Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Does Pretribulationism Lead to Idleness? A Consideration of 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12

STEVE LEWIS

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. (2 Thessalonians 3:6–12, NASB)

INTRODUCTION

Most evangelical commentators have concluded that the issue Paul was addressing in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12 was a problem of "idleness" within the church which was the direct result of confusion concerning the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ at the resurrection of Church-age saints (the Rapture). A brief sampling of such statements may be helpful in setting the stage for the following discussion.

> The traditional interpretation is that because of the Thessalonians' expectation of the imminent coming of Christ, they gave up working and sponged off others.[1]

> What was the original cause of their idleness is not known. There seems no reason, however, to doubt that it was much increased by their expectation that the Saviour would soon appear, and that the world would soon come to an end. If this was to be so, of what use would it be to labor? Why strive to accumulate property with reference to the wants of a family, or to a day of sickness, or old age? Why should

[1] Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*. (New York: The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 2000), 455.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

a man build a house that was soon to be burnt up, or why buy a farm which he was soon to leave?[2]

The eschatological excitement and mistaken idea that the Day of the Lord had arrived was the occasion, if not the cause, of much idleness.[3]

Unbalanced notions about the day of the Lord started the stopping of work and the busybody's running around spreading false notions.[4]

[W]e can only surmise from the completely eschatological atmosphere that they reasoned within themselves, "The end is near, work is a waste of time."[5]

These lazy people were asking the church to support them, expecting the church to provide their livelihood. They reasoned that Jesus was going to come back soon, so why not just live off the church until that time?… Even some Christians refused to work because they said, "The Lord is coming soon! Why should we work?"[6]

Some members of the church had become idle because they thought the coming of the Lord was imminent and felt that there was no need for diligence in worldly occupations and secular matters. They were under the impression that the end would soon come and there was no need for them to attend to any business except to prepare for His coming.[7]

The view that the day of the Lord had already set in and that the Lord would return at just any time would naturally stimulate their native tendency to give themselves to excited discussion in preference to dull manual labor.[8]

Some members of the assembly had misinterpreted Paul's teaching about the return of Christ, left their jobs, and were living off the generosity of the church. They were idle while others were working. Yet they expected the church to

---

[2] Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Thes-Phil.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1951), 99.
[3] E. J. Bicknell, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*. (London: Methuen and Company, 1932), 93.
[4] R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon*. (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1937), 465.
[5] Ernest Best, *Black's New Testament Commentary: The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1972), 334.
[6] James T. Draper, *1 & 2 Thessalonians: The Hope of a Waiting Church*. (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), 239–240, 244.
[7] Oliver B. Greene, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians*. (Greenville: The Gospel Hour, 1964), 295–296.
[8] D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 346.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

support them.… They had time on their hands and gossip on their lips, but they defended themselves by arguing, "The Lord is coming soon!"[9]

[T]he ataktoi were Christians whose belief in an imminent parousia led them to abandon what they considered mundane material pursuits. They may have reasoned that working for material gain was to commit the error of building up treasure on earth at a time when all such material stuff was about to pass away.[10]

In view of the nearness of the Parousia (as they thought) they were refraining from doing any work.[11]

Doctrinal error concerning the day of the Lord had led to disorderly conduct in the church. Paul dealt with the latter problem forcefully in this section. This cause-effect relationship is not stated explicitly in the epistle, but it is a safe deduction.… The offense was idleness, deliberate loafing which led some to interfere in the work of others (2 Thes. 3:11) and to expect others to provide for their needs (v. 12).[12]

It seems clear that some of the saints at Thessalonica had stopped working for a living because they were so intently waiting for the Lord's return.[13]

Evidently the precious truth of the second coming of our Lord had gripped the hearts of these Thessalonians so that they were fully expecting Him to return in their lifetime. I gather from this passage and the corresponding verses in the first Epistle that some of the members of the Church at Thessalonica who did not particularly enjoy hard work, were saying, "Well, if the Lord is coming soon what is the use of working? Why not take it easy? Others of the brethren have enough laid up for the future; let them divide with us. There is no necessity for our working."[14]

---

[9] Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol 2)*. (Wheaton: Scripture Press, 1989), 204.
[10] D. Michael Martin, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Thessalonians (vol 33)*. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 274.
[11] Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 251.
[12] Thomas L. Constable, *Second Thessalonians*, in Walvoord, John F. and Zuck, Roy B. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*. (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1983), 723.
[13] William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: New Testament*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 874.
[14] H. A. Ironside, *Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians*. (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1975), 119.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

> Now disorder and confusion at Thessalonica had resulted, in some cases, from a few among them who, waiting for the Lord's coming, gave up their daily employment and went visiting from house to house, doubtless to discuss their "blessed hope."[15]
>
> The great body of commentators, including the ablest, attribute this idleness to the erroneous notion that the Lord was about to come.[16]

Many conservative, Premillennial commentators are among the group which advances this view of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12, but what may not be clearly recognized is that this view opens the doctrine of Premillennialism to criticism by those in opposing eschatological camps. Opponents of Premillennialism are able to say, in effect, that belief in the doctrine of Premillennialism results in deficiencies in character, and they can point to Paul's Thessalonian letters for Scriptural support that Premillennialism leads to "idleness" or "unruliness." For example, in attempting to bring the doctrine of the imminent Rapture of the Church into disrepute, Allis states that, "The nearness of the goal may appeal to a man's selfishness, ambition, pride, even to his indolence."[17] In a later section entitled *Pretribulationism Appeals to Unworthy Motives* Allis says, "Before examining the evidence brought forward in support of this doctrine, it may be well to notice how singularly calculated it is to appeal to those selfish and unworthy impulses from which no Christian is wholly immune.… Christians who hold this doctrine are encouraged to view the present evil state of the world with a composure which savors not a little of complacency."[18] Another commentator who was writing about 2 Thessalonians 3:6 plainly declared that, "The effect of the expectation of the speedy appearing of the Lord Jesus *has always been to induce men to neglect their worldly affairs, and to lead idle lives*. Man, naturally disposed to be idle, wants the stimulus of hope that he is laboring for the future welfare of himself, for his family, or for society, *nor will he labor if he believes that the Saviour is about to appear*."[19] [emphasis added] From statements like these it is clear that Premillennialists should thoroughly examine the evidence supporting their view of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12. A careful exegesis of this passage will show that the conventional view presented above is by no means demanded by the text. Needless

---

[15] Cornelius R. Stam, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*. (Chicago: Berean Bible Society, 1984), 141.
[16] J. W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton, *Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans*. (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1940), 47.
[17] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*. (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1947), 169.
[18] Ibid., 207.
[19] Barnes, 99

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

criticism of the Premillennial doctrine can be avoided by maintaining a proper view of the "unruliness" which Paul addresses in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12.

THE PROBLEM OF *UNRULINESS* IN THESSALONICA

From Paul's Thessalonian letters it is apparent that there was a problem with some of the church members refusing to support themselves by working at their normal business. Paul affirms that this was occurring even during the time he was first with them in Thessalonica: "For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either" (2 Thess. 3:10). After Paul departed from Thessalonica, however, this behavior was still occurring. In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul instructed them:

> Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need. (1 Thess. 4:9–12, NASB)

At the conclusion of this first letter, the apostle Paul also gave the church instructions for dealing with this on-going issue when he declared, "Admonish the unruly" (1 Thess. 5:14). As a first step, Paul was hopeful that these unruly brethren would listen to the voice of authority and reason, and that they would change their behavior.

It is clear from Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, however, that the unruly ones within the church did *not* change their behavior after being admonished. Toward the end of his second letter Paul was forced to handle this issue in more detail, and he gave the church new and different instructions for decisively dealing with this problem (2 Thess. 3:6–15). It is evident that in both of the Thessalonian letters Paul was dealing with a small but specific group of believers, and that his instructions were intended to correct a specific offense. One of the first questions that must be addressed is, "What was the nature of the *unruliness* with which Paul was dealing?"

THE MEANING OF *UNRULY* IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In 1 Thess. 5:14 Paul had directed the church to "admonish the unruly," and in 2 Thess. 3:6 he commanded them to "keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life." Lenski shows that these two occurrences of the term *unruly* are connected when he says, "True, the lone reference to the *ataktoi* in 1 Thess 5:14 might refer to any kind of irregular

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

conduct; but in 2 Thess 3:6, 8, 11 the same word is used, *atakto* twice and the verb *etakthsamen* (we gospel ministers 'did not act disorderly among you'). The only fair deduction is that we have a reference to the same kind of disorderliness as that mentioned in 1 Thess 5:14."[20] Paul is addressing the same issue in the two Thessalonian letters, and it will be important to establish the intended meaning for the *atakt*—word group if a proper understanding of this issue is to be obtained.

One of the challenges in arriving at the intended meaning for this term involves the limited number of occurrences of this word group in the New Testament. Elias explains that, "One side of the puzzle centers on the meaning of several words, all with the same Greek root (*atakt-*, which literally means 'not in proper order'). This word-group appears in the NT only here in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 and in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15. Since these three words occur nowhere else in the NT and only once in the Septuagint (3 Macc. 1:19), we are largely restricted to the clues contained within these two epistles."[21] Because the wider context of the NT instances of these words does allude to "working with your own hands," many scholars have concluded that the atakt—word group must be translated with the sense of *idleness* or *laziness*. For example, BAGD gives the following brief definition of the verb *atakteo*: "In our literature only 2 Th 3:7, where the context demands the meaning *be idle, lazy*."[22] However, if idleness, unfruitfulness, unemployment, or laziness were intended, then a different Greek term (*argo* would have better represented this meaning. "*Argos* means a) indolent, useless, unemployed, and b) incapable of action. It occurs in the NT in the secular sense in Mt. 20:3 (unemployed), Mt. 20:6 (inactive), and Tit. 1:12 (idle). It also has a religious sense in 2 Pet. 1:8, namely, ineffective, i.e., without works that express faith and hence unserviceable or worthless."[23] Thayer explains that the word *argo* means, "Free from labor, at leisure, Mt. 20:3, 6; 1 Tim. 5:13. Lazy, shunning the labor which one ought to perform, Jas. 2:20; Tit. 1:12; 2 Pet. 1:8. Of things from which no profit is derived, although they can and ought to be productive."[24] Since *atakto* was used in the Thessalonian epistles rather than *argo*, the distinct meaning of *atakto* should be carefully examined.

Words of the *atakt*—group consist of the negative particle (a-) and a derivative of *tasso*, meaning to arrange in an orderly manner. The primary sense, then, is to be disorderly or

---

[20] Lenski, 456.

[21] Jacob W. Elias, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: 1 and 2 Thessalonians*. (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1995), 319.

[22] Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 119.

[23] Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Abridged)*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 76.

[24] Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1981), 72.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

to deviate from the prescribed order. "*atakto*" means disordered, disorderly, undisciplined, unbridled, without law or order. *atakteo* means to set oneself outside the order."[25] Thayer comments that *atakteo* was used "of soldiers marching out of order or quitting the ranks,"[26] and Barnes remarks that, "It is not difficult, in an army, when soldiers get out of the line or leave their places in the ranks or are thrown into confusion, to see that little can be accomplished in such a state of irregularity and confusion. As little difficult is it, when the members of a church are out of their places, to see that little can be accomplished in such a state. Many a church is like an army where half the soldiers are out of the line; where there is entire insubordination in the ranks, and where not half of them could be depended on for efficient service in a campaign."[27] The idea represented by this word group is that of deliberate disorderliness, insubordination, or unruliness. As Gaventa says, "Although the refusal to work appears to be one of the leading problems with these believers, the word itself suggests something other than sloth; it suggests a sense of insubordination that results in disorderliness—and therefore includes a refusal to work."[28] Elias concurs when he states that, "This group cannot be characterized simply as idle or lazy. In addition, they seem to have been socially disruptive, perhaps also resisting instruction and guidance given by the leaders of the congregation generally."[29] In order to determine in exactly what manner these believers were being unruly, it will be necessary to analyze the descriptions given of them by the apostle Paul in the Thessalonian letters.

WHAT CHARACTERIZED THE BEHAVIOR OF THE *UNRULY*?

From 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12 there are at least seven characteristics of these believers which help to define the exact nature of their unruliness. First, they were described as Christian brothers. "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every *brother*" (2 Thess. 3:6), indicating that the unruly ones were fellow-believers within the Thessalonian church. As believers, they would therefore come under the jurisdiction of the exhortations of the apostle Paul and the church as a whole. In 2 Thess. 3:15, Paul cautions the church not to treat the unruly ones as enemies, but continue to admonish them as brothers in Christ.

Second, these believers were acting in disobedience to the tradition that Paul had given them. "Keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the

[25] Bromiley, 1156.
[26] Thayer, 83.
[27] Barnes, 57–58.
[28] Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Interpretation: First and Second Thessalonians*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1998), 128.
[29] Elias, 319.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

tradition which you received from us" (2 Thess. 3:6). Broadly speaking, this tradition consisted of Paul's general example and instructions which were passed on personally when he was with them, as well as through his written epistles (2 Thess. 2:15). Although the unruly believers were members of the group which was obligated to adhere to the instructions of the apostle, there was a specific way in which they had departed from these instructions. Obviously Paul had admonished them to resume earning their own livelihood, but they continued to be unwilling to do so. The question remains as to whether their refusal to resume work is what fully constituted their "disobedience to tradition" or whether this was merely a symptom reflecting a larger problem of insubordination and unruliness.

Third, the unruly brothers were living off of others within the church and becoming a burden to them. Paul clearly contrasts his own behavior with that of the unruly believers when he says, "*We* did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did *we* eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship *we* kept working night and day so that *we* would not be a burden to any of you" (2 Thess. 3:7–8). When Paul used the expression *eat anyone's bread* he was indicating more than simply receiving a meal from members of the church. "To eat bread is evidently a Semitism. It means not simply 'get a meal' or even 'meals,' but rather 'get a living' (cf. Gen. 3:19; Amos 7:12, etc.). Paul does not mean that he had never accepted a hospitable invitation, but that he had not depended on other people for his means of livelihood."[30] By way of contrast, Paul shows that the unruly ones were depending on church members for their livelihood and thereby becoming a burden to the church.

Fourth, it was possible that the unruly brothers were claiming the same right to the support of the church which Paul could have claimed. "*We* kept working night and day so that *we* would not be a burden to any of you; not because *we* do not have the right to this" (2 Thess. 3:8–9). Again, Paul is setting up a stark contrast between himself and the unruly ones. *He* had a legitimate right to the support of the church, while *they* could not claim that right. The implication is that they were attempting to claim the same right of entitlement to church support which is due a recognized member of church leadership.

Fifth, the unruly believers were not willing to work at their own business in order to earn their own livelihood. "For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all" (2 Thess. 3:10–11). The word that is used for *work* is the Greek term *ergazomai*, and it is the same term that Paul had used to describe his own example of laboring at his trade while in Thessalonica so that

[30] Morris, 253.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

he would not be a burden to anyone. Thayer explains the meaning of this term as, "to trade, to make gains by trading, do business."[31] The unruly believers were neglecting their normal business activities and expecting to receive their livelihood from the church.

Sixth, these unruly brothers were certainly not inactive, lethargic, or idle loafers. They were very busy in other people's affairs. "Some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies" (2 Thess. 3:11). The final clause of this verse contains a very interesting play on words in the original Greek: *meden ergazomenou alla periergazomenou*, which could be translated literally as "working nothing but working around." Thayer comments that the term *periergazomenou* was "used apparently of a person officiously inquisitive about other's affairs."[32] The meaning of this term certainly goes beyond that of *idleness*, "suggesting that they actively interfere in the life of the community."[33] Bruce maintains that it might "be a symptom of that religiosity which must always be prying into the private lives of others."[34] It appears, then, that the unruly believers were very active in the life of the church, possibly in a self-appointed "official" capacity.

Seventh, the unruly ones were out from under proper authority or acting on their own authority. "Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread" (2 Thess. 3:12). Paul commanded these insubordinate believers to stop their meddlesome activities and return to their normal business. It is important to recognize that Paul is focusing on the aspect of *quietness* in his injunction for them to return to their regular work. "The emphasis rests on the phrase *meta esuxian*. This phrase is placed forward for the sake of emphasis just as in 1 Thess 4:11 *esuxazein* is placed forward for the same reason."[35] As Bruce declares, "Such quiet behavior is the antithesis to interfering in other people's affairs and being a general nuisance."[36] A sense of stillness, silence, or ceasing from undue commotion would be the natural result of obedience to Paul's command, but the emphasis on quietness also contains an implied connection with submission to proper authority. "Spicq (*Les Thesaloniciens*) claims that those living *atakto* were resisting authority. This is perhaps implied in v. 6 since the people involved are said not to be living according to the traditions received from Paul."[37] In another of Paul's epistles the same term for *quietness*

---

[31] Thayer, 247.
[32] Thayer, 502.
[33] Best, 340.
[34] F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1 and 2 Thessalonians (vol 45*). (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1982), 207.
[35] Lenski, 465.
[36] Bruce, 207–208.
[37] Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 281.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

is used in the discussion of women submitting to the teaching authority of the church leadership: "A woman must *quietly* receive instruction with entire *submissiveness*. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise *authority* over a man, but to remain *quiet*" (1 Timothy 2:11–12). The implication in 2 Thessalonians 3:12 is that the unruly, insubordinate believers are to submit to proper authority, to cease their unauthorized activity, and to focus their efforts on their normal livelihood.

WHAT WAS THE CAUSE OF THIS *UNRULINESS*?

This is a very important question, but what must be recognized is that the apostle Paul does *not* give an answer to this question in the inspired text of his epistles. Many commentators have acknowledged this fact:

> We are not told why the minority does not work.[38]
>
> What was the original cause of their idleness is not known.[39]
>
> What motivates this pattern of disruptive behavior, in which some decide that they will no longer work but will work at meddling in the lives of others? The writer does not provide an explanation.[40]
>
> However, the text never states what motivated the ataktoi, and assuming they had succumbed to an aberrant eschatology is only one of the viable options for explaining their behavior.[41]

At the outset of this discussion it must be admitted that no sincere biblical expositor can be absolutely dogmatic about this issue, simply because the text of Scripture does not clearly reveal the specific cause for this unruly behavior. One thing that is certain, however, is that the Thessalonians to whom Paul was writing would have known exactly what he was talking about. Several possible causes for the unruliness of these believers have been suggested, and five different proposals will be discussed here.

The Character Flaw of Laziness

Some have suggested that the Thessalonians had an inherent character weakness toward indolence which was the cause of their idleness. As Hiebert has said, "They may simply have been cloaking a disposition to idleness under a mask of feverish activity, perhaps

[38] Best, 334.
[39] Barnes, 99.
[40] Gaventa, 129.
[41] Martin, 274.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

spending on 'religious' work the time that should rightly have been given to manual labor.… The habit of idleness seems to have been a part of the background of some of the Thessalonian church members."[42] This view receives support from the fact that the members of the Thessalonian church were all new believers at the time Paul wrote to them. Christian maturity is a process that occurs over a span of time, and the Thessalonian believers were "babes" in Christ. It is quite possible that many of them had a natural bent toward laziness, but this does not seem to be a sufficient reason for Paul to address them as insubordinate, disorderly, or unruly.

The Trauma of Persecution

Another view is that the trauma resulting from the intense persecution of the Thessalonian believers was causing them to despair of their lives, and a corollary effect was that they gave up their normal work activities. It is certainly true that the Thessalonian Christians were being severely afflicted, as the apostle Paul confirmed:

> For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews. (1 Thess. 2:14)
>
> Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. (1 Thess. 3:1–4)
>
> Therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (2 Thess. 1:4–8)

[42] Hiebert, 346.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

While it is true that the Thessalonian believers experienced serious affliction, and the trauma associated with such experiences often does impact one's ability to function normally, this does not seem to provide a satisfactory basis for Paul to address them as insubordinate or unruly. In addition, rather than rebuking them for their reaction to persecution, Paul actually gave them high praise for their response to affliction.

The View of Labor as Degrading

Some have suggested that there was a general prejudice in the Greek mind against all manual labor. McGarvey and Pendleton explain that, "Many of the Thessalonian converts were from the laboring classes. Now, laborers in that day were brought into competition with slave labor, and hence were disposed to look upon all manual work as degrading. This false view of life was the main influence which produced that vast multitude of parasites that then swarmed in every large city of the empire. To correct this mistaken pride, and to restore labor to its just dignity, Paul had made tents and supported himself by his hands while at Thessalonica. For these and other reasons he had also waived his right to support and had sustained himself while at Corinth (Acts 18:3; 2 Cor. 11:9) and at Ephesus (Acts 20:34)."[43] Best adds that, "Perhaps they also had the Hellenistic scorn for manual work; as Christians they are the free children of God and cannot be expected to work like slaves."[44] While it is possible that this sort of attitude was held by some within the Thessalonian church, it is unclear why such "free children of God" would deliberately choose to gain their livelihood from other "free children of God" who were still earning a living by doing their normal business. There is no evidence for the existence of a "laboring" class of Christians from whom a few "enlightened" believers were allowed to gain their livelihood.

The Nearness of the Rapture

Probably the most commonly held view is that the nearness of Christ's return led the Thessalonian believers to the conclusion that they could abandon their normal work activities while waiting for the Rapture to take place. Lenski states, "We may picture them sitting around for hours in the bazaars and little shops of the other members, making a nuisance of themselves, and trying to unsettle the stable members with their fanatical notions."[45] Typically this view relies on making a connection between the injunctions regarding work/idleness and the eschatological sections of the Thessalonian epistles. In describing the typical argument Martin says that "eschatological concerns appear to dominate 2 Thessalonians, a letter that has the treatment of the *ataktoi* as its primary

[43] McGarvey and Pendleton, 46.
[44] Best, 334.
[45] Lenski, 463.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

ethical concern. Similarly, in 1 Thessalonians it is concern that believers work (4:11–12) and not be idle (5:12–14) that brackets Paul's eschatological discussions in 4:13–5:11. Finally, the connection between the *ataktoi* and an eschatological motivation seems both logical and true to human nature."[46] Martin goes on to say, "However, the text never states what motivated the *ataktoi*, and assuming they had succumbed to an aberrant eschatology is only one of the viable options for explaining their behavior. Neither letter explicitly connects the expectation of an imminent *parousia* and the actions of the idle."[47] Regarding the connection between idle behavior and eschatology, Malherbe comments, "The traditional interpretation is that some Thessalonians thought that the coming of Christ was so imminent that they saw no reason to work and thereby prepare for the future (e.g., Rigaux, Best, Bruce, Jewett).… Several factors make this interpretation improbable. The connection between idleness and eschatology is not made anywhere in the Thessalonian letters."[48] In fact the matter of "working with your own hands" (1 Thess. 4:11) is directly connected to the previous issue of expressing brotherly love, rather than to the subsequent topic of the resurrection of deceased believers. Malherbe insists that "Paul is correcting some Thessalonians who were abusing the love of the congregation by refusing to work, and instead looking to the church for their livelihood.… Partly because the connection between love and idleness is not explicitly made by Paul, it has not been examined in detail, and quite diverse interpretations of the situation have been offered."[49] At least in 1 Thessalonians 4, then, it is clear that there is not a causal relationship between eschatological confusion and idle behavior.

Specifically regarding the passage in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12, McGarvey and Pendleton explain that, "The great body of commentators, including the ablest, attribute this idleness to the erroneous notion that the Lord was about to come; but there is no hint of this in the text.… Moreover, such expectations as to the Lord's coming have often been repeated in history, and have not been found to be very productive of idleness, and certainly not in that 'busybody' form which is here rebuked."[50] Green also states that "in the present text and the others that deal with this problem, the eschatological expectation is not addressed, and Paul does not imply that this is the source of their rejection of labor. Although this and the previous letter are deeply concerned with eschatology, the author does not link this teaching with the problem of labor. In fact, the discussion on labor in 3:6–15 is not even juxtaposed with the eschatological concerns addressed previously."[51]

---

[46] Martin, 274.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Malherbe, 253.
[49] Ibid., 252.
[50] McGarvey and Pendleton, 47.
[51] Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 341.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

Hiebert adds, "Only the doctrinal error concerning the day of the Lord receives a fuller treatment (2:1–12). There is no expressed connection between the doctrinal error and the disorderly conduct of certain members. The doctrinal error apparently did not produce the practical problem."[52] Along these same lines, Malherbe argues that "there is no connection made anywhere in the Thessalonian letters between eschatology and work or idleness. The latter objection to the eschatological interpretation especially carries weight with respect to 2 Thess 3:6–12. The traditional interpretation is that because of the Thessalonians' expectation of the imminent coming of Christ, they gave up working and sponged off others.… If there were a connection between eschatology and the unwillingness to work, 2 Thess 2:1–2 poses a problem, for the eschatological error mentioned there is not an imminent futuristic expectation, but an already realized eschatology."[53] It is clear, then, that the typical association between eschatological confusion and idle behavior is not directly supported by the text of the Thessalonian letters.

The Self-Proclaimed Authority of Some

Some have proposed that a small group of believers was exercising a self-appointed spiritual ministry within the Thessalonian church, and that they were claiming the right of support from the church as a result. "Ellis had suggested that the ataktoi were a small group of Christian workers who were living off the church rather than working at other jobs to supply their needs. If such were the case, it certainly would have been appropriate for Paul to cite his own example of self-support as evidence that his coworkers in Thessalonica should support themselves as he had (vv. 7–9). Such persons might be characterized as idle, but as we have already seen, disorderly or insubordinate probably would be a better characterization of the *ataktoi* than idle."[54] Bruce presents this view by saying that, "Ellis thinks of 'a group of Christian workers' as addressed not only here but in 2 Thess generally. So far as the present context is concerned, he points to vv 7–9, where the persons addressed 'are commanded to imitate Paul in one specific respect, that is, in forgoing the Christian worker's right to unqualified support,' and to v 10, where 'these persons are receiving financial support or, at least, communal meals.' "[55] Jewett also holds this view. "He maintains that Paul's argument in vv. 6–10 was directed toward the *ataktoi* whom he says may have claimed apostolic privilege for receiving support from the community."[56]

---

[52] Hiebert, 337–338.
[53] Malherbe, 455.
[54] Martin, 274–275.
[55] Bruce, 204.
[56] Wanamaker, 280.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

The question remains as to why certain Thessalonian believers would have attempted to claim the right of support from the church, and DeBoer explains several aspects of their behavior which may shed light on this question.

> The excitement of the disorderly brethren may very well have involved a grasping for positions of superiority and an assuming to give instruction and inspiration to the rest. In short, there is much to recommend the view that some of the Thessalonians had been infected with devious ideas about what constitutes true spirituality and a really mature Christian way. They had become enthusiasts and fanatics in spiritual matters, laying aside their ordinary earning of a living, and were devoting themselves to prophesying, edifying their fellow Christians, and ministering to the spiritual needs which, according to them, were being neglected. For this they expected to receive support from the congregation.[57]

This view gains support from the fact that some within the Thessalonian church were employing the spiritual gift of prophecy, and in his first letter the apostle Paul provided brief guidelines for the exercise and evaluation of such utterances. "Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil." (1 Thess. 5:19–22) Paul's treatment of the gift of prophecy here is certainly not as extensive as in his subsequent letter to the Corinthian church, but what must be recognized is that those exercising this prophetic gift would be seen as having a certain degree of authority even though they may not have been part of the official leadership of the church. Holmberg describes the situation in the following words:

> The prophets, glossolalists and miracle workers are persons who have received a "charismatic," supernatural endowment from God. But we cannot with certainty maintain that this entails the exercise of any concrete leadership within the church, except possibly in the common act of worship. Acknowledgement of their supernatural gifts does not necessarily make them leaders of the church. We observe that Paul sets limits to the exercise of prophecy during the act of worship (1 Cor 14:29–32), and, interestingly enough, the local prophecy is firmly placed under the apostle's authority (1 Cor 14:37–40). He does not seem to wish this charismatic endowment to be manifested in an extraordinary way of life, but exhorts all brothers "to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you" (1 Thess 4:11). 2 Thess 3:6–12 may be

[57] Willis Peter DeBoer, *The Imitation of Paul*. (Amsterdam: J. H. Kok N. V. Kampen, 1962), 133.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

> interpreted as a criticism of the kind of exercise of charismatic authority within the local church that demands payment of the other members.[58]

Donfried concurs when he declares that, "The author of this letter is critical of a 'charismatic authority' being exercised by some in the congregation who are claiming that because of their self-claimed authority they are to be supported by others in the congregation."[59]

By the time Paul wrote his second letter to the believers in Thessalonica, however, the prophetic utterances had gotten out of control and were causing confusion within the church. "Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." (2 Thess. 2:1–2) The majority of biblical commentators[60] take the term "spirit" here to refer to prophetic utterances delivered by individuals within the church, and that these individuals were claiming the authority of divine revelation for their proclamations. A few believers were speaking as if from God, but the content of their message was contrary to the tradition which Paul had given them concerning the second coming of Christ. These individuals had assumed a role which was more akin to that of the itinerant philosophers of that era. Malherbe explains this phenomenon of the first century:

> Meddlesomeness was a common notion, as were the other terms he uses in 1 Thess 4:11–12, in the society at large in Paul's day. Philosophers were frequently accused of being busybodies. They could claim that they had given up their professions in order to better serve humanity in their teaching, but the slur that they were busybodies meddling in other people's affairs was constantly hurled at them. The persistence of this criticism is evident from the defensiveness with which it was insisted that the genuine philosopher is not a busybody (e.g., Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.97; cf. 1.21; Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 21.2–3). Thus Paul uses a well-known term of opprobrium that was applied by his contemporaries to people who thought of themselves as representing higher values.[61]

Paul himself had made every effort to distance himself from such slurs. For example, when commenting on Paul's strong statement that he always worked at his trade when

---

[58] Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power*. (Lund: Studentlitteratur AB, 1978), 159.
[59] Karl Paul Donfried, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 63.
[60] For example, see Morris, Robertson (*Word Pictures*), and Vincent (*Word Studies*).
[61] Malherbe, 453.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

he was with the Thessalonians, Elias affirms that, "Paul and his coworkers may want to differentiate themselves from some itinerant philosophers who abuse their right to hospitality."[62] However, some members of the Thessalonian church were not maintaining this distinction but were emulating the pattern of the worldly philosophers.

Based on the descriptions given by the apostle Paul of the general situation in Thessalonica, as well as of the specific characteristics of the unruly believers, the view that they were assuming some self-appointed authority within the church does seem to fit the facts rather well. All seven characteristics of the unruly brothers which were outlined previously can be easily reconciled with this view, and it also seems to explain several aspects of the Thessalonian epistles which would otherwise remain disconnected. Again, however, since the apostle Paul does not provide explicit details of the situation, the biblical interpreter cannot be absolutely dogmatic about this issue. What is clear, however, is that assuming a connection between idleness and confusion over eschatology is by no means the only option for explaining the behavior of the unruly believers.

WHAT IS PAUL'S SOLUTION FOR DEALING WITH THIS *UNRULINESS*?

By the time Paul wrote his second letter to the Thessalonians, the unruly brothers had already been admonished by the members of the church and yet they still persisted in their error. In Paul's second letter he outlined a new course of action that was intended to bring an immediate end to this particular problem. His solution consisted of two parts:

1. Church members are to "keep away" from the unruly (2 Thess 3:6, 14) while continuing to admonish them, and

2. The unruly brothers are to stop their meddlesome behavior and return to earning their living at their own business (2 Thess 3:12).

Paul declared, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us" (2 Thess. 3:6). The term translated "keep away" is the Greek word *stellesqai* (present middle infinitive), which means "to remove one's self, to withdraw one's self, to depart."[63] In 2 Thess. 3:14 Paul elaborates on this command by saying, "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him." These brothers are to be clearly identified, and the members of the church are not to "mix themselves up" with those that are so marked. Paul is, in effect, saying, "Discontinue your support for these brethren; withdraw your

[62] Elias, 321.
[63] Thayer, 587.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297

resources from them." He is obviously *not* commanding the church to excommunicate them or never to talk to them again, because in 2 Thess. 3:15 he commands, "Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." The church is to continue to tell the unruly brothers why they are being cut off from fellowship and support.

The nature of Paul's solution to this problem certainly fits well with the interpretation that the unruly believers were assuming a self-appointed authority and claiming the right of support from the church. It is not as clear why Paul would recommend such a solution if the cause of the problem in Thessalonica involved an incorrect view of the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ at the resurrection of Church-age saints. He gives a specific solution for a particular problem, and it was not intended as a general solution to be applied to every problem within the church.

Conclusion

The present study has shown that the common view of 2 Thess. 3:6–12 is that the unruly believers had forsaken their normal livelihood in order to wait for the Rapture of the Church. This view, however, opens the doctrine of Premillennialism to undue criticism. After investigating the meaning of the atakt—word group, as well as the characteristics of the unruly brothers provided by the apostle Paul, several views of the cause for this unruliness were examined. It was concluded that the commonly held view was by no means demanded by the text, and in fact an alternative view of the unruly was a much better fit for these facts. It appears that Paul was dealing with a small group within the Thessalonian church who were exercising a self-appointed spiritual ministry and claiming the right of support from the church as a result. Paul's instructions to the church were intended to rectify this specific problem by cutting off support and forcing the unruly ones to return to their normal lifestyle. Because the apostle Paul did not provide an explicit statement of the cause for their unruliness, no sincere biblical expositor can be absolutely dogmatic about the issue. It is clear, in any case, that the doctrine of Premillennialism can be freed from unjust criticism on this point. A proper view of 2 Thess. 3:6–12 (and related passages) provides *no* basis for asserting that Premillennialism leads to idleness.[64]

[64] Lewis, S. (2006). "Does Pretribulationism Lead to Idleness? A Consideration of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–12." *Journal of Dispensational Theology Volume 10*, *10*(30), 33–53.

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297