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**Antichrist in the Scriptures and  
the Lutheran Confessions:  
The Relevance of Reformation Exegesis  
of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 for the Church Today**

**Charles A. Gieschen**

Whenever we interpret a biblical text, we do not come to that text *tabula rasa*—with a blank-slate mind—but we stand on the shoulders of close to two thousand years’ worth of interpreters and interpretation. The Holy Spirit was active not only in the recording of God’s salvific deeds and words in the Scriptures by prophets and apostles, but also within the church when that word has been interpreted faithfully and proclaimed. In a Lutheran church like ours, in which we subscribe unconditionally to the Lutheran Confessions as reflecting correct exposition of the Scriptures, we are acutely aware that we stand on the shoulders of faithful Christians from the past centuries who have written creeds, confessions, and commentaries. Included in this number are our Reformation forefathers from the sixteenth century. Our subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, however, does not mean that everything about every biblical text has been expressed or that there are not new applications of the meaning of these texts in contemporary contexts. In short, we have much to learn from the past, but we still have exegetical work to do in the twenty-first century.

This study will present the ongoing relevance of Reformation exegesis by examining one prominent example from the Reformation period: the interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12. Even though this text does not contain the title *ἀντίχριστος* (“Antichrist”) found in 1–2 John, it does mention *ὁ ἀντικείμενος* (“the Adversary”) and thus became the central text among Luther and the Lutheran reformers for writing and teaching about Antichrist. Much of that teaching about Antichrist, but not all of it, focused on identifying the papacy as Antichrist. This relationship between 2 Thessalonians 2, the Antichrist, and the papacy since the time of the Reformation is affirmed by John Stephenson, who states, “The *sedes doctrinae* for the confessional dogma that the mystery of Antichrist has found

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realization and fulfillment in the papacy is the second chapter of Second Thessalonians.”<sup>1</sup> This study will demonstrate that the Reformation exegesis about Antichrist based on 2 Thessalonians 2 was a bit broader than simply identifying the papacy as Antichrist and will argue for the ongoing value of this exegesis in our current context. Furthermore, it will argue that 2 Thessalonians 2 testifies to a complex Antichrist reality that entails both the broad and ongoing attack of Satan against the church in various people and events in every generation of these latter days (“the *mystery* of lawlessness”) as well as an individual satanic figure who will be manifest shortly before the return of Christ and annihilated by Christ upon his return (“the *Man* of Lawlessness”).

### I. The Influence of Luther on the Use of 2 Thessalonians 2, Especially in the Smalcald Articles (1537)

In his engaging history of teaching about Antichrist, Bernard McGinn argues that there was significant discussion of Antichrist during the late medieval period before the Reformation, with both the papacy and Islam being identified as Antichrist in some of these discussions.<sup>2</sup> A prominent example of this is the writing of John Wycliffe, who began to make use of his papal antichrist rhetoric after Pope Gregory XI condemned some of his views in 1377. He did not go after a particular pope, but the office itself, as seen in his own words:

From this supposition, depending on the way of life of Christ and the way of life of the pope, it will appear to the knowledgeable faithful that the pope is the evident Antichrist, not just the individual person who sets up more laws that are against Christ’s law, but the multitude of popes for the time of the Church’s endowment—and of cardinals, bishops, and their other accomplices. Their person of Antichrist is a monstrous composite one.<sup>3</sup>

Although teaching about Antichrist had some prominence before the Reformation as McGinn has demonstrated, Hermann Sasse emphasizes that Antichrist is a teaching no previous or subsequent generation has focused on as much as Luther.

In Christian history there is no one who has so deeply probed the mystery of the Antichrist as Martin Luther, no one who so shuddered before it. In Roman theology, even in the greatest teachers of the Roman Church, the Antichrist has

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Stephenson, *Eschatology*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics 13 (Fort Wayne: Luther Academy, 1993), 79.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 143–199.

<sup>3</sup> John Wycliffe, *Opus evangelicum*, Book 3, as quoted in McGinn, *Antichrist*, 182.

always appeared as a comparatively harmless being. This figure of the distant end time may indeed be painted with the most frightening colors, but one need not be too frightened when one knows that this monster will rule for “not too long” a time, that is, three and a half years. It belongs to the essence of the Roman Church that it puts into a more or less distant future what Holy Scripture says about the events of the end time. For the present, then, [according to the Roman Church] Christians need not be much concerned about it. For Luther the Antichrist was not so innocuous.<sup>4</sup>

Why did teaching about Antichrist play such a large role in Luther’s proclamation? McGinn argues that it was not important to Luther’s thought in the early years leading up to the Reformation but gained prominence when Luther became more aware of the abuses of the papacy and realized that the papacy as an office was largely responsible for many of the things that he was opposing, such as indulgences.<sup>5</sup> Luther himself says as much when he reflects on the subject, alluding to 2 Thessalonians 2 in the process.

After the pope, with force and cunning, usurped all power and authority, so that he could not be humiliated either by emperor or king, then it was fitting that by the power of the word the Son of Perdition should be revealed. However, I came upon it quite innocently; for I never would have dreamed this twenty years prior to that day. Rather, if someone else had taught such a thing, I would have damned and burned him. But God is the cause, because he did such things miraculously.<sup>6</sup>

Luther, therefore, went from hardly thinking about the identification of Antichrist in 1517 to writing strongly about it in three treatises published in 1520: *To the Christian Nobility*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *Against the Bull of the Antichrist*. Sasse argues that Luther’s focus on Antichrist was part and parcel of his eschatological outlook of living in the end times of the world.

Is this to be explained by the influence of the apocalypticism of the Late Middle Ages, nourished by a mood born of the feeling that a dying world was going under, as well as by the despair of pious people in regard to the ever-more-decadent church? This certainly was an influence upon Luther and upon the whole century of the Reformation. He, along with most of his contemporaries,

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<sup>4</sup> Hermann Sasse, “Last Things: Church and Antichrist,” in *We Confess the Church*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 115.

<sup>5</sup> McGinn, *Antichrist*, 201–208; see also Scott Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993), 3:438.21–439.2, no. 3593, as translated and quoted in Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy*, 160–161.

was convinced of living in the eventide of the world. He never supposed that the world would last much longer.<sup>7</sup>

It is apparent that Luther did not attack the papacy because of its moral weakness, but because of its negative impact on the gospel. He states as much in the Smalcald Articles (1537): “The invocation of saints is also one of the abuses of the Antichrist that is in conflict with the first, chief article and that destroys the knowledge of Christ” (SA II II 25).<sup>8</sup> Luther identified the papacy as Antichrist primarily because this office was responsible for the false teaching that did not allow the gospel to be proclaimed. Sasse affirms this assessment when he writes, “For Luther, the pope is the Antichrist because his doctrine is anti-Christian. With his doctrine he casts the Lord Christ from His throne and puts himself there, there in the place which is Christ’s alone. Christendom, then, must choose between the Gospel and the doctrine of the pope.”<sup>9</sup>

What was Luther’s exegetical basis in Scripture for the conclusion that the papacy is the Antichrist? It was not 1–2 John, because there the Antichrist is defined as those who deny that Jesus came in the flesh (2 John 7). It may have been the word *ἀντίχριστος* (“Antichrist”), which means “opposer of Christ.”<sup>10</sup> It does appear that 2 Thessalonians 2 also played a role in Luther’s conclusion, especially Paul’s statement that the Man of Lawlessness exalts himself above every so-called god. Luther brings this into his argument in the Smalcald Articles.

This business [i.e., his rule over the church] shows overwhelmingly that he is the true end-times Antichrist, who has raised himself over and set himself against Christ, because the pope will not let Christians be saved without his authority (which amounts to nothing, since it is not ordered or commanded by God). This is precisely what St. Paul calls “setting oneself over God and against God” [cf. 2 Thess 2:4]. Neither the Turks nor the Tartars, despite being great enemies of the Christians, do any such thing. They allow whoever desires it to have faith in Christ, and they receive physical tribute and obedience from the Christians.

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<sup>7</sup> Sasse, “Last Things: Church and Antichrist,” 115.

<sup>8</sup> All quotations from the Lutheran Confessions in this article are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Sasse, “Last Things: Church and Antichrist,” 117.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 91, hereafter BDAG. Given the meaning of the preposition *ἀντι* (“in the place of”; see BDAG, 87), another possible meaning of *ἀντίχριστος* is “in the place of Christ.”

The pope, however, will not allow faith, but asserts instead that anyone who is obedient to him will be saved. (SA II IV 10–12)

Shortly after this statement, Luther returns to criticizing the teaching of the papacy as being of the devil because the papacy does not allow the teaching and preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Finally, that the pope in contradiction to God promotes his lies about Masses, purgatory, monastic life, one's own works, and worship (which are the essence of the papacy) is nothing but the devil through and through. He damns, slays, and plagues all Christians who do not exalt and honor his abominations above all things. Therefore, as little as we can worship the devil himself as our lord or god, so we cannot allow his apostle, the pope or Antichrist, to govern as our head or lord. His papal government is characterized by lying and murder and the eternal ruin of body and soul, as I have demonstrated in many books. (SA II IV 14)

Near the end of his life, Luther became even blunter about this matter. In *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil* (1545), he writes,

Praise God, not one good Christian conscience can believe anything but that the pope is not and cannot be the head of the Christian church and cannot be God's or Christ's vicar. Instead, he is the head of the accursed church of all the worst scoundrels on earth, a vicar of the devil, an enemy of God, an adversary of Christ, a destroyer of Christ's churches; a teacher of lies, blasphemies, and idolatries; an arch church-thief and church robber of the keys and all the goods of both the church and the temporal lords; a murderer of kings and an inciter of all kinds of bloodshed; a brothel-keeper over all brothel-keepers and all vermin, even that which cannot be named; an Antichrist, a man of sin and child of perdition [II Thess. 2:3]; a true werewolf. Whoever does not want to believe this may keep on riding with his god, the pope; I, a qualified teacher and preacher in the church of Christ responsible for telling the truth, have herewith done my share.<sup>11</sup>

Luther is known for this almost singular focus on the papacy as Antichrist. He does, however, also include Islam and other heresies in the realm of Antichrist; but in his view, they are not as strong of a manifestation of Antichrist. That is apparent in this statement from his treatise *Confession concerning Christ's Supper* (1528),

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil* (1545): vol. 41, pp. 357–358 in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), hereafter AE.

which also shows that Luther used Paul's "sits in the temple of God and exalts himself"<sup>12</sup> language from 2 Thessalonians 2:4:

The papacy is assuredly the true realm of Antichrist, the real anti-Christian tyrant, who sits in the temple of God and rules with human commandments, as Christ in Matthew 24 and Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2 declare; although the Turks and all heresies, wherever they may be, are also included in this abomination which according to prophecy will stand in the holy place, but are not to be compared to the papacy.<sup>13</sup>

Luther had a tremendous impact on Reformation discussions of Antichrist. However, his voice was not the only one, as will be seen now in an overview of the other Lutheran Confessions that mention Antichrist.

## II. The Interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2 in Other Confessional Writings

Several characteristics of the Antichrist emerge, most of them based directly or indirectly on Daniel 11:36–39 and 2 Thessalonians 2, as one examines references to the Antichrist in the rest of the Lutheran Confessions. It is noteworthy that Paul is drawing directly on Daniel 11:36 when he states that the Man of Lawlessness is "the one who opposes and exalts himself over every so-called god or object of worship" (2 Thess 2:4). The first characteristic that we find is the identification of *the singular Antichrist as a reality within the Christian church*, as already seen above when discussing the Smalcald Articles. This understanding is based on interpreting "the temple of God" mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 as a symbolic reference to the church, rather than the Jerusalem temple or any other earthly center of worship. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531) states,

Neither do the sacraments lose their efficacy when they are administered by the wicked. Indeed, we may legitimately make use of the sacraments that are administered by evil people. For Paul also predicts [2 Thess. 2:4] that the Antichrist "takes his seat in the temple of God," that is, he will rule and hold office in the church. (Ap VII and VIII 3–4)

The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (1537), authored by Melancthon shortly after Luther wrote the Smalcald Articles, also makes the point that the Antichrist must be within the Christian church because of Paul's mention that "he takes his seat in the temple of God" (2 Thess 2:4).

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<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are the author's translation.

<sup>13</sup> Luther, *Confession concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), AE 37:367–368.

It is well known, however, that the Roman pontiffs and their minions defend ungodly doctrines and worship practices. Moreover, the marks of the Antichrist clearly fit the reign of the pope and his minions. For describing the Antichrist to the Thessalonians, Paul calls him an adversary of Christ who “exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God” [2 Thess. 2:4]. He is speaking, therefore, of someone reigning in the church, not of pagan rulers, and calls that one an adversary of Christ because he will invent doctrine that conflicts with the gospel and will arrogate to himself divine authority. (Tr 39)

The second characteristic of Antichrist, which is the primary characteristic of Antichrist as expressed in the Lutheran Confessions, is *the teaching of Antichrist opposes the teaching of Christ*. The Apology centers the kingdom of the Antichrist in the teaching of righteousness by works and includes Islam in the kingdom of Antichrist.

If our opponents defend these human acts of worship as meriting justification, grace, and the forgiveness of sins, they are simply establishing the kingdom of the Antichrist. For the kingdom of the Antichrist is a new kind of worship of God, devised by human authority in opposition to Christ, just as the kingdom of Mohammed has religious rites and works, through which it seeks to be justified before God. It does not hold that people are freely justified by faith on account of Christ. So also the papacy will be a part of the kingdom of the Antichrist if it defends human rites as justifying. For they deprive Christ of his honor when they teach that we are not freely justified on account of Christ through faith but through such rites, and especially when they teach that such rites are not only useful for justification but even necessary. In the article on the church above they also condemned us because we said that it is not necessary for the true unity of the church that rites instituted by human beings be everywhere alike. Daniel 11[:38] indicates that new religious rites will be the very form and constitution of the kingdom of the Antichrist. For there he says, “He shall honor the god of fortresses instead of these; a god whom his ancestors did not know he shall honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts.” Here he is describing the invention of new religious rites, for he says that a god such as the Fathers did not know will be worshiped. (Ap XV 18–19)

Teaching contrary to the gospel that Christ taught is also seen as the primary characteristic of Antichrist in the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope. “Therefore, even if the Roman bishop did possess primacy by divine right, obedience is still not owed him when he defends ungodly worship and teaching contrary to the gospel. Indeed, it is necessary to oppose him as the Antichrist” (Tr 57). The most



extensive discussion of this characteristic of Antichrist is found earlier in the Treatise:

Next, papal teaching contradicts the gospel at numerous points, and the pope arrogates to himself divine authority in three ways. First, he assumes the right to alter Christ's teaching and the worship instituted by God, and he wants his own doctrine and worship regarded as divine. Second, he claims not only the power to loose and bind in this life but also authority over souls after this life. Third, the pope is not willing to be judged by the church or by anyone else and places his authority above the judgment of councils and of the whole church. To refuse to be judged by the church or by anyone is to make himself God [cf. 2 Thess 2:4]. Finally, he defends these dreadful errors and this wickedness with the greatest savagery, killing those who dissent.

This being the situation, all Christians must beware lest they become participants in the ungodly teachings, blasphemies, and unjust cruelty of the pope. Indeed, they ought to abandon and curse the pope and his minions as the realm of the Antichrist, just as Christ commanded: "Beware of false prophets" [Matt. 7:15]. Paul also commanded that ungodly teachers are to be shunned and denounced as accursed, and in 2 Corinthians 6[:14] he says: "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what fellowship is there . . . between light and darkness?"

To dissent from the consensus of so many nations and to be called schismatics is a grave matter. However, divine authority commands all people not to be accomplices and defenders of ungodliness and unjust cruelty. Thus, our consciences are sufficiently absolved. For the errors of papal rule are manifest, and the Scriptures cry out with one voice that those errors are the teaching of demons and of the Antichrist. (Tr 40–42)

The Apology sees the enforced celibacy of clergy as another example of the false teaching of the Antichrist, strangely finding an exegetical basis for this in Daniel 11: "Therefore, this law concerning perpetual celibacy is unique to this new pontifical tyranny, and for good reason. For Daniel [11:37] attributes to the kingdom of the Antichrist this mark, namely, the contempt for women" (Ap XXIII 25). The Apology also argues, based on Daniel 11 but probably grounded in the financial opulence of the papacy supported by indulgences, that the teaching of the gospel and faith is what should adorn worship, not outward adornments of worldly riches.

The true adornment of the churches is godly, useful, and clear doctrine, the devout use of the sacraments, ardent prayer, and the like. Candles, golden vessels, and similar adornments are appropriate, but they are not the distinctive adornment of the church. Now if the opponents make such things the center

of worship rather than the proclamation of the gospel, faith, and its struggles, they should be numbered among those whom Daniel describes as worshiping their god with gold and silver [Dan. 11:38]. (Ap XXIV 51)

A third characteristic of Antichrist as taught in the Confessions is that *the Antichrist has both a secular and ecclesiastical rule*. The eschatological king of Daniel 11:36–39 is the basis for this teaching in the Apology.

Perhaps the opponents demand that the church be defined as the supreme external monarchy of the entire world, in which the Roman pontiff must hold unlimited power. . . . Therefore the pope must necessarily be the lord of the entire world, of all worldly kingdoms, and of all private and public affairs; he must have complete power in both the temporal and spiritual realm; and he must possess both swords, the spiritual and temporal. Indeed, this is not a definition of the church of Christ but of the papal kingdom, according to the definition not only of the canonists but also of Daniel 11[:36–39]. (Ap VII and VIII 23–24)

The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope also offers a critique of the papacy's claim to authority over the church on earth by divine right: "First of all, the pope clearly reigns in the church and has established this dominion for himself on the pretext of the authority of the church and the ministry, offering as justification the words, 'I will give you the keys'" [Matt. 16:19] (Tr 40).

It is not that the Lutherans were against administrative structures in the church on earth. It is proper to note here the well-known caveat that Melancthon attaches to his signature on the Smalcald Articles: "However, concerning the pope I maintain that if he would allow the gospel, we, too, may (for the sake of peace and general unity among those Christians who are now under him and might be in the future) grant to him his superiority over the bishops which he has 'by human right'" (SA Subscriptions). Lutherans disputed the papacy's claim that this office was established by a divine right, as well as the extent to which the so-called "vicar of Christ" assumed the divine role of Christ over the church.

A fourth characteristic taught in the Confessions is that there is *a plurality of Antichrists who are false teachers within the church*. This is exegetically based on the use of the plural noun ἀντίχριστοι ("Antichrists") in 1 John 2:18. Luther's understanding, which is broader than 1–2 John, is that any ungodly teacher who does not teach the gospel is among the Antichrists.

The ungodly teachers must be avoided because they no longer act in the person of Christ but are Antichrists. Christ says [Matt. 7:15], "Beware of false prophets," and Paul says [Gal. 1:9], "If anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!" (Ap VII and VIII 48)

It is surprising that the Confessions do not engage what Paul means when he writes about “the mystery of lawlessness” already at work (2 Thess 2:7), even though it is a phrase of considerable importance used by Paul in parallel with “the Man of Lawlessness,” as will be argued below.

A fifth characteristic taught about the Antichrist is that the *papacy as Antichrist is seen as lasting until the return of Christ*, which is a clear allusion to the testimony in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 that Christ will destroy the Man of Lawlessness upon his triumphal return. This characteristic is expressed clearly in the Apology.

So Baal worship clings to the realm of the pope, namely, the abuse of the Mass, which they direct in such a way that by it they might merit the remission of guilt and punishment for the unrighteous. It appears that this Baal worship will endure together with the reign of the pope until Christ comes for judgment and by the glory of his coming destroys the kingdom of the Antichrist. (Ap XXIV 98)

It should be noted that the teaching about Antichrist in the Smalcald Articles and Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope is briefly restated in the Formula of Concord (FC SD X 20–23), but nothing new is taught there.

In summation, there are five primary characteristics of Antichrist presented in our Confessions. First, the singular Antichrist is a reality within the church. Second, the teaching of Antichrist opposes the teaching of Christ. Third, the singular Antichrist exercises authority in both secular and ecclesial realms. Fourth, there is a plurality of Antichrists or false teachers in these latter days. Fifth, the papacy as Antichrist is seen as lasting until the return of Christ. What is sometimes overlooked in our discussions of Antichrist in the Confessions is that while the papacy is clearly identified as the prominent part of the kingdom of Antichrist, the reality of Antichrist is not limited to the papacy. Testimony in the Confessions includes Islam and all false teachers with the papacy in its identification of Antichrist. What may also surprise some is that although Daniel 11 and 2 Thessalonians 2 are the most frequently cited texts, very few assertions about Antichrist are made on the basis of 2 Thessalonians 2 beyond that Antichrist sets himself up in “the temple of God” and “exalts himself over every so-called god” (2 Thess 2:4). To express it simply, for Luther and Lutherans, the primary characteristic of Antichrist is teaching that is against Christ, especially something that replaces or sidetracks the gospel.

### III. Revisiting the Exegesis of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12

What is apparent in this brief overview of testimony from Luther and the Confessions is that, although 2 Thessalonians 2 is one of the two texts most frequently alluded to or explicitly cited, testimony in this text, beyond the fact that

this figure sets himself up in “the temple of God” and “exalts himself over every so-called god,” does not appear to play a major role. It is also surprising that Lutherans have done very little detailed exegetical work on 2 Thessalonians 2.<sup>14</sup> This text is especially significant since it probably is among the earliest extant written evidence of apostolic teaching on this subject.

[1] Now we entreat you, brothers, with regard to the triumphal coming [τῆς παρουσίας] of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to him, [2] in order that you not be quickly shaken from your understanding or be disturbed, neither by a spirit nor a message nor a letter as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. [3] Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy [ἡ ἀποστασία] comes first, and the Man of Lawlessness is revealed [ἀποκαλυφθῆ ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας], the Son of Destruction [ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας], [4] the Adversary [ὁ ἀντικείμενος] and the one who exalts himself over every so-called god or object of worship, with the result that he takes his seat in the temple of God, himself proclaiming that he is God. [5] Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? [6] And you know the thing that is now restraining [τὸ κατέχον], in order that he [the Man of Lawlessness] be revealed [εἰς τὸ ἀποκαλυφθῆναι] in his time. [7] For the mystery of lawlessness is already effectively at work [τὸ μυστήριον ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται τῆς ἀνομίας], only [it must remain hidden] until he who now is restraining [ὁ κατέχων] is taken out of the way. [8] And then the Lawless One will be revealed [ἀποκαλυφθήσεται ὁ ἄνομος] whom the Lord will slay with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the manifestation of his triumphal coming [τῆ ἐπιφανεῖα τῆς παρουσίας αὐτοῦ]; [9] that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the working of Satan in all power and signs and false wonders, [10] and with all the wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they did not receive the love of the truth in order for them to be saved. [11] And for this reason God sends upon them a deluding influence so that they believe what is false, [12] in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

Although this text will not be interpreted in detail here, key aspects of Paul’s teaching will be examined.<sup>15</sup> First, Paul testifies to an already established teaching

<sup>14</sup> For example, in all of the twentieth century, the only two extensive exegetical discussions that I could find in English published within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod are Henry Hamann, “A Brief Exegesis of 2 Thess. 2:1–12 with Guideline for the Application of the Prophecy Contained Therein,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 24, no. 6 (1953): 418–433; and Ludwig Fuerbringer, “Leading Thoughts on Eschatology in the Epistles to the Thessalonians,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 13, no. 4 (1942): 265–272, 321–329, 401–413, 511–518.

<sup>15</sup> More detailed argumentation and documentation supporting the conclusions presented below on 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 will be presented in my forthcoming volume on 1–2 Thessalonians in the Concordia Commentary series.

that there will be a single eschatological figure whose revelation will cause a great apostasy before the last day arrives. Paul unmistakably draws on imagery and language about the eschatological king depicted in Daniel 11:36–39 who exalts himself over every so-called god (2 Thess 2:4). The fact that Paul’s writing here was influenced by the vision in Daniel is further confirmed by Paul’s use of *ὁ κατέχων*, “he who now is restraining” (2 Thess 2:6–7). Such language reflects the role of the angel Michael in Daniel 10–12, including the fact that shortly before the end Michael will “stand aside” (Dan 12:1) or, as Paul puts it, the one who is restraining will be “taken out of the way” (2 Thess 2:7b).<sup>16</sup> Even the title “Man of Lawlessness” probably reflects Daniel 12:10, which states “the lawless ones will do lawlessness, and all the lawless ones will not understand.” Paul’s description of the apostasy offered in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4, 8–9 may also have been influenced by Daniel’s time of great tribulation (Dan 12:1–10). In short, Paul does not draw this teaching out of thin air or receive it by special revelation. He draws on Daniel, possibly by way of early Christian eschatological teaching given by Jesus, who frequently identified himself as the Danielic Son of Man.

Second, there is not one exclusive title for this eschatological figure. Paul refers to him by four different titles: *ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας* (“the Man of Lawlessness”) and *ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας* (“the Son of Destruction,” best understood as “the Son Doomed to Destruction”) in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, *ὁ ἀντικείμενος* (“the Adversary”) in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, and simply as *ὁ ἄνομος* (“the Lawless One”) in 2 Thessalonians 2:8.<sup>17</sup> As I already noted, the term *ἀνομίας* (“lawlessness”) probably comes from Daniel 12:10, and Paul may use it here—rather than the prominent Aramaic title for Satan’s eschatological manifestation in Jewish literature, Belial or Beliar, a title with which Paul was also familiar (cf. 2 Cor 6:15)<sup>18</sup>—because he was in a predominantly Gentile congregation. The four titles in 2 Thessalonians 2, along with *ἀντίχριστος* (“Antichrist”), *ὁ ἀντίχριστος* (“the Antichrist”), and *ἀντίχριστοι* (“Antichrists”) in 1–2 John (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7), and *ψευδόχριστοι* (“False Christs”) in Matthew 24:24, demonstrate that there was some variety in how the final False Christ was identified in the first century. There was not yet a single title to identify him, at least not in Greek.

<sup>16</sup> See further Colin Nicholl, “Michael, the Restraint Removed (2 Thess. 2:6–7),” *Journal of Theological Studies* 51 (April 2000): 27–53.

<sup>17</sup> “The Lawless One” is a title used in Psalms of Solomon (17:11), a first-century BC Jewish text that probably draws on Daniel 12:10 to describe Pompey, the general who conquered Israel for Rome in 63 BC.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Beliar is the prominent title used in Qumran literature for the leader of the forces of darkness, especially in the War Scroll (1QM); see further Theodore J. Lewis, “Beliel,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:654–656.

Third, one of the most debated details of this text concerns the meaning of “he takes his seat in the temple of God” (2 Thess 2:4). Many, including Luther, interpret “temple of God” here as a metaphor for the church, because Paul uses this image elsewhere for the church (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21). For Luther and many others, this is the scriptural basis for teaching that the Antichrist is within the church. The primary background for Paul’s depiction, however, is Daniel. Daniel’s prophecy—fulfilled in Antiochus IV’s desecration of the Jerusalem temple—becomes the basis for what the eschatological king will do as described in Daniel 11:36–39, the text that influences Paul’s teaching in 2 Thessalonians 2. The Jerusalem temple was still standing when Paul wrote this letter around AD 51. Naturally, that would have been the temple brought to mind among the original listeners when they heard Paul’s words about the “temple of God.”<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Weima points out that such an understanding does not mean that the Jerusalem temple, destroyed in AD 70 by the Romans, must be rebuilt in order for what Paul writes about to come to pass in the future.

But while Paul is here referring to the historic temple of Jerusalem, he is more likely using this sanctuary metaphorically by picking up the well-known theme of its desecration as a graphic description of the lawless one’s usurpation of God and his divine authority. If so, this means that *the verse says more about the character of the man of lawlessness than the location where he will make his appearance.*<sup>20</sup>

There does not appear to be indisputable scriptural evidence that the Man of Lawlessness will be within the Christian church. The key part of the picture Paul paints is that he will take a position of authority over every deity claiming to be God.

Fourth, Paul teaches that this one will deceive many and cause a significant apostasy within the Christian church. This teaching is certainly similar to the teaching of Jesus about *ψευδόχριστοι* (“False Christs”) in his eschatological discourse (Matt 24:3–31, esp. v. 24), but Paul focuses on a singular end-time apostasy caused by the final False Christ. He does this because his pastoral purpose is to assure the Thessalonian congregation that the last day has not yet dawned (cf. 2 Thess 2:2).

A fifth feature of Paul’s eschatological teaching is that “the Man of Lawlessness” will be destroyed by Christ at his return: “And then the Lawless One will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of his mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of his coming” (2 Thess 2:8). Paul draws on Isaiah 11:4 to emphasize

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<sup>19</sup> William C. Weinrich notes that this was the dominant understanding among church fathers; see his “Antichrist in the Early Church,” *CTQ* 49, no. 2 (1985): 141.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 522 (emphasis original).

that this future and final *false* messiah will be destroyed upon Christ's return. Paul assures the Thessalonian church that the last day will not dawn until the Lawless One has been *both* manifest *and* slain. An example of ridiculous exegesis of this verse by a Lutheran from the perspective of Reformation triumphalism argues that Christ destroying the Man of Lawlessness with the breath of his mouth has already happened in principle in the condemnations of the papacy that occurred during the Reformation.<sup>21</sup> Such a conclusion goes against everything that Paul emphasizes about Jesus' visible triumphal coming on the last day!

A final and often overlooked feature of this pericope is that Paul also speaks of the broader work of Satan being already active but restrained.<sup>22</sup> Paul speaks not only of the *future* "Man of Lawlessness" but also of the *present* "mystery of lawlessness" in 2 Thessalonians 2:7: τὸ μυστήριον ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται τῆς ἀνομίας ("the mystery of lawlessness already at work"). The use of the same genitive modifier, τῆς ἀνομίας ("of lawlessness"), indicates an organic relationship between "the mystery" and "the Man" presented here. Paul places more emphasis on the final singular eschatological figure ("the Man of Lawlessness") because his overall purpose is to assure the Thessalonian congregation that the last day has not yet arrived (2 Thess 2:2).

#### IV. Conclusion

Based on these exegetical insights and information from Reformation-era understandings of this text, several conclusions can be drawn about the meaning of 2 Thessalonians 2. First, it would be helpful for many Lutherans to broaden the discussion of this doctrine by speaking of the biblical teaching of "Antichrist," rather than primarily or solely speaking of "the Antichrist." There is a need to teach of the plurality of "Antichrists" and "the mystery of lawlessness" already at work rather than focusing solely on "the Antichrist" or the eschatological "Man of Lawlessness."

Second, in light of an exegesis of 2 Thessalonians 2, it would be proper to put more stress on identifying the "mystery of lawlessness" already at work in each generation while always being alert to the final "Man of Lawlessness" who will lead a great apostasy and be destroyed by Jesus Christ at his Parousia. From a purely exegetical basis, the papacy, Islam, and other false teachers, both within the Christian church and outside of it, should be identified as the mystery of lawlessness already at work. Because the Man of Lawlessness is an eschatological figure, one can

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<sup>21</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1937), 443–446.

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion of questions concerning "the Restrainer," see Nicholl, "Michael, the Restrainer Removed (2 Thess. 2:6–7)," 27–53.

be absolutely certain of his identity only when Christ returns. Regarding the identification of the Man of Lawlessness or final Antichrist, Charles Arand properly states that “we must be cautious about making an absolute once-and-for-all-times, never to be altered verdict.”<sup>23</sup> Until the last day, like Luther and the reformers, Christians are to be actively identifying the various Antichrists and the mystery of lawlessness in the world around us, including in the church, even while being cautious about identifying the Man of Lawlessness of whom Paul writes. Does this mean that we should continue to identify the papacy with the reality of Antichrist? Absolutely. What John Stephenson has said about the identification of the papacy as Antichrist continues to remain true:

Confessional Lutherans will not be minded to reconsider the identification made by the Book of Concord of the papacy with the Antichrist until such time as the bishop of Rome and the church body in communion with him unequivocally confess that justification by grace for Christ’s sake through faith is the Scripturally-mandated bottom line of the one and only Gospel (Gal 1:8f.).<sup>24</sup>

Third, in light of the Johannine testimony to “many Antichrists” and the Pauline testimony about “the mystery of lawlessness” already at work, we, like our Lutheran forefathers, should be identifying the reality of Antichrist in our own generation and our own backyard. This includes the Roman papacy and Islam, but also other false teachers and churches, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Scientology, and many others. As John Stephenson has also written, “It is conceded that the papacy does not exhaust the mystery of Antichrist, but rather embodies the most intense manifestation of this mystery thus far encountered in the history of the church.”<sup>25</sup> He observes that the definition of Antichrist in the epistles of John is the denial of Christ’s coming in the flesh. This indicates that Zwingli and the Reformed could also be identified as Antichrist due to their principle that “the finite cannot hold the infinite.” Such a position denies the proper understanding of the incarnation as well as the real presence in the Sacrament.<sup>26</sup> Islam clearly denies that Jesus is God in human flesh, and tragedies too numerous to list, such as the December 2016 bombing of St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo that killed dozens, show that some radical adherents of Islam desire to silence the preaching

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<sup>23</sup> Charles P. Arand, “Antichrist?: The Lutheran Confessions on the Papacy,” *Concordia Journal* 29, no. 4 (2003): 402.

<sup>24</sup> Stephenson, *Eschatology*, 81.

<sup>25</sup> Stephenson, *Eschatology*, 80.

<sup>26</sup> Stephenson, *Eschatology*, 79. See also Paul R. Raabe, “Necessary Distinctions Regarding the Papacy,” *Concordia Journal* 14, no. 1 (1988): 3.



of Christ by any means possible. There is no way to sugarcoat what is happening. It is Antichrist—nothing less than Satan at work against Christ.

Fourth, it is problematic to state that the papacy is the exclusive fulfillment of the testimony in 2 Thessalonians 2, for our Reformation fathers and Lutheran Confessions have a broader interpretation, also including Islam in this discussion. Although we continue to identify the papacy as Antichrist, we have not yet beheld Christ destroying the Man of Lawlessness on the last day, as 2 Thessalonians 2 testifies. Our identification of this figure is always conditioned by the realization that the future may reveal things we do not yet see and know, as Hermann Sasse, among others, affirms.

There were items in Luther's view of history which were not accepted, specifically that the end of the world would come not later than within the next century. With such presuppositions Luther could not possibly answer the question as to what new forms the Antichrist might assume in subsequent centuries. The church can have no doctrine which answers such a question. The church can and must teach that all the eschatological prophecies of Holy Scripture come to fulfillment. How that may happen lies beyond its knowing. We can never say with certainty how what Scripture says in apocalyptic picture language will be realized. The fulfillment of all prophecies is greater than could be grasped by those who heard them, even by those who heard them in faith. The Lutheran Church teaches nothing in its Confessions as to how God may let the prophecy of the Antichrist come to fulfillment in the hidden future, that is, what form the Antichrist may take in the final terrors of the end time. What our Confessions can teach, and do teach, this and no more, is that in the "last time" which we can see, in the time of the church until the present day, the prophecy of the Antichrist has found fulfillment in the papacy.<sup>27</sup>

Although there are several things to disagree with in Edmund Schlink's discussion of Antichrist, he does offer this helpful conclusion about the broader understanding of Antichrist in the Confessions: "At all events it must be said that the church becomes unfaithful to the Confessions if it views the pope alone as the Antichrist, instead of being ever alert in constant watchfulness for the signs of the Antichrist in each current generation."<sup>28</sup>

Fifth, the example of our Reformation forefathers studying 2 Thessalonians 2 and being alert to the reality of Antichrist in their age is an example for us to follow. Our reading of the Confessions should drive us back to reexamining the biblical

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<sup>27</sup> Sasse, "Last Things: Church and Antichrist," 119.

<sup>28</sup> Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1961), 283.

testimony, especially in 2 Thessalonians 2 and Daniel 11, so that we ground all that we say about Antichrist solely in the testimony of the Scriptures themselves.

Finally, it is understood but must be expressed that all teaching about Antichrist is in service to teaching about Christ. Warnings about False Christs or Antichrists are given so that we never confuse the counterfeit with the genuine. That was true during the Reformation and it continues to be true today. The Scriptures seek to inoculate us against Antichrists and their false teaching not only through these warnings, but also especially by presenting the crucified and risen Jesus. His lordship is known in his self-sacrifice, and his presence in the world is not seen on a throne doing signs and wonders but in congregations at the baptismal font, altar, and pulpit from which his life and forgiveness flow. That is how it will be until he appears in glory on the last day.

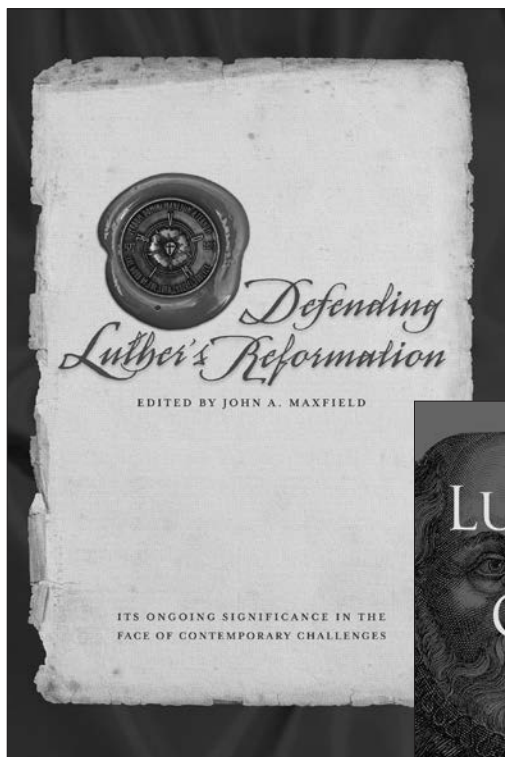
The sobering warning about Antichrist from Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–386) in his *Catechetical Lectures* serves as an appropriate conclusion:

So be warned, my friend. I have given you the signs of the Antichrist. Do not merely store them in your memory. Pass them on to everyone without stint. If you have a child after the flesh, teach them to him forthwith. And, if you have become a godparent, forewarn your godchild, lest he should take the false Christ for the true. For “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.” (15.18)<sup>29</sup>

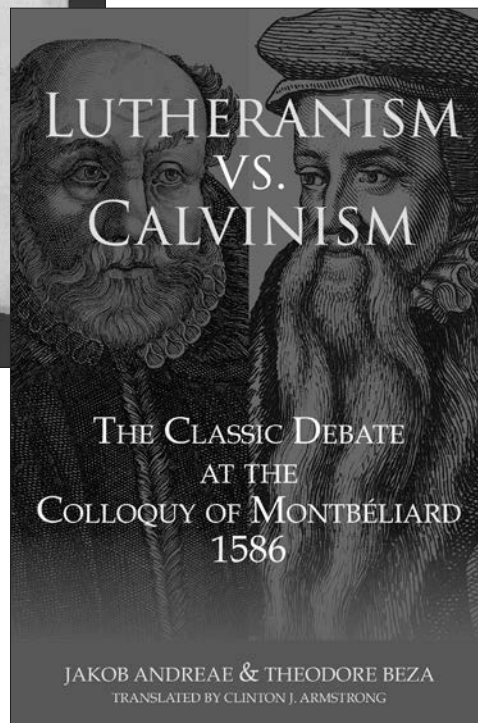
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<sup>29</sup> William Telfer, ed., *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 162.

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