



## Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

### AND THE ANTICHRIST IS ...

I don't normally use this forum to talk about partisan politics, but the theologian in me couldn't resist commenting on a Harris Poll taken in March of this year and reported in *Christian Century* (5/4/10, p. 9).

This poll was designed to reveal how Americans view their President; and predictably Democrats were the most positive about Mr. Obama, Republicans were the most negative, and Independents were somewhere in-between. No news there ...

What grabbed me was the last question: *Do you think President Obama may be the Antichrist?* Six percent of the polled Democrats answered in the affirmative. (Huh?—didn't they get the memo back in the 70s that the Dixiecrats had all moved over to the G.O.P.?) Thirteen percent of those identifying themselves as Independents opined that Pres. Obama might be the Antichrist. And just about one-quarter of all Republicans surveyed (24%) agreed with this assessment.

One-fourth of the whole Republican Party? The ANTICHRIST?

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Identifying the Antichrist has been a cottage industry in Christian circles since the term was first coined.

The word first appears in two minor and very late New Testament books: 1 John 1.18, 22; 4.3; and 2 Jn 1.7. That's it for the whole Bible! If you read these texts, you will see that relatively little is said about who this enigmatic figure might be. There is both one Antichrist and there are many antichrists. He/they (not "she"! ) has/have come and he/they are about to come (i.e., in the late first or early second century C.E.). He/they deny that Jesus is the Christ and that Jesus has come in bodily existence.

Second Thessalonians 2.3ff mentions a "man of sin," who is also identified by some people as the Antichrist. His *sin*? He claims to be God.

What is fascinating about this topic is that Christians of practically every generation have tended to identify someone of their own time, whom they intensely disliked, as the Antichrist. Here is a brief and very incomplete list:

<u>When</u>	<u>Identifier</u>	<u>Identified Antichrist</u>
100s – 200s	Church Leaders	Any one of several Roman emperors (including Nero)
300s	Athanasius	Arius (his <i>Christian</i> theological rival)
1000s	Pope Gregory VII	Wilbert (a.k.a. <i>Christian</i> Antipope Clement III)
1500s	Reformers	Any one of several RC Popes
1600s	Russ. Orth. Ch.	Czar Peter the Great
Mid-1900s	"Allies"	Franco, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin ...
1900s/2000s	Fundamentalists	FDR, JFK, Reagan, Clinton, Bush 43, & Obama Henry Kissinger, Bill Gates, Prince Charles, & even Barney the Dinosaur (!)

Martin Luther's case is instructive. When he wasn't claiming the Pope was the Antichrist, Luther opined that Suleiman the Magnificent fit the description. Suleiman was the leader of the great Ottoman Empire which, under his reign, stretched all over the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Suleiman's armies even tried to conquer Europe, but they were repulsed at Vienna in 1529. If Mr. Magnificent had succeeded in his quest, we all might be Muslims today.

Just before 1529, Luther (and Christian Europe) were convinced that the End Times had finally come. They saw the world as they knew it slipping away into the hands of the Evil One. They prayed for Christ to come and defeat Satan and his minions on the battlefield of Armageddon. They were afraid for the present, but confident in God's ultimate future for the Church.

Luther's experience reminds us that Antichrists are a projection of our deep anxieties over the troubling situations that we encounter in life. They usually pop up in times of angst, not when everything is going great (after all, who wants the End Times to come when life is wonderful?).

For Christians in the first centuries, it was Roman persecution that inspired them to connect the Antichrist image to some tyrannical emperor. For later Christians, it was often the threat of rival Christian communities. Protestants should be especially ashamed for having labeled the papacy as the Antichrist for so many centuries.

The March Harris Poll doesn't tell us anything of value about who the Antichrist might be. But it speaks volumes about the deeply rooted fears of those who think they know who he is.

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