

WHO IS THE ANTICHRIST?

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When we are spiritually-exercised and growing in grace, we long for Christ's Second Coming (Revelation 22:7,17,20). However, there are dangers. Christian people have sometimes been led astray and become skewed in their thinking. At Thessalonica, believers gave up their employment because they thought the Lord would arrive any moment (1 Thess.4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:11,12). Rather than working, they wanted devotional leisure to welcome Him properly. Paul corrects this error, first by reminding them of the doctrine of work (1 Thessalonians 4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12), and then by reminding them (2 Thessalonians 2:5) of the event that must precede the Lord's coming: the coming of the Antichrist (verses 3-10).

The word "Antichrist" is not used in this passage: it comes from references in John's epistles, e.g. 1 John 2:18 "ye have heard that Antichrist shall come" (cf also 1 John 2:22; 4:3, 2 John verse 7). However, while 2 Thessalonians 2 does not name him, it identifies and personifies him. Other passages bear upon our subject, notably Daniel chapters 7 and 8; Matthew chapter 24; and Revelation chapters 13,17,18. However, for space and conciseness of treatment, we will confine ourselves to 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10.

Who, then, is the Antichrist? Christians are not unanimous in their understanding here, and we appreciate that there are those who may hold differing opinions. However, in what follows I would like to outline the classic reformed view that Paul in this passage prophesies the rise of the Roman Catholic papacy. That each pope anytime is this Antichrist prophesied here who precedes our Lord's second advent.

1. Let us demonstrate this

1] Paul predicts a momentous removal from the true faith.

Verse 3 "a falling away first." The Greek word is literally "apostasy, revolt." It refers to the professing church at large. Church history records many downgrades and defections; however, this is something far from typical: it is huge and historic and it was still to come in Paul's time.

The rise of the papacy is consonant with this. It happened gradually and insidiously. When Constantine became Emperor Augustus, Christianity enjoyed freedom from persecution and even compensation from AD 313 onwards. This helped the spread of the Gospel and was the answer to the church's prayers (1 Timothy 2:2,3). However, it was a mixed blessing; as such blessings often are in a fallen world. Christianity became the religion of the empire. Paganism fell, but in time the church largely lost its primitive purity. As one writer put it:

"The simplicity of the Gospel was corrupted; pompous rites and ceremonies were introduced; worldly honours and emoluments were conferred on the teachers of Christianity, and the kingdom of Christ in a great measure converted into a kingdom of this world."

In 476 AD, Constantine moved the seat of his empire from Rome in the West to Byzantium in the East, renaming it Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey). Rome, therefore, went from being the imperial centre to the ecclesiastical centre - the place where the succession of bishops grew increasingly important. Innocent I (402-417) conceived the idea of the Roman bishop's universal supremacy. The first pope, however, the alleged successor to Peter at Rome, was Leo I (440-461) who entertained a vision of "an ecclesiastical monarchy." Pope Gregory VII (Hildebrand, 1073-1216) made the incumbent at Rome supreme ruler of the church, and of the secular world also.

The crowning move came, as Richard Bennett tells us, when the

“Emperor Justinian officially bestowed the title of “Supreme High Priest” on the bishop of the church at Rome in the sixth century The pagan Emperor Justinian also bestowed on the bishop of the church at Rome the universal oversight of the entire Christian world. That was when the bishop of the church at Rome became known as the Pope, arising as Spiritual Head of the pagan Roman Empire. The authority of this historical fact alone ought to be seen as clearly designating the Antichrist.”

(http://www.bereanbeacon.org/articles_pdf/antichrist_unveiled.pdf)

Over the centuries the Roman church has accrued a mass of heresies and blasphemies, most of which are well-known: salvation by works, indulgences, idolatry, pretended miracles, auricular confession, penance, worship of Mary and saints and angels, purgatory, the Mass. By 1870 it added papal infallibility. By 1950 the corporeal assumption of Mary was formally declared to be dogma by Pope Pius XII. Truly, judged by Scripture and church history Romanism represents “a falling away” (cf 1 Timothy 4:1-3) that is as satanic as it is horrendous.

2] Paul gives three clear glimpses of the pope.

a] Verse 3 “that man of sin.”

He predicts a definite figure, a man. This can be any pope representing the papacy, like a king representing the monarchy. The title harks back to the apostasy of the ten tribes because of Jeroboam’s idols, “Jeroboam, who did sin, and who made Israel to sin” (1 Kings 14:16). Interestingly, the northern kingdom of Israel never ceased *professedly* to worship Jehovah, but in practice it worshipped idols. The religious system headed by the “man of sin” is the same. It claims to be *the* Christian Church, yet it is so corrupt that it is more pagan than Christian.

b] Verse 3 “the son of perdition.”

In one other place in Scripture is this found, John 17:12, where our Lord uses it of Judas Iscariot. The pope and this arch-traitor have certain things in common.

i] Both were ministers and became apostates.

ii] Both betrayed Christ to His enemies.

Literally, in the case of Judas. Virtually, in the case of popes who cruelly handed Protestants over to the civil authorities for punishments and death.

iii] Both betrayed Christ with a kiss.

Judas on Christ’s cheek. Popes, in their feigned homage to Him.

iv] Both for money.

Judas for thirty pieces of silver. The papacy, in its wealth so vast that no one knows for sure how much it is.

v] Both at the instigation of Satan.

“The devil having now put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot ... to betray him” (John 13:2). The pope, “whose coming is after the working of Satan” (2 Thessalonians 2:9). Luther called him “His hellishness.” The pope, then, is the head of a satanic system. We should no more pray for the pope than our Lord would have prayed for Judas.

c] Verse 8 “that Wicked.”

Literally, “the lawless one.” Each pope transgresses all the Ten Commandments,

- 1st Commandment, “No other gods...”

The pope makes himself a god, verse 4 “Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped, etc.” Each pope arrogates to himself a position higher than what belongs to the living God. His three main titles are,

“Holy Father.” *Dominus Deus noster papa* — “Our Lord God the pope.”

“King of Kings and Lord of lords.”

“Vicar of Christ” (true only of the Holy Spirit, John 16:7).

He thus blasphemes each member of the Godhead.

- 2nd Commandment, “no graven image...”

Roman Catholicism is littered with statues and idols. Including the pope himself. In 1982 when John Paul II visited the UK, his ecstatic followers sang the spiritual, “He’s got the whole world in his hands,” which is always ascribed to God. The pope did not reject this tribute, whereas when the alleged first pope met similar adulation he immediately rejected it (Acts 10:26). At the funeral of the same pope in 2005, and the election of the current one, there were similar scenes, confirming that the Romish system is the worship of idols as shameless as paganism.

- 3rd Commandment, “not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.”

Verse 4 “sitteth in the temple of God.” 1 Corinthians 3:6 tells us that the church is this temple. Over all the Church the each pope presumes to sit as “universal primate” as a hideous **usurper** of the headship of our blessed Lord, an impostor like Satan in the beginning (1 Timothy 3:6; cf 1 Peter 5:3). His blasphemous pretensions indeed make God’s name vain.

- 4th Commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day...” The Romanist “continental Sunday,” where church attendance is followed by pleasure for the remainder of the day, is well known.

- 5th Commandment, “Honour thy father and thy mother.” However, the priest claims higher authority than parents, and has often assumed the right to overrule parents’ wishes (cf Matthew 15:3-5).

- 6th Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.”

How many innocent and godly people has the Roman Church slaughtered in its history of persecution and inquisition throughout the world! The figure goes easily into millions. It has also murdered countless souls by its damnable heresies (Luke 11:52).

- 7th Commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”

Transgressed by spiritual adultery in worshipping idols (Jeremiah 13:27). In addition, the scandalously immoral lives of some of the popes and priests, not to mention the child sex abuse scandals to this day.

- 8th Commandment, “Thou shalt not steal.”

Roman Catholicism has robbed the world of the truth, souls of their salvation, people of their money, countries of their prosperity and God of His glory.

- 9th Commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness.”

This is the “strong delusion, that they should believe a lie” (verse 11). Also in its pretentious “miracles,” Romanism has its “power and signs and lying wonders” (verse 9). That the Roman Church and the Charismatic Movement come together in ecumenism should not surprise us at all.

- 10th Commandment, “Thou shalt not covet.”

Romanism has always lusted for power and domination and is never satisfied with less.

The pope, then, is the arch-transgressor of God’s law, is lawless and consummately “that Wicked.”

2. Let us trace this

At the time of Paul writing here, the Antichrist papacy had not yet happened. He predicts it as something still to come. However, the projected sequence of events is clear enough.

1] A providential restraint.

Verses 6,7 “And now ye know what withholdeth, etc.” ... “he who now letteth will let.” Paul reminds the Thessalonian believers that they “know” from his verbal teaching (verse 5) why Antichrist has not appeared yet. Something is in the way that prevents his coming.

a] This held him back.

“What withholdeth” ... “letteth.” These two words are the same in the Greek and mean, “to hold back, prevent, suppress.” Something was stopping the rise of the papacy at the time. What was this? Answer: the Roman government, in the person of the Emperor. While imperial Rome was in place, it held the papacy in check.

b] We can understand this.

No Caesar would have tolerated a pope at Rome, since the latter claims to be king of the church and of the world. If he dared say such things in Paul’s time, he would have been put him to death for treason. We have only to remember Rome’s crackdown on any pretender to power. It persecuted Christianity itself as a seditious sect, and for refusing to worship the emperor. A pope would be seen as 100 times worse. Therefore, a providential restraint hindered him for a time.

c] However, things changed.

When Constantine became emperor in 325 AD, Christianity became the religion of the empire. When he moved his seat to Constantinople, Rome became the place where successive bishops there eventually grew into the papal power. When imperial Rome eventually fell in 476 AD, papal Rome filled the vacuum. As one has put it, “The Roman Empire had its rise, reign and ruin. ... that Rome might become the nest of Antichrist.”

d] So the restraining power was removed.

Verse 7 “taken out of the way.” To quote another, “...this removal or ‘taking away’ of the only restraint on the ambitious projects of the Roman bishops, gave all the opportunity which could be desired for the growth of the papal power. In all history there cannot, probably, be found a series of events corresponding more accurately with a prophetic statement than this; and there is every evidence, therefore, that these are the events to which the Spirit of inspiration referred.”

e] Paul mentions the restraining power anonymously.

Verse 7 “what withholdeth ... he who now letteth.” This is because the emperor Nero and the might of Rome were still there. What would happen if they were identified here as something to be “taken out of the way”?! The Thessalonians and Paul would be exposed to great danger (cf Acts 17:7).

2] Antichrist came.

Verse 6b “that he might be revealed in his time.”

a] It was already brewing as Paul wrote.

Verse 7 “For the mystery of iniquity doth already work.” We can easily identify elements of the coming apostasy in New Testament. For example, its religion of works in Galatians. Idolatry, 1 Corinthians 10:14. Sacred days, Galatians 4:10,11. Superstitious reverence of angels, Colossians 2:18. Arrogance, 2 John verse 9. Just as there is “the mystery of godliness” so there is the opposing “mystery of iniquity” that is papal Rome.

b] It became manifest at the appointed time.

Verse 6 “that he might be revealed in his time.” “Mystery” means hidden, concealed – until made known. Antichrist was revealed in God’s time. This reminds us that God is in control

of history, church history, and even the rise and fall of His enemies. He ordered the timing for Antichrist to arise in the 6th century. God has “a time to every purpose under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). It was not simply evil that got out of hand. God was over the whole process.

3] Antichrist shall have his ruin.

Verse 8 “whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, etc.” The *true* Christ will come and destroy this blasphemous and arrogant usurper, also “in His time.” “The spirit of his mouth” refers to the present blows Antichrist receives from the word of truth empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is the present great antidote to, and weapon against, Antichrist. When our Lord returns, at “the brightness of his coming,” it will be his final destruction.

3. Let us learn from all this

1] The Antichrist papacy had yet to come when Paul wrote.

We see it now as fulfilled. Many of the Church Fathers, the Reformers and the Puritans believed this. The Authorised Version translators clearly did when, in the Epistle Dedicatory they commended James I for his “writing in defence of the Truth, (which hath given such a blow unto that man of sin, as will not be healed)...” It is enshrined in the Protestant confessions of faith. Comparatively few today hold this view. However, if the Antichrist is not the papacy, then,

a] Who is he?

It opens the door to all kinds of speculation. Each notorious figure of history can be a candidate: from Nero to Napoleon, through Hitler and Stalin to Saddam Hussein.

b] We are looking for an evil personage rather than for the return of Christ.

c] It means that all this must first happen in our day.

This makes our Lord’s coming more remote.

d] Given the papacy *is* with us, our Lord may come sooner than we think.

Although it is true that the papacy may yet become worse and do worse.

2] The function of civil government.

God appointed the Roman Empire, as He has all civil government, (Romans 13). In Paul’s time it kept the papal power in check for centuries: “withholdeth.” Restraining evil and protecting good is what the state *should* do, and we are thankful for this God-given institution. Let us not forget to pray for our political leaders (1 Timothy 2:1).

How ironic, then, that with Antichrist’s rise, the papacy wheedled its way into so many governments around the world! To such an extent that we speak of “Roman Catholic countries.” Not so Great Britain, however, because we inherit a Protestant Constitution. Part of this is the Act of Settlement of 1701, which safeguards our monarchy: “Roman Catholics and those married to Roman Catholics are barred from ascending the throne ‘for ever.’” Our wise forefathers framed this because the pope claims universal jurisdiction. If a Roman Catholic became our King or Queen, they would owe their allegiance to the pope. This would mean the loss of sovereignty, civil and religious liberty that other countries have suffered. Sadly, the equivalent is happening via the EU, and we fear through the EU Reform Treaty! Rome never gives up, and we should never cease to watch and pray.

3] The Roman Catholic Church is apostate and wicked.

It is *the* enemy of Christ, His Church and the gospel. In 1 John 2:18 “Antichrist” comes from the Greek *anti*, which means both *against* and *instead of*. This is exactly what each pope is. He is the very antithesis of Christ, and yet He claims to be Christ’s representative. So clear is this identification in 2 Thessalonians that someone has said, “If the pope is not the Antichrist, he has the misfortune of looking very much like him.”

4] Let us detest and abhor this vile system.

Not individual Roman Catholics – they, like any lost sinners, have a claim upon our compassion and evangelism. However, we should hate Romanism and its monstrous pope with a perfect hatred.

5] We must have nothing to do with Roman Catholicism.

Ecumenism, with its liberal indifference to sound doctrinal belief and loyalty, wants to include the Roman Church its scheme of “unity.” Lovers of the truth must keep separate from all such (Romans 16:17; Jude 3). The Roman Antichrist is the enemy of Christ and cannot be regarded in any other way than as *our* enemy. If they believed Paul’s teaching on the Antichrist, could the Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) and the Anglican-Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) have ever happened? Has the abandonment of this historic view not led to a weakened and naive Protestantism among many?

Let us, then, cleave to the Word of God and to the Church of Christ with an unflinching “love of the truth” (verse 10). Moreover, let us remember that while not Protestantism but Christ saves us, nonetheless we are His disciples indeed if we continue steadfastly in His word (John 8:31). May we pray, work and live to see such a resurgence of biblical and Reformed Christianity in our time that Antichrist may fall and Truth shall win the day.