In Search of the AntiChrist

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ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the topic of the Antichrist, in light of the national headlines made by the Catholic Church this year. Numerous scandals involving sexual misconduct by priests have been uncovered after attempts to hide them away. This emphasis on the Catholic Church has reignited interest in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod's teaching on the Papacy being the Antichrist and what God says about it in his word. In an attempt to go through the reasoning logically, a step by step approach is taken using Biblical references and Church history to re-explore this entity, so fervently warned about in God's Word.
The matter of the Antichrist is not something that one’s salvation is dependent on, just as one’s salvation is not dependent on whether one keeps the Ten Commandments perfectly. As Christians, we know that our salvation is dependent upon our faith and that a subject such as the Antichrist is not fundamental doctrine. However, it is a largely debated topic and any Christian should be concerned with being knowledgeable about it as with any other aspect of God’s Word. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has accepted the historical Lutheran interpretation as to whom the Antichrist is revealed as through God’s Word.

The *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* defines *antichrist* as “against Christ, or secondarily, instead of, i.e., a substitute or pseudochrist” (178). In other terms, antichrist is any person, group, or force against Christ. Therefore, the world has been, is, and will be occupied by many antichrists. There are only four passages in the Bible that specifically use the term *antichrist*, yet they, along with a select group of passages that mention him in other terms, provide a clear list of traits that the Antichrist will possess. The first mentioned antichrist is a specific identity, prophesied in the Scriptures. 1 John 2:18 says, “Dear children, this is the last hour, and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.”

The second passage that uses the term antichrist is 1 John 2:22, which says, “Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son.” These words describe the Antichrist as one who will be untruthful and who will disavow God and his Son, the Christ.
1 John 4:3 not only confirms that the Antichrist will deny Jesus, but also shows that it is already established in the world. This passage reads, “But every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.”

The last of the four passages that precisely use the term antichrist is 2 John 1:7. “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.” These words again hit on the point that the antichrist will deny Jesus as the Christ.

Other passages in the Bible refer to the Antichrist without specifically calling him that. He is sometimes called, “The Lawless One,” “The Son of Perdition,” and “The Man of Lawlessness.” 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 warns against the Antichrist, saying, “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. 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.” This section of God’s Word clearly reveals that the Antichrist will be exposed; yet still raise himself above God in His church of believers, which would be Christians, those who believe that Christ redeemed them through his death. Therefore, the Antichrist will be an establishment of the Christian Church.

God’s word indicates that the rise of the Antichrist will be gradual, as it will be held back from assuming its full form. 2 Thessalonians 2:7 says, “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.” This passage also confirms that the Antichrist was already at work when these words were written, during the time of the apostles.

2 Thessalonians 2:9 distinctly indicates that the Antichrist will seemingly possess the power to do miracles, though it will be through the power of Satan and not God. The verses read, “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.”

Another reference to the Antichrist is found in Revelation 13:11-18. The verses talk of two beasts, the first, who has been wounded, and the second, who gains power to rule and to do miracles from the first beast. In studying these words and the surrounding context, one may conclude that the first beast is Satan, wounded by Jesus when He died on the cross, and the second is the Antichrist, deceiving men with Satan’s power. The last verses in the selection, which describe the number of the second beast, are also clues that God gives in his word about the Antichrist. The verses read:

Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He 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. And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because 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. He 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. He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and
poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so 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. This 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.

Some observers see this last section of the verses as pointing to Caesar Nero or Mohammed, while others believe it is an allusion to Satan. Using numerical schemes, the 666 can be contorted to fit a variety of names. The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia best puts it:

Taken as a whole, however, the best explanation seems to regard the triple six as referring to man since six is short of the perfect number seven. In Scripture man works six days and rests on the seventh. Nebuchadnezzar’s image was sixty cubits high and six cubits broad. The implication would then be that the antichrist, great though he is in power and influence, is only a man who ultimately will be judged by Christ who is God (181).

Therefore, it can be assumed that the Antichrist is a human being, although able to do miracles by a more sinister power.

In the study of these Bible passages, one is able to compile a thorough list of the characteristics of the Antichrist: the Antichrist will cause a falling away; it will set itself up in the temple of God; it will oppose and exalt itself above God; its rise will be gradual, initially being held back; it will be a collective person rather than one man; the force behind this striving for power will be Satan; it will exhibit false signs and miracles; the lawless one will be revealed; it was beginning a rise to power at the time of the apostles,
and it will continue until the second coming, when it will be overthrown by Christ (Koehler 273-5).

The search for the Antichrist leads to one answer: the Papacy. The Papacy of the Roman Catholic Church is the only institution that fulfills all of the criteria listed in the Bible. This conclusion may not have come as a surprise or may have even occurred at the mention of the word antichrist. Why, then, bother to reiterate this teaching? The year 2002 has been quite a year for the Catholic Church. It has been in national headlines numerous times for the accusations of sexual misconduct by its priests, its size is estimated at its largest ever, approximately 1 billion, and it is the 700 year anniversary of the Unam Sanctam, a bull issued by Pope Boniface VIII in 1302. The movements of the Catholic Church open a door that should entice one in to reexamine its teachings.

Roman Catholics use Matthew 16:18 to misleadingly prove that the Papacy started with Peter. The verse reads, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” However, Peter never speaks of being the Vicar of Christ in any of his writings and none of the disciples treats him as though he is of a higher authority (Papacy 733). Jesus meant through these words that the church would be built on “Peter’s inspired confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah” (Concordia 1473).

Due to the Roman Catholic belief that the Pope is infallible, they misuse Luke 22:31-32 (Papacy 733). It reads, “Simon [Peter], Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Jesus was not telling Peter that he was giving him infallible religious power, as the Papacy has interpreted, but that he prayed for
him to have strength. The footnotes relay that Satan had wanted to test the disciples to bring them to spiritual ruin and that this is to what Jesus was referring (Concordia 1592).

It is unclear as to when the Papacy officially began; yet, the workings of it were already formulating in the time of the apostles. It is not recorded that the apostles officially appointed successors to follow them, but the natural order led elders and bishops to take their places. Eventually, as the Church grew, head bishops were placed to be chairmen for the many different priests and their congregations. This order would continue to grow, pyramid style, ultimately leading to the Papacy (Papacy 715).

The development of the Papacy through the Roman bishop was very slow, due to hindrance by the Roman government. “But gradually the monarchical episcopate developed; the conception of the Church changed; the Church was that visible organization governed by the bishops. This concentration of power, once begun, fostered by the example of the imperial government, resulted in the Papacy. Alongside this crept another error which helped to make the Papacy a success: this, that New Testament pastors are a special priesthood, similar to that of the Old Testament, ordained by God through the bishops; they form a special caste, separate from and above the people” (Papacy 714).

An argument that the Catholic Church uses against the Lutherans, is that Protestants came into the world at the time of Martin Luther, and were, therefore, too late to be “the church of God,” where as the Catholic Church had already been well established. However, the appearance of the Lutheran Church was merely a new name with the passing of Martin Luther, the reformer. As long as the Papacy had existed, a group who spoke out against corruption in the church was known as heretics, protesters,
or “Protestants”, proving the existence of an opposing group since the beginning (Behm 129).

The reaction of the Catholic Church to the Lutheran Reformation was manifested in the Council of Trent, held in 1545. The official response of the Church was that any church body that taught justification by faith, without works, sent its followers to eternal damnation.

This new order of priests, the Papacy, placing themselves above the common people, fulfills the first point on the list of the traits of the Antichrist: the Antichrist will cause a falling away. The Papacy places numerous obstacles in the way of free salvation as it is found in the Bible. The Pope says that one must contribute toward one’s own salvation with prayers, alms, fasts, and works, and that the mass is a repeated sacrifice for one’s sins (Pieper 465). “The Apostle Paul, in the name of Christ, pronounces the curse on all teachers who falsify the Gospel of Christ by the doctrine of works” (Pieper 553)

2 Timothy 4:1-3 also contributes to the obstacles placed in the way of salvation by the Antichrist, saying,

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

This can be seen in the Papacy through laws that keep priests from marrying and prohibit the eating of meat on Fridays. These rules keep people from gifts of God. The following passage in this section, 2 Timothy 4:4, says, “For everything God created is
good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is to be received with thanksgiving, because it is
consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”

The rule of the Papacy prohibiting priests from marrying is especially under
scrutiny today as more and more priests are accused of sexual misconduct. Marriage is
an institution in which God delivers sexual gifts, among others. The deprival of this may
be a large contributor of what drives some of these priests to the sin of sexual
misconduct.

Second on the list is the point that the Antichrist will set itself up in the temple of
God. Clearly, the Papacy is an institution of the Church and has easy access to willing
believers. In addition, the Antichrist opposes and exalts itself above God by claiming
that one must communicate with their heavenly Father through the priest, the Pope, and
Mary, the mother of Jesus, rather than going straight to God. There has also been a
movement in the Catholic Church to pronounce Mary as co-Redemptrix. This teaching
that Mary had a hand in the work of salvation is yet another subordination of the work of
Christ. By doing this, the Papacy is putting itself in the position of Christ. The Papacy is
also holding itself above God when it makes a statement or decree that others can clearly
see is against God’s will. The Pope claims infallibility, putting his own word before that
of the Lord’s. This is obviously a falsehood, as more than once in Papal history has one
Pope’s rule contradicted a previous one’s. Interestingly enough, as mentioned
previously, this year is also the 700-year anniversary of Pope Boniface’s Unam Sanctam.
This bull has become a fundamental teaching of the Catholic Church, as it is a declaration
of Papal supremacy over all people. The teaching issued in this bull blocks God’s grace,
as one must first obey the pope, because it is stated that his teachings are without error. This is yet another way that the Papacy places itself before God in one’s life.

The fourth trait of the Antichrist is that its rise will be gradual. This is historically true with the Papacy, as the Roman government first repressed it in its rise to power. It is also a collective person rather than one man, as the fifth point states.

The Catholic Church is known for its holy relics and miracles, such as crying statues and bleeding paintings and is largely connected with reported occurrences of stigmata. Stigmata is the phenomenon of Christ’s wounds of suffering appearing mysteriously on people, such as bleeding from the wrists, where nails might have been driven to secure Jesus to the cross. This supports the traits that the force behind this striving for power will be Satan and it will exhibit false signs and miracles, because if the mystery behind these miracles is not the power of God, the only other force is Satan. Matthew 24:24 says, “For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect–if that were possible.”

Other such false signs may simply be the threat of purgatory, which is not mentioned anywhere in the Bible, or Catholic misinterpretations of the Bible. For instance, the Pope’s own Bible translates what we translate as “repent” into “do penance”. This changes John the Baptist’s words from “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” to “Do penance, for the kingdom of God is at hand” (Behm 17).

The eighth trait is that the lawless one will be revealed. The Papacy has been denounced by many others than only WELS Lutherans throughout history and is continuously labeled fraudulent today. Though these accusations are not new, many still follow the Papacy, regardless.
The Antichrist was beginning a rise to power in the time of the apostles, which can also be historically proven through God’s word, which discusses the succession of bishops after the apostles. The final point, that it will continue until the second coming, when it will be overthrown by Christ will only be proven in the future.

Christians see the Ten Commandments as clear theology given in God’s Word and do not doubt their validity. In the same way, the Lord has given his people substantial evidence in His Word to identify and be wary of the Antichrist, who is revealed as the Papacy. If God’s people are willing to obey His commands, should they not also heed his warnings?
Bibliography


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