

The Controversy Regarding  
the Doctrine of the Antichrist  
in the Synodical Conference

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The doctrine of the Antichrist (or of the man of lawlessness, as Paul calls him) is not one that will win many popularity contests. Lutherans from Martin Luther himself on down the line have identified the Antichrist with the Roman papacy. Some, however, who call themselves Lutherans, have denied and still do deny this fact. The reasons are many, but what it boils down to is that you certainly are not going to win a lot of friends--humanly speaking--by calling the Pope the very Antichrist. This even became an issue in the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference (commonly known simply as the Synodical Conference) of which the Wisconsin Synod was a member from 1872 until 1963. It is this controversy in the Synodical Conference regarding the doctrine of the Antichrist which is the subject of this paper.

First of all, it is good to give a brief exposition of the doctrine of the Antichrist. Paul speaks at length on the subject in II Thessalonians 2:1-12:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. The coming of

the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

Paul gives us various signs to look for when identifying the Antichrist. 1) He opposes and exalts himself over God, 2) he sets himself up in God's temple, 3) he had his beginnings at Paul's time, but was being held back, 4) he will perform counterfeit miracles.

Looking at all these signs, who else could the Antichrist, the man of lawlessness, be but the Pope? He opposes and exalts himself over God by claiming he is infallible when he speaks ex cathedra and he denies justification by grace alone. He is set up in God's temple (the Roman Catholic Church). The papacy began not long after Paul's time. There are many counterfeit miracles (healings, etc.) associated with the Pope.

Rightfully therefore, the Lutheran Confessions declare the Pope to be the very Antichrist. Martin Luther writes in his Smalcald Articles: "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." (Trigl., 475) And again we read:

This all proceeds from the fact that the Pope has wished to be called the supreme head of the Christian

Church by divine right. Accordingly he had to make himself equal and superior to Christ, and had to cause himself to be proclaimed the head and then the lord of the Church, and finally of the whole world, and simply God on earth, until he has dared to issue commands even to the angels in heaven . . . Therefore, just as little as we can worship the devil himself as Lord and God, we can endure his apostle, the Pope, or Antichrist, in his rule as king and lord. (Trigl., 475)

The Synodical Conference, from its inception, held to the fact that the Pope is the Antichrist. In a book which explains the differences between the different Lutheran bodies in the late 1800s, Francis Pieper writes on behalf of the Synodical Conference: "But the Scriptures speak also of *one* Antichrist in whom the principles and spirit of the many antichrists are to culminate. This Antichrist, commonly called the *great* Antichrist and graphically described in the second chapter of the second epistle to the Thessalonians, we believe to be the pope at Rome, the papacy." (Pieper, 142)

Pieper goes on to give the reason why we make this claim: the papacy fulfills all the prophecies regarding the Antichrist as they are shown in the Scriptures and attested by the Lutheran Confessions.

Thus the papacy is the greatest possible foe of Christ and His Church, and all traits which in II Thessalonians 2 are ascribed to the Antichrist, that he is to arise in the Church, exalting himself above all human authority, assuming to himself the prerogative of God, and sustaining these assumptions 'with all power and signs and lying wonders'--all these traits we find in the pope at Rome. (Pieper, 144)

He drives the point home by emphasizing that we do not look for any other Antichrist to come.

Hence, we fully and heartily indorse the doctrine of the Lutheran Confessions, that the pope is the great Antichrist of whom Scripture has prophesied. In the papacy we see the great Antichrist standing barely and squarely in the sight of Christians and doing his fearful work, and, therefore, we are not looking forward to any other great Antichrist to come in future times. (Pieper, 144f)

However, a question arose about the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's teachings about this doctrine when they were attempting to come into fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. Together, they were to use the *Common Confession* as a basis for fellowship. Unfortunately, the *Common Confession* had a rather weak statement on the Antichrist:

#### XII. THE LAST THINGS.

We believe and teach: The Church of Jesus Christ will exist and endure on earth, according to the promises of Christ, until His return for judgment. When Christ returns for judgement He will raise up all the dead--all believers in Him to eternal life, and all others to everlasting damnation.

Among the signs of His approaching return for judgment the distinguishing features of the Antichrist, as portrayed in the Holy Scriptures, are still clearly discernable in the Roman papacy, the climax of all human usurpations of Christ's authority in the Church. We hold it to be an error to teach anything as a sign of Christ's second advent not promised or foretold in the Holy Scriptures, such as the expectation of a mass conversion of the Jews, a preliminary resurrection of martyrs, and a visible millennial reign of Christ on earth before the Day of Judgment. (Reim, 48)

This article of the *Common Confession* caused quite a stir in the Synodical Conference, especially among the members of the Wisconsin Synod and the Norwegian Synod (commonly known as the ELS), who felt that their brothers in the Missouri Synod were becoming doctrinally lax for the sake of unionism. In an effort to get everything out in the open, papers were assigned to the

Missouri, Wisconsin, and Norwegian Synods, so that they could defend or air their complaints about the *Common Confession*. These papers were delivered at the 43rd convention of the Synodical Conference at First St. Paul's Church in Chicago in 1954.

E. H. Wendland delivered the paper which gave the Wisconsin Synod's position on the *Common Confession*. He had quite a bit to say about Article XII, pertaining to the doctrine of the Antichrist.

Under *Article XII, "The Last Things,"* we find it regrettable that the *Common Confession* does not use the same language of our Lutheran Confessions (Trigl., p. 475, 10) and reemphasized in the *Brief Statement* (par. 43) that the Pope is "the very Antichrist" and that the "prophecies of the Holy Scriptures concerning the Antichrist, II Thessalonians 2:3-12; I John 2:18, ~~X~~ have been fulfilled in the Pope of Rome and his dominion." The statement of the *Common Confession* is without question a qualified one when it declares: "Among the signs of His [Christ's] approaching return for judgment the distinguishing features of the Antichrist, as portrayed in the Holy Scriptures, are *still clearly discernable* in the Roman papacy, the climax of all human usurpations to Christ's authority in the church." (Wendland, 34)

Wendland and the Wisconsin Synod's complaint was that the statement regarding the Antichrist was too weak, and left itself open to various interpretations. The words "are still clearly discernable" are certainly not as strong as Luther's "the very Antichrist". Wendland continues:

But if this [that the Roman papacy is the Antichrist] is what is meant, why doesn't the *Common Confession* say so in words that cover the matter simply and clearly as in the *Brief Statement*? If simplicity and brevity were the goals, why not use a simple statement, if it suits the purpose, rather than a rather belabored one which

can certainly be interpreted in a different light?  
(Wendland, 34)

Wendland makes note of the fact that the Iowa Synod (part of the ALC) and the ALC itself were not holding firmly to the doctrine of the Pope as the Antichrist.

When we are aware that the Iowa Synod and the American Lutheran Church have always placed this so-called "non-fundamental" doctrine into the sphere of "open questions" . . . [and] when we realize that an entire district of the American Lutheran Church has gone on record with the words: "We reject the statement . . . that the Pope is *the* Antichrist," we are more convinced than ever that our misgivings are not without foundation and that a true settlement must admit of but one interpretation. (Wendland, 34)

Since the ALC was so much against a strong statement on the Antichrist, a lot of red flags went up when such a poor statement appeared in the *Common Confession*.

The ALC's wavering on this issue becomes apparent when you look at some of their own statements. The first is a statement made by the Iowa Synod right after the turn of the century:

Our Synod wants the question left open . . . Those who from Scripture have gained the conviction that the final fulfillment of these prophecies is still to be expected in the future, should have the same right in the Church as those who consider themselves convinced that everything is already fulfilled in the Roman papacy. (C.O.P., 4)

For the Iowa Synod, it was not a contradiction to have some pastors in their midst believing that the Antichrist is yet to come, and to have others believing that the prophecy of the Antichrist has been fulfilled in the Roman papacy.

In 1938, in the ALC's *Declaration* we read:

We accept the historical judgment of Luther in the Smalcald Articles . . . that the Pope is the Antichrist

. . . because among all the antichristian manifestations in the history of the world and the Church that lies behind us in the past there is none that fits the description given in II Thessalonians 2 better than the papacy . . .

The answer to the question whether in the future that is still before us, prior to the return of Christ, a special unfolding and a personal concentration of the antichristian power already present now, and thus a still more comprehensive fulfillment of II Thessalonians 2 may occur, we leave to the Lord and Ruler of Church and world history. (C.O.P., 4)

They are willing to admit that the Pope at least seems to be the Antichrist, but they are not willing to go so far as to say that he is the one and only Antichrist. It is obvious to see why the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods would get in an uproar over their sister synod trying to get into fellowship with such a doctrinally lax body!

Dean Madson presented the paper for the ELS. At the beginning of his paper he points out that the ELS is in full agreement with the Wisconsin Synod's position, so he was not intending for his paper to supplant Wendland's. Rather, at the urging of the Synodical Conference, he was simply stating what the ELS thinks about the *Common Confession*. We find this quote regarding the doctrine of the Antichrist:

6. *The Last Things*. Note: Underscored "are still clearly discernable in the Roman papacy."--Also underscored: "We hold it to be an error to teach anything as a sign of Christ's second advent not promised or foretold in the Holy Scriptures," etc. It would not be contrary to this paragraph to teach a mass conversion of the Jews so long as it was not held to be a sign of Christ's second advent. This paragraph also furnishes us the closest approach we have in the entire *Common Confession* to an antithesis, yet not in the Confessions' antithetical form: "We reject," but rather: "We hold it to be in error."



In the doctrine of the Antichrist it is that five-letter word "still" which causes one to wonder. There is not the definiteness here which we find in Paul's statement (II Thessalonians 2:8) concerning that Wicked (one) "who shall be destroyed with the brightness of Christ's coming." (Madson, 54)

Clearly, the ELS was not convinced that the *Common Confession* is an adequate statement for union either. The word "still" in article XII allowed plenty of room for both LC-MS and ALC theologians to interpret this statement in the light of their own personal convictions while still sounding Lutheran. "Still" is certainly not the same as "the very Antichrist".

It is interesting to note that the speaker for the Missouri Synod did not even mention the Antichrist in his paper. I am not sure if that means that he and his colleagues in the Missouri Synod did not consider this a major point of debate, or if he was simply focusing on a defense of the *Common Confession* itself, or what the situation might be. Nevertheless, the 1954 convention of the Synodical Conference certainly did not solve the controversy about the Antichrist, much less resolve all the arguments against the *Common Confession* as a whole.

Also in 1954, the Conference of Presidents of the Wisconsin Synod released a series of eleven pamphlets called *Continuing in His Word*. Significantly, they devoted one entire pamphlet to the subject of the Antichrist. In this tract, they quote the statements of the Iowa Synod and the ALC regarding the doctrine of the Antichrist. Some of these statements have been quoted above. These quotes show that the ALC has no intention of holding to the doctrine of the Pope as Antichrist. The pamphlet

also defends Luther against some of the slander leveled against him, saying that he merely made a "historical judgement" or that the Pope had gotten him so mad he called him the Antichrist out of spite. It points out that Luther only came to this conclusion after careful study of Scripture and with a tremendous love for the Gospel of Christ.

Luther's identification of the villain was not a mere "historical judgement," an identification performed primarily by his intellect. A cold, two-plus-two-equals-four, intellectual process of comparing the marks of the criminal with the fingerprints on file in the Scriptures did not settle him in his conviction. Not until his faith had become deeply rooted in the Savior and His Scriptures, not until it had fully embraced and lived the truth that we are saved alone through faith in Christ, did Luther fully recognize and denounce the vicious corruption of the Gospel by the Papacy. (C.O.P., 6)

Again we read, "The identification of the Pope as the Antichrist was for him [Luther] the reverse of the knowledge of the Gospel; and his battle against the Pope as the Antichrist the reverse of the battle for the Gospel." (C.O.P., 6) Luther felt compelled, as do all genuine Lutherans, to mark and avoid the Pope as the Antichrist out of love for the Gospel and love for people's souls. To simply turn the other way, when the papacy so clearly fulfills all the prophecies concerning the Antichrist would be tantamount to allowing the Gospel to be destroyed. This is something that neither Luther nor the Wisconsin Synod Lutherans after him could allow to happen.

These matters were once again taken up at the respective conventions of the Missouri and the Wisconsin Synods in 1956. Several resolutions were passed by the two bodies concerning the

*Common Confession* and its ramifications. These resolutions were reprinted in the proceedings of the convention of the Synodical Conference that took place in December of that same year.

First, let us take a look at the Missouri Synod's resolution concerning the use of the *Common Confession* as a union document for future dealing with other church bodies as well as its overall doctrinal soundness:

Resolution 13. Subject: *The Common Confession*

WHEREAS, The *Common Confession* represents a sincere attempt on the part of Synod to achieve unity of doctrine with the American Lutheran Church; and

WHEREAS, Honest and painstaking scrutiny of both Part I and Part II of the *Common Confession* has revealed nothing in conflict with the Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions; and

WHEREAS, It appears from recent historical developments that the *Common Confession* can no longer serve as a functioning union document; therefore be it

*Resolved*, That hereafter the *Common Confession* (Parts I and II) be not regarded or employed as a functioning basic document toward the establishment of altar or pulpit fellowships with other church bodies; and be it further

*Resolved*, That the *Common Confession*, one document composed of Parts I and II, be recognized as a statement in harmony with Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions." (ELSC Proc., 1957, p 138)

There seems to be at least a slight retraction of the *Common Confession* in this resolution. The Missouri Synod realized that it would not serve as an adequate basis for full fellowship with other church bodies. The second resolution is somewhat disturbing, as it seems to be an attempt to defend the *Common Confession*. It almost seems like they are talking out of both sides of their mouth. What good is a confession if it cannot serve any confessional purpose? What good is a wishy-washy confession anyway? The point was not that the *Confession* was

anti-Scriptural, the point was that it did not go far enough in refuting the errors in the ALC.

These are the exact same questions the Wisconsin Synod asked in its resolution in 1956:

[Proposal] II:

WHEREAS, We are not ready to stand committed to the contention "That the *Common Confession*, one document composed of Parts I and II, be recognized as a statement in harmony with Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions," inasmuch as the document failed to settle the doctrinal controversies which the church was assured had been settled by it; and

WHEREAS, We deplore the specific resolutions which our sister synod passed on the issues of Scouting and military chaplaincy; its stand on prayer fellowship; and the fact that several other issues were not acted upon at all, e.g., the Communion agreement with the National Lutheran Council; be it

*Resolved*, That our fellowship with The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod be one of vigorously protesting fellowship to be practiced where necessary in the light of II Thessalonians 3:14 and 15. (ELSC Proc., 1957, p 141)

This resolution points out clearly that the *Common Confession* has not and can not serve its purpose as being a union statement. More than that, the Missouri Synod has continued to pass resolutions that made many of these doctrinal aberrations the policy of that church body. As a result, Wisconsin had to warn Missouri that it was putting the future of their fellowship relationship and indeed the future of the Synodical Conference into grave jeopardy.

In an effort to save the Synodical Conference, a joint union committee was formed to wrestle with the doctrinal differences between the synods and to come up with joint statements on the various doctrines in question, to see if there still was true

doctrinal unity among the member synods of the Conference. This committee came up with an excellent statement on the Scriptures, which was adopted by all four synods. They also came up with a clear exposition of the doctrine of the Antichrist, by going back to Scriptures first and by quoting relevant passages from the Lutheran Confessions. I will only quote portions of that statement here.

First unlike the infamous "still" in the *Common Confession*, the *Statement on the Antichrist* speaks clearly and plainly, borrowing the words of the Smalcald Articles.

Therefore on the basis of a renewed study of the pertinent Scriptures we reaffirm the statement of the Lutheran Confessions that "the pope is the very Antichrist," especially since he anathematizes the doctrine of justification by faith alone and sets himself up as the infallible head of the church. (Joint Cmte., 44)

By using the phrase "the very Antichrist," the *Statement* shows plainly that the Synodical Conference should stand on the same ground on which Luther stood. This is not the half-hearted "still" but a definite identification of the Antichrist as prophesied in Scripture with the Roman papacy.

As if that weren't enough, the *Statement* goes on to drive the point home that we do not look for any other Antichrist to come. "We thereby affirm that we identify this 'Antichrist' with the papacy as it is known to us today, which shall, as II Thessalonians 2:8 states, continue to the end of time, whatever form or guise it may take." (Joint Cmte., 44)

In good thesis-antithesis format, the *Statement* also rejects any teachings about the Antichrist contrary to this one. "We reject the idea that the fulfillment of this prophecy is to be sought in the workings of any merely secular political power." (Joint Cmte., 44) Furthermore, it goes on to defend its position on the basis that it is firmly grounded in Scripture. "We reject the idea that the teaching that the papacy is the Antichrist rests on a merely human interpretation of history or is an open question. We hold rather that this teaching rests on the revelation of God in Scripture which finds its fulfillment in history." (Joint Cmte., 44) Again we read, "Since Scripture teaches that the Antichrist would be revealed and this prophecy has been clearly fulfilled in the history and development of the Roman papacy, it is Scripture which reveals that the papacy is the Antichrist." (Joint Cmte., 44)

What a fitting statement to make as Bible-believing Lutherans! It is significant that the mention of the Antichrist in the *Common Confession* is only a few paragraphs long, while the *Statement on the Antichrist* takes up five pages in the proceedings of the 46th convention of the Synodical Conference. They took great pains to make sure they would not be misunderstood, so the Synodical Conference would have a clear, concrete, Scripture-based statement on the Antichrist. This statement is one of the last hurrahs for the mortally wounded Synodical Conference.

But wait! Why should the Synodical Conference be mortally wounded? After all, we have a wonderful statement on the Scriptures, followed up with an excellent statement on the Antichrist, so what's the problem? What is keeping them from not also solving the rest of the doctrinal problems that lay before them? There are several reasons for this. First, the differences between the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods, and the Missouri and Slovak Synods regarding the doctrine of fellowship were far more deep and difficult (if not impossible) to mend. Secondly, although the statement on Scripture was passed by all four synods of the Synodical Conference, the statement on the Antichrist never was passed by the Missouri Synod. Professor Fredrich has some interesting words on this matter:

By the time of our [WELS'] 1959 convention an excellent statement on Scripture was at hand. It was accepted unanimously. The other three synods likewise accepted the statement. It was a fitting swan song for the Synodical Conference. No more doctrinal statements were fully accepted. The Antichrist statement was not voted on by the Missouri Synod on the dubious grounds that the Synodical Conference as a whole had not yet acted. (Fredrich, 206)

Apparently, the Missouri Synod did not wish to bring the *Statement on the Antichrist* up at their convention. Professor Fredrich tells of their weak excuse for not doing so. Perhaps the concerns of the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods were better founded than even they might have feared.

Due to this and several other doctrinal problems, the Wisconsin Synod and the Norwegian Synod formally withdrew from the Synodical Conference in 1963. The Synodical Conference

carried on for four more years until it itself was disbanded. It is a truly sad ending for a body that once was the world-wide voice of confessional Lutheranism.

But what can we learn from this controversy and the split up of the Synodical Conference? There are many lessons we can learn. First of all, in any doctrinal controversy, state your position clearly. This is best done in the thesis-antithesis format--first stating what you believe and then stating what you reject. This is especially important when entering into fellowship discussions with other church bodies. In this unionistic day and age, the temptation is great to join up with other church bodies that are not in complete fellowship with our own. Also, we see an awful lot of loosely worded religious statements coming out that can be interpreted in different ways by different people so they can claim to be united in doctrine. This is a temptation that we will always strive to avoid, and it is one that we will no doubt face for the rest of our lives.

Secondly, in any controversy, we should first go back to Scriptures and have a careful study of the *sedes doctrinae* so we are drawing our conclusions from Scripture and Scripture alone. This was admirably done by the joint committee in the *Statement on the Antichrist*.

Thirdly, there is no such thing as an unimportant doctrine of Scripture. In the controversy regarding the Antichrist, the Iowa Synod and ALC tried to push this issue into the realm of "non-fundamental doctrines" or "open questions" in an effort to



down-play it. The Apostle Paul was inspired to write his prophecy about the Antichrist for a reason, so that we might identify the Antichrist and avoid him at all costs. There is no one who fits the prophecies other than the Pope at Rome. Out of love for souls and out of faithfulness to God's Word, this doctrine must be maintained by our Synod at all costs. As the Antichrist, the Pope insidiously is undermining the very bedrock of the Christian faith--justification by grace alone. As Lutherans, we can hardly stand by while all this takes place.

The controversy regarding the Antichrist in the Synodical Conference is truly a sad chapter in church history. We see a once mighty confessional force crumble and fall. We in the WELS in 1994 are not immune from such a collapse happening to us as well. We would do well to never forget this portion of history, lest we fall into the same traps as those that ensnared our former brothers in the Missouri and Slovak Synods. May God preserve us from such a fall, and may God strengthen our faith through the careful study of his Word, so when temptations, trials and controversies do come our way (and they will) we will have the strength to stand firm. To this end help us, O Lord!

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