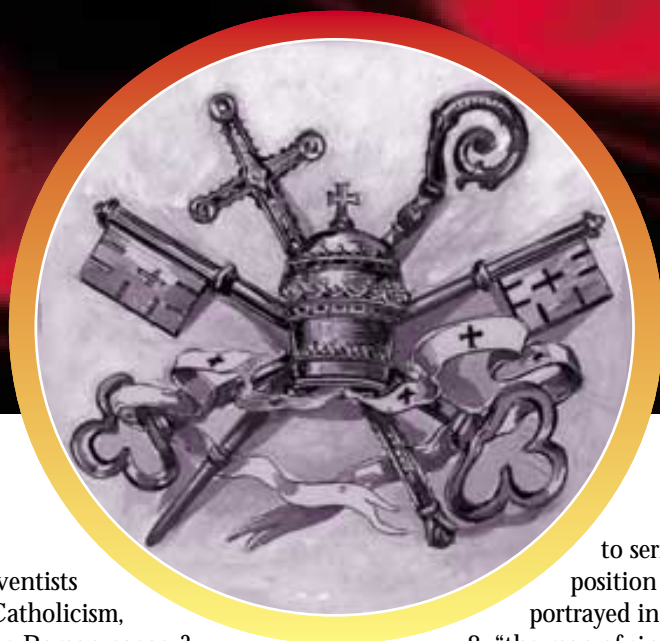


THE ANTICHRIST

Is the Adventist interpretation still viable?



BY WOODROW W. WHIDDEN

HOW SHOULD contemporary Adventists relate to Roman Catholicism, and specifically, the Roman papacy? Is it time to reassess our traditional point of view?

Many factors have contributed to the recent upsurge in discussion of this sensitive issue. The NET satellite evangelism crusades of the last five years have proclaimed to far-flung audiences the traditional Adventist understanding of the last great crisis of history as portrayed in Revelation 12-14. At the same time there have been numerous efforts by individuals with independent ministries who have quite openly attacked the pope and Roman Catholicism in ways that were embarrassing to the denomination.

As this is being written, the Adventist Church is taking legal action to restrain one ministry from using the name of the denomination in its anti-Catholic tactics.¹ On another front, one unofficial Adventist journal recently devoted a major portion of one issue to call for a reappraisal of Adventist attitudes toward the Papacy.²

Should the Traditional Exposition Change?

What is to be made of this delicate situation? Has the Roman Papacy changed to the point that Adventism needs

to seriously reconsider its traditional position that the Papacy is the antichrist portrayed in the “little horn” of Daniel 7 and 8, “the man of sin” of 2 Thessalonians 2, and the leopardlike, or sea, beast of Rev. 13? Has Roman Catholicism changed to such an extent since the Vatican II Council of the early 1960s that Adventism should seriously modify or even jettison its standard antichrist interpretation?

Before Adventists wade into our prophetic expositions on the antichrist, it’s necessary to be very clear about the core issues of the nature and character of any such power. In other words, before anyone attempts an identification, the characteristics of such a person or a system must be readily apparent.

If, for instance, you are going to declare that “pandas” are bears, you must know what the characteristics of the bear family are. Although we have popularly referred to “pandas” as bears, these winsome creatures were once alleged to be more closely related to the raccoon family than the bear clan. Naturalists have carefully studied their nature and characteristics and have sought to clarify which family they belong to.³

For us, the first question is this: What is the nature of the antichrist? What is the very core nature of the teachings, beliefs, and practices of any power that would qualify

it as an antichrist?

We must also honestly confront a second question: Has papal Rome really so changed its essential nature in the past four decades to demand that contemporary Adventism ought, in fairness, to cease and desist from its traditional prophetic interpretations? Has the alleged papal “leopard-like beast” of Revelation 13 now evolved into a domesticated, declawed, gospel-preaching, law-abiding Christian “cat”—some sort of leonine Aslan of the New Israel?⁴

Rome Has Changed

Before answering these questions, we must forthrightly affirm that many positive things have taken place in Roman Catholicism. The great progress made on issues such as religious liberty, the emphasis on Bible study (both lay and scholarly), the strong calls for social justice and obedience to moral law, and the Catholic Church’s important role in the demise of Communism are all truly commendable. At bare minimum, Christian honesty demands that Adventists should commend the modern Papacy for these courageous stands.

We should also praise God that these developments have become a blessing to millions. Adventists should greatly rejoice that it’s now much easier to engage our Roman Catholic friends in Bible study than it was 40 years ago. The Vatican II statements on religious liberty have certainly helped to open the way for Protestant gospel proclamation in formerly repressive Catholic countries where evangelical denominations, including our own, previously found the going very tough.

Has Rome Had a Truly Biblical Change?

But even as we acknowledge (and celebrate) this progress, we must ask: Are these the core issues that would enable us to identify an antichrist? Are we now dealing with a biblical and renewed “gospel” church?

To get a solid biblical answer to these questions, I propose the following litmus tests for any would-be can-

didate for the dubious office of antichrist. What makes any power by nature an “antichrist” is that it either denies or opposes the following:

1. The eternal authority of the ten-commandment law as an unchanging expression of the nature and will of God (Dan. 7:25; Rev. 12:17; 13; 14:12; 2 Thess. 2:3, 4, 7, 8).

2. The gospel of justification by grace through faith alone, not by works of the law (Rev. 14:6, 7; Rom. 1:16, 17; Gal. 1:8, 9; 2:16; 3:1-14).

3. The centrality of Jesus Christ as the only “mediator” between God and humanity (Dan. 8:9-14, 25; 9:24-27; Rev. 13:6; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15).

4. And finally, when such a power denies these great truths, it will ultimately seek to gain adherents by either “false miracles” (2 Thess. 2:7-12; Rev. 13:11-14; 16:12-15) or through compulsory force (Dan. 7:21, 25; 8:9, 10, 23-25; Rev. 13:7-10, 15-17).

On these points, has the Roman papal power actually experienced a biblical conversion?

The issue needs to be clearly drawn: before Adventists identify the Papacy

as the antichrist, we should be able to clearly identify the eternal authority of the law of God as binding on all professed believers, and also define the gospel of salvation by faith alone through the work of Christ as the believer’s one and only mediator.

Only then can the “lawless one” be identified. Only then can credible predictions be made that any power that denies these great truths will likely use miracles and

coercive force to gain adherents to its false laws, distorted gospel, and human mediators.

Doctrine, Not Behavior, Is the Real Test

Adventist interpretation and identification of the antichrist has never been based primarily on the alleged moral failures and corruptions of any religious organization. For 150 years we have held that the core issue is what is being taught about Christ as saving mediator and the closely related issues of the holy law and the “everlasting gospel.”

The Roman Papacy, like any human organization, is a mixed bag morally and ethically. There have been good popes and bad ones, along with great saints and great sinners. But the moral or ethical practice of a given religion is not the central issue for Adventists. All human organizations (including our own “enfeebled and defective”⁵ denomination) are sadly sinful. Neither was moral perfection the issue for the Protestant Reformers and their successors, who consistently identified

the Roman Papacy as an antichrist.

I vividly recall an incident when I was a graduate student at an ecumenically oriented, main-line Protestant seminary. During a seminar on the thought of eighteenth-century American theologian and revivalist Jonathan Edwards, we focused one

day on a discussion of Edwards’ anti-Catholic writings.

The very liberal and ecumenical professor walked into the seminar

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room and laid out a folder full of Adventist Revelation Seminar brochures. To my dismay, he promptly proceeded to call Edwards an anti-Catholic bigot because his position on the antichrist was very similar to that espoused in the Adventist brochures.

As calmly as I could, I suggested to him that if he was going to call Edwards a bigot, he must do the same to me. I went on to remind him that what drives purported “cranks” like Edwards and Adventists is not prejudicial bigotry and religious hatred but a deep concern for the issues of law, salvation, and the centrality of Christ as interceding high priest.

I don’t know that I convinced him, but I would like to convince Adventists that these are the issues that compel us reluctantly to identify any anti-Christian perversion of the biblical gospel.

Rome, the Bible, and the Law

It’s very clear from the Bible passages that describe the antichrist that this power seeks to do violence to the law of God, especially the law that deals with “time” and clearly identifies the great Creator/Redeemer God (Dan. 7:25; 2 Thess. 2; Rev. 12:17; and chapter 13).

Why is the biblical law, especially the Ten Commandments, so important to Seventh-day Adventists? Simply because the Bible is very clear that without the law the world is hopelessly prone to moral anarchy. Without law, personal salvation is in jeopardy. Where there is no law, there is no sin. If there is no sin, there is no need of a divine Saviour. Conversely, if there is only a human law, then all we need is a human “savior” to save us from something less than real sin.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that the only way that Jesus can truly be exalted is to spotlight the darkness of our desperately sinful situation rela-

tive to the law. Yet the features of the law that seem to be most in the “crosshairs” of the antichrist are precisely those commandments of the law that have to do with the proper worship of God. The central issue of Daniel 7 and Revelation 13 is one of worship: Will humans worship the Creator, or will they worship the

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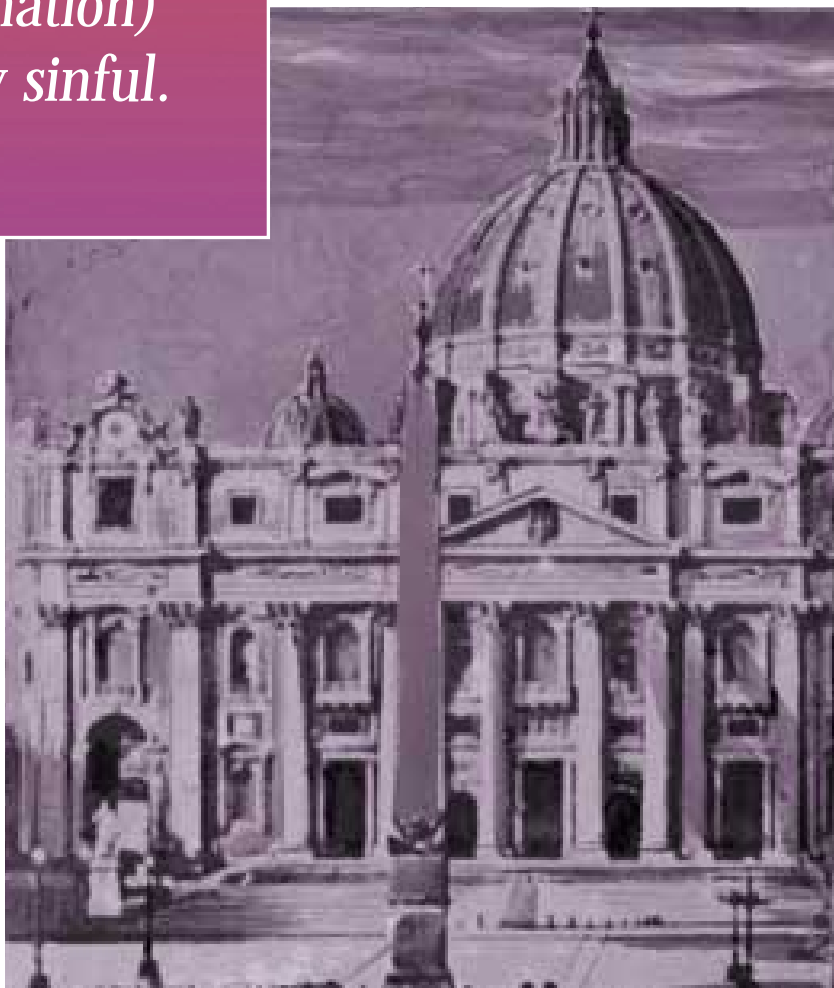
“beast”? Furthermore, all three “beast” powers of Revelation 13 are clearly making war on the first four commandments—the very ones that regulate and define the worship of the true God.⁶

How does papal Rome measure on this first litmus test?

The evidence is simply overwhelming. This biggest of all Christian denominations is a vast engine of opposition to the sacred unity and wholeness of the Ten Commandments, and it has especially centered its attack on the laws of the first table of the Ten Commandments.

This “anti-law” stance is certainly evident in the older catechisms of Roman Catholicism, but is this also true of the post-Vatican II church? The answer—again—is unequivocally “Yes.” Evidence abounds in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*⁷ and the recent “apostolic letter,” *Dies Domini*, which addressed Sunday sacredness.⁸

Reading these straightforward messages from the Papacy makes it clear that while Rome retained “ten commandments,” they are not the Ten of Exodus 20 and the Ten that Jesus and Paul discoursed on—the very Ten that



Jesus died to vindicate. Based on the most authoritative documents available—the new and definitive catechism of the church developed under the direction of Pope John Paul II—it is clear that papal Rome has not changed.

Rome and Justification by Faith

Why is the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone so important?

Though we often forget the point, the Protestant Reformation was not originally about the issue of the Bible and the “Bible alone” principle (*sola scriptura*); the Reformers were most concerned with how a person is reconciled to God. The primary reason that Luther began to call papal Rome the antichrist was his belief that the Papacy’s path to justification was unbiblical and destructive of Christian peace and security.⁹

The Roman Catholic way of justification—clearly articulated in the sixteenth-century Council of Trent—says this:

Persons are certainly justified through the grace of God. But it is the sanctifying grace of God, infused into the believer through the sacraments of the church, which produces an inner (or subjective) manifestation of the righteousness of Christ. This inner, “infused” righteousness forms the meritorious basis of the penitent believer’s justification.

Put simply, papal Rome supplants justification by faith alone, which *accounts or reckons* the sinner as righteous for Christ’s sake, with a justification that *makes* a sinner righteous through an inner, sanctifying or transforming grace. Through this transforming grace, the sinner is declared to be justified. The Bible teaching of justification by grace through faith alone is

hopelessly confused with and swallowed up by this inner, sanctifying grace. Put still another way: Rome teaches that the sinner is justified because of what grace does in him or her.

Against this view, the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers raised the great battle cry of “justification by faith alone, not by works of the law” (*sola fide*). They were not saying that the law was done away with by grace.¹⁰ They were simply declaring that the only way for a person to be truly justified is not by works of obedience, but by faith in the imputed merits of Christ’s righteousness, which are mediated to the believer by Christ in heaven. The believer stands forgiven and accepted *for Christ’s sake* and has a new, *objective* legal standing as sinless before God.

The Reformers never denied sanctifying or transforming grace: It was held to be the inevitable result of receiving Christ by faith—a fruit of the justifying root of Christ’s imputed righteousness.

Why is this issue so crucial today?

If I am saved because of what Christ does in me, rather than what He did for me, how can I ever be sure that my obedience and good works will be enough to satisfy the infinite justice of God?

Two closely related tragedies usually result from a distorted “gospel”:

1. Without the assurance that they are accounted righteous by an objective act of God, sensitive believers almost always succumb to despair. This discouragement causes many to simply “throw in the towel” and abandon the discipline of God’s law. “Since the law can’t be perfectly obeyed,” they conclude, “we should give in to our lusts and get as much as we can out of life.”

2. Knowing that they are never in full conformity with the law of God, some believers are tempted to “slice” the law down to size to convince themselves that they have now met its scaled-down demands—a condition correctly identified as “pharisaism.” The pharisaic route to justification is the most subtle way of degrading the law of God. If the basketball basket were only seven feet high, I could



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become a great slam-dunk artist!

Believers caught in the grip of pharisaism become preoccupied with meeting the mere “letter” of the law in a sterile, mechanical obedience. Not realizing the infinite nature of the righteousness of the law of Christ, they easily convince their desperate souls that the law’s demands have been met. In fact, all they have done is go through the motions in Christless self-deception.¹¹

Does papal Rome, in fact still teach that we are justified by the inner, transforming grace of God instead of by the imputed righteousness of Jesus? Yes, it most certainly does. The conclusions of the Council of Trent are still the standard cited by the new *Catechism*. The official papal way of justification is still one grand system of works righteousness.¹²

Many Protestants have become confused about this topic in recent months because of the highly publicized “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church on October 31, 1999. (For a detailed analysis, see the forthcoming article, “By Grace Alone?” by Clifford Goldstein in the June AnchorPoints Edition.)

While the Joint Declaration has some Lutheran-sounding language, it’s very clear that Rome has not renounced its classic positions outlined above. Nothing in this document denies the theology voted at the Council of Trent 400 years ago or presented in the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Second, the Joint Declaration is a classic example of ecumenical diplomacy, in which the participants seek to find vague agreement without really facing the nasty realities of disagreement. As one astute observer has pointed out, “the Catholic Church now concedes that, as far as justification is concerned, the Lutheran position is acceptable and not a church-dividing doctrine. This does not mean that Roman Catholics have now adopted the Lutheran position. They

have only *condoned* it and will likely continue to articulate their own view of justification in fairly traditional Catholic terms.”¹³

Adventists could wish that Rome had truly embraced the great Lutheran understanding of justification. But until Rome repudiates the conclusions of the Council of Trent—still articulated in its new *Catechism*—no breakthrough has been achieved.

Is papal Rome still engaging in its subtle opposition to biblical justification? The Roman Catholic Church’s

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most authoritative documents provide conclusive evidence that it is.

Jesus the Only Mediator and Rome

The Roman Catholic way of salvation not only collapses justification into sanctification, but it also tends to deny the centrality of Christ as saving mediator.

The Catholic way of salvation is a vast sacramental system that sees grace as being mediated through the sacraments administered by ordained priests. The sacraments and the human priests (vicars—those who represent the pope, the “vicar of Christ” on earth) are the channels of saving grace. The most important sacraments are the Eucharist (the

Lord’s Supper) and penance.

The emblems of the Lord’s broken body and shed blood aren’t merely signs filled with the spiritual presence of Jesus; through the words (“This is my body”) of the officiating vicar/priest these “hosts” become the very true body and blood of Jesus. And in partaking of these, Catholics partake of Jesus and His saving grace.

The necessity of other mediators than Christ in the Roman system becomes especially apparent when we look at the sacrament of penance.

When a person goes to confession, the penitent receives absolution (forgiveness) of sins from the priest/confessor. The guilt of sin and its eternal penalties are absolved (remitted) by the priest, but the temporal (earthly, time-based) penalties are not. These latter penalties must be satisfied, or “worked off,” through indulgences. These indulgences draw upon the so-called treasury of merit, a vast reservoir of excess merit that Jesus and the saints have gained through their righteous lives. Access to this treasury is the prerogative of the church and is obtained by the faithful through various actions, observances, or financial purchases.

What is to be made of all of this?¹⁴

The New Testament knows nothing about any such unique human priesthood of sacramental intercession (including Mary, the mother of Jesus). The Bible is quite clear that penitents may by faith “come boldly unto the throne of grace” through the intercessions of Christ—the “one mediator between God and men” (Heb. 4:16; 1 Tim. 2:5).

This vast, complicated system has totally taken the focus off of Christ’s mediation in the heavenly sanctuary and has placed it on an earthly sacrifice, created by an earthly, human priesthood, drawing at least partly on the merit of human accomplishment to produce a human righteousness.

When Rome fully repudiates this sacramental understanding of saving grace, so closely bound up with human merit, then, and only then, can we be quite sure that we are on the way to a

truly biblical, Christ-centered breakthrough.

Unrighteous Persuasion

The last identifying mark of any antichrist has to do with its unrighteous attempts to persuade others of its claims, often by purported miracles or through manipulating the power of civil government.

Rome is certainly not now the persecuting power it used to be. But has its essential character actually changed? Are the more moderate developments of the present period actual indications of a new commitment to freedom of conscience and human choice?

Here Ellen White's oft-quoted warning still rings with terrible clarity: "Let the restraints now imposed by secular governments be removed and Rome be reinstated in her former power, and there would speedily be a revival of her tyranny and persecution."¹⁵

Rome is certainly using false miracles to gain adherents. We have only to note the numerous reports of the sightings of the virgin Mary throughout the world to find evidence of this. These sightings, to which tens of thousands of the devout flock, are nothing but a type of spiritualism dressed up in the garb of the apparently pious cult of Mary. According to Scripture, Mary is neither a mediator nor even alive. She is dead, and the rumors of her appearances are either fraudulent, human trickery, self-deception, or a demonic miracle. Yet multitudes are awed by reports of her appearances. Millions seek the miracles that she supposedly works for the hurting and oppressed.

What cannot be accomplished by spectacle is often attempted by force. While it's true that the Papacy is not presently engaged in overt physical persecution, we dare not forget this truism: Any earthly power, political or religious, that doesn't have the love of God as the motive power for obedience will inevitably have to resort to force to get agreement with its beliefs and practices.

Two instructive biblical examples come immediately to mind:

1. When Cain's false, bloodless sacrifice was rejected (in contrast to the blood sacrifice offered by Abel), Cain resorted to force.

2. When the Jews of Christ's day—who played fast and loose with the sacredness of God's law (Mark 7:7-13) and salvation by grace through faith alone—couldn't overcome His teaching, they ultimately put to death the very One who was the author of both the holy law of God and the plan of salvation.

When the law of God is distorted, when the grace of Jesus is transformed into human merit, when the unique mediation of Jesus is supplanted by human mediators, we can be sure that false miracles and governmental tyranny are just around the corner.

Learning to Exalt Jesus

When these four key tests are applied to the Roman Catholic religious system, the sad but inescapable conclusion is that papal Rome is still the great power envisioned in Daniel 7 and 8; 2 Thessalonians 2; and Revelation 13. I write this with no sense of triumphalism or glee, for this is an extremely sad portrait that the Bible paints.

The key question is not whether Adventists should now mount a fresh campaign to figure out new and inventive ways to give the Papacy a good roasting. The challenge is rather for this prophetic movement to earnestly pray and study new ways to exalt Jesus, His law, and His gracious salvation as we have never done before.

If we have not clearly presented the "good news," I fear that our Roman Catholic friends won't be able to receive, in good grace, the bad news about the antichrist. This is the ultimate core issue for all peoples—be they non-Christians, Catholic Christians (both Greek and Latin), or Protestants: Do we love the "only mediator," the "lawgiver," enough that we would willingly die for those caught up in the antichrist system?

Our objective cannot be simply to win a debate over the identity of the antichrist. We must make certain that

our witness to Jesus and His marvelous plan of salvation effectually calls honest-hearted seekers out of the "Babylonian" system. If we lovingly witness for Jesus and His "once for all" sacrifice for sin, the antichrist will be exposed as never before.

¹A case is now pending in a Florida court in which the Seventh-day Adventist Church is urging the court to require that an offshoot congregation no longer use the name of the church in its billboard attacks on the Papacy and Roman Catholics.

²"Adventism and Catholicism," *Spectrum* 27, issue 3 (Summer 1999): 30-52.

³During a recent visit to the panda exhibit at the world-famous San Diego Zoo we learned that naturalists now lean to the theory that pandas are, after all, members of the bear clan, not the raccoon rabble.

⁴The reference here to Aslan draws upon the imaginative Christ figure in C. S. Lewis's classic children's story *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

⁵Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 15.

⁶See the very perceptive discussion of this issue in Jon Paulien's *What the Bible Says About the End-Time* (part 4), especially chapter 11, pages 121-129.

⁷*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1994), pp. 498-611.

⁸Issued from the Vatican on May 31, 1998.

⁹See James M. Kittleson's very readable and insightful biography of Martin Luther entitled *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1986), pp. 152ff.

¹⁰This is the false teaching of *antinomianism*, from the Greek words *anti* (against or taking the place of) and *nomos* (law). That is, justifying grace does away with the law.

¹¹This was Paul's sad state before he caught a vision of Christ's righteousness; see Philippians 3:1-15, especially verses 5-7.

¹²*Catechism*, pp. 366-370. Especially see the authoritative citation on page 367 from the Council of Trent—the definitive word on justifying grace that denied the Reformation doctrine of "faith alone, without works of the law."

¹³Douglass A. Sweeney, "Taming the Reformation," *Christianity Today*, Jan. 10, 2000, pp. 63-65.

¹⁴*Catechism*, pp. 384-399 (on the Eucharist and priesthood); pp. 481-490 (on grace and justification), and pp. 370-374 (on indulgences).

¹⁵Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 564.

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