

In Revelation 2:9 and 3:9, Jesus refers to a group of individuals who “*say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*” This raises an important question: Who are these people? Are they ethnic Jews by birth, or are they those who claim a spiritual identity as Jews—those who believe in Christ and are considered Jews inwardly?

Let’s first read the relevant passages:

Revelation 2:9-10 (ESV):

“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

Here, Christ is speaking to the church in Smyrna, a persecuted

and suffering community. He acknowledges their afflictions and then denounces a group who claim to be Jews but, in truth, are not—rather, they are serving the agenda of Satan himself.

Who Were These “Jews”?

Historically, these individuals were ethnic Jews by birth, descendants of Abraham, who considered themselves the true people of God. However, in God’s eyes, they had rejected the very Messiah prophesied in their own Scriptures—Jesus Christ—and were therefore disqualified from being considered true Jews in the spiritual sense.

Jesus rebukes them because, while they claimed the identity of God’s chosen people, they actively opposed the gospel of Christ. They slandered and persecuted Christians, especially Gentile believers who had turned to the God of Israel through faith in Jesus. This opposition aligned them not with God, but with Satan—the adversary.

Consider Jesus’ confrontation with the Jewish leaders in the Gospels:

John 5:39-40 (ESV):

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”

Acts 3:22-23 (ESV):

“Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.’”

These Scriptures point to Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. But many of the Jewish religious leaders, particularly the Pharisees and Sadducees, refused to believe in Him. They not only rejected the gospel but also fought against it, persecuting Christ’s followers.

Persecution by Unbelieving Jews

In the early church, the primary opponents of the gospel were often unbelieving Jews. Wherever the apostles preached, Jewish opponents stirred up trouble, especially when they saw Gentiles

embracing salvation through Jesus.

Acts 14:1-2 (ESV):

“Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.”

It wasn't merely that these Jews didn't believe; they were hostile toward the message of Christ. The apostles, particularly Paul, repeatedly warned Gentile believers to beware of these Judaizers—Jews who insisted that Gentile Christians must observe the Mosaic Law in order to be truly saved.

This is the backdrop of the entire letter to the Galatians, where Paul expresses deep concern over how quickly the believers were being swayed by this false teaching:

Galatians 1:6-7 (ESV):

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who

called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.”

Thus, when Jesus refers to “those who say they are Jews and are not,” He is addressing ethnic Jews who had rejected Him and were persecuting His church. Though they claimed the heritage of Abraham, they had cut themselves off from the true vine (John 15:1-6) by rejecting the Messiah.

True Jews: Spiritual Identity in Christ

The New Testament makes it clear that a true Jew is not one outwardly, but inwardly—one who has faith in Christ and whose heart has been transformed by the Holy Spirit.

Romans 2:28-29 (ESV):

“For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”

Therefore, true Jewish identity in the eyes of God is spiritual, not merely ethnic. Believers in Jesus—whether Jew or Gentile—are the true people of God.

Application for the Church Today

While Revelation 2 and 3 refer specifically to Jewish opposition in the early church, this spiritual principle continues today. Satan no longer relies solely on external enemies; he often works through those who claim to be Christians but oppose the truth of the gospel.

Today, if you preach the full gospel, live a holy life, or call for biblical repentance, often your fiercest opposition will come not from atheists or outsiders—but from those within the church, people who claim the name of Christ but deny His power.

2 Timothy 3:5 (ESV):

“...having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.”

This is why we must remain spiritually vigilant. Now more than

ever, we must be grounded in Scripture to discern truth from error, and walk faithfully with Christ despite opposition—even if it comes from those who bear His name falsely.

Matthew 7:21 (ESV):

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

Maranatha! (*Come, Lord Jesus!*)

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