

Recovering and Re-evaluating the Historical Interpretations of the Anti-Christ.

By Ottavio Palombaro

CONTEMPORARY AMNESIA TOWARD THE ANTI-CHRIST

In less than a century popular Christian literature has seen a gradual unprecedented shift from the traditional understanding of the Anti-Christ. Identifications of Anti-Christ are continuously changing in nature, geographical and historical location. While Protestantism traditionally understood the Pope and Rome as the Anti-Christ today, this is no longer the unanimous understanding of it. To show how far from this view things have developed, it is enough to mention that in 2013 Pope Francis has been named the man of the year by the Time magazine and in September 2015 he even gave an address to the American congress. The Pope's strategy in following the steps of St. Francis of Assisi and the ecumenical response from much of traditional Protestant denominations is another case in point.¹ The Pope now appears as a humble figure and the times of persecution and religious wars seem so far gone that to even suggest such connection with the Anti-Christ seems superfluous.

In America an increasingly high number of Evangelicals have embraced the idea that the Pope is an actual Christian, or at least a proponent of a new kind of Catholicism, global in its nature. Today to suggest that the pope is the Anti-Christ is considered among many Protestants an anachronism at best and a blatant insult at worst. It seems that the points of division among denominations which characterized past centuries are gone. Other centers of power, such as the United Nations, secularism, or totalitarian regimes, seem far better candidates for the Anti-Christ than a now irenic and ecumenical Pope.² Apart from few minor views deemed as fundamentalist and sectarian, no one wants to claim that the Pope is the Anti-Christ. This has also to do with one's eschatological view. Those who today follow a pre-millennial eschatology tend to identify the Anti-Christ

in overly specific political figures, while a-millennialists, for fear of mingling with fictional views, tend to speak of just a 'spirit of Anti-Christ' through the ages, but not a specific figure that we are supposed to be able to identify as Christians. Over-reacting to some excesses of the past, contemporary theologians interested in Eschatology have left a void on this point. What is striking is that such fluctuating views on the Anti-Christ were completely foreign to the traditional understanding of Protestants for centuries.³

In today's rampant ecumenism it is vital to keep this discussion in its proper historical perspective. Regardless of one's view on the identity of the Anti-Christ, the issue here seems to be that many evangelicals today have forgotten their history. Given our secularized context, they are also embracing an interpretative framework of Scripture which tends to downplay the demonic realm. Protestant theologians today furthermore, seem to have lost the apocalyptic urgency of their forefathers and an eschatological awareness of living in the last days. Christ warned the disciples of the urgent need to be watchful prior to the end of this current world. Scripture's challenge for the disciples was not so much to guard against external enemies which will openly militate against the church, but against more subtle enemies from within

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1. Robert L. Reymond, *The Reformation's Conflict with Rome* (Fearn: Mentor, 2001), p. 85.

2. Andrew Robinson, "Identifying the Beast: Samuel Horsley and the Problem of Papal AntiChrist," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 43, no. 4 (October 1992): 594.

3. Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist. Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1996), p. 173.

the folds of a pretense of piety which has already introduced demonic doctrines into the church. Likewise, the spirit of Anti-Christ tends to work this way.

This article intends to mainly look historically at the fact that such abandonment of seeing Rome as the Anti-Christ is unprecedented and how this change took place only relatively recently in the twentieth century. The final part of this article will also complete this historical analysis by bringing back to the forefront, in order to in part rediscover, some of the Biblical, ecclesiastical and practical reasons why this historical shift is problematic, regardless of one's ultimate position toward who the ultimate Anti-Christ might or might not be. While the focus of this paper remains historical, it is nevertheless crucial given the nature of the subject, to address at least in part, although not in an exhaustive way, scriptural as well as ecclesiastical evidence toward seeing Rome as the seat of the Anti-Christ, something that today remains neglected. While a comprehensive analysis of those elements might be an issue for another paper, through studies which will be referenced in the bibliography,⁴ it remains nevertheless relevant to keep them in mind even while the focus of the author remains historical. The problem is that Protestants becoming Roman Catholic friendly are without historical Scriptural nor ecclesiastical warrant. All this shows how Protestants are failing to remember that the Roman Catholic Church today is no less in antithesis (if not even in greater antithesis) to the Biblical Gospel as it was at the time of the Protestant Reformation.

HISTORICAL LOOK AT THE ANTI-CHRIST

What may come as a surprise for readers, is that for almost the entirety of the past two thousand years the predominant position of the church on the Anti-Christ had Rome always at its center. Ever since the time of the early church, the patristic discussion on the Anti-Christ recognized first of all that: "we are living in the last days."⁵ Cyril gave the signs of the Antichrist and warned people lest they should, "take the false Christ for the true." Irenaeus, Tychonius, Victorinus, Bishop of

Poetovio, or even Augustine, spoke of the Beast of the book of Revelation as referring to the city of the "seven hills," Rome (*super quos mulier sedet*).⁶ Both the church of the East and of the West saw Rome behind such evil, an idolatrous and powerful force. John Chrysostom believed that the "mystery of lawlessness" of the Antichrist was directly tied to the Roman emperors, in particular, to wicked emperors such as Nero, Caligula, Antiochus, Domitian or Diocletian. Nero himself would later be the epicenter of a legend as Nero redivivus, by being killed and yet rising back to life to make his final assault upon the world.

Emperors were particularly plausible candidates because they were demanding religious worship for themselves by all people and opposed any follower of Jesus to the threat of death. Their self-glorification and exaltation, pretending to be worshipped as gods, was an affront to Christ. Delegates from the Roman Empire were at the time of the New Testament imposing their Roman images in Jerusalem's temple. All these things were sending clear echoes to any Israelite or Christian convert acquainted with the abomination of desolation described in Scripture. Any reader of the book of Revelation would have understood the New Testament's references to Babylon as referring to Rome, the city placed among "many waters" from where the Antichrist was to rule. It is in this sense that the eschatology of full preterists is correct, only insofar as it allows people to recognize the clear partial fulfillment of many of these details in an immediate context in the first century. Yet, the early church's position on the matter stands as a warning: the church has forgotten today this Roman locus of the Antichrist as understood by early Christianity.

The rise of the Roman papacy did not see any substantial change in this framework. Already by the sixth century, Gregory I, bishop of Rome, condemned the use of the title "pope" and warned that whoever claims such title: "is in his elation the precursor of Antichrist."⁷ Despite his effort, such title would be claimed by future Popes and in centuries to come it became the definitive title of the bishop of Rome. The fact, for example, that the address "pontifex maximum" was a title reserved for the Roman emperor witnesses to such continuity. Already by the synod of Reims of A.D. 991 concerns were raised by some regarding the bishop of Rome, due to his honorary seat and dressings, associating such practices with the "Antichrist seated in the temple of God."⁸ In the early Middle Ages the concept of a papal Antichrist only brought forward those pre-existing theories. Bernard of Clairvaux and Hildegard von Bingen considered the coming of the Antichrist as something imminent and

4. See the Bibliography for this issue. Ed.

5. William C. Weinrich, "Antichrist in the Early Church," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*: 49 (1985): 136 [135-147].

6. G. Biguzzi, "Is the Babylon of Revelation Rome or Jerusalem?" *Biblica* Vol. 87 (2006): 373 [371-386].

7. Sabina Flanagan, "Twelfth-Century Apocalyptic Imaginations and the Coming of the Antichrist," *The Journal of Religious History* 24, no. 1 (February 2000): 58 [57-69].

8. Bernard McGinn, "Angel Pope and Papal Antichrist," *Church History* 47 (1978): 156 [155-173].

connected with Rome.⁹ Jan Hus and the Hussites, on their part, expressed themselves against the papacy in the treatise entitled: *Anatomy of the Antichrist*.¹⁰ John Wycliffe likewise gave an open critic of the papacy as primary cause of the collective evil within Christendom. In these treatises the papacy was contrasted with the primitive church, the pope being “the evident Antichrist.”¹¹ Apostolic poverty during the pauperistic resurgence in the Middle Ages was exalted and Popes were often urged to renounce their temporal splendors. The Franciscan Spirituali, Fraticelli and the Apostolic Brethren, among the radical fringes of the pauperistic movements, were not afraid to claim that the pope was the Antichrist.¹² Jacopone da Todi with his *Laude*, as a medieval poet from the Spirituali was a voice expressing such views toward the papacy as Antichrist:

Jesus Christ laments over the Roman church which is unthankful and villain [...]. Idolatry was raised with its pernicious mistake and magic arts to blind the people, reign as an emperor, killing people [...] the false clergy has quenched any fruit (*trans. from Italian mine*)¹³

This emphasis on the papal Antichrist and the need to reform can find another example even in the preaching of Ulbertino da Casale or Fra Dolcino. Joachim of Fiore with his *Figurae* was among the greatest defenders of the idea of a papal Antichrist. He saw the crisis of the papacy during his time as a clear sign of the imminent eschatological revelation of the Anti-Christ. The Roman Empire had simply been re-shaped into the Sacred Roman Empire and the spirit of Anti-Christ was at work through it. The papal schism that took place during the Avignon Captivity was also the source of many speculations concerning the papal Anti-Christ and Rome.¹⁴

Therefore, as Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation came to the scene, the Reformers were not innovators with their strongest invective against the papal Antichrist. Luther in his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, or in: *Against the Bull of the Antichrist, The Monk-Calf, Against the Roman Papacy, Institution of the Devil* ... was not coming up with anything radically new or foreign to the mindset of previous ages of church history. One may think *prima facie* that to make such claims was a radical step as compared with the intolerant environment of the day. Yet Luther and the other Reformers were only positioning themselves in a long tradition within the church ever since the times of the New Testament, that called out the danger of a Roman Antichrist. Luther therefore re-appropriated Gregory's claim, questioning the legitimacy of the Papal title

from within this centuries-old tradition of the church, where Babylon was identified with Rome.¹⁵ Luther borrowed, therefore, the term “Antichrist” in its Gregorian specific intended meaning. Rome was the seat of Antichrist, Babylon itself.¹⁶ He was not necessarily calling out a specific Pope as the ultimate Antichrist, yet he understood that the papal system was the ultimate fulfillment of such a figure. The Papacy, according to the Reformers, had distorted the sacraments with its own traditions and regulations, transforming them into a system of control.¹⁷

In other words, the Antichrist narrative, even in its Protestant form with the Papal Anti-Christ narrative, was not an invention of the Protestants. The Reformation did not change such emphasis but it remained instead permeated by the same fervent apocalyptic expectation.¹⁸ Rome was perceived to have brought forward the spirit of Babylon, or even before it, the primeval history with the seed of the serpent.¹⁹ First generations of Protestants were of the eschatological persuasion to be living at the eventide of the world, facing in the Pope the true end-times Antichrist. Although Islam was included in such rhetoric, no one was in their view a better candidate for the Antichrist than the Pope, who sat in the temple of God and declared another gospel.²⁰ Melancthon's *The Pope-Ass Explained* was only a revised version of traits, vocabulary, and tropology that many Medieval writers had already explored centuries earlier. Melancthon also defended the idea that the Anti-Christ needed to be an

9. McGinn, *Ibid*.

10. Lawrence P. Buck, “Anatomia Antichristi: Form and Content of the Papal Antichrist,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 42, no. 2 (2011): 349 [349–368].

11. Charles A. Gieschen, “Antichrist in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions: The Relevance of Reformation Exegesis of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 for the Church Today,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 81 (2017): 264 [263–279].

12. *Ibidem*.

13. Jacopone da Todi, *Laude* (Bari, Laterza, 2006), 175–176.

14. da Todi, *Laude*, *ibid*.

15. Bernardette McNary-Zak, “An Invitation to Pope Leo X,” *Cithara* 56 (2017): 4 [3–12].

16. Eric Leland Saak, *Luther and the Reformation of the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 342.

17. Paul W. Robinson, ed., *The Annotated Luther*. Vol. 3. *The Church and Sacraments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), p. 9.

18. Michael Parsons, “The Apocalyptic Luther: His Noahic Self-Understanding,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 4 (December 2001): 628 [627–645].

19. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology. its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 135.

20. George Yule, “The Church in the Theology of the Reformers,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 34, no. 4 (October 1983): 591.

individual within the Christian church, taking divine authority upon himself, claiming divine teaching and authority over all men. John Calvin and other Reformers, and afterwards, with one voice essentially confirmed, strenuously defended this same position, rejecting the papal Antichrist's claims with unbending attitude.²¹

Future generations of Protestants like the Puritans, heirs of the Reformers, were no different in their open and unanimous condemnation of the Pope as the Antichrist.²² They were not waiting for a coming, "man of sin," but rather they were persuaded that the Antichrist had already shown himself through Roman Catholicism. Protestant martyrology in England, such as the one found in Foxe's Book of Martyrs, displayed great invective against the Pope as the Anti-Christ. This was driven also by political concerns, fearing that England may once again fall under the control of the Church of Rome.²³ This was not something relegated to a few fundamentalist positions among the Puritans, but it was still a widespread opinion within the whole established Church of England for centuries.²⁴ Such unanimous understanding of the pope as the Antichrist proceeded through the centuries and across denominations even until the nineteenth century, through the preaching of notables such as Charles Spurgeon or in the twentieth century through Martin Lloyd-Jones. Within this long tradition, the papacy was still seen as the Babylon of Revelation.²⁵ It is possible to conclude, therefore, that the traditional interpretation of the church for centuries of Christian thought, all the way to little more than half a century ago, had always been that Babylon is Rome, and that the Antichrist must be a Roman figure, namely the Pope.

Since this was the predominant view for eighteen

hundred years of church history, we now have to focus on the twentieth century. We must consider what brought the sudden abandonment of a deeply rooted position of the pope as the Anti-Christ within Protestantism: the advent of ecumenism within Protestantism as well as within Catholicism. Such shift in American mainline Protestant culture toward becoming Roman Catholic friendly, according to scholars, seems to have had its beginnings at least in our Reformed camp already in the beginning of the twentieth century. This had to do with a broader shift beyond just North America in the wider Anglo-Saxon world of politics. All the way until the end of the nineteenth century, Protestant English culture, particularly Anglicanism, strenuously kept Roman Catholicism and the papacy at arms length. However, after the end of the revolutionary era, with the end of the temporal power of the pope and until the advent of the first world war, this began to look just like an outdated issue compared to other more pressing changes.²⁶ This was not just the case among Protestants but even among Roman Catholics toward Protestantism. This is noticeable if one compares the overall anti-Protestant animosity in the language of Vatican Council I (not just the Council of Trent) with its second counterpart less than a hundred years later.

Historic Reformed denominations, therefore, began changing their stand on this point, which became increasingly inconsistent with their intention to embrace ecumenical views. Discussions were underway on how to interpret confessional statements on this point that began to be perceived as controversial. For example, while until then adherence to the confession was a given among Reformed denominations on this point, several editions of Reformed confessions at the end of the nineteenth century began to have issues with the anti-Catholic language contained in them. The Heidelberg Catechism, because of its strong anti-Catholic language in question n. 80 on the "popish mass," began to be seen in contrast with the goals of a new ecumenical movement even among Protestants (see Philip Schaff's comment²⁷). One can think also of the Presbyterian Church in United States of America (PCUSA), which in 1903 took out the words the "pope is that antichrist" from their new edition of the Westminster Confession of Faith. All this was considered as not in tune anymore with the change of times. But the shift was broader than theology, as it involved a social and cultural dimension as well. Between the 1950's and 1960's, one can observe the shift in considerable cases of American religious journalism, even within fundamentalist circles. All this was reflective of a reciprocal opening both through the

21. Darren Chung Keung Fung, "Calvin's Critique of the Papacy: A Historical and Theological Study" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2003), p. 10.

22. Ronald N. Cooke, *Antichrist Exposed. The Reformed and Puritan View of the Antichrist*, Book 2 (Max Meadows, Va.: Truth International Ministries, 2006), p. 345.

23. Peter Lake, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat. Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 281.

24. Kenneth Gibson, "Eschatology, Apocalypse and Millenarianism in Seventeenth Century Protestant Thought" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Nottingham Trent University, 1999), p. 46.

25. Anthony Gavin, *A History of Popery* (Hartford: Case, Tiffany and Burnham, 1848), p. 119.

26. Cadoc Leighton, "Finding Antichrist: Apocalypticism in Nineteenth-Century Catholic England and the Writings of Frederick Faber," *Journal of Religious History* 47, no. 1 (2013): 80.

27. Philip Schaff, *Creeches of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), p. 69.

influence of the Vatican Council II in 1962 and the rise in fortune of the Protestant ecumenical movement in the post World War II decades.²⁸ Things came to their climax after the election of the first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy. His election saw the rise in popularity of an approach in America that became less and less pan-Protestant and more and more open toward Catholicism.²⁹ And even in relative terms, one can compare the anti-Catholic bias that Kennedy still had to face prior to his election with the unqualified reception of another professing Catholic president such as Joe Biden just sixty years later.³⁰ Such change of perspective no longer just involves Protestant denominations that are openly embracing ecumenism, but even conservative fringes of Evangelicalism who, whether to seek to remain relevant in a Western culture where secularism has risen as a common enemy or simply because they have forgotten their history, have abandoned the task of vocalizing any anti-Catholic remarks simply because this is considered unpopular. Any hostile sentiment, at least based on religious concerns, seems today completely removed. Roman Catholics are now treated as just confused Christians.

EXEGETICAL LOOK AT THE ANTI-CHRIST

Now that the historical development of this concept of the pope as the Anti-Christ has been explored as the primary goal of this paper, it is still relevant to also make allusion to the Biblical support of seeing Rome, if not the pope, as the Anti-Christ. This is not just a matter of history and confessions of faith. It is significant that Scripture itself testifies of this geopolitical and religious dimension of Rome as the Anti-Christ. Protestants today have by and large abandoned this hermeneutical interpretation. Obviously, this section is not intended to be a complete treatment of the matter, but only insofar as it informs and validates the historical background seen so far. What makes it hard for Biblical scholars to come to a conclusive opinion concerning the nature of the anti-Christ is the limited Biblical information on this figure. Only few passages of Scripture seem to speak directly of the Antichrist: Daniel 9:27, 11:36–38, Matthew 24:15, 2 Thessalonians 2:3–8, the Johannine epistles, as well as Revelation 13 and 19:20. In all these instances the individual is identified in the Greek as ἀντίχριστος, or with other titles such as ὁ ἀνθρώπος τῆς νομίας (“the man of lawlessness”), or ὁ υἱὸς τῆς πωλείας (“the son of destruction”), or ὁ ἀντικείμενος (“the adversary”), or ὁ ἄνομος (“the lawless one”). This individual will overthrow worship and demand to be worshipped while

he persecutes true believers.³¹ In Daniel a succession of kingdoms is described in the form of a ram and a goat. The reference according to the angelic interpretation refers to several successive kingdoms, such as Media, Persia, Greece (8:20–21), culminating in the “horn,” the “fierce-looking king” who will destroy the holy people and “take his stand against the Prince of Princes” (8:25). This will be the Roman Empire, which will rule during “the time of the end” (8:19). As for much of prophetic literature, it is clear that here Daniel is using prophetic foreshadowing, describing aspects that have a double fulfillment: one chronologically close and the other in a more distant future at the end of the age. This double fulfillment is due in particular to the fact that prophecies like this look at the same time to the first and to the second coming of Christ. Some take the predictions about successive kingdoms (Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, and Antiochus Epiphane) contained in Daniel 8:20–27 as well as Daniel 9:24–27, and particularly its predictions of the abomination of desolation, as referring exclusively to Christ’s first coming. This theory, however, goes against the same measurements of time repeated in the book of Revelation, which was written in a time subsequent to Christ’s ascension.

Daniel 9:27 is clearly referring to the Antichrist (not Christ), who will set up the “abomination that causes desolation.” In chapter 11, from verse 36 on, Daniel goes back to the description of the Antichrist, an individual who will demand worship, exalt himself above all other gods, and expand his dominion from outside Israel throughout the holy land. It is true that such figure has found a near fulfillment in the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Antiochus placed his image in the temple of Jerusalem and sacrificed a pig in the holy place. Yet, given the fact that New Testament passages confirm and describe similar events long after Antiochus’s death, it is evident that the prophecy has a far fuller fulfillment still to come.³² The statement on the abomination that

28. Lerond Curry, *Protestant-Catholic Relations in America: World War I Through Vatican II* (Lexington, KY: Lexington Press, 2015), p 61–62.

29. Patrick Lacroix, *John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Faith, 1960–1963* (New Hampshire: Proquest Dissertation Publishing, 2017), p. 45.

30. Brad Murg, *Tracing American Catholicism: from Archbishop John Carroll to Vice President Joe Biden* (Seattle, WA: Digital Commons, 2016), p. 23.

31. David M. Whitford, “The Papal Antichrist: Martin Luther and the Underappreciated Influence of Lorenzo Valla,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 32 [26–52].

32. Mark A. Hassler, “The Identity of the Little Horn in Daniel 8: Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Rome, or the Antichrist?,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 27, no 1 (Spring 2016): 44 [33–44].

causes desolation is in fact quoted by Jesus in Matthew 24:15 after the signs of the times, looking far beyond the apostolic age to an ultimate tribulation still located in the physical Jerusalem. Such an evil figure standing in the holy place, the temple in Jerusalem, will desecrate the sanctuary and abolish the sacrifices. When one comes to the famous and more direct passage on the Anti-Christ in 2 Thessalonians, several labels are given to this figure (“man of lawlessness,” “man doomed to destruction,” ...). The temple once again is mentioned there and the temporary restraint of the Anti-Christ prior to the end.

To these evidences one can add John’s epistles addressing the coming of “many antichrists” (ἀντίχριστοι πολλοί) or “false christs” (ψευδόχριστοι) in the plural, not necessarily having in mind the single figure dealt with elsewhere (1 John 2:18, 22, 4:3; 2 John 7; Matthew 24:24). This plural connotation does not deny the presence of an ultimate Anti-Christ as described in previous passages and even here in 1 John 2:18: “you have heard the antichrist is coming...” Here, with the plural, John is referring to heretics, in particular Gnostics that denied that Christ came in the flesh. Verse 22 seems to be problematic, “whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ ... is the antichrist.” Later on, in chapter 4 verse 3, John repeats a similar thought: “every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God”; “This is the spirit of antichrist”; as well as 2 John 7: “many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh.... Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.” Roman Catholicism and the Pope in the past have always confessed Jesus as the Christ and defended Christ’s deity. These statements must be kept in balance with the other passages mentioned above mentioning an individual final figure. False prophets as well as rulers of this world requiring worship under threat of persecution are said to be the preamble to this final individual. Such an individual is also described as the “beast out of the sea” in Revelation 13, the Antichrist. It is clear that from a Jewish perspective the beast out of the sea with seven horns is Rome seated on seven hills (17:9) which will demand worship. This is the only way to harmonize this passage with the prophecies of Daniel 7:2–7. The second “beast out of the earth” is the false prophet which comes upon Jerusalem from the opposite side of the Mediterranean Sea. As for the Antichrist, such a role could have had various examples in history such as Nebuchadnezzar or the emperor Trajan, but still, the

ultimate fulfillment of such a figure may point to a false prophetic figure from the east. Although my thought here is only tentative, Muhammad and Islam in general could come under such alliance, both geographically and religiously. Despite the deception perpetrated over the whole world, the Anti-Christ and the false prophet will one day be punished and thrown in the lake of fire (Rev. 19:20).

The etymological nature of the word Antichrist is also to be kept in mind, as the word does not simply mean “against Christ” but “in the place of Christ” (ἀντίχριστος). What many eschatological views of the Antichrist fail to realize is that biblically Antichrist is not equal with being openly and directly against Christ or godless. The Antichrist is not necessarily appearing as a secular archenemy of Christ, but indirectly he stands in antithesis to everything that Christ’s teaching commands while pretending to represent that same Christ. Just like the Devil since the beginning was cunning and did not approach mankind as an open enemy of God but somehow as his counselor (“did God say...?” Genesis 3:4), so here we see a similar kind of deception. The crucial aspect of the Anti-Christ conceived this way will be to claim and pretend to be a pseudo-Christ but despite his claims hides behind hypocrisy, avarice, and concupiscence.

It is evident that the Babylon in view in John’s mind (Revelation 18) was not the historical city situated on the river Euphrates in Mesopotamia, which by that time was in ruin. Nor could it refer to a metaphorical idea of a general evil force active through the ages since Revelation 17:10 describes Babylon as a kingdom currently active at the time John was alive. She is said to have persecuted the saints through the ages and to have fornicated with the nations (by her idolatry and wealth), standing among many waters, with ships passing through her. Its dressings are said to be “purple and scarlet” (18:16). Peter himself, the apostle from which the Pope today claims to trace his lineage, called the city of Rome “Babylon” (1 Peter 5:13). The New Testament parallel between Rome and Babylon is therefore evident even from scriptures themselves, as one explores how the mystery of iniquity was re-shaped through the Roman Empire and the rise of the Roman Papacy later on.³³ It is, however, more than just a correspondence of principles. It is a geographic and detailed correspondence. The identity of the “false prophet”, as I mentioned, could have according to this parallel a candidate in Islam. This may point to a future alliance between the Pope (Antichrist) and a Muslim representative (false prophet) in tune with the prophecies contained in the

33. Ralph Woodrow, *Babylon Mystery Religion. Ancient and Modern* (Riverside, Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1976), p. 81.

Quran which speak of the return of the Messiah (surah 43) and the hadiths (vol. 3, book 43, n. 656). In this sense, this exegetical approach allows to take the historical intuition seen before and support them further with more accurate exegesis of eschatological passages from an historical premillennialist approach. It is here that the Augustinian amillennial eschatology can meet with a more precise exegesis in order to make sense of the Anti-Christ as much as possible to our finite minds.

ECCLESIASTICAL LOOK AT THE ANTI-CHRIST

If Scripture, as well as the overwhelming majority of history, dealt with the idea of Anti-Christ as referring to Rome and the Papacy, then the implications for ecclesiology are lasting. John Calvin understood well the need to come to this logical conclusion: there is such a thing as a false church which can even rely on succession divorced from the truth of Christ.³⁴ Protestants traditionally were explicit in calling the pope the Anti-Christ.³⁵ Their thinking was that the Church of Rome still failed to display the requisites of a true church on all points by transforming the sacraments into the “abomination of the desolation” in the holy place, by abusing the exercise of church discipline for political reasons, and by failing to preach the Word of God in faithfulness with the Gospel of salvation by faith alone.³⁶ The pagan spirit of the Roman Empire was mixed with a Christian structure where indeed the pope acted “as God on earth.”³⁷

Some think that with Vatican Council II many reforms have taken place in Roman Catholicism, transforming it into something far more acceptable to the modern man.³⁸ If one takes into account such a dark history, then the evaluation of Roman Catholicism becomes very negative. Five hundred years have passed from the Reformation and Catholicism has not changed any essential element in its opposition to the Biblical understanding of the Reformation. The Pope still claims today the place of Jesus Christ on earth, with supreme and full power in faith and morals over each and every individual.³⁹ Popularity has not decreased either as Pope Francis remains the most re-tweeted leader in the world. Political presidents and governmental authorities still pay homage to him. However, the duty of the true Christian, according to the major Protestant confessions (see for example the Belgic Confession, Art. 29), is to separate from Rome as a false church, which “ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than the Word of God.” Similarly, the Scots Confession claims to “abhor all kind of popistry” and calls the pope the “Roman antichrist.”⁴⁰ These are more than historical clichés or

colorful invectives from centuries past. Regardless of one’s idea of the Anti-Christ, if he claims to be Protestant, then he should at least become aware of his personal substantial distancing from a centuries-old past Protestant interpretation of Rome and the Papacy. One has simply to look at the old notes of the Geneva Bible on the Book of Revelation to see how such eschatological emphasis on the papal Anti-Christ was a substantial part of Protestant thought for centuries.

PRACTICAL LOOK AT THE ANTI-CHRIST

After having seen the historical and exegetical support for a Roman Anti-Christ, it is time to come to some practical conclusions. The implications of seeing Rome as the seat of the Anti-Christ and the Pope, do not just pertain to theoretical matters but have practical implications. The Evangelical church in North America today on this issue is in danger more than any time in the past, since the goal of the Anti-Christ, whoever he may be, remains to deceive the church into thinking that he is not a threat but just a form, if not the very representative, of Christ.⁴¹ Never before our society has there been such a revived interest in prophecy experienced, with the spreading of many heterodox messages, pointing to the approaching of the end times.⁴² The Papacy is today, like in the past, a vital component, bringing together many tendencies of apostate Christendom under its wings, granting Protestant denominations in decline a voice and a space in the overall machinery of ecumenism. The Anti-Christ is more than a fictional idea or a mythological figure but he is a person that incarnates the spirit of Rome in the name of false religion. The

34. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), p. 690.

35. Francis Nigel Lee, *Antichrist in Scripture* (East Sussex: Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1992), p. 41.

36. J. A. Phillips, *Roman Catholicism Analyzed* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1915), p. 29.

37. Grattan Guinness, *Romanism and the Reformation* (Blackwood: Snead Printing Co., 1967), p. 16.

38. Charles Stuteville Isaacson, *Rome in Many Lands* (London, The Religious Tract Society, 1906), p. 99.

39. Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962), p. 127.

40. The National Covenant or Confession of Faith ... 1581 ... 1638, etc., in *The Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, etc. (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, Edinburgh, 1855), p. [347].

41. Barry Gritters, *The Anti-Christ* (Byron Center: Protestant Reformed Publications, 1990), p. 18.

42. Andrew Bonar, *The Development of Antichrist* (Essex: Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, 1990), p. 110.

way the universal church in all past ages has almost always interpreted the historical and scriptural warrant to the Anti-Christ points to Rome, and particularly for paleo-Protestants, the Papacy. According to Catholic apologists themselves, such Anti-Christ is instead often identified in the force behind secularism or any external opponent to the church.⁴³ Yet, as I pointed out, there is no Biblical warrant to exclude the religious dimension that such an Anti-Christ will manifest as he will take the place of Christ on earth, as an individual person and not just a force.

In less than a hundred years, contrary to the overall direction of previous church history, the church has almost completely forgotten the reality of the papal Antichrist. If history has strenuously and unanimously defended such a view on the basis of a strong exegesis, what warrant do Protestants have today in distancing themselves from such a view or dismissing the whole issue as irrelevant? Many facing the trauma of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century began to discredit the thesis of the papal Antichrist in favor of a more secular figure or simply in favor of an allegorical principle active throughout all ages.⁴⁴ I tried to show in this article how such conclusions fail to give justice to the religious and Christian roots of the Anti-Christ figure. Also, I pointed out how the interpretation of the pope as Antichrist is not something that came out of the blue, but it remains rooted in the overall tradition of Christendom ever since the early church. An individual person as Anti-Christ is therefore still to come. It will be far worse than Diocletian or Nero. Worse than Popes such as Innocent III or Boniface VIII. Worse than recent historical figures such as Hitler or Mussolini.

Surely all of these figures of the past advanced or intended to revive an imperial and almost divinized vision of the glories of Rome, trying to subvert true Christianity from within. In this sense they all worked to the advancement of the same spirit of Anti-Christ. The church is therefore called to oppose such a spirit of Anti-Christ, even in our present context. The Bible invites us to recognize that such a spirit is already at work among the sons of disobedience and that this is an increasingly relevant struggle for us especially just prior to Christ's second coming. As I pointed out, even if one takes a less historical interpretation of the Anti-Christ, even in the eventuality of coming to a different conclusion on who is the final Anti-Christ, the historical evidence itself still

points to Rome as the best candidate ever since the time of the Roman Empire. The ultimate and climactic revelation of the Anti-Christ remains still in the future. In tune with what Revelation tells us, an alliance will work itself out in a temple. We could think in the case of Jerusalem of a city that has been the crossroad between Roman Catholic and Islamic contentions for centuries. It is there that the papal Anti-Christ will sit with the false prophet in their effort to thwart the coming kingdom of the true Christ. This is how knowing past history and Scriptural warnings is intended to help us to face the unknown future with a little bit of discernment. ■

In Brief: The First Beast is Antichrist in his kingdom. From James Durham, *A Commentary upon the Book of the Revelation*, v3 (Naphtali Press and Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), chapter 13, lecture one, pp. 120–121.

Conclusion Two. By this first beast then is understood Antichrist in his kingdom, which appears by all the characters given: 1. He succeeds the dragon in his seat. 2. His rise, reign, and continuance agree to these forty-two months desolate condition of the church ending and beginning with it. He is worshipped not civilly only (that worship is no fault in itself) but religiously, as no emperor was; he has absolute dominion and takes a title to him over all kindreds, tongues, etc. Their submission to him is voluntary and with admiration, which was never to any civil state; he has crowned horns and kings under him who reverence him, which will more particularly appear in opening the words. For all spoken here agrees to one beast, and in one state or condition, to wit, under the last head when the wound which the sixth got was healed (things to come being represented to John as past). The beast thus healed in his head is admired, worshipped, followed, etc., to him power over the saints is given (alluding as is ordinary in the Antichrist's case to Antiochus, Daniel [11:21–35]), so either Antichrist is no head of this beast, or he is set out by this beast who this long continues, and in whom and by whom the dragon is again worshipped by the men of the earth: all which can agree to no other. To speak in short then, here is set out the Roman Empire as Antichristian or headed with Antichrist, having now the sixth head which was wounded by the throwing down of heathenish idolatry again healed by the papacy's becoming the seventh (for, there are but seven); and to this empire as under this head agrees all that is spoken unto here, considering it as representing that same civil state, now the seventh time carrying another head of blasphemy, yet again repeated under another type, that it may be known not to be the same head (though on the same beast) with that which was wounded, nor of the same kind altogether with the former.

It is true this is generally otherwise expounded by learned interpreters.... ■

43. Vincent P. Miceli, *The Antichrist* (New York: Roman Catholic Books, 1981), p. 24.

44. Arthur W. Pink, *The Antichrist* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1988), p. 29.