

# The Role of Reason in the Doctrine of the Antichrist

By Justin C. Cloute

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.<sup>1</sup>

These words from the Smalcald Articles contain what is perhaps the most succinct and straightforward presentation of the doctrine of the Antichrist in the Lutheran Confessions. The Confessions clearly teach that the Pope in Rome is the very Antichrist. Our Lutheran fathers had no doubts about it. In their minds this teaching was not considered an “historical judgment,” nor was it inserted as a human opinion. They believed with certainty that the Pope was the very Antichrist.

In a couple of weeks those who will receive a call from the seminary will be asked to subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions at their ordination. In doing so, they must believe that the Pope is the Antichrist. To subscribe without believing this, would be dishonest to say the least. However, throughout the years many seminary seniors have wrestled long and hard with this doctrine. This paper will seek to answer a question that cycled through my mind as I pondered this doctrine: “Is the Lutheran doctrine of the Antichrist *based* entirely on God’s Word, or is it *based* to a certain extent on human reason?” We will progress by looking at:

- 1) The Doctrine of the Antichrist
- 2) The Question concerning this Doctrine
- 3) A Response

## The Doctrine of the Antichrist

What does Scripture have to say about the Antichrist? The most direct and detailed prophecy about the Antichrist can be found in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2. Before we look at this portion of Scripture, it helps to know the background. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians to address a problem that had arisen. Many in Thessalonica had worked themselves into a frenzy about Christ's Second Coming. They were being tossed about by false rumors and prophecies. Some gave up work because they believed that Christ would return immediately, others grew very anxious and wondered about their brothers who had fallen asleep in the Lord. Would they miss out? Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians to calm their anxiety. He wrote to tell them that even though Christ would come again, he would not come until the Antichrist had been revealed. He then goes on to give this description:

<sup>3</sup> Don'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. <sup>4</sup> He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. <sup>5</sup> Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? <sup>6</sup> And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. <sup>7</sup> For 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. <sup>8</sup> And 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. <sup>9</sup> The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, <sup>10</sup> and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. (2 Th 2:3-10)

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<sup>1</sup> *Articuli Smalcaldi*, Pars II, Art IV, 474, 10.

We can highlight the central thoughts of this prophecy: 1) The Antichrist would be someone who has fallen away from the church in rebellion (v.3). 2) He will set himself up in God's temple, in the midst of believers, and act as though he were God himself (v.4). 3) He is not Satan himself, but he carries out the work of Satan as his chief agent performing all kinds of false miracles and signs (v.5). 4) His beginnings could be found already in Paul's day (v.7a), and he would continue to lead people astray until the end of the world when Jesus comes to destroy him (v.8).

As stated earlier, the Lutheran Confessions found the fulfillment of this prophecy in the Pope of Rome. One could fill an entire book with evidence from history that has been given to demonstrate this. These events are often pointed to by Lutheran Theologians: 1) At the council of Trent the Pope demonstrated that he had fallen away from the truth by condemning justification by grace through faith. Can: XII reads: "If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake; or that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified is only the favor of God; let him be anathema."<sup>2</sup> With such a teaching the Pope denies the true faith and demonstrates his rebellion. 2) The Pope has also set himself up in God's temple, among believers. Even though the Catholic Church has distorted much of true Christianity, they still retain Baptism, and despite much corruption, the Word of God is still being proclaimed. In addition the Pope acts as God himself by claiming that he alone holds the keys to forgive penitent sinners. 3) Throughout history the he has used miracles and signs (viz. Our Lady of Guadalupe) to validate his own false authority. 4) The principle of salvation by works, of which he is the chief representative, had its beginnings in Paul's day, and has been continually proclaimed from Rome to this day.

When we look at the history of the papacy, the description surely seems to fit well. When we line up all of the evidence, it definitely points to the Pope. However, can we be absolutely certain? Or is this conclusion *based in part* on fallible human reason?

### **The Question – Is This Doctrine Based in Part on Human Reason?**

Those who argue that we can't be certain that the Pope is the Antichrist believe that this doctrine is not *based* solely on God's Word. Instead they claim that human reason plays an improper role in forming this doctrine. They say that it consists of two premises. The major premise, the description of the Antichrist, is taken from Scripture, while the minor premise, our knowledge of the Pope, is taken from history. In order to make the connection between the two we must rely on a human judgment that is based on human, read fallible, reason. To them it seems that the Lutheran doctrine of the Antichrist takes the description given in Scripture and then joins it with information about the Pope, which is derived from history. Because human reason must be used to join this information, or make this connection, they believe that the doctrine of the Antichrist goes beyond what Scriptural doctrine does. Therefore, they say that identifying the Pope as the Antichrist can be regarded as an "historical judgment," but it should not be taught as an article of faith.

### **A Response**

At first glance the above line of argumentation seems pretty convincing. It does seem like human reason plays a prominent role in the doctrine of the Antichrist. One side of the doctrine is based on Scripture, while the other side seems to be based on a knowledge of history. In order to make the connection we must exercise human judgment – we must rely on human reason.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Meyer, *Papam Esse Ipsum Verum Antichristum*, WLQ, Vol. 40, 102.

If those who object are right – if reason plays a primary role in forming this doctrine, then the Confessions are standing on very shaky ground. As Confessional Lutherans, we have seen the damage that reason can do when it is used to connect or create premises that are not found in Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Luther warns:

No reason is so firm that it can not again be overthrown by reason. There is no counsel, no matter how wise, no thing, no edifice, no matter how magnificent or strong, which cannot again be destroyed by human counsel, wisdom, and strength. And this can be seen in all things. Only the Word of God remains to all eternity.<sup>4</sup>

If the doctrine of the Antichrist is *based* on human reason, then it has no place in dogma of the Christian Church. For reason cannot stand side by side with the eternal Word of God.

However, before we go and cross out all references to the Antichrist in our Triglots, perhaps we should ask ourselves a few questions. “Is this doctrine really *based* on human reason, or is reason just *used* to understand it?” Or in other words, “In this doctrine is reason playing an improper role by sitting as a judge over Scripture, or is it serving as a slave?”

When we seek to answer these questions we must remember that the description of the Antichrist is a prophecy. What is the nature of Biblical prophecy? Lutheran theologians have often pointed to the fulfilled prophecies about Christ as a matter of comparison. How did believers living at the time of Christ know with certainty that Jesus was the promised Messiah? The answer is that faith caused them to see that Old Testament prophecy found its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. For example, he was born

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<sup>3</sup> One example would be the Reformed doctrine of election. Other examples of how men have falsely used human reason and Scripture to come to conclusions about science and history can also be cited. The ancient “doctrine of a flat earth” was based on figurative statements in Scripture and combined with scientific deductions. In more modern days millennialists have offered many false predictions about the future events of the world. In both cases reason played an “improper” role in determining doctrine.

of a virgin, in Bethlehem, and from the line of David. All of these facts and hundreds of others prove that Jesus came in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Even though the Lord had not yet given believers living at the time of Christ his revealed Word in the New Testament, they could know with certainty that Jesus was the promised Savior by looking at Old Testament prophecy. In fact Jesus himself often instructed his followers to search Moses and the Prophets, so that they could find out that he was the Messiah (e.g. John 5:46).

New Testament evangelists did the same thing. In Acts chapter 18 we are told that Apollos proved that Jesus was the Christ by pointing to the Old Testament Scriptures. He did not use human arguments or logical syllogisms as his basis, rather “he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.” Apollos was not basing his proof on human reason. Rather he was calling for people to make the connection – to see that Jesus fit the description given in prophecy. Sure an element of reason would have to be used to do so, but that reason is based on, and finds its source in divine truth.

In a similar way when we see the fulfillment of the Antichrist in history, we are not *basing* our conclusion on human logic. Rather we are acknowledging what Scripture says, and applying it to the world around us. Professor Meyer writes:

The statement, *Papam esse ipsum verum Antichristum*, is not a conclusion at all arrived at by logical reasoning. It is a judgment of identification and classification. It is applying a Scripture truth to a given case, measuring an historical phenomenon by a standard revealed to us for that very purpose in the Scriptures.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Becker, *Foolishness of God*, p.38

<sup>5</sup> Meyer, *Papam Esse Ipsum Verum Antichristum*, WLQ, vol 40, 97.

Scripture serves as our starting point. It provides us with the description of the Antichrist. When we identify him as the pope, we are simply applying God's Word to history. In fact anytime that we identify a false teacher we are forced to use human reason. Scripture tells us that anyone who teaches contrary to God's Word is a false teacher. When we hear someone teaching falsely, we then make the connection, saying, "That person is teaching contrary to God's Word, *therefore* that person is a false teacher." This is a matter of identification. We make a similar connection, or application, when we say, "My sins are forgiven, because God forgave the *world* in Christ!" Even though Scripture never says, "Justin Cloute's sins are forgiven," I can make the deduction that my sins are forgiven because I am part of the world.

This is not an unscriptural use of human reason. Our heavenly Father wants us to use reason to make such applications. Robert Preus says in *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, "Theology is not presented to brutes but to rational human beings, who are expected to think and use their reason. As that which is employed with organic principles, such as logic and language, reason is necessary for the intelligent application of Scripture."<sup>6</sup> As long as we let Holy Scripture pull the cart, and not human reason, we are exercising solid principles of interpretation.

For when a believer goes to Scripture with the faith-born attitude of Samuel, which says, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening," he can be assured that the Holy Spirit will lead him into truth. In his essay on *Scripture and Reason*, August Pieper writes:

Spiritual reason and spiritual knowledge are not independent, formal ways of knowing things alongside natural reason; rather, natural human reason is sanctified and disciplined by the Holy Spirit, subjected to the obedience of Christ,

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<sup>6</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 261

and filled with divine certainty about the things of which it knows nothing from itself and its natural experience, but which the Holy Spirit tells it.<sup>7</sup>

When we let Scripture speak for itself the Holy Spirit guides us to certain conclusions. In the teaching about the Antichrist, he leads us to see that the Pope fits the description. In making such an identification, reason does not take on a role that places itself above Scripture as a judge; rather it looks at the brush strokes that have been painted by divine prophecy, and realizes that the strokes paint a portrait of the Pope in Rome. This use of reason is not much different than that which is used to understand the letters, words, and sentences of God's Word. In both cases God works in a miraculous way to bring certainty to sinful human beings.

Since Scripture paints a clear picture of the Pope in its prophecy about the Antichrist, we have every right to make this a doctrine of Scripture. For God himself gave us this prophecy, so that we could be on guard and ready to warn others about the deceptive ways of the Antichrist. May we always use this doctrine in a loving way, so that we can safeguard our own faith and the faith of those to whom we minister.

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<sup>7</sup> Pieper, *Scripture and Reason*, WWT, Vol. I, 158.