

2 Thessalonians (5): Correction of Mistaken End-times Expectations (3)

In 2 Thessalonians 2 we read of the Apostle Paul correcting the understanding of this local church regarding the nature and timing of the second coming of Jesus Christ. It is clear that one of the errors that they had embraced was the belief in the imminent return of the Lord Jesus, that His second coming would take place very, very soon. The apostle wrote to them that they were not to believe this teaching, even if it had been taught to them by a teacher in their midst, or by the claim that a “spirit” had revealed the truth of it, or even if it had been taught to them through a letter that had purported to be from Paul himself (2 Thess. 2:1, 2). He declared that the Lord’s second coming, at which time Christians would be gathered to Him, would not take place before two events occurred. The first event was that a great falling away from the faith would occur in professing Christendom. The second event that would take place before the second coming of Jesus Christ was that the man of lawlessness would appear, who will be destroyed by Christ at His coming. Last Lord’s Day we began to trace through history the history of Christian understanding of the man of lawlessness.

Now before we resume our study, let me say a word about our rehearsing the belief about these matters played out in church history. Last week and today we are addressing matters that have taken place in history. It is unfortunate that there are many in today’s world, and in today’s churches, that are unmindful and unconcerned about what has taken place in the past. They feel that it is irrelevant to who we are and what we believe. But a proper understanding of history is critically important for the church. We do not live in a vacuum, disconnected and uninfluenced by what has transpired in the past. God works in and through history. The Bible, the Holy Scriptures, is a record of what God has done in history. The Bible is a record of the history of redemption. And God’s working in His world did not cease with the completion of our Bibles. God has been at work in history to bring about His purposes that He had decreed from eternity. Luke recorded at the onset of the Book of Acts that the Lord was working in history. Acts 1:1f reads, “The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up...” What Luke was suggesting was that the Lord Jesus was continuing “to do and teach” through the history of the church as recorded in the Book of Acts. And we would assert that our Lord has continued to “do and teach” through these last two thousand years of church history. It is our responsibility and privilege to understand and to interpret the works of God as we study and examine what God has wrought in history. Those who discredit or dismiss history as the stage upon which God reveals and manifests Himself, will not know Him very well and certainly not serve Him well. May our Lord help us as we attempt to see and perceive all the works of God He has done.

Let us read once again Paul’s description and depiction of this man of lawlessness in **2 Thessalonians 2:1-10**.

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, ²not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. ³Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. ⁵Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? ⁶And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. ⁷For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. ⁸And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. ⁹The coming of the

lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders,¹⁰ and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

There have been two major views of the antichrist that have been held through church history. The first of these has been held by most evangelicals since about the beginning of the 20th century. This may be called a *futurist* understanding of the man of lawlessness (better known as the antichrist). Those who espouse this view advocate that the antichrist will be a *political leader*, a world-wide dictator, who will rule over the world during an end time 7 year period of tribulation just before the second coming of Jesus Christ. But prior to this latter day view, for the first 19 centuries of the Christian era, Christians held to another understanding of the antichrist. This may be called the *fulfilled* interpretation of the man of sin. Based on this passage before us and others,¹ the common understanding of the antichrist was that he would be a powerful *religious* leader within Christendom, who would corrupt the faith, persecute the true people of God, even while he claimed to be the ruler of the church. These Christians viewed the papacy of the Roman Catholic Church, that is, the institution of the popes, to be the antichrist. They have believed and taught that the pope of Rome is the man of sin, or the man of lawlessness.

When the view that the popes of the Roman Catholic Church are the realization of the prophecies of Holy Scripture concerning the antichrist, it is a common argument to discredit the position by claiming it the that the early Protestant Reformers originated the teaching, which was born in the context of their great conflict with the papacy during the period of the Protestant Reformation. But last week we showed that the origin of the view of the papacy as the antichrist was not due to the early Protestants, for the position dates back to *the writings of the early church fathers*, which wrote long before the rise of the Roman Catholic papacy. They taught that the one that was restraining the antichrist from coming to power was the Roman Empire and its emperor. They advocated praying to God that He would preserve the Roman state, for as terrible as the pagan Roman government had been to professing Christendom, the antichrist would be much worse when he came to power once the empire passed from the scene. These early church writers included **Justin Martyr** (A.D. 100-160), **Tertullian** (160-225 AD), **Cyril of Jerusalem** (A.D. 313-386), **John Chrysostom** (347-407 AD), and **Jerome** (A.D. 347-420). But there were many others, for the major leaders and writers of the early church were united in their assertions that the power of the Roman Empire was preventing the rise of the Antichrist to power. They were fearful of the rise of a pope-like person in the church. And it is significant that these men taught these things long before the disintegration of the Empire and before the rise of the Roman papacy.

The early Church, through the writings of the Fathers, tells us what it knew upon the subject, and with remarkable unanimity affirms that this “let” or hindrance, was the *Romans empire as governed by the Caesars*; that while the Caesars held imperial power, it was impossible for the predicted antichrist to arise, and that on the fall of the Caesars he *would* arise.²

But after the testimony of these early church fathers, we also showed last week that *the first ones who taught that the papacy was the antichrist were Roman Catholic leaders* themselves. As the bishops of Rome rose in power to become regarded as the pope over the church, the corrupt and authoritarian popes were charged as being the antichrist.

Now there is difference of opinion as to when the papacy became an established institution of the Roman Catholic Church. Of course Catholicism claims that the Apostle Peter was the first pope. Rome is the only institution that believes this to be true to history. Non Roman Catholic historians differ in their views of when the papacy originated. It is a difficult matter to determine with precision for the papacy grew in its extent of power over the course of time. But most scholars would argue that the institution of the papacy emerged over the 6th, 7th, and 8th centuries A.D.

¹ The three major passages that have influenced greatly the church’s understanding of the antichrist include this one, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-13, as well as Daniel 7, and Revelation 13.

² Guinness, p. 119.

Many assert that **Gregory the Great** (540-604) should be regarded as the first pope. Here is a description of this man and his influence on the Church of Rome:

Leo I (400-461) had claimed that the Bishop of Rome was first in authority, but after his death the papacy remained under the control of the emperors. The Emperor Theodoric appointed several popes during his lifetime. His son, Theodatus, also appointed several popes, demonstrating that the Emperor wielded supreme authority at this time.

The most powerful man after Leo I, to occupy the See of Rome, was **Gregory the Great**. For all intents and purposes he was probably the first man to achieve the position of “pope,” although he refused to be looked upon as a papal claimant. He was born in the year 541...

Gregory the Great was the inventor of the Mass and the erroneous teaching of transubstantiation; the originator of the teaching of Purgatory; and the compiler of worthless tales about alleged miracles which in most cases were not only unbelievable, but grossly absurd and magical. Heick observed that Gregory contributed mightily to the erroneous dogmas of Rome. He made the satisfaction of the ancient Church to depend on self-inflicted temporal punishments by which everlasting punishment was avoided. So, the power of the Church now was centered in its ability to convert eternal punishments into temporal ones and to decrease or do away with temporal punishments through masses for either the living or the dead.

The Eucharist was changed by Gregory from God’s action to man’s deed, from sacrament to sacrifice. The benefit received from the Mass (Ambrose was the first to use the term) was no longer merely the forgiveness of sins, but bodily blessings, magically communicated. Even the dead could be made partakers of such blessings if the Mass was offered for them. The Mystery of Iniquity was already flourishing.³

As time passed, the popes themselves grew increasingly brazen in their claims and in their acceptance of lofty designations and accolades. Paul declared that the man of sin would be one “who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God” (cf. 2 Thess. 2:6). And although we have been focusing on claims of popes prior to the Reformation, their claims became more absurd and blasphemous as the centuries unfolded. Here is one who recorded what transpired:

Have the popes claimed to be above all *that* is called God, have they claimed to be *as God* in the temple of God, and have they attempted to show that they are *divine*? Yes. They have claimed to be above all kings and emperors. They have claimed not only to rule of earth, but heaven and hell also. They have claimed attributes and titles which can rightly pertain only to God. At the coronation of Pope Innocent X, a cardinal who knelt before him addressed the following words to him: “Most holy and blessed father! Head of the Church, ruler of the world, to whom the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed, whom the angels in heaven revere, and the gates of hell fear, and all the world adores, we specially venerate, worship, and adore thee.”

Moreri, a noted historian, wrote: “To make war against the Pope is to make war against God, seeing the Pope *is God* and God is the Pope.” Decius said: “The Pope can do all things God can do.” Pope Leo XIII said of himself in 1890: “The supreme teacher in the Church is the Roman Pontiff. Union of minds, therefore, requires, together with a perfect accord in the one faith, complete submission and obedience of will to the Church and to the Roman Pontiff, *as to God Himself*.” In 1894, he said: “We hold the place of Almighty God on earth.”

On April 30, 1922, in the Vatican throne room before a throng of cardinals, bishops, priests, and nuns, who fell on their knees before him, Pope Pius XI in haughty tones said: “You know that I am the Holy Father, the representative of God on the earth, the Vicar of Christ, which means that I *am God* on the earth.”

³ Ronald N. Cooke, *Antichrist Exposed; The Reformed and Puritan View of the Antichrist*, vol. 1 (Truth International Ministries, 2006), pp. 33ff.

The pagan Caesar was called “our Lord and God.” For centuries the popes accepted the same title. On the arch raised in honor of Pope Borgia were the words: “Rome was great under Caesar; now she is greater: Alexander I reigns. The former was a man: this is a *god*!” Pope Pius X, when archbishop of Venice, said: “The Pope is not only the representative of Jesus Christ, he *is* Jesus Christ himself, hidden under the veil of flesh. Does the Pope speak? It is Jesus Christ who speaks.

The following is an extract from actual wording that has been used by popes:

“The Roman Pontiff judges all men, but is judged by no one....We declare...to be subject to the Roman Pontiff is to every creature altogether *necessary for salvation*....That which was spoken of Christ, ‘Thou has subdued all things under his feet’ may well seem verified in me...I have the authority of the King of kings. I am all in all and *above* all...I am able to do almost all God can do....Wherefore if those things that I do be said not to be done of man but of God: what can you make me but God?...Wherefore no marvel if it be in my power to *change time and times*, to alter and abrogate *laws*, to dispense all things, yea, with the precepts of *Christ*; for where Christ biddeth Peter to put up his sword and admonishes his disciples not to use any outward force in revenging themselves, so do not I, Pope Nicholas, writing to the Bishops of France, exhort them to draw out their material swords?...Wherefore, as I began, so I conclude, commanding, declaring, and pronouncing, to stand upon necessity of salvation, for every creature to be subject to *me*.”⁴

Now again, some have sought to discredit and dismiss the teaching that the men of the papacy are the realization of biblical prophecy regarding the antichrist, by charging that the early Reformers originated this teaching. But the belief that the papacy is the antichrist long preceded them. We have cited the early church fathers and we have described some of the popes who had assumed their authority long before the Reformation of the 16th century. But before we consider the teaching of the Protestant Reformers themselves, let us consider...

3. Witnesses against the pope as the antichrist by the precursors of the Reformation

It can be easily documented that the direct assertion that the papacy was the antichrist was not new with the Reformers, but rather those who had formerly lived and suffered for the true Christian faith had long charged Rome to be the antichristian seat of the man of sin. **Eberhard II**, the archbishop of Salzburg in the early 13th century, at the Council of Regensburg in 1241, denounced **Pope Gregory IX** as “that man of perdition, whom they call Antichrist, who in his extravagant boasting says, ‘I am God, I cannot err.’” Eberhard taught that the Pope as Antichrist would be in league with ten nations, including the Turks, Greeks, Egyptians, Africans, Spaniards, French, English, Germans, Sicilians, and Italians. He taught that the papacy was the “little horn” of Daniel 7:8. Eberhard was excommunicated in 1245.

John Wycliffe (1320-1384), the Morning Star of the Reformation, was very outspoken against the antichrist. He wrote a book entitled, *The Mirror of the Antichrist*. He also taught that the papacy was the “little horn” of Daniel 7. He asked, “Why is it necessary to look for another Antichrist?”⁵ He published *The Power of the Papacy* in 1379. He declared that the papacy was an office instituted by man, not God. He taught that no pope’s authority could extend to secular government. He said that any pope who does not follow Jesus Christ is the antichrist. He regarded the confessional as “the bondage of the antichrist.”

Lord Cobham, one of the Lollards, who were Wycliffe’s followers numbering hundreds of thousands, was brought before King Henry V and commanded to submit to the pope as an obedient child. Cobham responded, “As touching the Pope and his spirituality, I owe him neither suit nor service, forasmuch as I know him by the Scriptures to be the Antichrist, the son of perdition.”⁶

Sir John Oldcastle (1360-1417), an English Christian, said of the pope: “I know him by the Scriptures to be the great antichrist, the son of perdition....Rome is the very nest of antichrist, and out of that

⁴ Ralph Woodrow, *Great Prophecies of the Bible* (Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1971, 1989), pp. 144f.

⁵ Ibid. p. 157.

⁶ Ibid.

nest come all the disciples of him.” For his bold denunciation he was sentenced to death and in 1417 he was hung in chains and slowly burned to death.⁷

John Huss (1369-1415) was very outspoken against the papacy as the antichrist. He was influenced greatly by Wycliffe’s writings. Huss repeatedly referred in his writing and preaching to the papacy as the antichrist who was the enemy of Christ’s church. The pope was a false confessor of the name of Christ. The followers of Huss built a city 60 miles from Prague that they named Tabor, to which the Hussites could “flee from antichrist.” Huss was burned at the stake in Constance, after the assurance of safe conduct from the pope was ignored, for Huss was regarded as a heretic.

The testimonies of these men just cited were all Roman Catholic in persuasion and conviction. They were in the established church, but had believed that the antichrist, the man of lawlessness, and come into the church and gained power within and over the church. The point made here is this, long before the Reformers and the Puritans, the teaching that the papacy was the antichrist of Scripture was proclaimed in pulpits and addressed in writing. The concept of the antichrist arising within the church had been the popular teaching from the earliest centuries of the Christian era and dissenters continually espoused this teaching long before the Protestant Reformers lived in the 16th century and long before the English Puritans pronounced their doctrine in the 17th century confessions. The doctrine of the papacy as the antichrist has been a teaching that has been held and proclaimed throughout the Christian era, even until the end of the 19th century.

Is it any wonder that the Reformers and the Puritans would declare the pope to be the man of sin, the cursed antichrist that would arise in the temple of God, making blasphemous claims, even while he perpetrated upon the professing people of God the sale of indulgences and relics, prayers for the dead in purgatory, worthless pilgrimages, payment for masses, and offerings to idols? And beside promoting unbiblical practice and heretical doctrines, the papacy afflicted and oppressed the people, denied them access to the written Word of God through which they might find truth, hope, and the forgiveness of sins, as they would have been directed to look to Jesus Christ alone as their Lord and Savior. Rome had persecuted and put to death those who sought to translate the Bible into the language of the common people. Rome had a list of forbidden books which Catholics were not lawfully permitted to own or read. It was called the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, or the “Index of Forbidden Books.” The translations of the Holy Bible into the language of the common people were on this list until removed in 1963. The publication of the list itself ceased in 1966.

Let us next consider the teaching of the early Reformers (16th c.) and the English Puritans (17th c.) regarding this matter.

B. The views of Reformed and Puritan leaders

The testimony of our Reformed and Puritan forbearers is replete with assertions that the papacy is the antichrist, or man of sin, foretold in the Holy Scriptures. It is true that early on **Martin Luther** and other leaders of the Protestant Reformation had not intended to break with Rome, but rather reform “the church.” However it was not long before Luther identified and then declared in both preaching and writing that the pope was the antichrist and that true believers should depart from association and involvement with the Church of Rome.

Luther’s friends were concerned for his well being after he had published his book, *To the German Nobility*. In his response to his friends he wrote on August 18, 1520:

We here are of the conviction that the Papacy is the seat of the true and real Antichrist... personally I declare that I owe the Pope no other obedience than that to Antichrist.”

Shortly afterward Luther published his book, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, he declared that the papacy was antichrist.

⁷ Ibid, p. 158.

“I for my part will set free my own mind and deliver my conscience, by declaring aloud to the Pope and to all papists, that, unless they shall throw aside all their laws and traditions, and restore liberty to the churches of Christ, and cause that liberty to be taught, they are guilty of the death of all the souls which are perishing in this wretched bondage, and that the papacy is in truth nothing else than the kingdom of Babylon and of very Antichrist. For who is the man of sin and the son of perdition, but he who by his teaching and his ordinances increases the sin and perdition of souls in the Church; while he yet sits in the Church as if he were God? All these conditions have now for many ages been fulfilled by the papal tyranny. It has extinguished faith, darkened the sacraments, crushed the gospel; while it has enjoined and multiplied without end its own laws, which are not only wicked and sacrilegious, but also most unlearned and barbarous.”⁸

The declaration of the papacy as the fulfilment of biblical prophecies of the antichrist was a significant message that Luther proclaimed throughout his life. In 1540, six years before his death, he wrote:

Oh Christ, my Lord, look down upon us and bring upon us the Day of Judgment, and destroy the brood of Satan at Rome. There sits the Man, of whom the Apostle Paul wrote that he would oppose and exalt himself above all that is called God — the Man of Sin, the son of perdition... What is the Temple of God? Is it stoness and wood? Did not Paul say, The Temple of God is holy, which Temple ye are? To sit — what is it but to reign, to teach and to judge. Who from the beginning of the church has dared to call himself master of the whole church but the Pope alone. None of the saints, none of the heretics ever uttered so horrible a word of pride... He suppresses the law of God and exalts his commandments above the commandments of men.⁹

John Calvin was very bold and frequent in his denunciation of the papacy as the antichrist.¹⁰ He identified the papacy as the antichrist in his *Institutes*:

To some we seem slanderous and petulant, when we call the Roman Pontiff Antichrist. But those who think so perceive not that they are bringing a charge of intemperance against Paul, after whom we speak, nay, in whose very words we speak. But lest anyone object that Paul’s words have a different meaning, and are wrested by us against the Roman Pontiff, I will briefly show that they can only be understood of the Papacy. Paul says that Antichrist would sit in the temple of God (2 Thess. 2:4). In another passage, the Spirit, portraying him in the person of Antiochus, says that his reign would be with great swelling words of vanity (Dan. 7:25). Hence we infer that his tyranny is more over souls than bodies, a tyranny set up in opposition to the spiritual kingdom of Christ. Then his nature is such, that he abolishes not the name either of Christ or the Church, but rather uses the name of Christ as a pretext, and lurks under the name of Church as under a mask. But though all the heresies and schisms which have existed from the beginning belong to the kingdom of Antichrist, yet when Paul foretells that defection will come, he by the description intimates that that seat of abomination will be erected, when a kind of universal defection comes upon the Church, though many members of the Church scattered up and down should continue in the true unity of the faith. But when he adds, that in his own time, the mystery of iniquity, which was afterwards to be openly manifested, had begun to work in secret, we thereby understand that this calamity was neither to be introduced by one man, nor to terminate in one man (see Calvin in 2 Thess. 2:3; Dan. 7:9). Moreover, when the mark by which he distinguishes Antichrist is, that he would rob God of his honour and take it to himself, he gives the leading feature which we ought to follow in searching out Antichrist; especially when pride of this description proceeds to the open

⁸ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. See http://pdf.amazingdiscoveries.org/eBooks/BABYLONIAN_CAPTIVITY_OF_THE_CHURCH.pdf

⁹ *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 2. p. 281.

¹⁰ I have a PDF copy of an article that is 64 pages in length that contains quotations and references to the papacy as the antichrist in Calvin’s writings. Francis Nigel Lee, *Calvin on the Papacy*, see <http://www.dr-fnlee.org/docs/cotp/cotp.pdf>

devastation of the Church. Seeing then it is certain that the Roman Pontiff has impudently transferred to himself the most peculiar properties of God and Christ, there cannot be a doubt that he is the leader and standard-bearer of an impious and abominable kingdom.¹¹

Philip Melancthon, who was a fellow worker with Luther, wrote of the papal antichrist. Melancthon was the primary author of what came to be known as *The Augsburg Confession*, which was presented and adopted at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. Melancthon was the first systematic theologian of the Protestants. He was known for his mild manner and his irenic form of argument. Luther sometimes criticized him for his docile manner of expression. But he was a man of conviction and strong statement when the occasion warranted such delivery. He said of the papacy:

Since it is certain that the pontiffs and the monks have forbidden marriage [cf. 1 Timothy 4:1-3], it is most manifest, and true without any doubt, that the Roman Pontiff, with his whole order a kingdom, is very Antichrist... Likewise in 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul clearly says that the man of sin will rule in the church exalting himself above the worship of God.”

John Owen, who was perhaps the greatest theologian among the English Puritans, denounced the papacy as the antichrist.

Owen tied Rome into antichrist, antichristianity, and the great historical apostasy. He observed that there are scriptural prophecies, predictions, warnings especially in the book of Revelation and 2 Thessalonians that there would be a great apostasy or defection of the visible church from the faith, worship, and holiness of the Gospel; and in opposition to what was appointed by Christ. He also noted that in the place of the true church there would be the erection of a worldly, antichristian church-state, composed of tyranny, idolatry, and persecution. This evil religious monstrosity he said had for a long time oppressed the true worshippers of Christ with bloody cruelty and would at last be consumed with the Spirit of Christ’s mouth and destroyed with the brightness of His coming.¹²

Francis Turretin declared that the papacy was the predicted man of sin, the antichrist. He had published the work, *Concerning Our Necessary Secession from the Church of Rome and the Impossibility of Cooperation with Her*. The seventh reason that he gave was an effort to address the papacy as the antichrist. It was entitled, “Whether it can be proven the Pope of Rome is the Antichrist?” Turretin gave 22 reasons for his teaching, which he called “topics.” His sixth topic under this heading declared that there are three unique marks of the antichrist to which the pope may be identified. These include place, time, and person. He declared that the prophecy of 2 Thessalonians 2:4 *shouts* as it converges on the Roman Pontiff. He wrote:

The Pope has set himself in the Christian Church.

The Pope appropriates to himself the primacy over the whole church.

The Pope takes for himself not only the name of the Church, but with its name its privileges and all authority, as if he alone were the temple of God.

He then declared that the Pope reigns in the Church in order to attack and destroy the Church itself.¹³

Jonathan Edwards wrote of the antichrist: “Antichrist...still acts under the pretence of being Christ’s vicar and successor in his kingdom on earth...Popery is the deepest contrivance that ever Satan was the author of to uphold his kingdom.”¹⁴

¹¹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 4, Chapter 7, Paragraph 25.

¹² Ronald N. Cooke, *Antichrist Exposed; the Reformed and Puritan View of the Antichrist* (Truth International Ministries, 2006), vol. 1, p. 359.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 320f.

¹⁴ Stephen J. Nichols, “Prophecy Makes Strange Bedfellows: On the History of Identifying the Antichrist”, JETS 44/1 (March 2001), pp. 75-85.

Thomas Watson wrote a sermon against the papacy, which he based upon 1 Corinthians 10:14, “Wherefore, my dearly brethren flee from idolatry.” He gave only a partial list of errors and abuses perpetrated by Rome that should lead all true Christians to depart from her. He wrote in introduction to his sermon, “Among many others, there are these thirteen grand errors in popery that every good Christian must *take off, and flee from.*” At the head of the list Watson wrote:

The first error is this, the papists do hold, *That the Pope is the Head of the Church:* This is diametrically and point-blank opposite to Scripture, Colossians 2:9. Christ is there called, *The Head of the Church.* Now to make the Pope the head of the Church is to make the Church monstrous by *rising out of the sea.* By the *Beast* there interpreters understand the mystical *Antichrist, i.e. the Pope.* Now, if the *Pope* be the *Beast* there, and elsewhere spoken of; how *ridiculous*, yea how *impious* is it to make a *Beast the Head* of Christ’s Church. That is the first (of 13).¹⁵

Numerous similar testimonies may be cited of the early Reformers and the later Puritans. These include notable men as **Huldreich Zwingli, Nicolas Ridley, John Bradford, Thomas Cranmer, Sir Isaac Newton, Benjamin Keach,** and later still, **George Whitefield** and **John Wesley.** There was unanimous opinion of all Protestant preachers and writers that the Roman Catholic papacy was the antichrist foretold in Scripture.

The assertion that the pope was the antichrist precipitated the death of **Thomas Cranmer**, who was martyred for the Protestant faith in 1556. He had been the archbishop of the Church of England, seeking to bring about its reform. He wrote an early edition of *The Book of Common Prayer* (his 1549 edition is better than the 1662 and later editions). He had counselled King Henry VIII to break from Rome. Afterwards Cranmer sought to reform the Church of England to Scripture, which was no easy task given the great hostility between Protestants and Catholics. But when Mary, came to the throne, she, a loyal Catholic had Cranmer arrested and tortured. He was led by deprivation and torture to deny all that he had led England to embrace. He signed his name to several documents in which he renounced Luther, affirmed transubstantiation, and swore allegiance to the pope. He was sentenced to be burned at the stake for his treason. But when the occasion came, his enemies thought to have him publicly state all that he had signed, thereby providing a severe blow to the cause of Protestantism among the masses. But when he stood up before the place he was to be burned, he renounced his recantations, denouncing publicly the error to which he formally stood, and publicly confessed his shame and remorse for having betrayed his Lord. The guards rushed upon him. They tied him to the post and the fire was lit. As the flames rose, he held out his right hand in the flames, the hand that had signed the documents, holding there until it was consumed, saying, “This unworthy hand!” “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”

It was when Cranmer began to proclaim the error and heresy of the pope as the antichrist that his persecutors rushed upon him to silence him and to ignite the fire that consumed him. Here is a more complete description of Cranmer’s trial and execution which is recorded in *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*:

The queen’s revenge was only to be satiated by Cranmer’s blood, and therefore she wrote an order to Dr. Pole, to prepare a sermon to be preached March 21, directly before his martyrdom, at St. Mary’s, Oxford. Dr. Pole visited him the day previous, and was induced to believe that he would publicly deliver his sentiments in confirmation of the articles to which he had subscribed. About nine in the morning of the day of sacrifice, the queen’s commissioners, attended by the magistrates, conducted the amiable unfortunate to St. Mary’s Church. His torn, dirty garb, the same in which they habited him upon his degradation, excited the commiseration of the people. In the church he found a low mean stage, erected opposite to the pulpit, on which being placed, he turned his face, and fervently prayed to God.

The church was crowded with persons of both persuasions, expecting to hear the justification of the late apostasy: the Catholics rejoicing, and the Protestants deeply wounded in spirit at the deceit of the

¹⁵ Thomas Watson, “Mr. Watson’s Sermon against Popery.” http://www.truecovenanter.com/sermons/complete_collection_farewel_sermons_watson_1_cor_10_14.html

human heart. Dr. Pole, in his sermon, represented Cranmer as having been guilty of the most atrocious crimes; encouraged the deluded sufferer not to fear death, not to doubt the support of God in his torments, nor that Masses would be said in all the churches of Oxford for the repose of his soul. The doctor then noticed his conversion, and which he ascribed to the evident working of Almighty power and in order that the people might be convinced of its reality, asked the prisoner to give them a sign. This Cranmer did, and begged the congregation to pray for him, for he had committed many and grievous sins; but, of all, there was one which awfully lay upon his mind, of which he would speak shortly.

During the sermon Cranmer wept bitter tears: lifting up his hands and eyes to heaven, and letting them fall, as if unworthy to live: his grief now found vent in words: before his confession he fell upon his knees, and, in the following words unveiled the deep contrition and agitation which harrowed up his soul.

“O Father of heaven! O Son of God, Redeemer of the world! O Holy Ghost, three persons all one God! Have mercy on me, most wretched caitiff and miserable sinner. I have offended both against heaven and earth, more than my tongue can express. Whither then may I go, or whither may I flee? To heaven I may be ashamed to lift up mine eyes and in earth I find no place of refuge or succor. To Thee, therefore, O Lord, do I run; to Thee do I humble myself, saying, O Lord, my God, my sins be great, but yet have mercy upon me for Thy great mercy. The great mystery that God became man, was not wrought for little or few offences. Thou didst not give Thy Son, O Heavenly Father, unto death for small sins only, but for all the greatest sins of the world, so that the sinner return to Thee with his whole heart, as I do at present. Wherefore, have mercy on me, O God, whose property is always to have mercy, have mercy upon me, O Lord, for Thy great mercy. I crave nothing for my own merits, but for Thy name’s sake, that it may be hallowed thereby, and for Thy dear Son, Jesus Christ’s sake. And now therefore, O Father of Heaven, hallowed be Thy name.”

Then rising, he said he was desirous before his death to give them some pious exhortations by which God might be glorified and themselves edified. He then descanted upon the danger of a love for the world, the duty of obedience to their majesties, of love to one another and the necessity of the rich administering to the wants of the poor. He quoted the three verses of the fifth chapter of James, and then proceeded, “Let them that be rich ponder well these three sentences: for if they ever had occasion to show their charity, they have it now at this present, the poor people being so many, and victual so dear.

“And now forasmuch as I am come to the last end of my life, whereupon hangeth all my life past, and all my life to come, either to live with my master Christ for ever in joy, or else to be in pain for ever with the wicked in hell, and I see before mine eyes presently, either heaven ready to receive me, or else hell ready to swallow me up; I shall therefore declare unto you my very faith how I believe, without any color of dissimulation: for now is no time to dissemble, whatsoever I have said or written in times past.

“First, I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, etc. And I believe every article of the Catholic faith, every word and sentence taught by our Savior Jesus Christ, His apostles and prophets, in the New and Old Testament.

“And now I come to the great thing which so much troubleth my conscience, more than any thing that ever I did or said in my whole life, and that is the setting abroad of a writing contrary to the truth, which now here I renounce and refuse, as things written with my hand contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart, and written for fear of death, and to save my life, if it might be; and that is, all such bills or papers which I have written or signed with my hand since my degradation, wherein I have written many things untrue. And forasmuch as my hand hath offended, writing contrary to my heart, therefore my hand shall first be punished; for when I come to the fire it shall first be burned. ***And as for the pope, I refuse him as Christ’s enemy, and Antichrist, with all his false doctrine.***”

Upon the conclusion of this unexpected declaration, amazement and indignation were conspicuous in every part of the church. The Catholics were completely foiled, their object being frustrated, Cranmer, like Samson, having completed a greater ruin upon his enemies in the hour of death, than he did in his life.

Cranmer would have proceeded in the exposure of the popish doctrines, but the murmurs of the idolaters drowned his voice, and the preacher gave an order to “lead the heretic away!” The savage

command was directly obeyed, and the lamb about to suffer was torn from his stand to the place of slaughter, insulted all the way by the revilings and taunts of the pestilent monks and friars.

With thoughts intent upon a far higher object than the empty threats of man, he reached the spot dyed with the blood of Ridley and Latimer. There he knelt for a short time in earnest devotion, and then arose, that he might undress and prepare for the fire. Two friars who had been parties in prevailing upon him to abjure, now endeavored to draw him off again from the truth, but he was steadfast and immovable in what he had just professed, and publicly taught. A chain was provided to bind him to the stake, and after it had tightly encircled him, fire was put to the fuel, and the flames began soon to ascend.

Then were the glorious sentiments of the martyr made manifest; then it was, that stretching out his right hand, he held it unshrinkingly in the fire until it was burnt to a cinder, even before his body was injured, frequently exclaiming, "This unworthy right hand."

His body did abide the burning with such steadfastness that he seemed to have no more than the stake to which he was bound; his eyes were lifted up to heaven, and he repeated "this unworthy right hand," as long as his voice would suffer him; and using often the words of Stephen, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," in the greatness of the flame, he gave up the ghost.¹⁶

Much of the history of Protestantism is a record of conflict and suffering because of its stated belief that the pope was the antichrist foretold in Scripture. In fact it has been stated that the doctrine of the papacy as the antichrist was one of the two great themes of the Reformers.

There were two great truths that stood out in the preaching of the protestant Reformation: (1) The just shall live by faith (not by works of Romanism); and (2) the Papacy is the Antichrist of Scripture. It was a message FOR Christ and AGAINST Antichrist!... 'The entire Reformation rested on this twofold testimony.'

Hundreds of books were written in the contest of Protestant and Catholic pens regarding Antichrist. So great was the stir, in 1516 the fifth Lateran Council rose up forbidding anyone to write or preach on the subject of Antichrist. Nevertheless, in Germany, Switzerland, England, France, Denmark, and Sweden, the message continued with power and conviction by the ministers of the various Protestant churches. The Scriptures were getting into the hands of the people. Thousands had come to recognize the Papacy as the Antichrist—a teaching which dealt havoc to the church of Rome.¹⁷

C. The departure of evangelicals from the historic teaching of the papacy as the antichrist

The doctrine of the papacy as the antichrist was the accepted teaching of dissenters and reformers throughout the Christian era, even well into the 19th century. Rome was never a producer of expository remarks on the Scriptures. They denied the Scriptures and forbid their use by their people. Therefore the only teaching that was preeminent was the teaching that the papacy was the antichrist foretold in the Word of God. This changed, however, in the latter 16th century. A Roman Catholic Jesuit, **Francisco Ribera** (1537-1591) wrote a commentary on the subjects of Babylon and the antichrist in which he proposed a new interpretation concerning the antichrist. He proposed the teaching that the antichrist would be a future end time political figure. He taught that the Jewish temple would be rebuilt in Jerusalem and that the antichrist was a single individual who would manifest himself in that temple in a great end time tribulation lasting 3½ years. For the first time in history the futurist interpretation of the antichrist was proposed, which was developed by a loyal Catholic in an effort to deflect from the pope the popular teaching of the Protestants.

Of course the Protestants rejected Ribera's doctrine. When **Thomas Brighton** (1562-1607), a Protestant scholar learned of the work, he declared, "Once they would not suffer any man to scarce touch a Bible, now they produce a commentary to explain it—to point men away from the Papal Antichrist."¹⁸

¹⁶ Account in *Fox's Book of Martyrs*. See http://www.ccel.org/f/foxe_j/martyrs/fox116.htm; and http://www.ccel.org/f/foxe_j/martyrs/home.html.

¹⁷ Ralph Woodrow, *Great Prophecies of the Bible* (Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1971, 1989), pp. 170f.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 172.

All Protestants rejected the new teaching, that is, until 1826, when **Samuel R. Maitland**, who was the librarian to the Archbishop of Canterbury, became the first protestant to publically accept Ribera's teaching. George Ladd declared,

This futurist interpretation with its personal Antichrist and three and a half year tribulation did not take root in the Protestant church until the early nineteenth century. The first Protestant to adopt it was S. R. Maitland.

The futurist position was promoted to several groups through the 19th century, but it was largely through the popular prophecy conferences toward the end of the century and particularly the influence of the **Scofield Study Bible** in the beginning of the 20th century, that the futurist view of the Antichrist became the predominant one in evangelicalism.

Has the danger posed by the errant teachings of the Roman Catholic papacy diminished through this new period of understanding of biblical prophecy? No, in no degree at all. Oh yes, the papacy has succeeded in recasting its image to the world and to evangelicals, but no doctrine of Rome has ever been repudiated. And now Rome claims to have over 1.2 billion souls within its fold. How are we to react and respond to the conditions in our day? May the Lord give us wisdom and courage and conviction in these matters. May our Lord enable us to cut through all of the tradition and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ faithfully before the world.

You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen. (2 Pet. 3:17f)

The Comments of
Matthew Henry
on the Man of Sin in 2 Thessalonians 2

Matthew Henry was a Puritan commentator of 2 Thessalonians who set forth the commonly accepted interpretation of the passage. He argued that this was a prophecy of the Roman papacy as the antichrist.

In these words the apostle confutes the error against which he had cautioned them, and gives the reasons why they should not expect the coming of Christ as just at hand. There were several events previous to the second coming of Christ; in particular, he tells them there would be,

I. A general apostasy, *there would come a falling away first*, v. 3. By this apostasy we are not to understand a defection in the state, or from civil government, but in spiritual or religious matters, from sound doctrine, instituted worship and church government, and a holy life. The apostle speaks of some very great apostasy, not only of some converted Jews or Gentiles, but such as should be very general, though gradual, and should give occasion to the revelation of rise of *antichrist*, that *man of sin*. This, he says (v. 5), he had told them of when he was with them, with design, no doubt, that they should not take offence nor be stumbled at it. And let us observe that no sooner was Christianity planted and rooted in the world than there began to be a defection in the Christian church...

II. A revelation of that man of sin, that is (v. 3), antichrist would take his rise from this general apostasy. The apostle afterwards speaks of the revelation of that wicked one (v. 8), intimating the discovery which should be made of his wickedness, in order to his ruin: here he seems to speak of his rise, which should be occasioned by the general apostasy he had mentioned, and to intimate that all sorts of false doctrines and corruptions should centre in him. *Great disputes have been as to who or what is intended by this man of sin and son of perdition: and, if it be not certain that the papal power and tyranny are principally or only intended, yet this is plain, What is here said does very exactly agree thereto* (hereafter bold italic is my emphasis). For observe,

1. The names of this person, or rather the state and power here spoken of. He is called the man of sin, to denote his egregious wickedness; not only is he addicted to, and practices, wickedness himself, but he also promotes, countenances, and commands sin and wickedness in others; and he is the son of perdition, because he himself is devoted to certain destruction, and is the instrument of destroying many others both in soul and body. These names may properly be applied, for these reasons, to the papal state; and thereto agree also,

2. The characters here given, v. 4. (1.) That he *opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God, or is worshipped*; and thus have the bishops of Rome not only opposed God's authority, and that of the civil magistrates, who are called gods, but have exalted themselves above God and earthly governors, in demanding greater regard to their commands than to the commands of God or the magistrate. (2.) *As God, he sits in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God*. As God was in the temple of old, and worshipped there, and is in and with his church now, so the antichrist here mentioned is some usurper of God's authority in the Christian church, who claims divine honours; and to whom can this better apply than to the bishops of Rome, to whom the most blasphemous titles have been given, as *Dominus Deus noster papa—Our Lord God the pope; Deus alter in terrâ—Another God on earth; Idem est dominium Dei et papæ—The dominion of God and the pope is the same?*

3. His rise is mentioned, v. 6, 7. Concerning this we are to observe two things:—(1.) There was something that hindered or withheld, or *let, until it was taken away*. *This is supposed to be the power of the Roman Empire, which the apostle did not think fit to mention more plainly at that time; and it is notorious that, while this power continued, it prevented the advances of the bishops of Rome to that height of tyranny to which soon afterwards they arrived*. (2.) This mystery of iniquity was gradually to

arrive at its height; and so it was in effect that the universal corruption of doctrine and worship in the Romish church came in by degrees, and the usurpation of the bishops of Rome was gradual, not all at once; and thus the mystery of iniquity did the more easily, and almost insensibly, prevail. The apostle justly calls it a *mystery of iniquity*, because wicked designs and actions were concealed under false shows and pretences, at least they were concealed from the common view and observation. By pretended devotion, superstition and idolatry were advanced; and, by a pretended zeal for God and his glory, bigotry and persecution were promoted. And he tells us that this mystery of iniquity did even then begin, or did *already work*. While the apostles were yet living, *the enemy came, and sowed tares*; there were then the *deeds of the Nicolaitans*, persons who pretended zeal for Christ, but really opposed him. Pride, ambition, and worldly interest of church-pastors and church-rulers, as in Diotrephes and others, were the early working of the mystery of iniquity, which, by degrees, came to that prodigious height which has been visible in the church of Rome.

4. The fall or ruin of the antichristian state is declared, v. 8. The head of this antichristian kingdom is called *that wicked one*, or that lawless person who sets up a human power in competition with, and contradiction to, the divine dominion and power of the Lord Jesus Christ; but, as he would thus manifest himself to be the man of sin, so the revelation or discovery of this to the world would be the sure presage and the means of his ruin. The apostle assures the Thessalonians that the Lord would consume and destroy him; the consuming of him precedes his final destruction, and that is by the *Spirit of his mouth*, by his word of command; the pure word of God, accompanied with the Spirit of God, will discover this mystery of iniquity, and make the power of antichrist to consume and waste away; and in due time it will be totally and finally destroyed, and this will be by the brightness of Christ's coming. Note, the coming of Christ to destroy the wicked will be with peculiar glory and eminent lustre and brightness.

5. The apostle further describes the reign and rule of this man of sin. Here we are to observe, (1.) The manner of his coming, or ruling, and working: in general, that it is after the example of Satan, the grand enemy of souls, the great adversary of God and man. He is the great patron of error and lies, the sworn enemy of the truth as it is in Jesus and all the faithful followers of Jesus. More particularly, it is with Satanical power and deceit. A divine power is pretended for the support of this kingdom, but it is only after the working of Satan. Signs and wonders, visions and miracles, are pretended; by these the papal kingdom was first set up, and has all along been kept up, but they have false signs to support false doctrines; and lying wonders, or only pretended miracles that have served their cause, things false in fact, or fraudulently managed, to impose upon the people: and the diabolical deceits with which the antichristian state has been supported are notorious. The apostle calls it *all deceivableness of unrighteousness*, v. 10. Others may call them pious frauds, but the apostle called them unrighteous and wicked frauds; and, indeed, all fraud (which is contrary to truth) is an impious thing. Many are the subtle artifices the man of sin has used, and various are the plausible pretences by which he had beguiled unwary and unstable souls to embrace false doctrines, and submit to his usurped dominion. (2.) The persons are described who are his willing subjects, or most likely to become such, v. 10. They are such as *love not the truth that they may be saved*. They heard the truth (it may be), but they did not love it; they could not bear sound doctrine, and therefore easily imbibed false doctrines; they had some notional knowledge of what was true, but they indulged some powerful prejudices, and so became a prey to seducers. Had they loved the truth, they would have persevered in it, and been preserved by it; but no wonder if they easily parted with what they never had any love to. And of these persons it is said that they perish or are lost; they are in a lost condition, and in danger to be lost forever.

6. We have the *sin and ruin of the subjects* of antichrist's kingdom declared, vs. 11, 12. (1.) Their sin is this: *They believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness*: they did not love the truth, and therefore they did not believe it; and, because they did not believe the truth, therefore they had pleasure in unrighteousness, or in wicked actions, and were pleased with false notions. Note, an erroneous mind and vicious life often go together and help forward one another. (2.) Their ruin is thus expressed: *God shall send them strong delusions, to believe a lie*. Thus he will punish men for their unbelief, and for

their dislike of the truth and love to sin and wickedness; not that God is the author of sin, but in righteousness he sometimes withdraws his grace from such sinners as are here mentioned; he gives them over to Satan, or leaves them to be deluded by his instruments; he gives them up to their own hearts' lusts, and leaves them to themselves, and then sin will follow of course, yea, the worst of wickedness, that shall end at last in eternal damnation. God is just when he inflicts spiritual judgments here, and eternal punishments hereafter, upon those who have no love to the truths of the gospel, who will not believe them, nor live suitably to them, but indulge false doctrines in their minds, and wicked practices in their lives and conversations.
