

The Antichrist - Part One

by Pastor Paul F. Nolting

Fictional Antichrist

He was created by a Jesuit priest by the name of Francisco Ribera (1537-1591) who lived in Salamanca, Spain. What moved this priest to create a fictional antichrist? Notice that he lived for half a century after the death of Luther. In those days almost the entire Protestant Church identified the Papacy as the Antichrist. Ribera set out to remove that burden from the Roman Catholic Church. He did that by creating an endtime fictional antichrist. In so doing he became the father of futurism. He taught that the antichrist of prophecy would come in the distant future as a charismatic political leader who would wreak havoc upon the Jews and the church.

Ribera was successful beyond his fondest dreams, for many who believe in a future millennium have adopted his endtime antichrist. They are futurists who believe that the antichrist will appear on the scene of history after the rapture of the saints. He is to arise as a charismatic political leader who will make a covenant with the Jews, allowing them to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. Then after three and a half years he will break his covenant and institute a reign of terror known as the great tribulation. This scenario is religious fiction!

Biblical Antichrist

The Apostle John warns against antichrists in his first two epistles. He warned against contemporary antichrists who denied that Jesus is the Christ. But John also warned against a future Antichrist. The Apostle Paul did not use the term “antichrist.” He called the Antichrist the “Man of sin,” the “Son of Perdition,” and “Mr. Wicked” or “Mr. Lawless.”

The Antichrist of biblical prophecy would not be a charismatic political leader, but One who would **“sit as God in the temple of God.”** Don’t think of the temple building in Jerusalem! Consider rather the words of St. Paul written to the Corinthians, **“Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6:19).** The biblical antichrist dwells in the hearts and consciences of men, demanding submission to himself as God - upon the penalty of eternal damnation.

Who is this spiritual monster who parades as God, who demands obedience to himself as to God, who places a curse on the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus, and who claims the sole right of admitting people into heaven? He is the Pope or the Papacy.

Antichrist in Prophecy

The Apostle Paul gives us a prophetic picture of the Antichrist in his second letter to the Thessalonians, 2:3-12: **“Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”**

Antichrist as Described in Prophecy

The Thessalonians were expecting the coming of the Lord - at any moment! The Apostle curbed this enthusiasm with an apostolic “No!” Something had to happen first - “a falling away.” The word Paul used has come into English as apostasy, which means a falling away from or a departure from one’s beliefs. The belief that makes one a Christian is salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. In the years after Paul, but before the return of Jesus, there would be a apostasy, a falling away from that saving truth.

The apostasy would reveal the “man of sin,” the “son of perdition.” The word “apostasy” reveals that the sin would be doctrinal, not moral. The victims of the sin of the man of sin would suffer perdition of damnation. Christ saves; the Antichrist leads people to perdition!

What power! But the Antichrist has it! He is described as one ***“who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.”*** The man of sin, the son of perdition, claims to be God on earth. He has been making that claim for centuries.

Paul reminded the Thessalonians that he had spoken of these things when he had been in their midst. At that time ***“the mystery of lawlessness [was] already at work.”*** So the Antichrist of prophecy was not to be an endtime charismatic political tyrant, but rather an institution that developed in the church as a result of an apostasy caused by the working of the mystery of lawlessness - culminating in the Papacy!

How long would it take for the ***“mystery of lawlessness”*** to create the Man of sin, the Son of perdition? The Apostle wrote that there was something and Someone restraining this development. The something was the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus and the Someone was the Holy Spirit. As long as the gospel was preached, Jesus lived in the hearts of believers by the power of Spirit-created faith. But when, over the centuries, the Gospel was replaced by work righteousness, Jesus and the Holy Spirit were replaced by work-righteousness, Jesus and the Holy Spirit were replaced by philosophers and man’s reason.

First the apostasy, then the working of the mystery of lawlessness, followed by the revelation of Mr. Lawless after the removal of the Spirit, who works through the Gospel. What then? Then the judgment in two stages - ***“whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming.”*** The consuming breath of the Lord was the preaching and writing of Martin Luther, who was our Lord’s instrument in revealing the Papacy as the Antichrist. The final destruction of the Antichrist will take place with our Lord’s return to this earth for final judgment.

Paul taught that the entire historical development of the Antichrist and his continuing activity till the end of time is the ***“working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders.”*** The Papacy was a judgment upon the church ***“because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.”*** Whenever anyone rejects the truth, God imposes a strong delusion ***“that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”*** The height of unrighteousness is the claim of the Pope that all must submit to him for salvation or be eternally lost.

Prophecy in Fulfillment

Is the Pope or the Papacy the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Apostle Paul? The Old Testament gives us a picture of the coming Christ. Believers were able to identify Jesus. The New Testament gives us a picture of the Antichrist. We are to identify him in history. Remember that the truth that saves us is the Gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ Jesus.

In Part II, Article IV of “The Smallcald Articles,” written by Martin Luther and accepted as one of the confessions of the Lutheran Church, Luther stated the well-known papal claim ***“that no Christian can be saved unless he obeys him and is subject to him in all things that he wishes, that he says, and that he does.”*** So salvation is not by faith in Christ Jesus but by obedience to the Pope. This remains the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.

What did Luther and what does the Confessional Lutheran Church have to say about this claim? In the words of Luther: ***“This teaching shows forcefully that 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. This is properly speaking, ‘to exalt himself above all that is called God,’ as Paul says, 2 Thess. 2,4.”*** (Smallcald Articles)

Keep in mind that Holy Scriptures teach from Genesis to Revelation that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ Jesus. What does the Catholic Church have to say on this point? For an answer we go to the Canons of the Council of Trent which met for eighteen years, from 1545-1563, and was Rome’s answer to “grace through faith”: ***“If any one saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favor of God; let him be anathema (damned).”***

And again: ***“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; let him be anathema (damned).”*** Session VI, Canons XI and XII.

These are the confession of the Man of Sin whose rejection of salvation by grace alone through faith alone makes him Mr. Perdition.