THE IDENTITY OF THE
"RESTRAINER" IN
2 THESSALONIANS 2:6–7

Charles E. Powell

One of the most baffling problems in the New Testament and in eschatology is the identity of the "restrainer" in 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7. Verse 6 has the neuter participle τὸ κατέχων ("what restrains") and verse 7 has the masculine participle ὁ κατέχων ("he who restrains"). More than a dozen views have been proposed. Many of these views in part stem from the scholar's eschatological perspective. Other views stem from historical considerations and the Sitz im Leben of the Thessalonians.

Part of the difficulty in determining the identity of ὁ κατέχων is that it is based on Paul's previous teaching in Thessalonica, which he alluded to in this passage without explanation (καὶ νῦν τὸ κατέχων οἶδατε, "and now you know what restrains"). Nor in any of his other letters did he explain or even mention ὁ κατέχων.

Charles E. Powell is a Teaching Assistant in New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas.


While Scripture includes information elsewhere on other issues in 2 Thessalonians 2, such as the man of lawlessness (Dan. 7:8–26; 9:23–26; 11:36–45; Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14; Rev. 13:1–18; 14:9–10; 15:10–14; 17:1–19:21), the apostasy (Matt. 24:10–12; 1 Tim. 4:1–3; 2 Tim. 3:1–9; 2 Pet. 3:3–7), and Christ's second advent (Zech. 14; Matt. 24–25; Mark 13; Rev. 17–19), nothing specifically is stated about τὸ κατέχων or ὁ κατέχων. Thus there is wide disagreement on the identity, origin, and meaning of the restrainer. In addition several grammatical, syntactical, and semantic problems are associated with this passage.

Understanding the identity of ὁ κατέχων can help in understanding the man of lawlessness, the rapture, and the second coming of Christ. The information Paul did reveal connects τὸ κατέχων and ὁ κατέχων to these issues.

Structural features in a passage provide insight into what the author was emphasizing and how he presented his message and argument. If these features are neglected, one may miss the point the author was making. This article analyzes the semantic and formal structures of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–15, in which the most prominent structural feature in this passage is a chiasm, and suggests that the structure of the passage contributes greatly to understanding Paul's subject, concern, and emphasis.

**SEMANTIC AND STRUCTURAL FEATURES**

Second Thessalonians is commonly analyzed according to thematic or epistolary approaches. However, a number of scholars have recently suggested the rhetorical approach, which views 2 Thessalonians 2:1–17 as a unit. Others divide it into two parts (2:1–12, and 2:13–17 or 2:13–3:15).

**SEMANTIC STRUCTURE**

If 2 Thessalonians 2:1–17 is analyzed as a unit, more formally called a “division constituent,” then it can be viewed semantically as follows:

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4 See, for example, E. W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963), 392.
Relational Structure | Theme Contents
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Specific (neg.) | Do not be quickly troubled in mind or alarmed by any message that the Day of the Lord has already come (vv. 1–12).
Grounds | God chose you and summoned you that you might be saved and glorified (vv. 13–14).
Head | Continue to believe the body of teaching we committed to you (v. 15).
Means | We pray that our Lord Jesus Christ Himself will encourage you and cause you to continue doing and speaking what is good (vv. 16–17).\(^5\)

The theme of this division constituent may be stated this way: “Continue believing the body of teaching committed to you by us. In particular, do not be quickly troubled in mind and alarmed by any message that the Day of the Lord has already come.”\(^6\)

CHIastic Structure

Formally the structure of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–17 can be analyzed as a chiasm (vv. 1–15) with a concluding prayer (vv. 16–17). This chiasm, which is both verbal and conceptual, may be laid out as follows.

A Warning (vv. 1–3a)
   B The apostasy (v. 3b)
      C The revelation of the man of lawlessness (vv. 3c–5)
         D The restrainer (vv. 5–7)
      C' The revelation and annihilation of the lawless one (vv. 8–9)
   B' The leading astray of unbelievers (vv. 10–12)
A' Thanksgiving and exhortation (vv. 13–15)\(^7\)

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6. Ibid. Verse 15 includes the major exhortation. Three factors support this conclusion: (1) Relationally the other units support it. (2) It occurs with the particle εἰρην, whereas all the other units have ἐκ. (3) It is an affirmative command, and so ranks higher than the negative command of the first unit, the statement of the second unit, and the prayer of the last unit (ibid., 53).

7. This structure is partially adopted from M. J. J. Menken, “The Structure of Second Thessalonians,” in *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, ed. Raymond F. Collins (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), 376. The main differences are in-
The center of this chiasm concerns the discussion of τὸ κατέχον and ὁ κατέχων. Noting that this issue was Paul’s emphasis in this discussion about the Day of the Lord, Menken takes this point a step further.

In Part I, we hear about the actual conflict between the congregation and their persecutors that will be brought to a definite end at the final “revelation of the Lord Jesus” (1, 7), mentioned in the center of Part I. Part III is largely about an actual conflict within the congregation, caused by the undisciplined brothers, which Paul tries to bring to an end by referring, in the center of part III, to the example he has given in the past (3, 7–10). In Part II, on the other hand, Paul discusses the conflict to come: the apostasy and the activities of the “man of lawlessness.” In the center of this part, he draws attention not to what will end this conflict, but to what delays its final outbreak: the mysterious κατέχων (2, 6–7). As the passage about this figure constitutes the center of the central part of 2 Thessalonians, we may surmise that we have here the most important point of the message of the letter: the final outbreak of iniquity preceding the day of the Lord is not fully present; it is still inhibited by the κατέχων.8

If Menken’s observations are correct, then the discussion of τὸ κατέχον and ὁ κατέχων and its identity is far more important than is generally recognized. Thus its relationship to the theme and subject of both this division constituent and the book as a whole must be carefully analyzed. With this in view the proposed chiasm will be discussed in relation to the corresponding pairs.

In 2:1, Paul stated the overall subject or topic orienter of his exhortation: “the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him” (τῆς παρουσίας τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἡμῶν ἐπισκοπῆς ἐπὶ αὐτῶν). The “coming” and the “gathering” seem to refer to related but distinct events. The phrase is in an article-substantive-καὶ-substantive construction, also known as a Granville Sharp construction. However, since the nouns are impersonal, they do not meet the criteria of Sharp’s first rule.9 The impersonal constructions seem to fall into one of

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8 Menken, “The Structure of Second Thessalonians,” 381.

four semantic ranges: (a) two distinct entities (Matt. 3:4; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 1:20); (b) two ways of identifying the same thing (Acts 1:25); (c) the first entity as a subset of the second (Luke 11:42; 2 Cor. 8:24; Col. 2:8); and (d) the second entity included in a subset of the first (Matt. 24:36; Rom. 2:5; Heb. 13:16).10 Either the first or the fourth range is possible in 2 Thessalonians 2:1. The third is excluded because it is unlikely Paul viewed Jesus’ second coming as a part of the rapture. The second category is unlikely because referential identity for impersonal nouns is rare and unattested in concrete impersonal constructions.11 Perhaps the fourth view is best, since Paul seemed to use παρουσία in a general way. Neither the first nor fourth view necessarily supports pretribulationism or posttribulationism; they only suggest that a pretribulational rapture cannot be excluded outright. This subject is paralleled by the main exhortation in verse 15: “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught” (στήκετε καὶ κρατέτε τὰς παραδόσεις ἃς ἔδιδαχθε). Paul’s concern was that the Thessalonians hold firmly to what they were taught concerning Christ’s coming and their gathering to Him.

What seems to have kept the Thessalonians from holding to Paul’s teaching is that they were disturbed by a teaching that the Day of the Lord had already come (v. 2). If it had come, they may have wondered why they were still on earth. Callow writes,

The Greek underlying “troubled in mind” is hard to translate. Quite a variety of suggestions are given, but the idea seems to be that they no longer knew what to think about the Day of the Lord—had it come or had it not? This may be tied up with the second half of the topic orienter, in 2:1. Why did Paul mention this gathering together to Christ, which is not referred to again in this whole paragraph cluster? Quite possibly because it obviously had not happened, and hence, supported his rejection of this false teaching. But it could also be why the Thessalonians did not know what to think. If they believed, on the basis of Paul’s teaching, that the Day of the Lord would see the Lord’s return and their being gathered to him in the air, they might well


be unsettled if someone said the Day of the Lord had arrived and yet they were still on earth in Thessalonica.\footnote{Callow, *A Semantic Structure Analysis of Second Thessalonians*, 57. This particular point would be true of either a pretribulational or a posttribulational rapture. However, in light of the fact that the most probable basis for the false teaching about the arrival of the Day of the Lord was the Thessalonians’ persecution, this observation would argue for a pretribulational rapture.}

This observation is even more credible when one observes the parallel in the thanksgiving in the chiasm in verses 13–14. Through this thanksgiving Paul stated a strong basis of assurance for their salvation.\footnote{Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 264–65.} He told them they were “beloved by the Lord,” “chosen . . . from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth,” and that they were “called . . . through our gospel that [they] may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This last statement is similar to Paul’s statement of assurance in 1 Thessalonians 5:9, which was given in a passage on the Day of the Lord: “God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation.”\footnote{Compare εἰς περιποίησιν δόξας in 2 Thessalonians 2:14 with εἰς περιποίησιν σωτηρίας in 1 Thessalonians 5:9.} This in turn is associated with their gathering together with the Lord: “that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him” (v. 10). Though the Day of the Lord will come as a thief and as a time of sudden destruction (5:1–11), Paul assured the Thessalonians that they would escape this destruction. The implication is that the “escape” would be through their reunion with the Lord, which was delineated in 4:13–18.\footnote{See Zane C. Hodges, “The Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11,” in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 67–79, for a good defense of this position.}

It is generally assumed from 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 and 2 Thessalonians 1:6–7, with Paul’s comments about persecution, that the Thessalonians were disturbed about the false teaching that the Day of the Lord had come because they felt they would have to undergo suffering.\footnote{D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles: A Call to Readiness* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 304; and Robert L. Thomas, “2 Thessalonians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11318–19.} As disturbing as this would have been, there seems to be a much more important reason for their distress. The chiastic parallel in 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14, with its strong assurance of salvation, implies that their real distress stemmed from belief that they had lost their salvation. Their gathering to the Lord was, to them, the *sine qua non* of their salvation, because...
then they would obtain the glory of the Lord Jesus. To miss this event, if the Day of the Lord had already come, would mean, they apparently assumed, that they were not saved. In verses 13–14, Paul sought to relieve them of this concern about their salvation. Paul followed the negative exhortation in verse 2 (not to be disturbed) with a subordinate negative exhortation17 in verse 3 (not to be deceived by false teaching concerning the Day of the Lord).

The second chiastic parallel concerns the apostasy (ἀποστασία) or rebellion (v. 3b). This apostasy, merely mentioned in this verse, is apparently developed in its parallel in verses 10–12. In these verses Paul delineated how the lawless one will deceive unbelievers with his signs and wonders. Refusing the truth and salvation, unbelievers will be in rebellion against God. God in turn will send a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false. Thus in the apostasy unbelievers will be following the lawless one instead of God. After they harden their hearts God will then confirm them in their hardening.18

The next level of the chiasm describes the man of lawlessness (vv. 3c–4). As a lawless person he will exalt himself above every object of worship, even taking up residence in the temple of God19 and asserting himself to be God. In the parallel in verses

17 Of these two exhortations the former is chosen as the theme for several reasons: (1) It occurs with the hortatory orienter “we are requesting you.” (2) It includes the means that caused the Thessalonians’ alarm and unsettledness. (3) It stands in lexical contrast to the main exhortation of the primary matter, “stand firm.” (4) The deception referred to in the second command can be regarded as the reason for the unsettledness and alarm, and the result ranks higher than the reason (Callow, A Semantic Structure Analysis of Second Thessalonians, 55).

18 Interestingly Paul’s exhortation that the Thessalonian believers not be deceived may stand in contrast to the description of those who will be deceived by the lawless one. Perhaps, then, verse 3a should be included in part B of the chiasm instead of part A. Either way the chiastic structure is not violated.

19 Some writers believe this reference to a temple points to the church, since all Paul’s references to the temple elsewhere refer to the church (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21). However, the references to the church are not all the same. First Corinthians 3:16–17 may refer to the local church in Corinth; 1 Corinthians 6:19 refers to the individual believer or the believer’s body; 2 Corinthians 6:16 may refer to either the local church in Corinth or the universal church; and Ephesians 2:21 seems to refer to the universal church. There are also references to the Holy Spirit in the immediate context of these passages while such a reference (at least explicitly) is absent in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12. Another view is that this temple is the Jerusalem temple. This view is supported by allusions to Daniel (Dan. 7:8–26; 8:23–26; 9:27; 11:36–45), Jesus’ discussion of the same issue in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14), and the eschatological context of 2 Thessalonians 2. This is probably what the Thessalonians would have understood (the earliest reference to the church as the temple of God is in 1 Corinthians, which was written after 2 Thessalonians). Though the Jerusalem temple in Paul’s day was destroyed in A.D. 70, the temple will be rebuilt in the future, as 2 Thessalonians 2 indicates.
8–9 the man of lawlessness is said to be energized by Satan. Presenting himself as Christ's ultimate human rival and opponent, the man of lawlessness will be slain by the Lord by “the breath of His mouth.” Here is an explicit reference to the first subject introduced in verse 1, namely, the “coming” of the Lord Jesus. Verses 3–4 describe the primary circumstances and character of the Day of the Lord, and verse 8 addresses Christ's coming to slay the lawless one.20 In verse 5 Paul emphasized that he taught them these things when he was with them. This verse is transitional in the chiasm because the πράγμα ("these things") points back to verses 3–4 and ahead to verses 6–7.

The center element (D) in the chiasm thus focuses on τὸ κατέχων and ὁ κατέχων.21 As already noted, the subject of the gathering of the believers to Christ is not addressed explicitly in this passage after verse 1,22 but Pass suggests that verses 6–7 may address this subject in reference to the "restrainer."23 This suggestion is plausible for several reasons. First, Paul's discussion about τὸ κατέχων and ὁ κατέχων is the center of the chiasm, and thus is the most important point of the paragraph if not the whole book. Its centrality and importance would insist on a direct relationship to the subject of the paragraph. Second, since the gathering of believers to Christ is not mentioned elsewhere in the chapter other than in verse 1, and since the παρουσία is directly addressed in verse 8, it is likely that the subject associated with the restrainer is this gathering. Third, the importance of the restrainer as suggested by its centrality, must also be connected to both the negative exhortation in verse 2 and the positive exhortation in verse 15. Verse 5 would seem to confirm this, since Paul reminded the Thessalonians that this is what he taught them before. Thus the teaching about τὸ κατέχων and ὁ κατέχων is in view in the exhortation in verse 15. Fourth, since the coming of the Lord in verse 8 was discussed strictly in terms of its relationship to the lawless one, one would expect that the gathering of believers

21 For the significance of the central element of a chiasm see Ronald E. Man, “The Value of Chiasm for New Testament Interpretation,” Bibliotheca Sacra 141 (1984): 148–53. Man observes that the center element(s) of a chiasm may denote emphasis, the point of the passage, or a clarification of its meaning.
22 However, εἰς περιστάμενοι δόξας of 2:14 most probably alludes to it.
would also be discussed in terms of its relationship to the lawless one. Fifth, since this passage is concerned with the assurance of the Thessalonians’ salvation and relief from their distress, the center point of the chiasm would be related to this issue. In other words the center of the chiasm—the restrainer—has a great bearing on Paul’s subject, purpose, and concern. It is not just another item discussed; it is the crux of his entire argument. Without this discussion, which depends on the Thessalonians’ prior knowledge, Paul’s argument would essentially fail to accomplish his purpose: to assure them of their salvation and to exhort them to hold fast to what they had been taught.

THE IDENTITY OF THE “RESTRAINER”

There are many views on the identity of τὸ κατέχων and ὁ κατέχων. Several of these views do not necessarily involve a supernatural force. These include the Jewish state and James,24 Paul and the preaching of the gospel,25 the Roman Empire,26 and human government.27 Other views may be grouped as hostile supernatural views, which include Satan,28 a hostile false prophet,29 a general hostile force in the form of the mystery of lawlessness and human government,30 and the preincarnate state of the man of lawlessness.31 In several views ὁ κατέχων is seen as a benevolent supernatural figure rather than a hostile one. Usually an

24 Warfield, Biblical and Theological Studies, 473–74.
26 Most of the church fathers held this view.
27 F. F. Bruce, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 188.
angel, such as Michael, or another type of heavenly being, such as Elijah, or a mythological being, is suggested. The most common supernatural figure suggested, though, is God Himself. The view adopted here is a variation of this last view.

Several factors favor identifying τὸ κατέχων ("what restrains") as the preaching of the gospel and ὁ κατέχων as God in the person of the Holy Spirit. In Romans 1:16–17 the gospel is the power of God for salvation and is related to the revelation of God's righteousness. According to 1 Thessalonians 1:5 the gospel came in power and is connected with the apostolic "kerygma," which includes waiting for Jesus to deliver believers from God's wrath (1:10). Thus the gospel is directly associated with 2 Thessalonians 2:1. First Thessalonians 2:13 essentially equates the gospel with the Word of God (cf. 1:5). If this association can be carried over into the rest of the New Testament, then many more passages would support this view. First Corinthians 1:18 states that the word of the cross is the power of God (cf. 1:24). Hebrews 4:12 refers to the Word of God as living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Ephesians 6:17 calls the Word (ῥήμα) the sword of the Spirit. And Christ resisted Satan through citing the Word of God (Matt. 4:1–11). Since the gospel is the Word of God and the power of God, and is used against both lawlessness and Satan, then it may also be τὸ κατέχων. In addition, the association of the gospel with the coming of Christ in 1 Thessalonians 1:5–10 meshes well with the subject in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 and Paul's reminder in 2:5.

If God is ὁ κατέχων ("he who restrains"), then the member of the Trinity most likely to manifest this activity is the Holy Spirit. Several considerations favor identifying the "restrainer" with the Holy Spirit. First, several of the church fathers held this view, including Severian of Gabala (d. 409), Theodore of Mopsuestia

37 Severian of Gabala, 2 Thessalonians 2:6–8.
(350–428), and Theodoret (393–466). Theodoret specifically associates τό κατέχον and ὁ κατέχων with the preaching of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Second, if the one being restrained has the power of Satan (2 Thess. 2:9), then it would take the omnipotent power of God to restrain him. Third, this interpretation gives the most vivid force to the change in gender of the participles. The first participle (τό κατέχον) conforms to the gender of πνεῦμα. The second participle ὁ κατέχων confirms the personality of the Holy Spirit by ad sensum agreement.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit strove against man and his sin (Gen. 6:3). In 2 Thessalonians 2, He is said to be restraining a particular manifestation of sin, the man of lawlessness, and to some extent the mystery of lawlessness. This is compatible also with the ministry of the Spirit as depicted elsewhere in the New Testament. Jesus said the Spirit’s ministry is to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8–11).

Fifth, since the ministry of the Holy Spirit includes indwelling believers and working through the church, then ἐκ μέσου γένηται (“taken out of the way”) could possibly refer to the removal of the Holy Spirit through the removal of the church in the pretribulational rapture. Since the passage concerns the gathering of believers, this cryptic apocalyptic reference to the Spirit, who indwells the church, is probably in view. This would be an encouragement to the Thessalonian believers to stop being alarmed about any false teaching on the Day of the Lord.

However, several objections have been raised against this view. First, Ladd says the mention of the restrainer is too vague for it to refer to the Holy Spirit. But this can be countered by observing that the restrainer is vague in any interpretation. Further, the Thessalonians knew who or what it was.

38 Theodori Mopsuestia, In Epistolorum Posteriorum Pauli ad Thessalonicenses Commentari Fragmenta 2.6–7.
39 Theodoretus Cyrensis, Interpretatio Epistolae ad II Thessalonicenses 2.6–7.
41 Even though κατέχω is not used in Genesis 6:3, the concept is the same.
42 Hiebert, The Thessalonian Epistles, 310–14; Thomas, “2 Thessalonianism,” 324–25; and Walvoord, The Thessalonian Epistles, 124–25. This would also not be incompatible with a midtribulational rapture position, depending on how one interprets the revelation of the lawless one.
43 Ladd, The Blessed Hope, 94–95.
44 Gundry, The Church and the Tribulation, 126.
Second, Moo argues that the change in gender (from τὸ κατέχων to ὁ κατέχων) does not help support this view, for the New Testament never uses a neuter term for the Spirit except where it is directly dependent on πνεῦμα. However, there are very few references to the Spirit that are not dependent on πνεῦμα. In John 14:26 the Spirit is called ὁ παράκλητος and is related to a masculine term only because the noun is masculine in the first place (cf. Eph. 1:14).

Third, since the Holy Spirit will be present in the Tribulation period (Joel 2:28–32), how can it be said that He will be removed? The answer is that the Holy Spirit will be removed with respect to His restraining ministry through the church.

The view that the Holy Spirit is the restrainer fits the particulars of the passage just as well as, if not better than, any other interpretation. It fits Paul's apocalyptic style of intending to hide the identity of the "restrainer" from his enemies. The idea of the church as the temple of the Spirit restraining the man of lawlessness, would no doubt be vigorously resisted by Paul's opponents and so Paul referred to specific knowledge the Thessalonians had while he remained vague about the identity of the "restrainer" so far as his opponents were concerned.

Regarding the association of the Holy Spirit with the gospel, it might be said that neither the Spirit nor the gospel (or the Word of God) operate independently of each other. This is true of Creation when God spoke and the Spirit hovered over the waters (Gen. 1:1–3). The gospel came in power and in the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 1:5). Sanctification comes through both the Word and the Spirit (cf. Ps. 119:9, 11; 1 Thess. 4:8; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God (Eph. 6:17). Ephesians 6:10–18 depicts a holy war between Satan and his forces and the believer. The same armor imagery occurs in 1 Thessalonians 5:8 in a Day

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46 Even if Moo’s argument is legitimate, the neuter participle may be depicting the gospel as discussed above and defended again below.

47 Gundry, The Church and the Tribulation, 126–27. Though Gundry holds that ὁ κατέχων is the Holy Spirit, he does not believe He will be removed from the earth in any sense, but only that His restraining ministry will cease.

48 In fact all the other references in the literature in which ἐκ μέσου γίνομαι (“taken out of the way”) means “a voluntary withdrawal to another sphere” emphasizes also a change in activity. See Plutarch, Morals 1.616D; idem, Parallel Lives: Timoleon 5.4; and John Chrysostom, Homilies on John 78.4.
of the Lord context. The breastplate of righteousness (Eph. 6:14; the breastplate of faith and love in 1 Thess. 5:8) and the helmet of (hope of) salvation are features related directly to the gospel. Also the gospel of peace is a part of the armor (Eph. 6:15), and Ephesians 6 includes a request for boldness in the propagation of the gospel (v. 19). This armor and spiritual conflict are also seen in Romans 13:10–13 (an eschatological context) and 2 Corinthians 6:7; 10:3–6. Both 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10 and 2:1–12 depict features of this conflict. In Acts, as well as the Gospels, both Jesus and the apostles cast out demons by the power of the Spirit while they were engaged in the preaching of the gospel. In 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14 Paul stated that God chose the Thessalonians for salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and He called them through the gospel so that they could obtain the glory of the Lord Jesus. This way the neuter participle (τὸ κατέχων) may refer to the gospel and the masculine participle (ὁ κατέχων) may refer to God the Holy Spirit.

Why Paul chose to depict the Spirit’s ministry in the church in this manner could be explained in several ways. It emphasizes that this is in actuality the work of the Spirit and the gospel; the church is only the vessel or instrument. It demonstrates not only the Spirit’s relationship to the man of lawlessness and the mystery of lawlessness, but the church’s relationship as well. And it is sufficiently vague in order to hinder whoever tried to deceive the Thessalonians from trying to deceive them again.

CONCLUSION

In light of the chiastic structure and the emphases of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–15 the view adopted here is that the restrainer refers to the ministry of the Spirit (ὁ κατέχων) through the church as believers pursue their mission of preaching the gospel (τὸ κατέχων) to the world. When their mission is accomplished, they will be gathered together with Christ and live with Him forever (1 Thess. 4:17; 5:9–10; 2 Thess. 2:1). Then following the rapture the lawless one will be revealed in the Tribulation period and will rule, and the Holy Spirit will operate through the two witnesses (Rev. 11:3–13), the 144,000 (7:1–8), and other Tribulation saints in preaching the gospel.

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49 It may be that τὸ κατέχων is a veiled reference to the gospel so that the mystery of the gospel is opposed to the mystery of lawlessness.