

# Exegetical Brief: 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14,15—Admonish Him As A Brother

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This passage provides a classic example of what is meant by an exegetical question. An "exegetical question" exists when different interpreters disagree about which of two biblical doctrines is being taught in a given passage. They agree that both of these doctrines occur in the Bible, but have a different opinion about which teaching occurs in the passage under discussion. In this passage the difference of opinion is about the words "*do not keep company with him, ...but warn him as a brother.*" Some believe these words refer to a partial separation from the person while he is still a brother under admonition. Others believe that they refer to retaining a brotherly attitude toward the person even after the church has broken fellowship with him, but still cherishes the hope that he will repent and return.

This question has a very interesting historical background, especially in discussions between the WELS and the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC). It was commonly thought that according to the WELS position this passage refers to a partial separation from an individual while he is still a brother under admonition. Some even felt that this exegesis was used by the WELS to justify remaining in fellowship with a person (or with a church body) after he had been identified as a persistent errorist. Many thought that according to the CLC position this passage refers to retaining a brotherly attitude toward a person even after you have broken fellowship with him, but still cherish the hope he will repent and return to you. For this reason an exegesis of this passage was assigned to a WELS essayist and to a CLC essayist for discussion at a series of meetings between representatives of the WELS and CLC on January 11-14, 1988. The two presentations were prepared independently. At the meeting some participants were undoubtedly surprised when the WELS essayist presented what was supposedly the CLC position, and the CLC essayist presented what was supposedly the WELS position. This was indeed an "exegetical question," not the source of a difference of doctrine.

The following is an edited version of the WELS essay presented at this meeting:

Our assignment is a careful study of 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14,15. We will begin this study with an examination of the context of these verses.

## The Context

The context of the three verses assigned to us begins already in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, in which he issued two warnings against the sin of idleness. In 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul reminded all of the Thessalonians of the instructions concerning work that he had given to them when he had been with them in person. In 1 Thessalonians 5 he directed their attention to the example of their spiritual leaders, who were working hard among them. He also admonished those who were working faithfully to rebuke those who were not. He instructed the strong to be patient with those who needed correction and encouragement.

### 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

...aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to *work with your own hands, as we commanded you*, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing.

### 1 Thessalonians 5:12-14

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live

in peace with each other. And we urge you brothers *warn those who are idle*, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

In his second letter Paul returns to the problem since it apparently had not yet been resolved.

## 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

<sup>6</sup>In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to *keep away from every brother who is idle* and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. <sup>7</sup>For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup>nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. <sup>9</sup>We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. <sup>10</sup>For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

<sup>11</sup>We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. <sup>12</sup>Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. <sup>13</sup>And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.

<sup>14</sup>If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. *Do not associate with him*, in order that he may feel ashamed. <sup>15</sup>*Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.*

It is clear that Paul had given instruction against idleness already during his first visit to Thessalonica. Furthermore, he was aware of a problem with idleness at Thessalonica already at the time of his first letter and he had already urged the Thessalonians to deal with this problem at that time. This previous instruction helps explain why Paul was ready to call for prompt, vigorous action in his second letter.

In the interval between the writing of 1 and 2 Thessalonians (perhaps several months) Paul had apparently learned that the problem concerning idleness remained unresolved. In his second letter he therefore instructs the Thessalonians to take steps to deal decisively with the problem and with those who were responsible for it. He commands them to keep away from fellow Christians who are idle, who refuse to obey Paul's instruction, and who do not heed the congregation's warning. Such people had been warned against such conduct by Paul's teaching when he was among them and by his first letter. Now in his second letter Paul delivers another command and warning against such conduct. Paul also reminds them of his own example in this matter. If any still refuse to correct their conduct after this instruction and all these warnings, the congregation should not associate with them.

This command of Paul to "keep away from" the disorderly brothers and to "not associate with" them and the implications of such separation are the main concern of our study of 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14,15.

## **The Exegesis**

### 2 Thessalonians 3:6

Παραγγέλλομεν δὲ ὑμῖν, ἀδελφοί, ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου [ἡμῶν] Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ στέλλεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ παντὸς ἀδελφοῦ ἀτάκτως περιπατοῦντος καὶ μὴ κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν ἣν παρελάβοσαν παρ' ἡμῶν.

Furthermore, I command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep yourselves away from every brother who walks in a disorderly way and not according to the tradition which you/they/he<sup>1</sup> received from us.

The first thing to be noted is that Paul's directions are not simply advice which the Thessalonians may take or leave according to their own judgment. He was issuing a command in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Παραγγέλλω is sometimes translated "urge" or "direct," but it usually refers to an order or directive from a person in authority, so the NIV translation "command" expresses its connotation well. Paul is solemnly directing the Thessalonians to obey the teaching which he had passed on to them since he had received it from the Lord and had taught it with apostolic authority.

The offenders whom the Thessalonians are to discipline are "brothers," that is, fellow Christians. It is not the church's business to discipline unbelievers who are outside the fellowship of the church (1 Cor 5:12) but rather to deal with impenitent sinners who claim to be Christians in spite of their impenitence.

The offense involved in this case is idleness and living off the labors of others. The NIV translation, "who is idle," is not a literal rendering of the Greek ἀτάκτως περιπατοῦντος, "walking disorderly," but it accurately reflects the particular kind of disorderliness which is indicated by the larger context. Nevertheless, "disorderly" would be a better translation, since it indicates not only inactivity, but "unrest" as well (not busy, but busybodies). To many people living an idle life might not seem like a very great offense in comparison to murder, robbery, and adultery, but in church discipline it is not the magnitude of the offense in human opinion which matters, but the repentance or lack of repentance which is shown by the offender when he is admonished. The basic procedures and implications of church discipline for an impenitent sinner are the same whether the offense is "small" or "great," moral or doctrinal.

Since our main concern in this study is the basic procedures and implications of church discipline, we will not direct any further attention to the specific problem of idleness at Thessalonica. We will rather focus our attention on the nature and implications of the separation which Paul commanded the Thessalonians to practice as a result of this disorderly conduct.

The crucial question in this verse is the meaning of στέλλεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπο. Στέλλω means to put or leave something in a certain position in order to achieve a specific goal. It may refer to a wide variety of actions: drawing up troops for battle, putting something in the right place, arranging the sails of a ship, providing clothing to someone, propelling a ship, or traveling a road. In the intransitive it often means to travel or set out on a journey. In the middle it may mean "to get ready." In the Septuagint the middle means "to be available" or "to prepare for something." The only two occurrences of στέλλω in the New Testament are in the middle. In 2 Corinthians 8:20 it refers to avoiding offense: στελλόμενοι τοῦτο μή τις ἡμᾶς μωμήσῃται ἐν τῇ ἀδρότητι ταύτῃ τῇ διακονουμένῃ ὑφ' ἡμῶν, "avoiding this, that anyone find fault with us in connection with this generous gift which is being administered by us." The only other occurrence is our text in which στέλλεσθαι ἀπο seems to mean "keep away from." Kittel calls this an instance without exact linguistic parallel (VII, p. 589). However, the compound ὑποστέλλω furnishes two examples of similar meaning: Galatians 2:12, "[Peter]—began to *draw beck* and to separate himself," and Hebrews 10:36, "If he *shrinks back* I will not be pleased with him." (The other compounds of στέλλω do not offer any help with our passage.) Because of the very limited number of parallel usages the meaning of στέλλεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπο in our text must be determined largely from the immediate context and from parallel verbs in other passages which deal with the same subject. There seems to be no reason to disagree with NIV's "keep away from," BAG's "stand aloof from," or the KJV's "withdraw yourselves from." The basic idea seems to be retreating within oneself, like furling up the sails of a ship. The verb implies, "Store your fellowship away and save it for those with whom it really should be exercised." Nothing in the context suggests that this withdrawal is a partial break of fellowship, so the "keep away from" of 2 Thessalonians 3:6 appears to refer to the same kind of complete break of fellowship commanded by the "keep away from" (ἐκκλίνετε) of Romans 16:17 or the "have nothing to do with" (παραίτου) of Titus 3:10. Other suggested

<sup>1</sup> Since the textual variants do not significantly effect the meaning of the passages, they are not discussed here.

translations of these verbs such as "avoid," "withdraw from," or "reject" would not change the meaning of any of these passages. All of these renderings reflect one of the two aspects of a complete break of fellowship, namely, refusing to extend any fellowship to the impenitent offender and refusing to accept any fellowship from him. "Withdrawing from" and "rejecting" are simply two sides of the same coin, not two different kinds of breaking fellowship.

This same complete severance of fellowship is described in the last verses of our text.

## 2 Thessalonians 3:14 15

εἰ δέ τις οὐχ ὑπακούει τῷ λόγῳ ἡμῶν διὰ τῆς ἐπιστολῆς, τοῦτον σημειοῦσθε μὴ συναναμίγυσθαι αὐτῷ, ἵνα ἐντραπη· καὶ μὴ ὡς ἐχθρὸν ἠγεῖσθε, ἀλλὰ νοουθετεῖτε ὡς ἀδελφόν.

However, if anyone does not listen to this word of ours (delivered) through this letter, make note of such a one to not mix up together with him, so that he may be ashamed. And do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

If anyone refuses to heed the command against idleness in spite of the instruction and warnings which he had received from Paul and the congregation, the congregation should "take special note of (σημειῶ) such a person. Like its synonym (σημαίνω) this word may mean "denote," "signal," "seal," or "sign." It may refer to writing something down or marking off distances with milestones. In the middle it usually has the subjective connotation "to mark for oneself" or "take something as a sign." It may mean "to make a medical diagnosis on the basis of symptoms" (σημεῖα). In our text the meaning seems to be "to mark for oneself on the basis of the symptoms which have been observed." The σημειῶ of Thessalonians appears to be closely related to the σκοπεῖν of Romans 16. Although σημειῶ in this passage probably refers more to recognizing a person as an impenitent sinner, rather than to marking him as a sinner for others, in the widest sense of the term "marking" an impenitent sinner includes everything that is done by members of a congregation to establish the common conviction that this brother is an impenitent sinner who must be excluded from their fellowship. It includes such actions as recognizing the conduct of the offender as sin, establishing his impenitence by confronting him with his sin, "telling it to the church" so that they may reach a unanimous conviction in this matter, consenting to the verdict of the congregation, and declaring the exclusion of the offender. Although each individual member of the congregation should "mark" the offender as a matter of personal conviction, for the sake of decency and order the marking must lead to a "public" declaration by the congregation. In 1 Corinthians 5:3-5 Paul had already reached a personal conviction in the case of the man guilty of incest, but it was necessary that the congregation reach that same conviction and declare it publicly. The marking must lead to a congregational declaration which gives the grounds for the exclusion of the offender, for it would be improper to refuse to practice fellowship with the brother without first declaring the reason for this action.

Συναναμίγυσθαι is an infinitive which may express purpose or contemplated result. Rather than translating it as a subordinate clause, the NIV translates it as an imperative, parallel to "take note of him." This translation is legitimate since Greek sometimes continues an imperative construction with an infinitive which has the force of a second imperative (Robertson, p. 943, 944). The KJV also translates with an imperative, but perhaps for a different reason. A number of late manuscripts have the imperative rather than the infinitive, but the UBS text does not include this variant in its apparatus. Whichever reading or translation is followed, the meaning is essentially the same—marking or noting is to be followed by separation. It is important to stress the sequence of these two steps: first, the congregation should "mark," then they should "separate."

The nature of the break signified by μὴ συναναμίγυσθαι has been strongly debated. The word is a double compound, consisting of a verb meaning "mix," a prefix that usually denotes accompaniment (συν) and one that denotes interchange (ανα). The verb is used of the mixing of the ingredients of a prescription, the mixing of weeds with grain, and of various kinds of intermingling of people, such as the mingling of spies in a crowd or sexual intermingling of nations. In the Septuagint it is used of Israel's mingling with the heathen.

"Ephraim mixes with the nations" (Hos 7:8) (also Ezk 20:18 in the Greek text only). In Proverbs 20:19 συναναμίγνυσθαι refers to the act of avoiding a man who talks too much. Other than in our text the only NT occurrence of συναναμίγνυσθαι is in 1 Corinthians 5:9, 11 in which it refers to separation from sexually immoral people who claim to be Christian brothers yet impenitently cling to their sins. Since the term clearly refers to excommunication, which is a complete break of fellowship, in 1 Corinthians 5, it is most natural to expect the same meaning here in 2 Thessalonians 3.

However, most commentators do not see 2 Thessalonians 3 as parallel to 1 Corinthians 5. They interpret the μη συναναμίγνυσθαι of our text as a partial withdrawal of fellowship which is a probationary discipline or an additional warning that excommunication may result if the offender does not amend his ways. Hendriksen, Morris (*NIC*), Lenski (at least on verse 6, on verses 14 and 15 his position is unclear), Bruce (*Word*), Thomas (*EBC*), and Fredric Blume of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary are among the many commentators who see only a partial tentative withdrawal of fellowship in 2 Thessalonians 3. Kretzmann straddles the fence, allowing either a warning suspension or a complete break which is done with a non-hostile spirit. Kuske (*People's Bible*), Calvin, and the *Concordia Self Study Commentary* are among the relatively few commentaries which interpret the action in our text as a decisive, complete break. The main basis for the majority view, that this is not a complete break, is the next sentence: "Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." According to this view, if the offender is still to be regarded as a brother, the action commanded by our text cannot be a decisive break like excommunication. A second basis for this view is found in the present tenses in verses 14 and 15, which are interpreted as references to ongoing actions, rather than to a decisive break.

However, I do not find this majority viewpoint very persuasive. Since μη συναναμίγνυσθαι clearly refers to excommunication in 1 Corinthians 5, it is most natural to take it in the same sense here unless there are compelling reasons to the contrary, either in the immediate context or in the wider context of Scripture. I do not see such reasons in either place. There are no clear directives in Scripture for a partial withdrawal of fellowship that is probationary or punitive. Scripture speaks of only two basic steps or stages in church discipline. The first step is admonition of the offender through which his impenitence is established. (This first stage may involve a number of sub-steps as it does in Matthew 18 where first private, then public admonition of the offender is described.) The second step is a complete break with the offender whose impenitence has been established.

Verse 15 of our text does not impose a barrier to seeing these same two steps of discipline which are present in other passages of Scripture also here in 2 Thessalonians 3. The term "brother" in verse 15 does not describe the offender's continued status in the congregation after the withdrawal of fellowship, but rather expresses the attitude and aim of the congregation in excluding the offender. Their aim is not to punish him as an enemy, but to regain him as a brother. Their intention is not to shame him as a punishment. Their hope is that his shame will be a godly sorrow which leads to repentance. The impenitent offender does not remain a Christian brother after the congregation's rejection of fellowship with him, but the congregation continues to hope that as the ultimate outcome of their act of discipline he will regain his status as their brother. A similar prospective way of speaking is found in Genesis 9:6, "Whoever sheds man's blood by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God has God made man." This passage does not teach that all people still retain the image of God and therefore should not be killed. It rather demonstrates that murder is a horrible crime because it cuts off the time of grace during which the image of God, lost in the fall, may be restored. Just as Genesis 9:6 focuses on a lost blessing to be restored through faith, not on a present reality for natural man, so 2 Thessalonians 3:15 focuses on a brotherhood which has been broken by impenitence, but which will hopefully be restored by the offender's repentance. In Luke 15 the lost son remained a son only in the sense that the father still loved him and longed for his return. However, as long as he was away from home, he no longer had the benefits of being a son. As long as he remained impenitent, the Thessalonian offender would not be a brother to the congregation in any other sense than that they still loved him and longed for his return to the family. However, as long as he remained impenitent, he would not be a member of the family, and he could have no fellowship with the family. The break would remain complete. However, the Thessalonians hoped that the offender who had been expelled would be brought to his senses by the drastic action which they had taken and that he would repent and be regained as a brother. They hoped that the brother who was now dead would

become alive again, that the brother who was lost would be found. The present tense "admonish him" is not a barrier to this interpretation, since the congregation's withdrawal of fellowship was not a one-shot admonition given only at the time it was announced, but an ongoing rebuke, which would testify against the offender as long as the congregation maintained it.

In a loose sense, excommunication may be called a form of evangelism. Strictly speaking, it is a preaching of the law, not of the gospel, but it is done with an evangelical spirit and an evangelical aim, namely, regaining the lost brother. It was in this spirit that the Thessalonians were to deal with the offenders in their midst.

According to this interpretation 2 Thessalonians 3 refers to the same two basic steps of discipline as the other New Testament passages which deal with church discipline:

<b>"Marking":</b> <i>Admonition Which Establishes Impenitence</i>	<b>"Avoiding":</b> <i>Separation from the Impenitent Brother</i>
1 Thess 4, 5—we told you... warn	—keep away from
2 Thess 3 -take special note	—do not associate
Matthew 18—show him his fault —take one or two others —tell it to the church	—treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector
Titus 3:10—warn...warn	—have nothing to do with
Ro 16:17—watch out for	—keep away from
1 Cor 5—I have passed judgment	—put out of your fellowship —hand over to Satan —not to associate with —not even to eat with

In these passages there is no significant difference between the various terms for strong separation listed in the second column. However, the specific actions described in the first column vary according to the stage of admonition being discussed. As general statements of principle, Matthew 18 and Titus 3 are the most complete descriptions of the process of admonition. The directions for congregational action are least complete in 1 Corinthians 5, perhaps because the problem at Corinth was not lack of knowledge of the proper procedures of church discipline, but gross negligence in following those procedures and separating from the impenitent even when the guilt of the offender was clearly established. For that reason Paul does not elaborate on the Corinthians' responsibilities, but tells them to get busy and carry out the responsibilities about which they are already well informed.

When we examine 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 and 2 Thessalonians 3:14,15 and compare them with parallel texts of the New Testament, we see that they agree exactly with these other passages in speaking of two basic responsibilities in church discipline: first, establishing the impenitence of the offender, and then separating from him. Fulfilling these two basic responsibilities remains our chief concern in the exercise of church discipline and in the practice of church fellowship today.

The two different interpretations of this passage do not lead to a difference in the doctrine of fellowship between their respective advocates. Those who hold that this is a partial suspension of fellowship before a final break do not allow for continued fellowship with a persistent errorist. They maintain that this identification had not yet been made at Thessalonica. Those who hold that this passage refers to a complete break hold that this identification had already been made. Their doctrine, and presumably their practice, would be the same.