

Holding High the Torch of Protestantism

By Pastor John Anderson

The history of prophetic interpretation precedes the Reformation by many centuries, with expositors such as Irenaeus of Gaul, the bishop of Lyons (130-202 AD), Tertullian of Africa (160-240 AD), Hippolytus (d. 236 AD), and Julius Africanus (160-240 AD) to name but a few who had an excellent grasp of the fundamentals of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. As an example, notice this quotation from the writings of Hippolytus from the Treatise on Christ and Antichrist dealing with the prophecies of Daniel 2 (the image) and Daniel 7 (the wild beasts). Note that his commentary was written only a few hundred years after Christ's death. He states:*

“Let us look at what is before us more carefully, and scan it, as it were with open eye. The ‘goldenhead of the image’ is identical with the ‘lionsess, by which the Babylonians were represented. ‘The silver shoulders and the arms of silver’ are the same with the ‘bear,’ by which the Persians and Medes are meant. ‘The belly and thighs of brass’ are the ‘leopard,’ by which the Greeks who ruled from Alexander onwards are intended. The ‘legs of iron’ are the ‘dreadful and terrible beast,’ by which the Romans who hold the empire now are meant. The ‘toes of clay and iron’ are the ‘ten horns’ which are to be. The ‘one other little horn springing up in their midst’ is the ‘antichrist.’ The stone that ‘smites the image and breaks it in pieces,’ and that filled the whole earth, is Christ, who comes from heaven and brings judgment on the world.”

Remember that this piece of prophetic exposition is about 1800 years old, yet could not be improved by current commentators. And his views were by no means unique to him. Others echoed the same way of interpreting the symbols of prophecy. Let's skip forward 10 or 12 centuries now. With regard to the beliefs and teachings of the *Protestant reformers* having to do with prophetic interpretation, there was essential agreement:

I. That the horn power of Daniel 7, the man of sin of II Thessalonians, the antichrist of I John, and the leopard beast of Revelation 13 all represented the *same thing*. They were four different views of the *same system*.

2. More specifically, the *little horn* power of Daniel 7, which grew out of the 10 horns of the fourth beast and removed three of the 10 horns, persecuted the saints, had the eyes of a man and spoke great things against the Most High, thought to change times and laws, and continued for a time, times, and a half of a time, represented the **papacy**. That the *man of sin* spoken of in II Thessalonians 2, which brought about a great apostasy, who opposes and exalts himself above all, who sits in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God, represented the **papacy**. That the *antichrist* spoken of in I John 2 who was to appear in the last time represented the **papacy**. That the *leopard-like beast* of Revelation 13 which opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, made war against the saints, and continued for 42 prophetic months represented the **papacy**.

3. That in these symbolic prophecies, *the singular-sounding* “little horn,” “man of sin,” “antichrist” and “leopard beast” represented a **system**, not an individual.

4. That in these symbolic prophecies, based on scriptures like Ezekiel 4:6 a **day stood for a literal year**, and thus the period during which this system reigned (the time, times and half a time, the 42 months, and the 1260 days) was 1260 literal years (from 538 A.D. through 1798 A.D.).

Though there are literally volumes of information available, a few quotations will be given as examples. **Eberhard II**, archbishop of Salzburg (1200-1246), drawing largely from II Thessalonians 2, speaking of the papacy wrote (note the references to II Thessalonians 2 *and* I John 2),

“They cannot tolerate an equal, they will not desist until they have trampled all things under their feet, and until they sit in the temple of God, and until they are exalted above all that is worshipped....He who is servant of servants, desires to be lord of lords, just as if he were God....He speaks great things as if he were truly God. He ponders new counsels under his breast, in order that he may establish his own rule for himself, he changes laws, he ordains his own laws, he corrupts, he plunders, he pillages, he defrauds, he kills--that incorrigible man (whom they are accustomed to call anti-

Christ) on whose forehead an inscription of insult is written: 'I am God, I cannot err.' He sits in the temple of God, and has dominion far and wide."

Note that in his day, Eberhard says that they (those of like mind as he) are *accustomed* to identifying the papacy as the antichrist.

John Milicz of Bohemia (d. 1374) became a priest in 1350, and then secretary to the emperor Charles IV, king of Bohemia, then canon and archdeacon of the Cathedral of Prague. Subsequently, he resigned this important position and became a humble but powerful preacher, whose main thrust was the coming of the antichrist. He said he was

"moved contrary to his own will by the Holy Spirit to search the Scriptures concerning the time when antichrist would appear. While doing so, he found that this antichrist had already appeared and is dominating the church of Christ."

Milicz asked the Lord to free him from these convictions, but finding no rest, he undertook a pilgrimage to Rome and addressed a number of cardinals and fearlessly proclaimed that the antichrist has come. He waited for the pope to arrive, but, being delayed, Milicz gave himself to prayer, study, and fasting for a full month. Still the pope did not arrive, whereupon Milicz could not restrain himself any longer, but posted a placard on the very doors of St. Peter's in Rome that on a certain day he would come and address the crowd. In this announcement, Milicz stated "The antichrist is come; he has his seat in the church." The influence of Milicz on later Bohemian reformers like Huss and **Matthias of Janow** is unmistakable. The latter wrote,

"The antichrist has already come. He is neither Jew, pagan, Saracen, nor worldly tyrant, but the 'man who opposes Christian truth and the Christian life by way of deception;--he is, and will be, the most wicked Christian, falsely styling himself by that name, assuming the highest station in the church, and possessing the highest consideration, arrogating dominion over all ecclesiastics and laymen;' one who, by the working of Satan, assumes to himself power and wealth and honor, and makes the church, with its goods and sacraments, subservient to his own carnal ends."

John Wyclif (c. 1324-1384), the "morning star of the Reformation,"

professor at Oxford and later leader of the Lollards spoke openly of the papal antichrist.

“Why is it necessary in unbelief to look for another antichrist? Hence in the seventh chapter of Daniel antichrist is forcefully described by a horn arising in the time of the fourth kingdom (which has) eyes and a mouth speaking great things against the Lofty One, and wearing out the saints of the Most High, and thinking that he is able to change times and laws.”

After quoting Daniel 7:25 concerning this horn Wyclif expressly states “For so our clergy forsee the lord pope.” One of Wyclif’s followers, **Sir John Oldcastel** (1360-1417), also called Lord Cobham wrote,

“But as touching the Pope and his Spirituality, I owe them neither suit nor service, forsomuch as I know him by the Scriptures to be the great Antichrist, the Son of Perdition, the open Adversary of God, and the Abomination standing in the holy place.”

John Purvey (1354-1428) was a student at Oxford when the influence of Wyclif was at its height. He later became the leader of the Lollards after Wyclif’s death wrote an impressive commentary on Revelation, a copy of which found its way 100 years later into the hands of Luther. **Luther** had it reprinted, and wrote this preface to the new edition

“This preface, noble reader, you may understand was written by us for this reason--that we might make known to the world that we are not the first who interpret the Papacy as the kingdom of Antichrist. For many years prior to us, so many and so great men (whose number is large, and their memory eternal) have attempted this so clearly and openly, and that with great spirit and force, that (those) who were driven by the fury of the papal tyranny into the farthest boundaries of the earth, and suffering the most atrocious tortures, nevertheless bravely and faithfully persisted in the confession of the truth.”

Luther wrote,

“We here are of the conviction that the papacy is the seat of the true and real antichrist, against whose deceit and vileness all is permitted

for the salvation of souls. Personally I declare that I owe the Pope no other obedience than that to Antichrist.”

Luther was joined in this declaration by virtually all Protestant reformers, including Andreas Osiander of Bavaria, by Zwingli, Leo Juda, Theodor Bibliander and Heinrich Bullinger of Switzerland, by William Tyndale, Robert Barnes, George Joye, Nicholas Ridley, John Philpot, John Hooper, John Jewel and Thomas Cramner of England, many of whom gave their lives as martyrs for their faithful witness. John Knox and John Napier from Scotland joined the rising chorus identifying, on the basis of scripture, the papacy as the antichrist of prophecy. Because it identified the antichrist as the historical papacy, this teaching became known as *historicism*.

The Catholic Church understood clearly the role that prophetic interpretation was occupying in the Reformation. With such clear and powerful preaching taking effect, as witnessed by the success of the Reformation movement, we would not expect the papacy to sit idly by while her adherents deserted her. And indeed they did not. The Jesuit order, founded by Ignatius of Loyola and becoming authorized in 1540, became the leader of the counter-reformation movement. The Confession of Augsburg, the battle cry of the reformers, was met by the Catholic Church's Council of Trent. To the charge of being the antichrist, the Church responded by the teachings of the Jesuits, Francisco Ribera of Spain, and Robert Bellarmine of Italy, and Luis De Alcazar of Spain.

Alcazar said, “The Church cannot be the antichrist, because the antichrist already came long ago.” In his view, the antichrist was the two-fold attack made on the early church by unbelieving Jews and pagans. Because this view sees the antichrist in the past, it has been called “*preterism*.”

Ribera and **Bellarmino** said, “The Church cannot be the antichrist, because the antichrist has not come yet. The Antichrist will come in the future, will be a single individual and not a system, will be an infidel, will have power for 3 1/2 literal, not prophetic years, will rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, abolish the Christian religion, be received by the Jews, pretend to be God, and conquer the world.” Because this view sees the antichrist as coming in the future, it is called “*futurism*”.

Notice how these two schools of thought are basically self-contradicting. One says “Look for the antichrist in the past,” while the other says “Look for

the antichrist in the future.” These two counter-reformation teachings were taught at the very same time by the Papal Church. And, notice how these teachings sought to undermine the 4-fold foundation upon which the reformers had built their system of belief. With some success, the Church used these two basically inconsistent schools of prophetic interpretation, to counterattack the advances made by the Protestant reformation. By pushing the identity of the antichrist either *backward* into history, or *forward* into the future, the Church removed the heat from itself.

By no means, though, is that the end of the story. Unfortunately, what history has shown us, is that in time most of Protestantism has **embraced** these two views of prophetic interpretation. Protestantism became the banner-carrier of counter-reformation theology, the champion of anti-Protestant teaching. If you go to virtually any current Protestant commentary or school and ask the question, What is the antichrist of Scripture, the answer you get will be based on either the concepts of *preterism* or *futurism*. The antichrist either came and went long ago, or he is not here yet but will come in the future. He is not here among us today. The scholarly shovels undermining the foundation of Protestantism are being vigorously manned by Protestantism itself. The author Joseph Tanner has put it this way:

“It is a matter of deep regret that those who hold and advocate the Futurist system at the present day, Protestants as they are for the most part, are thus really playing into the hands of Rome, and helping to screen the Papacy from detection as the Antichrist. It has been well said that ‘Futurism tends to obliterate the brand put by the Holy Spirit upon Popery.’ More especially is this to be deplored at a time when the Papal Antichrist seems to be making an expiring effort to regain his former hold on men’s minds.”

It is important to keep in mind that if one is not clear as to who the “beast” of Revelation 13 is, it is likely that one will also be unclear as to the “mark of the beast.” Many Protestants today hold that the beast is some giant computer in Belgium, and that the mark will be a visible “bar-code” tattoo. These concepts unfortunately miss the spiritual meaning of the prophetic symbols by a wide margin and are misleading.

As we scan the horizon of time, it may be said, that with regard to prophetic interpretation, particularly the identity of the scriptural antichrist, most

Protestants today do *not* believe as did their spiritual forefathers, the original Protestants. The counter-reformation theologies of *preterism* and *futurism*, created to forestall the inroads of Protestantism, have become more successful than their originators ever would have dreamed, in that Protestantism *itself* has become their leading spokesman. The very name “Protestant” has a diminished meaning in the current context of ecumenism. As the late Tony Palmer recently said in his challenge to Evangelical pastors, “The protest is over!”

While others may look upon our teachings as being insensitive, uncaring, unkind, or even unchristian, a broad historical outlook puts them in an extremely favorable light. The picture of a long succession of torch bearers emerges, with the light of truth being borne by a many an athlete, the torch being passed from century to century.

*Note: all references quoted are taken from Leroy Edwin Froom’s books called [The Prophetic Faith Of Our Fathers](#).