

AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12
AS IT PERTAINS TO THE DOCTRINE OF THE ANTICHRIST

by

Jason A. Enderle

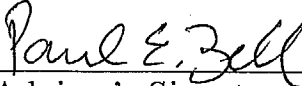
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The purpose of this thesis is to address the topic of the Antichrist. This paper will demonstrate that the misconceptions held by many cinematographers, authors, church bodies, Bible scholars, and exegetes result from personal attitudes and opinions coupled with misinterpretation of Scripture regarding eschatological events.

This thesis will examine the identifying marks of the Antichrist by means of an exegetical study of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. The attributes as Paul describes them will be shown to clearly identify the Roman Catholic papacy as the Antichrist. Corroboration will be offered by the confessional writings of Dr. Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon. Salient comments by theologians Francis Pieper and Adolf Hoenecke validate the indictment. Incontrovertible proof will confirm that it is neither a Lutheran idiosyncrasy to define the papacy as the Antichrist, nor is it an historical opinion or open question.

The doctrine of the Antichrist is found in Scripture. Its most comprehensive portrayal is found in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. This treatise by means of a thorough exegetical study will focus on the Scriptural definition, characterization, and attributes of the Antichrist as identified by the Apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. On the basis of the clear teachings of this portion of Scripture and what the Lutheran Confessions corroborate, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod boldly and correctly stands on the truth that the Roman Catholic papacy is the fulfillment of the Antichrist revealed in God's Word.

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Introduction: Interpretations of the Antichrist

It is interesting to observe the topic of the Antichrist in the culture and society of today. One can look at the media and literature and see a fascination with the topic. Movies such as *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Omen*, and *The Devil's Advocate* and literature such as the *Left Behind* novels all address the topic of the Antichrist. Yet they present the person of the Antichrist to be this great force to come. One who will be brought into this world, will come to power, will threaten God, and will bring chaos and terror to all nations. He will be evil incarnate. Sometimes he is portrayed as if he must conceal physical horns as he goes about his business, destroying the church, destroying the world. Other times it seems as if his coming will be accompanied by earthquakes, fire, darkness, and terrible demons. In other presentations he is pure evil contained in what looks like an innocent child.

The movie *Rosemary's Baby* presents a plot involving the conception and birth of the Antichrist. In his book *The Man of Sin: Uncovering the Truth About the Antichrist*, Kim Riddlebarger comments on the film *Rosemary's Baby*: "While not taught anywhere in the Bible, the notion of the incarnation of Satan is taken up in...*Rosemary's Baby* (1968). In this disturbing film, a lapsed Roman Catholic couple (played by Mia Farrow and John Cassavetes) makes a deal with the devil. As a result, Mia Farrow's character eventually gives birth to a child who is Satan incarnate."¹

The Omen, a 1976 horror film, is about an American ambassador, Robert Thorn, who learns from a priest, Father Brennan, that his son is actually the Antichrist. A scene from the movies carries this dialogue between the two:

Robert Thorn: Get on with it. Say what you have to say.

Father Brennan: "When the Jews return to Zion, and a comet rips the sky, and the Holy Roman Empire rises, then you and I must die. From the Eternal Sea, He rises, creating armies on either shore, turning man against his brother, till man exists, no more." The Book of Revelation predicted it all.

Robert Thorn: I'm not here to listen to a sermon.

Father Brennan: It is by means of a human personality entirely in his possession that Satan will wage his last formidable offense.

¹ Kim Riddlebarger, *The Man of Sin: Uncovering the Truth About the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 23-24.

Robert Thorn: You said that my wife was--

Father Brennan: Go to the city of Megiddo... in the old city of Jezreel. There see the old man Bugenhagen. He alone can describe how the child must die.

Robert Thorn: Look here--

Father Brennan: He who will not be saved by the lamb will be torn by the beast!

Robert Thorn: Will you stop? I'm here because you said my wife is in danger.

Father Brennan: She is pregnant.

Robert Thorn: You're mistaken. That's nonsense.

Father Brennan: He'll not allow the child to be born. He will kill it while it slumbers in the womb.

Robert Thorn: What in God's name are you talking about?

Father Brennan: Your son, Mr. Thorn. The Son of the Devil. He will kill the unborn child. Then he will kill your wife. And then, when he is certain to inherit all that is yours, then, Mr. Thorn... he will kill you.

Robert Thorn: That's enough.

Father Brennan: And with your wealth and power he will establish his counterfeit kingdom here on Earth, receiving his power directly from Satan!

Robert Thorn: You're insane.

Father Brennan: He must *die*, Mr. Thorn!

Robert Thorn: You asked for five minutes... and you've got five minutes.

Father Brennan: Go to the city of Megiddo. See Bugenhagen before it's too late.

Robert Thorn. Now I've heard you. I want you to hear me. I never want to see you again.

Father Brennan: You'll see me in Hell, Mr. Thorn. There we will share out our sentence.²

The movie *The Omen*, which portrays the Antichrist incarnate in the form of a small child, was followed by a number of sequels that depict the Antichrist's move through childhood,

² *The Omen*, 18 July 2011. Online. Available: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/The_Omen. (Date accessed: 28 February 2012.)

adolescence, and finally into adulthood where he gains world domination and is defeated in the film's rendition of the Second Coming.³ In his book *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*, Bernard McGinn makes an interesting yet sad comment about these movies: "Still, it is sobering to reflect that millions today probably know more about Antichrist from [*The Omen*] trilogy than from the Bible or from the popular traditions that played a part in the development of the legend."⁴

The Devil's Advocate, a 1997 American horror film, revolves around the legal profession and moral dilemmas. John Milton [Satan] carefully crafts a scenario involving his protégé Kevin Lomax. In exchange for victory in the courtroom no matter what the cost, Satan explains that he wants Kevin to mate with his half-sister to conceive a child, the Antichrist, who will be the key to a new future.⁵ In the movie John and Kevin carry on this discussion:

Kevin Lomax: What are you?

John Milton: Oh, I have so many names...

Kevin Lomax: Satan.

John Milton: Call me Dad.

John Milton: [*chanting in Latin*] Diaboli virtus in lumbis est. Diaboli virtus in lumbis est. [*continues chant in English*] The virtue of the devil is in his loins.

Kevin Lomax: In the Bible you lose. We're destined to lose, Dad.

John Milton: Well, consider the source, son.

John Milton: That day on the subway, what did I say to you? What were my words to you? Maybe it was your time to lose. You didn't think so.

³ The "Omen trilogy" produced by Twentieth Century-Fox includes: "The Omen" (1976), "Omen II: Damien" (1978), and "Omen III: The Final Conflict" (1981). A fourth movie was made in 1991 called "Omen IV: The Awakening" which revives the storyline that the prophecy of the Antichrist was reborn in a little girl. A remake of the original "The Omen" was made in 2006.

⁴ Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1996), 273.

⁵ *The Devil's Advocate*, 16 February 2012. Online. Available: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Devil's_Advocate_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Devil's_Advocate_(film)). (Date accessed: 28 February 2012.)

Kevin Lomax: [*raging*] Lose? I don't lose! I win! I win! I'm a lawyer! That's my job, that's what I do!

John Milton: I rest my case.

John Milton: Your vanity is justified, Kevin. Your seed is the key to a new future. Your son is gonna sit at the head of all tables, my boy. He's gonna set this whole thing free.

Kevin Lomax: You want a child?

John Milton: I want a family.

Kevin Lomax: The Anti-Christ?

John Milton: [*laughing*] Whatever... Here is an instance in which, "You're going to mate with your sister...and create the Antichrist."⁶

Left Behind is a series of 16 best-selling novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins dealing with a dispensationalist premillennial viewpoint of the end of the world.

Based on dispensationalist interpretation of prophecies in the Biblical books of Revelation, Daniel, Isaiah and Ezekiel, *Left Behind* tells the story of the end times, in which true believers in Christ have been "raptured," (i.e., taken instantly to heaven) leaving the world shattered and chaotic. As people scramble for answers, a relatively unknown Romanian politician named Nicolae Jetty Carpathia rises to become secretary-general of the United Nations, promising to restore peace and stability to all nations. What most of the world does not realize is that Carpathia is actually the Antichrist foretold from the Bible.⁷

Obviously this subject is an interesting one for media to address. The imagery is a compelling draw in modern society. The topic allows freedom of interpretation. In the media the incarnate Antichrist can be spawned by Satan himself. This Antichrist will bend the rules of nature, make holy water boil, cause mysterious "accidents," and will be accompanied by demons that terrorize and kill. Kim Riddlebarger comments on this topic:

The biblical writers do indeed foretell of Antichrist, but the images found in Scripture are markedly different from those of either *The Omen* or the *Left Behind* novels. The fact that end-times speculation and sensationalism has trumped sound biblical exegesis is surely the reason this is the case. Too often people don't know what's in their Bibles but can recount in great detail the plot of the most recent Christian novel. Christians are

⁶ *The Devil's Advocate*, 17 January 2012 Online. Available: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/The_Devil's_Advocate. (Date accessed: 28 February 2012.)

⁷ *Left Behind*, 24 February 2012 Online. Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left_behind; Internet. (Date accessed: 28 February 2012.)

quite familiar with the frightening images created by Hollywood but often remain ill-informed about the church's reflection on this important doctrine. This is most unfortunate and creates a climate in which Antichrist speculation occurs apart from serious reflection upon the teaching of the biblical text.⁸

With minds so heavily influenced by the media, people generally want to portray what is said in Scripture to be some cataclysmic event that blatantly says, "THESE ARE THE LAST DAYS! THE ANTICHRIST IS HERE!"

A misunderstanding of Scripture

It seems as though the same notion exists among some Bible scholars and exegetes. The same is true for different religions. In his book *Who Is the Antichrist?: Answering the Question Everyone Is Asking*, Mark Hitchcock makes the observation: "The three great world religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) teach about a powerful and sinister world ruler who will emerge during the end times. They are all looking for a man of unparalleled evil, an ultimate enemy who will come during the last days and take over the world."⁹ Many look at the passages in Scripture that prophesy about the coming of the Antichrist, the passages that describe the man of sin, and anxiously await his arrival with tags in hand in order to flag him for the world and expose him for what he is. Yet what is done with the rest of Scripture?

A misunderstanding of the end times

How do some Bible scholars and exegetes take Jesus' words in Matthew 24:36 when he says, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father"¹⁰? God does not say, "No one knows that day or hour, but you will have a good idea since the Antichrist will be terrorizing the Church." Do such scholars hope to deduce Christ's imminent return by a revealed Antichrist to mark the end times? How do they interpret Jesus' words later on in that chapter? Jesus said:

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So

⁸ Kim Riddlebarger, *The Man of Sin: Uncovering the Truth About the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 35.

⁹ Mark Hitchcock, *Who Is the Antichrist?: Answering the Question Everyone Is Asking* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 15.

¹⁰ All the Scriptural references will be taken from the New International Version 1984 unless stated otherwise.

you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him (Mt 24:42-44).

Are some scholars of the opinion that they will not have to worry about the thief for the first part of the night until “the Antichrist alarm” goes off? Do they think that only after this alarm is sounded is the time to be watchful? What about the people described in the preceding verses? Jesus says: “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left” (Mt 24:40,41). Will the man who was left complain: “Excuse me Jesus! I did not recognize this Antichrist about whom you spoke”? Will the woman who was not taken say, “Jesus, I believe that you came too early. I do not recall hearing about this Antichrist you were going to reveal to us”?

If Bible scholars who hold to this belief concerning the Antichrist were present at this precise moment would they be able to say, “The world could end today, it could end tomorrow”? Is it their contention that the end times are yet to come? If they are waiting for the Antichrist to be revealed to mark the end times, then why bother being watchful until he appears? Why bother being prepared if one must simply await a certain sign of the “final lap” of this present world? Jesus describes the end times in Matthew 24:4-13. We do not have to wait. We are already living in the end times.

“Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains. ‘Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.’”

One can look at these words of our Savior, apply them to the world today, and realize that the end times are already here. Nations have risen against nations. Consider the conflicts and wars in the world, present and past. Count the numerous catastrophes that have happened throughout the world within the past year. The earth is certainly enduring birth pains. Look back to the time of the Apostles and record all of the persecutions Christians have endured throughout the ages.

The development of countless manmade religions has led people away from God's Word. Millions of misguided Muslims follow the teachings of Mohammad in the ever growing religion of Islam. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism are so dominant in the Eastern countries that millions of people do not know anything about the Bible or the Savior. In this country false prophets such as Joseph Smith and Charles Taze Russell have led countless astray in the cults of Mormonism and the Jehovah's Witnesses. New Age proponents, doomsday theorists, and eschatological charlatans falsely predict the end of the world and lead many astray with their deceitful interpretations. Yet we still see the spread of the gospel. Since the day of Pentecost, Christians have taken the Word of God with them throughout the world. History records how God preserved and spread his message through faithful servants. Today the gospel is preached throughout the world. The truth of God's precious Word is being shared in Russia, China, India, Europe, Africa, and South America. Faithful men and women are taking the Word of God to every continent. This is clear evidence of the end times of which Jesus was speaking. We are in the end times now.

That being the case, the words of 1 John 2:18 also apply: "Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour." John speaks of the Antichrist coming and being present in the last hour. If all the signs point to the end times as happening now, does it not make sense that the time of the Antichrist, which is also a sign of the end times, is present as well? Those who consign the Antichrist to a safely distant future in the days immediately prior to the Second Coming have fundamentally misunderstood the prophecy and its purpose. Those who maintain this opinion threaten to leave the Church vulnerable and defenseless, unable to recognize the enemy within her midst or to protect herself against him.

A misunderstanding of the Antichrist

If we are indeed in the end times, then who is the Antichrist? Mark Hitchcock names some of those who have been suggested as the Antichrist:

Among the more prominent candidates that have been suggested are Emperor Frederick II, Pope Innocent IV, Muhammad, the Turks, Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin....Almost every president since Ronald Reagan has been identified as the

Antichrist by someone. So it's not too surprising that after Barack Obama became president, some began to suggest he is the Antichrist.¹¹

So often people are all too eager to point the finger. If a person possesses a quality or attitude that goes against their morals or is a threat to their freedoms, the condemned name of "Antichrist" is attached. In his book *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession*, Robert Fuller addresses this sentiment that was common in the twentieth century: "Reaction was called for: Enemies needed to be properly identified; strategies of resistance defined, and for this, the apocalyptic tradition of 'naming the Antichrist' proved an invaluable resource."¹² He goes on to say:

Twentieth-century efforts to name the Antichrist have been prime carriers of this nativistic and conspiratorial strain of American intellectual tendencies. Jews, labor unions, blacks, socialists, Catholics, and liberal government leaders all have been implicated in the grand plot of the Antichrist to dissolve America into a lawless, immoral state.¹³

He attests to a significant problem that lies with many in modern society – naming the Antichrist based on personal feelings and beliefs. To such a viewpoint Hitchcock makes an important statement: "We must be careful not to interpret prophecy in light of current events, but rather, view current events through the lens of Scripture."¹⁴

Those who make incorrect use of Scripture passages cause additional problems. Some will look only to the prophetic language of Daniel and the apocalyptic language of Revelation as a means of identifying the Antichrist. Hitchcock comments: "Most people—even those who have little or no biblical knowledge—have heard about 666 and know that it's associated with evil."¹⁵ He notes the many forced applications of this number:

¹¹ Mark Hitchcock, *Who Is the Antichrist?: Answering the Question Everyone Is Asking* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 11-12.

¹² Robert C. Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 134.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁴ Mark Hitchcock, *Who Is the Antichrist?: Answering the Question Everyone Is Asking* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 103-4.

Many have grossly misused the gematria¹⁶ approach by applying it to the names of modern leaders to see if they could be the Antichrist. It has been applied to Henry Kissinger and Lyndon Johnson...their names equal the number 666. It has also been tried out on John F. Kennedy, Gorbachev, and Ronald Reagan. Supposedly Bill Gates III equals 666. And allegedly MS DOS 6.21 equals 666, as does Windows 95 and System 7.0.¹⁷

Another stumbling block is dispensational premillennialism which developed around the reoccurrence of the “thousand years” in Revelation 20. This is the belief to which Mark Hitchcock himself falls victim. He says that it is impossible to know the Antichrist before the rapture and states:

Since, as many Bible teachers believe, the Antichrist will be revealed at the beginning of the Day of the Lord (the Tribulation period), and the church will be raptured before this time, it doesn't appear that we who are Christians will know the identity of the Antichrist before we are taken to heaven. If you ever do figure out who the Antichrist is, then I've got bad news for you: You've been left behind!¹⁸

Kim Riddlebarger comments on this thought: “Sadly, the dispensational approach to biblical prophecy generally, and to the doctrine of the Antichrist specifically, has drifted far afield from the teaching of Scripture and from the way in which Christians throughout the ages have understood this doctrine.”¹⁹

While they are in harmony with what Scripture says about the Antichrist, neither the prophetic book of Daniel nor the apocalyptic book of Revelation, with their visions of beasts and “the great prostitute,” are suitable places to begin when studying what Scripture says on the Antichrist. Thomas Nass cautions against such action, “These passages make use of strange imagery to convey their messages, so it is more difficult to establish points of doctrine on the basis of them.”²⁰ Rather, it is best to start with clearer portions of Scripture that are neither

¹⁶ Gematria refers to the numerical value of names. In gematria, a numerical value is attributed to each of the letters of the alphabet.

¹⁷ Mark Hitchcock, *Who Is the Antichrist?: Answering the Question Everyone Is Asking* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 97.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹⁹ Kim Riddlebarger, *The Man of Sin: Uncovering the Truth About the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 10.

prophetic nor apocalyptic. Only after a study of these portions of Scripture and in light of these portions of Scripture should one begin to try to study or understand what has been written regarding this person in Daniel or Revelation. The primary source of Scripture on which the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) bases their doctrine of the Antichrist is found in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonian Christians. Therefore the focus of this thesis will center on this portion of Scripture.

Background to the letter to the Thessalonians

We learn from Acts 16-18 that Paul wrote this letter while on his second missionary journey which took place circa AD 49-52. Paul had been in the city of Corinth. There he was rejoined by his fellow missionaries, Silas and Timothy. Paul had only spent a short time in Thessalonica, and so he wanted to return yet was unable. "But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us" (1 Th 2:17,18). Therefore, since Paul was unable to go himself, he sent Timothy to Thessalonica for his assessment. When Timothy returned and gave his report, Paul sent his first letter to the Thessalonians. In it he wrote, "Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you" (1 Th 3:6). With this news of encouragement he wrote to them about keeping the faith, living God-pleasing lives, and enduring in the face of persecution. He also wrote about the final coming of the Lord.

After this first letter he likely received news from Thessalonica concerning certain congregational issues. Paul wrote them a second letter, seemingly not long after the first, to address the issues and concerns that had arisen. The issues seemed to stem from the harsh persecutions they were facing, and this situation led to a misunderstanding of the second coming of Christ. It seems as though some were of the opinion that Christ had already had come and his arrival had been missed. This misunderstanding had resulted in laziness, idleness, and relinquishing of jobs. In addition, it appears that the reports of said arrival were falsely attributed to Paul. "Paul therefore decided to write a second letter; chapter two is his Spirit-inspired attempt to cool off feverish expectation without quenching the hope that would sustain them in

²⁰ Thomas Nass, *End Times: Jesus is Coming Soon* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011), 102.

their tribulations.”²¹ As Paul reminded them of the events of the second coming, he also told them what would come before Christ’s return, namely the “apostasy” and “the man of lawlessness.”

The interpretations of Paul’s meaning in this portion of the letter have been wide and varied. Very few exegetes, commentators, and religious bodies take a solid stance on who Paul is describing in these verses. Gordon Fee sums up the reason:

Our difficulties in understanding are the result of two further matters. First, Paul himself is not sure of the *source* of their misinformation, and especially as to how it could have been laid at his feet in some way. Second, his response is full of *reminders* of matters about which he has previously informed them while among them. These two realities together account for the major part of our challenges in understanding.²²

Since present-day readers and exegetes have neither a record of Paul’s teachings among the Thessalonians nor the false teachings against which he had warned, it is important to study carefully Paul’s words in this letter in light of all Scripture. It is also important to take Paul’s words of warning concerning the “man of lawlessness” as a warning in the present day as well. Paul’s warning was applied to the Thessalonians, and it is also applicable to everyone who reads it today. The description of this man is to be applied at all times.

David Kuske, in his *People’s Bible* commentary, highlights nine points from Paul’s letter to keep in mind regarding the apostasy and the Antichrist:

1. The falling away from the truth of salvation would be accompanied by the revelation of the Antichrist, the man of sin.
2. The Antichrist would exalt himself so that he would become the equal of God in the hearts of men.
3. The opposition to Christ was already at work when Paul wrote these words, but God was holding it back from working openly.
4. Eventually God would let it work openly, and this would result in the Antichrist being clearly revealed as an opponent of God.
5. With his Word, Jesus would overthrow the power of the Antichrist.

²¹ Mark Jeske, *An Exegesis of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10*. Online. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File. Available: <http://www.wlssays.net/node/1015>. (Date accessed: 9 September 2011), 1.

²² Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 269.

6. At his second coming, Jesus would completely destroy the Antichrist.
7. The Antichrist would be successful in bringing about the apostasy, because Satan would support him with miracles to mislead many.
8. Satan would also use his power to lead the Antichrist's followers to join the man of sin in denying the truth of salvation.
9. Because of their denial of the truth, God would harden the Antichrist's followers in the delusion that they were on the way to salvation when really they were perishing.²³

As some commentators address the words of Paul, many will simply state that this “man of lawlessness” has not yet arrived but will come at the end, just before Christ comes. Yet some, after careful study of Paul's words, came to believe that Paul's description of the “man of lawlessness” or the “Antichrist” was fulfilled in their present day. Dr. Martin Luther believed that the seat of the papacy was the fulfillment of Paul's description of the “man of lawlessness.” The Lutheran Confessors after him maintained this belief. The current doctrinal stance of WELS also follows the belief that the papacy is the “man of lawlessness” which Paul has described. Through a thorough exegetical study of Paul's words it the author's intent to defend the WELS doctrine regarding that man of lawlessness, the Antichrist. This study will not only serve as a defense but also as an application of the warning of the dangers of the Antichrist in the present time. An exegetical study of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 follows.

Paul's Prayer

The Greek text: 1 Ἐρωτῶμεν δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, ὑπὲρ τῆς παρουσίας τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἡμῶν ἐπισυναγωγῆς ἐπ' αὐτὸν²⁴

Author's translation: 1) But we ask you, brothers, with reference to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to him,

It is possible that chapter two begins with a prayer from the pen of the apostle. Paul uses the verb Ἐρωτῶμεν, which is a present active indicative first person plural form of ἐρωτάω. The basic meaning of the verb is “to ask or request.” This verb will usually imply and introduce an underlying question. The verb is used sixty-three times in the New Testament, most of which are in the gospels, where they are primarily used in dialogue – people asking questions or making requests. The verb is used in the epistles only a few times (Php 4:3 “I plead”, 1 Th 4:1 “we

²³ David P. Kuske, *1,2 Thessalonians* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1984), 90.

²⁴ The Greek text comes from the *Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament*, 27th Edition.

instructed”, 1 Th 5:12 “we ask”, 2 Th 2:1 “we ask”, 2 Jn 5 “I ask”) and then always in the present active indicative form. In these cases it carries the sense of urging, requesting, appealing or pleading. Paul’s request carries the mood of urgency as he stresses to his readers the importance of paying close attention to his past and present teachings. The verb ἐρωτάω will sometimes take an object with the accusative, “to ask for something.” The object is expressed either by an indirect question or by an infinitive clause introduced with the preposition εἰς. This is the sense that it is used in this verse. The infinitive clause comes in verse two where it will be addressed. The verb contains a plural subject which would include the encouragement of not only Paul but also his fellow missionaries, Silas and Timothy.

Here the verb is used as a dignified and kindly request, supported by the use of the vocative ἀδελφοί. The address is obviously not to Paul’s actual brothers nor to merely the men of the congregation. The term is used collectively to address fellow believers, both male and female and yet retains that idea of closeness. D. Michael Martin comments on the vocative form: “It reiterated the familial bond that existed between Paul the Thessalonians and helped establish the context in which he gave his exhortations to the church. He exhorted them as one who loved them, as their brother in Christ, as a spiritual parent giving guidance to his children in the faith.”²⁵ The idea is not any different from Greek grammar, which uses the masculine plural for groups consisting of mixed genders. Paul uses the term not in a personal request or desire for something for himself, but in a kindly way to encourage the Christians in Thessalonica with his words.

Paul prays for proper understanding of Christ’s return

Paul’s encouragement is in relation to “the advent or coming” (τῆς παρουσίας) of Jesus. παρουσία is used twenty-four times in the Bible, seventeen of which refer to the Messianic advent in glory to judge the world at the end of this age. The noun will appear again in verse nine of this chapter. However, it refers there to the coming of the “man of lawlessness.” This “coming” of the “man of lawlessness” is still in reference to the end times, the final coming of Jesus Christ. As Paul would have to address in the letter, the second coming of Christ had not yet occurred. The Thessalonians had not missed it. There was no need to fall into despair or to give up caring – both of which apparently were happening among the Thessalonians.

²⁵ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Vol. 33, *The New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 223.

Paul tells them that when this “coming” happens, they will know, for they will be gathered together with the Lord (καὶ ἡμῶν ἐπισυναγωγῆς ἐπ’ αὐτὸν) [literally: “and our assembly to him”]. Paul uses the word ἐπισυναγωγῆς meaning “a gathering/ assembly.” Paul adds this fact because he had written in his first letter about those who had died. They would not be left behind and forgotten but would be raised to life and gathered with them.

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming (τὴν παρουσίαν) of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Th 4:13-17).

The Greek word ἐπισυναγωγῆς used here in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 for this “gathering/assembly” appears only one other time in the New Testament – in Hebrews 10:25, where the writer tells the Christians to gather together at some location, a “meeting,” to encourage one another and spur one another on. Gene Green draws a connection between the two occurrences: “This gathering of Christians in worship anticipates and symbolically rehearses this grand eschatological event.”²⁶ Ronald Ward tends to find a similar connection between the two word uses: “The thought arises that ‘going to church’ is a miniature (we hesitate to say a rehearsal) of the gathering of the saints at the last day.”²⁷ While it is a nice thought, the need to make such a connection is not essential. The lack of usage of this word in the New Testament is not a concern. The noun is scarcely to be differentiated from συναγωγή, “an assembly, meeting, or gathering,” which enjoys much more common usage in the New Testament.

By using both the terms παρουσίας, which is used also in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, and ἐπισυναγωγῆς, which carries the understanding of the gathering together of the living and the

²⁶ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 302.

²⁷ Ronald A. Ward, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: Word Incorporated, 1973), 153.

dead, Paul is here referring to the final coming the Lord Jesus Christ. No one on earth would miss this coming. Jesus himself spoke of the public, all inclusive nature of his final coming:

At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other (Mt 24:30,31).

Gordon Fee comments on this day: “The Day [of the Lord] not only will be *preceded* by certain events, but also the events surrounding it will simply be too visible for any of them to miss it when it does come.”²⁸ Paul wants to set the record straight on the events surrounding the end times and put to rest any false teachings that had arisen and worried the Thessalonian Christians. Gene Green notes: “The apostle earnestly desires that the vital hope of the *coming of the Lord Jesus* and the gathering *to him* do not become distorted by some erroneous teaching about ‘the day of the Lord.’”²⁹ Paul continues to clear up any misguided information concerning that day.

Paul prays for peace of mind

2 εἰς τὸ μὴ ταχέως σαλευθῆναι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ νοῦς μηδὲ θροεῖσθαι, μήτε διὰ πνεύματος μήτε διὰ λόγου μήτε δι’ ἐπιστολῆς ὡς δι’ ἡμῶν, ὡς ὅτι ἐνέστηκεν ἡ ἡμέρα τοῦ κυρίου.

2) (we ask) that you not be quickly distressed and thereby lose your calmness of mind, neither by a spirit nor by a word nor by a letter as if from us, that the day of the Lord has come

With clarity and skill, Paul calms troubled hearts and minds with God’s precious truth. The preposition εἰς begins the object clause of Ἐρωτῶμεν and states the content of the request. It introduces an intended result or purpose clause with the articularized infinitives τὸ ... σαλευθῆναι, and later θροεῖσθαι. The infinitives form a pair of complementary descriptors of the mentality Paul is discouraging among the Thessalonians. σαλευθῆναι refers to the shaking of waves and here in the mental sense, “to be disturbed, shaken,” “to be emotionally distraught.” The verb occurs fifteen times in the New Testament and is often used to describe the shaking of the earth in an earthquake. The infinitive is in the aorist tense which emphasizes the suddenness of the

²⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 269-270.

²⁹ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 302.

shock to the mind that has occurred because of the news that Jesus had already come. R.C.H. Lenski has opined that this verb suggests the sudden blow or impact of a blast or wave as it hits while the complementary verb *θροεῖσθαι* indicates the disturbance that follows.³⁰ It parallels *σαλευθῆναι* in the sense of “being troubled/ frightened/ alarmed” mentally, and yet because it is in the present form it describes the continued state of agitation and jumpiness following that initial shock. This verb is only used three times in the New Testament. The only other two times occur in the gospels (Matthew 24:6 and Mark 13:7) where Jesus speaks of the end times, of wars and rumors of wars, but gives the encouragement to “not be frightened.” Paul here seems to be taking the language from Jesus as he himself spoke of the end times.

This is not mere coincidence. Paul seems to be playing on words here. He uses the very words associated with the cataclysmic events that will occur in the end time to describe their mental state. One can only imagine the shock and alarm that must have agitated the Thessalonians. After that initial shock suddenly the mind starts racing, past experiences fail, mental planning falls apart, and a sense of direction is lost. That is what happened to the Thessalonians. Everything they had just been taught by Paul was suddenly suspect. The comfort, joy, and peace to which they were looking forward were gone. Plans of living Christian lives out of love and thankfulness were now worthless and pointless. Minds must have been racing on what to do now, what to think. In contrast to this agitated mindset, Paul urges calmness and composure. They were to be constantly watchful of false teachings that would cause them to waver in their faith. He does not simply ask for it but encourages it as a dearly loved brother.

One can imagine Paul’s agitation as well. Someone through some means was leading the Thessalonians astray with false teaching. What is worse, the impression was given that this false teaching came from Paul himself. Paul does not know how this false teaching came to Thessalonica, but he intends to deal with all facets of the fallacy. He lists three possible sources of confusion: by a spirit, word, or letter. With the phrase *διὰ πνεύματος* (“by a spirit”) Paul does not mean the Holy Spirit but rather someone claiming revelation by a spirit. Paul is likely referring to a false prophecy or some speaking in tongues. With the phrase *διὰ λόγου* (“by word”) Paul is referring to any false report or oral teaching they had received. With the final

³⁰ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: The Wartburg Press, 1946), 402.

phrase δι' ἐπιστολῆς (“by letter”) Paul refutes anything written that contradicted his own teaching. No evidence is given as to whether a letter was written that forged Paul’s name or whether the Thessalonians misunderstood a letter written by Paul or one of his coworkers. Any theory of a lost letter bears no evidence or proof. It is not known what the source of the false teaching was, and Paul’s words here imply that even he himself did not know. Paul is simply indicating any means by which such a teaching would have come to them. Whatever or whoever it was, it gave the impression that the message came from Paul. Paul quickly eradicates any belief that such contradictory teachings came from him.

The verb ἐνέστηκεν is the perfect active indicative form of ἐνίστημι, meaning “it has come.” This verb tense captures the essence of the worry that overwhelmed the Thessalonians. They believed that the day of the Lord had already come and that they had somehow missed it. The perfect tense implies an action already taken place with the present sense, not merely approaching but already having arrived with continuing effects. Robertson in his grammar categorizes this verb as a durative perfect.³¹ To contrast their worried beliefs Paul proceeds to tell them why the day of the Lord had not come yet, and he describes what must precede that final day. F.F. Bruce observes,

Paul and his colleagues, who knew more about their converts’ problem than the exegete of today can know, judged that it would help them to be told something about the sequence of events leading up to the Day of the Lord. They had been taught about the actual events, but they needed to have them set in their chronological relationship.³²

Events to precede Christ’s return

3 Μή τις ὑμᾶς ἐξαπατήσῃ κατὰ μηδένα τρόπον. ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ ἔλθῃ ἡ ἀποστασία πρῶτον καὶ ἀποκαλυφθῇ ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας, ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας,

3) Do not let anyone deceive you in any way. For [that day will not come] unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction, is revealed,

The apostle continues to urge stalwart faith in God’s truth. Paul continues with his encouragement, taking a more direct approach. He uses a prohibitory subjunctive ἐξαπατήσῃ. The verb means “to cause someone to accept false ideas about something”, “to deceive / cheat.”

³¹ A.T. Robertson, M.A., D.D., LL.D., LITT.D., *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 895.

³² F.F. Bruce, *World Biblical Commentary*. Vol. 45, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: World Books, 1982), 166.

The subjunctive indicates the verbal action as being probable or intentional. The intent was to deceive them with this false message of Christ's coming, and yet Paul commands with the aorist form and the negative – do not let anyone even begin to deceive you, no matter what is used or said. The truth is: Christ has not returned, and when he does, no one will miss it. In the verses which follow, Paul offers substantiated proof that Christ's coming has not yet occurred. He presents the chronological order of events before the final day. D. Michael Martin relates, "What was important for Paul's argument was that the visible elements of these happenings were not evident; therefore the day of the Lord had not arrived."³³ One must keep Paul's purpose for writing this letter in mind as he goes on to describe the events that will precede Christ's coming. Gordon Fee states,

Everything that follows must be understood as Paul's response to this misinformation rather than as "teaching" about the future in its own right....Most of this is not new teaching for the Thessalonian church; thus there is much they already know, which will help them to "connect the dots" as it were, but which is simply not available to us.³⁴

This is important to keep in mind as one studies this section of the second letter to the Thessalonians. While one does not use this portion of Scripture alone to profess that the Antichrist has arrived, it is useful to "connect the dots" on those truths presented throughout Scripture concerning the Antichrist.

While this section was initially written to the Thessalonians to comfort them regarding the misinformation they had received concerning the Lord's return, the audience that now reads the letter is different from the original audience. Yet one must recognize that God has preserved this letter as part of his Holy Scripture to inform believers of all ages. This letter is not merely preserved for people to study the Thessalonians' misconceptions but to comfort present-day readers that the Lord has not yet returned. Along with the comfort, present-day readers must take care to recognize the events that Paul describes leading up to and surrounding the last day. As the letter was initially used to counter the false teaching that the day of the Lord had already come, it can still be used in that same sense today. For those false prophets of today who might proclaim that Christ has already come, this letter presents proof that he indeed has not. The

³³ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Vol. 33, *The New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 230.

³⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 278.

letter, however, can also be used in response to false teachings on the other end of the spectrum. In response to those who may proclaim that this world is not yet in the “end times,” this letter may be used to show that these events are of the present age. While it is certain that Christ has not yet come, these words from Paul confirm that he could return at any moment. God has not preserved this letter in a vacuum but has connected it with all of Scripture. These words of Paul that were originally written as a source of comfort serve also as words of warning in this present age.

The apostasy

Paul’s plea: Do not let anyone deceive you in any way, ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ (“for unless”).... The conjunction ὅτι plus the negative particle ἐὰν μὴ introduces a conditional sentence which begins with the word “unless.” This clause is the protasis of a future more vivid condition. It is, however, an ellipsis. The apodosis, the first clause of the condition, is absent but implied – “that day will not come unless...” The conditional sentence does not get finished, but the implication is that if the apostasy and the man of lawlessness do not come first, then the end has not come. Paul points to two conditions that must occur before the end comes. The first is the “apostasy” (ἡ ἀποστασία), defined as “defiance of established system or authority, rebellion, abandonment, breach of faith.” The word denotes either political rebellion or a religious rebellion against God. The religious rebellion would be to desert one’s faith. This noun, ἡ ἀποστασία, is a rarely used form in the New Testament. The only other time it occurs is in Acts 21:21, where it was falsely said of Paul that he taught the Jews who lived among the Gentiles “rebellion towards / abandonment of” Moses. Some commentators and exegetes are of the opinion that ἡ ἀποστασία directs focus of the revelation of the “man of lawlessness” to politics. Bruce writes: “It is a large-scale revolt against public order, and since public order is maintained by the ‘governing authorities’ who ‘have been instituted by God,’ any assault on it is an assault on a divine ordinance.”³⁵ One must, however, not take a single reference out of the wider context of Paul’s letter and attempt to construct a teaching on it. Since the word itself is rarely used and is only a piece of the events that Paul describes, readers and exegetes must consider it in line with the rest

³⁵ F.F. Bruce, *World Biblical Commentary*. Vol. 45, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: World Books, 1982), 167.

of Paul's words. Those who compartmentalize this person into a certain position are not considering this word in its wider context.

The man of lawlessness

This rebellion would be caused by and associated with “the man of lawlessness” (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας) whose coming is the second condition that must take place before Judgment Day. He “would be revealed” (ἀποκαλυφθῆ). ἀποκαλυφθῆ is the aorist passive subjunctive from the verb ἀποκαλύπτω, from which the English word “apocalypse” is taken. The word is used of the revelation of certain persons and circumstances in the end times. As Paul is speaking of the final coming of Christ, he uses end time language. George Mulligan in his commentary draws special attention to this word: “The emphatic ἀποκαλυφθῆ by which the appearance of this sign is described is very significant, not only as marking the ‘superhuman’ character of the coming spoken of, but as placing it in mocking counterpart to the ἀποκάλυψις of the Lord Jesus Himself.”³⁶

While Paul does not use the term ἀντίχριστος “antichrist,” the description and characteristics of this “man of lawlessness” indicate that this man is the Antichrist. The term ἀντίχριστος is only found in John's letters (1 Jn 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 Jn 7) where he speaks of the Antichrist as well as (lesser) antichrists that have come. John defines this ἀντίχριστος as a liar, a man who denies that Jesus is the Christ (1 Jn 2:22), one who does not acknowledge that Jesus is from God (1 Jn 4:3), and a deceiver (2 Jn 7). The fact that Paul does not use the term here does not mean that he is describing someone else. Here Paul reveals this “man of lawlessness” to be the Antichrist. He is not using the term as a title but rather as a description of his activities. Paul is speaking of the one dominant person who stands in opposition to and in place of Christ. Lenski says in his commentary, “We should not confuse the little antichrists with the great Antichrist, the antichrists *outside* of the visible church with the great Antichrist *inside* of it.”³⁷ One must not get confused with the use of terminology. The important thing to remember is the concept of this person described in Scripture, not the title used by the various writers. The term

³⁶ George Milligan, D.D., *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), 98.

³⁷ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: The Wartburg Press, 1946), 433.

“Antichrist” has simply been the title that society has chosen for this person as he has been described throughout the Bible. G.G. Findlay says: “This gigantic impersonation of evil is exhibited as the antagonist and antithesis of Christ in such a way that, while St Paul does not give to his conception the name *Antichrist*, yet this designation correctly sums up his description.”³⁸

There is a textual variant in this verse. Some versions have *ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἁμαρτίας* (“the man of sin”) instead of *ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας* (“the man of lawlessness”). *ἀνομίας* has both early and fairly widespread support including both **Ⲱ** and **B** uncials. Many of the sources come from Alexandria, but other regions have this variant as well. *ἁμαρτίας* also has early and widespread support from many church fathers. While both words have early and widespread support, the use of *ἀνομίας* in verse seven, as well as the masculine noun of the same root in verse eight, seems to support its usage here. Finally, the question of variant does not affect the translation or the doctrine. Since Paul is addressing a Christian community which is not under the norm of the Old Testament Law, it is apparent that the term here does not derive its main force from the Old Testament Law but simply means sin or unrighteousness. So “the man of lawlessness” and “the man of sin” essentially mean the same thing.

The identity of this “man of lawlessness” is not given by Paul. Therefore one must look at the following verses which explain his character and qualities and apply them to today. Ronald A. Ward follows the viewpoint that this “man of lawlessness” is yet to be revealed. He writes: “We can dismiss...any member of the papacy up to the present time. [The man of lawlessness] is a figure of the eschatological future and he can be identified only if the rebellion has already started. But has it?”³⁹ Ward, like many others, falls into the category of those waiting for this “man of lawlessness” to be revealed to mark the beginning of end times. He goes on to say:

The world is capable of carrying its rebellion against God even further than it has done hitherto. Even if it were granted that the rebellion had started, it would be difficult to identify *the man of lawlessness*. There seems to be no obvious

³⁸ G.G. Findlay, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1982), 162.

³⁹ Ronald A. Ward, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: Word Incorporated, 1973), 156.

candidate. At the most we can say that the present mood of the world could become the rebellion.⁴⁰

Ward's key words seem to be "obvious candidate." This mindset seems to be that once the Antichrist is revealed, everyone will know, everyone will be able to point and say without a doubt, "That man is the 'man of lawlessness' about whom Paul had warned us." Yet Scripture indicates that Satan's intentions are neither easily nor readily seen. He operates surreptitiously. In the Garden of Eden, he did not tell Eve that eating of the fruit would condemn the whole world in sin. Rather, with cunning and craft he presented disobedience against God as something enticing. As he approached Jesus in the wilderness he did not come out and say, "I want you to fail your mission." He approached Jesus with logical alluring arguments, even misusing Scripture in an attempt to lead Jesus into sin. In today's world Satan's approach might best be described as the use of familiarity. The illustration of the frog in the boiling pot of water comes to mind. Place a frog into a pot of water and slowly bring the water to a boil. The frog will remain in the water as the temperature increases. The frog acclimates to the temperature until it boils to death. Yet drop a frog into that same pot with water already boiling, and it will immediately jump out. This is one of Satan's tactics. He does not enter the battle head-on. Instead he sneaks in from behind. He works behind the scenes and takes advantage of the sinful nature. Satan tries his best in the time he has to slowly lead people astray without them even knowing it. Paul will later speak of this deception in verses nine and ten: "The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing."

Others, like William Hendriksen, present the thought that this "man of lawlessness" will be a specific person in the end times whom Christ himself will destroy. Following this line of thought, logic concludes that anyone in the past could not have been the Antichrist, for no one person opposed Christ in such a great way. Nor did Christ himself come and bring any person to their end. Hendriksen says, "It stands to reason that if the man of sin is a definitely eschatological person, he cannot be the first pope, nor the second, nor the third, etc., neither can he be the collective concept 'the papacy.'"⁴¹ It appears that this is a popular thought.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 156.

⁴¹ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of I and II Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 174.

Unfortunately, a focus on one word or phrase allows it to interfere with other clear teachings regarding the Antichrist. While Ward, Hendriksen, and many others hold their breath in anticipation for the revelation of this “man of lawlessness,” a proper application of the whole text indicate that he is already at work and leading people astray in the form of the papacy.

This person is also described by Paul as ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας (“the son of destruction / perdition”). Robertson defines τῆς ἀπωλείας as a descriptive attributive genitive which expresses a quality like an adjective but with more sharpness and distinction.⁴² In the New Testament the term regularly refers to the destruction of those who oppose God and his purposes (Mt 7:13; Ro 9:22; Php 1:28, 3:19; Heb 10:39; 2 Pe 3:7; Rev 17:8, 11). In John 17:12 the apostle states that Jesus calls Judas a “son of destruction.” The genitive here refers to the destruction that one would experience, not that one would cause. Gordon Fee says, “Thus the one who in his rebellion would play havoc by means of his evil powers is also the one whose ultimate destiny is his own ‘destruction.’”⁴³ This makes sense, since Paul was presenting words of comfort to the Thessalonian Christians. Comfort is found in the destruction of the one who would oppose God.

The actions of the man of lawlessness

4 ὁ ἀντικείμενος καὶ ὑπεραιρόμενος ἐπὶ πάντα λεγόμενον θεὸν ἢ σέβασμα, ὥστε αὐτὸν εἰς τὸν ναὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καθίσει ἀποδεικνύντα ἑαυτὸν ὅτι ἐστὶν θεός.

4) who opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or object of worship, so that he sits in the house of God proclaiming that he himself is God.

Opposition

Paul goes onto describe the character and attributes of this man of lawlessness. These are the key pieces of information used to determine who the Antichrist is. ὁ ἀντικείμενος is a present middle participle in the nominative case, both masculine and singular. It is an attributive adjectival participle used to describe the man of lawlessness, and it means “one who is in opposition to, to be opposed / hostile to.” This is God’s end-time adversary. The man is not merely one who is without the law but who is hostile to the law and acts against it. This person

⁴² A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 496-497.

⁴³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 282.

will cause the rebellion because he not only disobeys the law of God but he opposes it. It is not passive disobedience but active opposition.

Self-exaltation

Paul uses another attributive adjectival participle to describe the man of lawlessness. He is *ὑπεραιρόμενος*, “who exalts himself.” He places himself above everything that is called God, over every *σέβασμα*, “object of worship.” The noun *σέβασμα* is only found once outside of this verse, and that is in Acts 17:23 when Paul tells the Athenians he noticed all their “places/objects of worship” including the altar to the UNKNOWN GOD. The word signifies not merely an idol or a sanctuary but anything to which one shows reverence or worship. The “man of lawlessness” will not only exalt himself over the God of Christians but over every divinity or deity, whether it is true or not. This language is similar to that of Daniel 11:36a: “The king will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods.” In this passages from Daniel the prophecies were fulfilled in the person of Antiochus IV. Antiochus IV was a Seleucid ruler who desecrated the temple in Jerusalem and persecuted the Jews during the intertestamental period. He outlawed the Jewish religion and destroyed Jewish places of worship. It was his oppressive rule that led to the Maccabean wars, giving the Israelites a brief period of freedom. Because of Antiochus’ fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy, we can say that Antiochus was the immediate fulfillment of the prophecy. Yet we can apply Daniel’s prophecy further in the sense that it also describes the Antichrist. This is clearly seen when comparing Daniel 8 and 11 with 2 Thessalonians 2. It is fair to say that Antiochus IV is a type of the Antichrist. Lange writes, “Thus we believe that Antiochus IV served as a type of the great Antichrist to come and that Daniel 11:36-38 gives us the same description of the Antichrist which Paul gave us: ‘he will exalt and magnify himself above every god.’”⁴⁴

How he accomplishes such a feat is recorded for us in the following clause of actual result introduced by *ὥστε*: “so that he sits in the house of God proclaiming that he himself is God”. This man in his arrogance sits himself down in the house of God, that holy place, God’s dwelling here on earth, and he demands honor and praise in place of God. He is not appointed to this position but takes it for himself.

⁴⁴ Lange, Lyle. *For God So Loved the World*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005), p. 589.

Self-deification

The word that Paul uses for “house” is τὸν ναόν, often translated “temple.” It is often used in the general sense as a building in which a deity is worshipped. It is also used more specifically to refer to the temple in Jerusalem. Gordon Fee makes the bold statement: “The temple, of course, is the one in Jerusalem, which by this time had already been desecrated three times.”⁴⁵ Martin agrees: “Here it must be used literally if the passage is to depict an observable, symbolic event the church could recognize as an indication of the nearness of the day of the Lord.”⁴⁶ So too does Wanamaker: “The inner sanctuary in question is almost certainly the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple where God was thought by the Jewish people from OT times to dwell.”⁴⁷ This interpretation can lead to misconstrued conclusions. They conclude that the prophecy in Daniel 11 was in reference to Antiochus Epiphanes’ desecration of the temple in 169 BC. Some of these commentators say that Paul, knowingly or unknowingly, made a reference to Daniel using similar language. Some point to Gaius Caesar (Caligula) who erected a statue of himself in the temple in Jerusalem in AD 40. This instance, however, took place close to a decade before Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonians. Paul in the following verses speaks of this man to be revealed in his own time.

His words to the Thessalonians here are meant to be words of comfort, implying that they need not believe that the Lord has already come because the “man of lawlessness” has not yet been revealed. Paul’s letter would be confusing and unsettling for his initial audience if the reference to the “man of lawlessness” was made concerning someone who had already been revealed. Conceding this fact, Wanamaker states: “The well-known attempt...may well have given renewed substance to the belief that the temple would be desecrated by a usurper whom God would destroy in ushering in the new age.”⁴⁸ Fee also opines, “What cannot be known from

⁴⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 283.

⁴⁶ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Vol. 33, *The New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 236.

⁴⁷ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 246.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 247.

our distance is whether in the present passage Paul expected this to happen yet another time, or whether he was simply using well-known ‘anti-Christ’ events to describe the Rebel’s self-deification.”⁴⁹

Some commentators and exegetes take the word out of its context. They remove the word from the broader context of this section in which Paul speaks of the revelation of the “man of lawlessness” in futuristic terminology. Wanamaker boldly says:

2 Thes. 2:3f., however, reads like prophecy about historical events to come, and it is almost certain that this is how Paul and his readers would have understood it. The passage can no longer be understood as valid, since the temple was destroyed in AD 70 without the manifestation of the person of lawlessness or the return of Christ occurring. In order to maintain the continuing validity of the passage, some deny the obvious reference to the historical temple at Jerusalem.⁵⁰

Scripture, however, is not to be discarded as unimportant or as no longer applicable. God has preserved this letter of Paul as his inspired word. The comfort and warnings Paul gave to the Thessalonian Christians are words of comfort and warning to all generations as well.

Some have taken the word out of the context of this very passage. With the phrase ἐπὶ πάντα λεγόμενον θεὸν ἢ σέβασμα (“over everything that is called God or object of worship”) Paul does not limit the Antichrist’s usurpation of authority to the Christian or Jewish faith. Lenski says,

By saying “everyone called God,” etc., the Antichrist’s lawlessness is described as being worse than that of the worst pagans. Pharaohs and Roman emperors were deified and claimed divine honors, but never for one moment did they do this “against” any of their pagan gods, temples, altars, etc. Antiochus desecrated the Jewish Temple, but he did it by erecting an altar to Zeus. About thirteen years before the writing of this epistle Caligula, the Roman emperor, did the same by trying to have his own statue erected in the Jewish Temple, but even he was in no way opposing and exalting himself *against* the Roman gods and objects of worship.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 284.

⁵⁰ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 248.

⁵¹ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: The Wartburg Press, 1946), 409.

By maintaining that the word τὸν ναὸν refers to the temple at Jerusalem, many exegetes of this verse either ignore the context of the surrounding verses or disregard the validity of this portion of Scripture entirely. Jeske adds:

The adult instruction course in Thessalonica had included a pretty thorough section on eschatology; they should have known better than to suppose that Christ would come any day now. (Here, incidentally, is good advice when we are confronted with doctrinal unrest—abandon speculation, reason, and fashionable philosophy in favor of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. As Isaiah said, “To the Law and to the Testimony”).⁵²

Therefore one ought to direct attention away from τὸν ναὸν meaning “the temple (in Jerusalem).” If one keeps in mind the eschatological nature of this section of Scripture, the temple in Jerusalem is a difficult meaning to support because the temple will not be standing at the Last Day. Paul undoubtedly knew Jesus’ prophetic words concerning the temple recorded in the gospel of Matthew:

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (Mt 24:1,2).

Herod’s temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed in AD 70. This being the case, Paul’s letter would have caused confusion for the Thessalonians as they saw his prediction unfulfilled.

Finally, one must consider how much importance these new Christians in Thessalonica placed on the temple in Jerusalem. It certainly was not their place of worship. The events that took place there did not have a significant effect on their Christian lives, much less the lives of other Jews and Christians throughout the world. Rather the meaning here seems to simply be the general sense of “house of God,” the place where God is worshipped. While the term is most commonly used in the New Testament for the temple at Jerusalem, it is noteworthy to consider that the majority of these uses occur in the gospels. The gospels record Jesus’ ministry in and around Jerusalem. It is only natural that when reference was made to “the house of God” it referred to the temple, which was the central place of worship for the Jews at this time. Yet Jesus himself used the term to mean something other than the physical sanctuary in Jerusalem. In John 2:19 Jesus said, “Destroy this temple (τὸν ναὸν), and in three days I will raise it up.” While the Jews at the time thought he was speaking of the actual temple, John clearly says, “The

⁵² Mark Jeske, *An Exegesis of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10*. Online. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File. Available: <http://www.wlssays.net/node/1015>. (Date accessed: 9 September 2011), 3.

temple (τοῦ ναοῦ) he had spoken of was his body” (Jn 2:21). John later in his book of Revelation uses the term τὸν ναὸν to describe a heavenly sanctuary, not the temple in Jerusalem.

To suggest that the ναός here refers to the temple in Jerusalem would also be forcing a meaning upon Paul that he does not use in his letters. Paul uses the term ναός in three other letters (1 Co 3:16, 17; 6:19; 2 Co 6:16; Eph 2:21). Paul, speaking to believers in Corinth, says, “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple (ναὸς θεοῦ) and that God’s Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple (τὸν ναὸν τοῦ θεοῦ), God will destroy him; for God’s temple (ὁ ναὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) is sacred, and you are that temple” (1 Cor 3:16,17). Later in chapter 6:19 he speaks of the believer’s body as a temple: “Do you not know that your body is a temple (ναὸς) of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” Also in his second letter to that congregation he writes to fellow Christian believers saying, “We are the temple (ναὸς θεοῦ) of the living God” (2 Cor 6:16). Then in Ephesians 2:21, while speaking of Jews and Gentiles being united together in the body of Christ, he says, “In [Christ] the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple (ναὸν) in the Lord.” In all of these references Paul does not use ναός in reference to the temple in Jerusalem but in reference to the gathering of believers, united in Christ with the Spirit dwelling in each one. He uses ναός in the imagery of a human body, “of the spirit-filled body of Christians, which is said to be the habitation of God, therefore a temple.”⁵³

In light of the statement he makes in the following verse, “when I was with you I used to tell you these things,” together with the understanding that he proclaimed the same message in every city he entered during his missionary journeys, one is lead to understand his language to be the same in all his letters. Scripture seems to give evidence of the unchanging message about which Paul preached and wrote. In the book of Acts, Luke records Paul’s visit to Thessalonica saying, “They came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead” (Ac 17:1b-3a). Paul himself in his first letter to the Corinthians states the consistency of his message, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1

⁵³ Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Edition. 3rd ed. (University Of Chicago Press, 2001), Libronix.

Co 2:2). He also boldly does so in his letter to the Galatians, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” (Ga 1:8).

Therefore it is safe to conclude that Paul is not teaching something new. He is neither referencing the temple in Jerusalem nor a single physical building but as he has previously taught, the Church, the body of believers. And the Antichrist “sits himself down” (*καθίσαι... ἐαυτὸν*) in this place. Paul doesn’t mean merely the physical act of sitting but rather dwelling in, putting oneself in the seat of authority and power. He places himself in the house of God and demands the honor and worship that is meant for God alone. While Paul does not use the term Antichrist at all, Siegbert Becker notes this characteristic in the title “Antichrist”:

It is significant that the Greek preposition *ἀντί* (*anti*) in Koine usage almost always has the meaning “instead of” and not “against.” When the New Testament, therefore, uses the name “Antichrist,” the common understanding would be that he is a “substitute” Christ, and not just someone who is against Christ.⁵⁴

Hitchcock also makes a similar comment:

The Antichrist will not only be anti Christ in the sense he is against Christ; he will also be anti Christ in the sense of trying to put himself “in place of” Christ. He will be an amazing parody or counterfeit of the true Christ. He will be a substitute Christ, a mock Christ, a pseudo Christ, an imitation Christ.⁵⁵

Lenski suggests that with the verb *καθίσαι* the aorist tense indicates the one-time act, but it has the idea of permanency.⁵⁶ He did not simply seat himself down momentarily to see how it felt. He sat down in this seat with the intention of keeping it. And why stop there? Since he is in God’s house, in the seat of power and authority as well as praise and worship, he is so bold as to claim that he is God. Lenski comes to the conclusion:

Thus it is plain what the Antichrist would do, he would seat himself in the church like a pagan god and show himself off that he is God. [Paul] does not say that

⁵⁴ Siegbert Becker, *Revelation: The Distant Triumph Song* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985), 207.

⁵⁵ Mark Hitchcock, *Who Is the Antichrist?: Answering the Question Everyone Is Asking* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 43.

⁵⁶ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: The Wartburg Press, 1946), 410.

God and Christ are no longer God, that this “sanctuary” is no longer theirs, but that he, this man, has the right to sit there as a divine being. Anti-Christianity can go no further. The history of the church during these hundreds of years presents only *one* phenomenon of this type, the papacy.⁵⁷

This man of lawlessness will be very bold as he stands against the Lord. He will place himself in the very house of God and demand authority. Paul’s warning is as urgent and meaningful for people today as it was for the Thessalonians.

Paul’s call to remembrance

5 Οὐ μνημονεύετε ὅτι ἔτι ὢν πρὸς ὑμᾶς ταῦτα ἔλεγον ὑμῖν;

5) *Do you not remember that while I was still with you I was saying these things to you?*

Offering further comfort, Paul takes his readers back to those days when he was with them and reminds them of what he had taught. He emphasizes that the things he told them concerning Christ’s final coming remain the same; the teachings have not changed. Paul uses the indicative form *μνημονεύετε* with the negative particle *οὐ* in a question that expects the answer “Yes.” Paul is asking them, “You remember that, don’t you?” with the hope and expectation that they would think back to his time with them and remember the truths he had shared with them. This is the fourth of six instances where Paul asked the Thessalonians to recall what he had previously taught them.⁵⁸ By this communication, Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to be confident that he does not change his message. In contrast with the false messages, Paul reminds them what they first believed and were taught. This is to be a message of confidence for those who read his words today. The lessons Paul taught while on his missionary journeys, the letters he wrote that are contained in Scripture, have not changed.

The clause introduced by the conjunction *ὅτι* refers to the time when Paul was with them personally in Thessalonica. The clause includes the present participle *ὢν*. This is a circumstantial participle that describes the main verb, here the imperfect *ἔλεγον*, “I was saying.” The participle carries a temporal flavor, “while I was still with you.” The fact that Paul refers to his previous teachings while on his missionary journeys reiterates that what he writes in this letter regarding the end times, and specifically regarding the man of lawlessness, is the same as what he told them in person. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that Paul, as he travelled from

⁵⁷ Ibid., 415.

⁵⁸ Cf. 1 Th 2:9; 3:4; 4:1; 5:1-2; 2 Th 3:10.

place to place and spread the gospel, regularly taught the people concerning the end times, the final coming of Jesus, and the coming of the “man of lawlessness.” With this letter he was reassuring them that what he had told them had not changed. They were not to let anything that they had heard or read contrary to what he had originally told them distress them. Gordon Fee opines, “One can understand the argument as such easily enough; our problems lie with some of the details, to which the Thessalonians had access but we do not.”⁵⁹

The difficulty remains that present-day readers do not have what Paul had told the Thessalonians while he was with them. While this statement gave them confidence and assurance, the fact that his previous teachings are not recorded gives many today much grief. Fee also notes: “When one is reminded that the content of the present letter can be read aloud in about fifteen minutes, and that Paul had spent at least a few weeks there, it is perhaps more noteworthy that we learn as much as we do from his letters.”⁶⁰ In light of all of Paul’s letters, in light of what Christ himself said regarding the Last Day, and in light of the prophecies of Scripture, people of today can read what follows with reassurance. Paul continues to further describe the “man of lawlessness.”

The man of lawlessness is set loose

6 καὶ νῦν τὸ κατέχον οἴδατε εἰς τὸ ἀποκαλυφθῆναι αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ ἑαυτοῦ καιρῷ.

6) And now you know what is restraining him so that he will be revealed in his own time.

After his momentary reminder that he had taught them these things while with them, Paul goes on describing the events surrounding the coming of the “man of lawlessness.” Paul begins this sentence with the conjunction and adverb pair, καὶ νῦν. Fee brings up the challenge on which some exegetes as well as Bible translations differ: “Paul’s following his ‘and’ with the adverb ‘now’ is equally ambiguous and has thus led to two different understandings, depending on whether the adverb is truly ‘temporal,’ having to do with ‘the present time’ in some way or another, or whether it is ‘logical,’ having to do with the nature of the argument.”⁶¹ The latter is more of a progressive movement in Paul’s letter: “and now (moving on)...you know.” The

⁵⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 284.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 286.

former idea is that the “now” goes together with a word following it in the sentence. One option is to take it with the verb οἶδατε, so as to carry the sense that the readers “now (already) know” the thing restraining. Another option presented is to take it with the participle τὸ κατέχον, thus implying that they know the thing that is “now (currently) restraining” him. This is a moot point since there is not a definite answer. The focus is simply this: because of Paul’s ministry among them they knew this force. Paul spends no further time describing it to them. Keeping in mind that he wrote this letter to give them comfort and assurance, Paul simply asks them to recall what they already knew and use it to support his words here.

From the restraining force

After Paul directs their attention to what he had told them while he was with them, he encourages them to recall what they had learned from him. He uses οἶδατε, the perfect active indicative form of the verb οἶδα, which in its simplest definition means “to know, to have information about something.” One must assume that Paul’s original readers had been told previously by Paul because no further description is given in the letter. It was this knowledge of the direct object, the articularized accusative participle, τὸ κατέχον, that he brought to the forefront of their minds. τὸ κατέχον is from κατέχω, meaning “to prevent, hinder, or restrain.” This force is the thing that is preventing this “man of lawlessness” from being revealed. The participle is here found in the neuter gender, yet Paul uses the masculine gender in the following verse to describe the same force. Wanamaker in his commentary comes to the conclusion that “Timothy, as the bearer of the letter, would have explained anything not fully understood when he brought the letter to Thessalonica.”⁶²

While the Thessalonians would have had the oral training and teaching in regard to this matter, present-day readers have nothing more than Paul’s letters, which give no additional description of this restraining force. D.G. Barnhouse interprets “temple of God” in verse four as the Holy Spirit dwelling in us and says: “The believer’s body is the temple of the Spirit of God. Put all believers together then, with the Holy Spirit indwelling each of us, and you have a formidable restraining force. Now, it’s true, the church of Jesus Christ could be more bold in its

⁶² Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 250.

stance against evil.”⁶³ Yet do millennialistic beliefs get in the way of his interpretation? He goes on to say: “But just consider what this world will be like when the church is removed at the rapture!...For when the church is removed at the rapture, the Holy Spirit goes with the church insofar as His restraining power is concerned.”⁶⁴ Other suggestions are made by various commentators who take note of the neuter form in this verse and the masculine form in verse seven. Wanamaker discusses some of these suggestions:

- The neuter participle referred to the Roman Empire while the masculine is thought to have referred to the emperor.
- The restraining force as the neuter was the preaching of the gospel; while the masculine referred to Paul himself who preached the gospel.
- The participles simply mean God’s “delay” of Christ’s return.
- The restraining force is in reference to Isaiah 66 and refers to God “shutting the womb” or “restraining birth.”
- The verb is to be associated with the “person of rebellion” and means “to seize.” The neuter form refers to the prophetic seizure while the masculine form refers to some individual who was causing trouble with his false prophecy.
- The participles refer to an evil power, the principle of rebellion (neuter), and an evil person, Satan (masculine).⁶⁵

Some commentators head in the direction of this final point as they try to interpret Paul’s meaning in relation to this restraining force. Some take what is said in the following verse concerning the “mystery of lawlessness being already at work” and relate it to the restraining force. They take τὸ κατέχον as an evil power that is in line with the “man of lawlessness.”

Green mentions commentators who make such suggestions for τὸ κατέχον:

- The one holding him back is Satan and τὸ κατέχον is that power which rules over the forces of evil.

⁶³ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Thessalonians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), 100.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁶⁵ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 250-252.

- τὸ κατέχον is not a power that restrains but one that exercises his power on Satan's behalf.
- This power that holds back, that “seizes” or “possesses,” implies some form of demon possession.⁶⁶

While many interpretations have been made, no evidence exists to prove one over another. In the end one cannot know for certain. David Kuske favors one interpretation in his *People Bible* commentary: “That ‘thing,’ which was a matter of common knowledge to the Thessalonians, was the Word of God and the believers’ love for that Word.”⁶⁷ This interpretation is quite agreeable. The neuter could imply the power of the Word while the masculine could refer to God himself. In keeping with the context of comfort, it is preferable to see this restraining force as good rather than evil. Also, Paul writes to the Thessalonians that they knew something of this restraining force. The two things one can be certain that they knew were God’s Word and the Savior. Yet without Paul’s previous teachings to them, this remains an argument from silence. What can be determined from Paul’s words is that the “man of lawlessness” had not yet been revealed at the writing of this letter because of this restraining force.

In his own time

Paul follows with the phrase εἰς τὸ ἀποκαλυφθῆναι αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ ἑαυτοῦ καιρῷ (“that he will be revealed in his/its own time”). The preposition introduces an accusative with the infinitive construction. While there is no nearby antecedent for the accusative masculine pronoun αὐτὸν, it most likely refers back to the “man of lawlessness.” This is most natural, for it goes along with the aorist passive infinitive ἀποκαλυφθῆναι. This same verb was used in verse three to speak about the revelation of the “man of lawlessness,” and the same words will come up once again in verse eight. A debate arises as to which word this phrase is linked, whether τὸ κατέχον or οἴδατε. Others will also argue as to whether the εἰς introduces a result or a purpose clause. Lenski gets to the point when he says, “There is no need for debate. There is no question about the sense, for the words are quite simple: something is now holding up the revelation of

⁶⁶ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 316.

⁶⁷ David P. Kuske, *1,2 Thessalonians* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1984), 93.

the Antichrist so that this revelation will occur in its proper season.”⁶⁸ This is a time appointed for him by God, not a time of his choosing. Just as God is the one who restrains him, God is the one who allows him to be revealed. Ward states: “The man of lawlessness is straining at the leash, but he cannot come out into the open until God permits.”⁶⁹

The mystery at work

7 τὸ γὰρ μυστήριον ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται τῆς ἀνομίας· μόνον ὁ κατέχων ἄρτι ἕως ἐκ μέσου γένηται.

7) For the mystery of the lawlessness is already at work: but only until the one who is now restraining [it] would be removed.

Paul proceeds by offering words of warning and the encouragement to remain watchful. The word μυστήριον has the basic sense of “mystery/secret.” It is a mystery too profound for human ingenuity, and it transcends normal human understanding. It is rather the secret thoughts and plans of God. These mysteries are only known to mankind through their fulfillment or their revelation by God. In the gospels it is found only in one context, in what Jesus said to his disciples when they asked him why he spoke in parables. Matthew 13:11 records his words: “The knowledge of the secrets (τὰ μυστήρια) of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.” His words in parallel accounts are recorded in Mark 4:11 and Luke 8:10. These mysteries or secrets are not known by human understanding but must be taught by God. When it came to the disciples, they were taught these mysteries by Jesus himself. Paul too as a servant specially called by God would have received knowledge of these mysteries from God directly and so passed it on to those who believed. Here in this verse the “secret/mystery” is of “the lawlessness” (τῆς ἀνομίας). The lawlessness is still veiled in mystery because it has not yet been revealed. Exact understanding of the lawlessness is unknown to Paul. Lenski notes: “This revelation is exactly like the great Old Testament prophecies; it offers a succession of events, but the intervals of time are omitted. The whole is one view that is flat and without perspective.”⁷⁰ While exact understanding may be unknown, one is to apply the very real warning that Paul

⁶⁸ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: The Wartburg Press, 1946), 416.

⁶⁹ Ronald A. Ward, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: Word Incorporated, 1973), 159.

⁷⁰ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: The Wartburg Press, 1946), 417.

gives in this letter. The fact that Paul calls it a mystery does not indicate that it must remain a mystery until the end. Paul's words are words of warning and encouragements to be watchful. Gordon Fee clings too tightly to the word "mystery" and dismisses any application of Paul's words when he writes: "All speculations about later applications to one's own present realities, whether it be Luther's to the pope or twentieth-century North Americans' to Hitler or Russian communism, are idle speculations. From our present distance the best position would seem to be, 'Wait and see.'"⁷¹ This attitude of "wait and see" seems to capture the sentiment of some commentators and exegetes – simply one of watchfulness and anticipation for this great Antichrist to finally come.

This mystery "is at work" (ἐνεργεῖται). The verb is a present middle indicative from ἐνεργέω. The middle voice is always used with an impersonal subject; here "the secret force of lawlessness is at work," that is, it is in operation. The word is also often used of supernatural working. Green states, "Paul does not suggest that this *secret power* is divine but only that it is supernatural, and, according to the context, malignant and satanic."⁷²

The masculine form of the verb κατέχω is used here, ὁ κατέχων. Present-day readers do not know what this restraining force is, but its purpose is known. The verb form would take a supplied object, simply the pronoun "it," to refer back to the "mystery of lawlessness" previously stated. This person will "restrain" or "hold back" the "mystery of lawlessness." Stated earlier were the interpretations and suggestions of what this restraining force, both neuter and masculine, could be. Lenski suggests an answer to why both the masculine and neuter are used: "The collective or general sense of the neuter (here τὸ κατέχον) refers to all the elements or powers in the hands of the persons involved who are here named by the masculine ὁ κατέχων."⁷³

Speaking of this personal force, Paul says that "it would be removed" (ἐκ μέσου γένηται). The prepositional phrase ἐκ μέσου ("from among") in itself implies removal. This phrase is

⁷¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 288.

⁷² Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 317.

⁷³ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: The Wartburg Press, 1946), 419.

taken together with the verb γένηται, which is an aorist deponent subjunctive verb from γίνομαι. γίνομαι has a wide variety of meanings. Here it carries the meaning “to make a change of location or space, to move.” The phrase would literally mean then, “to move from among,” that is, to remove. The verb is in the subjunctive mood, for it goes together with the conjunction ἕως, which is used to denote the end of a period of time and requires a subjunctive. The verb is also third person singular, and ὁ κατέχων fits naturally as the subject. As many struggle with identifying this participle, one must keep these words of Paul in line with his purpose in writing – to counter the false teachings that the day of the Lord had already come. Bruce writes:

It is plain, moreover, that both the mystery of iniquity and the restraining agency are at work at the time of the writing of the epistle; the restrainer has not yet been removed, therefore the man of lawlessness has not yet appeared, and *a fortiori* the Day of the Lord has not yet arrived.⁷⁴

Paul himself did not know who the “man of lawlessness” would be, and yet he has given certain characteristics for which to look. One must take care not to interpret too much into what Paul does not say but rather simply to apply what he does say.

The lawless one will be revealed

8 καὶ τότε ἀποκαλυφθήσεται ὁ ἄνομος, ὃν ὁ κύριος [Ἰησοῦς] ἀνελεῖ τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ καὶ καταργήσει τῇ ἐπιφανείᾳ τῆς παρουσίας αὐτοῦ,
8) *And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will destroy with the breath of his mouth and whom he will abolish with the appearance of his coming,*

Once this restraint has been removed the Antichrist will be revealed. Paul uses the adverb τότε. Simply translated “then/thereupon” the adverb introduces that which follows in time. Paul is listing the events as they will take place chronologically. After all this has taken place, the Antichrist will be revealed (ἀποκαλυφθήσεται). This is the future passive indicative of the same verb that has appeared in verses 3 and 6. The uses of this verb in these three verses are the only places in Paul’s letters where the verb is applied to someone other than God. The one that will be revealed is defined by the noun ὁ ἄνομος. Verse 3 describes the man as ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας, with “lawlessness” being found in the genitive case to describe the generic “man.” The same genitive case, τῆς ἀνομίας, is used in the preceding verse to describe the “mystery.”

⁷⁴ F.F. Bruce, *World Biblical Commentary*. Vol. 45, 1 & 2 *Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: World Books, 1982), 170.

Here the very root word for “lawlessness” is used for the man himself. The term means “behaving contrary to the law, being without adherence to a moral code, violating moral standards.”

While word usage is important, taking the word in context is essential. The context of Paul’s letter here indicates a different connotation from the word’s typical meaning. The noun *ἄνομος* is used only eight times in the New Testament. It occurs once in the gospels, at Luke 22:37. Luke quotes Isaiah 53:12, who describes Jesus in his prophetic chapter on the crucifixion, “he was numbered with the transgressors (*ἀνόμων*).” This is the same reference used in Mark 15:28 in those manuscripts that include the verse (Mark 15:28 is a textual variant). Peter uses it in his Pentecost speech in Acts 2:23. Speaking of Jesus’ crucifixion he tells the Jews they put Jesus to death “by the hands of those not having the law” (*διὰ χειρὸς ἀνόμων*). Peter is referring to Gentiles, specifically the Romans. Paul uses the word four times in 1 Corinthians 9:21 in his section concerning the rights of an apostle. He says, “To those not having the law [*τοῖς ἀνόμοις*] I became like one not having the law [*ἄνομος*] (though I am not free from God’s law [*ἄνομος*] but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law [*τοὺς ἀνόμους*].” Paul also uses the word to describe Gentiles or pagans. He makes use of the same sense in 1 Timothy 1:9 as he speaks of the fact that the law is for “those not having the law” (*ἀνόμοις*). All of these references speak of those being outside the law, specifically God’s law, and therefore either are lawbreakers or Gentiles. The context of 2 Thessalonians 2, however, indicates that this “lawless one” is different from the rest. He is not merely a Gentile or a common lawbreaker. Paul speaks of this “lawless one” with eschatological words. This reference seems to indicate one who is the epitome of lawlessness.

The lawless one will be defeated

This “lawless one” the Lord himself will destroy (*ἀνελεῖ*). *ἀνελεῖ* is a future active indicative from *ἀναιρέω*. The verb is stronger than *ἀποκτείνω* (“to kill”). *ἀναιρέω* carries the stronger sense “to kill by violence, to get rid of by execution, destroy.” Paul gives the Thessalonians comfort with this word. No matter how evil this Antichrist will be and how much destruction he will bring, assurance can be found in the truth that the Lord will utterly destroy him. There will be no compromise, no stalemate. Jesus will be the undisputed victor.

By the breath of the Lord's mouth

The means by which the Lord will destroy the “lawless one” is τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ (“by the breath of his mouth”). While the noun πνεῦμα can mean “spirit,” most likely here it simply refers to the “breath.” Paul does not seem to be making reference to the Holy Spirit here but rather highlighting the power of the breath, the spoken word of the Lord. The simple fact that the breath of Jesus’ mouth will destroy this Antichrist shows the great power of the Lord. This is the same power the Lord has possessed since the creation of the world, as Psalm 33:6 records: “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.”⁷⁵ Even though this man of lawlessness seats himself in the place of God, performs mighty acts, and stands in opposition against God, he cannot begin to compare to the Lord. Ronald Ward comments, “The power of divine speech is remarkable, both to create and destroy.”⁷⁶

The clause that Paul uses here seems to draw from Isaiah 11:4: “He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.” Taking note of the connection to Judgment Day, Wanamaker says, “Isaiah 11 was an important messianic text in the early Church, and the judgment theme of Is. 11:4 was probably seen as awaiting its fulfillment with the parousia of Christ.”⁷⁷ A description of Jesus in John’s Revelation also supports this destructive nature of the Word of the Lord: “In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance” (1:16) and “Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations” (19:15). The writer to the Hebrews also writes about the power of the Word: “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (4:12). Isaiah in his prophecy also speaks of the power of the Word of God, the word of his mouth: “So is my

⁷⁵ This verse is translated in LXX Psalm 32:6: “τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ κυρίου οἱ οὐρανοὶ ἐστερεώθησαν καὶ τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ πᾶσα ἡ δύναμις αὐτῶν”. The same phrase τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ (“by the breath of his mouth”) is used in the Septuagint translation of the psalm. In this verse the phrase τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ στόματος αὐτοῦ is parallel to τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ κυρίου (“the word of the Lord”).

⁷⁶ Ronald A. Ward, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: Word Incorporated, 1973), 160.

⁷⁷ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 258.

word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (55:11). This powerful word is not only that which God speaks but that which God has written and recorded in Scripture through divine inspiration.

The source of this breath is not in question; however, there is a textual variant in the verse. The pronoun *αὐτοῦ* refers back to *ὁ κύριος* [Ἰησοῦς]. The inclusion of Ἰησοῦς is a textual variant. Evidence supports this word’s omission and inclusion. Both readings have early manuscript evidence.⁷⁸ Perhaps the simpler translation is preferred. The simpler translation would omit Ἰησοῦς from the sentence. Yet whether it is included or omitted, the meaning of Paul’s words remain the same. Undoubtedly by *ὁ κύριος* Paul was referring to Jesus. Ernest Best summarizes as follows: “Though ‘Jesus’ is widely and anciently attested it is not clear if it is the true reading: the whole phrase, ‘the Lord Jesus’, appears so often in this letter that scribes could easily have added ‘Jesus’ to ‘the Lord’; in any case ‘the Lord’ is certainly Jesus.”⁷⁹ Further support comes with the same personal pronoun *αὐτοῦ* used in connection with the noun *τῆς παρουσίας* (“the coming”) in the following phrase. This section of the letter as introduced in verse one is “concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*ὑπὲρ τῆς παρουσίας τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*), so the inclusion or exclusion of the name Jesus here does not cause any textual problems.

By the appearance of the Lord’s coming

As if the picture presented with the verb *ἀνελεῖ* was not enough, Paul uses another finalizing word *καταργήσει* to describe what will happen to the Antichrist. *καταργήσει* is from *καταργέομαι* and means “to cause something to come to an end or to be no longer in existence, to abolish, to wipe out.” Lenski suggests that because Paul uses two different verbs that have two different datives of means attached to them, this must be two different acts. He says, “While the Word blasts the lawless one, ‘the epiphany of the Parousia,’ the actual appearance of the Lord

⁷⁸ Some early manuscripts have just “the Lord” (B, D², K, Textus Receptus). Some early manuscripts include “Jesus” (a, A, D, G, P, Ψ).

⁷⁹ Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 303.

himself, will abolish completely.”⁸⁰ David Kuske and Paul Kretzmann agree in their commentaries that these will be two separate events. Kuske, believing that the breath of the Lord’s mouth is his Word, notes the first action having already taken place:

God’s Word held the Antichrist in check, until the Christian church slowly but surely lost its love for that Word. But when the Word was almost totally lost under the accumulated doctrines of the papacy...Jesus restored the “breath of his mouth.” At the time of Martin Luther and the Reformation, the Lord overthrew the tyranny of the papacy. By the preaching of God’s pure Word the gospel was restored. Many heard and believed the truth that they were completely saved by Christ alone, not by subjection to the Pope and his teachings. They were freed from the papacy’s tyranny.⁸¹

Kretzmann, similar to Lenski and Kuske, states:

Though Antichrist has now been revealed and exposed before all the world, and though the Lord Jesus, through the breath of His mouth, through the sword of the Spirit in the Word, is counteracting the work of Antichrist and destroying his work in many instances, the final destruction will come only at the appearance of His coming.⁸²

Clear teaching of God’s Word would keep the Antichrist in check; his power, however, would not be completely destroyed (*καταργήσει*) until the Last Day with the appearance of Christ’s coming. Such an understanding would call for a comparison/contrast between the two verbs *ἀνελεῖ* and *καταργήσει*. Rather than the harsh meaning “to do away with, destroy, slay, murder, killing by violence,”⁸³ *ἀνελεῖ* would more likely convey the secondary meaning “to do away with, to remove or withdraw the validation of something,”⁸⁴ since the Antichrist would not be destroyed completely until Christ’s final coming.

⁸⁰ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: The Wartburg Press, 1946), 423.

⁸¹ David P. Kuske, *1,2 Thessalonians* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1984), 95.

⁸² Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible: New Testament Vol. II* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1923), 363.

⁸³ Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd Edition*. 3rd ed. (University Of Chicago Press, 2001), Libronix.

⁸⁴ J. P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. 2nd ed. (United Bible Societies, 1999,) [Libronix].

Gordon Fee takes a different position based on the idea of the parallelism of Hebrew poetry.⁸⁵ He says,

At the same time, the poetic nature of this sentence seems to disallow altogether that these two lines of (now poetic) prose intend two different events. Indeed, it is the nature of such synonymous parallelism in Hebrew poetry that the second line usually simply elaborates or intensifies what is said in the first line.⁸⁶

While the parallelism of Hebrew poetry is something to recognize, one cannot necessarily make such conclusions with Paul's words here. When one looks at Isaiah 11:4, the first phrase is indeed intensified with the second. The subjects of both phrases, however, are similar: "the rod of his mouth" and "the breath of his lips." Here the subjects are two different aspects of the Lord Jesus; first, the breath of his mouth, and second, the appearance of his coming. This seems to imply two different actions or events. When these events will take place and how much time will be between them is unknown. Paul does not want to raise different concerns with the Thessalonians by causing them to fear this great evil force. There will be no question as to what will be the outcome. The Lord Jesus will stand victorious over the clearly defeated "lawless one."

The Lord will abolish him "with the appearance of his coming" (τῇ ἐπιφάνειᾳ τῆς παρουσίας αὐτοῦ). ἐπιφάνεια ("appearance") is a rather rare noun in the New Testament. Outside of this letter, it only appears five other times, all in Paul's pastoral epistles. Paul uses it once in 2 Timothy 1:10 to refer to the first appearance of Christ on this earth at his birth. The other four references (1 Ti 6:14; 2 Ti 4:1,8; Tit 2:13) all refer to his appearance in judgment as he returns in glory, much similar to the use here. D. Michael Martin suggests, "The term implies a visible demonstration of the presence of a formerly unseen deity. It may consist of a revelation of the deity himself or a revelation of his power through some visible act."⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Other commentators see this sentence as parallelism to describe the same action: Hendriksen (183), Ward (160), and Martin (243).

⁸⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 292.

⁸⁷ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Vol. 33, *The New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 242.

The power of the lawless one

9 οὗ ἐστὶν ἡ παρουσία κατ' ἐνέργειαν τοῦ σατανᾶ ἐν πάσῃ δυνάμει καὶ σημείοις καὶ τέρασιν ψεύδους
9) Whose coming is according to the working of Satan with every deed of power and deceptive signs and wonders

Although the man of lawlessness receives great power from Satan, he is not omniscient. That attribute belongs to God alone. Similar wording is used in this verse as it is used to describe Christ. Yet the major differences are from where the power comes and how much power it is. The relative pronoun οὗ refers back to ὁ ἄνομος. Therefore ἡ παρουσία (“the coming”) refers to the Antichrist. This same word is used for Christ’s coming, and yet here in direct contrast, it describes the coming of the Antichrist.

Power that comes from Satan

This “coming” is described with the phrase κατ' ἐνέργειαν τοῦ σατανᾶ (“according to the workings of Satan”). A parallel reference is found in Revelation as John describes a beast from the sea receiving his power from Satan, the great red dragon: “The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority” (Rev 13:2). The noun ἐνέργεια is often used of supernatural working. Here the working is described as that of Satan, as opposed to the working of God. Wanamaker notes: “Paul saw this as a work of Satan (κατ' ἐνέργειαν τοῦ σατανᾶ) because the type of opposition to God envisaged in this passage could only emanate from God’s ultimate opponent and because the power (δυνάμις) mentioned here could only have its source in the power of Satan.”⁸⁸ Ward draws an interesting conclusion: “As the lawless one is not Satan himself, we can see a further analogy. Just as Christ is the Mediator between God and man, so the lawless one is presented as the mediator between Satan and perishing man.”⁸⁹ Lenski highlights another parallel yet distinction: “When a second parallel is drawn between the revelation of Christ and the revelation of the Antichrist, we should note the difference: Christ’s revelation is active (1:7)⁹⁰, made by himself, the Antichrist’s is passive (2:3,6,8)⁹¹, one that is

⁸⁸ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 259.

⁸⁹ Ronald A. Ward, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: Word Incorporated, 1973), 160.

⁹⁰ “This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.”

made by the Lord.”⁹² While there are obvious distinctions between Christ and the Antichrist, there are certain parallels. Both have power. Christ has power as true God from all eternity. The Antichrist’s power comes from Satan. Although he is not omnipotent, Satan does have supernatural power. By providing the Antichrist with power he misleads people into thinking that the Antichrist is a servant of God.

Power to perform miraculous deeds

The words that Paul uses to describe the lawless one are *δυνάμει καὶ σημείοις καὶ τέρασιν* (“deed of power and signs and miracles”). These are all terms used in the gospels in reference to the miracles of Jesus. In his address to the crowd at Pentecost, Peter uses the three terms to describe Jesus: “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs [*δυνάμεσι καὶ τέρασι καὶ σημείοις*], which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know” (Ac 2:22). The phraseology here in 2 Thessalonians, however, is slightly different. Lenski calls to attention the singular use of *δυνάμει* and notes that only the plural form *δυνάμεις* is designated as works of divine omnipotence. “Such works are beyond Satan and the Antichrist who follows Satan’s norm. Satan has power, and his power works with this greatest tool of his, but his power is not omnipresence, nor can it perform *δυνάμεις*, genuine ‘power works,’ genuine miracles.”⁹³ Yet here the wonders of the man of lawlessness are powered by the devil. More parallelism is found in John’s Revelation describing the second beast, the beast from the earth:

He [the beast coming out of the earth] exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And he performed great and miraculous signs,...because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth (Rev 13:12,13a,14a).

⁹¹ “Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction”; “And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time”; “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.”

⁹² R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: The Wartburg Press, 1946), 425.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 426.

Siegbert Becker in his commentary on Revelation makes this remark regarding this beast:

Orthodox Lutheran commentators have generally seen in this beast from the earth a representation of the great Antichrist and, in harmony with the Lutheran confessions, have identified him with the pope of Rome. While the identification of the Antichrist rest primarily on what the Apostle Paul teaches concerning “the man of sin” in 2 Thessalonians 2, there are still some things said here that help to undergird the confessional Lutheran doctrine.⁹⁴

It is important to note that Jesus himself speaks of his enemies performing such similar wonders in Matthew 24:24 (also Mark 13:22): “For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles [σημεῖα μεγάλα καὶ τέρατα] to deceive even the elect—if that were possible.” The nouns σημεῖοις καὶ τέρασιν (“signs and wonders”) are to be taken as a pair. The genitive ψεύδους (“of falsehood, deceptive”) describes the combined pair. The signs and wonders are done with the intent to mislead God’s people. Lenski says, “Here the two words apply equally to the Antichrist’s pretended miracles. The papal apostasy is full of lie-signs and wonders. This mark alone is sufficient to identify the papacy as being the great Antichrist.”⁹⁵ Kuske in his commentary makes an interesting note regarding such signs and wonders by the papacy:

In Roman Catholicism the working of signs, wonders, and miracles by Satan is an integral part of the religious system developed by the papacy. Perhaps the best example is one of the requirements for a person to be declared a saint. Before the pope can declare a new saint, a commission must investigate reports about the person proposed for sainthood. It must establish as true that at least three miracles took place through the prayers of this person.⁹⁶

The fate of those who believe the lie

10 καὶ ἐν πάσῃ ἀπάτῃ ἀδικίας τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις, ἀνθ’ ὧν τὴν ἀγάπην τῆς ἀληθείας οὐκ ἐδέξαντο εἰς τὸ σωθῆναι αὐτούς.

10) and with every wicked deception to those who are perishing, because they have not been receptive of the love of the truth so that they would be saved.

⁹⁴ Siegbert Becker, *Revelation: The Distant Triumph Song* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985), 206-207.

⁹⁵ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: The Wartburg Press, 1946), 427.

⁹⁶ David P. Kuske, *1,2 Thessalonians* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1984), 97.

Unlike God’s plan of salvation which is based on the truth of God’s grace, the mission of the “lawless one” is to mislead. As if to rule out any other possibility Paul adds the phrase ἐν πάσῃ ἀπάτῃ ἀδικίας (“with every deception of wickedness”) to his list of deceitful powers given to the Antichrist by Satan. Martin writes:

The message of the lawless one springs not from truth or even from honest error but from a satanic and conscious intent to mislead. It is self-consciously contrary to God’s truth and will find its greatest audience among persons already hostile to God’s truth, that is, among “those who are perishing.”⁹⁷

They are perishing

With the dative τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις (“to those who are perishing”) Paul indicates the fate of those who believe in such false deeds. τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις is an articularized present middle participle in the dative case from the root ἀπόλλυμαι. This word indicates eternal ruin. Paul does not present this as a cause and effect situation. These people are not perishing simply because they believe in the deception of the Antichrist. Paul indicates the reason with the preposition ἀνθ’, which indicated the reason for something. Here ἀνθ’ with the attraction of the relative pronoun ὧν literally means “in return for which” or “because.”⁹⁸ The ultimate reason for perishing eternally is as Paul then explains, “they perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” F.F. Bruce highlights the distinction Paul makes here: “It is not the elect who are led astray in the present context, but those who are on the way to perdition, whose unbelief has made them gullible.”⁹⁹ This distinction is also indicated in the book of Revelation: “All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Rev 13:8).

Therefore, by using τῆς ἀληθείας (“the truth”) Paul is not referring to an abstract concept but to the gospel of Jesus Christ which he had clearly taught them while he was with them. This truth is in stark contrast to the falsehood and deception of Satan and the Antichrist. Ernest Best

⁹⁷ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Vol. 33, *The New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 245-246.

⁹⁸ Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Edition. 3rd ed. (University Of Chicago Press, 2001), Libronix.

⁹⁹ F.F. Bruce, *World Biblical Commentary*. Vol. 45, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: World Books, 1982), 173.

reiterates this thought: “The context implies that neither does truth mean truth in general (intellectual or philosophical truth), but the truth of the gospel, nor is wickedness misbehavior in general but the choice of Satan instead of God.”¹⁰⁰ The truth is Jesus Christ as Paul clearly says in his letter to the Ephesians, “Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus” (Eph 4:21). Jesus himself tells us this in the gospel of John: “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life’” (Jn 14:6). The phrase τὴν ἀγάπην τῆς ἀληθείας (“the love of the truth”) occurs nowhere else in the Greek New Testament. Understanding the truth to mean the gospel of Jesus and taking it as an objective genitive, however, one can easily understand the phrase – love that has as its object the gospel.

Those who reject the truth of the gospel are easy prey for Satan and the Antichrist. The verb ἐδέξαντο is an aorist middle indicative form from the verb δέχομαι. Here it has as its meaning “to indicate approval or conviction by accepting, to be receptive of.”¹⁰¹ The aorist shows their fate as having occurred in the past. Because these people have rejected the gospel, they are perishing. Paul contrasts their state of being lost with the truth of the gospel by which they would be saved (σωθῆναι).

God confirms their unbelief

11 καὶ διὰ τοῦτο πέμπει αὐτοῖς ὁ θεὸς ἐνέργειαν πλάνης εἰς τὸ πιστεῦσαι αὐτοὺς τῷ ψεύδει,
11) And for this reason God sends them a work of delusion so that they believe in the lie,

Paul goes on to describe the fate of those who follow the deception of this man of lawlessness. He begins verse eleven with the prepositional phrase διὰ τοῦτο (“for this reason”). The neuter demonstrative pronoun simply refers back to what Paul had said at the end of verse ten – because they have rejected the gospel. Therefore, “God sends them a work of delusion” (πέμπει αὐτοῖς ὁ θεὸς ἐνέργειαν πλάνης). F.F. Bruce says, “Here God sends ‘a working of delusion’ in the sense that to be misled by falsehood is the divine judgment inevitably incurred in

¹⁰⁰ Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 309.

¹⁰¹ Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd Edition*. 3rd ed. (University Of Chicago Press, 2001), Libronix.

a moral universe by those who close their eyes to the truth.”¹⁰² In his commentary, Martin expounds on this ἐνέργειαν πλάνης and names two suggestions as to how this “powerful delusion” is to be understood:

It is most commonly taken as a new element in the passage, a revelation that God, in the last days, will actively confuse the reasoning of the lost and guarantee their condemnation. ...It is also possible, however, to see the “powerful delusion” as a reference to the coming of the lawless one.¹⁰³

Trying to define this “work of delusion” is not necessary. God simply confirms them in their unbelief and their condemnation. This sense of God confirming people in their unbelief is nothing new in Scripture. God hardened Pharaoh’s heart only after Pharaoh hardened it himself.¹⁰⁴ Paul in his letter to the Romans makes a number of statements in this respect,

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ...Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another...Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts...Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done (Ro 1:21,24,26a,28).

Martin explains the clause here in this way: “God does not cause their unbelief, but he does set the stage for them to demonstrate it and thus openly earn their own condemnation.”¹⁰⁵

The preposition εἰς here used with an articularized infinitive expresses purpose, “so that.” The infinitive clause here is an infinitive with the accusative construction in which the accusative pronoun αὐτούς becomes the subject of the infinitive verb πιστεῦσαι, “they believe in.” The verb here takes the dative object τῷ ψεύδει, indicating that they believe what the lie says. Wanamaker

¹⁰² F.F. Bruce, *World Biblical Commentary*. Vol. 45, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: World Books, 1982), 174.

¹⁰³ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Vol. 33, *The New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 248-249.

¹⁰⁴ “When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again: He and his officials hardened their hearts. So Pharaoh’s heart was hard and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the LORD had said through Moses....But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let the Israelites go.” (Ex 9:34-35; 10:20)

¹⁰⁵ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Vol. 33, *The New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 247.

notes the lack of a governing preposition with τῷ ψεύδει. He says, “This is unusual and may serve to emphasize the absolute character of the ‘lie’ here and the ‘truth’ in the next verse.”¹⁰⁶

Paul brought up this truth/lie concept in his letter to the Romans where, speaking of the unbelievers, he says, “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worship and served created things rather than the Creator” (Ro 1:25). God confirms this delusion that those who are perishing have chosen for themselves.

They will be condemned

12 ἵνα κριθῶσιν πάντες οἱ μὴ πιστεύσαντες τῇ ἀληθείᾳ ἀλλὰ εὐδοκήσαντες τῇ ἀδικίᾳ.

12) so that all those who did not believe in the truth but who took pleasure in wickedness will be condemned.

Paul pens the final result of God’s judgment on the delusions the “lawless one” brings. The ἵνα expresses a purpose clause. The verb κριθῶσιν in the aorist passive subjunctive form implies the ultimate outcome of God’s judgment on them, condemnation. The verb is pulled forward for emphasis. Paul here is speaking of the Final Judgment. The same judgment that awaits the man of lawlessness awaits those who believe in him and reject the gospel truth. The reason for their condemnation is twofold. They “did not believe in the truth” (οἱ μὴ πιστεύσαντες τῇ ἀληθείᾳ), that is the gospel of Jesus. And along with this rejection of the gospel they “took pleasure in wickedness” (εὐδοκήσαντες τῇ ἀδικίᾳ). Martin comments on the verb εὐδοκήσαντες:

The verb...implies the exercise of personal judgment and will. But delighting in wickedness in this context implies far more than finding a particular sinful act enjoyable. It represents one’s basic attitude toward God. Faced with the opportunity to follow God’s truth, those who delight in wickedness are those who have chosen to reject God and follow the path of “wickedness.”¹⁰⁷

The Greek word ἀδικία (“wickedness”) is the same word that Paul used in verse ten to describe the deception of the lawless one. This word stands in contrast to the truth (ἀληθείας) Paul speaks of in the second half of verse ten. Paul thus describes the fate of those who follow

¹⁰⁶ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 262.

¹⁰⁷ D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Vol. 33, *The New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 250.

the man of lawlessness. On the Last Day they too, like him, will be condemned to eternal punishment.

Applying the marks of the Antichrist

Only after one has carefully studied Paul's words describing the attributes of the Antichrist can one begin to look for this person. By observing the "fingerprints" of the Antichrist, many have reached the conclusion that these "fingerprints" match those of the papacy. In his book *Christian Dogmatics*, Francis Pieper draws some comparisons between the attributes Paul has here described and the papacy:

1. The position of the Antichrist is called the "falling away" (the apostasy) [v.3]. This apostasy is rebellion against God and a defection from the Christian religion in the sphere of religion.
 - The doctrine of justification by faith is officially anathematized by the papacy.
2. The Antichrist has his seat "in the temple of God" [v.4] that is, in the Christian Church.
 - The papacy is found not outside, but inside the Christian Church, for within the domain of the pope are a considerable number of people who trust only in the merits of Christ.
3. The conduct of the Antichrist corresponds with his sitting in the temple. He acts as if he were God himself [v.4], claiming himself to be superior to all authorities in the world.
 - The pope refuses to subordinate himself to anyone; instead, he insists that he is supreme in Church and world. He asserts that only those will be saved who subject themselves to his authority. He alters God's Word and institutions at his pleasure and asserts infallibility. He demands that secular governments acknowledge his supremacy and with their powers serve his kingdom.
4. The Antichrist is not Satan himself, but his "coming is after the working of Satan" and his kingdom is built and backed by all manner of lying powers and signs and wonders [v.9].
 - The papacy, past and present, employs all manner of lying powers, signs and wonders to bolster its rule.
5. The Antichrist will remain until Judgment Day [v.8].

- It cannot be denied that to this day the papacy has continued to be what it has always been.¹⁰⁸

Adolf Hoenecke agrees in his *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*: “The papacy, and the papacy alone, fits all of these indications excellently, and is therefore the Antichrist.”¹⁰⁹

The papacy is the Antichrist

One would find it difficult to identify anyone who has affected and influenced the Church, the body of believers, more than the papacy. Throughout history the pope has been head of the Catholic (“universal”) Church. This is the church that claims to be the church of God. The pope has always claimed a significant role in doctrine and religious matters. Likewise he has played a significant role in society.

Throughout much of history the papacy has been clearly identified as the Antichrist. Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon indicted the papacy as the fulfillment of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Martin Luther outlined his reasons according to the marks of the Antichrist taken from Scripture.

But the pope in our midst is the real Antichrist. His is the exalted, subtle, fine, polished devil, who sits in the midst of Christendom and allows the Holy Scripture, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the keys, the Catechism, and marriage to remain. As St. Paul says: He sits (that is, rules) in the temple of God (2 Thess. 2:4), that is, in the Church of Christendom, in the midst of the people who are baptized and have the Lord’s Supper, the keys, the Holy Scripture, and God’s Word. And yet he rules in such masterly fashion that he at the same time elevates his decretals, . . . his human teaching, above the Word of God, so that Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the keys, the Gospel, and Christ Himself no longer do the Christians any good; for those over whom he rules are obliged to believe that they are saved through their own works.¹¹⁰

Philip Melanchthon also recognized the marks of the Antichrist as found in the papacy. He wrote:

First of all, the head of the ass is a description of the pope. For the church is a spiritual body, assembled in spirit. Therefore, it cannot and ought not have a man as its head, but only the Lord Jesus. . . . Nevertheless, the pope has made himself the visible and outward

¹⁰⁸ Francis, Pieper, D.D., *Christian Dogmatics* vol. III (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 463-466.

¹⁰⁹ Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* vol. IV (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999) , 233.

¹¹⁰ Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*. Vol. I. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 29.

head of the church, and so the pope is signified by the head of this ass, joined with a man's body. For it is not seemly that a man's body should have an ass's head, even so it is altogether unseemly that the pope of Rome should be the head of the church.¹¹¹

The Lutheran Confessions also clearly declared that the pope is the Antichrist. In the treatise entitled "Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope," Melanchthon wrote:

Now, it is manifest that the Roman pontiffs, with their adherents, defend [and practice] godless doctrines and godless services. And the marks [all the vices] of Antichrist plainly agree with the kingdom of the Pope and his adherents. For Paul, 2 Th 2:3, in describing to the Thessalonians Antichrist, calls him "an adversary of Christ, who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God." He speaks therefore of one ruling in the Church, not of heathen kings, and he calls this one the adversary of Christ, because he will devise doctrine conflicting with the Gospel and will assume to himself divine authority.¹¹²

And again:

Therefore, even though the bishop of Rome had the primacy by divine right, yet since he defends godless services and doctrine conflicting with the Gospel, obedience is not due him; yea, it is necessary to resist him as Antichrist. The errors of the Pope are manifest and not trifling.¹¹³

In the Smalcald Articles Luther forcefully contended that the pope is the Antichrist described in Holy Scripture:

This teaching shows forcefully that the Pope is the very Antichrist, who has exalted himself above, and opposed himself against Christ, because he will not permit Christians to be saved without his power, which, nevertheless, is nothing, and is neither ordained nor commanded by God. This is properly speaking, to exalt himself above all that is called God, as Paul says, 2 Thess. 2,4. Even the Turks or the Tartars, great enemies of Christians as they are, do not do this, but they allow whoever wishes to believe in Christ, and take bodily tribute and obedience from Christians.¹¹⁴

The papacy also indicts itself. In the sixth session of the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, which served as the Roman Catholic confession against the dissenters of the Reformation, the council wrote:

¹¹¹ Clyde L. Manschreck, *Melanchthon: The Quiet Reformer*. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), 108.

¹¹² Philip Melanchthon, "Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope," in *Triglott Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999), Treatise 39.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, Treatise 57.

¹¹⁴ *Triglott Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church*. (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999), SA II, IV, 10-11, 475.

If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema.¹¹⁵

The council also wrote:

If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema.¹¹⁶

Such statements make it difficult to deny that the papacy identifies with the description of the Antichrist.

Then and now

This identification is not merely one held by Luther and Melanchthon. Thomas Nass says, “Without a doubt, it has not been a Lutheran idiosyncrasy to say that the pope is the Antichrist. It has been a Protestant commonplace.”¹¹⁷ He lists all of these men and church bodies who throughout the centuries have said the pope is the Antichrist:

- Bishop Arnulf of Rheims (already in A.D. 991)
- The Italian author Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) in his *Inferno*
- John Wyclif in England (1324-1384)
- John Hus in Bohemia (1373-1415)
- Jerome Savonarola in Italy (1452-1498)
- John Knox in Scotland (1514-1572)
- Thomas Cranmer in England (1489-1556)
- Heinrich Bullinger in Switzerland (1504-1575)
- John Calvin in Switzerland (1509-1564)
- Theodore Beza in Switzerland (1519-1565)
- The Westminster (Presbyterian) Confession of 1647
- The Baptist Confession of 1688
- Jonathan Edwards, the leader of the “Great Awakening” (1703-1758)
- John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church (1703-1791)
- Charles Hodge, Princeton Seminary professor (1797-1878)

¹¹⁵ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, ed. trans. Rev. H. J. Schroeder, (St. Louis: B Herder Book Co., 1941), 43.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 43.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Nass, *End Times: Jesus is Coming Soon* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2011), 92.

- Charles Spurgeon, Baptist preacher in England (1834-1892).¹¹⁸

In the early 20th century, there were those in Lutheran circles who felt that the teaching of the pope as Antichrist could be viewed as an “historical opinion” that once was valid but no longer applies. The American Lutheran Church (ALC) of 1930 produced a document titled the “Sandusky Declaration.” It stated:

. . . we accept the historical judgment of Luther in the Smalcald Articles . . . that the Pope is the Antichrist . . . because among all the antichristian manifestations in the history of the world and the Church that lie behind us in the past there is none that fits the description given in 2 Thess. 2 better than the Papacy . . .

The answer to the question whether in the future that is still before us, prior to the return of Christ, a special unfolding and a personal concentration of the antichristian power already present now, and thus a still more comprehensive fulfillment of 2 Thess. 2 may occur, we leave to the Lord and Ruler of Church and world history.¹¹⁹

Lutheran churches in general tend to follow this “open question” concept of the Antichrist. In his essay, “A Scriptural and Historical Survey of the Doctrine of the Antichrist,” John Brug says, “I believe we would be amazed and rejoice to get a statement half as strong from the ELCA, which is the successor body to the ALC.”¹²⁰

Those in the largest Lutheran church body in America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) confirm this with their own words. In an article on the Antichrist in the ELCA’s quarterly, *The Lutheran Quarterly*, George Drach writes: “Later Lutheran theologians . . . softened Luther’s positive stand by designating the papacy not as the Antichrist but as one of the antichrists in the world.”¹²¹ He then comments, “It cannot be denied that the papacy with its fundamental errors of doctrine and practice is stamped with evident antichristian marks.”¹²² And finally he says, “Russian Communism, also, as it operates in our times, by its

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 91-92.

¹¹⁹ “Statement on the Antichrist,” in *WELS Doctrinal Statements*. Online. Available: <http://www.wels.net/about-wels/doctrinal-statements/antichrist?page=0,1>. (Date accessed: 28 February 2012.)

¹²⁰ John F Brug, “A Scriptural and Historical Survey of the Doctrine of the Antichrist”. 1988. Online. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File. Available: <http://www.wlsessays.net/node/376>. (Date accessed: 9 September, 2011.)

¹²¹ George Drach, “Antichrist” in *The Lutheran Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1949), 461.

atheistic teachings, its unethical practices and its persecution of professing Christians, clearly bears the marks of Antichrist.”¹²³ The ELCA also falls back on the concept of “historical opinion” in regard to the Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century. In an article from the ELCA’s *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* Kathryn Kleinhans writes: “The Smalcald Articles explicitly identify the pope as the Antichrist (Part II, Article IV), but many of us would read that passage not as dogma but as a reflection of the historical circumstances of the papacy in the early sixteenth century without thinking that we were thereby rejecting the Confessions or their authority.”¹²⁴

The second largest Lutheran church body in America, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), does not regard the teaching of the pope as Antichrist to be an “historical opinion” or an “open question.” According to the “Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod,” the Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod on the Antichrist adopted in 1932 reads:

As to the Antichrist we teach that the prophecies of the Holy Scriptures concerning the Antichrist, 2 Thess. 2:3-12; 1 John 2:18, have been fulfilled in the Pope of Rome and his dominion. All the features of the Antichrist as drawn in these prophecies, including the most abominable and horrible ones, for example, that the Antichrist "as God sitteth in the temple of God," 2 Thess. 2:4; that he anathematizes the very heart of the Gospel of Christ, that is, the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins by grace alone, for Christ's sake alone, through faith alone, without any merit or worthiness in man (Rom. 3:20-28; Gal. 2:16); that he recognizes only those as members of the Christian Church who bow to his authority; and that, like a deluge, he had inundated the whole Church with his antichristian doctrines till God revealed him through the Reformation -- these very features are the outstanding characteristics of the Papacy. (Cf. Smalcald Articles, Triglot, p. 515, Paragraphs 39-41; p. 401, Paragraph 45; M. pp. 336, 258.) Hence we subscribe to the statement of our Confessions that the Pope is "the very Antichrist." (Smalcald Articles, Triglot, p. 475, Paragraph 10; M., p. 308.)¹²⁵

¹²² Ibid., 461.

¹²³ Ibid., 461.

¹²⁴ Kathryn A. Kleinhans, “Sources of Authority in the Lutheran Tradition: Back to the Future” in *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, Lutheran University Press, September 2011. Available: <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/September-2011/Sources-of-Authority-in-the-Lutheran-Tradition.aspx>. (25 February 2012.)

¹²⁵ “A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod: Of the Antichrist,” in *Project Wittenberg*, Commission of Theological and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (St. Louis,

While officially this has been the Missouri Synod's stance, the position seems to differ from time to time, pastor to pastor, congregation to congregation. In 1982, Richard Hillenbrand wrote a thesis on the Missouri Synod's position regarding the Antichrist. In it he comments,

Missouri is a vibrant, living organism that contains many diverse individuals. Some are more conservative than others; some are more vocal; some are gentle and willing to bend; some are ignorant, but interested in learning; others don't care all that much. This is the makeup of the Synod today, and probably always will be. There might be slight or even significant shifts towards the left or towards the right, but generally the makeup remains constant.¹²⁶

Later he indicates that this flexibility within the synod exists concerning the doctrine of the Antichrist:

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, for the most part, has followed Luther in its stance on the Antichrist. It identifies this figure with the papacy on the basis of II Thessalonians 2. Because a careful reading of both Scripture (I and II John) and the Confessions does suggest this view, but does not absolutely necessitate it, there have been dissenters from this viewpoint – especially more recently. In a sense, these men seem to be following Melancthon – allowing for the possibility of the more traditional view and more than ready to agree that the papacy is one of the most antichristian institutions this world has ever seen, but hesitating to denounce it as “the very Antichrist.” At the present time, such a view seems to be permissible in Missouri, but historically has not been her traditional view.¹²⁷

The concept of leaving the doctrine on the Antichrist as an “historical opinion” or an “open question” would literally destroy the Lutheran identity of those confessing it. The Confessions found in the Lutheran *Book of Concord* serve as the document that gives the church body its Lutheran identity and confession. When the doctrine on the Antichrist is denied, what is stopping one from denying any other doctrine expressed therein?

Conclusion

Holding to what Scripture has clearly taught and what the Lutheran Confessions corroborate, the WELS's statement on the Antichrist correctly summarizes why this teaching is not an “historical opinion” or “open question”:

MO: Concordia Publishing House, adopted 1932). Online. Available: <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/mosynod/web/doct-17.html>. (Date accessed: 28 February 2012.)

¹²⁶ Richard P. Hillenbrand, “An evaluation of the position of the Missouri Synod on the Antichrist” (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1982), 42.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 44.

Therefore on the basis of a renewed study of the pertinent Scriptures we reaffirm the statement of the Lutheran Confessions, that “the Pope is the very Antichrist” (cf. Section II), especially since he anathematizes the doctrine of the justification by faith alone and sets himself up as the infallible head of the Church.

We thereby affirm that we identify this “Antichrist” with the Papacy as it is known to us today, which shall, as 2 Thessalonians 2:8 states, continue to the end of time, whatever form or guise it may take. This neither means nor implies a blanket condemnation of all members of the Roman Catholic Church, for despite all the errors taught in that church the Word of God is still heard there, and that Word is an effectual Word. Isa 55:10, 11; cf. Apology XXIV, 98.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ “Statement on the Antichrist,” in *WELS Doctrinal Statements*. Online. Available: <http://www.wels.net/about-wels/doctrinal-statements/antichrist?page=0,1>. (Date accessed: 28 February 2012.)

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