

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

VOLUME 2

IS THE POPE THE ANTICHRIST?

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1 The Lutheran Confessions and the Theses of Agreement

- 1.1 In the period before the Reformation, the papacy had used a number of formal letters ('bulls') and decrees to claim that, as vicar of Christ, the pope had absolute power and authority not only over the church but also over all civil authority. This claim included the right to announce new doctrines. The papacy said that if people wanted to be saved they had to submit to the authority of the pope.
- 1.2 Following the lead of men such as John Wycliffe and John Hus, the Lutheran confessors rightly asserted that in their day the papacy was the institution which displayed most clearly the signs of the Antichrist. They said this because the pope took to himself the authority of Christ and corrupted the gospel. This judgment, especially as it is expressed in the 'Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope' (1537), was an accurate contemporary application of the biblical texts dealing with the Antichrist, namely 1 John 2:18-22; 4:1-3; and 2 John 7. The confessors believed that they were living in the last times, and that the Antichrist, in the form of the pope, already sat on his earthly throne.
- 1.2 The 'Theses of Agreement on Eschatological Matters' (VII.7; DSTO I, A16) repeat the charge that 'the Papacy is a part of the kingdom of Antichrist'. The papacy 'bears the distinguishing features of the Antichrist in greater number, more distinctly, and with greater soul-destroying force than any other human historical person and phenomenon' (7.b). Three reasons are given for this judgment:
 - a) the papacy's rejection of the sinner's justification by faith;
 - b) the papacy's introduction of the cult of human beings;
 - c) the papacy's claim that it represents supreme authority on earth, and that it cannot be mistaken when it speaks on matters of faith and morals.

2 What Scripture says about the Antichrist

- 2.1 The Antichrist worms his way into the church. His rule is sponsored by Satan. His appearance is a sign that Christ's return is near (2 Thessalonians 2:3,4; 1 John 2:18). The nearness of the end of the world makes his task of undermining God's kingdom more urgent.
- 2.2 While the Antichrist will be fully revealed at the end, his spirit is active in the church until that time, winning victories in preparation for the final onslaught on God's people (1 John 2:18; 4:3).
- 2.3 The Antichrist aims to erode the pure teaching of the gospel, so that Jesus is no longer confessed as the Son of God (1 John 4:15; 5:5). His specific heresy is the denial that Christ has come as a real human being (1 John 2:22; 4:2; 5:1; 2 John 7).

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2.4 The Antichrist pretends to speak with Christ's authority, and erodes the gospel from within the church. So the Antichrist is difficult to distinguish from those who teach the truth; he comes as a wolf in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). It is his spirit which inspires the false prophets (Matthew 24:11,24; 2 Peter 2:1).

The warnings of the Scriptures show that the spirit of Antichrist remains a constant threat to God's people. It is ready to emerge as a special threat in any age. Yet the Scriptures also give the assurance that the destructive attacks of Satan and his forces are only a prelude to their final judgment and destruction (see the book of Revelation).

3 Papal authority today

3.1 Roman Catholic practice is not to take back what the Church has said in the past, but to update teaching and to give new interpretations of doctrine. Hence we cannot expect that a pope or council will rescind offensive statements made in the past. Our assessment of the papacy must be based on present-day claims, not on pronouncements made at the time of the Reformation.

3.2 The statement of the Lutheran Church of Australia on the papacy as the Antichrist (Theses of Agreement VII,7) was valid and correct at the time. Thirty-five years later it requires critical review. Our present stance must reflect current Roman Catholic doctrine and the mutual learning which has resulted from protracted and productive dialogue between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches in Australia and around the world. Our present stance must also do justice to the substantial reforms and the modification of many doctrines within Catholicism, most of which have come out of Vatican II.

3.3 Recent developments in Roman Catholic theology, reflected in Vatican II and in official dialogues, reveal changes in the three areas referred to in the Theses of Agreement (see I.3 above):

- a) Past attacks on the doctrine of justification by faith have been replaced by an emphasis on salvation by grace through faith, for Christ's sake (see W M Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, 25,26).
- b) Vatican II has repeated the age-old Roman Catholic distinction between the worship due to Christ and any reverence to be paid to human beings as members of the body of Christ.
- c) In particular, Vatican II stressed the conciliar and collegial nature of papal authority in the 'decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church' (see Abbott, 396-98). The pope's authority over the church as 'pastor of the faithful' is exercised with the college of bishops. Papal infallibility is hedged about by so many provisos that it is extremely limited.

Although we may regard many Catholic teachings as theological deductions with no direct connection to the Scriptures, we recognise that the Roman Catholic Church upholds the principle that doctrinal pronouncements must be consistent with the seeds within the Scriptures that have given rise to such pronouncements.

Furthermore, we applaud the Roman Catholic Church for the unprecedented renaissance in scholarly and lay biblical studies that Vatican II has set in motion.

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4 Conclusion

- 4.1 A reassessment of the attitude of the Lutheran Church of Australia to the papacy does not mean any change in our insistence on the authority of God's word and its teaching on the Antichrist. We acknowledge that the statements concerning the Antichrist in the Lutheran Confessions and the Theses of Agreement contain judgments made from the historical perspective of the time. But they still stand as a summons to vigilance, so that the Lutheran Church of Australia remains alert to any signs of antichrist within itself and within other denominations.
- 4.2 The Lutheran Church of Australia cannot continue to affirm at this time that the Roman papacy bears the distinguishing features of the Antichrist. We dialogue with Roman Catholics as with brothers and sisters in the faith; we certainly do not regard them as people under the authority and spirit of Antichrist.
- 4.3 The papacy still presents formidable problems for Lutherans. The Pope continues to see himself as the vicar of Christ, claiming the right and power to represent the whole church as Christ's supreme representative. Although papal infallibility is now limited by provisos, it is still maintained. Decisive conflicts still exist concerning the teaching on justification, the role of Mary and the saints, and purgatory and masses for the dead.

[Note: In 1997 a joint committee of representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation finalised a document entitled 'Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification'. In 1998 Lutherans and Roman Catholics in Australia produced a document entitled 'Justification: A Common Statement of the Australian Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue' -Ed].

- 4.4 The Lutheran Church of Australia looks forward to its ongoing dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church and to the confession of a common faith according to the truth of Scripture. While continuing to wrestle honestly with the doctrinal differences which separate us, we affirm every teaching of the pope which glorifies Christ and his all-sufficient sacrifice, and which is in keeping with the evangelical faith.