

To Beast or Not To Beast: That Is a Fascinating Question!

By Shane Anderson

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Recently, while traveling on business, I had occasion to meet with a group of about fifty Adventists. Those gathered were well educated, with many of them coming from families of long experience in the church. As our discussion progressed, someone raised the topic of how the church publicly presents Bible prophecy—these days, a sure-fire path to lively discussion.

Some in the group knew that I had recently finished preaching a 3-part sermon series (back in my home church) on portions of the book of Revelation. And while few in the group had heard the series themselves, some that had were clearly agitated about it. “I noticed that you mentioned Catholicism by name in one of your sermons,” one man said. “That really made me uncomfortable!” His discomfort, he explained, came in large part from the extreme contrast between how he was raised to view Catholicism and his subsequent experience with Catholics as an adult. With obvious passion and genuine concern, he detailed how he had been taught as a child that Catholics hated Protestants like himself; that Catholic churches had (and I’m not making this up) jail cells in their basements in which to hold captured Protestants; and yes, that the Catholic Church was “The Beast” of Bible prophecy.

But later in life, it came as a great surprise to this man (and undoubtedly to many other Adventists before and since) to discover that actually, many Catholics are genuinely nice people. In fact, he currently employed a number of them in his privately owned business precisely because he found them to be such kind people. Catholics, he said, are courteous, hard working, and honest—in short, completely different from the stereotype he’d been taught as a child. “So

why,” he said, concluding his argument, “would we squander that kind of good will with Catholics by preaching against them and calling them ‘The Beast’?”

My guess is that this man’s experience is not rare. For every Adventist expressing his views, there are probably many others who have similarly squeamish feelings regarding the traditional Adventist understanding of prophecy in general and Roman Catholicism in particular. And for this sincere group, there are dozens of topics they’d rather have their church declare publicly than Bible prophecy! Wisdom—and perhaps just sheer good taste—would seem to dictate that we stick with seemingly less controversial topics (Christ’s death and resurrection, heaven, etc.) while steering clear of things that might cause unnecessary divisions among those we live, work, and play with.

I can certainly relate to such sentiment. I too have been uncomfortable with the abrasive and ham-fisted prophecy presentations I’ve sometimes sat through, ones in which the presenter seemed to care more about causing shock and awe than they did about reaching people for Christ. And consequently, I firmly believe that in some contexts, prophecy is not the all-purpose “entering wedge” we’ve sometimes made it out to be, and instead proves to simply offend people, not save them.

But all that said, is it possible that seeing this issue as a question only of community relations might be oversimplifying what is really a significantly more complex problem?

What I mean is this: What Adventism has to say to the world (or, as the case may be, what it *doesn’t* have to say to it) is more than a question of whether or not people like us—as important as that is. It is also be a deeper question of identity: Who are we as a church? What is our message and our mission? What is it that God has asked us to be and to do and to say to

those in our sphere influence? Questions like these must always precede (though not preempt) questions of social propriety...and therein lies a fascinating discussion.

Still a Place for Prophecy?

Let me be quick to state what I hope is obvious: It is hardly the primary mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to identify the Catholic Church as the antichrist/beast power of Daniel and Revelation (our billboard-posting friends past and present notwithstanding). Our primary mission is instead to proclaim the same good news about Jesus that the apostles did, although now in the additional context of the Three Angels Messages of Revelation 14. Our goal in doing so is to make fully devoted followers of Christ (think Matthew 28:18-20) who help others biblically withstand the final deception (that's where the Three Angels of Revelation 14 come in, showing God's truth and exposing Satan's counterfeit gospel). *And in accomplishing that mission, it may indeed be necessary at times to share some startling and uncomfortable truths with either friends or strangers who have a desire to know more about God's will for their lives.*

“But won't that just needlessly chase them off?” some will say. “Can't we just skip those uncomfortable things until later, or perhaps completely?” To answer that question, let's do a little case study on the idea of Catholicism having a major role at the end of time being part of (not all, but *part* of) the Adventist witness. Yes, there are other “uncomfortable” things that we have taught—the perpetuity of the Ten Commandments, what happens after you die, the health message, etc. But the topic of Catholicism in the end of time might just provide us with a good vantage point from which to view the rest of our witness.

So, here 'goes: Why do it? Why are there times when it is necessary to publicly proclaim something so potentially uncomfortable as Catholicism and its role in Bible prophecy? I believe there are at least three reasons:

1. *It is truth.* In my experience, it is exceedingly rare for Adventists opposed to discussing Catholicism's end-time role to oppose it on the grounds that it's untrue. In other words, it's not that they necessarily believe Catholicism has no role to play in the end of time, but rather that they see it as uncomfortable and awkward to talk about.

But to state the obvious, *this does not mean that Catholicism does not play a significant role at the end of time.* Traditionally, Adventists have given a prominent role to the papacy in discussions of Christian history (which is easily justifiable by generally accepted historical fact) as well as a prominent role in the end of time (which is based on proven principals of biblical interpretation). In other words, discomfoting does not equal discrediting: simply because something makes us uncomfortable does not make it untrue—which brings up an important point.

In John 8:32, Jesus makes a profound statement regarding truth. He said, "...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." The primary definition of the "truth" in this context is that truth is the person of Jesus. But the statement has implications beyond His personhood, at least as personhood is commonly defined. Surely what Jesus is really saying here is that if anything is true, it is true *because He is who He is.* Christ is thus the foundation of all truth: the truth that water quenches thirst; that $E=mc^2$; that murder is wrong; that Jesus' death can pay the price for our sins; etc., etc. All these things are true in a very real sense because Jesus is who He is: Creator, Sustainer, The Sovereign King of All! And furthermore, because all truth is rooted in Christ, *all truth seen through the person of Christ is liberating*—even (and at

times, especially) uncomfortable truth. Thus, Christ's statement in John 8 means that knowing and appropriately sharing the truth about Catholicism's end-time role (or, for that matter, any truth) when done in the love of Christ, is on some level a liberating and freeing experience.

Which brings us to point #2:

2. *Knowing the truth about Catholicism's end-time role—as well as other prophetic truths—can bring tremendous freedom.* A few years ago, I was in Rome, Italy. As part of my travels, I visited the *santa scala*, or holy stairs. I will never forget the sight that greeted our tour group that day.

The stairs are reportedly the same ones that Christ walked up as He went to His trial before Pilate, painstakingly transported from Jerusalem hundreds of years ago to their current site in Rome. As we entered the building containing the stairs, about 15 people were silently ascending them on their knees, saying the Our Father (the Lord's Prayer) and confessing their sins on each stair before moving to the next. A plaque on the wall with text in several languages explained these pilgrims' behavior. It read in part as follows:

“The following indulgences may be received [that is, for ascending the stairs], in accord with the usual conditions: **PLENARY INDULGENCE**—on all Fridays of Lent, and once more each year on an occasion of one's choice. **PARTIAL INDULGENCE**—on all other days of the year, as long as one is sincerely repentant of one's sins.”

My Protestant bones couldn't believe it! What year is this anyway? I thought. How can such a pitiful scene persist in our day? Isn't this the very thing that Martin Luther and dozens of other Protestant reformers fought so hard to overthrow five hundred years ago, the same righteousness-by-works slavery they risked (and at times, lost) their lives to remove? Moreover, what kind of monstrous picture of “God” is it that requires sinners to evaluate their salvation by the depth of the callouses on their knees? And how outrageous is it that an organization that commands the

devotion of one billion people reduces the gift of God's Son to a veritable trinket that MUST be bought by the actions of one's body (and on occasion, one's wallet) rather than "mere" repentance and faith in God?¹

But upon further reflection, I had to confess there was little reason for my surprise. You see, as the businessman I mentioned earlier alluded to, the world is filled with compassionate and gracious Catholics (many of which I was undoubtedly watching that day on those stairs!). But the core teachings of the church they reside in are sadly a different matter. For while Catholicism's public face has softened since the Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965, it has never changed its fundamental teachings on salvation—not for Luther, nor for anyone else before or since. The Catholic Catechism and the councils of the church throughout history are instead unanimous in teaching that salvation comes only through the Catholic Church; that believers can only receive that salvation by participating in the sacraments of the Church (the Eucharist², in particular); and that those believers who refuse this "grace" via these sacraments will suffer eternal damnation—no exceptions.³

Is it any wonder that Jesus' words "you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" have utterly transformed the lives of thousands of Catholics who are now hearty and happy Seventh-day Adventists?

Let it be crystal clear: It is true that some people—be they non-believers, Protestants, or, of course, Catholics—are offended by what the Bible teaches about the end-time papal role.⁴ But that offense pales in comparison to the extreme relief that comes to so many Catholics when they realize for the first time that Jesus died for them personally; that they can go directly to Him without a human intermediary; that they don't have to earn the love of the Father! And seeing

the joy on the face of a prisoner set free ought to give pause to the critic who declares Bible prophecy to be too offensive and embarrassing for public consumption.

3. *Jesus is coming.* September of 2011 marked the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks back in 2001. Few Americans will ever forget that day—where they were when they first heard the news, the images of the planes striking the towers, the mounting sense of horror and uncertainty. The unthinkable had become reality, and whatever sense of immunity we may have felt to terrorism unraveled into a billion pieces as the World Trade Center cascaded into the streets of lower Manhattan.

But as tragic as the events of that day were, my sense is that something that may prove even more deadly has come about in the ten years since: Many Adventists have lost their sense of the nearness of Christ's coming—and with it, their appetite for Bible prophecy.

That sounds counter-intuitive, doesn't it—losing confidence in prophecy even as end-time-like events are happening? But nonetheless, as I travel in North America in ministry-related settings, it seems that an increasing swath of Adventism since 9/11 is losing its prophetic focus rather than sharpening it. More and more Adventists see prophecy as antagonistic rather than liberating. And yes, some have suppressed public prophecy presentations in part on the grounds that people have enough fear in their post-9/11 lives already. Why burden them with more by studying scary prophetic beasts?

There are many answers that could be given to that question. But for our purposes here, one final response stands out: *Being prepared for the end of time and Jesus' return is far better than not being prepared.*

Translation: Jesus is still coming back whether we are calm or 9/11-nervous! And the only way to be ready for Jesus to come—and to thus delete that nervousness—is to know Jesus,

personally and daily. *He* is our salvation, not Bible prophecy or anything else. *And*, Jesus went through a great deal of effort to provide reams of prophetic insight (e.g., the books of Daniel and Revelation, the writings of Ellen White, etc.) *precisely so that people might make that decision to choose Him as their Lord and Savior*. In other words, prophecy matters! It matters greatly to God, and it therefore ought to be of everlasting importance to all Christians everywhere! Jesus inspired prophecy to be written, knowing that that prophetic message would provide a quantum leap in helping people be ready for His return.

Furthermore, in the heart of that message—that is, the Three Angels Messages of Revelation 14, the very message that God has tasked Adventism with sharing with the world—is a warning against counterfeits. So strong is the warning that nothing else in scripture exceeds its intensity. And in spite of what conservative talk radio may have us believe, the warning is not against making bad financial investments or high unemployment rates or having a weak national defense. It is instead against worshipping an end-time beast and receiving his mark—a *discussion that is extremely difficult to have without mention of Catholicism and its role in the end of time*.

When preparing people for the end of time, Adventists must present Jesus clearly. *That* is the heart of our mission. And for many, many people, they will not see Jesus clearly or be ready for His soon return unless the truth about counterfeit forms of salvation and other real issues of the end time are presented in detail—including, when necessary, details about Catholicism.

A Gift Like No Other

I can readily sympathize with that Adventist businessman and others who get nervous about our prophetic message. I still at times get nervous when I present it today, for it remains a

difficult topic to convey appropriately. I know that some people, no matter how much I love them and treat them with respect, may be offended by that message. But I keep doing it—carefully, tactfully, yes, but still doing it—because Christ has asked us to and it is has proven so liberating to so many people. We do live in a post-9/11 world that is more tenuous than ever. But that also means that Jesus is more relevant than ever. “To beast or not to beast?” should thus no longer be a question we approach with irritation or distrust. Instead, let us be tactful, let us be kind, let us be loving—and let us faithfully present Christ with all the prophetic clarity we can muster.

¹ Some may point out that the phrase “as long as one is truly repentant of one’s sins” shows that the Catholic Church believes in biblical grace. This would be true but for one stubborn fact: God’s grace in the Catholic understanding is only given *after* you’ve walked the stairs (or performed some other meritorious action)—not before. This is consistent with the Catholic definition of grace: the unmerited favor of God *mediated to the believer through the sacraments of the church*. No sacraments therefore equals no saving grace, regardless of the sincerity of one’s repentance.

² The Eucharist is vaguely similar to what we call communion, or the Lord’s Supper.

³ Some commentators insist that Vatican II fundamentally changed the “exclusivist” view of salvation that Catholicism had held for centuries before. But there are some very well respected theologians who emphatically disagree that any such change occurred—among them Pope Benedict XVI, the current pope. Benedict has made it abundantly clear that Vatican II did not make any changes to the historic Catholic doctrine concerning salvation. See William Cardinal Levada’s “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church,” Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Vatican, June 29, 2007, at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_responsa-quaestiones_en.html#_ftnref3. Pope Benedict fully ratified Levada’s document (see the closing paragraphs of the above link), and made very similar statements himself in the document *Dominus Iesus* (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html) when he previously held Cardinal Levada’s post in the year 2000.

⁴ However, though it is by no means official dogma of the church, a sizable and growing segment of Catholicism now believes that the end-time antichrist will arise from within the Catholic Church (they say it will be a pope, while Adventism would say it is not a person, but a system of religious belief coupled with political power). Without going into their rationale for this conclusion, suffice it to say that for many Catholics today, Adventist prophetic interpretation is a very welcome elucidating force.