

Lesson #9

The Mystery of Iniquity

As we continue our overview of history, we will look at a portion of the time period which we have referred to as “This Present Age.” This lesson will begin with the birth of the Church at Pentecost and cover the “falling away” of the church which has also been called The Dark Ages. This is roughly a period of 1000-1500 years, depending upon various interpretations..

There are large and significant portions of history that have been left out, but the purpose of this overview is to show *the historical decline of the church*, and set the stage for our study of *the restoration of the church*. Having a general grasp of this history helps us see the strategy of Jesus Christ and understand where we are now in His plan and purpose.

Satan’s Worst Nightmare

In the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, Satan was completely out smarted and defeated by Jesus Christ. In killing Jesus, Satan lost whatever authority he had. To make matters even worse for Satan, Jesus had not only risen from the dead with all authority in heaven and earth, He had ascended into heaven, sent the Holy Spirit to empower the disciples with the same power and anointing - and they were multiplying! Satan’s worst nightmare was upon Him.

Satan could not deny his nature, so he continued to steal, kill, and destroy. He used his influence in established religion and in the government of Rome to persecute and kill Christians, just as he had killed Jesus. But intimidation through violence and murder was not enough because this anointed army of Christians did not fear death. The more Christians he killed, the more they multiplied. This army proved to be too powerful to simply attack head on, so Satan needed an additional strategy that would attack from a different angle as well.

Satan’s Anti-Anointing Plan

The power of the Christian is directly connected to the indwelling Holy Spirit which provides every true believer with a personal relationship with God. Every believer has direct access to God through Jesus Christ, and has access to the same anointing that Jesus had as a man on earth. No earthly priest or mediator is needed. Jesus has become our High Priest forever; He is the only Mediator between God and man. This concept has been referred to as the priesthood of the believer. So while Satan kept on killing and destroying, he set a diabolical plan into motion. It was a plan to infiltrate the ranks of the Church and sabotage the source of their power from within. It was an anti-anointing or anti-Christ plan.

The word antichrist comes from two Greek words *anti* (“opposite” or “instead”) and *christos* (“anointed” or “the Anointed One, Christ”). Therefore, antichrist could be defined as: *instead of or against Christ, instead of or against the anointing*.

It was this anti-anointing or antichrist plan that Paul was referring to when he wrote to the Thessalonians saying, "... the mystery of iniquity is already at work." (2 Thess. 2:7). Also, Jesus had warned, "...because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold" (Matt 24:12). The Apostle John addressed this anti-anointing plan when he said

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth.

— 1 John 2:18-21 (NKJV)

Notice in the passage above how John describes these antichrists as people who "...*went out from us, but they were not of us...*" This leads us to believe that these antichrists were people who had at some point professed to be Christians and had enjoyed fellowship with the true believers, but were not genuine. As we continue to read John's warnings, we can conclude that these antichrists continue to appear as Christians on the surface. Paul warned Timothy describing them as "...having a form of godliness, but denying the power there of." (2 Tim. 3:5).

Hierarchy Begins

In John's third epistle, John writes to Gaius, who was a member of a church, but not the primary leader. The leader of this church was a man named Diotrophes, who had gained control of a local church, was malicious toward John and threw anyone who received him out of the church. The root of Diotrophes' error is found in the fact that he loved preeminence.

I wrote to the church, but Diotrophes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.

— 3 John 1:9-10 (NKJV)

In Diotrophes, we see an early example of the church moving away from servant leadership and the encouragement for all believers to walk in the anointing of the Holy Spirit toward church hierarchy. Such self-elevated leaders resisted the priesthood of the believer, made themselves priests over others, and made the people of God dependent upon their leadership. It was a plan to shift our relationship with Christ to earthly priests and leaders, teaching us to rely upon their anointing instead of the anointing within us. This is the mystery of iniquity that was immediately at work in the early Church.

The Merging of Church and State

By the 3rd century, a church hierarchy was developing. Bishops over cities were being set up and in the 4th century, we saw the "marriage" of the church to the Roman Empire. This union reinforced the idea of hierarchy in the church and sought to consolidate power and authority in a few.

Rome had become hostile to the Christian faith and persecution persisted until about 310 AD when the edict of toleration signed by the Emperors Galerius, Licinius, and Constantine put an end to the great persecution of the Christians. But it was Constantine, who was supposedly converted to Christianity in 312 AD, that essentially merged Rome and the church. He granted extraordinary public favor to the church, making it essentially a state sponsored religion. He built basilicas, granted privileges to clergy and appointed Christians to high ranking offices.

Constantine also removed pretty much all that remained of the Jewish patterns that were left in the church, and moved it from the Hebrew calendar to a calendar more like the one we use today. He did not see the church as an extension of God's linear plan through the ages, but as a new religion that he was in charge of.

With the marriage of the church to Rome, the church took on Rome's name and became the Roman Church with hierarchy as the norm. The bishops of the regions, particularly the Bishop of Rome, were gradually given more and more power, and they obviously grew to love the preeminence among men. The rise of the Bishop of Rome became apparent in 445 A.D. when Valentinian III, Emperor of the Western Empire, acknowledged him as the last tribunal of appeal over the other bishops. The Bishop of Rome (or at least that office) would eventually gain power until it exercised power over, not just other churches, but over nations and kings!

At what point the real power shifted from the state to the church is unclear, as it was gradual and oscillating. But somewhere around 800 AD, the popes began to appoint heads of state, and eventually embraced the doctrine of papal supremacy, the doctrine that the pope is the infallible leader of the worldwide church and pastor of all Christians. Satan's anti-anointing plan of religious deception designed to centralize authority, undermine relationship with God and disconnect people from the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit was virtually complete, at least in the institutional church.

The story is told of Thomas Aquinas with Pope Innocent II. A large sum of money was spread out before Pope Innocent II when he said, "You see, the Church is no longer in that age in which she said, 'Silver and gold have I none.'"—"True, holy father," replied Aquinas; "neither can she any longer say to the lame, 'Rise up and walk.'"

The Mystery of Iniquity and the Antichrist

The term "Mystery of Iniquity" for which this lesson is named, is in the context of Christ's return and "The Day of the Lord." Apparently, some were teaching a mystical or "spiritualized" view of the resurrection and claiming that Jesus and the Day of the Lord had already come. Among these were Hymenaeus and Philetus (see 2 Tim 2:17-18). This teaching was a deception that certainly would have upset the faith of many, causing them to believe they had been abandoned by Jesus. Such a view certainly would have fallen right into Satan's plan by disrupting the Church's mission to prepare the way for Jesus' return. The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians (see 2 Thess 2:1-4) to assure them that Jesus had not yet come and that He would not appear until at least two things happened:

- 1) a great falling away and
- 2) the man of sin is revealed.

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, 2 not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. 3 Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, 4 who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

— 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4 (NKJV)

1) *The Great Falling Away*

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was written about 50 AD. So, for them, the falling away of which he spoke was a future event. But that is not the case for us. When we look at the last 2000 years of history, the gradual embracing of centralized hierarchy and the decline of the church into the Dark Ages, we see a clear description of a "great falling away." So this event is almost certainly a fulfilled event from our perspective today. As we continue our study, we will see that this falling away has been halted and there has been a steady increase and restoration of the church through history since the end of the Dark Ages.

2) *The Revealing of the Man of Sin*

Many people consider *The Man of Sin* and *The Antichrist* to be the same person. Though they are undoubtedly of the same evil spirit, there are several different interpretations regarding this issue. Some have claimed the man of sin to be a secular/political leader. Speculations have included Roman Emperors like Nero (54-68 AD) and dictators like Mussolini and Hitler.

Others claim that the appearance of the man of sin is fulfilled in the *office* of the pope (not just one individual) which came about through the union of the Church with Rome consolidating all authority in one man at the top. Based on John's description, of antichrists being religious, the historic office of the Roman Pope during the Dark Ages seems to be a better fit. The book of 2 Thessalonians, Chapter 2:6-8 also provides insight. It reveals that this man of sin, who exalts himself and puts himself in the place of God, will be revealed when he that is restraining his appearing is taken out of the way.

And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming;

— 2 Thessalonians 2:6-8 (NASB)

Notice that this person who is restraining is referred to as "he." The NKJV version capitalizes this word, inferring that this "*He*" is the Holy Spirit. This is purely a human interpretation which other versions do not use. There is even a foot note in the NKJV which says "*or he*" (not capitalized). The idea that the Holy Spirit will be taken out of the way is a view based on the idea that the church will be removed from the earth along with the Holy Spirit during a great tribulation period, during which the Antichrist will supposedly rule the world. I find no biblical foundation for that view.

The historical interpretation is that "*he*" in this passage is referring to the Roman Emperor, which is another way of saying "when *Rome* is taken out of the way," and does not refer to a specific or particular ruler. As we have seen, Rome exercised control over the Church, but after Christianity was officially accepted by Rome, the Bishops gained more and more power until they were actually more

powerful than the Roman Emperor. The actual date of the fall of the Roman Empire is debated because, after it had lost all real power, it continued to exist in name for some time.

Many historians mark the fall of Rome to be 410 AD, after Rome was defeated and sacked by the Visigoths. Regardless of the exact date which marks the fall of Rome, we can see that Rome (the Roman Emperor) was effectively taken out of the way which made way for the revealing of a new power that was not defined as a nation or limited by national boundaries.

Historically, with its head man who claimed infallibility and exalted himself as the head of every Christian on earth, the rise of the Roman Catholic church is a fit. If this is the case, the Pope sitting in the papal office fits the description of the man of sin who was revealed when Rome/the Roman Emperor was taken out of the way (lost authority). Assuming this to be an accurate interpretation, this would make the revealing of the man of sin a past event.

Others believe that the revealing of “*the man of sin*” is a future event because of the letter to the Thessalonians which seems to indicate that this man is revealed just before the coming of the Lord.

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming”

— 2 Thess 2:8 (KJV)

However, we are dealing with time stretched out over multiple centuries here. Marking the date when the lawless one (the man of sin) was slain could be ambiguous and even more difficult to date than when the Roman Empire fell. Therefore, we should not assume that the slaying of the man of sin is an instantaneous event. From a human perspective it certainly could have happened gradually, even though there may be key events in history that could be pointed to.

With that in mind, another look at 2 Thessalonians 2:8 actually supports the view that the slaying of the man of sin with the breath of His mouth (the word of God) and his final destruction at the Lord’s return, is indeed a description of a gradual process that concludes with a final event. The words *consume* and *destroy* have different meanings. The Greek word in verse 8 for *consume* (by the breath of His mouth) is *analisko*, which can mean to destroy, but includes the meaning: to *use up*, and would imply a gradual demise. The word for *destroy* (at His coming) is the Greek word for *katargeo*, which means to *render entirely idle or useless*, as in to destroy or abolish, and therefore implies a final event.

This would fit with the belief held by many of the reformers, that the Word of God unleashed in the Reformation is the “breath of His mouth.” This unleashed Word was a force that began to consume, and continues to consume, the man of sin. Ever since the establishment of the foundational principle of Justification by faith through the Reformation, the centralized antichrist systems of hierarchy and control over the people have been undermined and exposed.

It should be noted that we are dealing with an evil spiritual power here, not any one institution. We are not **only** talking about the Roman Catholic Church and its Pope. This anti-anointing plan, which was designed to undermine the priesthood of the believer and centralize authority, is not unique to the Roman Catholic religion. This concept of centralized power was first seen (and disapproved of by God) at the Tower of Babel and it was spreading in the early Church before it found expression through the Roman Catholic Church. It has continued to spread where ever it can.

The evil that is the antichrist spirit has manifested itself to some degree in virtually every branch of the Christian Church, both Catholic and Protestant. On the other hand, we see people, both Catholic and Protestant, who continue to seek a genuine relationship with God in spite of the anti-anointing plans and structures they may find themselves in. But wherever there are leaders who have selfish ambition and wherever there are people who refuse to put their relationship with God ahead of their religion, the anti-anointing spirit finds fertile soil. It is the truth of the Word of God that will consume it and its final destruction will be brought about by the brightness of His coming.

Some students of history see the rise of Islamic caliphate, with its chief civil and religious leader called a Caliph, as the fulfilment of the antichrist system. However, Paul said the mystery of iniquity was already at work, and since Islam did not appear until the 7th century, we must conclude that, if it is a fulfillment, it is only one of many antichrist manifestations. As John wrote, there are many antichrists (1 John 2:18).

There is a lot of information to process in such studies as this and it is easy to see why this is called the “*mystery* of iniquity.” However, Jesus said it has been given to us to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of God (Luke 8:10), and Proverbs 25:2 says, it is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter. This much is clear: The antichrist plan is a plan to replace our relational connection with God with human elements, and to replace true godliness and the Holy Spirit with a religious form void of power and anointing.

The Dark Ages

After Rome was taken out of the way, the *overgrown system of human mediation*¹ in the Roman Church gained power until it dominated all of Christendom. It grew to the point that the Holy Spirit was completely ignored and the idea of grace and salvation was all but lost. The corrupt church taught people that forgiveness for sins was based on good works and could be purchased by money. Skilled salesmen went about the country selling indulgences to raise money for the church.

Though the institutional church was corrupt, our understanding of the true Church must be qualified by the fact that God always has his faithful ones. There have always been those who, though they may have existed within the structure of the institutional Church and who may not be recorded in the history books, will nevertheless have great places of honor in the Kingdom of God when it appears.

The Dark Ages was a time when the light of God’s word was withheld from the people on a broad scale. In general, they were excluded from the light and life of God through *imposed* ignorance (see Eph. 4:18). This period of history known as the Dark Ages would last approximately 1000 years. The Dark Ages is generally considered to be from about 500 - 1500 AD.

Balancing Concepts and Closing Thoughts

This lesson has pointed out that the antichrist concept of centralized power/leadership is a satanic plan designed to undermine the priesthood of the believer and the anointing within us. But we must not

¹ a phrase borrowed from Sheldon, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol 3, p 4

discount leadership in general. God is orderly and organizational. Leadership, even a hierarchy of sorts, is absolutely essential in the church. We all need the benefit of human leaders in our lives. One of the goals of this lesson is to help us discern the difference between leaders who draw people after themselves and leaders who point people to Christ.

An antichrist is a person who places himself in the position of leadership in another's life which rightly belongs to Christ, replacing the New Covenant Spirit-led life with legalistic systems of human mediation. The spirit of Antichrist may manifest itself through an individual, a group, a committee, but the result is still an overgrown system of human mediation. *When we see the priesthood of the believer trampled by overgrown human mediation, you have found the footprint of the antichrist spirit.*

The Antichrist spirit is a religious spirit that finds its fullest expression when it merges with civil government because that is where it can exercise the greatest power and control. This was what happened during the dark ages, when corrupted religion merged with the civil government creating a state church. When this is the case, the correction is not for the church to disengage from civil government. Instead, it is a call for true Christians to rise up and lead in civil government. Both church and state, as separate institutions, should be partners working together to accomplish the same goals.

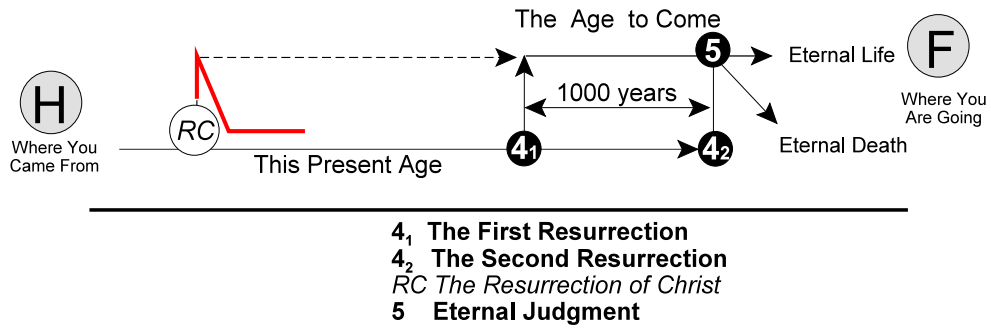
As Christians, we must see our influence upon government as an essential part of our ministry. If we do not influence civil government, someone else will. Separation of church and state, when seen as a disengagement from civil government, pretends to make government neutral, but that is a myth. Someone's views *will* dictate policy. There is no such thing as a philosophical vacuum. Everyone has a religion, even if they call it atheism. Separation (disengagement) is simply a ploy designed to disconnect Christians from civil government so other forces can take control.

The influence of true Christianity creates the freest climate for civil government because it is, by nature, decentralized—each Christian is a priest unto God and has direct access to God by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Extensive centralized external government is not needed for true Christians because they are each individually governed by God internally.

Satan always seeks to corrupt that which is God's and co-opt it for his own use. Therefore, one of his highest goals is to infiltrate and corrupt the church leaving its name and appearance intact while using it for his purposes. When he is able to do so, he not only recruits people to his purposes, but he sullies the name of Christ and discredits the church.

In Destiny Diagram #9 below, *This Present Age* is that section between RC (the resurrection of Christ) and 4-1, The First Resurrection. The ascending line from RC which also descends and then goes flat, represents three things. 1) The ascending line represents the foundational truth and Kingdom power in the early church brought about by the teachings of Christ and His resurrection. 2) The descending line represents the falling away as a result of the mystery of iniquity. 3) The flat portion represents the dark ages, when the church existed largely without the light of truth.

Destiny Diagram #9



In the next lesson, we will look at the reformation and the advancement of the church since the end of the Dark Ages, and continue to develop this diagram illustrating the continuing restoration of truth to the church.