

3 Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day [the day of Christ] will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, 4 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. [2 Thess. 2:3-4]

2 By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. [1 John 4:2-3]

Why does the Lutheran Church together with Luther mark and struggle against the Pope as the true great Antichrist?

The fact that the Lutheran church does this, provided that it is earnest about its confession, does not need to be first shown on the jubilee of the Schmalkald articles. Every Lutheran Christian who knows the confession of his church not only by name, but who has read it attentively, will find the clear statement in it:

This portion powerfully shows that he (the Pope) is the true End- or Antichrist who has set himself against Christ and exalted himself over Christ. ...

He will also more and more comprehend that all statements of Luther in those articles are intended to reveal the antichristian nature of papacy in order to warn the Christians against it. In his treatise on “*The Power and Primacy of the Pope*,” written 400 years ago in Schmalkalden, and accepted by all the assembled evangelical theologians, Melanchthon also comes to the conclusion that:

Now because it is that way, all Christians should most diligently beware not to take part in this godliness teaching, blasphemy and cruelty. But they should turn away from the Pope and his followers or members as from the kingdom of the Antichrist and to curse it as Jesus commanded: Beware of the false prophets...

This fact, that the Lutheran confessions call the Pope in Rome the true Antichrist and warn of him and his kingdom with such vengeance, is uncomfortable and embarrassing for many in our day who call themselves “evangelical” or “Lutheran” and who take a stand for the “confessions.” One has read very few things about this in the writings and essays that appeared to celebrate the day of Schmalkalden.”

We know that this doctrine is not a central doctrine of our confessions. Far be it from us to deny Christianity or even salvation to such dear Christians who cannot recognize the Pope as the antichrist. It would even be antichristian if one wanted to make salvation dependent on anything other than on the relationship to Christ, on the faith in our beloved Savior. But how would it be when it becomes clear in the course of the study of Luther’s teachings and those of our confessions, that the relationship with Christ was precisely the main reason for Luther and the reformers to identify the Pope as the Antichrist? Indeed we may expect and require of those who call themselves Lutheran and who hold themselves to the confessions, that they will also take this point of the confessions seriously and on the occasion of the year of the jubilee of the

Smalcald articles, bring up the question and seek an answer to it: Why did Luther come up with this assumption and why did the Lutheran Church include it in its confession? How did they come to the point that they called the Pope the antichrist and warned of him? One also cannot avoid this question by simply saying that we now have other concerns; we have totally different battles to fight than the battle against Rome! No! We as Lutherans have the conviction that, especially in these days with its great doctrinal struggle, it is necessary to deal with the question about what made Luther call the Pope the antichrist, to get back to the fundamental doctrines of the Reformation and the Gospel. Without this, the fight against every antichristian thing or thought is impossible and a clear understanding of this point can and will lead to the removal of the tension between state and church.

1.

Why has Luther fought against the Pope as the great antichrist? There are many reasons that moved Luther to fight against the papacy. He has, as a German, fought the papacy out of national reasons as well. It aroused his righteous anger against the Romanists that they so shamefully robbed and drained the German people and the country. For every privilege of the Pope, great sums of money crossed the Alps and were squandered by the Roman court. Therefore he already earlier raised his voice and called the German princes and the Christian nobility of Germany to put an end to this situation. However, that is not why he called the Pope the antichrist.

Luther and the Lutheran Church with him saw the antichristian nature of the papacy rather in the fact that the Pope has claimed for himself a sort of power that belongs neither to him nor to any other human, that he “sets himself over and against God” and that he wants to be “worshiped as an earthly god” and that he claims to be the representative of Christ on earth. This hubris of the Pope has disastrous effects on different levels: First on an earthly level: The Pope assumes to interfere in and to change the orders that God gave for the cohabitation of humans on earth. The Romanists forbid the married life for their priests. Of this, Luther writes in the Smalcald articles:

They have acted like antichristian, tyrannical, desperate scoundrels [have performed the work of antichrist, of tyrants and the worst knaves], and have thereby caused all kinds of horrible, abominable, innumerable sins of unchastity [depraved lusts], in which they still wallow. Now, as little as we or they have been given the power to make a woman out of a man or a man out of a woman, or to nullify either sex, so little have they had the power to [sunder and] separate such creatures of God, or to forbid them from living [and cohabiting] honestly in marriage.

Luther wants to say with this, it is an intrusion on God’s order of creation when the Pope forbids certain people to marry. Through this, he reveals himself as the antichrist and causes great misery and destruction on earth. Further, it is an interference with God’s rights that the pope makes himself to be praised as the one lord of the whole world and assumes to *built up a new outward, worldly kingdom* with the *pretext of spiritual power*. It is *wrong and wicked* to claim, that the pope is by God’s law lord over the kingdoms of the earth. *Because of that, terrible tribulations have risen in Europe*. Our fathers have indeed seen, what many evangelical Christians of our time have not seen and do not want to see, namely that the pope, by claiming to be the highest Lord of the world and by assuming the right to interfere in and to change God’s orders, has shattered the foundation of human cohabitation. The history of both the world and the church

also shows that more than once, the pope has freed the subjects from their obligations towards their authorities and he has taken the side of the insurgents. His prohibition of marriage for the priest has not only lead to terrible vice, it has additionally spread the opinion that the state of marriage does not represent the true Christian perfection and therefore many people in this state have lived and still live with wounded conscience. The pope has given up nothing of this assumption, although he cannot enact it everywhere as he pleases. The fact that, on the evangelical side, one does not recognize this and give an earnest testimony against it and separate from this ungodliness, and probably thinks he can see in the Roman church an ally to change the present order, is a proof of how little one understands and recognizes Luther's and the Lutheran Churches' confession.

2.

When Luther calls the pope the true great Antichrist, he does not think only or even mainly of his presumptuousness on an earthly level, but above all he means that the pope has appointed himself to be Lord over the consciences by claiming to be the highest authority in spiritual matters and that he does not want anyone to be saved apart from his power. The pope has appointed himself to be the Lord over scripture, over the word of God by asserting to proclaim articles of faith that all men would have to follow for their souls' salvation and he proclaimed his interpretation of the Bible as the only valid and true one. Against this, Luther speaks with holy concern: *God's word shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel.* At this point, it became clear to Luther for the first time that the Pope is the true antichrist.

A. Rosenberg quotes Luther's words in his book "*Protestantische Rompilger*" (*Protestant Rome-Pilgrims*): *O blessed Greece, oh blessed Bohemia, oh blessed all those who went out of this Babylon! So depart, ungodly, damned, blasphemous Rome!* Luther wrote these words in 1520. They were prompted by the writing of a high papal dignitary, who in the struggle against Luther defended the pope's claim to power by quoting the terrible word from the papal law books that no one on earth would have the right to depose a pope or to make a judgment over him, even if the pope lived so scandalously that he would lead many people to hell; and who presumed to claim that the Holy Scripture only received its power and dignity from the pope. Especially the last sentence lead Luther into deep anger; he wrote:

*But now, this Satan wants to give power and dignity to the Scripture through a man!
What is the antichrist if such a pope is not the antichrist?*

And shortly thereafter, we find the words quoted by Rosenberg in their context:

If Rome has this belief, then O blessed Greece, oh blessed Bohemia, oh blessed all those who have separated themselves from Rome and went out of this Babylon! Damned all those who have fellowship with Rome! And I confess openly in front of these witnesses: If pope and cardinals cannot make this mouth of satan silent and make it to recant, then I will not agree with the church of Rome; but I separate myself from it and from pope and cardinals as from the idol that is standing on holy ground. In it, for some time already, the faith is extinguished, the Gospel is banned, Christ is exiled and their methods are more than barbaric. One last hope has remained, the unchanged respect of the Holy scriptures and at least the right view of it, even if there is no understanding. Now, satan has occupied this as well, the fortress of Zion and the

tower of David which, until now, has been impenetrable. So depart, ungodly, damned, vicious Rome!...

This was the reason why Luther already at that time recognized the pope as the antichrist and Rome as Babylon: Because they did not submit themselves under the Holy scriptures, but placed themselves over it.

3.

Why is scripture so important to Luther? Is this not a remnant of medieval dogmatism and slavish bondage to the letter? Whoever thinks and talks that way has no idea of Luther's view of the word of scripture. In his last writing against the Roman papacy (1545), he writes about the confession about Christ that Peter gave in the name of all disciples near Caesarea Philippi. Here Luther says:

In these few words of Peter ... the whole Gospel is included, indeed the whole Scripture. For what does Scripture have in mind from beginning to end other than that the Messiah, the Son of God would come and, by his sacrifice as the innocent Lamb of God, take away the world's sin and save us from eternal death to eternal salvation. Scripture was written for the Messiah, the Son of God, and everything that happened, happened for His sake.

These words show clearly what was important to him. Note carefully: He does not state here, nor in any other place, that only the parts of Scripture that give direct testimony about Christ are God's word or are inspired by God. But he says, as Paul also said, that the whole, Spirit inspired Scripture is a testimony of Jesus Christ which can and should lead us to salvation through faith in Him. This is the reason, the ultimate and deepest reason for Luther's fight for Scripture and against the pope as the true antichrist, that the pope with outward adherence to Scripture denies the main article that Christ alone is the Lamb of God that bears the world's sins. He does not only deny this, but he rejects and condemns it and instead of showing the people Christ's merit, he shows them the works of obedience towards his, the pope's commandments and the "unbloody sacrifice" that his, the pope's priests are said to offer in the mass for the sins of the living and the dead.

It is therefore clearly against the main article who there says that not a godly or ungodly servant of the mass through his work but the lamb of God, the Son of God bears our sin...So will I, with God's help, rather let me be burned to ashes than let a servant of the mass, if he is godly or ungodly, be higher or even as high as my Savior Jesus Christ. We therefore are and remain separate and contrary to one another.

This is, as stated above, the ultimate and deepest reason for Luther and the Lutheran Church to recognize and to fight against the pope, the papacy as the true great antichrist. The official Roman church still holds to the anathema that was spoken by the great Council of Trent over the main article of the gospel about the justification of the sinner before God by faith in Christ alone and his atoning suffering and death. The anathema translated into English is as follows:

When anyone says that men are justified alone by imputation of Christ's righteousness or alone by forgiveness of sins without the grace and love that is

poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit and dwell in them or that the grace through which we are justified is only God's gracious disposition, he is cursed.

When anyone says that justifying faith is nothing other than trust in God's mercy, that forgives us sins for Christ's sake or that this trust alone would justify us, he is cursed.

So, the papacy has hardened itself against the basic truth of the Gospel. When he outwardly holds fast to the Holy Scriptures and to the individual articles of the Christian Creeds, it is another proof that he is the true, great antichrist, for he shall "sit in the temple of God," that is, to stand up in the middle of Christianity and remain there until Christ's return for judgment. Not any ruler of the world outside Christianity is the antichrist, but the "*man of sin*" and the "*son of perdition sits in the temple of God and claims to be God.*" He is called the antichrist not only because he stands against Christ, but also because he elevates himself above Christ by taking His place.

These are the most important reasons for Luther and the Lutheran Church to recognize the pope as the antichrist and to warn earnestly of the realm of the pope as of the antichrist's. Such warning is more important today than ever. When the accusation is made against Protestantism that it makes a pilgrimage to Rome, true Lutherans have every reason to seriously ask themselves and investigate if there is some truth in this. That there are protestant Pilgrimages to Rome is not proven by the fact that here and there are festival services in the form of the *Deutsche Messe*, an overworked order of service that was proposed by Luther himself! But when the evangelical *Volkskirche* (main- or people's church) sees its role in christianizing the state according to the principle of the gospel, it is on its way to Rome. And when evangelical theologians with their science assume themselves to be masters over the written word and when they want to be strict judges between Spirit and Letter, it is the same enthusiasm that Luther sees rightly in the papacy. And finally, when an evangelical theologian, who is entrusted with bringing up young men to be preachers of the Gospel and to give them right instructions to preach, writes that it is *an aberration when the suffering of the Savior is regarded as an atonement for sins which reconciled us to God* but sees the meaning of Christ's substitutionary suffering in that Jesus wants to *draw us into the fellowship of his personal life* and thereby wants to *remove the offense of the mere scapegoat-theory*, then he stands right in the middle of the papistic, antichristian camp and at the same time on the same level with Rosenberg and all the other fighters against the Gospel of Christ.

Die evangelische Kirche auf dem Weg nach Rom (The evangelical church on its way to Rome) is the title of an essay that was published by Johannes Herrmann in Zwickau some thirty-seven years ago. The author, Dr. H. Ebeling, a departed faithful Lutheran christian, not a theologian, already at that time raised a warning, that the protestant theology and church, by their leading men through their renunciation of the Holy Scripture and by their false teaching about the church and the person and work of Christ and other things paved the way to the Roman church. In this regard there has been no real change in recent years in spite of much talking about *the confession*. Even today there are enough evangelical, even Lutheran theologians who, because they themselves have fallen away from Scripture and present many false teachings, claim that the fight against Rome is out dated, yes indeed they even see Rome as a sister-church and as an ally and therefore do not inform the Christians about the "secret of evil" in the papacy that has been revealed by Luther and his Reformation.

Finally, there are three points that have to be explained: First: That Luther and the Lutheran Church have always emphasized the difference between the papacy and the catholic church, so that through the identification of the papacy as the antichrist, it is not denied that there are true Christians inside the catholic church, who do not recognize the “secret of evil” and hold fast to Christ’s merit alone and therefore are saved. Especially towards those Christians, we have the responsibility to earnestly make known Rome’s soul-endangering false doctrines.

Secondly: We as Lutherans confess that the pope is the great antichrist, but we do not maintain that he is the only antichrist. We know indeed from God’s word that, already at the time of the apostles, many antichrists had arisen (1 John 2,18). We know that everything that is directed against God and His holy Word both in doctrine and life, is antichristian: False doctrine inside Christianity, the old and new paganism that blasphemes God and Christ and the godless conduct of the children of this world. And we further know that, in our necessary spiritual battle against the pope as the true great antichrist, we cannot forget the battle we must wage against everything antichristian around us and in our own evil heart.

And thirdly: The battle that we wage against the papacy and everything antichristian has to be a spiritual battle with spiritual weapons to which no fleshly hatred or any unholy zeal shall move us but the love towards God and His word and towards the souls of our fellow men, which are dearly paid for. Out of this love flows the holy hatred again all erring and flattering spirits, who destroy the temple of God and against whom we therefore have to fight.

We will only fight this battle in the right way when this one article lives and reigns in our heart, the article of our beloved Lord, Jesus Christ, who, as the lamb of God has born and taken away the sins of the whole world, our sins. On this article stands everything that we teach and live against the pope, satan and the world. Therefore we must be completely certain about this and not doubt, otherwise, the pope, satan and everything that is against us will maintain the victory and right.

The pope confesses this word: Christ has come in the flesh, but he denies the fruit of this. This is the same as to say that Christ has not come in the flesh. For the coming of Christ has not happened because He became man for his own sake, but to save us..., that he destroyed the works of the devil and to save the sinners from their sins. But this the pope denies. He holds to the same words but he denies the power of the coming of Christ, that is, that our heart shall trust in Christ’s righteousness alone and shall therefore be justified. The pope condemns this article in his bulls that we are justified through Christ’s righteousness alone. (Luther on 1 John 4,2)

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The great Antichrist (essay written by Martin Willkomm, Professor of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Germany ca. 1936, originally German, translated by David Weiss 2015)