

Martin Luther's Views on the Antichrist

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In the warm ecumenical afterglow of Vatican II, Martin Luther's identification of the papacy as the Antichrist of Bible prophecy is often seen as narrow-minded, bigoted, and even unchristian. His view, which until recently was shared by a broad spectrum of conservative Evangelical Protestants,¹ is now seen as an embarrassment by some members of churches that retain this interpretation. It is no longer socially acceptable to describe the papacy as the fulfillment of a collection of prophecies regarding a powerful spiritual tyranny.

Even the United States Congress has put itself on record regarding this issue. In 2000 Congress passed a joint resolution condemning Bob Jones University for promoting this belief.²

The politicians who passed that resolution were probably unaware that they were undermining the historical foundations of Protestantism, but this is the logical inference one can make from this significant observation by Professor Phillip Cary of Eastern University: "The Reformation wouldn't have happened without the conviction that the pope was Antichrist."³ Since this conviction is one that most contemporary Protestants have discarded, Cary—who describes himself as an "ecumenical

¹ Roland Bainton, *Christianity* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964, 2000), 362; Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over: An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 43-66, 76, 186.

² U.S., Congress, 106th Cong., 2d. sess., S. Con. Res. 85, February 29, 2000, <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c106:S.CON.RES.85.IS>:

³ Philip Cary, *Luther: Gospel, Law, and Reformation* (2 vols. Chantilly: The Teaching Company, 2004), 1:155.

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minded Protestant”⁴—challenges his fellow Protestants: “If the pope isn’t the Antichrist, what right do you have to be split?”⁵

If Protestantism owes its very existence to Luther’s conviction that the papacy was the Antichrist, it might be instructive to inquire why Luther held this view and under what circumstances he came to this conclusion. We will see that he came to this view slowly and reluctantly, driven by historical circumstances and theological reflection. We will also briefly note the comparable views of other Protestant Reformers and their predecessors. Looking at the idea that the papacy is the Antichrist of prophecy in its historical context might give us a rational basis for evaluating it.

We will focus primarily on Luther because it was his views on the subject that triggered the Protestant Reformation. However, we should note that Luther was far from the first person to hold this view. Luther himself credited John Huss with being the first to call the pope an Antichrist.⁶ Huss did indeed consider the Pope to be the Antichrist,⁷ but he was not the first to do so, nor was his mentor, John Wycliffe, although Wycliffe⁸ and at least some of his Lolland followers, including Sir John Oldcastle,⁹ held this belief. This idea also circulated among the Waldensians, the Albigensians, and the Fraticelli, a group of Franciscans with more regard for the rule of St. Francis than for papal authority.¹⁰

But even earlier than that, back in 991, Bishop Arnulf of Orleans, describing papal murder, lust, and intrigue, asked, “Are there any bold

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁶ *Luther’s Works (LW)*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (55 vols. St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986), 13:417.

⁷ Brian Moynahan, *The Faith: A History of Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 310; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, vol. 4 of “The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine” (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984), 109.

⁸ Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, rev. ed., 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970-1975, 1987), 2:331; Roland Bainton, 215; Williston Walker, Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz, and Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Christian Church*, fourth ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1985), 379; Moynahan, 298, Pelikan, 109.

⁹ Moynahan, 306-308. Regarding other Lollards who considered the Pope the head of Antichrist’s church, see John Knox, *John Knox’s History of the Reformation in Scotland*, ed. William Croft Dickinson (2 vols. New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 1:7-9.

¹⁰ LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation* (4 vols. Washington: Review & Herald, 1950), 1: 884; Joseph R. Strayer, *The Albigensian Crusades* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1971, 1992), 22; Bainton, 212.

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enough to maintain that the priests of the Lord over all the world are to take their law from monsters of guilt like these . . . ?” When a person so deficient in virtue sits on the papal throne, Arnulf suggested that he must “be the ‘Antichrist, sitting in the temple of God, and showing himself as God.’”¹¹

Martin Luther was probably unaware of the previous attacks on the papacy when, in 1517, he drafted his 95 Theses. If he had been, he would have been unsympathetic. At the time he regarded John Huss as a heretic.¹² His target was not the papacy; it was a greedy Dominican monk named Johann Tetzel who was distorting Catholic doctrine by exaggerating the benefits of indulgences.¹³ Luther had no intention of splitting the church: he was only trying to protect his parishioners.¹⁴

Enraged, Tetzel made sure that Rome knew what was happening. This set in motion a chain of events that led to a summons for Luther to appear before a papal representative. It also led to a theological attack on Luther’s position by Sylvester Cardinal Prierias, the papal court’s chief theologian. Prierias wrote, “He who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome and pontiff of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the Holy Scriptures, too, draw their strength, is a heretic.” Furthermore, “Whoever says that the Church of Rome may not do what it is actually doing in the matter of indulgences is a heretic.”¹⁵ Prierias had transformed the debate from a question of procedure to one of authority.

¹¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, third ed., rev (8 vols. [New York]: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910, repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985-1986), 4:290-291. Several other people had identified specific popes as Antichrist. These included Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II and his advisor, Eberhard II, archbishop of Salzburg, as well as the Dominican monk Girolomo Savanarola. Froom, 1:796, 798, 800; Eugen Weber, “Apocalypse Through History,” *The Key Reporter*, August 1999, <http://www.pbt.org/pubs/keyreporter/Autumn99/Weber3.htm>. Nicholas of Cusa expected that a future pope would succumb to “the satanic spirit of Antichrist” (Pelikan, 109).

¹² *LW*, 26:70, 28:242.

¹³ Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York: Viking, 2004), 29-31; Pelikan, 136; Cary, 135; Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and the Devil* (Cambridge: Belknap, Harvard, 1999), 135; Patrick Collinson, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2003, 2004), 54.

¹⁴ *LW*, 34:325; Marius, 137, 159; Cary, 134.

¹⁵ Marty, 33; Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Wallisn-Shwartzbart (New York: Doubleday Image, 1990, 1992), 193-194; Cary, 139; *Works of Martin Luther with Introductions and Notes (WML)* (6 vols. Philadelphia: A.J. Holman & Castle, 1915-1932), 2:73.

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Responding to the papal summons, Luther traveled to Augsburg to appear before a papal legate, Cardinal Thomas Cajetan, who demanded that Luther recant. When Luther asked for scriptural reasons to do so, none were given him. Rome had ordered that Luther be arrested if he refused to recant, but Luther—mindful of the fate of John Huss—avoided arrest by stealing away from Augsburg on the night of October 16, 1518.¹⁶

First Hesitant Steps

Luther had read Prierias' assertions of papal infallibility and had experienced Cajetan's reliance on tradition, refusal to discuss Scriptures, and implicit threats of force. Now he began to consider the possibility that these men might be serving Antichrist. On December 18, 1518, he wrote to Wenzeslaus Link, soon to replace Stanpitz as the head of the Augustinian order in Germany, asking him to evaluate, on the basis of some of his writings, whether he was right in his suspicion "that the true Antichrist mentioned by St. Paul reigns in the court of Rome"¹⁷ A few months later Luther wrote to his friend and former student Georg Spalatin, chaplain and secretary to Elector Frederick of Saxony, telling him that he had been studying papal decretals in preparation for the upcoming disputation at Leipzig. He added, "Confidentially, I do not know whether the Pope is Antichrist himself or his apostle, so miserably is Christ (that is, the truth) corrupted and crucified by the Pope in the decretals."¹⁸

In July, 1519, at the Leipzig debate with Johann Eck for which Luther had been preparing, Luther took the position that both popes and church councils could err. Now, for Luther, "[e]verything stood under the judgment of scripture."¹⁹ He would soon be using Scripture to pass judgment on the Pope.

Two things that Luther read the following year weakened his hesitation about calling the Pope Antichrist. First, in February, 1520, he read Lorenzo Valla's demonstration that the Donation of Constantine—the

¹⁶ Oberman, 195-197; Marius, 159-164, 209; Robert Henderson Fife, *The Revolt of Martin Luther* (New York: Columbia UP, 1957), 283, 308-309.

¹⁷ Marius, 188; George Waddington, *A History of the Reformation on the Continent*, 3 vols. (London: Duncan and Malcolm, 1841), 1:201.

¹⁸ Waddington, 1:201; Will Durant, *The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wycliffe to Calvin: 1300-1564*, Part 6 of "The Story of Civilization" (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 349; Marius, 188; *LW*, 48:114.

¹⁹ Collinson, 30; Marius, 179.

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basis for Rome's "claim to supremacy over the Western world"²⁰—was a forgery. This seems to have inspired another letter to Spalatin (February 24, 1520): "I am practically cornered, and can hardly doubt any more that the Pope really is the Antichrist . . . because everything so exactly corresponds to his life, action, words, and commandments."²¹

After reading Valla's treatise, Luther, hesitantly at first, began to publicly say what he had previously written privately to friends. Augustine Altveld was a monk in Leipzig who asserted that the Bible supported total papal control of the church and that submission to the Pope was essential for the operation of an effective government. Luther responded early in 1520 with *On the Papacy in Rome against the Famous Romanist at Leipzig*.²² This publication mentioned several reasons for possibly considering Rome to be the Antichrist. "It is said that the Antichrist shall find the treasures of the earth," Luther wrote, suggesting that the "insufferable Roman thieves" were finding their treasure by exploiting the Germans, and quoting what he said was a Roman proverb: "Squeeze the gold from the German fools, in any way you can."²³

Luther then raised the issue of papal infallibility. Expressing a willingness to accept anything the Pope decreed after first testing it by the Bible, he contrasted this position with that of "Roman knaves" who placed the Pope "above Christ" and made him "a judge over the Scriptures" and said that he was infallible. If the Pope expected Christians to place their faith in something visible (himself) rather than that which was invisible, Luther concluded, "I would say right out that he is the real Antichrist."²⁴ Notice that in neither of these statements did Luther directly say that either the Pope or the papacy was the Antichrist, but he raised the possibility.²⁵

The second thing that Luther read in 1520 that weakened his hesitancy to openly declare that the Pope was Antichrist was Prierias' second treatise against Luther's teachings. Reprising his earlier arguments that the Pope had more authority than either Scriptures or church councils, Prierias quoted a passage of canon law that horrified Luther: the Pope could not be deposed from office even if he "were so scandalously bad

²⁰ Oberman, 42.

²¹ Fromm, 2:255.

²² Marius, 234.

²³ *WML*, 1:343.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:391-392.

²⁵ But he did address Rome's shepherds as "thou scarlet whore of Babylon." *Ibid.*, 1:392.

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that he led multitudes of souls to the devil.”²⁶ Shocked at this extreme statement from Rome’s chief theologian, Luther wrote to Spalatin, “I think everyone in Rome has gone crazy.”²⁷

Address to the Christian Nobility

Now Luther’s pen began to fly. First came *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*, which went to press on June 13, 1520.²⁸ Early in this treatise, a book that repeatedly linked the papacy and Antichrist, came Luther’s reaction to Prierias’ appalling statement:

It must . . . have been the very prince of devils who said what was written in canon law: “If the pope were so scandalously bad as to lead souls in crowds to the devil, yet he could not be deposed.” On this accursed and devilish foundation they build at Rome, and think that we should let all the world go to the devil, rather than resist their knavery. . . . It is to be feared that this is a game of Antichrist or a sign that he is close at hand.²⁹

Luther then suggested calling a free church council and said if the Pope tried to block this, he would be hindering the church’s edification, thus violating 2 Corinthians 10:8, which Luther paraphrased as, “God has given us authority not for the destruction but for the edification of Christendom.” Then Luther said, “It is only the power of the devil and of Antichrist which resists the things that serve for the edification of Christendom.”³⁰ If the Pope claimed the “power to interpret the Scriptures by mere authority,” that would—like trying to prevent or control a church council—be evidence that the papacy was “in truth the communion of Antichrist and of the devil,” Luther said.³¹

Quoting Christ’s warning in Matthew 24 about false prophets performing “signs and wonders, so as to deceive the elect,” Luther said miracles were no proof of papal authority. He said 2 Thessalonians 2:9 had predicted “that Antichrist shall, through power of Satan, be mighty in lying wonders.”³²

²⁶ Oberman, 42; Cary, 1:140; Marius, 237; *WML*, 2:72.

²⁷ Oberman, 43.

²⁸ Marius, 237.

²⁹ *WML*, 2:72-73.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:73, 78.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2:79.

³² *Ibid.*

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Luther also attacked as “the very works of the very Antichrist” papal claims to power over earthly authorities and even over angels. Reminding his readers that Jesus said His kingdom was not “of this world,” Luther bluntly said, “No vicar’s rule can go beyond his lord’s.” These “over-presumptuous” claims were devil-devised devices to facilitate bringing in Antichrist and raising “the Pope above God, as many are already doing,” Luther said.³³

Commenting on the report that the Pope had prevented the Bishop of Strassburg from implementing moral reform in his diocese, Luther said,

Thus priests are to be encouraged against their own bishop, and their disobedience to divine law is to be protected! Antichrist himself, I hope, will not dare to put God to such open shame.³⁴

Luther then spoke of the corruption and immorality in Rome. “There is buying, selling, bartering, trading, trafficking, lying, deceiving, robbing, stealing, luxury, harlotry, knavery and every sort of contempt of God, and even the rule of Antichrist could not be more scandalous.”³⁵ He also complained of papal legates accepting money to “legalize unjust gain” and “dissolve oaths, vows, and agreements” while saying “the pope has authority to do this.” This alone, Luther said, was enough “to prove the pope the true Antichrist.”³⁶ By accepting money for annulling oaths, the Pope was suppressing “God’s commandment” and exalting “his own commandment over it,” according to Luther, who added, “If he is not Antichrist, then let some one else tell me who he can be!”³⁷

Nevertheless, after saying all this, Luther held out an olive branch to Pope Leo X. He implied that his quarrel was not with the Pope himself but the Roman curia, which was, he said, undeniably “more corrupt than any Babylon or Sodom ever was . . . so that Antichrist himself, should he come” could not add anything “to its wickedness.”³⁸

Babylonian Captivity

In August, Luther learned that Leo was sending a bull threatening him with excommunication. With this, Richard Marius observes, “all

³³ *Ibid.*, 2:81, 108-109.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:90.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:95.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:138.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:140.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:303-304.

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ambiguity about the Antichrist evaporated from his mind; to him the pope was the Beast, the man of evil foretold in the New Testament, and no compromise was possible.”³⁹

After this, Luther published *On the Babylon Captivity of the Church*, which charged the papacy with leading “believers into a new captivity.”⁴⁰ Criticizing those who claimed that the Pope had “the power to make laws,” Luther wrote, “Unless they will abandon their laws, and restore to Christ’s churches their liberty, they are guilty of all the souls that perish under this . . . captivity, and the papacy is of a truth the kingdom of Babylon, yea, of the very Antichrist.”⁴¹

In addition, this booklet mentioned two specific reasons for calling the papacy Antichrist. First, “this Babylon of ours” had distorted the sacraments by withholding the Communion cup from the laity and, “with the wickedness of Antichrist,” calling it heresy for anyone to say it was necessary for laymen to have access to the cup as well as to the bread.⁴² Second was the annulment of legitimate marriages, of which Luther said,

I am incensed at that barefaced wickedness which is so ready to put asunder what God hath joined together that one may well scent Antichrist in it, for it opposes all that Christ has done and taught. What earthly reason is there in holding that no relative of a deceased husband, even to the fourth degree, may marry the latter’s widow?⁴³

Other 1520 Publications

Luther wrote three other tracts that year which linked the papacy and Antichrist. In *Treatise on Christian Liberty* he denounced the “soul-destroying traditions of our popes” as “snares” by which “numberless souls” had “been dragged down to hell,” clearly “the work of Antichrist.”⁴⁴

In *The Treatise on Usury* he again discussed Rome’s Antichrist-like financial exploitation of “German fools,” while in his *Treatise on the New Testament* he said in the context of the papal denial of the cup to the laity, “The pope . . . does not have a hair’s breadth of power to change

³⁹ Marius, 248.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 249; Marty, 60.

⁴¹ *WML*, 2:234-236

⁴² Ibid., 2:236, 247.

⁴³ Ibid., 2:268.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2:346.

what Christ has made, and whatever of these things he changes, . . . he does as a tyrant and Antichrist.”⁴⁵

Luther's Response to the Bull

The threatening bull, *Exsurge Domine*, primarily the work of Eck, Cajetan, and Prierias, denounced 44 of Luther's published statements as “poisonous, offensive, misleading for godly and simple minds, uncharitable, counter to all reverence for the Holy Roman Church, the mother of the faithful and the mistress of the faith.” Condemning anyone holding or defending these positions, it warned Luther that he must return “to the bosom of the church” within 60 days. Meanwhile, it ordered that he keep silent and that his books be burned.⁴⁶ After its arrival, on December 10 Luther burned it as well as books of canon law.⁴⁷ Leo X signed the actual bull of excommunication on January 3, 1521, but for various reasons it was not delivered until much later.⁴⁸

The Pope expected his condemnation of Luther to automatically trigger his temporal punishment, probably by execution. Before his death, Emperor Maximilian I had promised Leo that he would enforce any papal verdict against Luther. On January 18, 1521, Leo ordered Maximilian's successor, Charles V, to do likewise. Papal nuncio Girolamo Alessandro then tried to convince first Charles and then the Diet of Worms to simply condemn Luther without granting him a hearing.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, replying to *Exsurge Domine's* charges in his *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, Luther said, “Beware of the Antichrist, the Pope!”⁵⁰ Arguing that Christ was the rock of Matthew 16:18, Luther said that interpreting this text to suggest “papal authority” was “a lying device,” perverting God's word. This, Luther continued, confirmed Paul's prediction that Antichrist's entrance would be “by the power of the evil spirit, who enters only by means of lies and false interpretations of Scripture.”⁵¹ In this book he also called the Pope Antichrist for giving people false assurance through indulgences, for denying that belief was required for forgiveness of sins, for spreading “errors throughout the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4:50, 1:320-322.

⁴⁶ *LW*, 32:ix, x.

⁴⁷ Marty, 57; Froom 1:21.

⁴⁸ Oberman, 22; Marius, 281.

⁴⁹ Fife, 281, 498, Marty 66, Marius 228, 279, Durant 360.

⁵⁰ *LW*, 32:42; *WML*, 3:51, 84-85.

⁵¹ *LW*, 32:42.

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world” in exchange for “the wealth of the nations, and for imposing on people a system of ‘contrition, confession, and satisfaction.’”⁵²

Returning to the Communion issue, Luther said Jesus gave both bread and wine to everyone and told everyone to repeat the ordinance in His remembrance, but “the pope teaches us differently, and gives us only a half-sacrament.” Then, addressing Leo, Luther offered to recant if the Pope could prove that he wasn’t “banned and condemned before God” by Paul’s curse on anyone “who changes his Lord’s ordinance, and resists and perverts His gospel.” Unless he could prove this, Luther said, the Pope should not take offense when Luther called him the Antichrist.⁵³ Furthermore, Christ merely invites us to partake, whereas “the pope . . . compels us to go to the sacrament once a year.” Thus, in both “his commands and his prohibitions, he is the direct opposite of Christ, as befits a true Antichrist.”⁵⁴ This reflected a general papal tendency to bind Christians with “man-made laws” while “this unspeakable Antichrist at Rome” treated God’s word “as though it were a carnival joke.”⁵⁵

One of the statements Leo had condemned in *Exsurge Domine* was, “The burning of heretics is contrary to the will of the Holy Spirit.” Luther responded that papists had burned the “good Christians” John Huss and Jerome of Prague and “the pope and other heresy-hunters have burned other good Christians,” including “the godly man of Florence, . . . Girolomo Savonarola,” thus “fulfilling the prophecy concerning the Antichrist that he will cast Christians into the oven.”⁵⁶ In this booklet Luther also condemned “the error about the free will” as “a peculiar teaching of Antichrist”⁵⁷ and denounced the creation of mendicant orders as “one of Antichrist’s tricks” for increasing his own power.⁵⁸

To Worms and Wartburg (1521)

Having been twice condemned by the papacy, Luther’s life was clearly in jeopardy. Nevertheless, he opposed Ulrich von Hutten’s proposal to defend the new faith militarily. “I would not have the gospel defended by violence and murder,” he said. “Antichrist . . . will be

⁵² *LW*, 32:36, 44-47; *WML*, 3:53, 57.

⁵³ *WML*, 3:68, 71.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:73.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:94.

⁵⁶ *LW*, 32:82, 87-88.

⁵⁷ *WML*, 3:111.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:116.

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crushed without violence by the Word.”⁵⁹ However, he fully expected that he himself would lose his life before this happened because, as he wrote to Spalatin, “This cunning Antichrist holds the kingdoms and this world captive.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, when appearing before the imperial diet at Worms, he courageously refused to retract anything he had written unless “convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason.”⁶¹ Consequently, he was declared an outlaw. The fact that he survived despite the imperial ban was due to the intervention of Frederick of Saxony.⁶²

During his protective confinement at Wartburg Castle, he continued to describe the papacy as “the Antichrist, the sign of the end prophesied throughout the Scriptures.”⁶³ He wrote,

St. Paul calls Antichrist the man of sin and the son of perdition, because through his precepts and laws he will turn all the world from God and prevent God and the world from coming together; he shall be a master of sin and all iniquity, and yet will retain the name and appearance of Christ and call himself Sanctimus and Vicarius Dei and Caput Ecclesiae [“most holy one; vicar of God; head of the Church”], and persecute all who will not obey him. It is easy to recognize that the pope more than fits this description.⁶⁴

Now Luther introduced a new reason for calling the Pope Antichrist, one to which he would repeatedly return in the future, the denial of the right of the clergy to marry. Speaking sympathetically of “the pitiable flock of fallen priests”, Luther said, “and if the pope had brought about no other calamity than this prohibition of marriage, it would be sufficient to stamp him as antichrist, who is rightly called the man of sin and son of perdition, and the abomination, so much sin and perdition have followed in the wake of this one law.”⁶⁵

⁵⁹ *LW*, 32:xii; Schaff, 7:201-202.

⁶⁰ *LW*, 32:xiv, xv.

⁶¹ *LW*, 32:112.

⁶² Bainton, *Christianity*, 250; Schaff, 7:332.

⁶³ *LW*, 32: xvi, 141.

⁶⁴ *WML*, 3:368 cf. 376.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:388.

Usurping God's Place

Luther did not soften his characterization of the Pope as Antichrist after the crisis had passed and he could feel reasonably secure under Frederick's protection. Indeed, he expanded and strengthened this position. Of course, he could never feel completely secure. Indeed, Leo's successor, Hadrian VI, warned Frederick that, unless he separated himself from Martin Luther "and put a muzzle on his blasphemous tongue," church and state would jointly subject Frederick to both earthly punishment and eternal torment. "Repent therefore," he said, "before you feel the two swords." Later, in 1530, Pope Clement VII specifically ordered Emperor Charles V to "exterminate the evangelical heretics."⁶⁶

The chief reason the mature Luther described the Pope as Antichrist was because, in Luther's opinion, he had usurped God's place as law-maker, adding his own rules to those in the Bible, burdening consciences with human traditions, and infringing on Christian freedom, declaring as sinful things which Christ has said are not sinful, including clerical marriage.⁶⁷ Indeed, Luther said, "He has deposed all of Scripture and set up his own laws," sitting in judgment on God's word and making decrees that oppose what Scripture says, nullifying the texts assuring us of forgiveness of sins, distorting Christ's words, falsely interpreting Scripture, diluting Biblical mandates, and giving people a distorted picture of God.⁶⁸ Rather than feeding Christ's sheep, the Pope taught and did the very opposite of what "Christ spoke and did," according to Luther.⁶⁹

One way the Pope usurped God's place was by teaching that the Scriptures derived their authority from the church rather than vice versa.⁷⁰ Another way was by claiming authority not only over the church but over the whole world, judging everyone but permitting himself to "be judged or punished by no one" "even if the whole world were to see a pope lead innumerable multitudes of souls to the devil in the abyss of hell." The Pope said that "whoever obeys him will be saved" and "whoever acts and speaks in opposition to" his teaching "must die," when—according to Luther—"his devilish doctrine (1 Tim. 4:1)" actually "leads directly to hell." The Pope's claim to divine prerogatives had "denied

⁶⁶ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon, 1950), 250; Marty, 152.

⁶⁷ *LW*, 13:281; 41:364; 26:385; 52:137; 4:141; 8:282, 185; 3:349; 30:107; 51:364; 28:23-24.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 52:81; 8:312; 24:355; 52:21; 27:89; *WML*, 4:77; 5:116.

⁶⁹ *LW*, 30:138.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:101; Pelikan, 175.

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and utterly buried the office and divinity of Christ,” who never “intended the Pope to rule over the whole world.”⁷¹ He cited both Scripture and history to show that neither Peter nor the bishop of Rome at the time of the Council of Nicea ruled over the whole church.⁷²

Excommunicating and persecuting people for following God’s word was another way the Pope was usurping God’s authority, according to Luther. “The false church is always the persecutor of the true church, not only spiritually . . . but also physically, by means of the sword and tyranny,” he said, declaring that the Bible had foretold that Antichrist would “kill those who cling to the Word.” This had been fulfilled by papal “arch murderers,” who had “slain many Christians.”⁷³

Central to Luther’s understanding of the Pope as Antichrist usurping God’s place was 2 Thessalonians 2:3,4. Phrases he borrowed from this passage to describe the Pope included “man of sin,” “the lawless one,” and “son of perdition.”⁷⁴ Noting that the villain in 2 Thessalonians 2 sits in God’s temple and exalts himself above God, Luther said, “The Antichrist took his seat in the church, yet not to govern it with divine laws, promises, and grace,” but with “his foolish and innumerable laws and altogether unnecessary traditions.”⁷⁵ “He sits in the temple of God and rules with human commandments.”⁷⁶ Luther connected this passage with Matthew 15:3:

Paul tells the Thessalonians (2 Thes. 2:4) that the Antichrist “exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship”—surely by means of his self-invented holiness. Christ bears witness, Matt. 15:3, that the Jews transgress the commandments of God so that they might keep the traditions of men. We can also see this in the hostile monastery life and holy orders. There we find fasting, holiday-making, lying in hard beds, watching, keeping silent, wearing coarse clothes,

⁷¹ *LW*, 22:82; 27:342; 29:42; 13:281-282; 14:12-13; Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, ed. Erasmus Middleton, quoted in Philip S. Watson, *Let God be God: An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (London: Epworth, 1947), 96.

⁷² *LW*, 41:299, 357.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 24:308; 2:34, 101, 214, 316; 22:61; *WML*, 5:26.

⁷⁴ The first two phrases are two different translations of the same words. *WML*, 2:102; *LW*, 28:357; 31:391-392.

⁷⁵ *LW*, 8:283 cf. 31:393; 41:209; 46:408.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 37:367.

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being tonsured and locked in a cell, being unmarried—and God has commanded none of these things.⁷⁷

Rather than being subject to God, he exalted himself “above God’s Word and worship,” thus “sitting in judgment over God.”⁷⁸

The prophecies of Daniel, Matthew, and Revelation were also significant for Luther’s understanding of the papacy as Antichrist usurping God’s prerogatives. Luther interpreted Daniel 2 and 7 as depicting four great empires, culminating with the Roman Empire, which would be divided, after which the Antichrist would arise. His own generation, he believed, was symbolized by “the last toes of the great image of which Daniel speaks.”⁷⁹ The little horn arising out of the Roman Empire he identified as the papal Antichrist. Perhaps he was thinking of the prophecy that the little horn would “think to change times and laws” (Daniel 7:25) in his earlier statement that the Pope had no power to change what Christ has made, and whatever of these things he changes, that he does as a tyrant and Antichrist.⁸⁰

Luther believed that Daniel 8, 11, and 12 contained blended prophecies applying to both Antiochus and the Antichrist.⁸¹ He interpreted Daniel’s prophecy of a ruler who would “exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvelous things against the God of gods” and who would not “regard the desire of women” (Dan 11:36,37) as referring to the papacy because of the Pope’s ban on clerical marriage and his demand for obedience to himself and his rules “in opposition to all the words of God.”⁸²

Quoting Daniel 9:27 and 12:11, Jesus in Matthew 24:15 refers to the “abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel.” Noting that the Pope had threatened burning to all who opposed him, Luther interpreted this text as follows:

The pope is a god on earth over everything heavenly, earthly, spiritual, and secular, and all on his own. No one is permitted

⁷⁷ Ibid., 20:264 cf. 3:121; 9:67.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 13:178, 190-191; 41:364.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 13:342; 28:119, 131; 35:314, 387; 39:191; 20:192.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 10:114; 18:120; 41:198; 35:106-107.

⁸¹ Ibid., 35:306, 313, 351.

⁸² Ibid., 28:24; 38:190, 232; 39:193, 195. He also applied Daniel 11:38 and 12:8 to the Antichrist (ibid., 11:38, 551) and identified the little horn of Daniel 8 as Antichrist (ibid., 10:252, 353; 39:279), and suggested that the 70 weeks of Daniel 9 extended from the Persian emperors to the ministry of Christ. Ibid., 45:25 cf. 35:314.

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to say to him: "What are you doing?" That is the abomination and stench of which Christ speaks in Matthew 24.⁸³

In other passages applying this text to the papacy, Luther said, "The desolating sacrilege stands in the holy place . . . and rules over us in the place of Christ" and "he has set up his own law for God's law and his own priesthood for Christ's priesthood, and thus set abomination in the holy place."⁸⁴

Luther also found predictions of the Antichrist in the book of Revelation, especially chapters 13 and 17. In Revelation 13, it was the lamblike beast, appearing "to be Christian," yet speaking "like the devil," preaching the doctrines of "the dragon from hell."⁸⁵ Usurping Christ's role as high priest, Luther said, the Pope had set up his own clergy, claiming that he was "imprinting on their souls an indelible character," when in actuality he was imprinting them with "the mark of the beast in Revelation."⁸⁶

Using the symbolism from Revelation 14, 17, and 18, Luther frequently referred to Rome as Babylon and the "scarlet whore of Babylon," sometimes using these terms when discussing the papacy's persecution of religious dissent. Calling Rome a "scarlet murderess," Luther remembered the attempt to have him brought "as a prisoner to that murderous Jerusalem, that Babylon clothed in purple." Declaring, "This Babylon in Rome burns Christ's children," he "praised and thanked" the Lord for rescuing him from "the scarlet whore."⁸⁷

Negating Christ's Sacrifice

Not only did the Roman Antichrist usurp God's prerogatives and persecute His people, according to Luther, but he in effect negated Christ's sacrifice and mediation. "Antichrist . . . abolishes grace and denies the blessings of Christ, our High Priest, who gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins," he said.⁸⁸ One way he did this was through the "doctrine of merit."⁸⁹ Said Luther,

⁸³ Ibid., 31:393 cf. 8:187; 26:201, 259; 32:77; 38:174, 176, 211; 40: 15; 41:303.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 36:138, 218.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 35:405; 38:102; 39:195.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 36:201. In another passage, Luther identified the papacy as "that loathsome beast (Rev. 13:1) which has blasphemous names on his forehead." Ibid., 4:31. He also identified the beast of Revelation 15 and 16 as the papacy. Ibid., 35:407.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 39:102; 52:89; 48:109; 32:89; 41:206 cf. 8:282-283; 13:327; 35:402.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 26:180.

⁸⁹ Watson, 96.

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The noxious notion of our own righteousness . . . was why we could not at all see Christ as the Mediator and Savior but simply supposed that He was a severe judge, who had to be placated by our works. This was to blaspheme Christ to the utmost and . . . to nullify the grace of God, to make Christ die to no purpose . . . And this is . . . “the desolating sacrilege, standing in the holy place.” (Matt. 24:15)⁹⁰

The doctrine that monks could justify themselves by “their hypocritical sanctity . . . , even though it is the proper function of Christ alone to justify the sinner” had, he said, “denied and completely suppressed the work of Christ and his divinity.” The blasphemy on the forehead of the scarlet whore he interpreted to be “the manifold, innumerable, self-chosen works or forms of worship” which were presented “as sacrifices in order to suppress Christ’s sacrifice.” Luther declared, “The chief article of the Christian doctrine is . . . that Christ is our righteousness. He who is now attacking this is taking the whole Christ away and is the true Antichrist.”⁹¹

Luther said the papacy also negated Christ’s sacrifice by proclaiming the Mass to be “a sacrifice for the living and the dead,” obtaining “forgiveness of sins. . . . It is as though Christ had not done this very thing on the cross, as though his sacrifice had no validity and were of no value.” Luther suggested that these “daily repeated sacrifices” were “counterfeiting Christ” and purporting to do “that which Christ alone by his sacrifice once for all effected.”⁹²

Luther insisted that Christ was still our only mediator. “Christ and the Scriptures know nothing” of the priestly system set up by the papacy. Jesus had not abdicated His High Priestly office, nor had He transferred it to the Pope. “God preserve us from having any other priest but Christ,” he said.⁹³

Another way we nullify Christ’s “coming in the flesh,” according to Luther, is by calling upon Mary or the other saints. “The invocation of the saints is . . . one of the abuses of the Antichrist,” he said.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ *LW* 26:200-201 cf. 35:393.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 26:259; 13:327; 30:252 cf. 287.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 7:297; 13:313; 40:15.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 13:330.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30:287; *The Book of Concord: The Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Thomas G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 297.

Eschatology

Luther believed that the Bible foretold the church's future and suggested that the time of judgment predicted in Daniel 7:8,9 was taking place during his lifetime. Affirming that his own teachings were those of "the ancient and true church at the time of the apostles," he thought the little horn was being judged as "the original and ancient church" shone "forth once more (like the sun emerging from the clouds behind which it [had been] shining but where it could not be seen)." He found comfort in the prophecies that the last days would "be shortened for the sake of the godly" and "that the church" would "be preserved and Antichrist [would] not encompass everything with error and falsehood."⁹⁵

He noted that in the second angel's message of Revelation 14, "the gospel" was followed by a voice predicting that Babylon, "the spiritual papacy," would be destroyed. This would be done, according to other passages, "without human hands," with the breath of Christ's mouth, "slaying him with spiritual preaching" before destroying him "by his glorious"—and sudden—coming, which would free "Christendom from every evil." At that time, "those who cling to the papacy against the gospel shall be cast outside the city of Christ, into the winepress of God's wrath."⁹⁶

Luther's Final Year

The intensity of Luther's attacks on the papacy increased during 1545, the final year of his life. As Will Durant puts it, "Luther's temper became hot lava as he neared the grave."⁹⁷ That year, in his preface to a compilation of his complete works, he described the Pope not only as Antichrist but also as the devil's vicar.⁹⁸

His "last and most bitter attack on the pope" was called *Against the Roman Papacy, An Institution of the Devil*. Written at the request of Elector John Frederick, it was a response to two letters from Pope Paul III forbidding the emperor from calling a "free German National Council" to settle the religious disputes within the empire. Three times in this publication Luther referred to the Pope as "the most hellish father." He denounced him as a teacher of lies, blasphemies, and idolatries," a murderer of kings, an inciter to all kinds of bloodshed, and "a brothel-keeper

⁹⁵ *LW*, 24:367; 41:198; 2:229.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35:387, 405, 407, 408; 39:279; 13:258; 24:366 cf. 41:198.

⁹⁷ Durant, 450.

⁹⁸ *WML* 1:11.

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above all brothel-keepers and all vermin”—and even “a true werewolf.”⁹⁹

Were such attacks unchristian? Luther didn’t think so. Earlier, he had said it was “not sin” to refute Satan’s “reviling against godliness and God himself.” They must, he said, “be exposed and refuted” so the people could “be corrected and liberated from the tyranny of Satan.” Similarly, Luther said,

We . . . are attacking the pope as the Antichrist and seducer of the whole world. We are incited to anger against him not by personal ambition but by righteous jealousy and fervor of conscience to vindicate and protect the glory of God.

Paul’s attacks on “the false apostles” were not slander: he was “judging them by his apostolic authority.” Likewise, when Luther called the Pope Antichrist, he said, he was “judging . . . by divine authority” on the basis of Galatians 1:8. “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.”¹⁰⁰

It can be argued, however, that although Luther was antipapal, he was not anti-Catholic. He opposed the dictatorial monarchical episcopate at the head of the church, not the church itself. As Jaroslav Pelikan puts it, “Although the pope was the Antichrist ‘seated in the temple of God,’ the church in which he was seated was still the temple of God.”¹⁰¹

Other Reformers

By the time of Luther’s death, other voices had joined him in proclaiming that the pope was the Antichrist, including both his friend and disciple Philip Melancthon and a man for whom he had little respect, Ulrich Zwingli.¹⁰² Other contemporaries of Luther who shared his belief about the papal Antichrist included John Calvin, John Knox, and Thomas Cranmer.¹⁰³ Among the later reformers who held this view were the

⁹⁹ William M. Landeen, *Martin Luther’s Religious Thought* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1971), 82; Preserved Smith, *The Life and Letters of Martin Luther* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1911, 1968), 399; Marty, 163; LW, 41:263, 264, 336, 357.

¹⁰⁰ LW, 6:63; 27: 129.

¹⁰¹ Pelikan, 173.

¹⁰² Froom, 2:288, 334; *Book of Concord*, 217, 243.

¹⁰³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. John Allen (2 vols. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), 2:314, 410-411; Knox, 1:[3], 83-87; Froom, 2:391; Pelikan, 316.

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Anabaptist Menno Simons and various Huguenot theologians.¹⁰⁴ Even King James I of England got into the act, writing an exposition of the book of Revelation that called Rome the seat of the Antichrist and “a second Babylon.”¹⁰⁵ Many of the foundational creeds of Protestantism, including the Formula of Concord, the Second Scottish Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration of the Congregational Churches, and the Baptist Confession of 1688, echoed Luther’s belief on this subject.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

Luther’s conflict with church authorities over the financial exploitation of his parishioners through indulgences led to papal attempts to silence the independent-minded monk. He first began to suspect that the papacy was the Antichrist when its representatives resorted to power plays rather than appealing to Scripture, supported the execution of dissidents,¹⁰⁷ and—long before it became official dogma—claimed papal infallibility. He became sure of his position when the Pope himself threatened Luther with excommunication, pressured rulers to silence him, and ordered the extermination of his followers. But Luther’s Antichrist theology was the result of biblical analysis as well as personal experience. The key theological reason for Luther’s position was his belief that the Pope was in many ways usurping God’s place and negating Christ’s sacrifice.

Clearly, Luther’s position on the Antichrist is no longer politically correct. It is out of sync with the groupthink of the twenty-first century. As Heiko Oberman says, “Luther’s way of speaking about the Antichrist has become alien to us.”¹⁰⁸

However, “with so great a cloud of witnesses”¹⁰⁹ stretching back so many centuries who courageously asserted that the papacy was the Antichrist, the question for us should not be, is this position embarrassing or is it politically correct or socially acceptable? Rather, it should be, is it

¹⁰⁴ Pelikan, 316; Froom, 2:632.

¹⁰⁵ Froom, 2:537, 540.

¹⁰⁶ *Book of Concord*, 614; Philip Schaff, *Bibliotheca Symbolica Ecclesiae Universalis: The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 4th ed. (3 vols. New York: Harper & Row, 1877, 1905, 1919, repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 3:480-481, 658-659, 723, 739.

¹⁰⁷ Marius, 249 cf. Fife, 497.

¹⁰⁸ Oberman, 67.

¹⁰⁹ Hebrews 12:1.

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biblically correct? This view was not politically correct in Luther's day—it was very incorrect politically. And in Luther's day, unlike ours, this opinion could have been literally fatal for the person holding it, as it was for John Huss and Thomas Cranmer.

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