

A Scriptural and Historical Survey of the Doctrine of the Antichrist

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[1998 edition of an essay originally presented by the author to the Northern Wisconsin District in 1987]

When we discuss the doctrine of the Antichrist, we usually focus our attention on an exegesis of 2 Thessalonians 2 and on the explicit confession of the Smalcald Articles that the Pope is the true Antichrist. This is appropriate since these two texts are respectively the most important scriptural testimony to this doctrine and, for us Lutherans, the most important church confession of this doctrine. However, in this paper our emphasis will be different. We will consider material less often studied, namely, the other passages of Scripture that deal with this doctrine and the non-Lutheran confessions of this doctrine. Because of the great volume of the material our treatment of each source will have to be a brief survey rather than exegesis. In general, we will have to confine our comments to a general overview and to dealing with a few difficulties.

The Scriptural Testimony

It is ironic that the passages that provide us with the title “The Antichrist” tell us very little about him. The title comes from passages in John’s epistles in which he is discussing, not the great Antichrist, but the other lesser antichrists who appear throughout the history of the church and some specific antichrists who were a threat to the church in his own day. John warns:

¹⁸Dear children, this is the last hour, and as you have heard that Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. ¹⁹They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us.

²²Who is such a liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the sort of antichrist I am warning you about—he denies the Father and the Son. (From 1 Jn 2:18,19,22).

The main grammatical problem in this passage is how to render the presence or absence of the Greek article in the English translation since the idioms of the two languages differ. In the first occurrence *antichrist* in v. 18 the Greek has no article, but because John is here talking about a specific individual, the NIV is correct when it adds an article to the English translation and renders, “The antichrist is coming.” I have tried to convey the same meaning by capitalizing Antichrist to make it a proper name and yet reflecting the absence of the Greek article in my translation. In verse 22 *antichrist* has the article, but John here is not talking about the great Antichrist, but about the sort of lesser antichrist he had previously mentioned in verse 18. For this reason I have rendered the article as an article of previous reference or a generic article and paraphrased “the sort of antichrist I am warning you about.” Similar references to such lesser antichrists who operate with the same spirit as the great Antichrist occur in 1 Jn 4:3 and 2 Jn 7. In 3 Jn 9,10 we see an example of such incipient popishness in the church in the mini-pope Diotrephes, who loved the primacy.

All that John’s letters teach us about the great Antichrist is that this doctrine was so well known in the early church that John could base his discussions of lesser antichrists on his readers’ previous knowledge of the Antichrist. Since the problem which John is addressing in his letter is false teachers who arise in the church and who arrogantly oppose God’s truth, we may conclude that both the lesser antichrists and the great Antichrist fall into this category.

Although all the apostles taught the same doctrine, they did not always use the same terminology. The one who John called “Antichrist” was called “the Man of Sin” or “the Man of Lawlessness” by Paul. For some unknown reason it was John’s term “Antichrist” which became the standard term of the church even though it was Paul who had given a more thorough description of this person in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12:

³Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. ⁴He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. ⁵Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? ⁶And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. ⁷For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. ⁸And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. ⁹The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, ¹⁰and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie ¹²and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

In spite of the importance of this passage we must pass it by with only a brief summary of its description of Antichrist. The power and spirit of Antichrist were already secretly at work in Paul's day, but he could come out into the open and develop fully only when the person and thing which were restraining him (probably the Roman emperor and empire) were removed from the scene. Although Antichrist is called a man, his power is at work from Paul's time until the end of the world, so he apparently is a succession of persons. He is above all a religious deceiver who seats himself in God's Temple, the church. He usurps divine authority to himself, promotes the lie that opposes the Gospel, and supports his delusions with counterfeit miracles. The essence of his work is that he leads souls to destruction. This description alone is enough to justify the conclusion that the Pope of Rome is the Great Antichrist, since he alone fits all the marks in the highest degree.

However, Scripture gives further evidence that should be more than enough to convict him in the minds of the uncertain. Although John does not use the term "Antichrist" in Revelation, he there gives a more thorough treatment of this topic, which he touched on only indirectly in his letters.

The first main passage is Revelation 13, the description of the two beasts who are Satan's henchmen:

¹And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name, ²The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. ³One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. ⁴Men worshipped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshipped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" ⁵The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. ⁶He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. ⁷He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. ⁸All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world. ⁹He who has an ear, let him hear. ¹⁰If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints. ¹¹Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. ¹²He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. ¹³And he

performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. ¹⁴Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. ¹⁵He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. ¹⁶He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, ¹⁷so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. ¹⁸This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.

Throughout the history of the church this passage has been recognized as a reference to the Antichrist or to the Antichrist and his helpers even by Roman Catholic exegetes. It is largely only recent commentators who shy away from this interpretation.

The first beast clearly represents governmental power since he is based on the four beasts of Daniel 7 that represent four world empires. The interpretation of the fatal wound which the beast receives (and yet lives on) has been very controversial. The tower of Babel, the fall of Rome, and the Reformation have been among the interpretations. I believe that best interpretation is the first coming of Christ. At that time Christ became King of Kings with all power in heaven and in earth. (Compare Daniel 2 and the Stone which shatters the image of world empires.) Nevertheless, although fatally wounded by Christ's coming, the beast of government continues to persecute God's people throughout the New Testament era (the 42 months).

The second beast is called the "false prophet" in Revelation 19:20 so it is clear that he represents false teaching in the church. Like the man of sin in 2 Thessalonians he supports his teachings with counterfeit miracles. He oppresses all who will not obey him. Since all the numbers in Revelation have symbolic value, the beast's number 666 is very likely intended to symbolize "Triple Failure." He is the man who always comes up short of seven, the number of God's completed work.

Many orthodox Lutheran commentators like Kretzmann have seen the whole of Revelation 13 as a reference to the Antichrist, the Pope of Rome. According to this interpretation the first half of the chapter describes the bloody way in which Antichrist operated before the Reformation; the second half the smoother, more subtle *modus operandi* of modern times. Stoeckhardt sees the first half of the chapter as a reference to Antichrist and the second as a reference to such supporters of his system as the Jesuits. I believe it is preferable to see the first beast as governmental power in service to the apostate church and the second beast as the apostate church or the Antichrist himself. Chapter 13 is broad enough to include all persecuting governments and all antichrists as many recent commentators have done, but to discuss this chapter without mentioning the Antichrist, the Pope, is like discussing World War II and talking about Himmler, Goering and Hess without mentioning Hitler.

John presents a more specific portrait of the Antichrist in Chapter 17:

¹One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the punishment of *the great prostitute*, who sits on many waters. ²*With her the kings of the earth* committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries." ³Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴The woman was *dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls*. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. ⁵This title was written on her forehead: MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. ⁶I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore

testimony to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. ⁷Then the angel said to me: Why are you astonished? I will explain to you *the mystery* of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns. ⁸The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come. ⁹“This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are *seven hills on which the woman sits*. ¹⁰They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. ¹¹The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction. ¹²“The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. ¹³They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers. ¹⁵Then the angel said to me, “The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are *peoples, multitudes, nations and languages*. ¹⁶The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. ¹⁷For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God’s words are fulfilled. ¹⁸The woman you saw is *the great city* that rules over the kings of the earth..

The match-ups of this chapter with the history of the papacy are so frequent and so specific that it is very difficult to avoid the connection. Even a number of Roman Catholic commentators acknowledge that the Babylon of Revelation 17 must be Rome, but they deflect its condemnations to a revived pagan Roman Empire.¹ The correspondences with papal history are so many that it is difficult to mention them all in a paper of this scope.

The prostitute, who represents the apostate church as she often does in Scripture (Ezekiel 16, 23, Hosea), forms a sad contrast with the faithful woman of Revelation 12. She rides on a beast that apparently is the same beast of government that appeared in Revelation 13. The church now dominates the state and makes the state serve its purposes. At first glance John’s readers, who were being persecuted by the government, must have thought that would be a wonderful day. Who of them would have guessed how disastrous it would be when the church dominated a diminished Roman Empire? A church which is catholic—that is which rules over all peoples and nations, a church rich with gems, precious metals, and rich garments, a church which has more annual revenue than all the kings of Europe—wouldn’t such a church be a great blessing to the world? But what do we see in the vision? We see a church that is in adulterous alliance with kings and yet tries to lord it over them. (Canosa and the Interdict on England are but two examples in a long, sad train of such events.) We see a church lavishing its wealth on castles and great works of art and luxurious living. (One would think that her princes would at least blush when they parade in scarlet and purple.) Most incredible of all we see a church drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of Waldensians and Albigensians, of Savonarola and Huss, of victims of the Inquisition, of Netherlanders and Germans. We see a church hated even by her allies, the kings of the earth, who turn against her and devour her. (Recall the captivity of the papacy in Avignon, the actions of Henry VIII in England, and anticlericalism and state-church conflicts over property through the centuries right down to our own time.) The kings of the earth live in a love-hate relationship with her, fascinated by her pomp and glory, but angered by her power and pretensions. (The recent papal visit has again demonstrated these conflicting passions.)

In Revelation 18 even her enemies mourn her fall because she embodies every thing that is magnificent in human achievement, the greatest art, architecture and music, the greatest scholarship and humanistic

¹ Culleton, p 20.

endeavors. Yet all her pomp has been achieved at the cost of sacrificing her loyalty to God, so that his people are warned:

Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.

To avoid her we must identify her. To make her identity more certain her connection with Rome is made clear. Who of John's readers could fail to catch the significance of the seven hills? Furthermore, she is identified with the culmination of seven kings or kingdoms. The "king who is" must be the pagan Rome of John's day. The five who have fallen are apparently Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece, the past kingdoms who oppressed God's people. The seventh and eighth kingdoms, which belong together, are the unholy allies, the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire and other kingdoms allied with the papacy.

This identification of the Antichrist with Rome is confirmed by the prophecies of Daniel 7:

²Daniel said: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. ³*Four great beasts*, each different from the others, came up out of the sea. ⁴The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a man, and the heart of a man was given to it. ⁵And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, 'Get up and eat your fill of flesh!' ⁶After that, I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule. ⁷After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a *fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful*. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had *ten horns*. ⁸While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was *another horn, a little one, which came up* among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth that *spoke boastfully*. ¹¹Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. ¹²(The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.) ¹⁷'The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth.' ¹⁹Then I wanted to know the true meaning of the fourth beast, which was different from all the others and most terrifying, with its iron teeth and bronze claws—the beast that crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. ²⁰I also wanted to know about the ten horns on its head and about the other horn that came up, before which three of them fell—the horn that looked more imposing than the others and that had eyes and a mouth that spoke boastfully. ²¹As I watched, *this horn was waging war against the saints* and defeating them, ²²until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom. ²³He gave me this explanation: 'The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, treading it down and crushing it. ²⁴The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. ²⁵He will speak against the Most High and oppress his saints and try to change the set times and the laws. The saints will be handed over to him for a time, times and half a time. ²⁶But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. ²⁷Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom.'" (Dn 7:2-8,11-12,17,19-27)

From the context of Daniel it is clear that the first three empires are Babylon, which carried Judah into captivity, Persia which nearly destroyed Israel through Haman's plot, and the Greek Empire of Alexander which eventually led to the terrible persecutions under Antiochus Epiphanes. The fourth empire must therefore be Rome, the oppressor of John's day that had ruthlessly devoured the world in its conquests. It is from this fourth Empire, Rome, that the horn arises who speaks boastfully and changes times and laws, who oppresses the saints throughout the time, times and half a time of the New Testament era. It is clear that Revelation 13 and 17 rest solidly on the foundation of Daniel 7.

In Daniel 8 there is another little horn who arises to oppress God's people, but he rises out of the Greek Empire, not out of Rome. He is Antiochus Epiphanes who bitterly persecuted Israel around 168 B.C., the time of the Maccabean revolt. He is relevant to our discussion because in Daniel 11 he serves as a type of the Antichrist.

³⁶The king will do as he pleases. He will *exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things* against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed, for what has been determined must take place. ³⁷He will show *no regard for the gods of his fathers or for the desire of women.*² nor will he regard any god, but will exalt himself above them all. ³⁸Instead of them, he will honor a *god of fortresses*; a god unknown to his fathers he will honor with *gold and silver*, with precious stones and costly gifts. ³⁹He will attack the mightiest fortresses with the help of a foreign god and will greatly honor those who acknowledge him. He will make them rulers over many people and will *distribute the land at a price*.

⁴⁰At the time of the end the king of the South will engage him in battle, and the king of the North will storm out against him with chariots and cavalry and a great fleet of ships. He will invade many countries and sweep through them like a flood. ⁴¹He will also invade the Beautiful Land. Many countries will fall, but Edom, Moab and the leaders of Ammon will be delivered from his hand. ⁴²He will extend his power over many countries, Egypt will not escape. ⁴³He will gain control of the treasures of gold and silver and all the riches of Egypt, with the Libyans and Nubians in submission. ⁴⁴But reports from the east and the north will alarm him, and he will set out in a great rage to destroy and annihilate many. ⁴⁵He will pitch his royal tents between the seas at the beautiful holy mountain. Yet he will come to his end, and no one will help him. (Dn 11:36-45)

In Matthew 24 Jesus discusses the fall of Jerusalem which took place in 70 A.D. This event is a type of the Last Judgment, which Jesus also discusses in Matthew 24. In the same way in his 11th chapter Daniel begins with the arrogant oppressions of Antiochus the King of the North, who is the type, and finishes with the Antichrist, who is anti-type or fulfillment. Especially in verses 37-40 the Reformers and their heirs saw an apt description of the wars and wealth, the simony and enforced celibacy of the Antichrist. Because of the poor rendering in the NIV translation, verse 37 needs our special attention. Literally it reads, "For the God (or gods) of his fathers he will show no regard and for the desire of women and for every god he will not show regard." By its translation "the one desired by women" the NIV favors the interpretation that this verse refers to Tammuz, a heathen god whose cult especially attracted women (Eze 8:14). The traditional Reformation interpretation was to see this verse as a reference to the scorn of normal sexual relations which underlies enforced celibacy. This interpretation fits whether one understands the phrase as meaning "the desire women have for men" (subjective genitive) or "the desire men have for women" (objective genitive). This interpretation already appears in the oldest extant commentary on Daniel, that of Jerome, who refers to the Antichrist's false pretense of chastity in his discussion of this passage. This passage is used by Chemnitz in his discussion of

² I have corrected the NIV translation here. See comments in the discussion.

celibacy and explicitly applied to the papacy.³ It therefore is clear that this interpretation is worthy of serious consideration in spite of the remarks of commentators like Robert Anderson who says that the view which sees the Antichrist in Daniel 11 has “minimal appeal beyond the circle of some sects” and is “exegetically witless and religiously worthless...”⁴

In this survey we have seen that the evidence identifying the Pope as the Antichrist is overwhelming. But did this testimony in fact serve its purpose of enabling God’s people to identify the Antichrist when he came? Did others besides Luther make the identification?

The Historical Testimony

An interest in the Antichrist is apparent in the theological writings of the church from the very beginning. *The Didache*, one of the earliest writings of the church, speaks of the “world-deceiver” who is to come (*Did.* 16:3-5). However, the term “Antichrist,” quickly became the standard term. Late in the 2nd century Irenaeus used the term “Antichrist,” even when discussing 2 Thessalonians 2 (*Against Heresies* Bk V, 25, 28-30). In general, the pre-medieval church fathers describe the Antichrist as a single man who will appear at the end of world history. To some degree the interpretation of the early church fathers is similar to the modern millennial view of the Antichrist, even among the fathers who were not themselves millennialists. In general they believed that the Antichrist would be of Jewish birth (from the tribe of Dan) and would rule for 3 ½ literal years from a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Irenaeus, Jerome, Athanasius, Ambrose, Hippolytus, Lactantius, Isidore of Seville, Chrysostom, and Gregory the Great all refer to such an end-time Antichrist, although with varying degrees of emphasis and clarity.⁵ Even Augustine refers to the Antichrist as an end-time figure, but he is cautious in his approach and expresses doubt about whether the Antichrist will rule from a temple in Jerusalem or in the church (*City of God* 20:3-29). Cyril of Jerusalem associates the Antichrist with Rome and a revived empire, but he also connects his activity with the temple in Jerusalem (*Cat.* 15:11-16). This view must have caused quite a stir since it was expressed on the eve of Julian the Apostate’s attempt to restore the temple in Jerusalem. A variant of this view was the belief in two antichrists, a revived Nero as the Eastern Antichrist who would be overcome by the Jewish Eastern antichrist (Attributed to Martin of Tours by Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogues* 1:41).

The fact that the earliest extant Latin biblical commentary is the commentary of Victorinus of Pettau (ca. 300) on Revelation is evidence of the strong eschatological interest of the early church. Victorinus too sees the Antichrist as a false Messiah for the Jews, but he also appears to hold the *Nero redivivus* view. Victorinus was a moderate chiliast so his work was revised by Jerome to make it more acceptable for use in the orthodox church. The oldest extant Old Testament commentary is Jerome’s work on Daniel, another eschatological book.

Two tendencies which were to remain a part of eschatological writing throughout the Middle Ages and right down to the present day began already during the pre-medieval period. Excessive imagination began to play a prominent role in writings about the Antichrist. There were many fanciful popular legends and poems about the Antichrist, some of which even included details of his physical appearance.⁶ Myths about the Last Good Ruler and other eschatological figures sprang up alongside the biblically based view of the Antichrist. The second tendency that began already in the pre-medieval period was the quickness to shape one’s description of the Antichrist to fit current events, often for polemical or political reasons. This tendency began to flourish already with the rise of Constantine and received new impetus from such events as the fall of Rome, the rise of Islam, the change of millennia at 1000 A.D., the Crusades, and the arrival of the Mongols and Turks in Europe. It has continued in present day applications of eschatology to Middle Eastern politics.

³ *Examination III*, p 157,168.

⁴ *Daniel*, on chapter 11.

⁵ Hopkins, p 86ff. for a thorough but slanted summary. Also *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, I. p 616-618.

⁶ McGinn, p 23-25.

Although the testimony of the pre-medieval fathers is disappointing, we can to some degree excuse them because the Antichrist had not yet come fully into the open in their day. The clear fulfillment of the prophecy did not occur until the Middle Ages. During this time of fulfillment people began to recognize the papacy as the Antichrist well before the time of the Reformation.

A very interesting sidelight in the history of the doctrine of the Antichrist is contained in a letter of Pope Gregory I to the Emperor Maurice written in 597. Gregory's statement, "I say with confidence that whoever calls or desires to call himself 'universal priest' in self-exaltation of himself is a precursor of the Antichrist," has a certain irony to it in light of subsequent history.⁷

Speculation about the Antichrist remained popular in both East and West between 500 to 900. During this period belief in an individual end-time Antichrist continued. A corporate view which identified heretics or the Jews as Antichrist was also popular.⁸

The most important development late in the 1st millennium was the declaration of Arnulf of Orleans to the Gallican Synod. After describing a string of corrupt popes, he declared, "Are there indeed any bold enough to maintain that the priests of the Lord over all the world are to take their law from monsters of guilt like these men branded with ignominy, illiterate men, and ignorant alike of things human and divine?...What would you say of such a one, when you behold him sitting upon the throne, glittering in purple and gold? Must he not be the Antichrist, sitting in the temple of God and showing himself as God?"⁹

Unfortunately, the Crusades directed attention away from the guilt of the papacy to other antichristian forces. Many saw the Crusades as a necessary prelude to the coming of Antichrist, since Christianity had to be restored in Jerusalem before Antichrist could rule there.¹⁰ Again the correspondence with modern millennial thought about the Near East is striking.

"Antichrist" name-calling was thrown about freely by all parties during the reform movements and empire-church struggles of the 11th and 12th centuries. Gregory VII branded the imperial antipope Guibert of Ravenna as Antichrist (perhaps in the wider sense). Gregory's other enemies are called precursors or limbs of Antichrist. The papal supporter Gerhoh of Reichersberg branded imperial opponents, especially Henry IV, as Antichrist, specifically linking his rise with the loosing of Satan in Revelation 20. Gerhoh asserted that the greed of simony was paving the way for the final Antichrist, but he placed the blame on the people of Rome, not the papacy. The same kind of propapal rhetoric continued into the thirteenth century when it was used against Emperor Frederick II. Frederick was expected to fulfill the prophecies of Antichrist in 1260 (matching the 1260 days of Revelation), but he messed things up by dying in 1250.

Frederick was called Antichrist by papal adherents, but he was a messiah to his supporters, who responded in kind against Frederick's papal accusers. A battle of tracts and pamphlets followed. A bold step was taken when an anonymous treatise identified the name of Pope Innocent IV (*Innocencius papa*) with the 666 of Revelation. It further declares, "All these signs which the saints applied to the Antichrist according to the Sacred Scripture spiritually understood, that is, as completely contrary to Christ and his teaching, apply to Pope Innocent. There is no doubt he is the true Antichrist."¹¹

Joachim of Fiore, the famous apocalypticist, was torn in two directions by the events of his time. He expected the imminent rise of Antichrist as a western king who would attack the church. He still hoped for a good pope, a Pastor Angelicus, who would turn the church in the right direction. But this very hope implied that current popes were less than angelic. These seeds of criticism were brought to fruition by "Joachite" imitators who criticized the papacy more directly.

By the 13th century attacks on popes as the Antichrist were becoming common. Reform-minded groups like the Beguines and Fraticelli were prominent in these attacks, especially against John XXII.¹² The

⁷ McGinn, p 64.

⁸ McGinn, p 82.

⁹ Schaff, IV, p 261.

¹⁰ McGinn, p 91.

¹¹ McGinn, Ch. 20, esp. p. 175-176.

¹² McGinn, p 208,235.

Albigensians and Waldensians, heretical groups that were persecuted by the church, joined in the chorus. Some would dismiss the testimony of these groups because they all had their own ax to grind and their own doctrine was suspect or worse.¹³ However, even loyal sons of the church were beginning to recognize the prophetic portrait of the papacy's misdeeds in Scripture. Even the poet Dante in his famous *Inferno* (ca. 1321) attacks the popes of his day, especially Boniface VIII, as fulfillers of the scriptural prophecies of Antichrist, although he does not apply the term itself to the papacy. Reflecting on the simony in the church he writes:

Of such as you was the Evangelist's vision when he says
 "She who sits upon the Waters locked with the Kings of the earth in fornication."
 Gold and silver are the gods you adore! In what are you different from the idolater, save that he
 worships one, and you a score?
 Ah Constantine, what evil marked the hour not of your conversion, but of the fee the first rich
 Father took from you in dower. (*Canto XIX*, 100-111)

Notice the clear statements that Revelation 17 and Daniel 11 find fulfillment in the medieval papacy.

The pre-Reformers sharpened the attacks. Occam and Marsiglius of Padua wrote important anti-papal works.¹⁴ In the tracts and sermons of his last years the English reformer Wycliffe (d. 1384) stepped up his attacks on the pope as the Antichrist.¹⁵ The Bohemian reformer Huss followed up strongly on Wycliffe's attacks, but at his fatal trial at Constance he qualified his identification of the pope as the Antichrist. In response to the charge that he had called the pope the Antichrist he replied, "I did not say this, but I did say that if the pope sells benefices, if he is proud, avaricious, or otherwise morally opposed to Christ, then he is the Antichrist. But it should by no means follow that every Pope is Antichrist; a good pope, like St. Gregory, is not the Antichrist, nor do I think that he ever was."¹⁶

Right up to the Reformation men such as the Italian reformer Savonarola continued to launch strong attacks on the papacy. On the very eve of the Reformation in 1516 at the Fifth Lateran Council the pope found it necessary to ban preaching about the Antichrist. However, this futile effort could not ward off the decisive blow. By 1518 and 1519 Luther was suggesting privately that the Pope was the Antichrist. By his great writings of 1520 he was proclaiming it openly. Luther's position was a notable advance from that of Wycliffe, Huss, and Savonarola, the three pre-reformers who stand by him in the Worms Monument, because he so clearly saw that the problem was not merely in the abuse of the papal office, but in its very essence, which usurped Christ's authority to a man, and in the heart of its doctrinal system, the denial of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Luther's scriptural confession of the doctrine of the Antichrist entered the confessions of the Lutheran Church in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession and even more explicitly in the Smalcald Articles. It was strongly confessed by Lutherans in such works as Heerbrand's *Disputations Concerning Antichrist* (1583) and Spener's *Righteous Zeal Against the Antichristian Papacy* (1714).

Luther's statement in the Smalcald Articles II, IV stands as the classic statement of the scriptural reasons for declaring that the pope is the Antichrist:

10) This teaching shows forcefully that the Pope is the very Antichrist, who has exalted himself above, and opposed himself against Christ because he will not permit Christians to be saved without his power, which, nevertheless, is nothing, and is neither ordained nor commanded by God. 11) This is, properly speaking to exalt himself above all that is called God as Paul says, 2 Thess. 2, 4. Even the Turks or the Tartars, great enemies of Christians as they are, do not do this,

¹³ See Latourette, *History*, p 453-454.

¹⁴ Schaff, VI, p 71-74.

¹⁵ Schaff, VI, p 332-334.

¹⁶ McGinn, p 263.

but they allow whoever wishes to believe in Christ, and take bodily tribute and obedience from Christians.

12) The Pope, however, prohibits this faith, saying that to be saved a person must obey him. This we are unwilling to do, even though on this account we must die in God's name. 13) This all proceeds from the fact that the Pope has wished to be called the supreme head of the Christian Church by divine right. Accordingly he had to make himself equal and superior to Christ, and had to cause himself to be proclaimed the head and then the lord of the Church, and finally of the whole world, and simply God on earth, until he has dared to issue commands even to the angels in heaven.

This clear confession was not the exclusive property of Lutherans. Calvin sets it forth in his *Institutes* (4.2.12; 4.9.4; 4.7.25). The Westminster Confession is explicit: "There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ; nor can the pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof, but is that Antichrist, that man of sin and son of perdition" (XX vi).

The Catholic response from the Counterreformation down to the present has followed pretty much the same line: The Pope cannot be the Antichrist since the Antichrist is an end-time figure. The prophecies of the Antichrist will be fulfilled only within a brief period before Christ's return. The Catholic position is thus very similar to that of the early fathers and modern millennialists. However, since Rome does not have an official position on the Antichrist, other Catholic writers follow a collective interpretation that sees Antichrist as a composite of all anti-Christian forces.

Today the great majority of Protestants teach a doctrine of the Antichrist that differs little from that of Rome. There may be a variety of reasons for this—millennial presuppositions, ecumenical blinders, or simply a combination of weak exegesis and shallow historical knowledge. But in all these cases the harm done by failing to recognize the Antichrist may be the same. Unfortunately, we must acknowledge that the situation in Lutheranism is not much better. In the 1930's through the 1950's the Wisconsin Synod objected to the equivocating statements produced by ALC-Missouri Synod dialogues, which upheld the historical judgment of the reformers in calling the pope the Antichrist, but stopped short of a clear statement that the papacy by its very nature is and will remain the Antichrist. In the 1950's the Wisconsin Synod expressed disappointment in the statement of *The Common Confession*, "The distinguishing features of the Antichrist, as portrayed in the Holy Scripture, are still clearly discernible in the Roman papacy, the climax of all human usurpations of Christ's authority in the church,"¹⁷ on the grounds that this statement left the millennial opinion that the papacy may be replaced in the future by a "better" end-time Antichrist as an unresolved open question.¹⁸ In the 1990's I believe we would be amazed and rejoice to get a statement half as strong from the ELCA, which is the successor body to the ALC.

In response to the shifts occurring in American Lutheranism the Wisconsin Synod in 1957 produced an unambiguous statement on the Antichrist. "We thereby affirm that we identify this Antichrist with the Papacy as it is known to us today, which shall as 2 Thess 2:8 states, continue to the end of time, whatever form or guise it may take."¹⁹ This position has drawn plenty of fire and ridicule, but the scriptural and historical evidence fully justifies it. The theological climate of our times clearly calls for such a statement from those who desire to be confessional Lutherans. Those who reject this statement either do not know or do not believe what Scripture says and what the papacy stands for. In seeking to win others to this position we are most likely to be successful if we set the prophecies of Scripture and the history and doctrines of the papacy side by side and let God guide our hearers to draw their own conclusions. Surely, the evidence is enough to win conviction.

¹⁷ *The Common Confession*, p 16.

¹⁸ Siegler, p 5-6.

¹⁹ *WELS Doctrinal Statements*, p 66 old edition, p 22 new edition. Though the statement was produced by a joint committee of WELS and LCMS theologians for both synods, it was never adopted by the LCMS.

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