

## **“AS A BROTHER”: 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6–15 AND ECCLESIASTICAL SEPARATION**

by  
Charles J. Bumgardner<sup>1</sup>

Interpreters often misread Paul’s *ad hoc* instructions for church discipline in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 and, as a result, misapply the passage.<sup>2</sup> A key point of misunderstanding concerns Paul’s instruction regarding the persistently disobedient: “admonish him as a brother” (3:15).<sup>3</sup> This language of Christian siblingship has encouraged interpreters to read Paul as commanding not a complete expulsion from the church, but a sort of probationary ostracism instead. In turn, the seriousness of the infraction is downplayed because it does not seem to have led to excommunication. It is our contention that the offense addressed in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 was quite serious, and that Paul’s response to those who persisted in it did indeed involve complete expulsion from the church. While a minority position, this is a plausible reading of the passage and coheres with other New Testament teaching on church discipline.

After giving a general summary of the passage, we will examine the situation at Thessalonica and Paul’s response to it by exploring certain exegetical questions, arguing that 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 does not provide an exception to the general NT teaching that persistently unrepentant offenders should be expelled from the church. Subsequently, we will explore certain applications of the passage to ecclesiastical separation. Specifically, we will argue that (a) 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 does not provide support for the typical understanding of a “disobedient brother” often referenced in treatments of ecclesiastical separation; and (b) while 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 does provide support for the practice of ecclesiastical separation on the basis of improper associations, such support is indirect and not as explicit in the passage as some suggest.

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Bumgardner has served at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Plymouth, MN, as an adjunct professor of New Testament.

<sup>2</sup>A translation of 2 Thess 3:6–15 is provided in figure 1. The proposed chiasmic structure in 3:6–12 is quite similar to that suggested by John C. Hurd, *The Earliest Letters of Paul—and Other Studies* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1988), pp. 155–56.

<sup>3</sup>All translations of Scripture are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

*Figure 1: Translation and Structure of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15<sup>4</sup>*

- (3:6a) A Now we **command** you, brothers, **in the** name of our **Lord Jesus Christ**,
- (3:6b) B that you withdraw yourselves from every brother who is **living in a disorderly way**,
- (3:6c) C that is, not according to the tradition which they received from us.
- (3:7a) D For you yourselves know how it is necessary **to imitate us**,
- (3:7b–8a) E because we were not disorderly among you, that is, we did not eat anyone's bread without paying,
- (3:8b) E' working instead with labor and toil, night and day, so as not to burden any of you;
- (3:9) D' not because we do not have that right, but so that we might provide ourselves an example to you, in order for you **to imitate us**.
- (3:10) C' For even when we were with you, this is what we were commanding you: "If anyone will not work, neither let him eat."
- (3:11) B' For we hear that some are **living** among you **in a disorderly way**, not working at all but meddling.
- (3:12) A' Now such people we **command** and exhort **in the Lord Jesus Christ** that working with quietness they should eat their own bread.
- (3:13–15) But you, brothers, do not be weary in doing what is right. Instead, if anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that per son so as not to associate with him, so that he might be put to shame; and do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

**SUMMARY OF 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6–15**

In 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15, we find the apostle Paul facing an escalating problem in one of his churches. Some in the congregation at Thessalonica were living in disobedience to his teaching by not working at all, and instead were being meddlesome in some unspecified way (3:10–11).<sup>5</sup> This state of affairs was almost certainly made

<sup>4</sup>It may be objected that the proposed chiasmic structure is lopsided, with the second half being significantly longer than the first. See, however, H. Van Dyke Parunak, "Oral Typesetting: Some Uses of Biblical Structure," *Biblica* 62 (1981): 163; John D. Harvey, *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 100–101.

<sup>5</sup>Numerous *Sitze im Leben* behind 2 Thess 3:6–15 have been suggested. The commonly proposed solution of intense eschatological expectation leading to cessation

possible by the assembly or individuals therein providing material support for the disorderly.<sup>6</sup> This was a serious matter, in that the offenders were openly flouting the Christian tradition which the apostolic team had taught by word and example (3:6–10), harming the testimony of Christ through their disorderly conduct (cf. 1 Thess 4:10–12).

This problem was hardly new to the Thessalonian assembly, for Paul had previously taught on the matter (3:10; 1 Thess 4:9–12) and had instructed the congregation in a letter to admonish the disorderly (1 Thess 5:14). Because at least some of the disorderly had proved recalcitrant, the apostle is now constrained to take further action. In this second letter to the church, with bluntly authoritative language, he

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of work—based upon the juxtaposition of 2 Thess 2 and 2 Thess 3—is problematic. It is absent in extant patristic and medieval sources, finds early expression in Johann Albrecht Bengel (*Gnomon Novi Testamenti* [1742]), and becomes the majority view only in the early- to mid-1800s. For a convenient collection of expressions of this view, see Steve Lewis, “Does Pretribulationism Lead to Idleness? A Consideration of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 10 (2006): 35–38. This view has fallen into disfavor for two major reasons. First, Paul does not explicitly tie the eschatological corrective of 2 Thess 2 with the disciplinary issue of 2 Thess 3. So, e.g., Colin Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica: Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 158–63; although see G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 250–56. Second, and more telling, related terminology indicates a connection between 2 Thess 3:6–15 and two earlier passages (1 Thess 4:9–12; 5:14), strongly suggesting that the problem of the disorderly preceded the eschatological issues addressed in 2 Thess 2:1–2. So, e.g., R. Russell, “The Idle in 2 Thess 3:6–12: An Eschatological or a Social Problem?” *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 10; lexical comparisons are given in Göran Forkman, *The Limits of the Religious Community: Expulsion from the Religious Community within the Qumran Sect, within Rabbinic Judaism, and within Primitive Christianity*, trans. Pearl Sjölander (Lund: Gleerup, 1972), pp. 134–35.

Background proposals emphasizing sociological factors began to gain prominence in the late 20th century. For examples, see Russell, “Idle,” 105–19; David C. Aune, “Trouble in Thessalonica: An Exegetical Study of 1 Thess 4:9–12, 5:12–14 and 2 Thess 3:6–15 in Light of First Century Social Conditions,” Th.M. thesis, Regent College, 1989; Robert Jewett, “Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: The Implications of a Form-Critical Reading Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3:10,” *Biblical Research* 38 (1993): 23–43; Bruce W. Winter, “From Secular Clients to Christian Benefactors: 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13,” in *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 41–60; Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 241–60, 454–57. Perhaps the most plausible reconstruction sees the disorderly as laborers having left pagan trade guilds and now taking advantage of newly-formed (though informal) client-patron relationships within the church, which provided easy—and from the patron’s perspective, obligatory—support for a sedentary lifestyle. Due to lack of textual data, however, any detailed *Sitz im Leben* must remain tentative.

<sup>6</sup>Regarding Paul’s command in 3:10 (“If anyone will not work, neither let him eat”), Jewett rightly notes, “The sanction must be enforceable for the regulation to be effective” (“Tenement Churches,” p. 37). Whether the Thessalonians provided this charity as part of a communal meal, or on occasion as the need arose, or as a regular dole from patrons within the church, Paul now insists that they desist from their assistance.

commands the congregation to withdraw themselves from any of their number who continue in disobedience (3:6). He justifies this withdrawal by demonstrating that, as to working for their living, the disorderly had been amply instructed via both apostolic example (3:7–9) and apostolic catechesis (3:6, 10).<sup>7</sup> The disorderly were to conform to proper Christian behavior: Paul commands them to earn their own living (“eat their own bread,” 3:12) as opposed to not working at all, and to work in a non-disturbing fashion (“quietness,” 3:12) instead of meddling.

After his command to the disorderly, Paul instructs the obedient majority, “Do not be weary in doing what is right,” a command best understood to involve persevering in disciplinary action toward the disorderly.<sup>8</sup> This involved publicly noting anyone who continued in disobedience, in order that they might cease associating with him.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Several textual variants exist for the last verb in 3:6, with the most likely contenders being *παρελάβσαν/παρέλαβον* (“they received”) and *παρελάβετε* (“you received”). Although modern versions generally opt for *παρελάβετε, παρελάβσαν* appears to best explain the other readings and enjoys reasonably good external support. Further, it is the more difficult reading: the third person plural form is unusual (F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. Robert W. Funk [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], 84.2 and hence not likely a correction, while the third person matches neither the numerous references to the second person plural in the context, nor the singular “brother” (3:6). For support of this textual choice, see Martin Dibelius, *An die Thessalonicher I.II. An die Philipper*, 3rd ed., Handbuch zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr, 1937), p. 54; Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), p. 569; Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 326. In using *παρελάβσαν*, Paul is emphasizing the inexcusable nature of the offense of the disorderly by pointing out that they themselves had received the tradition, not merely the congregation of which they were a part.

<sup>8</sup>So Jacob W. Elias, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995), pp. 326, 334; John P. Meyer, “Second Thessalonians 3:14, 15,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (Jan 1957): 22–23; Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 257. The command of 3:13 is often taken to enjoin continued benevolence toward the deserving in spite of the abuse of charity by the disorderly, due to similar language used elsewhere in the context of charitable benevolence (cf. Mark 14:7; Phil 4:14; 1 Tim 6:18; Heb 13:16). However, “doing good” cannot be limited to technical language for charitable benevolence (cf. Rom 7:21; 1 Cor 7:37–38; 2 Cor 13:7) and must be informed by the immediate context, as is the case with Paul’s nearly identical injunction in Gal 6:9. The context of 2 Thess 3:13 is better served by connecting “doing what is right” with the main thrust of the present passage: engaging in discipline of the disorderly. As well, the connection of thought with 3:14 is preserved with this reading, and gives specific content to the general exhortation of 3:13: “Do not be weary in doing what is right [that is, correcting the disorderly], *but instead* [adversative δέ] if any man does not obey,” move forward with disciplinary action.

<sup>9</sup>There are two major points to consider in translating Paul’s use of *συναμίγνμι* in 3:14, the first textual and the second grammatical. As to the textual question, the Majority text and a few other witnesses give the imperative *συναμίγνυθε*, but the infinitive has much better attestation and is almost certainly the original reading.

Paul's hope was that the disorderly would be put to shame as a result of the congregation's action. Given his teaching on church discipline elsewhere, his commands here presumably are given with an eye toward the repentance and restoration of the offenders.

### EXEGETICAL QUESTIONS IN 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6–15

While the general contours of the passage are fairly clear, certain exegetical details are debated. Several exegetical questions bear quite directly on a proper interpretation of the passage, and thus on various applications of it. First, who is in view as a potential object of discipline in 3:14–15? Second, what does Paul communicate by characterizing the offenders with ἀτάκτως and its cognates (3:6, 7, 11)? Third, how serious was the offense of the disorderly? Fourth, what does Paul prescribe as the Thessalonians' response? We will address these questions in turn, subsequently using the answers to inform questions of application.

#### Who Was Facing Discipline?

In 3:14–15, Paul speaks of the congregation not associating with anyone among them who “does not obey our word by this epistle” (εἰ δέ τις οὐχ ὑπακούει τῷ λόγῳ ἡμῶν διὰ τῆς ἐπιστολῆς). How broadly should this standard for conduct be understood, and who therefore is a potential object of discipline in 3:14–15?

#### Possible Interpretations of “Our Word by This Epistle”

A majority of scholars limit Paul's “word by this epistle” to his injunction to the disorderly to work quietly (3:12).<sup>10</sup> Some, however, see

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The difference in translations based on the critical text, as compared to those based on the Majority text, is minimal, however, for most versions take συναναμίγνυσθαι as an imperatival infinitive (e.g., ESV: “Take note of that person and have nothing to do with him”), thereby obscuring the connection with the preceding imperative. But as Daniel B. Wallace notes, only an infinitive clearly independent of other verbs should be considered to have an imperatival force (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], p. 608 [hereafter cited as *GGBB*]; contra A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* [Nashville: Broadman, 1934], pp. 943–44, 1047, 1170, although Robertson grants that συναναμίγνυσθαι could be understood as a purpose infinitive, p. 944).

If συναναμίγνυσθαι is not to be understood as an imperative, then what sort of infinitive is it? Wallace sees συναναμίγνυσθαι here as a result infinitive (p. 608), but it seems to fit more comfortably into his category of purpose infinitive (pp. 590–92). So Forkman, *The Limits of the Religious Community*, p. 137; Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, p. 459; Beda Rigaux, *Saint Paul. Les épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, Études bibliques (Paris: Gabalda, 1956), p. 714 (“un infinitif d'intention”); Clyde W. Votaw, *The Use of the Infinitive in Biblical Greek* (Chicago: self-published, 1896), p. 37.

<sup>10</sup>Best understands λόγος in the sense of the Hebrew לִצְוָה and equivalent here to “command,” referring particularly to the command in 3:10: “If anyone will not work, neither let him eat” (Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Black's New Testament Commentaries [New York: Harper & Row,

Paul's "word by this epistle" as referring to his command to the Thessalonian majority to withdraw from the disorderly (3:6), in addition to his command to the disorderly to work quietly.<sup>11</sup> Others understand Paul's "word by this epistle" in the broadest sense, considering Paul's direct reference to include everything which is the proper object of obedience in the entire epistle.<sup>12</sup>

### Additional Evidence from Paul

In seeking to delimit Paul's "word by this epistle," it is helpful to give attention to other juxtapositions of λόγος and ἐπιστολή in Paul. Earlier in the present epistle, for example, Paul contrasts oral teaching (λόγος) and written teaching (ἐπιστολή) (2:2); the Thessalonians are to hold fast to the traditions taught by either means (2:15).<sup>13</sup> Further, in 2 Corinthians 10:10–11, Paul quotes his enemies as saying that while his (written) ἐπιστολαὶ were weighty and strong, his (spoken) λόγος was contemptible. In response, Paul notes that "what we are in word

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1972], p. 342). Wanamaker suggests that the singular form of λόγος indicates a particular command, not Paul's instruction in general (Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], p. 289). Martin suggests that Paul only enjoins discipline on the basis of ethical issues, not doctrinal ones, which means the reference in the present epistle must be limited to the only ethical issue addressed: the avoidance of work and corresponding meddling by the disorderly (D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995], p. 285). Marshall suggests that the imperative of the present verse is so similar to that in 3:6 that any other reference is doubtful (I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], p. 227).

<sup>11</sup>Such an interpretation finds support in the strong language of command toward not just the disorderly (3:12) but toward the Thessalonian majority as well (3:6). B. N. Kaye is crystal clear here: "Not only are they not to mix with the disorderly, but they are not to mix with those who do not obey the first injunction to keep away from them. The disorderly, and those who associate with them, are therefore to be cut off" ("Eschatology and Ethics in 1 and 2 Thessalonians," *Novum Testamentum* 17 [1975]: 54–55). See also J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985), p. 65; and (more indirectly) F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1982), pp. 209–10.

<sup>12</sup>This interpretation takes the singular λόγος in a collective sense, and is held by, e.g., Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, pp. 259–60; Georges Gander, *Les deux Epîtres de Paul aux Thessaloniens: Nouveau commentaire d'après l'araméen, le grec et le latin* (Saint-Légier, Switzerland: Editions Contrastes, 1993), p. 181; M. J. J. Menken, *2 Thessalonians*, New Testament Readings (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 142. In a passing reference, David A. deSilva suggests that 3:14 refers both to the disorderly and "any who will not follow Paul's team's instructions" (*The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999], p. 107).

<sup>13</sup>The two categories were closely related in Greco-Roman culture, the letter being the "bearer and reproduction of the λόγος" (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "λέγω, λόγος, κτλ.," by G. Kittel, 4:101 [hereafter cited as *TDNT*]) and "a necessary surrogate for oral communication" (Ben Witherington III, "Oral Texts and Rhetorical Letters: Rethinking the Categories," Baylor University, Parchman Lecture 1 [2 Oct 2007], available online at <http://www.baylor.tv.com/video.php?id=001319>).

by letters (τῶ λόγῳ δι' ἐπιστολῶν) when absent, we will be in deed when present.” Here, the singular λόγῳ clearly has a general referent and not a specific command or statement in view. The pertinent construction in 2 Corinthians 10:11 is close to that in 2 Thessalonians 3:14, suggesting a similar general translation of λόγῳ: “what we say in this letter.”<sup>14</sup>

### The Identity of the Disobedient

Who then are the disobedient? It is likely that Paul is directly referring in 3:14 only to the disorderly who do not follow his instructions in 3:10–12. It is true that the singular form of λόγος in 3:14 should not intrinsically limit Paul’s “word by this epistle” to a single command, given the similar construction in 2 Corinthians 10:11. However, while the singular form of λόγος in 3:14 does not settle the issue, the context makes it unlikely that Paul refers to a larger group than the disorderly (e.g., any who might not separate from the disorderly) when he speaks of any who might not obey his “word by this epistle.” Two observations suggest this to be the case.

On the one hand, given Paul’s usage elsewhere, it is doubtful that by virtue of its singular form λόγος in 2 Thessalonians 3:14 limits Paul’s reference to a particular command. On the other hand, while a broad reference of “our word by this epistle” is plausible on a lexical basis, the context makes it unlikely that the direct reference goes beyond Paul’s instruction in 3:10–12 to the disorderly. Two observations suggest this to be the case.

First, if it is true, as suggested above, that the injunction not to be weary in doing good (3:13) has a primary reference to perseverance in the discipline of the disorderly, it would be most natural to see the disorderly as the object of the disassociation of 3:14. On this reading, 3:14 serves as an explication of the “withdrawal” commanded in 3:6, not an addition to it.

Second, the instance of someone not withdrawing from the disorderly and the instance of the disorderly continuing not to work do not seem to be offenses which had reached the same level of seriousness. It is true, on the one hand, that both instances technically would be contrary to “what we say in this letter.” On the other hand, the majority apparently had been obeying adequately what Paul had commanded (3:4), while the disorderly had been consistently intractable. To apply the same level of discipline to each of them seems inconsistent.<sup>15</sup> It

<sup>14</sup>Cf. RSV, NRSV, ESV, NET: “what we say by letter(s)”; Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “λόγος,” p. 599b (hereafter cited as BDAG); *TDNT*, s.v. “σημεῖον, σημαίνω, σημειόω, κτλ.,” by K. Rengstorff, 7:266.

<sup>15</sup>This is particularly true in light of other teaching on church discipline, such as Matt 18:15–17, which suggests a gradual procedure which escalates only in the face of unrepentance, or Titus 3:10, where a factious person in the church is to be given

therefore seems best to see only the ἄτακτοι as those whom Paul has immediately in mind as potentially disobedient to his “word by this epistle.”

### Application to the “Disobediently Associative”

Seeing Paul’s direct reference in 3:14 as being to the ἄτακτοι does not disallow, however, a more indirect application to a person in the Thessalonian congregation whom we might call “disobediently associative”—someone who disobeys Paul’s command to withdraw from the disorderly. As demonstrated in his life and teaching, it is clearly the case that Paul looked to the apostolic tradition as the touchstone for Christian doctrine and ethics (cf. 3:6). It is also true that the apostolic tradition has been preserved for the church, to the extent ordained by God, in the writings of the New Testament. Therefore, to deny in doctrine or ethics any aspect of the apostolic tradition contained in the New Testament is to live in a disorderly fashion and to present oneself as a candidate for church discipline.<sup>16</sup> It follows logically that 2 Thessalonians 3:14 can indeed be rightly applied to the disobediently associative, but only after due disciplinary process. When, in line with the apostolic command, a person has been rightly expelled from a church, improper association with that person is a discipline-worthy sin; and if the disobediently associative persists in that sin after due confrontation and admonition, an assembly would properly (though indirectly) apply 2 Thessalonians 3:14 by formally expelling him from their midst.<sup>17</sup>

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admonition (νοηθεία) twice before being rejected. For the notion that there is a generally consistent pattern of discipline followed throughout the NT, see John F. Brug, “Exegetical Brief: 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14, 15—Admonish Him as a Brother,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 96 (1999): 216–17; Richard L. Mayhue, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1999), pp. 194–95. This is not to say that, in the Thessalonian situation, Paul never would have sanctioned disassociation from someone who consistently disobeyed his command to withdraw from the disorderly. To the contrary, “condoning another’s offense could be viewed as sharing in its guilt...especially if those condoning it were a court assigned to punish it” (Craig S. Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], p. 49). Still, the point of escalation where disassociation for such disobedience would be appropriate does not seem to be in view in the present passage.

<sup>16</sup>“Every one who doth not observe the doctrine of the apostles, and their word contained in their epistles [note the allusion to 2 Thess 3:14 here], and so, by parity of reason, the divine instructions contained in the other parts of Scripture, is to be excommunicated, provided he continue impenitent and contumacious.” Jonathan Edwards, “Sermon V. The Nature and End of Excommunication,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (1834; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:121.

<sup>17</sup>It appears that Menno Simons applied 2 Thess 3:14 in this way: “If any person should not maintain this ban and yet be pious otherwise, should such an one be banned on that account? *Answer*. Whoever is pious will show his piety in obedience, and not knowingly or willfully despise and disregard the word, commandment, will, counsel, admonition and doctrine of God. For if any one willfully keeps *commercium* (intercourse, company) with such whose company is forbidden in Scripture, to be kept, then we must come to the conclusion that he despises the word of God, yea, is in



### Ἀτάκτως: “Idle” or “Disorderly”?

The adverb ἀτάκτως and its cognates find canonical use exclusively in the Thessalonian epistles and describe the persistent behavior of those from whom the Thessalonians were to withdraw. What does Paul communicate by characterizing the offenders with this terminology?

#### The Standard Meaning of the Ἀτάκτως Word Group

The adverb ἀτάκτως is derived from the verb τάσσω, “to order,” and was used in military contexts to describe that which was deemed “out of order”: “negligent officers...an army in disarray, undisciplined or insubordinate soldiers.”<sup>18</sup> It came to mean anything that was disorderly, and when applied to behavior, generally implied an unruliness, disruptiveness, and lack of submission to the established order.<sup>19</sup> This meaning is clearly seen in the usage of ἀτάκτως and its cognates during the time period around the New Testament era, both in classical and non-classical sources.<sup>20</sup>

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open rebellion and refractoriness (I speak of those who well know and acknowledge, and yet do so). ‘For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry,’ 1 Sam. 15:23. Since the Scriptures admonishes [*sic*] and command, That we shall not associate with such, nor eat with them, nor greet them, nor receive them into our houses, &c.; and yet if some body should say, I will associate with them, I will eat with them, I will greet them in the Lord and receive them into my house—he would plainly prove that he did not fear the commandment and admonition of the Lord, but that he despised it, rejected the Holy Spirit and that he trusted, honored and followed his own opinion rather than the word of God. Now judge for yourself what kind of a sin it is not to be willing to hear and obey God’s word. Paul says, ‘Now we command you brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which ye received of us;’ again, ‘And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed,’ 2 Thess. 3:6, 14. Inasmuch as the ban was so strictly commanded by the Lord, and practiced by the apostles, Matt. 18:17; therefore we must also use it and obey it, since we are thus taught and enlightened by God, or else we should be shunned by the church of God. This must be acknowledged.” “On the Ban: Questions and Answers by Menno Simons (1550),” in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), pp. 263–64.

<sup>18</sup> *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. “ἄτακτέω, ἄτακτος, ἀτάκτως,” by C. Spicq, 1:223–24 (hereafter cited as *TLNT*). Cf. Appian, *Bella civilia* 3.8.56; 3.9.69; Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.150, 152; 17.296; *Jewish War* 1.101, 382; 2.517, 649; 3.113; 6.255; Pausanias, *Graeciae description* 10.21.4; Plutarch, *Aristides* 17.1; *Nicias* 18.2; 21.7.

<sup>19</sup> BDAG, s.v. “ἀτάκτως,” p. 148c (BDAG, s.v. “ἄτακτέω,” p. 148b, also rightly suggests “out of line” as a contemporary equivalent); *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “ἀτάκτως,” 1:177 (hereafter cited as *EDNT*); *TDNT*, s.v. “τάσσω, κτλ.,” by G. Dellinger, 8:47–48; Earl J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995), pp. 379, 389–90.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Elephantine Papyrus 2.10–13; *Testament of Naphtali* 2.9; *3 Maccabees* 1.19; Philo, *De plantatione* 3; *De specialibus legibus* 1.48; Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.231;

### The Debated Translation of the ἄτακτος Word Group

Although the general connotation of the ἄτακτος word group seems clear, its rendering in the Thessalonian epistles has been a matter of extended discussion. Certain uses of the ἄτακτος word group in papyri excavated around the turn of the twentieth century led some, while not denying the classical meaning, to posit a meaning in the New Testament which was somewhat different and more specific than usual—one involving idleness or laziness.<sup>21</sup> To add support to this suggestion, it has been noted that the adverb ἀτάκτως is contrasted with ἐργαζομένουσ (‘‘working’’) in 3:11 and that behaving ἀτάκτως is described as not abiding by the apostolic tradition of working for one’s living.<sup>22</sup> Since the early 20th century, therefore, the alternate nuance of ‘‘idle’’ has been widely accepted.<sup>23</sup>

While in popular works the ἄτακτος word group continues to be translated in the Thessalonian epistles with words related to idleness, the present scholarly consensus has returned to using the language of

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*Against Apion* 2.151; *1 Clement* 40.2; *Diognetus* 9.1.

<sup>21</sup>George Milligan lays out the papyrological evidence in *St Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: MacMillan, 1908), pp. 152–54. In the same year, W. G. Rutherford’s translation *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians and to the Corinthians* (London: Macmillan, 1908) was published, using the translation ‘‘loafer’’ in 2 Thess 3:6–7. Milligan was followed by James Everett Frame, ‘‘Οἱ Ἄτακτοι (1 Thess. 5.14),’’ in *Essays in Modern Theology and Related Subjects* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911), pp. 191–206; James Everett Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), p. 299; J. H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-literary Sources* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1914–30; one-volume reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), pp. xviii–xix, 89. More recently, the nuance of ‘‘idleness’’ has been defended in Best, *First and Second Thessalonians*, pp. 229–30.

<sup>22</sup>Frame, ‘‘Οἱ Ἄτακτοι,’’ pp. 204–5; Frame, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 299.

<sup>23</sup>E.g., NIV, ESV, NLT, RSV consistently use words related to idleness and laziness to render the ἄτακτος word group in 1 Thess 5:14; 2 Thess 3:6–7, 11. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), §88.246–47 (hereafter cited as L&N), gloss ἀτακτέω with ‘‘be lazy’’ and ἀτάκτως with ‘‘lazily.’’ Of course, before the papyri discoveries, commentators consistently defined the ἄτακτος word group with its classical meaning. So Benjamin Jowett, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, Galatians, Romans* (London: John Murray, 1859), pp. 102, 173–75; Charles John Ellicott, *Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1864; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), pp. 76–77; John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians* (London: MacMillan, 1877), pp. 201–2; Gottlieb Lünemann, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistles to the Thessalonians*, trans. Paton J. Gloag (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1883; reprint, Winona Lake, IN: Alpha, 1979), p. 552; J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (London: Macmillan, 1895), p. 129; F. J. A. Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia and One Sermon* (London: MacMillan., 1897; reprint, 1914), p. 124.

disorderliness.<sup>24</sup> This shift in consensus is reflected in Bauer: the second edition (1979), referring to ἀτάκτως in the present passage, gives “fig. ἀ. περιπατεῖν *live in idleness*,” while the third edition (2000) gives “ἀτάκτως περιπατεῖν *behave irresponsibly*...the specific manner in which the irresponsible behavior manifests itself is described in the context: freeloading, sponging.”<sup>25</sup> This shift in consensus is also demonstrated in the most recent major commentary on Thessalonians, where Gordon Fee confesses his inability to grasp the reason that the ἄτακτος word group is still rendered in modern translations with words related to idleness, in that such translations do “not in fact have a lexical leg to stand on,” being supported by “a total lack of evidence.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup>This growing scholarly consensus found early expression in Ceslas Spicq’s seminal article, “Les Thessaloniens ‘inquiets’ étaient-ils des paresseux?” *Studia Theologica* 10 (1956): 1–13; and includes (in chronological order) *TDNT*, s.v. “τάσσω, κτλ.,” 8:48; Forkman, *Limits*, pp. 134–35; Göran Agrell, *Work, Toil and Sustenance: An Examination of the View of Work in the New Testament, Taking into Consideration Views Found in Old Testament, Intertestamental, and Early Rabbinic Writings* (Verbum: Ohlssons, 1976), pp. 117–18; Wolfgang Trilling, *Der zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher*, Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, (Zurich: Einsiedeln, 1980), p. 143 [‘unordentlich’]; Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, pp. 203–5; Robert Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), pp. 104–5; Russell, “Idle,” pp. 107–8; Raymond F. Collins, *The Birth of the New Testament: The Origin and Development of the First Christian Generation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p. 94; François Bassin, *Les deux épîtres de Paul aux Thessaloniens*, Commentaires Évangéliques de la Bible (Vaux-sur-Seine: Edifac, 1991), pp. 265–66 [‘indisciplinés’, ‘désordonnée’]; Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, pp. 273–74; Richard, *Thessalonians*, pp. 379, 382, 388–90; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Interpretation Commentary (Louisville: John Knox, 1998), pp. 81–82, 128–29; Michael W. Holmes, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, New International Version Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 271–72 (1998); Simon Légasse, *Les épîtres de Paul aux Thessaloniens*, Lectio Divina (Paris: du Cerf, 1999), p. 429 [‘dérégulée’, ‘désordre’]; Mayhue, *Thessalonians*, p. 195; BDAG, s.v. “ἀτάκτως,” “ἀτακτέω,” p. 148bc; Karl P. Donfried, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 61–63; Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Pillar (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 343–44; Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, p. 249; Nicholl, *Hope to Despair*, pp. 167–68; Ben Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 162; Victor Paul Furnish, *1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), p. 116; Nijay Gupta, “An Apocalyptic Reading of Psalm 78 in 2 Thessalonians 3,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (2008): 188; Fee, *First and Second Thessalonians*, pp. 209–10.

<sup>25</sup>Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), s.v. “ἀτακτος,” p. 119d (hereafter cited as BAGD); BDAG, s.v. “ἀτακτος,” p. 148c. The shift is even more explicit in defining the verb ἀτακτέω: BAGD (p. 119c) gives “in our lit. only 2 Th 3:7, where the context demands the mng. *be idle, lazy*,” while BDAG (p. 148b) gives “to violate prescribed or recognized order, *behave inappropriately*” and notes that “the trans. *be idle, lazy* does not take adequate account of Gr-Rom. social history.”

<sup>26</sup>Fee, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 209. Fee’s treatment on pp. 209–10 suggests he might be unaware of the papyrological discoveries (of which he makes no

### The ἄτακτος Word Group in the Thessalonian Context

While it is true that the contexts of the ἄτακτος word group in Thessalonians and certain papyri involve a lack of work, it is doubtful that the word itself means “idle.” It is both contextually acceptable and linguistically preferable to retain in those contexts the standard meaning of the word, “disorderly” or “unruly.”<sup>27</sup> This meaning fits well contextually in the four occurrences of ἀτάκτως and cognates in Thessalonians, making a narrower definition unnecessary.<sup>28</sup> Further, ἀτάκτως is not only contrasted in 3:11 with the idea of working, but also associated with being a meddler,<sup>29</sup> making the limited meaning of “idle” less likely.<sup>30</sup> The fact that some were not working seems to have been less a concern to Paul than the fact that they were not submitting to the instruction and example of their spiritual authorities, hence his use of terminology that indicates they were “out of order.”

Each time in 2 Thessalonians 3 that Paul uses a term from the ἄτακτος word group, he immediately describes the disorderliness to which he refers. Accordingly, Paul speaks in 3:6 of “every brother who is leading a disorderly life, *that is* [explanatory καί], not according to the tradition which they received from us.”<sup>31</sup> In 3:7–8, Paul claims that

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mention) which precipitated the changing translation of the ἄτακτος word group in the early 20th century.

<sup>27</sup>Frame, “Οἱ ἄτακτοι,” references uses of the ἄτακτος word group in Oxyrhynchus Papyri 275 (A.D. 66) and 725 (A.D. 183) as evidence for the nuance of “loafing.” Full texts are found in B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, 15 volumes (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1898–1922), 2:262–62 and 4:206–8; A. S. Hunt and C. C. Edgar, trans., *Select Papyri*, vol. 1, *Private Affairs*, Loeb Classical Library 266 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), pp. 38–45. In their original publication, Grenfell and Hunt translate ἀτακτῆσι as “disobedient.” Justification for retaining the classical meaning in these texts is found in Forkman, *Limits*, pp. 134–35. Forkman makes a telling point, noting that in Oxyrhynchus Papyri 725, a weaver’s apprentice is described as potentially idle (ἀργήσι), ill (ἀσθενήσι), or undisciplined (ἀτακτῆσι); Forkman rightly notes that given the context, “it is hardly likely that ἀργήσι has the same meaning as ἀτακτῆσι.”

<sup>28</sup>Spicq is unyielding on this point: “The usage of the verb, the adjective, and the adverb in the Koine, notably in the first century AD, confirms that the word covers any breach of obligation or convention, disorders of life in general; and the usage is decisive” (*TLNT*, s.v. “ἀτακτέω, ἄτακτος, ἀτάκτως,” 1:223).

<sup>29</sup>Hence Fee’s characterization of the disorderly as the “disruptive-idle” (*First and Second Thessalonians*, pp. 324–39, *passim*).

<sup>30</sup>See Forkman, *Limits*, pp. 134–35; Rigaux, *Saint Paul. Les épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, pp. 704–5; Walter Schmithals, “The Historical Situation of the Thessalonian Epistles,” in *Paul and the Gnostics* (Nashville: Abington, 1972), p. 197; Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 251. Even if ἀτάκτως were opposed in 3:11 merely to the idea of working, idleness is not the only possibility for a conceptual opposite of work (Holmes, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 271).

<sup>31</sup>See M. J. J. Menken, “Paradise Regained or Still Lost? Eschatology and Disorderly Behaviour in 2 Thessalonians,” *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992): 276; Légasse, *Les épîtres de Paul aux Thessaloniens*, p. 429: “The adverb *ataktôs*, like the

the apostolic team “did not live in a disorderly manner among you, *that is* [explanatory οὐδέ], we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it.”<sup>32</sup> In 3:11, Paul specifies the nature of the disorderly behavior, noting that some Thessalonians were “leading a disorderly life, doing no work at all, but meddling.”<sup>33</sup> These clarifications suggest the more general meaning of “disorderly,” not the specific meaning of “idle.”

### Summary of Paul’s Use of the ἄτακτος Word Group

In sum, the linguistic evidence indicates that the ἄτακτος word group in Paul’s time normally communicated the concept of “disorderliness,” a meaning which fits well in the contexts in the Thessalonian epistles where the word group is used. Proponents of the specialized, atypical nuance of “idleness” have not made a sufficient case for their proposal. It is best, therefore, to understand Paul here describing those from whom the Thessalonians were to separate as “disorderly,” and treatments and translations of the Thessalonian epistles ought to render the ἄτακτος word group accordingly. The ἄτακτος word group by itself does not lexically indicate “idleness,” even though that may be contextually the sort of disorderliness in view.

### The Seriousness of the Offense of the Disorderly

At times, interpreters understate the seriousness of the offense of the disorderly,<sup>34</sup> particularly in contrast to the sexual immorality addressed in 1 Corinthians 5, another Pauline disciplinary passage.<sup>35</sup> This

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corresponding adjective (1 Thess 5:14) and verb (2 Thess 3:7), does not provide specificity by itself and requires the light of the context” (“L’adverbe *ataktōs*...comme l’adjectif [1 Th 5, 14] et le verbe [2 Th 3, 7] correspondent, n’apporte par lui-même aucune précision et requiert la lumière du contexte”).

<sup>32</sup>Wallace (*GGBB*, p. 673) does not list οὐδέ in his category of “explanatory conjunctions,” but does list δε, of which οὐδέ is merely the negative form. A. T. Robertson notes that the various uses of καί (presumably including the explanatory use) all find parallels in οὐδέ (*Grammar*, p. 1185).

<sup>33</sup>Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 389; Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, p. 453.

<sup>34</sup>Mark Minnick speaks of the offender’s disorder of not working for a living as “minor” and “a lesser kind of disobedience” (“Straight Cuts,” *FrontLine* [Journal of the Fundamental Baptist Fellowship; Jan–Feb 2005], “FrontLine Pastor’s Insert,” p. 6). Similarly, Peter Masters, “Secondary Separation,” in “Separation and Obedience,” supplement to *Sword and Trowel* (London: Metropolitan Tabernacle, 1983), p. 7; Layton Talbert, “2 Thessalonians—Perseverance during the Delay of Christ’s Certain Coming,” *FrontLine* (Journal of the Fundamental Baptist Fellowship; May–June 2009), p. 31.

<sup>35</sup>See the two offenses contrasted as to their corresponding weightiness in, e.g., Best, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 344; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 226; Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul & Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), p. 117, n. 81.

understatement is often tied to the prescribed response to the offenders in 3:14–15, which is seen as less severe than that of 1 Corinthians 5. Just how serious was the offense Paul addresses? Three descriptions of the offenders in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 help to underscore its gravity: the disorderly were “not working at all” (3:11), they were “meddlesome” (3:11), and they lived contrary to the apostolic tradition (3:6).

### The Disorderly Were not Working at All

In commending manual labor to the Thessalonians, Paul differed strikingly from the prevalent attitude in Greco-Roman society,<sup>36</sup> an attitude which reflected the cultural acceptability of the offenders' lack of employment. Particularly among the elite, physical labor was disdained as dishonorable and fit only for the poor and unrefined.<sup>37</sup> Plutarch, for instance, believed that even excellent workmanship by an artisan did not indicate that the workman was anything but low and sordid. A person might achieve a high level of competence in a particular occupation, but if such an occupation were intrinsically dishonorable, he thereby only proved his negligence of and indisposition toward what was really good.<sup>38</sup> For Cicero, artisans and shopkeepers were the “dregs of a city,” no workshop could be considered an appropriate place for a gentleman, and manual labor was vulgar and akin to slavery.<sup>39</sup> This dismissive attitude was not universal, but common.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Ronald F. Hock disagrees with this estimation, understanding Paul's canonical descriptions of his labor to reflect a prejudice against manual labor which resulted from the upper-class background he posits for Paul. In his view, Paul considered manual labor slavish and demeaning, but worked because of necessity, paralleling the attitude and situation of philosophers such as Dio Chrysostom. “Paul's Tentmaking and the Problem of His Social Class,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978): 555–64. Hock has been ably critiqued by Todd D. Still, “Did Paul Loathe Manual Labor? Revisiting the Work of Ronald F. Hock on the Apostle's Tentmaking and Social Class,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006): 781–95.

<sup>37</sup>An exception was that of the agricultural laborer, as noted in Peter Garnsey, “Non-Slave Labour in the Roman World,” in *Non-Slave Labour in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1980), pp. 34–35. “No other type of worker is honoured in the (upper-class) literature.” The Thessalonian setting was urban, however, not rural.

<sup>38</sup>*Pericles* 1.3–2.2.

<sup>39</sup>*Pro Flacco* 18; *De officiis* 1.150. Cf. Plutarch, *De vitando aere alieno* 830D.

<sup>40</sup>See further source material in Aune, “Trouble in Thessalonica,” pp. 33–40; Ramsey McMullen, *Roman Social Relations, 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 114–17; S. M. Treggiari, “Urban Labour in Rome,” in *Non-Slave Labour in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1980), pp. 48–49. While certain philosophers subscribed to the “upper crust disgust” (Still, “Loathe?” p. 783) toward manual labor, it is true that others took a more positive attitude. Dio Chrysostom, e.g., defended work in *Venator* 103–24, although he did not stress manual labor in particular, but looked at gainful employment in general. Musonius, a first-century Stoic philosopher, recommended that a philosopher do manual labor like a peasant, “demonstrating by his own labor the lessons which philosophy inculcates—that one should endure hardships, and suffer the pains of labor with his own body, rather than depend upon another for sustenance.”

While the perspective of the apostolic tradition on manual labor was at odds with the widespread Greco-Roman stance, it was much closer to the prevalent attitude in Judaism.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, “working with one’s hands” appears to be an idiom with a Jewish background.<sup>42</sup> While recognizing that working for one’s livelihood can be an exhausting proposition as a result of the Fall (Gen 3:17–19),<sup>43</sup> the OT does not portray manual labor as intrinsically demeaning, but as rooted in and reflective of God’s own creative work.<sup>44</sup> Rabbinic literature reflects a positive attitude toward the necessity of manual labor, even for those devoted to the study of Torah.<sup>45</sup>

Paul had already commanded the Thessalonians to work with their hands (1 Thess 4:11) and would later give a similar injunction to the Ephesians in the context of basic ethical instruction (Eph 4:28). In 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15, he highlights the gravity of the intentional unemployment of the disorderly by contrasting it with his direct instruction (3:6, 10) and purposeful example (3:7–9). Part of the ethical teaching of the apostolic tradition was capsulized in Paul’s teaching, “If anyone will not work, neither let him eat.” Clearly, the offenders’ refusal to work was a serious problem, not to be taken lightly.<sup>46</sup>

### The Disorderly Were Meddlesome

The participle of *περιεργάζομαι* (“be intrusively busy”) in 3:11 is typically translated “busybody,” but is better rendered “meddler.”<sup>47</sup>

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Musonius Rufus, *Fragment 11 (What Means of Livelihood Is Appropriate for a Philosopher)* in Abraham Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), p. 152.

<sup>41</sup>As in 1 Cor 4:12; 1 Thess 4:11. So Trilling, *Der zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher*, p. 148.

<sup>42</sup>So Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 220; Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 123. Cf., e.g., Deut 16:15; Job 1:10; Ps 90:17. OT authors use this sort of language for God himself, which could not help but dignify the notion of manual labor in the eyes of pious Jews. Cf. Job 34:19; Ps 8:6; 19:1; 28:5; 92:4; 102:25; 138:8; 143:3; Isa 5:12; 19:25.

<sup>43</sup>Menken (“Paradise Regained,” pp. 275–80) plausibly proposes that the “tradition” being flouted is rooted in the OT, particularly in the divine institution of Gen 3:17–19 where hard work is presented as necessary for one’s sustenance in a post-Fall world.

<sup>44</sup>See Gen 2:15; Exod 20:9–11; Prov 6:6–11; 10:4–5; 24:30–34; 31:13–27.

<sup>45</sup>See the pertinent compilation of rabbinic commentary in C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Schocken, 1974), pp. 440–45.

<sup>46</sup>Refusing to work for one’s livelihood would be at least akin to the failure to provide for one’s own family, which for Paul constituted denial of the faith (1 Tim 5:8). As well, it is probably fair to categorize the disorderly as *πλεονέκτης* (“greedy”) one of the categories listed in 1 Cor 6:9–10 as characteristic of one who would not inherit the kingdom of God. *πλεονέκτης* is “one who desires to have more than is due” (BDAG, s.v. “πλεονεξία,” 824c).

<sup>47</sup>BDAG, s.v. “περιεργάζομαι,” p. 800bc; cf. Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 5th rev. ed. (Rome: Editrice

While “busybody” might have a rather innocuous connotation in the twenty-first century, the same did not hold true for the term περιεργάζομαι in Paul’s day. “Meddling” was considered “abhorrent” and “a weighty social transgression in the first-century world” and was a standard topic of consideration and condemnation in Greco-Roman writings.<sup>48</sup> Because περιεργάζομαι and related terms tend to be fairly general and occur in a wide range of contexts, it is impossible to determine from a purely lexical standpoint the precise nuance of περιεργάζομαι in the present passage.<sup>49</sup> All the same, it is clear that in Paul’s culture, it was no small matter. Further, Paul himself categorizes the sort of meddling in question as disorderly behavior (3:11); it was therefore not merely contrary to prevailing Greco-Roman mores, but to the established norm for Christian conduct (3:6).

### The Disorderly Lived Contrary to the Apostolic Tradition

In 3:6, Paul describes the Thessalonian disorderliness as not in accord with the “tradition” received from the apostolic team (3:6).<sup>50</sup>

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Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1996), p. 625. The participle is often translated “busybody” in order to maintain something of the Greek wordplay in translation: “not busy, but busybodies” (μηδὲν ἐργαζομένουσ ἀλλὰ περιεργαζομένουσ). *EDNT* (s.v. “περιεργάζομαι,” 3:73) glosses the word as “do useless things, appear busy,” but this seems too bland an understanding of the term in light of its usage in, e.g., Sirach 3.23; *Testament of Reuben* 3.10; Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.112. See the treatments in L&N 88.243–45; Jeannine K. Brown, “Just a Busybody? A Look at the Greco-Roman Topos of Meddling for Defining ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος in 1 Peter 4:15,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006): 550–54; Victor Ehrenberg, “Polypragmosyne: A Study in Greek Politics,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 67 (1947): 62; J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1988), pp. 267–68.

<sup>48</sup>Brown, “Busybody?” pp. 555, 561. She also speaks of “the serious nature of meddling in the ancient context” as “no small transgression” (p. 562), suggesting that it was “an activity that caused serious opposition and may have even evoked revolutionary overtones” (p. 549). “Standard topic”: Brown (“Busybody,” pp. 552–58) demonstrates this aptly. Note e.g., Epictetus, *Diatribai* 3.22.81–99; Theophrastus, *Characteres* 105; Plutarch, *De curiositate* 516, 519; Plato, *Republica* 434, 551–52. Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 3.171. Malherbe (*Thessalonians*, p. 453) notes that περιεργάζομαι was a “well-known term of opprobrium” and notes that “the emphatic position and sharpness of *periergazesthai* show the importance that this offensive behavior has for Paul.”

<sup>49</sup>Trilling (*Der zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher*, pp. 150–51) considers περιεργάζομαι to be so general in nature that it supplies nothing in particular about the disorderliness in view; see also Best, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 340; Furnish, *1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians*, p. 178. A scholar’s reconstruction of the Thessalonian *Sitz im Leben* typically drives his understanding of the particular “meddling” in view, whether spreading false teaching (e.g., Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, p. 257), supporting the causes of one’s patron (Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, p. 351), or merely keeping others from their work by useless chatter (Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, pp. 224–25).

<sup>50</sup>Important discussions of the apostolic tradition are found in Oscar Cullman, “The Tradition,” in *The Early Church*, trans. A. J. B. Higgins (London: SCM, 1956; trans. of *La Tradition. Problème exégétique, historique et théologique* [Paris and Neuchâtel, 1953]); Yves M.-J. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions* (New York:



What is the nature of the apostolic tradition to which Paul refers, and how broadly should his particular reference to it in 3:6 be understood?

*The Nature of the Apostolic Tradition*

Παράδοσις is used in the New Testament as a technical term referring to the content of instruction that has been handed down authoritatively.<sup>51</sup> The verbs παραδίδωμι (“deliver”) and παραλαμβάνω (“receive”) are used technically in the NT for the deliverance and reception of the παράδοσις.<sup>52</sup> Passages with any of these three technical terms may help to illuminate the NT idea of tradition.<sup>53</sup>

In his ministry, Jesus used strong words against the “tradition of the elders”—the oral law of Judaism—which had in practice been vested with an authority equal to or greater than the canonical law of Moses.<sup>54</sup> Christ spoke against the very thing that Saul the Pharisee held dear: “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my peers among my people, because I was more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions” (Gal 1:14). When Paul the Christian uses the language of tradition in regard to his own teaching, however, he has something other

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Macmillan, 1966; trans. of *La Tradition et les Traditions: Essai Historique* [Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1960]), pp. 1–13; Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1964); F. F. Bruce, *Tradition: Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. and rev. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 425–32; Richard Bauckham, “Transmitting the Jesus Traditions,” in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 264–89.

<sup>51</sup>BDAG, s.v. “παράδοσις,” p. 763bc. Cf. also TDNT, s.v., “παραδίδωμι” and “παράδοσις,” by F. Büchsel, 2:169–73; EDNT, s.v. “παράδοσις,” by W. Porckes, 3:21; *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. “παραδίδωμι,” by K. Wegenast, 3:774–75 (hereafter cited as NIDNTT).

<sup>52</sup>BDAG, s.v. “παραδίδωμι,” and “παραλαμβάνω,” pp. 762d–763a; 768ab. Note also L&N §33.237–39; Cullman, “Tradition,” pp. 63, 65; Bruce, *Tradition*, pp. 20–21. Although used more generally in antiquity (Plato, *Philebus* 16c; see EDNT, s.v. “παράδοσις,” 3:16–17), this terminology in Paul almost certainly reflects more specifically its use and his background in Judaism. Cf. *m. Abot* 1:1–3; Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.297; Mark 7:4; Acts 6:14. At the same time, as Bauckham notes, “These Greek words were used for formal transmission of tradition in the Hellenistic schools and so would have been familiar in this sense to Paul’s Gentile readers” (“Transmitting the Jesus Traditions,” p. 264).

<sup>53</sup>The words are used technically in the following passages: παράδοσις: Matt 15:2–3, 6; Mark 7:3, 5, 8–9, 13; 1 Cor 11:2; Gal 1:14; Col 2:8; 2 Thess 2:15; 3:6; παραδίδωμι: Matt 11:27 (?); Mark 7:13; Luke 1:2; 10:22 (?); Acts 6:14; 16:4; Rom 6:17 (?); 1 Cor 11:2, 23; 15:3; Gal 1:14; Col 2:8; 2 Thess 2:15; 3:6; 2 Pet 2:21; Jude 3; παραλαμβάνω: Mark 7:4; 1 Cor 11:23; 15:1, 3; Gal 1:9, 12; Phil 4:9; Col 2:6; 1 Thess 2:13; 4:1; 2 Thess 3:6. Of course, passages which have reference to the apostolic tradition are not limited to those with this technical terminology. See Bruce, *Tradition*, p. 38; Cullman, “Tradition,” p. 63; Gerhardsson, *Memory*, p. 290.

<sup>54</sup>Matt 15:1–9; Mark 7:1–13.

than the oral law of Judaism in view, as shown in Galatians 1:9–14.<sup>55</sup> A survey of the relevant technical terminology in his epistles, as well as in the remainder of the NT, indicates that Paul delivered to his converts a new collection of tradition, consisting of certain interrelated categories of material centered in the gospel: (1) a summary of the gospel message; (2) sayings and accounts of Jesus; (3) teachings of Christian doctrine; and (4) moral and ethical guidelines for believers.<sup>56</sup> To these categories might be added Jesus' divine interpretation of OT Scripture referring to himself, recorded in Luke-Acts as having been explained to his followers.<sup>57</sup>

By using the language of tradition, Paul points to the authority for his teaching: such authority was external to himself and ultimately could be traced back to Jesus as its originator.<sup>58</sup> It should be emphasized that Paul and the other apostles (using the term narrowly) held a unique position in regard to the Christian παράδοσις.<sup>59</sup> They were the authoritative representatives of Jesus and had received from him his teaching, the promise of the guidance of his Spirit in bringing to their

<sup>55</sup>In Gal 1:9–14 the true gospel of Christ “received” by the Galatians (v. 9) is indirectly contrasted to the “traditions” (v. 14) in which Paul had been trained. For discussion on Paul’s claim there that he did not “receive” his gospel as tradition from men, as contrasted with language elsewhere which seems to indicate the opposite (cf. 1 Cor 15:1–8), see Knox Chamblin, “Revelation and Tradition in the Pauline Euangelion,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986): 1–16, and further bibliography there; also, Cullman, “Tradition,” pp. 66–73; J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1925), pp. 142–47.

<sup>56</sup>(1) 1 Cor 15:1–8; Gal 1:9–12; 1 Thess 2:13. (2) Luke 1:1–4; 1 Cor 11:23–25; cf. 1 Cor 7:10–11. (3) 2 Thess 2:15; Jude 1:3; cf. 2 Tim 1:13–14; 2:2. (4) Acts 16:4; Rom 6:17 (?); 1 Cor 11:2; Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 4:1–2. See Bauckham, “Transmitting the Jesus Traditions,” p. 265; Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, pp. 9–10; Cullman, “Tradition,” p. 64; Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 303–6; R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), p. 11; James I. H. McDonald, *Kerygma and Didache* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 101–25.

<sup>57</sup>Although the technical language of tradition noted above is not used, see Luke 24:27, 44–48; Acts 1:3. With two of his followers, “beginning with Moses and the prophets, he explained (διεξηγήσατο) to them in all the Scriptures that which concerned himself.” Later, he appeared to the Eleven and their companions, referenced the fulfillment of the OT regarding himself, and “opened their minds to understand (συνίημι) the Scriptures.” Before his ascension, he spent a period of forty days speaking to his apostles “about the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:1–3). This authoritative interpretation of Jesus is doubtless behind much of the use of the OT in the NT, and almost certainly referenced in 1 Cor 15:3–4 (“according to the Scriptures”). See especially Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 228–31. For the general idea of specific interpretations of OT Scripture as part of the received tradition, see also Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 8; Cullman, “Tradition,” p. 69; E. Earle Ellis, “Traditions in 1 Corinthians,” *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986): 482.

<sup>58</sup>This is made explicit with ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου in 1 Cor 11:23. Cf. J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (London: Macmillan, 1895), p. 121; Ralph P. Martin, “Authority in the Light of the Apostolate, Tradition and the Canon,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 40 (1968): 72–73.

<sup>59</sup>Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 220–25; *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, s.v. “Tradition,” by Rainer Riesner, pp. 824–25.

minds all that he had said (John 14:26; 16:13–15), and his direct commission to deliver his teaching to other believers (Matt 28:18–20).<sup>60</sup> “Apostolic authority was not innovative authority,” Belleville reminds us; instead, it “resided in a common core of traditions about the life and teaching of Jesus,” and therefore, “the apostolic task was that of faithful transmission of these traditions to new congregations, rather than origination.”<sup>61</sup>

Because of the apostles’ unique position as the proxies of Christ and their direct reception of Christ’s teachings, “the apostle cannot...have any successor who can replace him as bearer of the revelation for future generations, but he must continue *himself* to fulfill his function in the Church of today: *in* the Church, not *by* the Church, but *by his word*, διὰ τοῦ λόγου (John 17:20), in other words, by his *writings*.”<sup>62</sup> Due to the singular position of the apostles, their own words regarding the Christian tradition are as binding upon the church as those handed down from Christ himself.<sup>63</sup>

### *The Apostolic Tradition and the Thessalonians*

The language of tradition is highlighted in both letters to the

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<sup>60</sup> Ἀπόστολος seems to be used in at least two senses in the NT: broadly, in reference to anyone who is sent out on a mission (e.g., 2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25), or more narrowly in reference to the Twelve and Paul (e.g., Luke 6:13; 1 Cor 9:1–2). See *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, s.v. “Apostle,” by Paul W. Barnett, pp. 47–48. For apostles as authoritative representatives, see Luke 10:16; John 13:20; Robert Duncan Culver, “Apostles and the Apostolate in the New Testament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134 (1977): 132–33; *TLNT*, s.v. “ἀπόστολος,” by C. Spicq, 1:191–92.

<sup>61</sup> Belleville, “Authority,” p. 57. Cf. 2 Tim 2:2. While the apostles retained the tradition handed down to them, however, they did add to it as authoritative representatives of Christ, enlarging upon what they had received. These additions might include events which happened after the ascension (e.g., 1 Cor 15:8, grammatically part of the sequence beginning with 15:3), ethical instructions on matters to which Christ had not spoken directly (e.g., Acts 16:4 in reference to Acts 15; 1 Cor 7:12 as contrasted with 7:10), and what Paul characterizes as “mystery”—previously unrevealed aspects of God’s redemptive plan (e.g., 1 Cor 15:51–52; Eph 3:4–7). “The tradition is both a fixed and growing tradition; that is, the tradition cannot be changed, but it can be enlarged.... The Spirit can add to the tradition by granting through the apostles and prophets an unfolding and outworking of the redemptive purpose of God which is already implicit in the redemptive work of Christ” (Ladd, “Revelation,” p. 228). Cf. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, p. 6 (although he extends the privilege of expanding the apostolic tradition beyond the apostles); D. H. Williams, *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), pp. 20–21. Apostolic expansion of the tradition was accomplished by the work of the Spirit, whom Jesus had promised would guide the disciples “into all the truth” and would declare to them “the things to come” (John 16:13).

<sup>62</sup> Cullman, “Tradition,” p. 80.

<sup>63</sup> Contra Congar, who distinguishes two categories of tradition: the “fundamental” core of the gospel message, which has “an absolute and immutable character,” vs. the apostles’ rules of conduct which are “open to modification, or at least growth, according to the needs of the historical life of the Church” (*Tradition and Traditions*, p. 11).

Thessalonians.<sup>64</sup> In the first letter, Paul notes that when he had preached the gospel to them, they had received (παραλαμβάνω) it not as the word of men, but as what it really was, the word of God (1 Thess 2:13).<sup>65</sup> Later in the letter, Paul indicates that they had received (παραλαμβάνω) ethical instruction from the apostolic team: they were taught how to live so as to please God (1 Thess 4:1).<sup>66</sup> The instruction which Paul goes on to detail includes—significantly—admonitions to aspire to live quietly, to attend to one’s own affairs, and to work with one’s own hands (1 Thess 4:11). Paul clearly considers these three admonitions to be part of the apostolic tradition delivered to the Thessalonians.<sup>67</sup>

In the second letter, after Paul corrects eschatological error regarding the coming of the Lord (2:1–12) and gives thanks for the Thessalonians’ election to salvation (2:13–14), he instructs them to “stand firm and hold fast to the traditions which you were taught, either by word or by letter from us” (2:15). Two vehicles for transmitting tradition are contrasted here, “word” (λόγος) and “letter” (ἐπιστολή), which were “both equally authoritative and binding.”<sup>68</sup> The latter clearly refers to written correspondence, and the meaning of the contrasted λόγος is thus limited to the spoken “word.”<sup>69</sup> While the reference to the “traditions” in 2:15 doubtless includes Paul’s teaching regarding the coming of the Lord, it seems best to understand the entire

<sup>64</sup>Most notably, two of the three major technical terms used vis-à-vis tradition are found in 1 Thess 2:13; 4:1; 2 Thess 2:15; 3:6. Note the treatment in Caroline Vander Stichele, “The Concept of Tradition and 1 and 2 Thessalonians,” in *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, ed. Raymond F. Collins (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1990), pp. 499–504.

<sup>65</sup>The term παραλαμβάνω is almost certainly used technically here, as noted by, e.g., BDAG, s.v. “παραλαμβάνω,” p. 768a; Best, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 110; Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, pp. 110–11.

<sup>66</sup>To refer to what they had received as tradition, Paul goes on to speak of the “commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus” (1 Thess 4:2). This language is quite similar to that used in 2 Thess 3:6: “We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

<sup>67</sup>Regarding these admonitions, Paul says “we commanded you” (4:11, ὑμῖν παρηγγείλαμεν); this statement forms an inclusio with the earlier “what commands we gave you” (4:2, τίνας παραγγελίας ἐδώκαμεν ὑμῖν), which in turn is used in reference to what the Thessalonians had “received as tradition” (4:1, παραλαμβάνω). Cf. Collins, *Birth*, p. 64. Of course, anything that was formally “commanded” of a church by an apostle would qualify as part of the apostolic παράδοσις. Cf. Gerhardsson, *Memory*, p. 293.

<sup>68</sup>Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 269.

<sup>69</sup>BDAG, s.v. “ἐπιστολή,” p. 381c; “λόγος,” p. 599a. Since Paul later uses ἐπιστολή in reference to the letter he was currently writing (3:14), it is likely that this reference in 2:15 to a previous “letter” has 1 Thessalonians in view, while διὰ λόγου points to the oral catechesis of Paul and company when present at Thessalonica. So, e.g., Best, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 318; Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, pp. 209–10.

Christian παράδοσις as being in view.<sup>70</sup>

In 2 Thessalonians 3:4, Paul expresses his confidence that the church is doing and will do what he commands, apparently a reference to keeping the traditions (plural) they had been taught (2:15).<sup>71</sup> This expression of confidence anticipates his further command two verses later to withdraw from the disorderly, those who were not living according to the tradition (singular) which they had received (3:6). This singular “tradition” stands in contradistinction to the plural “traditions” of 2:15, suggesting a particular aspect of the apostolic tradition as a whole.<sup>72</sup> The chiasmic structure of 3:6–12 in turn indicates a correspondence of “the tradition” of 3:6 with Paul’s command in 3:10: “If anyone will not work, neither let him eat.”<sup>73</sup> Given its characterization as “tradition,” it may possibly be that this command preserves a saying of Christ unknown in the canonical gospels (cf. Acts 20:35). Even if the command originated with Paul, however, his apostleship makes its authoritative nature indisputable. Given the significance of the apostolic tradition for the Christian faith, any clear disobedience thereto surely would have been a grave matter.

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<sup>70</sup>In the preceding context (2:10–12), Paul speaks of those who are perishing (τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις) as having neither loved nor believed the truth, but having had pleasure in unrighteousness, and thus having been condemned. In contrast, the Thessalonians had been called to salvation through the sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth, through the gospel message they had heard (2:13–14). Therefore, they were to continue both to stand fast (στήκετε) and hold fast (κρατεῖτε) to the traditions. Based on the contrast of the Thessalonians with both the beliefs and behavior of τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις, and on the proximity of the reference to the gospel (2:14), it seems likely that the reference to the “traditions” (plural!) here would be fairly broad, and not merely a reference to the portion of the apostolic tradition which served as a corrective to the false eschatological teaching addressed in 2 Thess 2. So Best, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 317; Calvin on 2:15; Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, p. 440; Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 366. This seems to be the way the plural is to be understood in 1 Cor 11:2 as well. At the same time, the specific teachings which the Thessalonians had received about the coming of the Lord would be included, as indicated by 2:5 and implied by the inclusio formed by 2:2 and 2:15 (as suggested by the repeated λόγος and ἐπιστολή, as well as the contrast between “be not shaken” [2:2, σαλευῶ] and “stand fast” [2:15, στήκω]; see Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 234).

<sup>71</sup>The nature of and near reference to “the traditions” in 2:15, along with the general nature of both “the traditions which you were taught” (2:15) and “the things we command you” (3:4), makes it likely that “the things we command you” refer at least to “the traditions.” So Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 376. Cf. also the connection between the language of tradition and the language of command in 1 Thess 4:1–2.

<sup>72</sup>So Best, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 335; Calvin on 3:6; Forkman, *Limits*, p. 135; Morris, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 252; Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, pp. 379–80; Vander Stichele, “Tradition,” p. 500. Contra Rigaux, *Les épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, p. 705.

<sup>73</sup>See figure 1 above.

### Summary of the Seriousness of the Offense

Rather than consisting of a minor infraction, the offense of the disorderly was grave and significant. Both their lack of work and their meddling behavior were intrinsically blameworthy in that they contradicted the apostolic tradition which Paul had delivered to the Thesalonians with the authority of the Lord Jesus. Moreover, the dual offense appears to have demonstrated a lack of Christian love (cf. 1 Thess 4:9–10). Further, while their willful unemployment might not have met with disapproval from their pagan neighbors, their meddling behavior would certainly have given needless offense, thus harming the testimony of Christ (cf. 1 Thess 4:12). The seriousness of the situation is highlighted by its placement at the end of the letter for emphasis<sup>74</sup> and by the bluntly authoritative language which Paul uses in the passage.<sup>75</sup>

Further, the offenders were not guilty of merely a single incident of disorderliness, nor were they acting in ignorance. They had been clearly instructed as to working for a living, and they persisted in their disorderly behavior in the face of repeated admonition by both the apostle (2 Thess 3:10) and (presumably) the congregation (cf. 1 Thess 5:14 and 2 Thess 3:4). It is evident that the infraction of the disorderly had gone beyond intentional unemployment and involved a rebellious unwillingness to submit to apostolic authority.<sup>76</sup> One would expect Paul to respond strongly to the disorderly, and he does just that.

<sup>74</sup>Fee, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 333.

<sup>75</sup>Some see Paul as moderating his language with the use of παρακαλέω (“exhort”) alongside παραγγέλλω (“command”) in 3:12 (Frame, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 306; Morris, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 256). This is an inaccurate reading, however, for as several recent commentators note, the work of Bjerkelund shows that Paul is using a stereotypical Hellenistic Greek formula which requested or commanded some particular action, and that Paul’s use of the formula “conforms most closely to the pattern used by a ruler to his subjects” (Carl J. Bjerkelund, *Parakalō: Form, Funktion und Sinn der parakalō-Sätze in den paulinischen Briefen* [Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1967]; see Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 148; Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, p. 183). Malherbe notes that when παρακαλέω is used, it is frequently “interpreted or given precision by an accompanying word or words from the moral philosophers’ vocabulary” (*Letters to the Thessalonians*, p. 139). Παρακαλέω should be seen as a general term of exhortation which is taking its nuance from παραγγέλλω, not moderating the forcefulness of παραγγέλλω.

<sup>76</sup>It is difficult to understand the suggestion of Wanamaker that the disorderly were not intentionally resisting authority or acting in disobedience, but merely acting irresponsibly (*Epistles to the Thessalonians*, pp. 281–82). This line of thinking is also seen in Nicholl: “The view that ‘Paul’ is confronting active rebellion on the part of the ἄτακτοι is irreconcilable with the sentiment expressed in verse 15” (*Hope to Despair*, p. 168). Note also John Cassian, *Institutes* 10.7; Jerry L. Sumney, “Studying Paul’s Opponents: Advances and Challenges,” in *Paul and His Opponents*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 38. But the view that Paul is *not* confronting active rebellion is irreconcilable with the previous apostolic instruction, both personal (1 Thess 4:11; 2 Thess 3:10), and written (1 Thess 4:10–11). Contra Wanamaker and Nicholl, see Robert Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), pp. 104–5.

### Paul's Response to the Disorderly

In 3:14, the obedient congregation is instructed to take note of any who continue to live in a disorderly manner in order that they might cease associating with him. If Paul's instructions stopped at 3:14, few would deny that he wanted the congregation to expel the disorderly from the church. However, the passage continues: "And do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." Because Paul uses the term "brother," many who comment on this passage reason thus: (a) the congregation is to disassociate from the disorderly in some fashion; (b) the congregation is still to understand the disorderly to be brothers after this disassociation; (c) therefore, the disassociation must not be expulsion from the church.<sup>77</sup> Usually it is concluded that there is some sort of ostracism of the offender, while he is allowed to remain a member of the church.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps he is excluded from the Lord's Supper, it is suggested, or perhaps the rest of the congregation treats him with a certain coldness.<sup>79</sup>

This typical conclusion is rendered suspect, however, in that aside from the "brother" terminology there is every indication that the disorderly who continued in disobedience were to be disciplined out of the church. Several lines of evidence support this conclusion: (1) Paul uses the same terminology (*μη συναναμειγνυμι*) for disassociation both from the disorderly in Thessalonica (3:14) and from the incestuous man at Corinth (1 Cor 5:9, 11), and it is abundantly clear in 1 Corinthians 5 that the Corinthian offender was to be removed altogether from the church.<sup>80</sup> (2) Unless here, the NT does not know of a

<sup>77</sup>So, e.g., Fee, *First Corinthians*, p. 226; Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, p. 344; Paul Ellingworth and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1975), p. 200; James T. South, *Disciplinary Practices in Pauline Texts* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1992), pp. 163–64; Trilling, *Der zweite Brief an die Thessalonicher*, p. 156.

<sup>78</sup>So, e.g., R. S. T. Haslehurst, *Some Account of the Penitential Discipline of the Early Church in the First Four Centuries* (London: S. P. C. K., 1921), p. 26; William Hendriksen, *Thessalonians, Timothy, and Titus*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), pp. 199–200.

<sup>79</sup>Accordingly, Best bars the offender from the church's common meal, but allows him to continue to worship with the church, because "he is still a brother and has to be treated as a brother" (*First and Second Thessalonians*, pp. 343–44). Similarly, see Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, pp. 354–55; Mahlerbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, p. 460. Witherington suggests in light of Paul's use of *συναναμειγνυμι* in 1 Cor 5:9–11 a limitation of table fellowship; perhaps "at the congregational meal, the offender must eat alone," or possibly he should be denied invitations "to a private Christian meal to prevent his sponging off the host" (*1 and 2 Thessalonians*, pp. 255–56).

<sup>80</sup>It might be objected that Paul intensifies the dissociation of 1 Cor 5:11 by telling the church not only "not to associate" but also "not to eat" with the incestuous man: "I wrote with you not to associate with any so-called brother...not even (*μηδὲ*) to eat with such a one." It has been recently demonstrated, however, that *μηδὲ* here is almost universally misread as ascensive ("not even") when it is rightly understood as coordinate: "not to associate...not to eat." That is, refusing table fellowship was not an

situation where a professed believer persistently refuses to heed corrective admonition, yet is allowed to remain in a local congregation indefinitely on some sort of a probationary level.<sup>81</sup> (3) Arguably, Matthew 18:15–18 provides at least a broad template for Paul's disciplinary procedure,<sup>82</sup> and the advanced stage which the Thessalonian situation had reached clearly called for dismissal of the offenders from the church.<sup>83</sup> (4) While church discipline may be initiated for a wide

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escalation of an otherwise mild disassociation, but an essential part of what Paul had in mind in a culture which placed a great deal of weight on eating together. Jonathan Schwiebert, "Table Fellowship and the Translation of 1 Corinthians 5:11," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127 (2008): 159–64. Presumably, expulsion from the church would always have involved ceasing table fellowship with the offender.

Another suggested intensifier of dissociation in 1 Cor 5 is the offender's "deliverance to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" in v. 5. "Deliverance to Satan," however, is best understood as a technical term for expulsion from the church (cf. 1 Tim 1:20) not an extraordinary measure, and "destruction of the flesh" is not to be taken as some sort of physical retribution upon the offender. See Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), p. 60; Marlin Jeschke, *Discipling in the Church: Recovering a Ministry of the Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1988), pp. 80–83; South, *Disciplinary Practices*, pp. 95–105; Anthony C. Thiselton, "The Meaning of Σαρξ in 1 Cor. 5:5," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 26 (1973): 204–28.

<sup>81</sup>"Nor does [excommunication] admit of degrees;... Some talk indeed of a lesser and a greater excommunication, but without any foundation from the word of God.... A man is either in communion with a church or he is not; there is no middle state; to withdraw from a disorderly person, or to withdraw and separate him from communion are the same thing" (John Gill, *Body of Divinity* [1767–70; reprint, Atlanta: Turner Lassetter, 1957], pp. 893–94). Some commentators see probationary ostracism not as extending indefinitely, but as a step in church discipline preceding expulsion from the church (see, e.g., Hendriksen, *Thessalonians*, pp. 206–7; Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 256). Such a step is, however, unnecessary after repeated rejection of admonition, foreign to the sequence of Matt 18:15–17, and inherently ambiguous as to when it would need to be concluded in favor of complete expulsion.

<sup>82</sup>The relationship between Jesus' disciplinary instructions in Matt 18:15–17 and Paul's teaching on the matter has been debated. Paul's instructions do not always seem to mesh with Jesus' teaching, and the uncertain text of Matt 18:15 ("against you?") makes it possible to consider Jesus to be addressing personal offenses while Paul addresses public ones (so Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.3). Given Paul's emphasis on maintaining the apostolic tradition, however, it would not be surprising if the general outline of his disciplinary procedures looked a good deal like the dominical guidelines recorded in Matt 18:15–17—and arguably, the likelihood is quite high that Paul knew and utilized these instructions, as several observations suggest: (1) While Pauline *ad hoc* disciplinary passages do not in each instance provide an exhaustive account of disciplinary steps, the procedures are broadly compatible with the model of Matt 18. See Brug, "Exegetical Brief," pp. 216–17; Mayhue, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 194; (2) Paul had opportunity for instruction in the apostolic tradition while at Jerusalem before his formal itinerant ministry commenced (Acts 9:26–28; Gal 1:18) and spoke in other contexts about the tradition he had received (e.g., 1 Cor 11:23–25); (3) Paul was part of the Jerusalem congregation (Acts 9:26–28) and later ministered in Antioch with Barnabas, an emissary of the Jerusalem congregation (Acts 11:19–26); it would be expected that such congregations would themselves incorporate the disciplinary guidelines spoken to the apostles by the Lord.

<sup>83</sup>Paul had preached against the disorderly behavior while at Thessalonica (cf. 2 Thess 3:10); had himself admonished the church by letter in relation to the



variety of offenses, it is brought to the stage of expulsion by the sin of continued rebellion against authority; whatever one thinks about the seriousness of “not working at all, but meddling instead,” it is clear that the Thessalonian offenders were persistently scorning Paul’s very pointed instructions on this matter.<sup>84</sup>

If Paul does indeed have expulsion from the church in mind in 3:14–15, then how is his command to “admonish [the disorderly] as a brother” to be understood? Some think that “admonishing as a brother” has reference to the disorderly member once expelled.<sup>85</sup> It seems evident, however, that once a person is disciplined out of the church, he is no longer to be considered a “brother,”<sup>86</sup> a conclusion indicated by the progression found in 1 Corinthians 5–6 where Paul speaks first of not associating with a fornicator (πόρνος, 5:9) such as the offender in the Corinthian church, then gradually adds to that category (5:10; 5:11) until he culminates in 6:9–10 with a ten-category list of examples of the “unrighteous” (ἄδικος) who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Paul thereby indicates his estimation that the incestuous man was not a true believer in Christ. Paul likely also suggests the offender’s lack of saving faith with his terminology “one called a brother” (τις ἀδελφὸς ὀνομαζόμενος, 5:11), perhaps better rendered in English idiom as “a so-called brother.”<sup>87</sup>

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disorderly behavior (1 Thess 4:10–12); had instructed the congregation to admonish the disorderly (1 Thess 5:14), which they evidently had done (2 Thess 3:4); and now was directly confronting the disorderly a second time by letter (2 Thess 3:10).

<sup>84</sup>“There is always only one sin that excludes from the fellowship of God’s people, and that is not the specific sin that first evokes our concern. It is rather the sinning brother’s unwillingness to ‘hear’ the pleas and admonitions of his brethren, the sin of persisting on the sinful course and of refusing to come to repentance” (Herbert J. A. Bouman, “Biblical Presuppositions for Church Discipline,” *Concordia Theological Journal* 30 [1959]: 515).

<sup>85</sup>So Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 11; Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.10.

<sup>86</sup>R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Church Discipline: The Missing Mark,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 (2000): 22.

<sup>87</sup>It is possible that the participle ὀνομαζόμενος stands in bland contrast to those “in the world” (5:10), but the bare ἀδελφός would have sufficed for that. Especially when taking into account Paul’s exclusion of those in the categories of 6:9–10 from the kingdom of God, it seems clear that he thinks of their status as “brother” as being likely in name only.

In addition, the instructions of Matt 18:15–17 indicate that when an offender “refuses to listen to the church,” he was to be to them “as a pagan [ἔθνικός] and a tax collector [τελώνης].” Given Jesus’ attitude toward pagans and tax collectors, he does not likely mean that offenders at this point of church discipline ought to be treated contemptuously, but that they can no longer be considered members of the assembly. “Both these expressions stand for people outside the people of God, people who have sinned and not repented, and that is the position of the sinning brother” (Leon Morris, *Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], p. 469). See also J. Carl Laney, “The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (1986): 361–62; Victor C. Pfitzner, “Purified Community—Purified Sinner,” *Australian Biblical Review* 30 (1982): 35–36; Herman N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, Bible Student’s Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 339.

Another innovative suggestion understands “admonition as a brother” to follow the restoration of the offender: “If anyone continues to disobey our instruction in this letter, publicly note and expel that one, with the goal that, once excluded, he might come to repentance. *And once that happens* (καί) stop regarding him as an enemy, but instead admonish him as your brother (since he may once again be regarded as one).”<sup>88</sup> While this would resolve the tension of 3:14–15, it makes awkward use of νοθετέω (“admonish”); Paul’s use of the word in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 suggests that admonition was appropriate for those who were walking in a disorderly fashion, not those who had repented from doing such. One would expect Paul to be more explicit in 2 Thessalonians 3:15 if he were speaking about admonition *after* restoration.

The best way to understand the connection between the disassociation of 3:14 and the admonition of 3:15 is to see Paul intending his instructions in 3:15 (“and do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother”) to be applied *simultaneously* with the “taking public note” of the disorderly, not *subsequent* to the expulsion of the offender.<sup>89</sup> If this is correct, the caveat of 3:15 would inform the attitude with which the Thessalonians are to carry out the instructions of 3:14.<sup>90</sup> They are not to see the offender as their enemy, to be harshly thrust from the church because he is not “playing by the rules,” but throughout the disciplinary process—even to the very brink of expulsion from the church, as they “take public note” of the offender “so as not to associate with him”—they are to admonish him as a brother (as Paul instructed them in 1 Thessalonians 5:14).

On this understanding, the instructions of 3:14–15 would read something like this: “If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take public note of that person so as not to associate with him, so that he might be put to shame, and *as you do so*, do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”<sup>91</sup> This conclusion is

<sup>88</sup>Michael M. Canham, “‘Not Home Yet’: The Role of Over-Realized Eschatology in Pauline Church Discipline Cases” (Ph.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2005), pp. 105–8.

<sup>89</sup>This is not to say that after the disorderly were expelled, they then were to be treated “as an enemy,” but that during the process of church discipline, they certainly were not to be treated that way.

<sup>90</sup>This conclusion (or a similar one) is supported by Brug, “Exegetical Brief,” pp. 208–17; Rigaux, *Les épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, pp. 715–16. John Gill sees this as the primary understanding of 3:15: “But *admonish* or *reprove* him *as a brother*; as one that has been called a brother, and a member of the church...who indeed is to be reckoned as a brother whilst the censure is passing, and the sentence of excommunication is executing on him; for till it is finished he stands in such a relation” *An Exposition of the New Testament* [1746–48; London: William Hill Collingridge, 1853; reprint, Atlanta: Turner Lassetter, n.d.], p. 586).

<sup>91</sup>The grammar of 3:14–15 supports this conclusion as well. As noted above, μή συνανομίγυσθαι is subordinate, not independent, and best seen as a purpose infinitive describing the aim of the “taking note” (σημειοῦσθε). So Paul is not necessarily giving

supported by the progression in Matt 18:15–17; the last step before expulsion is the church’s admonition of the offender, as indicated by the instruction to “tell it to the church” and by the possibility that the offender might refuse to listen to the church. Best helpfully suggests that the admonition of 3:15 would have occurred as “action when the community is gathered.”<sup>92</sup> If this is the case, we should understand a public “taking note” (i.e., “tell it to the church,” Matt 18:17) of the persistently disorderly combined with a formal (though not unloving) admonition of the disorderly to repent. If repentance was not forthcoming, the disorderly would then be expelled from the congregation (“so as not to associate with him”).

### Summary

Our exegetical investigations have suggested a number of details that aid in understanding Paul’s instructions in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15. (1) When Paul spoke of any who might not “obey what we say in this letter” (3:14), he most likely had in immediate view the ἄτακτοι, as opposed to any who might fail to “withdraw” (3:6) from the ἄτακτοι. (2) When he describes these offenders using the ἄτακτος word group, his terminology should not be translated with words related to “idleness”; Paul is highlighting their behavior as being “out of line,” irresponsible, and contrary to the teaching of the apostolic tradition. (3) The variance of the ἄτακτοι from the apostolic tradition, their willful unemployment, and their meddlesome behavior all point to the gravity of their disorderliness. (4) In response to their serious and persistent infraction, Paul wants the obedient majority to publicly note the offenders so that they may disassociate from them, and during this last step of church discipline, to avoid treating them as enemies but to admonish them as brothers.

## ECCLESIASTICAL SEPARATION AND 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6–15

Throughout the history of its interpretation, 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 has most frequently been enlisted to demonstrate that believers must work for their living as opposed to freeloading.<sup>93</sup> The passage also

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a progression of actions in 3:14–15, i.e., (1) take public note of the disorderly, (2) disassociate from the disorderly, (3) admonish the disorderly as a brother. Instead, it is better to understand Paul thus: (1) take public note of the disorderly so that (purpose infinitive) the congregation may disassociate from him, and (coordinate καί) (2) in relation to taking public note of the disorderly, do not treat him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

<sup>92</sup>*First and Second Thessalonians*, pp. 343–44. Best does, however, understand the commanded disassociation of 3:14 merely to involve a probationary ostracism and not a complete expulsion. Best also seems to suggest that if the admonition was corporate in nature, then it was not “on an individualistic basis” at all, but there is no reason that both could not have been involved.

<sup>93</sup>For early treatments, note *Didache* 12.1–5; Augustine, *De opere monachorum*

has been applied, of course, to the church's practice of internal discipline.<sup>94</sup> In addition to these areas, however, Paul's instructions in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 have been brought to bear upon relationships of Christian cooperation external to the local church, such as those involving churches, parachurch organizations, and religious leaders. After discussing some preliminary matters regarding ecclesiastical separation, we will examine typical fundamentalist applications of the passage in this regard.

### **Preliminary Considerations Regarding Ecclesiastical Separation**

In order to evaluate the application of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 to ecclesiastical separation, we must establish a working definition of the term. In addition, it will be helpful to discuss the question of extent: does ecclesiastical separation necessarily involve a complete disassociation in all cases, or does the extent of separation vary according to the level of disagreement between two parties?

#### **The Question of Definition**

A search for a standard fundamentalist understanding of "ecclesiastical separation" will encounter definitions of the term which share among them a common core but vary from each other in a number of details.<sup>95</sup> As to the common ground, ecclesiastical separation as

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1–3; Jerome, *Epistulae* 17.2; John Cassian, *Institutes* 10.7–16; *Conferences* 24.11–12; John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in epistulam ii ad Thessalonicenses* 5; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 187, a. 3; Martin Luther, *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Respecting the Reformation of the Christian Estate*, article 21.

<sup>94</sup>For early treatments, note Cyprian, *Ad Quirinum testimonia adversus Judaeos* 3.68; *Ad Fortunatum* 54.21; *De catholicae ecclesiae unitate* 23; Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.5, 4.12.10; Heidelberg Catechism, question 85; Westminster Confession of Faith, 20.4, 29.8, 30.4; London Baptist Confession of Faith (1677/89), 26.12; New Hampshire Baptist Confession (1833), 13.

<sup>95</sup>Note the following representative fundamentalist descriptions of the term. "Ecclesiastical separation is the refusal to collaborate with or the withdrawal of a working relationship from an ecclesiastical organization or religious leader that deviates from the standard of Scripture or that does not believe and obey the word of God in doctrine or practice" (Rolland McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled: The Failed Strategy of Modern Evangelicalism* [Greenville, SC: Ambassador, 2004], p. 138). "Ecclesiastical separation is in many ways the application of the principles of personal separation practiced on the level of an assembly of believers. It involves a refusal to align with false doctrine or unbelief and a rejection of the willful practice of disobedience" (Mark Sidwell, *The Dividing Line: Understanding and Applying Biblical Separation* [Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1998], pp. 175–76). "Ecclesiastical separation is the decision by a local church or by an association of local churches not to engage in cooperative ministry endeavors at an organizational level that are deemed as inconsistent in doctrinal position" (General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, "Ecclesiastical Separation and Its Associational Applications," available online at <http://www.garbc.org/news/wp-content/uploads/2007/01/council18onseparation.pdf>). "The purposeful action of an individual Christian, a local church, or an entire denomination to seek the purity and holiness of testimony and membership

understood among fundamentalists involves as a general rule a refusal of some level of Christian collaboration at an organizational level, predicated upon a perceived deviance from proper Christian teaching or practice.

A significant variation in fundamentalist definitions of “ecclesiastical separation” involves its proper object.<sup>96</sup> Some consider the objects of ecclesiastical separation to be incidental to the practice; any truncation of Christian fellowship by a church is considered to be “ecclesiastical separation” by virtue of the identity of the separating party, whether or not the party separated from is to be considered an apostate or merely a “disobedient brother.”<sup>97</sup> A more restricted understanding of ecclesiastical separation limits its application to apostates, those who profess to be believers in Christ while in actuality denying the faith; limiting Christian fellowship with “disobedient brothers” due to perceived deviation from proper Christian teaching or practice is not strictly “ecclesiastical separation” in this view.<sup>98</sup>

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commanded by Scripture, and in pursuing this holiness to not give any visibly apostate person or group approval, fellowship, cooperation, or membership” (Gary Cohen, “The Bible Presbyterian Position on Ecclesiastical Separation,” available online at <http://www.bpc.org/resources/reading/articles/history/separation3.html>).

<sup>96</sup>Another variation includes whether ecclesiastical separation may involve an individual separating from a congregation (so, e.g., Gary Cohen, “Bible Presbyterian Position”; Millard J. Erickson, s.v. “Separation,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001], p. 1092), or whether both parties involved must be organizations (so, e.g., David Warren, “Ecclesiastical Separation—Positioning the Ohio Association of Regular Baptist Churches,” available online at <http://www.sharperiron.org/showthread.php?t=1093>).

<sup>97</sup>E.g., R. Bruce Compton, “2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 and Second-Degree Separation,” unpublished paper presented at the Mid-America Conference on Preaching, October 18–19, 2001 (Allen Park, MI), pp. 3–4; “Ecclesiastical Separation and Its Associational Applications,” position paper of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (7 Feb 2006), p. 2, available online at <http://www.garbc.org/news/wp-content/uploads/2007/01/council18onseparation.pdf>; McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled*, p. 150; Sidwell, *Dividing Line*, pp. 4–5.

This understanding of the proper objects of ecclesiastical separation usually has in view those who are outside the church, but often is considered to include those under church discipline as well. So Sidwell, *Dividing Line*, pp. 175–76. Cf. also Compton, who notes “separation from disobedient believers” as a subset of “ecclesiastical separation,” and subdivides this “separation from disobedient believers” into “internal separation” (church discipline) and “external separation” (separation from believers or organizations outside its membership) (“2 Thessalonians 3:6–15,” p. 4).

<sup>98</sup>A typical short definition of ecclesiastical separation is “the separation of the church from apostasy,” which an online search will reveal in the doctrinal statements of many fundamentalist churches and institutions. Some fundamentalists include separation from infidels as well as apostates; see, e.g., Douglas R. McLachlan, *Reclaiming Authentic Fundamentalism* (Plymouth, MN: Central Baptist Seminary, 2002). For McLachlan, on the one hand, “ecclesiastical separation” is from “satanic religion, whatever form it takes,” including liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, Eastern religions, the occult, and “unbelief in all its forms” (pp. 125–26). On the other hand, “familial separation” is a “functional severance from members of the family who are true Christians” (p. 132). McLachlan notes, “Clearly, we are meant to deal differently with our brethren than we do with apostates.... If we lump our brothers together with

In the present treatment, we will engage the former understanding of ecclesiastical separation, addressing it as any curtailing of Christian fellowship by a church due to perceived deviance from proper Christian teaching or practice. We will address “ecclesiastical separation,” therefore, as including both (1) the forgoing of all Christian cooperation due to perceived defection in doctrine or practice which invalidates the gospel itself (hereafter, “ecclesiastical separation from apostates”), and (2) the limiting of Christian cooperation due to differing doctrines or practices which are not perceived to invalidate the gospel (hereafter, “ecclesiastical separation from Christian brothers”).<sup>99</sup> This separation might have as its object a professing believer or an organization of professing believers such as a congregation, an association of churches, a denomination, or a parachurch organization. That there is a clear distinction between these two species of ecclesiastical separation is acknowledged, and arguments can and have been made that they ought to be distinguished by varying terminology. We will be addressing both under the rubric of “ecclesiastical separation,” however, in that the term is not infrequently applied to each.

### The Question of Extent

Some argue that a church can have no Christian collaboration whatsoever with a party that disagrees with what the church understands to be a Scriptural doctrine or practice. Instead, ecclesiastical separation is seen as “all or nothing”: persistent violation of any “clear teaching” of Scripture necessitates a complete break of ecclesiastical fellowship.<sup>100</sup> Others suggest that varying levels of Christian

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apostates under the general heading of ‘ecclesiastical separation,’ it isn’t long before we are speaking of and treating our brothers as though they were apostates” (p. 134). Fred Moritz appears to limit the objects of “ecclesiastical separation” to unbelievers by contrasting it with “separation from brethren” (*Be Ye Holy: The Call to Christian Separation* [Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1994], p. 83). Cf. also Curtis Hutson, *Who Is a Fundamentalist?* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1982), pp. 19–20.

<sup>99</sup>An example of the former category might be a church withdrawing from the Northern Baptist Convention due to the liberal theology of its leadership. An example of the latter category might be a de facto separation between a Baptist church and a Presbyterian church; although both may preach the true gospel, their differing views of baptism will preclude cooperation at certain levels.

<sup>100</sup>John F. Brug argues strongly for the model of “unit fellowship” on behalf of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1996), pp. 33–50. This model teaches that “all outward expressions of church fellowship should be practiced only among those who agree in *all* doctrines of Scripture,” and “agreement in all the doctrines of Scripture forms the necessary prerequisite for the joint practice of *all expressions* of church fellowship” (p. 50). It should be noted that Brug considers agreement in adiaphora to be unnecessary for fellowship, and in that category includes such things as worship styles, mode of (infant?) baptism, church polity, and the moderate use of beverage alcohol (p. 35). As well, Brug differentiates between Christian fellowship [“the spiritual ties that we have with all believers as members of the invisible church”] and church fellowship [“all activities in which Christian join together as members of visible

cooperation are possible depending upon how much two Christian parties hold in common; “the extent of fellowship depends upon the level of agreement about truth.”<sup>101</sup> Is the “all or nothing” position or the “levels of fellowship” position correct? Combining observations about the clarity and importance of various aspects of the teaching contained in the New Testament will help to provide an answer.

First, it must be observed that various teachings of Scripture have different levels of clarity. It is too simplistic an approach to say that a given body of Scriptural teachings are “clear” and the rest are by implication “unclear,” drawing a sharp dichotomy between the two categories. Seeing a sliding scale or continuum of exegetical certainty is more realistic.<sup>102</sup> Why is this the case?

The NT churches enjoyed an advantage over contemporary churches in that they had the potential of authoritative apostolic arbitration regarding questions of interpretation or theology.<sup>103</sup> This sort of arbitration, in fact, forms a large part of the Pauline letters, as Paul combats false teaching and clarifies deficient understanding. If it is objected that no such advantage existed for the apostolic churches because the contemporary church now has that apostolic teaching preserved in Scripture, it may be answered that while the apostolic tradition contained in the NT is enormously valuable, it is neither systematic nor exhaustive.<sup>104</sup> This answer reflects the standard observation

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churches”] (pp. 19–20). See also Wilbert R. Gawrisch, “‘Levels of Fellowship’—Scriptural Principles or Rules of Men?” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary online essay file, available online at <http://www.wlssays.net/files/GawrischFellowship.pdf>; Peter Masters, “‘And of some have compassion, making a difference,’” in “Separation and Obedience,” supplement to *Sword and Trowel* (London: Metropolitan Tabernacle, 1983), p. 8.

<sup>101</sup>“Ecclesiastical Separation and Its Associational Applications,” p. 1. For other articulations of the “levels of fellowship” idea in fundamentalism, see Kevin Bauder, “Separation from Professing Brethren—Notes Toward an Understanding,” workshop notes from 2006 National Leadership Convention, Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary, Lansdale, PA, available online at <http://sharperiron.org/2006/07/01/separation-from-professing-brethren-notes-toward-an-understanding/#more-452>; A. Philip Brown II, “Categories of Truth vs. Categories of Exegetical Certainty: What Really Matters and How Much Does It Matter?” paper presented at the Bible Faculty Leadership Summit, August, 2005, available online at [http://www.apbrown2.net/web/CategoriesOfTruth\\_DBTS.pdf](http://www.apbrown2.net/web/CategoriesOfTruth_DBTS.pdf); McCune, *Promise Unfilled*, p. 154; Ernest Pickering, *Biblical Separation: The Struggle for a Pure Church* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1979), pp. 218–19.

<sup>102</sup>The term “exegetical certainty” is drawn from Brown, “Categories of Truth.”

<sup>103</sup>Of course, the Roman Catholic Church looks to the Magisterium (*Dei Verbum* 10) to settle questions of doctrine or practice, but independent churches have no such contemporary teaching authority, a point emphasized in Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 41–42.

<sup>104</sup>It is likely that systematic and organized teaching was provided to new catechumens, and Paul probably obliquely refers to this at various points in his writings (e.g., 1 Thess 4:2; 2 Thess 2:15). If such a body of teaching was set down in writing, however, it apparently is not included wholesale in the NT.

in NT studies that the canonical writings of Paul and others are occasional as a rule, addressing particular questions *ad hoc*.<sup>105</sup> While the NT communicates the general contours and many specifics of the apostolic tradition—all that God has chosen to preserve for the church—it is obvious that it does not and cannot contain direct rulings on every possible point of theology or practice.<sup>106</sup> This limitation is reflected in much of the variety among Christian denominations, the existence of which demonstrates that churches will differ, sometimes considerably, about what Scripture “clearly teaches.” It is not the case that a correct understanding of any of Scripture is impossible without the direct intervention of an apostle. However, while not denying that Paul specifies certain issues as adiaphora, other issues which presumably would have been grounds for excommunication in the NT church (once clarified by an apostle) might be better approached as open questions today, as they have not been clarified in the NT documents.<sup>107</sup>

A second observation is that various teachings of Scripture have different levels of importance.<sup>108</sup> This is not to say that certain

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<sup>105</sup>See Gordon D. Fee, “Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles, with Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of *Ad Hoc* Documents,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28 (1985): 141–51. The *ad hoc* nature of Scripture should not, however, be overemphasized, a point brought out in George W. Knight III, “The Scriptures Were Written for Our Instruction,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 (1996): 3–13.

<sup>106</sup>This statement is not meant to support the extreme postmodern stance that knowledge of a text is impossible. It must be acknowledged, however, that all readers of a text approach it from a particular cultural perspective which may bring misunderstanding of that text. Nor is this statement an attempt to undermine the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. Any particular question of belief or practice can be informed by the teaching contained in the NT. It seems obvious, however, that some aspects of the apostolic tradition are more clearly elucidated in the NT than others.

<sup>107</sup>E.g., if Paul were present today, he could definitively settle the question of non-salvific infant baptism vs. believer baptism, and presumably he would command excommunication for disobedience to his clarified teaching. As it stands, however, the lack of a clear command or prohibition regarding the baptism of infants has led to differing positions on the question, with each side able to recognize the other as Christian while strongly maintaining their distinctive understanding.

<sup>108</sup>This observation is reflected in various schemas of levels of doctrine and practice which have been proposed. Calvin (*Institutes*, 4.1.12) contrasts doctrines which are necessary to be known with others which do not destroy the unity of the faith but are matters of opinion. Olson (*Mosaic*, pp. 44–45) delineates among “dogmas” (Christian essentials), “doctrines” (denominational distinctives), and “opinions.” See also Brown, “Categories of Truth,” Appendix B; Kevin T. Bauder, “Thinking About the Gospel, Part Seven: Frontloading the Gospel,” *In the Nick of Time* (27 July 2007), available online at <http://www.centalseminary.edu/publications/Nick/Nick127.html>; Bauder, “Separation from Professing Brethren”; R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity,” Dr. Mohler’s Blog, entry posted 20 May 2004, available online at [http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary\\_read.php?cdate=2004-05-20](http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2004-05-20). Of note, Mohler avers that “the misjudgment of true fundamentalism is the belief that all disagreements concern first-order doctrines”; this is not true, however, within the present fundamentalist milieu, much less of early fundamentalism which was



teachings of Scripture are unimportant, for “all Scripture is profitable” (2 Tim 3:16). However, Paul himself notes in 1 Corinthians 15:3, using the technical terminology of passing along traditional material, that he “delivered” (παραδίδωμι) to the Corinthians certain teachings inextricably linked to the gospel, and did so ἐν πρώτοις—“as of first importance.”<sup>109</sup> This passage suggests not only that different levels of importance are attached to various Christian teachings, but that the highest level of importance ought to be attached to doctrines and conduct whose repudiation would invalidate the gospel.<sup>110</sup> The more closely a differing doctrine or practice is connected to the gospel, therefore, the less fellowship is warranted between two Christian parties. Further, when a differing doctrine or practice is judged to have invalidated the gospel, no Christian fellowship is warranted because none is possible by the nature of the case.

These observations regarding varying levels of clarity and importance of the teachings of Scripture suggest that a church may justifiably recognize as Christian an external party whose doctrine or practice, while compatible with the gospel, does not precisely match one’s own. Commonality in the gospel in turn suggests that agreement in every point of doctrine or practice is not necessary for ecclesiastical cooperation at every level. The “levels of fellowship” approach to ecclesiastical separation would seem to be superior to the “all or nothing” approach.<sup>111</sup>

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interdenominational in composition, insisting on the “first-order doctrines” (the “fundamentals”) while allowing some degree of latitude regarding “second-order doctrines.”

The term “adiaphora” (“indifferent things”) is often used in this connection (cf. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, pp. 35–36) to denote beliefs or practices of lesser importance, presumably over which ecclesiastical separation is unnecessary. Understanding precisely what a particular Christian group means by “adiaphora” is essential, however, for as Olson (*Mosaic*, p. 45) notes, “In one sense [doctrines and practices not essential to the gospel but important to a particular group are] *adiaphora* in that these beliefs are not crucial to Christianity itself. But for a specific denomination they may be important enough to not be *adiaphora* within its ranks.”

<sup>109</sup>For a defense of this understanding of ἐν πρώτοις against a temporal one, see Fee, *First Corinthians*, p. 722; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 1186. For the notion that the gospel defines the boundaries of the Christian faith, see Kevin T. Bauder, “Thinking About the Gospel, Part Five: The Gospel and Christian Fellowship,” *In the Nick of Time* (13 July 2007), available online at <http://www.centralseminary.edu/publications/Nick/Nick125.html>.

<sup>110</sup>That the denial of certain doctrines (heterodoxy) constitutes a denial of the gospel is indicated in, e.g., Gal 1:6–9; 1 John 2:22–23; 2 John 9. That the persistent practice of certain sins (heteropraxy) does the same is indicated most directly in 1 Tim 5:8.

<sup>111</sup>The “levels of fellowship” model also solves the challenge posed by Canham: “*Anything* that is regarded by believers as a matter of ‘apostolic tradition’ becomes grounds for separation whenever another believer does not follow it.... The practical effect of this is that there is no room for godly believers to disagree on Biblical matters and still have fellowship. This would render the *interdenominational* character of

### The Application of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 to Ecclesiastical Separation

As noted above, 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 regularly and rightly has been seen as applicable to the internal discipline of a local church, which can be considered a species of ecclesiastical separation.<sup>112</sup> Ecclesiastical separation may involve not only matters of internal church discipline, however, but also involvement in Christian collaboration outside the local church, and Christians have brought the passage to bear on these relationships as well.

Of note, the application of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 to instances of ecclesiastical separation beyond the local church by no means finds its genesis in 20th-century fundamentalism. As long ago as the early 19th century, for instance, William McGavin enlisted this passage to justify the actions of the Reformers:

They were commanded [in Scripture] to withdraw from *every brother* who walked disorderly, and who refused to be reclaimed; which necessarily implies the duty of withdrawing from *any number of brethren*,—even from *a whole church* when found disorderly and irreclaimable: so that the reformers were guilty of no schism, but were only obeying a divine command, when they separated from the church of Rome.<sup>113</sup>

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historic fundamentalism impossible” (Michael M. Canham, “Ecclesiastical Separation: Towards a Biblical Balance” [Th.M. thesis, The Master’s Seminary, 1995], pp. 112–13).

<sup>112</sup>In the realm of church discipline, we would suggest that a misunderstanding of “admonish him as a brother” in 3:15 has led to a misapplication of the passage when churches, after due admonition (cf. Matt 18:15–18), subject a persistently disobedient member to ostracism rather than expulsion. While there is some flexibility within church discipline as modeled in the NT, a probationary ostracism seems to be contrary to the NT spirit of church discipline, recalling instead the false notion of minor and major excommunication once held by the Roman Catholic Church. The former merely deprived one of participation in the Eucharist, while the latter also deprived one of the communion of the church altogether. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III–II, q. 21, a. 1; and discussion in Jeschke, *Discipling*, pp. 79–80, 91–93.

<sup>113</sup>*The Protestant: Essays on the Principal Points of Controversy Between the Church of Rome and the Reformed*, 2 vols. (Hartford, CT: Hutchison and Dwier, 1833), 2:618. In 1840, within the Presbyterian church, the Associate Synod of North America noted in connection with 2 Thess 3:6–15, “If we are to withdraw from every disorderly-walking brother, of course, we are to withdraw from all disorderly-walking churches; if we are to note that *man* that obeys not the word, and have no company with him, of course we are to act in the same manner toward those *churches* which obey not the word” (*The Religious Monitor, and Evangelical Repository*, vol. 17, ed. C. Webster [Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1840–41], p. 559). Using the key term terms “withdraw” and “disorderly” from 2 Thess 3, H. F. Tong speaks only a half-century later of “the important right and power of an association of sister churches to withdraw from any disorderly church, or fraction of a church, when all conciliatory means fail to satisfy or restore them” (*Historical Sketches of the Baptists of Southeast Missouri* [St. Louis: National Baptist Publishing, 1888], p. 109). See also A. Hastings Ross, “Superiority of the Congregational Churches,” in *Congregational Quarterly*, vol. 12 (new series, vol. 2), ed. Alonzo H. Quint, et al. (Boston: Congregational Rooms, 1870), p. 561; Daniel Musser, *The Reformed Mennonite Church: Its Rise and Progress, with Its Principles and*

Applications of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 to ecclesiastical separation external to the local church have also been made more recently within groups that would not consider themselves to be fundamentalist.<sup>114</sup>

That being said, fundamentalists have indeed taken up the argument that New Testament church discipline passages such as 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 do also inform questions of ecclesiastical separation which concern relationships external to the local church.<sup>115</sup> In this connection, a hermeneutical issue arises: may a passage concerning the relationship between congregation and congregant validly be applied to relationships of Christian cooperation outside a local church?<sup>116</sup> The question cannot be answered here in detail, but it may suffice to say that although differences certainly exist between internal discipline and external disassociation,<sup>117</sup> both are species of ecclesiastical separation

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*Doctrines* (Lancaster, PA: Elias Barr & Co., 1873), p. 294; “Close Communion: By a Baptist Divine,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 52 (1895): 109–10.

<sup>114</sup>In comparatively recent days the passage has been important for debates over ecclesiastical separation within the Lutheran church. These debates deeply impacted the denomination, resulting in the formation of the Church of the Lutheran Confession by some who had withdrawn from the Wisconsin Synod in the 1950s over the issue of church fellowship, as well as the withdrawal of the Wisconsin Synod itself from the Missouri Synod in 1961 over related matters. For details, see John F. Brug, Edward C. Fredrich II, and Armin W. Schuetze, *WELS and Other Lutherans: Lutheran Church Bodies in the USA* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1995), pp. 19–21, 90–91. Although it strictly limits its church fellowship and it practices what might be termed in other circles “secondary separation,” the Wisconsin Synod would not consider itself to be part of the fundamentalist movement (John F. Brug, e-mail message to author, 17 July 2008).

<sup>115</sup>Rolland McCune suggests, “Ecclesiastical separation from disobedient Christians is in principle the same as local church discipline of disobedient Christians. There is no real dichotomy” (“The Self-Identity of Fundamentalism,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 [Spring 1996]: 24). Again, “The polity that regulates local church fellowship also in principle regulates ecclesiastical connections and associations that may transcend the affairs of a local church” (McCune, *Promise Unfilled*, p. 150). See also John E. Ashbrook, *Axioms of Separation* (Mentor, OH: “Here I Stand” Books, [1989]), pp. 11–13; David Burgraff, “Baptist Fundamentalism: What We Have Lost, Gained, and Learned,” session notes from Conference on Baptist Fundamentalism,” Maranatha Baptist Bible College, Watertown, WI (3 Mar 2008), p. 24, available online at <http://www.mbbc.edu/download/Fundamentalism/2008/2008ConferenceBaptistFundamentalismMBBC.pdf>; Compton, “2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 and Second-Degree Separation,” pp. 4–5; “Ecclesiastical Separation and Its Associational Applications,” p. 2; McLachlan, *Reclaiming*, pp. 132–37 (although he discusses 2 Thess 3:6–15 under the category of “familial” and not “ecclesiastical” separation, he is clearly applying church discipline principles beyond the walls of the local church); Moritz, “*Be Ye Holy*,” pp. 74–80.

<sup>116</sup>This question is often passed over in fundamentalist treatments of ecclesiastical separation. Exceptions include McCune, *Promise Unfilled*, p. 150; and Brown, “Categories of Truth.” Brown notes, “It seems to me that we have applied [2 Thess 3:6–15] to the entire gamut of ecclesiastical relationships (e.g., believer-to-believer, believer-to-congregation, parachurch-to-parachurch, church-to-parachurch, etc.) without carefully arguing the hermeneutical grounds that justify such a broad application.”

<sup>117</sup>The two differ in the following ways, among others. (1) Church discipline finds a more significant relationship between the separating party and the offending

more broadly considered,<sup>118</sup> which suggests that passages concerning the former may be judiciously applied to situations involving the latter.<sup>119</sup> In addition, as noted earlier, Paul's use of the adverb ἀτόκτως and its cognates in the church discipline passage of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 engages the category of “disorderliness,” which is quite general in nature. This general terminology suggests a similar response of disassociation to other disorderliness which is contrary to the apostolic tradition, and it is difficult to see why such a response might not be appropriate in the realm of external ecclesiastical relationships as well as internal ones.<sup>120</sup> When considering ecclesiastical separation from apostates, it seems evident that if tolerating those within the church who deny the gospel is problematic—as is clear from Pauline disciplinary passages—then maintaining Christian cooperation with those outside the church who deny the gospel is unacceptable as well.<sup>121</sup>

What should be said, however, about situations where an external party is believed to be in persistent error in doctrine or practice, but the error is not such that it invalidates the gospel? Typically, such a person is styled a “disobedient brother,” and it is to such people and their organizations that 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 has found its most pointed application in fundamentalism.<sup>122</sup> As discussed earlier, the

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party. Joining with a local assembly involves a covenanted relationship, and one in which the believer is placed under the authority of the church as a whole (as demonstrated, e.g., by the congregational role in church discipline in the NT). (2) At least partly because of these varying relationships, church discipline taken to its end typically means the congregation is to treat the offender as a pagan, but the best understanding of “external” ecclesiastical separation admits of degrees or levels, and not in every case does it involve a person or organization which must be considered apostate.

<sup>118</sup>Even aside from our working definition, it is clear that both involve a church separating itself from persistent offenders who deviate from proper Christian teaching or practice, whether they are within or without the local assembly.

<sup>119</sup>Both address the appropriate action to be taken when a Christian party finds a related Christian party to be aberrant in doctrine or practice. Both involve similar purposes: the purity of the separating party and the restoration of the offending party.

<sup>120</sup>It is true that 2 Thess 3 does not strictly teach that any practice or teaching contrary to the apostolic tradition is grounds for disciplinary confrontation. That is, given that (a) the Thessalonian offenders were not walking according to the apostolic tradition, and (b) the disorderly were to be disciplined, it does not strictly follow that (c) all who do not walk according to the apostolic tradition ought to be disciplined. But this is certainly implied in the passage, and is a reasonable inference to draw, given the nature of the apostolic tradition as grounded in Christ's authoritative teaching, the nature of the church as an assembly of Christ-followers, and the purposes of church discipline.

<sup>121</sup>This having been said, it should be noted that, given the context of the local church scenario, Paul is not likely to have meant his use of the indefinite pronoun τις in 3:14 (“if *anyone* does not obey”) to have direct reference to disobedient believers outside the Thessalonian congregation, as suggested by “Close Communion,” pp. 109–10; Compton, “2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 and Second-Degree Separation,” p. 7.

<sup>122</sup>Busenitz has asked why fundamentalists tend to support ecclesiastical

term “brother” in 2 Thessalonians 3:15 is generally misunderstood as being used of the offender *after* the church’s disassociation from him. As a result, when 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 is applied to external ecclesiastical separation, the Thessalonian offender is considered to be equivalent to a party outside the church who professes faith in Christ, who “walks disorderly” and from whom the church must separate, but who is afterward still to be considered a “brother”—albeit a “disobedient” one.

Following this general line of interpretation, for instance, Minnick avers that apart from 2 Thessalonians 3, we might very well conclude on the basis of other church discipline passages (e.g., Matt 18; 1 Cor 5) that those who persist in disobedience in either doctrine or deportment cannot truly partake in salvation in Christ. Because he understands “brother” in 2 Thessalonians 3:15 to indicate the state of the offender after the final stage of discipline, however, he concludes, “There actually is a category of people who are true believers but they are not obeying,” and applies this category to evangelicals who do not fully obey NT instruction regarding ecclesiastical separation.<sup>123</sup> Stowell made a similar application of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15:

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separation with an appeal to 2 Thess 3:6–15, which addresses a specific church discipline scenario, instead of an appeal to a passage such as Matt 18:15–17, which “includes the timeless principles that Jesus outlined for all Christians of all time” (Nathan Busenitz, “The Dividing Line: Where We Draw the Line on Biblical Separation,” session notes from Shepherd’s Conference [7 Mar 2008], p. 23, available online at <http://audio.gracechurch.org/sc/2008notes/Busenitz,%20The%20Dividing%20Line.pdf>). Fundamentalists typically use 2 Thess 3 to support a particular species of ecclesiastical separation—disassociation from “disobedient brothers” and their organizations—and the answer to Busenitz’s question likely includes one or more of several factors: (1) While Matt 18 clearly finds the impenitent offender expelled from the church and considered a “pagan and tax collector,” the typical understanding of 2 Thess 3 sees him as remaining in an ostracized fellowship; on this reading, 2 Thess 3 better parallels a fundamentalist separating from a “disobedient brother” without having to question his salvation. (2) Some understand Matt 18 to have reference to private personal offenses, but the scenario of 2 Thess 3 is clearly public in nature. (3) Matt 18 contains clear steps of confrontation, which are often difficult to implement at the ecclesiastical level; since 2 Thess 3 is describing the end of a discipline process, the language of personal confrontation is largely absent. (4) Certain terms used in 2 Thess 3 lend themselves to external ecclesiastical separation from non-apostates: (a) the term “disobedient brother” itself, ubiquitous in fundamentalist discussions of ecclesiastical separation, almost certainly finds its origin in the passage at hand; the disorderly potentially “obey not” what Paul says in his letter (3:14, KJV), but (as typically understood) is a “brother” (3:15), and (b) the English term “withdraw” (3:6, KJV) is easily applicable in ecclesiastical relationships where, e.g., a church is a minority party which must separate from a larger denomination or association. (5) Certain language unique to 2 Thess 3 has been used to support separation based on improper associations (“secondary separation”) and Matt 18 has not lent itself as readily to that application.

<sup>123</sup>Mark Minnick, “Scriptural Separation (II Thessalonians 3:6, 14–15)” (sermon, Mt. Calvary Baptist Church, Greenville, SC, 23 October 2005). Minnick does not, however, build his case solely on 2 Thess 3:14–15, but appeals as well to passages such as 2 John 9–11, noting that “even if we didn’t have 2 Thessalonians 3, the whole issue of exactly how to view somebody who embraces the unorthodox is not left in question.”

Let me say this. Most of the people, if not all of them in the New-Evangelical camp, are born-again people. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. But we believe they are walking disorderly and contrary to the teachings of the Bible in these matters [ecumenical evangelism, etc.]. The Bible says to 'withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly' (2 Thess. 3:6). So, we do not cooperate with them.<sup>124</sup>

The common appeal to 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 as an example of separation from a professing Christian while continuing to consider him to be a believer in Christ is, however, somewhat misguided. This is so because the passage does not, in our view, concern a persistent offender who is still to be considered a brother in Christ after due confrontation and expulsion from the church. Appealing to 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 and other church discipline passages in support of "separation from a Christian brother" while acknowledging his continued faith in Christ depends upon the proposal that the offenders in (at least some) discipline passages are to be considered "brothers" after they are formally expelled from the church.<sup>125</sup> This proposal is doubtful, however, for while excommunicated offenders may in reality be true believers in Christ—which would be demonstrated by their subsequent repentance and restoration—the persistent disobedience which led to their expulsion leaves the church no choice but to categorize them with "pagans and tax collectors" (Matt 18:17) until such time as they repent.

Church discipline passages such as 2 Thessalonians 3 are in reality more directly applicable to ecclesiastical separation from apostates, who profess to be believers in Christ while in actuality denying the faith, than to ecclesiastical separation from Christian brothers, who merely differ in some non-fundamental area of doctrine or practice. In

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<sup>124</sup>Joseph Stowell II, "Where We Stand Today," *The Gospel Witness* (January 23, 1975), p. 13, available from the Fundamentalism File, Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC, item #1078674.

<sup>125</sup>This seems to be Sidwell's position: we are to "presume" a person disciplined from the church to have "faith in Christ's saving work" (*Dividing Line*, p. 57), but we are to "treat" him "as an unregenerate man" (p. 58). Interestingly, McCune does see the scenario of 2 Thess 3 as culminating in "excommunication from membership" (*Promise Unfilled*, p. 149) but maintains a category of disobedient Christians who "do not adhere to primary separation and other vital doctrines" (p. 146) (in the context, it appears that "vital" is used in the sense of "important," not "essential"). McCune is able to simultaneously maintain excommunication in 2 Thess 3 and the category of persistent errorists who are to be considered brothers because of his understanding that (1) Jesus' reference to the offender as a "brother" in Matt 18:15 holds true even after excommunication, and therefore (2) excommunication merely *regards* the offender "as if he were not a believer, although in fact he is" (p. 150, favorably quoting R. Bruce Compton, "2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 and Biblical Separation," *The Sentinel* [publication of Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, Allen Park, MI], 5 [1988]; see also Compton, "2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 and Second-Degree Separation," 4–5).

This does not seem to be, however, an obvious reading of Matt 18, particularly when considered in the light of Paul's understanding of an excommunicated "so-called brother" in 1 Cor 5–6 as detailed above. The term ἀδελφός in Matt 18:15 is best understood not in terms of someone who is necessarily a true fellow-believer in reality, but is merely a member of a religious community. BDAG, s.v. "ἀδελφός," 18d.

this regard, it will be objected that the offense of the disorderly does not seem to involve a “fundamental of the faith.” In response, we may say that certain activities in which a professing Christian may be persistently involved (particularly after due confrontation) serve to call into question the gospel he professes, being inconsistent with new life in Christ.<sup>126</sup> After all, the practice of church discipline is predicated, at least in part, upon this notion of “practical fundamentals.” Earlier, we demonstrated the gravity of the Thessalonian offense, and it is noteworthy that Paul elsewhere explicitly notes that a similar offense invalidates the gospel: “But if anyone is not providing for his own, that is, those in his own household, he has denied the faith (ὁ πιστός) and is worse than an unbeliever (ἄπιστος)” (1 Tim 5:8).

This is not to say that a church may not separate from an external party while continuing to acknowledge the Christian faith of that party. Given our previous discussion on the definition and extent of ecclesiastical separation, such is entirely possible. Moreover, 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 could be applied in a very general way to external ecclesiastical association from non-apostates, by appealing to its example of separation due to persistent disobedience to the apostolic tradition. The disassociation actually occurring in this passage, however, is to be understood differently than that which occurs in ecclesiastical separation from Christian brothers who differ in non-essential areas of doctrine or practice.

#### **The Application of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 to Ecclesiastical Separation Based upon Improper Associations**

Another question of application in the realm of ecclesiastical separation must be addressed, that of ecclesiastical separation based on improper associations.<sup>127</sup> How has 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 been applied in this regard, and are such applications valid? What precisely does the passage contribute toward a justification of this sort of separation?

As noted above, some understand those who do not obey Paul’s “word by this epistle” (3:14) to include any who disobey Paul’s command to withdraw from the disorderly (3:6). Our conclusion to the contrary was that given the context of 3:6–15, the “disobedient” of 3:14 has direct reference only to the disorderly referenced throughout the passage, not to any who might not separate from them. We suggested that it was legitimate, however, to apply 3:14 more indirectly to those who would not withdraw from an excommunicated person in a

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<sup>126</sup>Kevin T. Bauder, “Thinking About the Gospel, Part Nine: Practical Fundamentals?” *In the Nick of Time* (10 Aug 2007), available online at <http://www.centalseminary.edu/publications/Nick/Nick129.html>.

<sup>127</sup>Such an application is described by some as one of “secondary” or “second-degree” separation, but as some find such terminology to be objectionable and somewhat loaded, we will speak more precisely of “ecclesiastical separation due to improper associations” instead.

church discipline situation. Would the same sort of application be valid in the realm of ecclesiastical separation? That is, if a given church (“B”) is not deviating from the doctrine or ethics of the gospel, but maintains Christian cooperation with another religious organization or leader (“C”) who *is* deviating, would a third religious organization or leader (“A”) apply 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 validly by breaking ties with “B” on the basis of its improper association with “C”?<sup>128</sup> Many fundamentalists have answered “yes” by appealing to 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 in support of such ecclesiastical separation due to improper associations,<sup>129</sup> while others have disagreed with these fundamentalists.<sup>130</sup>

Some who would affirm external ecclesiastical separation based upon improper associations find in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 warrant to do so which is explicit in nature. For such, Paul’s command in 3:14 to disassociate from any who does not “obey what we say in this letter” is understood to include any who would not withdraw from the disorderly, as commanded in 3:6.<sup>131</sup> Given this understanding, they (= “A”) connect this church discipline scenario to that of ecclesiastical separation, and thereby justify disassociation from those (= “B”) who will not cut off association with others who have compromised the gospel (= “C”). Because those who do not “obey what we say in this letter”

<sup>128</sup>Obviously, the characterization of “B” as “not deviating from the doctrine or ethics of the gospel,” might be challenged, in that the association of “B” with “C” could be considered such deviation. This is, however, the question under discussion.

<sup>129</sup>More detailed discussions which use the passage to support this practice include Robert I. Potter, “Separation from Disobedient Brethren—Is It a Scriptural Doctrine?” *Ohio Bible Fellowship Visitor*, n.d.; Robert D. Bell, “Practical Exhortations Concerning Disciplinary Separation,” *Biblical Viewpoint* 9 (Nov 1975): 92–96; Ernest Pickering, “Should We Ever Separate From Christian Brethren?” (Minneapolis: Central Press, n.d.), pp. 4–7; Pickering, *Biblical Separation* (1979), pp. 220–23; Masters, “Secondary Separation” (1983), pp. 6–7; Robert G. Delnay, “Ecclesiastical Separation,” *Faith Pulpit* (June–August, 1987); McLachlan, *Reclaiming* (1993), pp. 132–37; Fred Moritz, “*Be Ye Holy*” (1994), pp. 77–80; Charles Seet, “The Principle of Secondary Separation (2 Thessalonians 3:6–15),” *The Burning Bush* 2 (Jan 1996): 40–48; McCune, “Self-Identity” (1996), pp. 31–33; Sidwell, *Dividing Line* (1998), p. 66; R. Bruce Compton, “2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 and Second-Degree Separation,” pp. 4–8 (2001); McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled* (2004), pp. 148–50; Mark Minnick, “Straight Cuts” (2005), 6; Brown, “Categories of Truth” (2005).

<sup>130</sup>Treatments which specifically deny an application of 2 Thess 3:6–15, in part or in whole, to “secondary separation” include John R. Rice, *Christian Co-operation and Separation* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1959); John R. Rice, *Come Out—Or Stay In?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1974); Dale T. Huffman, “Toward a Biblical View of Separation and Cooperation among Believers” (Th.M. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1988); Andrew Sandlin, “A Scriptural Examination of Secondary Separation,” *The Biblical Editor* (Winter 1992): 4–12; Sandlin, “Second Thoughts of Secondary Separation,” *Target* 9 (Aug 1994): 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 22; Michael M. Canham, “‘Secondary Separation’ and 2 Thessalonians 3,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Far-West Region of the Evangelical Theological Society, April 28, 1995; Canham, “Ecclesiastical Separation” (1995); Busenitz, “Dividing Line” (2008), pp. 22–25.

<sup>131</sup>This understanding appears to be operative in Compton, “2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 and Second-Degree Separation,” pp. 7–8; Minnick, “Scriptural Separation.”



ought to be contextually limited to the disorderly, however, such an explicit appeal is misguided. That is, in 2 Thessalonians 3, Paul is not explicitly saying, in essence, “Separate from any who do not separate.” Any application of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 to ecclesiastical separation due to improper associations must be more indirect in nature.

More often than finding in 2 Thessalonians 3 explicit warrant for ecclesiastical separation due to improper associations, a more general appeal is made to the passage.<sup>132</sup> Typically, it is demonstrated that Paul’s particular concern in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 involves only one “tradition” (3:6) out of the larger body of “traditions” (2:15) which provide the standard of Christian faith and practice, and to which Paul is concerned that all believers adhere. The necessity of disassociation from professing believers who persist in sin after due confrontation is considered to be part of the apostolic tradition, as it is a scriptural injunction given by Paul (3:6, 14). Therefore, those who continue to cooperate in gospel endeavors (= “B”) with those who have deviated from the gospel (= “C”) are themselves in violation of the apostolic tradition.<sup>133</sup> Thus, ecclesiastical separation from those who continue in this faulty cooperation (= “B”) is required of faithful churches and Christian leaders (= “A”). This more general appeal based on principles drawn from 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 and other passages seems to be a legitimate—though indirect—application of the passage and has the advantage of recognizing Paul’s emphasis on the apostolic tradition as the standard for Christian doctrine and ethics as well as the touchstone for disciplinary action.<sup>134</sup> We must, however, repeat our earlier caveat that while the church discipline situation of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 ends in expulsion of the offender from the church as an unbeliever,

<sup>132</sup>So, e.g., Moritz, “*Be Ye Holy*,” pp. 77–80; McCune, *Promise Unfilled*, pp. 148–50; Pickering, “Separate?” pp. 4–6.

<sup>133</sup>Cf. 2 Cor 6:14–18; 2 John 9–11. The application of 2 Cor 6:14–18 to separation from apostasy and not merely from pagan idolaters is debated, but see Howard M. Ervin, “A Re-Examination of 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1,” *The Baptist Bulletin* (April 1950): 4–5, 20–21, available online at <http://www.baptistbulletin.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/02/reexamination-of-2-corinthians.pdf>.

<sup>134</sup>Opponents of ecclesiastical separation based on improper associations will at times seek to limit the application of church discipline passages (2 Thess 3:6–15 in particular)—and by extension the application of ecclesiastical separation—to the specific sins mentioned. For instance, Andrew Sandlin (“Examination,” p. 10) writes, “The Bible does not require secondary separation...if it is interpreted as separation from Christians who disobey Scripture by associating with apostates, because associating with apostates is not listed as one of the sins whose violator is subject to separation.” It is not uncommon to limit the application of 2 Thess 3:6–15 to those who are not working for a living when they are able to do so, denying the larger principle of addressing the sin of any who “walk in a disorderly fashion, not according to the tradition.” So, e.g., Canham, “Ecclesiastical Separation,” pp. 100–101. Such an approach is reductionistic and does not take into account the NT emphasis on the apostolic tradition. As well, in church discipline scenarios Paul (and contemporary churches) can hardly be limited to addressing the specific sins delineated in church discipline passages, a point suggested by the list of offenses in Gal 5:19–21 which Paul leaves open-ended with the words *καὶ τὰ ὅμοια τούτοις* (“and things like these”).

ecclesiastical separation based upon improper associations may yet view the offender (= “B”) as a believer in Christ.<sup>135</sup>

How then does 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 inform the practice of external ecclesiastical separation based upon improper associations? As do other church discipline passages, it demonstrates that faithful believers are to disassociate from professing believers in the local church who continue unrepentantly in disorderly behavior, which suggests a similar application to ecclesiastical relationships outside the church as well. It also alludes to the “tradition” as the standard for Christian conduct and the touchstone for Christian discipline. By implication, then, it encourages (at least some level of) separation from any professing believer who persists in disorderly behavior which contradicts the apostolic tradition Christians have received. A proper understanding of the passage also reflects—again, as do other church discipline passages—the notion that Christian recognition of those who deny the gospel is inappropriate, hence the expulsion from the church which comprises the final step of church discipline.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We have attempted in this paper to establish at least four exegetical points related to a proper interpretation and application of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15. (1) The offenders in the passage are to be understood not merely as “idle,” but as “disorderly,” a general term which lends itself more readily to broader applications of the passage. (2) The disorderly are specifically in view as those who might not “obey our word by this epistle” (3:14), not those who might fail to “withdraw” (3:6) from them; application of the passage to ecclesiastical separation based on improper associations is not, therefore, as explicit as some suggest. (3) The offense of the disorderly was quite serious,

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<sup>135</sup>While ecclesiastical separation based on improper associations is a legitimate practice, its implementation is not as clear or simple as church discipline based on improper associations. This is the case because the former differs from the latter in a number of ways. Consider, e.g., the matter of timing. Matt 18 provides a clear due process for addressing sin in the church, and an unrepentant offender is expelled at the end of the process, making it clear when church members are to avoid any form of Christian recognition of the offender. So, once an offender has been expelled from the local church, those in the church who extend Christian recognition to him while he remains unrepentant are presumably susceptible to the process of church discipline themselves. However, in external ecclesiastical separation, at least among independent churches, there is no clear due process, making the timing of separation less clear. Outside the church, it is less clear when a professing Christian party who deviates from the gospel ought to be treated as apostate (= “C”), and correspondingly unclear when a church (= “A”) should separate from another professing Christian party (= “B”) on the basis of Christian collaboration with the first party (= “C”). In addition, external ecclesiastical separation may take longer to deal with disassociation from groups than church discipline would take to deal with individuals. The response of a confronted church member should typically be expected in short order, while the response of an external group may require meetings of a constituency, study groups, executive sessions, and so forth.

and this in turn provides support for the excommunication, not merely the ostracism, of the offenders. (4) The appropriate course of action that the church was to take toward any of the disorderly who continued in impenitence was to expel them from the church, not to continue to acknowledge them as members and Christian brothers (albeit disobedient ones).

In examining applications of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15, we have suggested that although the passage addresses ecclesiastical separation within the church (internal discipline), it can validly be applied more broadly to ecclesiastical separation outside the church (external dissociation). We noted that such an application of the passage has been made since at least the early 19th century and continues to be made in the present day. We have proposed that the passage is often used incorrectly among fundamentalists to support a certain understanding of a “disobedient brother”—a professing believer who continues persistently and unrepentantly in sin, but who remains in the church and is presumed to be a believer in Christ—and demonstrated that such a category is not likely in view in 2 Thessalonians 3, where the offenders were to be expelled from the church due to their persistently rebellious behavior. In turn, we suggested that 2 Thessalonians 3 would be better applied to ecclesiastical separation from apostates rather than from believers who differ in non-fundamental areas of doctrine or practice. We noted that 2 Thessalonians 3 does not explicitly teach “separation from those who will not separate,” but also acknowledged that the passage may rightly be used in a more general and indirect way to support ecclesiastical separation from professing believers who continue in collaboration with apostates.

One may ask whether ecclesiastical separation based upon improper associations is quite so serious as fundamentalists aver. It can be responded that nothing less than the gospel is at stake.<sup>136</sup> It may be that we do not go so far as to question the salvation of professing Christians who continue in Christian collaboration with those who deny the gospel—although the extent and nature of the collaboration may indeed warrant that course of action—but at the same time, the cooperative fellowship of faithful believers with those who demean the gospel by their improper associations must be limited.

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<sup>136</sup>In this connection, see Kevin T. Bauder, “Thinking About the Gospel, Part Six: Demeaning the Gospel,” *In the Nick of Time* (20 July 2007), available online at <http://www.centraleseminary.edu/publications/Nick/Nick126.html>.