

# Luther And The Recognition Of Antichrist: The Testimony of J.H. Merle D'Aubigne, D.D.



This article is from Journal of History and Prophecy compiled by Ron Bullock of [Old Working BOOKS & BINDERY](#). Jean-Henri Merle d'Aubigné (16 August 1794 – 21 October 1872) was a Swiss Protestant minister and historian of the Reformation. See the [Wikipedia article about him](#).

## **Introduction by Ron Bullock**

This classic work by J.H. Merle D'Aubigne remains one of the primary studies of the Reformation even after a century and a half of existence. It is still in print today and is required reading in many church history courses in our colleges and seminaries. The testimony of D'Aubigne is a powerful one, though the tendency is to relativize and discount the basic principles under which it was written. And this is done of course in the name of objectivity. Modern men have come to realize however, in the process of writing history, that such a thing as the bare, strict, objective fact continually eludes our apprehension. And if we could apprehend this, we suspect that it would somehow have lost its quality of history. It would have no heart, no soul.

That D'Aubigne was well aware of the problems which history would pose for the modern age is evident from his comments concerning his *History of the Reformation*. "History," he writes, "can no longer remain in our days that dead letter of events, to the detail of which the majority of earlier writers restricted themselves."<sup>1</sup> Just as a personal crisis or life threatening event often has the effect of jarring one loose from a privatized circle of awareness into the great mysteries of existence, to the pondering of the wherefore and why of a larger perspective, so the epoch of the Reformation was the awakening of the whole world from the lethargy of the Medieval age. The sense of personal responsibility for the interpretation of these momentous events became unshakeable. "Our great modern historians," wrote D'Aubigne, "unwilling to resign themselves to the task of producing a simple recital of facts, which would have been but a barren chronicle. . . have sought for a vital principle to animate the materials of past ages."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, some have sought this principle in art, some in philosophy and there

is a limited good in both these methods. "But there is another source," he continues, "to which, above all, we must look for the intelligence, spirit, and life of past ages. . .<sup>3</sup> This is the crux of the whole matter for D'Aubigne the historian;

History should live by that life which belongs to it, and that life is God. In history, God should be acknowledged and proclaimed. The history of the world should be set forth as the annals of the government of the Sovereign King."<sup>4</sup>

In the final account, therefore, the Reformation must be seen as the movement of God in history. There are other accounts to be made in a consideration of this revolution in the affairs of men, however, because "as God works by second causes, another task remains for the historian. Many circumstances which have often, passed unnoticed, gradually prepared the world for the great transformation of the sixteenth century, so that the human mind was ripe when the hour of its emancipation arrived."<sup>5</sup>

And so D'Aubigne is led to this bittersweet observation concerning the reception of his *History of the Reformation*:

"I shall be easily understood so long as I am occupied in investigating the secondary causes that concurred in producing the revolution I have undertaken to describe. Many perhaps will understand me less clearly, and will even be tempted to charge me with superstition, when I ascribe the completion of the work to God. It is a conviction, however, that I fondly cherish. These volumes, as well as the motto I have prefixed to them, lay down in the chief and foremost place this simple and pregnant principle: GOD IN HISTORY."<sup>6</sup>

And lest we think D'Aubigne passively resigned in the adherence of his principles of history, let us closely heed his conclusion to the matter:

"I address this history to those who love to see past events exactly as they occurred, and not by the aid of that magic glass of genius which colours and magnifies, but which also sometimes diminishes and changes them. Neither the philosophy of the eighteenth nor the romanticism of the nineteenth century will guide my judgments or supply my colors. The history of the Reformation is written in the spirit of the work itself. Principles, it is said, have no modesty. It is their nature to rule, and they steadily assert their privilege. Do they encounter other principles in their paths that would dispute their empire, they give battle immediately. A principle never rests until it has gained the victory; and it cannot be otherwise—with it to reign is to live. If it does not reign supreme, it dies. Thus, at the same time that I declare my inability and unwillingness to enter into rivalry with other historians of the Reformation, I make an exception in favour of the principles on which this history is founded, and I firmly maintain their superiority."<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

\*\*\*\*\*

1. D'Aubigne's History of the Reformation, p.2
2. Ibid. p.2
3. Ibid. p.2
4. Ibid. p.3
5. Ibid. p.2
6. Ibid. p.2
7. Ibid. p.6

## **LUTHER AND THE RECOGNITION OF ANTICHRIST**

Excerpted from History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century by J.H. Merle D'Aubigne, D.D

If the legates of Rome failed with the mighty ones of this world, the inferior agents of the papacy succeeded in spreading trouble among the lower ranks. The army of Rome had heard the commands of its chief. Fanatical priests made use of the bull<sup>1</sup> to alarm timid consciences, and well meaning but unenlightened ecclesiastics considered it a sacred duty to act in conformity with the instructions of the pope. It was in the confessional that Luther had commenced his struggle against Rome;<sup>2</sup> it was in the confessional that Rome contended against Luther's adherents. Scouted in the face of the world, the bull became powerful in these solitary tribunals. "Have you read Luther's works?" asked the confessors; "do you possess any of them? Do you regard them as true or heretical?" And if the penitent hesitated to pronounce the anathema, the priest refused absolution. Many consciences were troubled. Great agitation prevailed among the people. This skillfull maneuver bade fair to restore to the papal yoke the people already won over to the Gospel. Rome congratulated herself on having in the thirteenth century erected this tribunal, so skillfully adapted to render the free consciences of Christians the slaves of priests.<sup>3</sup> So long as this remains standing, her reign is not over.

Luther was informed of these proceedings. What can he do unaided, to baffle this maneuver? The Word, the Word proclaimed loudly and courageously, shall be his weapon. The Word will find access to those alarmed consciences, those terrified souls, and give them strength. A powerful impulse was necessary, and Luther's voice made itself heard. He addressed the penitents with fearless dignity, with a noble disdain of all secondary considerations. "When you are asked whether you approve of my books or not," said he, "reply: 'You are a confessor, and not an inquisitor or a jailer. My duty is to confess what my conscience leads me to say: yours is not to sound and extort the secrets of my heart. Give me absolution, and then dispute with Luther, with the pope, with whomsoever you please; but do not convert the sacrament of penance into a quarrel and a combat.' -And if the confessor will not give way, then (continues Luther) I would rather go without absolution. Do not be uneasy: if man does not absolve you, God will. Rejoice that you are absolved by God himself, and appear at the altar without fear. At the last judgment the priest will have to give an account of the absolution he has refused you. They may deprive us of the sacrament, but they cannot deprive us of the strength and grace that God has connected with it. It is not in their will or in their power, but in our own faith, that God has placed salvation. Dispense

with the sacrament, altar, priest, and church; the Word of God, condemned by the bull, is more than all these things. The soul can do without the sacrament, but it cannot do without the Word. Christ, the true bishop, will undertake to give you spiritual food."

Thus did Luther's voice sink into every alarmed conscience, and make its way into every troubled family, imparting courage and faith.

But he was not content simply with defending himself; he felt that he ought to become the assailant, and return blow for blow. A Romish theologian, Ambrose Catharinus, had written against him. "I will stir up the bile of this Italian beast," said Luther. He kept his word. In his reply, he proved, by the revelations of Daniel and St. John, by the epistles of St. Paul, St. Peter, and St. Jude, that the reign of Antichrist, predicted and described in the Bible was the Papacy. (Underlining added)

"I know for certain," said he in conclusion, "that our Lord Jesus Christ lives and reigns. Strong in this assurance, I should not fear many thousands of popes. May God visit us at last according to his infinite power, and show forth the day of the glorious advent of his Son, in which he will destroy the wicked one. And let all the people say, Amen!"

And all the people did say, Amen! A holy terror seized upon their souls. It was Antichrist whom they beheld seated on the pontifical throne. This new idea, which derived greater strength from the prophetic descriptions launched forth by Luther into the midst of his contemporaries, inflicted the most terrible blow on Rome. Faith in the Word of God took the place of that faith which the Church alone had hitherto enjoyed; and the power of the pope, long the object of adoration among nations, had now become a source of terror and detestation.

## NOTES

\*\*\*\*\*

1. The Pope's Bull of anathema and excommunication issued by Leo X in the summer of 1520. See JHP, vol. 1 , May-June 1987.
2. See D'Aubigne's History of the Reformation, Vol.I, p.94 New York, Robert Carter and Brothers, 1870.
3. In 1215 by the Fourth Lateran Council, under Innocent III.
4. See D'Aubigne's History of the Reformation, Vol.II, Bk.V, Chap.XII, pp. 214-215. New York, Robert Carter and Brothers, 1870.

---

I found [D's Aubign's History of the Reformation](http://whitehorsemedia.com) on line on [whitehorsemedia.com](http://whitehorsemedia.com). It's a 5 megabyte file. Maybe someday I will post the individual chapters of that file of 1409 pages and make another PDF file with a smaller file size.