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## Leading Thoughts on Eschatology in the Epistles to the Thessalonians

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### III

In our discussion of the leading eschatological thoughts of the Epistles to the Thessalonians we first of all called attention to the teaching of St. Paul that the Lord will return, and will return suddenly, as a thief in the night, 1 Thess. 5:1-3; in the second installment we pointed out that He will return only after the great Antichrist will have been revealed, 2 Thess. 2:1-12. The discussion of this second division has not been completed. After warning his readers not to let themselves be misled into believing that the Day of the Lord had already arrived and after giving a description of the Antichrist who was to come, vv. 1-4, the apostle continues: "*Remember ye not that when I was yet with you, I told you these things?*" v. 5. This reminder and question contains a mild rebuke for the Thessalonians. Since Paul had told them of these things while he was present with them and told them more than once (note the past tense in the original, ἔλεγε), they should not have permitted themselves to be misled. Without particularly stressing his reminder, he then continues: "*And now ye know what withholdeth [restraineth] that he might be revealed in his time,*" v. 6. Paul expresses himself very briefly, but the meaning of his words is clear. He wants to say: The Day of the Lord has not yet appeared, for the Antichrist has not yet been revealed; and the man of sin, whom I have just portrayed, will be recognized only after he has been revealed; but that which withholds him and keeps him from being revealed you know now already, νῦν τὸ κατέχον οἴδατε. "Now ye know." The grammatical construction demands this connection of "now." The translation "that which now withholds" would require a different construction, either τὸ νῦν κατέχον or τὸ κατέχον νῦν. The Thessalonians knew that there still existed



an agency delaying the appearance of the Antichrist, retarding his manifestation, preventing him from boldly rearing his head. The Thessalonians also knew the nature of this agency. Evidently Paul had previously enlightened them on that matter; hence it was not necessary at this time to enlarge upon it. For that reason he does not repeat what he has already told them but speaks merely of "what withholdeth," τὸ κατέχον, and later, v. 7, of him "who now letteth," ὁ κατέχων. Paul does not name the agency, and therefore we must study these two words and the entire context very carefully in order to learn just what or whom the apostle had in mind when he used these expressions. Etymologically there can be no doubt concerning the meaning of the words. They denote "that which" or "one who suppresses or holds back," τὸ κωλύον, as Chrysostom circumscribes the word. This certainly does not mean "that which prevents me from expressing myself freely," as some foolish interpreters have thought. That would militate against the context, since Paul actually does express himself freely and since he knew not the fear of man. Nor can the meaning be "that which prevents the *parousia* of Christ," as others have explained the term. That likewise would militate against the context; for in this verse not the return of Christ is being discussed, but the manifestation of the Antichrist. Another important fact must not be overlooked, that the word never denotes to keep back something coming from without, but to prevent or retard the free and full development of some plan or idea originating within one's self or carried in one's mind. Cp. Rom. 1:18; Luke 4:42. (The people sought to stop Jesus from carrying out his plan stated in v. 43.) This interpretation of the terms is demanded also by the clause of purpose which follows: "That he might be revealed in his time." The appearance of the Antichrist (for with "he" no one else than the Antichrist can be meant, in view of the context) is being held back by some force which is known to the Thessalonians and retarded for a purpose, "that he might be revealed in his time." His appearance shall not be a matter of chance nor a matter of his own choice, but he shall appear at such a time as God shall set, a time assigned and permitted to him by God, not earlier, not now already, but "in his time." What is meant by this force we shall see later when we discuss the concept Antichrist. But we can already establish the fact that the same force is meant as referred to in v. 7, "he who letteth." The neuter, τὸ κατέχον, stresses the principle, the force, the masculine ὁ κατέχων, on the other hand, emphasizes the person, one who will direct that force. We shall see that most probably τὸ κατέχον is the Roman Empire in its entire organization; ὁ κατέχων is the ruler of that empire, the Caesar. Finally it is to be noted that here again the Antichrist is placed parallel with Christ by the



use of the term "revealed," as in vv. 3 and 8. (Cp. also chap. 1:7.) As Christ came at His time, in the fullness of time, Gal. 4:4, and as Christ will come again in the time designated by the Father, Acts 1:7; 17:31, so also the caricature of Christ, the Antichrist, will appear at his appointed time (note the word *καίρῳ* and the remarks in the March issue of this journal, page 189). If Luther's works are at hand, it will be interesting to compare his "Passional Christi und Antichristi," St. Louis Edition, XIV:198.—Still in the same vein Paul continues: "*The mystery of iniquity doth already work, only [it remains a secret] until [that is, the only thing that must first come to pass] he who now letteth will be taken out of the way.*" V. 7. The apostle now explains more fully the unusual expression in v. 6, that the Antichrist will be revealed "in his time." Indeed, he is active already now, but in secret; he can come out in the open only after that force which now holds him back is put aside. The apostle, however, does not say: "The Antichrist doth work," but very significantly: "The mystery of iniquity is active." All emphasis rests on the word "mystery"; in the Greek text it is placed at the beginning and separated from the word which modifies it, iniquity. What is to be emphasized is that the iniquity as yet does its work only in secret since it is still being suppressed. The "mystery" of sin described in the foregoing is *already* present; more than that, it is already active and working vigorously, effectively, (*ἐνεργεῖται*, "doth already work," is stronger than Luther's translation, "es reget sich schon") but it has not yet been revealed; it is still in hiding and keeps under cover: it is a "mystery." But it is a mystery of "iniquity," a mystery consisting of godlessness, or possessing godlessness. Iniquity, *ἀνομία*, means literally "lawlessness," 1 John 3:4, which includes godlessness, breaking all divine commandments and bowing to no one's will. Already Daniel had thus portrayed the Antichrist: "The king shall do according to his will," Dan. 11:36. The word "iniquity" corresponds to the term "falling away," v. 3. There the falling away reaches its climax in the man of sin; here the iniquity reaches its climax in "that Wicked" one, v. 8. Here again the Antichrist is placed parallel with Christ. As there is a mystery of "godliness," 1 Tim. 3:16, so there is also a mystery of godlessness. As there are "deep things of God," 1 Cor. 2:10, so there are also "depths of Satan," Rev. 2:24. But this mystery will become exposed, the godlessness will be revealed, the "Wicked" one will come to the light and will be plainly recognized as soon as he "who now letteth" will "be taken out of the way." That is stated in the second part of the verse in language somewhat pregnant but very clear. The *κατέχων*, "he who now letteth," (as already noted) must be essentially the same agency referred to in v. 6 by the term τὸ κατέχων,



"what withholdeth." The same action is predicated of both terms: both hold back the manifestation of the Antichrist. This restraining force must, therefore, have been so constituted that it could be spoken of as a person and at the same time as a thing. That again points to the Roman Empire and its ruler, as we shall explain more fully later. At the time Paul is writing these words, "He who letteth" hinders the appearance of the Antichrist; but in time he will be removed, he will be taken out of the way. In what manner this removal is to take place is not indicated; the expression simply indicates some kind of removal, not of necessity a removal by violence or death. Cp. 1 Cor. 5:3; Col. 2:14.

The portrayal of Antichrist as sketched briefly by St. Paul puts one fact beyond the possibility of refutation: At the time this letter was being written the "mystery" was already on the way, in fact, already in existence and active; only it had not yet become manifest, and its activity was on a small scale. It was still a mystery, known to the apostle but recognizable, it seems, to only a few beside him. This declaration, therefore, shows that the Antichrist cannot be a specific individual, that the term is used ideally, collectively, comprising a series of individuals, all of them collectively forming the complete concept "Antichrist." This individual is to remain until the return of Christ, v. 8, which would be impossible if some individual living and already active in the days of Paul were meant, as history and common sense demonstrate. Either the Antichrist was then already on the way or—Paul was thoroughly and completely mistaken in this matter, and that cannot be since he wrote as the mouthpiece of God.

Paul continues: "*And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming,*" v. 8. What was already hinted at in the foregoing is now stated in clear and unmistakable language: The Antichrist will come to light *then*, when "he who letteth" will have been removed. He will then really become manifest, the mystery which hitherto has remained concealed will be unveiled. A new name is given to the Antichrist, "that Wicked," ὁ ἄνομος, the lawless, the ruthless one. (Luther: "Der Boshafte.") This designation is occasioned by the expression used in the previous verse: "The mystery of iniquity," of lawlessness, "doth already work." When revealed, the godlessness will appear in full growth, in one head, in one person, in the Antichrist. The entire context clearly proves that none other than the man of sin and the son of perdition is meant with "that Wicked" one. He is indeed a lawless one because he sets aside the Law of God, he does away with divine authority and establishes an autocracy, a dictatorship, in the fullest sense of the term. He is not



an atheist, not an anarchist, but an Antichrist, as Daniel has prophesied: "The king shall do according to his will," Dan. 11:36. While Christ as the righteous servant of the Lord was obedient to the will of His Father unto death, so His opposite sets aside the divine will, stands there as a lawless one, a revolutionist who makes himself God; he is not a pseudo-Christ, a false Christ, but an Antichrist.

Before Paul proceeds to describe the activity of the ruthless one, vv. 9, 10, he points out in v. 8 b the ultimate fate of the Antichrist. In order to comfort the believers, he assures them that this fear-inspiring enemy of Christ and His Church will in due time be judged and condemned. In like manner the apostle had in v. 3 first called attention to the fate of the "man of sin" by adding at once the term "son of perdition," one bound to perish eternally, and only then he had proceeded in v. 4 to outline his activity.—Paul says, "The Lord shall consume [him] with the spirit of His mouth and shall destroy [him] with the brightness of His coming." In the style of the Old Testament prophets Paul foretells in vigorous, glowing language in a well-balanced parallelism the fate of the foe of Christendom. In fact, the first member of the parallelism is a quotation from a prophecy recorded Is. 11:4: "With the breath of His lips shall He slay the wicked." "The wicked" does not refer to the ungodly in general, the singular is to designate the one great archenemy of God and Christ so frequently referred to by the prophets and in the Psalms, the Antichrist.

But what is meant by the spirit, the breath, τὸ πνεῦμα, of His mouth, wherewith Christ will consume the Antichrist? Ordinarily this expression is referred to the might and irresistible power of Christ. In order to slay the Antichrist, the Lord does not even have to utter a word, much less move His hand. "That which in the case of man is the weakest," says Hofmann in commenting on this passage, "the breath of the mouth, is in the case of Jesus sufficient to consume the adversary," when He will come in His glory. ("Die Heilige Schrift neuen Testaments zusammenhaengend untersucht." I:334.) The Old Testament, however, suggests a different and more suitable interpretation. The breath of the mouth of Christ is His Word according to Is. 34:16, the breath being thought of as the bearer of the word. By means of His Word Christ will remove the Antichrist, will consume him. And finally He will put an end to his reign "with the brightness of His coming." At His coming Christ will do away with him, overthrow him, annihilate him, destroy him, will "cast him into a lake of fire burning with brimstone," as the Book of Revelation tells us, Rev. 19:20. Very solemnly Paul writes: "With the brightness of His coming." In the New Testament these two expressions designate exclusively the



return of Christ, Titus 2:13; 2 Tim. 4:8 (ἐπιφάνεια, manifestation, παρουσία, return, presence, advent). Here the expressions are combined, and the combination emphasizes more forcefully that the *parousia* will be a visible one and a return coupled with brightness and glory. That will be the fate, the end of the Antichrist, eternal damnation. That, too, had been foretold by Daniel, when chap. 9, v. 26, he wrote concerning the coming prince: "The end thereof shall be with a flood," in the deluge, in the universal judgment of the world, and v. 27: "That determined shall be poured upon the desolate."

*"Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved."* Vv. 9, 10. These verses in particular show clearly the glaring contrast between Antichrist and Christ, so often pointed out by Paul in these two letters. The One is Christ, the other Anti-christ. To both, indeed, a coming, a *parousia*, is frequently ascribed. But Antichrist's *parousia* shall precede that of the Lord, vv. 3, 8, and shall come to an end through the very return of Christ. The manner in which the "Wicked" one will become established explains why he will have such a great following and be capable of bringing about such extensive falling away. His coming "is after the work of Satan," comes about through the activity of Satan. While the heavenly Father "bringeth in the first-begotten into the world," Heb. 1:6; 10:5, it is Satan who causes the "Wicked" one to arise; of course, with divine permission, Rev. 13:15. And since the coming of the Antichrist is the work of Satan, it is accompanied by all manner of "signs and lying wonders." The expressions are multiplied in order to give a vivid description of the matter: "power," "signs," "lying wonders." The terms differ slightly in their meaning. "Power," δύναμις, describes the signs according to their source, the power producing them; "signs," σημεῖα, designates the "miracles" according to their significance; they indicate and reveal the importance and authority of him who performs them; and "wonders," τέρατα, describes the signs with reference to their effect upon others; they arouse amazement, fear, and trembling. Scripture uses these terms frequently in connection with the works of Christ and the apostles. Peter calls Jesus "a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs," Acts 2:22, and according to Heb. 2:4 God corroborated the preaching of the apostles "with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles." Cp. also 2 Cor. 12:12. Paul describes the caricature of Christ's miracles. Satan gives unto the Antichrist and unto his apostles power to perform signs and wonders, even as the Father has given Christ the authority to perform



miracles, and as Christ in turn has granted this power to his disciples. In Antichrist we find the fulfillment of the word of Christ in His eschatological discourse: "For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders," Matt. 24:24, as also the Book of Revelation tells us that the dragon gave great power unto the seven-headed beast, that "he maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men, and deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by the means of those miracles which he had power to do," Rev. 13:2, 13, 14. Yet there is a vast difference between the miracles of Christ and those of the Antichrist. Christ's miracles were true miracles, miracles of truth, as He Himself is the truth. The miracles of the Antichrist, on the other hand, are "lying signs and wonders." The apostle does not mean to say that all miracles of the "Wicked" one are lying deceptions without reality, fraudulent mystifications, coarse swindles, trickery and hocus-pocus, or the result of illusions and hallucinations. That may be true in innumerable cases, yet it cannot be denied, and the apostle does not mean to dispute the fact, that many of the strange feats performed can neither be classed as outright frauds nor be explained according to the known laws of nature. Yet, even granted that many of Antichrist's miracles are inexplicable, are supernatural, they are nevertheless lying signs and wonders. The Antichrist boasts that they are divine miracles, performed by divine power, proving him to be the divinely appointed ruler of the Church; while in truth he does not perform one miracle by the authority and in the power of God, but by the satanic power of the Prince of Darkness. "Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light," and his tool, the Antichrist, "as a minister of righteousness," 2 Cor. 11:14, 15. They proceed from falsehood, are saturated with falsehood, and produce falsehood, since they deceive and mislead men into misbelief, as we shall see from vv. 10-12. It cannot be otherwise. The devil is the father of lies, and when he speaks and works lies, he speaks and works his own. Lying is essential to his being.

Finally, the coming of the Antichrist will be "with all deceivableness of unrighteousness." The activities of the Antichrist have the appearance of righteousness; nevertheless they are full of unrighteousness and therefore deceive the people. Since deception, lying, and trickery are some of the characteristic marks of unrighteousness and wickedness, he, the "Wicked" one, makes full use of these foul means in order to rob men of their salvation. Fortunately, this power does not extend over all people; the frightful activity of the Antichrist is not irresistible; only they "that perish" become its victims, only they who ultimately go to eternal perdition. Their terrible fate is self-invited. The reason the "Wicked" one is



able to seduce them by his satanic activities and arts and trickeries is that "they receive not the love of the truth." They have well deserved their fate. It is visited upon them as a reward, ἀντὶ ὧν, because. Note that Paul does not say: they did not receive the truth, but rather, they did not receive the *love* of the truth. In the former case it would be conceivable that they had esteemed the truth, but because of some fatal deception had not come to a living knowledge of the truth and therefore had not accepted it. But no, they did not receive the *love* of the truth; they did not even have the desire for the truth; they hardened themselves against it. They did not want to know anything of the truth of Christianity (for that is the meaning of "truth"). They did not want to know the Gospel, they did not want to hear of the love of God in Christ Jesus offered to them in the Gospel. And this their guilt appears all the greater when we remember the purpose for which the truth was offered to them, the marvelous blessing it had in store for them. This truth was to rescue and save them also. God's intention and objective was their everlasting salvation. With careless indifference they neglected the great salvation prepared for them, and as a punishment for their neglect they fall victims to the wiles of Antichrist. Continuing in the same line of thought, the apostle now concludes with the words of warning: "*And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness,*" vv. 11, 12. Therefore, because those who perish did not receive the love of the truth, God sends them a "strong delusion." Literally the meaning is: he sends them a power or working of error. The error is already at hand, but at the time of the Antichrist, when sin and deception will manifest their full force in the man of sin, the error will do its deadly work. And let us not forget, God will send these strong delusions. We cannot get away from this meaning of the word; we must accept it in its full significance, we dare not weaken it, as some commentators have done, by understanding it to mean that all this comes to people by divine sufferance. The text does not say that God permits error to come, but it says that He sends it. Yes, He punishes the wicked by means of the wicked. Deliberate and persistent contempt for the truth brings with it divine punishment in the form of strong delusions sent by God, Rom. 1:24; 2 Sam. 24:1; Job 12:16; Prov. 1:29-31. God does that in order that they who do not wish to believe the truth will believe a lie. That is God's intention in carrying out His righteous judgment. He punishes sin by means of greater sin. They shall believe a lie, τῷ ψεύδει, not merely error, τῇ πλάνῃ, but a lie, a falsehood, consciously and purposely spoken in enmity of God. Lying



is the direct opposite of truth; and, if truth, the whole, complete Christian truth, is the truth of the Gospel, as we have seen, then "the lie" is not merely some single lie, but the whole and complete power of satanic perversion of all truth. It is the anti-Gospel, corresponding to him who is the father of lies and whose tool and prophet is the Antichrist.

All this will come to pass at God's direction for the ultimate purpose that "they all might be damned who believe not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness." That is God's ultimate intention when He sends "strong delusion." God has decreed a final decision, a mighty, terrible judgment. In that judgment all who have not believed the truth of Christianity "will be damned," all without exception. The translation of the Authorized Version, "they will be damned," says exactly what the apostle meant to express with the word *κρίνεσθαι*, which here, as frequently, is used in the sense of *κατακρίνεσθαι*. (Heb. 13:4.) The cause of their damnation is their unbelief. He that believes not will be damned. They had no love for the truth. The reason they did not love the truth was that it demanded righteousness of them. Instead, they had pleasure in unrighteousness, in godlessness, in the "lie." And for that reason they will finally be overtaken by the judgment that will be visited upon unrighteousness, upon the lie, upon unbelief.

This entire conclusion is an urgent warning addressed to the Thessalonians and to all readers of all places and all times. It brings to mind the warning with which Jesus closed His conversation with Nicodemus, John 3:19, 20: "And this is the condemnation that light is come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved." What the apostle here teaches by divine inspiration does not furnish Biblical basis for the error of Calvinism, but forms the foundation for the correct Lutheran distinction between the antecedent and the consequent will of God. The antecedent will of God is a merciful will, according to which He wants all men to be saved, 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9; John 3:17. God is ready to condemn only after man refuses to believe, Is. 6:9, 10; Acts 28:24-27; Luke 8:10; John 3:18; 12:35-40. (Cp. Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, I, 558; and II, 38-41.) For that reason Paul very definitely declares not that God sends the "delusion" but that He sends the power, the ability, and energy to produce delusion.

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