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Leading Thoughts on Eschatology in the Epistles to the Thessalonians

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Leading Thoughts on Eschatology in the Epistles to the Thessalonians

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In view of the importance of the matter, we return once more to Paul's discussion in 2 Thess. 2:3-12, where the apostle sets forth that before Judgment Day the great falling away will occur and the Antichrist, whose nature and activities are described at some length, will put in his appearance. The passage was expounded verse by verse, various interpretations were presented, and finally arguments were advanced why the Lutheran Church in its Confessions has justly applied this passage to the Roman Papacy. Since this historical line of argument is of particular significance in our day, we refer to the matter once more.

In an old volume of *Lehre und Wehre* an article of some length was published under the heading "Remarks on the Doctrine of the Antichrist" (Bemerkungen zu dem "Bemerkungen zu der Lehre vom Widerchrist" ueberschriebenen Artikel in Dr. Muenkels *Zeitblatt* vom 7. Juni 1867). See *Lehre und Wehre* XIII, 297, 325, 341. This article presents an extended exposition of 2 Thess. 2:3-12 which agrees essentially with the one we have offered. To this exegetical treatise a historical excursus of some length is added. The author of the article signs himself "M. R. E.," and we have good reasons to believe that he was none other than Prof. Moritz Robert Engel, who first was pastor in Saxony, then professor at our college in Fort Wayne from 1868 to 1873. Later he returned to Germany and served twenty-one years as instructor at the "Gymnasium" in Greiz, where he died in 1903. We are familiar with his ability in the field of Exegesis and History, which he displayed in his historico-exegetical study *The Controversy concerning Romans Chapter 7* (1902) and other writings. His excursus, which has all but been forgotten, will be read with interest. After his exegetical presentation he writes:

"We would be justified in closing at this point. By expounding 2 Thess. 2 we have at the same time answered the question stated at the beginning. We hope to have shown that the Lutheran doctrine concerning the Antichrist has a firmer foundation than conceded by our opponent and that 2 Thess. 2 is not as dark, not as void of weapons for the defense of the thesis that the Pope is the antipode of our Lord as our opponent assumes. We are fully aware of our shortcomings. We realize that our line of argument based on 2 Thess. 2 could have been made much stronger. But we do wish to add something. Very briefly we shall attempt to draw a picture

of what the Papacy was at its height; what according to its own idea of itself it should like to be and in part still is. Our readers will pardon the necessity of repeating some things that have been said, since it will be our aim to bring the various details into focus and to unite them in a miniature picture. We believe in that way it will become evident that they who cannot recognize the Antichrist in Romanism do not see him in such black colors as they should view him when the actual facts are considered. We have no fear that bias will cause us to paint too dark a picture. What we can and will say will rather fall far short of what the Papacy actually is. Rome can congratulate herself that no human pen is able to do her justice and that all who since the days of the apostles and prophets have written and testified in this matter have in spite of their best intentions fallen short of what the Spirit of God in Scripture says concerning this abomination of all abominations.

"What, then, is the real nature of the Papacy? Briefly summarized, the answer to that question will have to be formulated about as follows:

"The Papacy is a spiritual-secular kingdom embracing the whole world, whose head and master is the Pope at Rome.

"The Pope claims to stand far above all emperors and kings; in his decrees he says clearly: Comparing his power with secular rulers is like comparing the sun, the great light of day, with the moon, the lesser light of the night. In contradiction to Rom. 13:1; 1 Pet. 2:13; Matt. 22:21, he holds uncompromisingly to the principle that he can be subject to no government. In the course of time he succeeded to free himself from the jurisdiction of the German rulers, to whom he was formerly required to pay tribute. Soon he rose to such heights that he imagined all kings and rulers were wearing their crowns by his grace. He therefore claimed the right to enthrone or dethrone them, to release nations from their oath of allegiance to their rulers; he went so far as to profess that all rights were concealed "*in scrinio pectoris sui*" (in the shrine of his heart). Vast kingdoms had to pay tribute to him. Nations unwilling to do so were placed under the ban and the interdict. The mightiest persons on earth were required to do him service. Even the German emperors, at that time the rulers of virtually the whole civilized world, had to bow before him. He took from them the right to elect the pope, a right which they had held. By means of long controversies he lessened the influence which they wielded in calling and appointing the higher spiritual officials in their domain. In mid-winter the German emperor Henry IV was required to stand barefooted in the court of the castle at Canossa, where Gregory VII resided at that time, and do penance for three days and as proof of his guilt tremblingly accept the host of which the Pope partook in

all calmness in order to indicate how innocent he was. Three of the mightiest rulers were required to humble themselves before Innocent III. Boniface VIII had a long controversy with Philip the Fair, king of France. In 1302 he released the French people from their oath of allegiance to their king and in the same year, in a consistory held in Rome, the Pope claimed for himself the highest authority in the secular as well as in the spiritual realm, and a short time later issued the infamous Bull '*Unam sanctam*,' which advanced the same claims and represents the height of papal pride. Clement VI, like his predecessor Benedict XII, bitterly opposed the German emperor Ludwig of Bavaria; in 1342 he placed him under the ban and offered him absolution only under the following conditions: Ludwig should acknowledge that he had been guilty of heresy, particularly because he had claimed that the emperor could enthrone or dethrone the Pope; he was to relinquish his crown with the understanding that it would be returned to him only by permission of the Pope; he was to place himself, his family, and his provinces at the disposition of the Pope; finally he was to acknowledge his kingdom as belonging to the Pope. The emperor rejected these conditions. In 1346 the Pope issued a bull against him, placing him under the ban and pronouncing a horrible curse upon him. In 1369 Urban V had the triumphant satisfaction of seeing the emperor of the Greek (Eastern Roman) empire come to Rome, vow allegiance to the Pope, acknowledge the Pope's primacy over the Greek Catholic Churches and accept the Roman confession of faith. Innocent VI in 1353 absolved himself from an oath which, prior to his election to the Papacy, he had sworn in the presence of the cardinals and declared said oath to be null and void. He declared the agreement he had sworn to fulfill to be illegal, and yet he had sworn the oath without scruples.

"These are but a few noteworthy instances taken from the history of the Pope's controversy with the secular powers; but they show how the Pope sought to exalt himself over all the gods of the world and how in most instances he succeeded to subjugate princes and people.

"The Popes exalted themselves even above the angels in heaven. In his exposition of the 11th and 12th chapters of the prophet Daniel, Luther writes: 'Clement VI, posing as a god not only on earth but also in heaven, issued a bull in which he commanded the angels in heaven that they should at once take into Paradise and into eternal joy the souls of those who while making a pilgrimage to Rome in quest of indulgence might die along the way. To hell and to the devil he gave the following orders concerning such souls: We object to have these souls subjected to the pains of hell. Thus this cursed abomination has seated him-

self not only in the temple of God here upon earth, but also in heaven, ruling over the angels, over heaven, over Paradise, over hell, etc. Several years later, when indulgences were being preached in Bohemia in a most blasphemous manner, John Hus objected, attacking particularly this devilish bull of Clement and denouncing the vices of the Popes. And this was the offense that he taught: If the Pope were not holy, he would not be a member of the holy Church, that is, if the Pope were a scoundrel, he would not be a pious man. That was, besides the claim that the Pope was the head of the Church, not "*iure divino, sed humano*," the great heresy because of which Hus had to be burned at the stake. The attack by Hus inflicted two fatal wounds upon the Papacy. The first, 'that the Popes have been ejected out of heaven' (that is, out of the Church of Christ, Rev. 12:7-9) 'and were compelled to make concessions; no longer were they permitted to issue such bulls as gave orders to the angels. And soon God began to visit this overbearing pride and outrage. The other wound was that since the days of John Hus the Papacy began to be despised and by no means could stop or suppress the name and the teaching of John Hus' (St. Louis Edition, VI, 926, 927).

"Furthermore, the Pope has established his throne in the midst of the Church and has permitted himself to be worshiped. He claims that he is the head and lord of the Church, the representative of Christ on earth. According to Roman teaching, subjecting one's self to the Pope in every matter is a mark of being a Christian. The holy keys are emblazoned on his coat of arms; he says that not the Church but he himself had received them from the Lord. All church powers exercised by him are merely demonstrations of the authority granted to him by Christ; all bishops and priests are his servants; the whole Church is required to subject itself without hesitation to his commands and precepts. His authority goes far beyond the Word of God. His book of laws is on the same level with Scripture, yes, above it, and his decrees are feared and revered more than God's commandments. Infallibility in matters of faith is one of the fundamental principles of Popery.* No one has the right to punish the Pope, to place him under a ban or to depose him, even though he should hurl a million souls into hell, as one of the decrees states. Thus the Church of Christ was robbed of its highest right, she was disfranchised, led into captivity, made the slave of a man. She, the free one, was robbed of her liberty, of her nobility,

* Though this was written several years before 1870 when at the Vatican Council the dogma of papal infallibility was officially promulgated, the pretensions of the Papacy had been at this iniquitous level for a long time.

and of her glory. Without means of protection she was surrendered to the wolf, and on all sides the gates were opened wide to every form of sin, vice, and error. The Pope could do as he pleased — who would stop him? The watchmen of Zion were silenced, they were to remain silent regardless of what might take place. One fortress after another crumbled and was captured, in the midst of the Holy Place stood the abomination of desolation, the sin which refused to be rebuked, which dared not to be rebuked. And all this occurred with the greatest show of right and in the name of true Christianity. Christ's name, God's Word were misused to give these endless outrages the appearance of holiness; sin was to be sin no longer, unbelief was to be faith, Satan's kingdom was to be the kingdom of heaven, the Church of the Pope was to be the Church which alone could save, and the Pope was to be the Holy Father, His holiness. One of the first bishops of the Church, the bishop of Rome, the foremost city of the world, the chief shepherd of one of the oldest congregations of Christ, which numbered its martyrs by the thousands, became an apostate and a seducer. He posed as the successor of the prince of apostles, Peter; he claimed that his office as bishop had been handed down in uninterrupted succession from Peter and even attempted to base his authority on a word of Scripture, the glorious word of the Lord: 'Thou art Peter, and upon this Rock I will build My Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven.' Matt. 16:18, 19.

"Moreover, Rome made use of all manner of pomp and glory to fascinate the eye of the weak (Rev. 17:4). All treasures of the earth flowed into the coffers of the Church. By means of indulgences, masses, annates, commendams, the tithes exacted from all clerics, the Peter's pence, by means of the most shameless usury the Roman Church was enriched while the people were stripped. Those who dared to protest were branded as heretics. The greatest scoundrels were looked upon as holy men, the most faithful witnesses had to endure every imaginable torture and insult. Sane reason and science were despised and disgraced; the universities were on the pay roll of Rome and were subjected to enforced silence. The councils degenerated into tools of the Popes, struggling in vain against the Antichrist to regain the influence which they had at one time possessed. Princes and people sighed under the burden of this tyranny. A frank expression was a crime, crusades were urged against those who dared to resist, heresy courts were instituted, funeral pyres were erected, and every form of torture was invented against the witnesses of Jesus. The whore

was made drunken with the blood of the saints, she drank of it to excess, and she drinks of it still. To cap the climax, the commands of the Pope were issued as in the name of the Triune God, as in Christ's stead; on pain of losing salvation people were commanded to believe in the errors and inventions of the Pope, and thus the consciences were tortured, often in matters altogether silly and impossible to carry out.

"And to what lengths did the Pope go in the use of his self-ascribed spiritual power? Did he not issue numberless commands placing an unbearable and indescribably shameful yoke upon the Church of Christ and the nations? Already in the 9th century a large collection of papal laws appeared; then already it contained the greater part of the Canonical Rights, this bible of the Papacy; and in the course of centuries the collection was enlarged by the addition of decrees of later Popes. The spirit that breathes in this book is not that of the Gospel nor even that of law and justice; it is the spirit of tyranny that is rampant in its man-made laws. Moreover, it has been falsified to a large extent, since many decrees contained in it were manifestly not issued by the Popes whose names appear above them. Not even the name of the man who made the collection is known; like a clap of thunder out of the blue sky, the book appears in history, a veritable *deus ex machina*. But horrifying was its success, firmly forged by it were the bands in which the Church was compelled to suffer for a long time. The most horrible of these laws deserve special mention. There is the law commanding celibacy, issued already in the 11th century. This law was forced upon the priests, at least in Germany, by fomenting a revolution of the laity against the clergy who were unwilling to bow under this yoke. There are the commandments regarding fasting, which arbitrarily denied Christians the enjoyment of God's gifts. There is the law of auricular confession, issued in the year 1215. There is the commandment forbidding the reception of the Holy Sacrament under both forms, which was the principal cause of the bloody war of the Hussites. There is, finally, the commandment forbidding the reading of Holy Scripture by lay people, this master tool of papal domination, since it barred them from the armory in which they might find weapons to defend themselves against the Pope's tyranny. This latter commandment alone and the satanic trickery with which it is still being defended as a salutary measure by the followers of the Pope, is proof sufficient of the spirit dwelling in those who issued that commandment. Christ says: 'Search the Scriptures,' etc., John 5:39; the Pope prevents those who desire to read Scripture and should do so. He fears Scripture; were he to allow indiscriminate reading of the Bible, he would be signing his own death sentence. For that reason he leads his followers into the

wilderness of human and devil's doctrine and tells them: Here is Christ and there is Christ.*

"One more thought. What has become of the Law and the Gospel in the hands of the Pope? What does he teach and preach? True, the Romanists still have the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Absolution, Baptism, Holy Communion, at least in part, and certain other remnants of Christian doctrine. But what are these few grains among the mass of chaff piled mountain high? What are these few drops of balsam for the many within the walls of Babylon who have been wounded unto death? What are these faint signs of life in the midst of that death prevailing everywhere? What are these few crumbs from the richly laden table of the great supper of our Lord? How infinitely great must be the power of Christ, who with mighty hand is able to sustain His kingdom and to preserve His elect even in the midst of His bitter enemies! Has not the very foundation of faith been destroyed and rejected in the Papacy, that foundation of which Paul says: 'For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ,' 1 Cor. 3:11? The Papacy knows of no original sin. While the name of that sin is used among them, it has been emptied of its Scriptural meaning. The doctrine of justification by faith was condemned by the Council of Trent; condemned, I say, in spite of the fact that just with reference to this doctrine the Apostle Paul writes to the Galatians who had departed from it, 'Though we or an angel from heaven' (much more so the Pope, who is inspired by the devil) 'preach any other Gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed,' Gal. 1:8. The Romanists exalt love above faith. They have changed faith, this work of God, into a work of man, and a very significant work at that. Instead of two Sacraments they have seven, and they are supposed to be effective even without faith. The means of grace, Baptism and Holy Communion, have been distorted and mutilated. They exalt the vows of monks and their penance above Baptism and have changed Holy Communion into a sacrifice in which the priests everywhere offer Christ again and again as an unbloody sacrifice, an offering for the living and the dead. Bread and wine, so they believe, are changed into the body and blood of Christ by the act of consecration, and the cup is refused the laity in direct disobedience of Him who instituted this His testament (Mark 14:23; Matt. 26:27). And what shall we say of all the other

* Owing to enlightened public opinion, a modification of these decrees has been granted. An encyclical of Leo XIII, dated Jan. 25, 1897, states that "all versions in the vernacular, even by Catholics, are prohibited, unless approved by the Holy See, or published under the vigilant care of the bishops, with annotations from the Fathers of the Church and learned Catholic writers."

doctrines of devils which prevail in the Church of the Pope among young and old; about purgatory, about praying to the saints, about penance and confession, about monastic vows, about the rosary, and many other matters?

"Is it really possible? Is it true that Rome teaches, confesses, and defends all these abominations? Yes, these stones and scorpions the 'Mother Church, without which there is no salvation,' gives to her hungry children in place of the bread of life, which she keeps from them by force! She has led thousands upon thousands of those whom the Lord has redeemed by His precious blood along the broad road to hell, groaning under the yoke of her bondage. And she has plunged other thousands into fierce temptations and agonies, so that only in their later life, perhaps only in the hour of death they recovered themselves out of the snare of the devil and learned to rely altogether on the grace of God alone. She has persecuted Christ's witnesses and drunk their blood and made the earth desolate for no other reason than to enjoy temporal luxury and to be permitted to rule for a short season in this transient world. This is the truth, and no one can deny it, least of all Rome herself. It cannot be otherwise, here must be Antichrist. The Mass alone, this continual blasphemy, brands Romanism as the Antichrist. All other evils combined: the unbelief of Voltaire, revolution, Mohammedanism, the Talmud, Mormonism, are not the Papacy. In Rome we find all the hostility against God and His kingdom concentrated. She is the great arsenal of all evil spirits; the mother of harlotry and every abomination upon earth. We have escaped her clutches. Shall we look back as did Lot's wife? Dare we underestimate what the Lord has done for us? Dare we deny the danger out of which we have escaped? Dare we forget the distress out of which we have been delivered? Or dare we grow carelessly secure because three and a half centuries have now elapsed since Luther nailed his theses to the Castle Church in Wittenberg? A relapse would be worse than the first falling away (2 Pet. 2:21, 22). Dare we permit ourselves to be misled by the good things which the Pope may have done now and then? Is it not Rome which, though not openly, yet in fact takes the position: 'Let us do evil that good may come,' and do good in order that we may engage in sin all the more? No, let us call white white, black black, sour sour, sweet sweet; let us call the Papacy the Antichrist; doing so, we will be giving the Papacy its due, we are but following the word of the Lord: 'Whosoever therefore shall confess Me before men, him will I confess before My Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny Me before men, him will I also deny before My Father which is in heaven,' Matt. 10:32, 33."

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