

2 Thessalonians

Bible Study

Follow Paul

2 Thessalonians 3:6—15

The Thessalonian believers failed in two areas in their Christian walk, they were not following the teaching of the Apostle Paul, and they were walking in step with those who were behaving incorrectly. Obviously, these two are tied together. Not only were there those who turned away from Paul's teaching, but many of them were encouraging others to follow them down the wrong path. They had created a support group for those who rejected Paul's Mystery doctrine. This reminds me of Matthew 23:15 where Jesus warns the scribes and Pharisees of the coming doom for recruiting proselytes and turning them into twice the son of hell that the Pharisees were.

The Thessalonian believers were having trouble from two different groups of people. The first group were unbelievers who were trying to turn them away from the truth of Paul's gospel (1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2 Thessalonians 1:4). The second group of troublemakers were believing brethren (2 Thessalonians 3:6). How sad is it that Paul had to warn these believers about fellow believers who had turned their back on Pauline doctrine and were trying to bring others down with them. This same warning can also go out to most of Christianity today. How many churches preach the Mystery? How many people do we know who encourage us to withdraw from those who do not teach the doctrine of Paul? Tragically, most people emphasize love and unity amongst people of faith instead of unity in doctrine. Love and harmony are actually the byproducts of being united in doctrine. Too many churches focus on attaining fellowship through activities such as social events, dancing, meals, etc., while deemphasizing doctrine. As usual, the majority of churches have it all wrong.

Withdraw! (verse 6)

Paul does not waste any words in telling the Thessalonians what they ought to do concerning those who do not follow the doctrine that Paul had been teaching them. They were to withdraw or remove themselves from the presence of those who were not walking in the traditions (teachings) set forth by the Apostle Paul. These men were called disorderly, meaning they were like unruly soldiers who were not walking in step. In this case they were not in lockstep with what Paul had taught them, and therefore were turning their backs on what God taught Paul. They were not only rebelling against Paul's teaching, but were taking other believers with them.

This is where we need to part with most churches. We often hear a call from churches for unity. We do need to be united, but must be careful what we are united about. The new-age, emergent, ecumenical type churches often emphasize the importance of coming together in unity. However, they define unity as relational instead of doctrinal. A biblical unity is one that is built on the Bible, rightly divided. This is the type of unity that the Apostle Paul was emphasizing when he wrote to the Thessalonians and told them to stay away from the brothers who are not living according to the teachings he gave them.

I just recently ran into an example of a church that claims to follow mid-Acts doctrine but are using Vacation Bible School materials that teach children to follow the earthly Jesus. Instead of teaching them what God expects in this dispensation of Grace, they will be taught how to follow the teaching of the Beatitudes. Jesus' earthly ministry was focused on Israel and the good news of the Millennial Kingdom. In this dispensation, we have a heavenly hope and live according to Paul's 13 books. Paul warned the church at Rome to mark those who cause divisions contrary to the doctrine they learned from him and avoid them (Romans 16:17). Paul warns about mixing with those who refuse to follow his teaching because he knows they will be a negative influence, ultimately causing stunted spiritual growth.

What should our reaction be when we run into Christians who do not believe the same thing we believe? Are we to distance ourselves from everyone who teaches something different? I don't think that the

Apostle Paul had that in mind. The problem seems to be that there were people who were not only vocal in turning these believers away from the truth, they were also setting a bad example of Christian living. This is clearly stated in Romans 16:17 where there were those who were causing divisions. They were troublemakers who were working at ruining Paul's ministry. If I were to distance myself from every person who has a different idea than I do, I would not speak or interact with anyone. Paul is really warning for us to be careful that we don't let someone who teaches a different doctrine, other than what Paul did, to influence us to leave Pauline doctrine.

That means I don't need to break fellowship with people who happen to attend the aforementioned church, and we don't need to cut ties with someone who may believe the church started in Acts 2 or 28. We do need to be cautious in accepting anything that anyone teaches. We always need to go right back to Scripture to hold all teaching up against Paul's teaching. By mixing with those who do not agree with us, as long as they are not being contentious or divisive, we have the opportunity to show them the truth of the Mystery doctrine.

Paul as an example

Paul set himself up as an example to follow. He is a pattern, example or prototype of those who would follow him into the Body of Christ (1 Timothy 1:16). A pattern is produced to define the rest that will follow. Paul was the beginning, the first, the prototype or pattern of those who became a part of the Body of Christ. He also presented himself as our role model so we would know how to behave as members of the Body of Christ. When he came to the Thessalonians he didn't ask for any support (1 Thessalonians 2:9). At this point, he was still making tents to support himself and continued to do so until he traveled to Corinth (Acts 18:1—5).

When he was with the Thessalonians, he didn't ask them for any support and in fact didn't even ask them for a piece of bread. He was setting himself up as an example against those believers who stopped working and began begging others to support them while they sat idly waiting for the Lord to come. Paul tells the Thessalonians there is no room for these lazy brothers and they were to part ways with them. However, they were to still count them as brothers in Christ that needed to be corrected (see 1 Corinthians 5:5 for another correction of a Christian brother).

Paul not only directs them to follow his instructions, but acts as an example. We see this when he tells the Philippians that they were to take what they learned and received (one Greek word meaning to accepted), and heard and seen (again, one Greek word meaning to hear from as a first-hand account or hear of as in second-hand account) and put those things into practice (Philippians 4:9). There is a similar instruction in Philippians 3:17.

We, too, need to be careful what doctrine we follow. Many claim to follow Paul's teachings, but only in a very generic sense. In their quest to reconcile the teachings of Jesus and His Disciples with the 13 books of Paul, they find it necessary to follow him only in his zeal to reach the lost or in his desire to see Christians grow but not as their exclusive pattern for Christian living. They look at how he suffered for the sake of Jesus as he founded church after church. Unfortunately, most don't see the unique message the Apostle Paul was given by the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ. They don't see him as the beginning of the distinctive Body of Christ and definitely don't see a new work of God beginning through Paul. However, Paul himself distanced his work from the Disciples and took the leadership role away from Peter (Galatians 1—2) while preaching a message revealed only to him after his salvation. (Galatians 2:6—9, 11—14; Romans 16:25—26; Ephesians 3:1—7).

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