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### An Evaluation of the Position of the Missouri Synod on the Antichrist

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AN EVALUATION OF THE POSITION OF THE  
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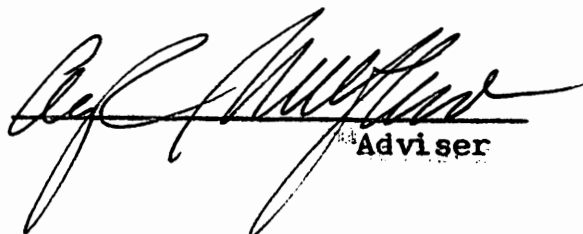
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by

Richard P. Hillenbrand

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AN EVALUATION OF THE POSITION OF THE  
MISSOURI SYNOD ON THE ANTICHRIST

Introduction

Who, or what, is the Antichrist? That question has often aroused great interest in the history of the Church. The Church Fathers discussed identifications made in their own days and sometimes came up with their own identifications--and the same is still happening today. Such diverse figures as Jeanne Dixon and Hal Lindsey have made their own predictions concerning the Antichrist in the not-so-distant past. Even the curiosity of non-Christians is sparked by this mysterious figure: a few years ago a fairly popular movie, The Omen, made its appearance, dealing with this very subject.

Although interest in this subject is certainly not dead, Lutherans today have tended to smile at it, treating it as the latest "fad"--which it indeed may be. Surely this interest has died down in the last five years or so. But whether this is the case or not, there is a problem that must be dealt with here. If these modern identifications are somewhat fantastic and "far-fetched," what shall we present as the true identification of the Antichrist? After all, the Bible speaks of such a figure, though many connotations have come to be associated with it that are not all that biblical. It is easy to pass off today's ridiculous identifications as false, but what are we to present as

true? Is Antichrist identifiable? What has our own church body said, and on what basis?

To examine such questions is no small task if we want to be fully objective, because The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod claims to be not only Lutheran (that is, faithful to all the confessions of The Book of Concord), but the Lutheran Church itself claims to be faithful to the Scriptures. So to examine the claim that our Missouri Synod makes (that its teaching is in complete accord with both the Confessions and the Scriptures), one must know what each of these says separately, then compare them to see if the witness is truly united. And not only the bare teaching should be looked at, but the reasons behind it. Completely different motivations may be behind identical teachings, and wrong reasons for a correct teaching can be nearly as dangerous as a false teaching.

In this study, then, we will concentrate on three main witnesses: that of the Scriptures, that of sixteenth century Lutherans (with special emphasis on Luther), and that of the Missouri Synod. Each will be dealt with thoroughly in separate sections. The stance taken will be presented, and also the historical circumstances that brought about that stance at that particular time. Stances and the reasons for them will be compared and, finally, the practical implications of differing stances will be discussed.

Because the author set many limits, and also felt several limitations in this study, these should be mentioned at the outset. Firstly, the study is by no means meant to be exhaustive. This would be impossible. Not only do figures from other deno-

minations differ in their interpretations regarding various specific points, but Lutherans do also. For this reason, key figures or documents deemed to be more representative or authoritative were chosen. In presenting the Missouri Synod position, for example, official statements were deemed to carry the most weight, or special publications approved by Concordia Publishing House. Statements by individuals in a magazine article are more likely to reflect one man's opinion.

Secondly, the number of books and articles read had to be limited. This was the case especially with the Missouri Synod position. The author found many books relating to his subject, but they most often tended to repeat themselves--to continually make the same points. So even for key figures (ex.: Luther, P. E. Kretzmann), not everything they wrote on the Antichrist could be read.

Finally, there was the language limitation. This was felt most acutely with sixteenth century Lutherans. Because the author only reads English fluently, works in such languages as Latin and German were closed to him--except for those few that have been translated. This "closed doors" to such important figures as Melanchthon and C.F.W. Walther. Though more extensive study amongst these men would have been extremely helpful, the author feels that he has accurately portrayed them and freely admits his ignorance where he has been unable to do so.

### Holy Scripture and the Antichrist

#### I and II John

The starting-point for our study of Antichrist should

properly be those passages of Scripture from which the term comes. Actually these are very few in number; there are only four in all!

I John 2:18-- Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.

I John 2:22 - Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist-- he denies the Father and the Son.

I John 4:2-3 - This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

II John 7 - Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.

Of themselves, the verses seem quite clear--yet they don't tell us all that much. But John had good reason to write what he did about Antichrist. According to history, a system of thought known as Gnosticism appeared in the second century, and its beginnings very likely go back before this time. Regarding matter as intrinsically evil, the Gnostics denied that a good God could have anything to do with such a thing as creation. Most piercing to the hearts of Christians was their denial of the incarnation of Christ. Knowledge and thought brought salvation--release from the material body. God would never become incarnate, suffer, and die--nor would He rise again. This wouldn't help man at all, and would be unseemly for God. John was quick to see that a denial of the incarnation resulted in a denial of the heart of Christianity, for if Christ hadn't suffered and died, no atonement had been made for sin.<sup>1</sup>



To counteract this false teaching, John sets forth what he knows with certainty, and he writes for the purpose of spreading this truth:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ...so that you also may have fellowship with us. ... We write this to make our joy complete. (I John 1: 1-4)

John's purpose, as mentioned above, included the refutation of error, but much more than that he had a positive aim: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (I John 5: 13).

So much for John's purpose; what exactly does he say? I John 2: 18ff. tells us that he differentiated between antichrists (plural) and Antichrist. Little is told us about Antichrist except that his coming is a sign of the last hour. The antichrists he refers to seem to be the Gnostic heretics who claimed to be Christian, but really were not: "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us" (I John 2: 19).

I John 2: 22ff. tells us much more. It is especially explicit because the definite article is found throughout (which was not the case in the previous verse). This verse refers specifically to the liar, the one who denies, the Antichrist. The main sign given of Antichrist is that he denies Jesus is the Christ, and also denies the Father and the Son. The latter denial may not be an explicit denial, for in the next verse John is careful to add that "no one who denies the Son has the Father." This would fit in well with his purpose, for the Gnostics main denial was that Jesus was both God and man united. John says that if

you don't believe in Jesus as Christ, you don't have God as Father either--which some Gnostics might still claim.

Is John referring to an individual here, or a class of people, or what? Certainly among the Gnostics there were many who denied what John denounces, and these false teachers in the people's own day was John's main concern: "I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray" (I John 2: 26). But John's mention of a specific Antichrist in verse 18, along with his persistent use of the definite article here, seems to point to a special manifestation of antichristian power in the liar, the Antichrist. Little more can be said about who he is, but his main denial is here plainly set forth for all to recognize: he denies that Jesus is the Christ.

I John 4: 2-3 is somewhat similar to the above verse. It is necessary to acknowledge that Jesus Christ came in the flesh if one claims to be a Christian. Anyone who does not confess this is "of the Antichrist." So again we see a distinction. There is an Antichrist, and then there are those that follow along in the same spirit. All of them confess the same things--they deny the incarnation of Christ; but it seems that Antichrist will do so in an especially explicit and most destructive way.

But we learn more in these verses. Antichrist is coming, but "even now is already in the world." Antichrist was already present in John's time, but was yet to come! Perhaps this is in the same sense as we Christians say Christ is with us, yet is to come. In the same way, Antichrist was present, but his fullest manifestation was in the future.

As if we were not confused enough, John continues in chapter

four, verse four: "you have overcome them." "Who is "them?" It seems to refer to Antichrist, or perhaps to the false prophets who were of the spirit of Antichrist. Is Antichrist a group of people? It includes, at least to some extent, the Gnostics, whom these early Christians were "overcoming." Was Antichrist present in John's day through them because they held the same beliefs that Antichrist held; or were they part of Antichrist; or were they simply antichrists? Certainly they were at least of the same spirit of the Antichrist. But as for a specific identification of Antichrist and his relationship to the false teachers of John's day, this author feels unable to say anything with certainty (despite sometimes seemingly certain identifications of commentaries).

John's readers knew exactly what he was talking about, for they had heard things which we don't have available to us (I John 4:3). It appears that the Gnostics were forerunners of the final Antichrist, especially in their teaching. But more than this we cannot say.

Finally, II John 7 reiterates the same ~~point~~ John has made in the two verses above, and some of the same confusions are also reinforced. The denial of the incarnation is the key issue, which "many deceivers" have taught. The Greek then says, "This one is the deceiver and the Antichrist." Again the definite article is used, yet Antichrist appears to include even those of John's own day.

To sum up, then, there are antichrists, and there is the Antichrist. In some sense, antichrists are a part of Antichrist--perhaps because they spread the same false teachings that would "come to a/head" in Antichrist. But one thing is absolutely certain from the Scriptures: the main identifying mark of the

Antichrist is his denial of the incarnation of Christ. This one point John makes over and over again.

## II Thessalonians (in relation to I and II John)

The only verses in the entire Bible that contain the word "Antichrist" are the I and II John passages listed above, but there are other places in Scripture that seem to refer to the same figure without using the same term. Although precedence should be given to those passages actually using the term when studying the scriptural doctrine of Antichrist, still these others cannot be ignored. One rather lengthy section of Scripture immediately comes to mind: 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 opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, and even 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.

After reading these verses, one might well wonder whether they

should be connected at all with I and II John. II Thessalonians is so much more explicit, and there are very few obvious correlations with I and II John. Perhaps some of this can be accounted for by looking at the purpose Paul had for writing what he did.

From the book of I Thessalonians, it is quite obvious that the Thessalonian people were having problems because of misunderstandings concerning the end times and the second coming of the Lord. The very same types of problems are evident in II Thessalonians. The people needed clear teaching from an authoritative figure in order to bring them comfort. They had become disturbed by false teachers, who perhaps even employed forgery to give their teachings more credibility (verse 2). Paul makes it his business to set down exactly what would come about before the end.

What similarities and differences can we find between John's and Paul's descriptions? Firstly, John's teaching was to help combat a specific heresy in the early church. His teaching on the end times and Antichrist is incidental to what he writes. But Paul is setting forth a rather systematic eschatology in II Thessalonians. That is what he means to do.

Secondly, Paul treats everything in the context of the coming of Christ. John hardly touches on this theme, but speaks of keeping oneself from evil and doing good--loving one another. Paul looks more at the overall picture of the Christian life, whereas John looks at the immediate picture.

Thirdly, both are also looking to the future in what they're communicating--to end times. John speaks of the coming Antichrist

who is already in the world. Paul talks about "the man of lawlessness" or "the man doomed to destruction" being revealed. If he will be revealed, he must also be in the world for a time before this revelation, just as John's Antichrist.

Fourthly, Paul's readers were expected to know more than is explicitly stated in the letter, just as John's (II Thess. 2: 5-6; I Jn. 2: 18; I Jn. 4: 3).

Fifthly, John's main mark of Antichrist is his denial of the incarnation. Paul never even mentions this; his chief mark is the arrogation of this "man of lawlessness" to a position equal with or even above God.

Other similarities and differences might be brought out, but these should be sufficient to show that there are just enough similarities to suggest equating the man of lawlessness (II Thess.) and the Antichrist (I and II Jn.), but enough differences to also make it questionable. These differences may be explained by the different purposes in writing; still, the key mark of John is totally ignored by Paul, and vice versa. This does not indicate a lack of perspecuity in the Scriptures. Scripture is quite clear where it speaks. But information appears to have been delivered orally by both Paul and John to their readers. This we do not have available to us, and it is obvious that this helped their readers understand what they were saying. Therefore, where they speak, we also can speak and be absolutely certain of what we say. But where they are silent we can only speculate what might be the case.

#### Other Passages

There are numerous other passages that are referred to when

studying the concept of Antichrist. Some of these come from the Old Testament, such as Daniel 11: 36ff. (which is reflected in II Thessalonians 2: 4, and perhaps even Revelation 13: 4ff). Revelation 13 and 17 are also oft referred to; but since Daniel and Revelation are both apocalyptic books and, therefore, must be interpreted in accordance with the rest of Scripture (by "the analogy of faith"), the author has chosen to concentrate his studies on the clearer, more explicit testimonies of I and II John and II Thessalonians. Other Scriptures, such as Mark 13: 6, 21ff; I Timothy 4: 1ff; and II Peter 2: 1ff, are all important to examine when studying the last days, but say nothing at all about a final antichristian figure. They speak of false prophets and what John might term as antichrists, but nothing specifically about the Antichrist.

#### Sixteenth Century Lutherans and the Antichrist

Having looked at the teaching of the Scriptures on the Antichrist, the proper starting point for examining any doctrine, we now turn to the opinions of sixteenth century Lutherans, namely Luther and Melanchthon. Before doing so, however, it may be helpful to determine the common view of Antichrist during this time period. Only by knowing the common view will we be able to determine whether these men simply repeated the opinions of others, or whether their views were unique.

#### Background

Since both the word and the concept of Antichrist are found only here and there in Scripture (and this is certainly not one of its major doctrines) one might be surprised to find that belief

in such a figure was considered part of conservative orthodox Christian eschatology throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Antichrist became a most important figure in medieval Christian apocalypticism.<sup>3</sup> He was not equated with the pope at first, though some identified him as such in later medieval times. But Antichrist was viewed as

a single human, a man with devilish connections who will come near the end of the world to persecute Christians to mislead them by claiming that he is Christ, he will be opposed by Enoch and Elias, whom he will kill, and will finally be destroyed by Christ or his agent.<sup>4</sup>

This was <sup>the</sup> typical medieval conception of Antichrist.

Later, in the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries, some began to look at the immorality and worldliness of specific popes--and these popes were identified as Antichrist.<sup>5</sup> This was also done with other individuals, whether they were political or religious figures. Any opponent might be labelled as Antichrist. It became a polemical term used to vilify the opponent.<sup>6</sup> Wycliffe and Huss became two early opponents of the papacy and identified the whole institution as the Antichrist.<sup>7</sup> But

most of the medieval attacks upon the papacy were directed against the amorality and worldliness of individual popes rather than against the papacy as an institution and certainly not against the church in general.<sup>8</sup>

So one can see a view with a special emphasis developing. In earlier medieval days there was more of an "exegetical emphasis on explaining the events of the last days."<sup>9</sup> Though the exegesis may have been rather peripheral, still it was based on various Scripture passages. A unique feature was that this interpretation was not simply from one or another of the many Scriptures dealing with the end times. These passages have been combined to put together a comprehensive picture of Antichrist. And almost all



of the predictions of Antichrist found in the medieval interpretation came from II Thessalonians and Revelation. The only connection with the Antichrist as described in I and II John was the name. John's descriptive name has been retained, for it tells both that this figure shall be against Christ, and that he shall pass himself off as Christ. (The Greek anti means both "against," and "in place of; instead of"). But John's key emphasis in I and II John has been totally forgotten. Denial of the incarnation of the Son of God has received not even token mention.

In later medieval times, even this somewhat slanted view of Antichrist was deemphasized, and any opponent with bad morals or an evil lifestyle became "Antichrist." The label was not based on much exegesis at all.

#### Martin Luther

Luther's position on the Antichrist is very well known, but how he came to his convictions and his reasons for it are often ignored; yet these are vital to understanding the position itself. In the following section we will first look at Luther's growing conviction that the institution of the papacy was the Antichrist, then precisely define what his position was and how he defended it, and finally make an interesting conjecture about what Luther meant by this label.

#### Luther's Growing Conviction

Of course, Luther had not been "anti-papal" from the beginning. He himself had been brought up as a Roman Christian--it was his spiritual and material home for many years. In several places, Luther says that he had quite a bit of zeal for the papacy and was

against anyone who attacked the pope.<sup>10</sup> At first he hesitated to criticize papal authority, believing it was dangerous to elevate one's own opinions above the church's.<sup>11</sup>

Although much of what they said seemed absurd to me and completely alien to Christ, yet for more than a decade I curbed my thoughts with the advice of Solomon: "Do not rely on your own insight" (Prov. 3: 5).<sup>12</sup>

During his years in the monestary, Luther doesn't seem to have had any reservations about the office of the papacy. He was consumed primarily with living an exemplary life so that he might be saved. However, he came to realize that one of the main reasons he doubted his salvation was the many obligations the church placed upon him.<sup>13</sup> Luther had believed that obedience to the priesthood and the hierarchy of the church were essential, except when these were against God. But though he began to criticize the lax morals and the greediness of the clergy, he never came out against the authority of the hierarchy at this time. This he seems to have accepted in his earlier years.<sup>14</sup>

But the priests and the entire hierarchy of the church had obligations they must fulfill. They were to feed the people on the Word of God. If they did not, there would be no faith.<sup>15</sup> This is the very thing they were not doing, so even before 1517 we find hints of a rejection of the hierarchy in Luther. It was failing to fulfill its functions.<sup>16</sup> But criticism of the papacy itself was restrained even after the indulgence controversy. Luther was as yet not convinced that the pope was involved in this sad state of affairs in the church. However, he did "establish the feeling of the faithful with the word of God as the criterion for claiming legitimate authority in the church."<sup>17</sup> So the seeds

were already there for his future conflict with the papacy.

The indulgence controversy is what brought Luther into this conflict. Actually, Luther did not mean for authority or the pope to be the main concerns in his discussion theses, but the faithful execution of pastoral duties. Luther still held the pope in high regard, but his opponents realized the implications of what he was saying and forced the issue.<sup>18</sup> It was the pope, after all, who granted the selling of indulgences--and he could do so for whatever reasons he pleased. Was not Luther attacking him when he challenged the validity of indulgences?

But Luther, in these earlier years, assumed that the intentions of the pope were altogether right and true, and even that the messages the indulgence preachers delivered were true in some sense. But the people were misunderstanding them! Later he came to believe that the indulgences were being sold under false pretexts, and this prompted his Ninety-five Theses.<sup>19</sup> Souls were perishing! The people were being lulled into a sense of false security. Because of his sense of pastoral duty, Luther felt he must come out against indulgences. Still, the pope was not to blame. It was these teachers, or their leaders, or the curia--the blame crept up the hierarchy. Luther, through disputations with opponents, gained more and more knowledge about who was responsible. Luther's theses were meant to be an appeal to restore a right perspective of indulgences to the people, but they were construed as an attack on the papacy by men like Eck and Tetzl, who considered the pope to be the supreme authority.<sup>20</sup>

Even Luther, at this early stage in his life, seems to have appealed to mixed authorities: popes, councils of the church,

Scripture, and the Church Fathers--though he appears to show preference for the latter two. He regarded the pope as a man who could indeed err, which he considered proved by conflicting papal decrees. Where there is doubt, one should go back to Scripture and the Fathers. The popes and councils were expected to rule in accordance with these.<sup>21</sup> So at this stage, at least, Luther's own views had not yet come to fruition, but were heading in that direction. Scripture was appealed to more and more, and he had ever increasing suspicions about the papacy.

Luther, later credited his many opponents with helping him to clearly define his position, and indeed they did. With men like Prierias saying that Scripture drew its strength from the pope and that church practice might establish doctrine and truth,<sup>22</sup> Luther was forced to clarify what he believed about ultimate authority in Christ's Church. His ultimate stand on Scripture, and especially his opinion that popes could err, did not fit in with the views of the Roman Church. In 1518, Luther was considered a heretic whose opinions were to be recanted--with the alternative of excommunication, and Pope Leo X himself had ordered this.<sup>23</sup> Papal authority was one line that no one had better dare to cross. Yet Luther continued to be most concerned with the pastoral care of the people--to protect them from the deception of indulgences and to instruct them in God's truth. Such a concern caused him to reject the papacy, for he saw that it refused to carry out its task of being sure this instruction was carried out. Even by this year (1518), he no longer expects that the papacy will exercise its pastoral office.<sup>24</sup>

A real turning point for Luther in his struggle with the

papacy was his rejection of Leo's bull on indulgences (1519). This failed to bring forth any new arguments from Scripture, the Fathers, or the laws of the church so, though a pope had written it, he would not recant his previous views.<sup>25</sup> In private letters he began to reject the papacy, and to express his suspicion that it might be the Antichrist.

I am studying the decrees of the popes for my [Leipzig] debate, and (in your ear I speak it) I know not whether the pope is the Antichrist himself or his apostle, so very miserably does he, in these decretals, corrupt and crucify Christ, that is, the truth. I am terribly pained that the people of Christ should be deceived like this under the guise of laws and the Christian name.<sup>26</sup>

Publically, Luther still affirmed his loyalty, but Scripture was now his authority above all others.

Luther had nothing against the papacy if properly exercised, but it was the effects of papal rule that caused him to challenge it publically.<sup>27</sup> Up to the Leipzig debate (July 1519) he never publically identified the papacy with the Antichrist, but the debate polarized the sides. Though Luther sought to reform the Roman Church and not separate from it, he could not accede to the supposed divine right of the pope to rule the Church.<sup>28</sup>

In 1520, Luther came out against papal tyranny--spreading his doctrine through pamphlets, sermons and books. He set forth his stand on the papacy in German for the first time.<sup>29</sup> Still, for a time, he did not think it should be revolted against, but endured as an expression of God's anger on a corrupt church.<sup>30</sup> He seems to have wavered back and forth during this time period on his view of the papacy. Perhaps the best way to sum up his stand would be to say that he vacillated in his view depending on circumstances, what he read of the popes' decrees, etc.; but,

overall, he found his fears confirmed and grew progressively skeptical towards the papacy. In The Babylonian Captivity, he makes his identification for all to see:

For who else is the man of sin and the son of perdition [II Thess. 2: 37], than he who multiplies sin and the destruction of souls in the church with his own doctrines and statutes, sitting nevertheless in the church like God?<sup>31</sup>

By this time Luther was certain that the papacy was the Antichrist. Notice from the above quote that he considers the whole papal system corrupt. It was no individual pope that he was coming out against, but this office that would not allow the Word of God to flourish. Anything else he might have put up with for the sake of peace, but not this.<sup>32</sup>

After Luther was condemned by the pope in January 1521, all attempts at reconciliation were at an end. Things seemed more "black and white" for him.<sup>33</sup>

Whoever teaches the gospel is pope, the successor of Peter;<sup>34</sup> whoever does not teach it is Judas, the betrayer of Christ.

From this point forward, Luther was confirmed in his views and spread them with zeal. He claimed his teaching was in complete accord with the Scriptures and attacked papal tyranny.<sup>35</sup> He wanted his reform to spread even past Wittenberg through evangelical preaching. This was in no way a personal vendetta against the Roman Church, which had treated him very badly. Rather, Luther's opposition to the papacy was embedded in his outrage at its perversion of the pastoral office.<sup>36</sup>

Luther's disagreement with the papacy was never an abstract doctrinal matter. It remained grounded in his concern for the destructive effect that papal sovereignty had upon the people of the church.<sup>37</sup>

This opposition to the papacy continued throughout Luther's life

in spite of other pressing concerns and responsibilities.<sup>38</sup> It was something he never gave up.

Thus far we have looked at how and why Luther came to the view that he did. Next we shall more clearly define exactly what that view was.

#### Luther's Position: Defense Against Objections

It is a well known fact that Luther was an explosive individual. He inveighed mightily against anyone who did not teach in accordance with God's truth. Is it possible that the papacy was just the first of the victims of the mighty wrath of Luther? Perhaps he used the name "Antichrist" simply as a polemical term (as many had before him) and never really meant any connection with the biblical term. After all, didn't he also at times label Turks as Antichrist, and even other opponents? How do we know that Luther might not have been a victim of his times? Even many Roman Catholics today admit that some of the sixteenth century popes were most dastardly. If Luther had lived in our times, perhaps he never would have broken with the papacy.

But none of this can be substantiated; in fact, it can be categorically denied using Luther's own words.

As has been expressed throughout the preceeding section, Luther's chief concern in his conflict with the papacy was not his own ego, nor his welfare. He did not even desire to separate from the church. Everything that he rebelled against was because the pope was not carrying out his chief function in the church: he was not seeing to it that people were being fed on the Word of God. In fact, he seemed to be doing everything possible to be sure

that this was not accomplished. To be silent when such an activity was being carried out in the name of the Church would be denying Christ.

Lord God, if these swindling masqueraders were only erring and doing evil to themselves, we would very gladly put up with them and bear with them in all honor. But now, since they are doing nothing but murdering souls and exterminating God's Word, surely silence and toleration can no longer be expected. Let no one speak to me of patience and respect. Accursed be the patience that is silent here! Accursed be the respect that defers here and gives such murderous<sup>39</sup> masqueraders an opportunity to swindle poor souls!

It was God's truth that one must stand up for against anyone that might attack it.

Was the pope the Antichrist prophesied in the Scriptures?

It is true that Luther used the term of several opponents, But he also said, in one of the clearest statements of his view--

I do not consider Mohammed the Antichrist. His teaching is too obviously false ... able to deceive neither faith nor reason and is a heathen, who persecutes Christendom from without....

But the pope in our midst is the real Antichrist. [He] allows the Holy Scripture, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the keys, the Catechism, and marriage to remain. ... And yet [they] ... no longer do the Christians any good; for those over whom he rules are obliged to believe that they are saved through their own works....<sup>40</sup>

It is obvious throughout Luther's writings that he believed that the papacy fulfilled the prophecies of Antichrist--especially those of II Thessalonians, Daniel, and Revelation. In fact, to prove that the pope is the Antichrist, Luther quoted II Thessalonians more than any other selection of Scripture.<sup>41</sup> His was no purely polemical identification, but also an exegetical one. And he believed that anyone who "recognized the centrality of the atoning Christ in the body of Scripture doctrines" would also be able to see the truth that the pope is the Antichrist.<sup>42</sup>



But what if the papacy would reform itself, as it apparently has today. Today's popes are neither greedy nor immoral, as they were in Luther's time. However, it was the power and prerogatives that the papacy had taken to itself that most concerned him. The pope claimed to rule by divine right, and if this were indeed true, he should not be opposed.

What we condemn is not the wickedness of the sovereign but the wickedness of the sovereignty. For it is so constituted that no pious, upright sovereign can administer it, but only one who is an enemy of Christ.<sup>43</sup>

We have rebuked and attacked the papacy not because its members lead a wicked and shameful life.... Even though they were to live a holy, angelic life...and were to keep, not only their own but also Moses' Law--both of which are also impossible to do--we nonetheless consider them not only hirelings but veritable wolves; for they teach nothing but that which kills souls.<sup>44</sup>

Over and over and over again Luther says it is the teaching of and about the papacy that makes him object to it and consider it the Antichrist. However, as we examined the Scriptures in the first part of this paper, we saw that the term "Antichrist" is used only of an individual who denies the incarnation of Christ. This the Roman Church has never done--in fact, it is because of the incarnation that Roman Catholics have such a high regard for Mary, the "Mother of God." Luther is not unaware of this objection and he meets it in his Lectures on the First Epistle of St. John.

Luther was no ignorant exegete. He knew the background of the book and recognized that John was writing primarily for the people of his own day. Luther referred the "antichrists" in I John 2:18 to Cerinthian Gnostics and other heretics of John's day.<sup>45</sup> Still, he continued to refer even those passages which speak of

denial of the incarnation to the papacy, chiefly because of the pope's denial of justification by faith alone.

For the chief article of the Christian doctrine is this, that Christ is our Righteousness. He who is now attacking this is taking the whole Christ away from us and is the true Antichrist. ... A heretic opposed to the Person of Christ is not so great as one who is opposed to the merit of Christ.<sup>46</sup>

By the wording of such a quote, one gets the impression Luther knew that the Antichrist described in I John seemed to be an attacker of the person of Christ, yet he still regarded the papacy as worse. By this time (1527) his mind was made up that it was the papacy that was the Antichrist. Therefore he had to make the pope appear to do what (at least explicitly) he did not do.

For the pope confesses the statement that Christ came in the flesh, but he denies its fruits. But this is the same as saying that Christ did not come in the flesh. For Christ's coming in the flesh did not take place in order that He might be made man for His own sake; it took place in order that He might save us.<sup>47</sup>

If you consider the papacy, you will not see why Christ came into the flesh. ... The pope removes the kernel of Christ and leaves the words; he leaves Him the shell and takes out the kernel.<sup>48</sup>

So by denying justification apart from works, Luther says, the pope denies the incarnation.

It is easy to see from such quotes that Luther's main Scriptural backup for claiming the pope was Antichrist was II Thessalonians and other similar Scriptures. These prophecies he matches up precisely with the papacy. But in these I John passages, he appears to try to get around what the words of Scripture themselves convey. What he says about abuses of the papacy is accurate, but denying the benefits of Christ's coming in the flesh does not at all necessitate a denial of His incarnation.

As a parallel example--if a man is in jail and a relative whom he has not gotten along with comes to bail him out, the man might well believe that his relative has come, but may not believe that he will really be so gracious to him. In the same way, one might believe that God has truly become incarnate in Christ Jesus, yet deny that Christ has come to freely forgive sinners. He receives none of the benefits of Christ because of his unbelief, but none can deny that he believes the incarnation.

To Luther's credit, however, he was not so obsessed with this one identification that he saw no other enemies to the church.

In reference to I John 2: 22, Luther admits that "he who denies that Jesus is the Christ" is a reference to Cerinthus (a Gnostic),

who was the first to begin to deny that Christ is the Son of God, just as Pelagius was the first to deny the grace of God. What Cerinthus began, Arius finished. What Ebion began, Mohammed continued. Thus all the throngs of heretics and sectarians, all nations and peoples, rise up against Christ.<sup>49</sup>

Luther saw the papacy as one danger amongst many that John was warning against.

#### Luther's Position: Confessional Writings

Of great importance to all Lutherans is the view of Luther on the Antichrist reflected in our confessional writings. This is found in only one place in the entire Confessions: Smalcald Articles, Part II, Article iv. There are hints of it in other places, for example in SA II,ii (Tappert 297.25): "The invocation of saints is also one of the abuses of the Antichrist." But here the assumption is simply made that the papacy is the Antichrist and no reasons are given--not even Scripture. (Scripture never gives

"invocation of saints" as a mark of Antichrist, so it is obvious that Luther is simply using the term here as being synonymous with the papacy.) But Article iv goes into slightly more detail. Why is the papacy rejected?

The holy Christian church can exist very well without such a head, and it would have remained much better if such a head had not been raised up by the devil. The papacy is of no use to the church because it exercises no Christian office. Consequently the church must continue to exist without the pope. (Tappert 299.5-6)

Luther was most concerned with the function of the office. If the papacy had carried out its function of being sure the souls of men were fed, Luther would allow it. But this it refused to do.

Definitely the strongest statement in the entire Confessions identifying the papacy with the Antichrist is this statement by Luther. After discussing the pope's claim to be head of the Church by divine right, he says:

This is a powerful demonstration that the pope is the real Antichrist who has raised himself over and set himself against Christ, for the pope will not permit Christians to be saved except by his own power, which amounts to nothing since it is neither established nor commanded by God. (Tappert 300.10)

Following this, II Thessalonians 2 is referred to. In the Confessions, then, there can be no doubt. Luther presents here beyond all shadow of doubt that the papacy, arrogating to itself the power of God, is the Antichrist predicted by Paul in II Thessalonians.

#### Luther's Position: Summary and Conclusions

Martin Luther did not want to equate the papacy with the Antichrist. In fact, since he was brought up as a member of the Roman Church and became a member of its clergy, such an idea was at first repugnant to him. But when he discovered the full

meaning of the Gospel and the importance of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone, and then compared these to the works righteous system advocated by the pope along with his claim to rule by divine right--these forced Luther to his conclusion. He compared the papal system with prophecies of the end times--especially those of II Thessalonians, Revelation, and Daniel--and declared unequivocally that the papacy was the antichristian figure prophesied in these books: the Antichrist. Absolutely convinced of this, he also interpreted other prophecies that did not fit in so well with his interpretation in accordance with it--notably, I John. Luther would never have come to the conclusion that the papacy was the Antichrist on the basis of I or II John alone. But the key passage that led him to it was II Thessalonians 2, then, most likely, to Daniel(which II Thess. quotes), to Revelation (which has close affinities with Daniel). I John seems to have been tied in solely because of its use of the word "Antichrist."

#### Luther's Terminology: A Conjecture

This author has a profound respect for the exegesis and teaching of Martin Luther and feels it very hard to believe that Luther could have been totally unaware at the difficulty presented to his position (that the papacy is the Antichrist) by I and II John. These verses, as we saw previously, are the only ones using the word "Antichrist," yet they speak of an explicit denial of the incarnation. However, perhaps Luther also distinguished between this figure and that of II Thessalonians, though he somewhat equated the two. The author has found some evidence that

points in this direction.

Throughout this study (though most of it has been done in English), the author noticed that Luther shows a marked preference for the word Endechrist when speaking of the Antichrist. However, there are other German words which are also translated "Antichrist." In Luther's own translation of I and II John, for example, he consistently uses the term Widerchrist. Wider and anti are completely parallel--both mean "against." Once in awhile, the word Antichrist is used also in German.

But Luther preferred Endechrist, which, literally translated, means "End Christ," not "Antichrist." Perhaps Luther got this term from II Thessalonians 2: 8, which he translates, "und wird sein ein Ende machen durch die Erscheinung seiner Zukunft," "[the Lord] will bring him to an end by the splendor of His coming."

In this theory, then, Luther used the word Endechrist most because he is absolutely certain that the papacy is the fulfillment of the prophecy of II Thessalonians. He used Widerchrist less often because the descriptions of I and II John do not fit in as well with the papacy.

Further backup for this point may be found in that statement previously mentioned as the most explicit identification in the Confessions of the papacy with the Antichrist, "This teaching shows forcefully that the Pope is the very Antichrist...." (SA II, iv). In the original German this reads, "dass er der rechte Endechrist oder Widerchrist sei...." What reason would Luther have for using both words if he considered the two as completely synonymous? The idea of Antichrist being the figure of II Thessalonians, Daniel, and Revelation Luther inherited from the people

of his time, and he seems to have accepted this identification. However, perhaps he realized that there were some problems with this in relation to I and II John. One cannot expect him to be absolutely consistent in this distinction, since the people of his day identified the figure of II Thessalonians, etc., with "Antichrist." Also, he himself equates the Antichrist of I John with the papacy. But he may have realized that his real scriptural basis for doing so rested upon passages that never, in the original languages, used the word "Antichrist," and so have somewhat distinguished between the two terms, but not unequivocally. Admittedly this is just a supposition that would need further research in the original languages for validation, but the research this author has done seems to allow for it.

#### Philip Melanchthon

Though it is well known that Melanchthon was much more the mediator conciliator than Luther, study of his position on the Antichrist is still important because he is the author of most of what has been written on the pope in the Confessions. Regretably, very few of Melanchthon's works have been translated into English, and so this study will deal exclusively with his Confessional writings.

Perhaps not so surprisingly (considering his concessions to the Romanists after Luther's death), Melanchthon's identification of the papacy with the Antichrist is much more vague. He is more than willing to agree that the pope has taken upon himself privileges that are not his and has tyrannized over consciences. He has condemned Christian doctrine and replaced it with his own

false teaching. But Melanchthon allows for the rule of a pope by human right and a reform of the papacy. Therefore, though many of his statements sound as if they were uttered in the spirit of Luther, there always seems to be a route of escape. Speaking of the abuse of the Mass in the Apology, for example, he says:

And it seems that this worship of Baal will endure together with the papal realm until Christ comes to judge and by the glory of his coming destroys the kingdom of Antichrist.  
Apology XXIV (Tappert 268.98)

Here Melanchthon comes very close to saying that the papacy is the Antichrist, but doesn't quite say it. He allows for that possibility, but everything is so well qualified that one need not take it in that sense. He says, "it seems" this will be the case; and "the kingdom of Antichrist" will most certainly be destroyed, but is this the same as "the papal realm"? If this were the only example, one might assume that Melanchthon meant to equate the two: the pope and the Antichrist. But in every case there is always some other way to take the sentence. No explicit identification is made. [Other examples: Apology VII and VIII (177.48); XV (217-218.18-19); XXIV (259.51)]

Even in the Treatise this is evident. He says, for example,

The errors of the pope's kingdom are manifest, and the Scriptures unanimously declare these errors to be doctrines of demons and of the Antichrist. (328.42; cf. 327.39)

Melanchthon never says that the Scriptures identify the pope as the Antichrist, but that they give certain marks of Antichrist (and the ones referred to are those of II Thessalonians), and that the pope fulfills them. Another parallel example--a man may have a car whose engine rattles and knocks. The man remembers that these are marks of a broken motor mount, and he will want to check these



out thoroughly. But it is not necessary that the trouble is with the motor mounts at all, but perhaps something has happened with one of the cylinders. The rattling is a mark of a broken mount, but other defects might also carry the same mark.

About as explicit as Melanchthon gets are these statements from the Treatise:

[All Christians] ought...to abandon and execrate the pope and his adherents as the kingdom of the Antichrist. (327.41)

...it is necessary to resist [the bishop of Rome] as Antichrist. (330.57)

In both of these, which sound quite definitive in English, the Latin word, tamquam, is used (translated above as "as"). According to Dr. H. Armin Moellering of Concordia Seminary, this word can mean "just as, as if, so to speak." It is a "weaker, more ambiguous, less explicit" term than Luther's "er der rechte Ende-christ oder Widerchrist sei," or its Latin counterpart, "papam esse ipsum verum antichristum." The Latin of Luther's statement, in comparison with Melanchthon's statement, is markedly more explicit.<sup>50</sup> The term tamquam need not equate (although it might), but might also simply associate. Melanchthon may be saying that the pope is the Antichrist, or he might just as well be saying that he thinks about as much of the pope as he would think of the Antichrist.

This helps to explain how Melanchthon could qualify his subscription to The Smalcald Articles yet, shortly thereafter, write the apparently antipapal Treatise. His signature to The Smalcald Articles reads:

I, Philip Melanchthon, regard the above articles as right and Christian. However, concerning the pope I hold that, if he would allow the Gospel, we, too, may concede to him

that superiority over the bishops which he possesses by human right, making this concession for the sake of peace and general unity among the Christians who are now under him and who may be in the future. (Tappert 316-317)

If he truly believed that the papacy was the Antichrist, as he appears to say in the Treatise, such a statement would be most nonsensical. How could one accede any prerogatives over Christians to the Antichrist! But Melanchthon's statements in the Treatise do not necessarily say that the pope is the Antichrist, but only that he now is acting in a most unchristian fashion. Melanchthon allows for a reform and, if such a reform would come about, he would be willing to make some concessions "if he would allow the Gospel."

Melanchthon's qualified subscription also tells us something about Lutheranism in his day. Apparently, absolute agreement on this one article was not regarded as essential to being a "good Lutheran," for we know that Melanchthon was considered as such at least until the death of Luther. As a matter of fact, many believe that Melanchthon could have been the leader of <sup>the</sup> Lutherans after Luther's death if only he had "taken the reins." Even Bente, whom some regard as "anti-Melanchthon," admits that "the Elector, though not regarding Melanchthon's deviation as a false doctrine, did not consider it to be without danger."<sup>51</sup> In other words, the Elector (and Luther, for that matter) identified the papacy with the Antichrist and considered this as very important, for the pope condemned what Christ affirmed. But if someone had qualms about such frankness, yet believed in the truth of the Gospel (especially justification through faith alone), he was not disassociated with and cast out. Melanchthon, at this time,

recognized the dangers of the papacy and pointed them out quite well in the Treatise. Though papal reform was quite unlikely, Melanchthon hoped for it for the sake of the unity of the visible church and wished to allow for its possibility. Though one might consider this naive (after all, Luther gave up this view early in his career), still he considered this not an impossibility. Though some may credit such a stance for his later swerve towards Romanism, this does not seem to be the case. He apparently held such a position until the death of Luther and remained quite faithful to Lutheran principles. It was his forgetting the dangers of the papacy (which he had formerly defined so well) that caused Melanchthon his troubles--not a continuation of his old principles.

Melanchthon's early view, then, might be best defined as a mediating view. He recognized the dangers of the papal system and labelled it as antichristian, but did not want to go so far as calling it the Antichrist. Though reform was unlikely, he wished to allow for it by not setting up unnecessary roadblocks to a possible reunion under a reformed papacy--one that would fulfill its function.

#### The Missouri Synod and the Antichrist

We now move to the Missouri Synod's position on the Antichrist. Although many of the earlier German works of the Synod's fathers could not be examined, there is a good deal of evidence to back up the claim that the Synod's official position has changed very little over the years. As we summarize this position, we will also look at a few of the statements of other Lutheran church bodies inasmuch as they relate to Missouri's formulation

of her own statements.

### Early Conflicts

It seems that disagreements amongst different American Lutheran synods over the doctrine of the Antichrist were not all that uncommon, especially in earlier years. Even regarding what the Confessions said, what they affirmed and denied, there was disagreement. In the Davenport Theses (1873), for example, the Iowa Synod clarified its stance over against Missouri:

... Missouri maintained that the Antichrist, in the real sense of the Word, is the pope alone and exclusively; but with this assertion we cannot agree.

IX. As regards the pope, we accept all the declarations of our Symbolical Books concerning his anti-Christian character, and acknowledge that all the marks of Antichrist which they enumerate agree with the pope's kingdom and members.

X. But ... we cannot concede that the respective passages in our Symbolical Books claim to exhaust the exegetical interpretation of the prophecies cited, and we do not regard it as being in conflict with our confession for any one to hold that the personification of all these anti-Christian elements in a particular individual is foretold.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps underlying such a statement were the passages of I and II John and a conviction that the Confessions never explicitly identify the papacy with the Antichrist (though they allow for such an interpretation). Iowa agreed with what the Confessions said on the papacy and the Antichrist, but did not believe they said everything.

In spite of such disagreements, all Lutheran bodies early in the twentieth century did agree that the Roman Catholic Church was most antichristian, and its teachings were to be denounced so that no one would fall into their trap.

One area of interchurch relations on which Lutherans had no trouble agreeing was the Roman Catholic Church. ... Because

the Missouri Synod identified the pope with the Antichrist, its polemic was most unrestrained. The other synods, although they were more temperate, were no less opposed to Rome's doctrine, political principles, and growing strength. 53

### Missouri's Historical Position

What was Missouri's position? One may find it in any number of books, magazine articles, and official statements. Though the smaller details of interpretation might vary amongst these documents from diverse decades, they all agree on one key point: the papacy is the Antichrist. In fact, just about all the smaller details of the explanations of various authors also agree. It was as if every author was judged by how closely he agreed with them.

Missouri's interpretation, as reflected in such works as Pieper's Christian Dogmatics (III, 462-469; 1920), P. E. Kretzmann's Popular Commentary of the Bible (N.T. II, 361-365; 1922), and the Synod's Centennial celebration work, The Abiding Word (II, 709-766; 1947) -- all of which are still much used and considered fairly authoritative and representative of Missouri--runs something like this:

God never puts anything needless or useless in His Word. Everything He puts there is there for a reason. In this Word, He speaks of the Antichrist--a figure who will appear in the last days and lead many astray. For what purpose are these passages on Antichrist given? So that "future generations of Christians, who would live in the time of Antichrist, might recognize this evil foe and escape him." 54

### II Thessalonians 2

The most graphic prophecy of the Antichrist is found in II

Thessalonians 2: 1-12. This informs us that:

1. The day of the Lord will not come until "the apostacy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed." This is not an apostacy, but the apostacy; "not a falling away from single doctrines, but from the essence of all Christian doctrine, from Christ Himself."<sup>55</sup> What greater falling away could there be than this official condemnation of the Council of Trent (Canon 12):

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.<sup>56</sup>

As for the man of lawlessness being revealed, this happened in Luther's reformation, when he clearly pointed out that the pope is the Antichrist.

2. This man of lawlessness will "oppose and exalt himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God." The pope does sit in God's "temple," that is, he claims to be not only a member of, but head of the Christian Church. And, though he is but a man, he raises himself up above all other men and claims priveleges for himself that properly belong only to God. In the bull Unum Sanctum (1302), for example, Boniface VIII said, "We, moreover, proclaim, declare, and pronounce that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human being to be subject to the Roman Pontiff."<sup>57</sup>

3. There was a restraining force in the world at the time this letter was written that kept the "lawless one" from being made known. This was the Roman government, which could persecute Christianity before it became a legal religion under Constantine.

This kept any prominent figure of Christianity from raising himself up to an inordinate degree.

4. The "mystery of lawlessness" was at work even then.

It is true that there was no papacy in Paul's day, but a desire to exalt oneself above one's brothers did exist. It was evident even in Christ's apostles before they received the fulness of His Spirit as they discussed who was greatest among them. And the same spirit is evident in one of the later books of the Bible, III John (9-10) when we hear of a Diotephes, "who loves to be first." Such persons were also John's "antichrists" of I John 2: 18.<sup>56</sup> In such a sense Antichrist was already present, yet the full manifestation was yet in the future.

5. Many would be deluded into believing in this "lawless one." This happened slowly and gradually through the years as the conception of the Church changed "from that of an invisible communion of believers to that of a visible organization, with the bishops as representatives...." Such a change was evident by the beginning of the third century.<sup>59</sup> Soon the Roman bishop was exalted above other bishops, and he claimed preeminence. As the years went on, fraudulent documents like the Donation of Constantine (c. 753; claims to have been written c. 330 by Constantine) were put forth to bolster claims of the Roman bishop.

It is not right that the earthly emperor have power where the prince of priests and head of the Christian religion has been installed by the heavenly Emperor.<sup>60</sup>

In other words, what an earthly emperor had power over, certainly the head of the Church (i.e.: the pope) should have power over. Papal claims were constantly backed up by such fraudulent documents and biblical interpretations.

6. The lawless one would come in accordance with Satan's activity--with "power, signs, and false wonders and with all deception of wickedness."

It is ... common knowledge that the Papacy, past and present, employs all manner of lying powers, signs and wonders to bolster its rule.<sup>61</sup>

Part of the requirements for being declared a Catholic saint is that one must have performed a certain number of documented miracles. Even today miracles and wonders are said to happen at Catholic charismatic prayer conferences. Such things may indeed happen, but if these signs are used to substantiate Rome's antichristian teachings, one may be sure that such signs are not from God.

7. The Lord will bring an end to this lawless one by His coming. This will happen on the last day!

### I and II John

These views are very close to Luther's own views on II Thessalonians; but what about the more difficult I and II John passages? How are they dealt with? For the most part, they are either ignored or else briskly treated without much explanation. Pieper passes over the entire question with this statement:

It has been urged that the Papacy still confesses "fundamental articles" of the Christian faith, such as the article of the Trinity and of the theanthropic Person of Christ. We answer: These "fundamental articles" save no man if at the same time he denies and curses the Christian doctrine of justification.<sup>62</sup>

True, salvation cannot be had by affirming belief in the person of Christ and denying His work. But neither can one be saved by affirming belief in His work, yet denying His person. Both are necessary. Rome will not be saved because it affirms belief in



Christ's incarnation, because it denies His work. But it does affirm His incarnation, and this seems to militate against regarding it as John's Antichrist (II John 7).

The Abiding Word treats the problem by saying that "the Pope does not deny the fact of Jesus' incarnation, but...the purpose for which He came in the flesh...."<sup>63</sup> This is basically the same as Luther's position. The Antichrist of I and II John, however, does deny the fact of Jesus' incarnation.

### Official Statements

The position on the Antichrist presented above, based almost entirely on II Thessalonians and Luther, was well accepted amongst members of the Missouri Synod, apparently without any official declaration. It seems to have been accepted as an obvious part of confessional subscription, which was required of all pastors. The first official declaration this author was able to find regarding the Antichrist was that in the Brief Statement, which was adopted in 1932. "Section 43" says,

As to the Antichrist we teach that the prophecies of the Holy Scripture concerning the Antichrist, 2 Thess. 2, 3-12; 1 John 2, 18, have been fulfilled in the Pope of Rome and his dominion.<sup>64</sup>

It then proceeds to deal with prophecies, all from II Thessalonians, to prove its point.

This statement from the Brief Statement was reaffirmed numerous times whenever any question came up about the Synod's stance on Antichrist (exs.: 1947 Proceedings, pp. 491, 515; 1953 Proceedings, pp. 564-565). Though it appears some questioned whether or not the Synod solidly identified the papacy with "the very Antichrist," the only solace given them was this reaffirmation

of the Brief Statement. Perhaps there were some that had no trouble with the wording of the Brief Statement, but might have had problems with other more direct wordings.

Most material on the papacy and Antichrist in the Proceedings of the Synod came from the era of the late 1940's and early '50's. During this time the Synod was considering the establishment of fellowship with the old American Lutheran Church. Naturally there were some doctrinal differences that had to be ironed out. The A.L.C. accepted what they called the "historical judgment" of Luther that the pope is the Antichrist because, in looking back at all antichristian manifestations in the past, none better fit the description given in II Thessalonians 2 than the papacy. But they also allowed for a more comprehensive fulfillment in the future.

The answer to the question whether in the future that is still before us, prior to the return of Christ, a special unfolding and personal concentration of the antichristian power already present now and thus a still more comprehensive fulfillment of 2 Thessalonians 2 may occur, we leave to the Lord and Ruler of the Church and world history.<sup>65</sup>

Thus the A.L.C. seemed to make the identity of the Antichrist an open question--Luther might have been right, or he might have been wrong. But the Brief Statement had said that not to be included in the number of questions "which Scripture answers either not at all or not clearly" was (amongst others) the doctrine of the Antichrist. That was said to be "clearly defined in Scripture."<sup>66</sup>

This stance caused friction between the two bodies, and so a committee was formed to work together on the Common Confession, which formulated an agreement in this and other problems. Section

XII of this document (which was adopted by both Missouri and the old A.L.C. in 1950) read:

Among the signs of [Christ's] approaching return for judgment the distinguishing features of the Antichrist, as portrayed in the Holy Scriptures, are still clearly discernible in the Roman papacy, the climax<sup>67</sup> of all human usurpations of Christ's authority in the Church.

As previously mentioned, Missouri did accept the Confession as in harmony with Scripture, but it also recognized that it was ambiguous in places and needed clarification. The Norwegian Synod was upset with this statement of agreement between Missouri and the A.L.C., for example, because it did not wholly reject the A.L.C.'s notion that "the Papacy may not be the Antichrist until the last day: (II Thess. 2.8)...."<sup>68</sup> Eventually the entire effort at union fell apart, and use of the doctrine of the Antichrist as a "test of orthodoxy" by the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods and conservative Missourians played a part in that.

#### Importance of the Doctrine

How important was this doctrine deemed to be by Missouri? The answer can be given somewhat by examining the above section. Missouri was torn by this issue. Some thought the Common Confession was enough, others that it was much too lax. Some individuals were quite zealous in seeking out any deviation from what they believed Missouri's position should be. In Memorial 608 of the 1950 Proceedings, concern was expressed by a great number of pastors about where Synod stood. There must have been some doubt in their minds.

4. Does the venerable Synod approve or does it reject the teaching as found in the classrooms of the St. Louis Seminary, in conference discussions, and in the Lutheran Witness: ...

b. That, as openly stated by at least one member of the St. Louis faculty, the declaration of our Lutheran Confessions of the Pope's being the Antichrist according to clear statements of Scripture is not acceptable?<sup>69</sup>

Historically the Synod had stood up for belief in this doctrine. Pieper caricatured all Protestant rejection of the pope as Antichrist as stemming from opposition to sola gratia (synergism) and rejection of verbal inspiration.<sup>70</sup> He also insulted anyone who did not agree with him:

But every teacher in the Christian Church who is familiar with the historical phenomenon called the Papacy and still does not recognize in this Papacy the Antichrist prophesied in 2 Thessalonians 2 is weak in Christian theology.<sup>71</sup>

(Notice that the assumption is made that the figure in II Thessalonians is the same as "the Antichrist" of John.) The Abiding Word, a later work written in the heat of the A.L.C. debate, is somewhat weaker in its denouncements. It states that the doctrine of the papacy as the Antichrist is not a fundamental article of Christian faith.

Denial of it is not...in itself alone divisive of Church fellowship. But the Christian who does not recognize the truth of this teaching is in greater danger than others of being led astray by the errors of the Papacy.<sup>72</sup>

So Missouri always felt this was an important doctrine of Scripture that should be believed, though at times she took a stricter stance, at times a middle stance. Individuals within the Synod differed from one another in details, but generally all agreed that the papacy was indeed the Antichrist.

#### Today's Stance

Officially, today's stance is exactly as it has always been. However, there have been challenges to it. These have not usually

taken the form of blatant attacks on the position, but gentle proddings in another direction. Dr. Henry Hamann challenged Missouri's normal interpretation of those passages that actually use the word "Antichrist" in Concordia Theological Monthly magazine, and he applied the words to Gnosticism. This, we saw, Luther also partially did, but Missouri hardly ever recognized the correlation. He says,

Does the Pope deny the Son, more particularly, that the Son has come into the flesh? Is the usual explanation, that the Pope through the anathematization of the doctrine of justification by faith virtually denies Christ's coming in the flesh, does this explanation do justice to the words of St. John?<sup>73</sup>

Dr. Hamann believes that just as Luther pointed out the great dangers to the faith in his own day, even so we must do the same today. In Luther's day the papacy was the great deceiver; in our own day it might be something else, such as liberalism or the cults. We should not forget the dangers of the papacy, but Satan may also work through some other antichristian force in a greater way. His work must be warned against wherever it appears, but especially where the danger is greatest.

Much more significant than an obscure magazine article printed years ago is the recently published Concordia Self-Study Commentary. Martin Franzmann authored the New Testament section and, surprisingly, his views are very close to Dr. Hamann's.

A few quotes will prove the point:

I John 2: 18 John does not say whether he identifies the many antichristian teachers with THE Antichrist of whom the church has been warned (cf. 2 Th. 2) or sees in them precursors of the Antichrist. The important thing is that the church recognize and reject their antichristian teaching. <sup>74</sup>

II Thessalonians 2: 1-12 Just where Paul saw the first workings of the mystery of lawlessness we cannot say....

Nor do we know just what or whom he had in mind when he spoke of a restraint and a restrainer.... Nor do we know how far he was permitted to look into the future toward the final historical manifestation of the mystery of lawlessness and its judgment. Paul wrote, prophetically, to sober men's hope and to alert men to the realities of the history in which they live. The men of the Lutheran Reformation responded responsibly to that alert when they looked upon the papacy and saw there the marks of the man of lawlessness. A responsible church is called on to do in this<sup>75</sup> our day what they did, with faith and fears, in theirs.

Franzmann never clearly identifies the papacy with either "THE Antichrist," or "the man of lawlessness," nor does he ever explicitly identify the Antichrist with the man of lawlessness, though he admits there are parallels. He seems to regard most of Missouri's traditional interpretations as open questions. He is not so concerned with point by point identifications as with practical application, something that was sorely missing from other articles on the subject. This is not the usual approach.

This raises the question, has Missouri changed in the past few years? From talks with synodical officials, teachers, students, and laymen about this subject, this author thinks not or, if so, only slightly. Missouri is a vibrant, living organism that contains many diverse individuals. Some are more conservative than others; some are more vocal; some are gentle and willing to bend; some are ignorant, but interested in learning; others don't care all that much. This is the makeup of the Synod today, and probably always will be. There might be slight or even significant shifts towards the left or towards the right, but generally the makeup remains constant. At the very least, this much is true; the Synod and all its members are very concerned about the stance they will take publically, and treat it as most important. All doctrines must be based in Scripture, and are constantly examined by elements from the "left" and "right" to be sure they are. Sometimes slight

modifications must be made to take into account a greater understanding of what the Scriptures have always said. This should not be viewed as "vacillating," but as a necessary part of living up to that which the Scriptures themselves command us to do: testing everything by the Word of truth, expelling the evil, holding on to the good. As a church body full of saints/sinners, this task will never be done.

### Comparisons, Implications, Conclusions

The time now comes to draw loose ends together and bring this study to a close.

What has brought very much confusion to this whole issue is an assumption. The word "Antichrist" is only <sup>used</sup> in I and II John in the Scriptures, and the description of this being specifies that he will deny the Father and the Son, as well as the incarnation of Christ. II Thessalonians 2 describes a similar figure called the man of lawlessness, and his identifying characteristic is that he presents himself as being God. These two figures were equated with each other especially in medieval times, though there is not all that much the two have in common. But it became popular to speak of antichristian figures described in II Thessalonians, Daniel, and Revelation as "the Antichrist." The term came to have associations connected with it that are not necessitated by its use in Scripture. Some individuals also used the term in a purely derogatory fashion.

Luther, as a child of his times, somewhat adopted both of these. He would sometimes use the term to deride an opponent. But also, as an exegete, he applied the term to a figure in the end times--particularly that figure described in II Thessalonians.

Because this figure showed amazing similarities to the pope of Rome, Luther came to identify the two. His basis for doing so was almost entirely the Scriptures of II Thessalonians, not those of I and II John.

Melanchthon was also very aware of Roman errors, but was a little more cautious about identifying the pope with the Antichrist. Perhaps this had something to do with I and II John but, more likely, it was probably due to Melanchthon's desire to at least allow for the possibility of the reform of the papacy and the reunification of severed churches. Whereas Luther had come to regard corruption and error as a necessary part of the papacy, Melanchthon believed that this was an unfortunate circumstance that might be corrected. Therefore he was much less willing to denounce the papacy than Luther.

The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, for the most part, has followed Luther in its stance on the Antichrist. It identifies this figure with the papacy on the basis of II Thessalonians 2. Because a careful reading of both Scripture (I and II John) and the Confessions does suggest this view, but does not absolutely necessitate it, there have been dissenters from this viewpoint--especially more recently. In a sense, these men seem to be following Melanchthon--allowing for the possibility of the more traditional view and more than ready to agree that the papacy is one of the most antichristian institutions this world has ever seen, but hesitating to denounce it as "the very Antichrist." At the present time, such a view seems to be permissible in Missouri, but historically has not been her traditional view.

This author wishes to ask the question, what is the practical



difference whether one clings to this teaching or not? We have briefly presented the varying views above, but have failed to recognize their common spirit. Paul, John, Luther, and Melanchthon all had very practical concerns. They did not want the people God had entrusted to them to be led into error. Paul's people were being seduced by false prophets; John's, by the Gnostics; Luther's and Melanchthon's, by the papacy. A responsible response to these errors was to point out where they were in conflict with the truth of the Gospel. All of these men wanted to train their people to be able to recognize the difference between truth and error. They did not simply label one opponent and come out against him, but they taught biblical principles by which one could judge what was right from what was wrong.

The Missouri Synod also has given her people principles by which they can judge. But in her stance on the Antichrist it sometimes appears that her main concern has not been to refute error, but rather to test orthodoxy. Certainly it is imperative that she teach her people the dangers of the papacy: denial of justification by faith alone and submission to an earthly being who claims to be equal with God! These are the most important elements of the doctrine of the Antichrist, not a mere label. This is why Melanchthon was still considered a "good Lutheran" during Luther's lifetime: because he recognized the errors, though he hesitated to apply the label.

What is the practical difference whether one clings to this teaching or not? That depends. One pastor may denounce the pope as the Antichrist and use this as an excuse to sever all relationships with Roman Catholics (who should at least be considered as

mission material)--even in externals. Principles by which such a judgement has been made may not be taught. In such a situation the doctrine is held, but its essentials have been totally ignored.

Another pastor may refuse to use such terminology because he has doubts about the identification, and also does not want to "close doors" to any Roman Catholics that might listen to his witness. But he recognizes the dangers of papal system and teaches these to his people. Thereby they are enabled to see such dangers not only in Roman Catholicism, but wherever they appear.

At present, the Missouri Synod seems to be leaning away from treating its teaching on the Antichrist as a cold, abstract doctrinal concern. This is more in keeping with the spirit of the Scriptures and our Lutheran forefathers, who had very practical concerns at heart whenever they spoke of the Antichrist. Though there is anything but absolute unanimity amongst individual members of the Synod concerning this doctrine (ranging from the views of Kretzmann to those of Franzmann), all of them seem to recognize the practical importance of this teaching: that we point out the dangers of the papacy to our people and, positively, that we continually teach them the riches which God has freely poured out upon us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup>Richard Kenneth Emmerson, Antichrist in the Middle Ages (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 7, 72.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>10</sup>Scott H. Hendrix, Luther and the Papacy (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 3-5.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 6-7.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 8-9.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 14-15.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 42-43.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 26-27.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 39-40.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 53-54.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 69-70.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 76-77.

<sup>26</sup>Ewald M. Plass, comp., What Luther Says, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1:29.

<sup>27</sup>Hendrix, pp. 84-85.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 93-94.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 101-103.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 115-116.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 123-124.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

- <sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 132-133.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 136.
- <sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 149.
- <sup>38</sup>Ibid., pp. 146-147.
- <sup>39</sup>Plass, 2:1017.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid., 1:32.
- <sup>41</sup>Ibid., 1:30.
- <sup>42</sup>Ibid., 1:33.
- <sup>43</sup>Ibid., 2:1010.
- <sup>44</sup>Ibid., 2:1013.
- <sup>45</sup>Luther's Works (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), vol. 30: The Catholic Epistles, p. 252.
- <sup>46</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 285.
- <sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 286.
- <sup>49</sup>Ibid., pp. 257-258.
- <sup>50</sup>Interview with Dr. H. Armin Moellering, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 9 June 1982.
- <sup>51</sup>F. Bente, Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 54.
- <sup>52</sup>Richard C. Wolf, Documents of Lutheran Unity in America (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 208.
- <sup>53</sup>E. Clifford Nelson, ed., The Lutherans in North America, Revised Edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 388-389.
- <sup>54</sup>Theodore Hoyer, "The Papacy," in The Abiding Word, ed. Theodore Laetsch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), p. 750.
- <sup>55</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 751.
- <sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 756.
- <sup>58</sup>Paul E. Kretzmann, Popular Commentary of the Bible, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), The New Testament, vol. 2, p. 363.
- <sup>59</sup>Hoyer, p. 717.
- <sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 724.
- <sup>61</sup>Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), vol. 3: edited (and translated by?) Walter W.F. Albrecht, pp. 465-466.
- <sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 468.
- <sup>63</sup>Hoyer, p. 752.
- <sup>64</sup>The Ev. Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, Proceedings of the Fortieth Regular Convention (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), p. 491.

<sup>65</sup>The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, Proceedings of the Forty-first Regular Convention (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), pp. 590-591.

<sup>66</sup>The Ev. Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Proceedings (1947), pp. 491-492.

<sup>67</sup>The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, Proceedings (1950), p. 572.

<sup>68</sup>The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, Proceedings of the Forty-second Regular Convention (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), p. 496.

<sup>69</sup>The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, Proceedings (1950), p. 588.

<sup>70</sup>Pieper, pp. 467-468.     <sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 469.

<sup>72</sup>Hoyer, p. 764.

<sup>73</sup>Henry Hamann, "A Brief Exegesis of II Thess. 2: 1-12 with Guidelines for the Application of the Prophecy Contained Therein," Concordia Theological Monthly XXIV:432.

<sup>74</sup>Martin H. Franzmann and Walter R. Roehrs, Concordia Self-Study Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), p. 274.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 213.

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