the world, in II Thessalonians 2:9-10,

. . . the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders,

and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

The world wanted unity. The world wanted a one-world government. The world wanted a one-united religion – in fact, loved this and loved to talk about it.

However, the world did not love the truth revealed in this Bible so as to be saved.

Every generation has false prophets and false miracle workers – who lead people astray and not toward the God of this Book and certainly not into the Book of our God.

This should be warning enough to us all – exercise discernment, even when miracles appear to vindicate the messenger!^{viii}

This is not all the false prophet will conjure up by his demonic power.

Notice the first part of verse 14.

And he deceives those who dwell on the earth...

We see again, the expression, “those who dwell on the earth” to refer to those who follow the lie, rather than those who believe during this Tribulation period. The believers who have come to faith in Christ during this period are referred to as saints, which means “separated ones unto the grace of God,” which they are indeed.

Now notice verse 14b.

. . . because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who had the wound of the sword and has come to life.

Continue to verse 15, which is another implication of the false prophet’s delegated authority, ultimately by God Himself.

And it was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast would even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

Fire from heaven is amazing, but this performance is almost unbelievable.

Some authors suggest that this is some kind of sleight of hand – perhaps there is a microphone hidden somewhere or this is some sort of Disney life-like creature that moves as if it is alive.

There is nothing in the text to give us an easy answer. Some credible commentators say that since we are told, in verse 15, the image is given breath, from the word “pneuma” (πνευμα), instead of telling us the image was given life, from “zoe” (ζωη), then the false prophet just made it seem like it was breathing.^{ix}

I would actually like to believe this is the case. The problem is that later in verse 15, this colossal creature is not just breathing, he is speaking.

Keep in mind that this would be one of the things that would cause the world to believe the prophet is telling the truth. This moment also indicates that the image actually calls for the execution of all who refuse to worship the antichrist, which indicates some sense of reason – a vocabulary and the ability to communicate on his own.

We are told in verses 14 and 15 that this image is an image of the antichrist. It is a greater-than-life statue of him that seems to parallel the desolation of the temple that Daniel refers to, as the antichrist

desecrates the Holy Place. It is very likely that this image will be set up in the Holy of Holies; in the place of God, as it were. (Daniel 11:31)

This will be the most blatant and shocking idolatry ever seen on the planet and it will be on a global scale.^x

Imagine the delegated power of the false prophet, who is permitted to give a living quality to this devilish image.^{xi}

The world will fall at this prophet’s feet. The pilgrimage of millions of followers around the world will commence as they come to pay their respects. It will be reminiscent of Babylonians falling at the feet of Nebuchadnezzar’s image, only this time, it will be worldwide.

And there will be this threat – only this time, there is no mention of a fiery furnace for all who will not bow. There is, still, the sentence of death to all who will not worship the antichrist as their true and living God.

However, the fireworks have evidently paid off – the world believes the signs and wonders; the majority of the human race has been duped and has believed a false preacher who ultimately, leads the world to hell.

What a tragedy. What an everlasting horror.

Do you, however, believe it is a tragedy to have, in our time, false teachers, false preachers, and false miracle workers leading our own world and our own generation away from God and away from the Bible? How disturbed are you about this?

This brought agony to the heart of Paul, who warned the elders in Ephesus, “Watch out for the wolves in sheep’s clothing” (Acts 20:29).

“They are going to rise up from among you. They’ll look like you and sound like you, but they will only want to draw people away after themselves. They don’t care about the sheep; they don’t care about the church; they don’t care about the truth.”

So let me give this warning, dear flock of God, with this timeless caution for today:

Whoever or whatever downplays, discredits, or denigrates the authority of the word of God should be rejected.

Stay alert.

Of those who deny the authority of scripture . . .

. . . the god of this world has blinded [their] minds . . . so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ . . . (II Corinthians 4:4)

One emergent church leader, Brian McLaren, whom I have quoted already and more than enough, co-authored a book recently with Tony Campolo. The purpose of this book is to denigrate a number of what they believe to be, old-fashioned ideas believed by Christians that miss the point. Let me give one of these and say that like a number of them, it sounds on target until you think again. “[The] theology that [has the] . . . implicit threat of being left behind, of time running out – is used by [some] preachers to great evangelistic effect. . . . To the contrary, the history of the world is infused with the presence of God who is guiding the world toward becoming the kind of world God willed for it to be when it was created. Human history is going somewhere wonderful.”

Never mind that on the authority of scripture, the human race is warned about the coming rapture (I Thessalonians 4); the planet is heading for a firestorm that will destroy it (II Peter 3); the wrath of God is coming and the planet will be infused with the judgments of the terror of God, which we have been studying for the last seven chapters in Revelation.

Human history it is not going somewhere wonderful until it has gone someplace terrible.

These guys are like the proverbial man who fell off the roof of a ten story building – as he fell past an open window on the third floor, he was heard to say, “This isn’t so bad.”

Eventually reality will collide with his misguided perception.

One of the elders in our church sent an article to me regarding an ad campaign that was launched this past month in England. It was launched by the British Humanist Association and carried the endorsement of the well-known atheist and professor, Richard Dawkins. The association purchased large advertisement space on 800 British buses to announce their disdain for God. This is what the advertisement said, “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.”

This backfired.

“There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.”

I cannot imagine what the unemployed atheist is doing who came up with this idea.

“There’s probably no God”?

This is the same as saying, “There’s probably a God.”

I read that Christian campus organizations have taken advantage of this opportunity and started

debates on campuses and in Bible studies to address the existence of God. As a result, many college students have already come to faith in Christ.

I have three brothers and as we were growing up, they were always into mischief, unlike perfect little me. I cannot tell you how many times when I was growing up that my mother would send me outside the kitchen door to pull off a switch from the bush so she could use it on one of my brothers – and they needed it too! Okay, I got it too.

How many times did my brothers and I say to each other as we started into some mischief, “It’s okay, Mom and Dad are gone”?

It would never have worked to say, “It’s okay, Mom and Dad are probably gone.”

It would never work to say:

- “Go ahead and cut out early, your boss is probably not in his office.”
- “Go ahead and cheat on that test, the teacher is probably not looking.”
- “Go ahead and steal that item, those cameras probably aren’t working.”

“There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.”

Are they kidding? We are not talking about a spanking; we are not talking about doing time, we are talking about eternity – heaven or hell.

This is the message: “There *is* a God. Believe in Him and you can stop worrying about meeting Him – and that’s the only way you’ll be able to *enjoy* your life.”

Conclusion

Let me close with the words of another note someone sent to me. This note asked a convicting question that I challenge you with as we leave our study of the infallible, inerrant, authoritative, life-changing, true word of God.

“What if we treated our Bible like we treat our cell phones?”

- What if we carried it around in our purses or pockets?
- What if we dashed back home if we forgot it?
- What if we flipped through it several times a day?
- What if we used it to receive text messages?
- What if we treated it like we couldn’t live without it?

- What if we gave it to kids as gifts?
- What if we used it when we traveled?
- What if it became our GPS system of direction when we traveled?
- What if we used it in case of emergency?

Unlike our cell phones, we never have to worry about being disconnected – it has service anywhere on the planet.

The only difference in this analogy would be that when you came to church, we would not tell you to turn it off – we would encourage you to turn it on! And I will add this – do not turn it off when you leave.

ⁱ John MacArthur, “The Sufficiency of Scripture, Part 1,” <http://www.gty.org/Resources/transcripts>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.nytimes.com>, Jan. 13, 2009.

^{iv} “Full text of Tony Blair’s speech to the National Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 5, 2009, <http://tonyblairoffice.org/2009/02/full-text-of-tony-blairs-spec.html>.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} John Phillips, Exploring Revelation (Loizeaux Brothers, 1991), p. 171.

^{vii} Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1995), p. 174.

^{viii} Daymond R. Duck and Larry Richards, Revelation (Thomas Nelson, 2006), p. 197.

^{ix} Thomas, p. 178.

^x John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 2000), p. 61.

^{xi} Donald Grey Barnhouse, Revelation: God’s Last Word (Zondervan, 1971), p. 245.