

CHURCH DISCIPLINE:  
THE CORRECTION OF A BELIEVER  
OR THE EXCOMMUNICATION  
OF AN UNBELIEVER?  
HARMONIZING MATTHEW 18:15–17,  
1 CORINTHIANS 5:1–13, AND  
2 THESSALONIANS 3:6–15

by  
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INTRODUCTION

Within the larger discussion on church discipline, two questions that go to the heart of the issue continue to resist consensus. The *first* question concerns the spiritual status of those being disciplined. Are they to be viewed by the church as true believers caught up in some transgression and, thus, to be corrected and restored? Or, are they to be viewed as those who have made a profession of faith but who are, in fact, not saved and who need to be confronted and removed? Or, does the New Testament allow for either of these two options, depending on the nature of the disobedience?

The *second* question, related to the first, addresses the type of discipline meted out to the disobedient. Does church discipline invariably involve excommunication, that is, the removal of the disobedient from the membership of the local church with a loss of all rights and privileges? In other words, does the New Testament teach that excommunication is the only option when exercising church discipline of the unrepentant? Or, does the New Testament allow for a level of church discipline that stops short of that? And, if that be the case, what does this level look like?

The initial step in answering these questions is to provide a fresh reading of the New Testament texts that directly deal with church discipline. Specifically in view are Matthew 18:15–17, 1 Corinthians 5:1–13, and 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15. These texts are selected because they provide a description of those who are to be disciplined and they reveal something of the nature and rationale for the discipline the church is to follow.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Other texts in the New Testament that address church discipline are discussed to

After this, the information provided by a fresh reading of the key texts is applied to the above questions to arrive at a biblical paradigm for church discipline. In particular, the information from the key texts is used to determine: (1) the spiritual status of the disobedient, (2) the nature and purpose of church discipline, and (3) the number of steps involved.<sup>3</sup>

## KEY TEXTS

### Matthew 18:15–17

<sup>15</sup>“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.

<sup>16</sup>But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. <sup>17</sup>If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”<sup>4</sup>

### Literary Context

Matthew structures the body of his gospel around six of the Lord’s discourses, with a record of the Lord’s birth and an account of his death and resurrection serving respectively as the introduction and the apex/conclusion to the gospel.<sup>5</sup> Each of the six discourses is prefaced by a narrative sequence that sets the stage for the discourse that follows. The above passage is part of Matthew’s fourth discourse, 13:53–18:35, where the Lord instructs his followers on the nature and responsibilities of discipleship within the community. The narrative sequence preceding the fourth discourse extends from 13:53 to 17:27, with the discourse taking up all of chapter 18.<sup>6</sup>

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the extent they contribute to an understanding of the key texts.

<sup>3</sup>This essay has been revised and updated from its earlier presentation at the 64th annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Milwaukee, WI, 14 November 2012.

<sup>4</sup>All Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 edition, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup>The consensus among interpreters is to see the body of Matthew’s gospel structured around five discourses, based on the statement “when Jesus had finished these words,” at the end of each discourse (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). See, for example, D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 134–39. Dividing the body of Matthew’s gospel into six discourses separates the Lord’s condemnation of the Pharisees in chapter 23 from his presentation of events surrounding the Second Advent in chapters 24–25, a division based principally on thematic grounds. See the discussion in W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988–97), 1:61, and esp. note 31.

<sup>6</sup>Davies and Allison, *Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 2:451.

The passage on church discipline, 18:15–17, follows the Lord’s warning about the consequences of causing one of his “little ones” or followers to sin (18:5–9) and the parable of the lost sheep (18:10–14). It precedes the Lord’s teaching on forgiveness (18:21–22) and the parable of the unmerciful servant (18:23–35). Starting at the beginning of the chapter, the sequence in the discourse appears straightforward.<sup>7</sup> Prompted by the disciples’ question about greatness in the coming kingdom, the Lord begins by stressing the need for childlike humility and trust as the characteristics of a true disciple and as the gateway to greatness (18:1–4).

He then warns all of the seriousness of sin and, in particular, of any sin that would cause one of his “little ones” or followers to stumble and fall away (18:5–10).<sup>8</sup> Next, the parable of the lost sheep reinforces how valuable each of the Lord’s followers is (18:12–14). His disciples must do nothing that would harm another follower and must do everything to see that none of these “little ones” is lost. Hand in hand with seeing that none of his “little ones” is lost is the responsibility his disciples have in helping to restore those who have fallen into sin (18:15a).

It is unclear whether the Lord has in mind any sin committed by a disciple or, specifically, a sin against a fellow disciple. A number of manuscripts include the phrase “against you” in 18:15, identifying the sin as against a fellow disciple. Some older manuscripts, however, omit the phrase, making the sin open-ended.<sup>9</sup> Assuming for the moment that the sin in view is against a fellow disciple, the Lord’s directives are sufficiently generic that they can apply to any sin committed by one of his followers.<sup>10</sup>

After stating the responsibility a disciple has in seeking to restore a fellow disciple caught up in sin, the Lord spells out the procedure to be

<sup>7</sup>On the structure and coherence of the fourth discourse, see David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 431–32.

<sup>8</sup>The textual evidence suggests that 18:11 is not original and appears to have been borrowed from Luke 19:10 to provide a link between 18:10 and 18:12. See Barbara Aland, et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 5th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014), 66; the comments in Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 36; and Roger L. Omanson, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 29.

<sup>9</sup>Aland, *Greek New Testament*, 67; Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 36; and Omanson, *Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament*, 29. In the parallel passage in Luke 17:3–4, the evidence tilts in favor of including the prepositional phrase “against you.” While the phrase is omitted in the Lord’s initial statement about forgiveness in Luke 17:3 (though found in a textual variant), it is included in the Lord’s expansion of his statement in 17:4.

<sup>10</sup>According to Gal 6:1, “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one,” the responsibility to restore an errant disciple extends to “any trespass” committed by “any” disciple. See J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1985), 49.

followed (18:15b–17) and highlights the authority of the congregation in disciplining its members (18:18–20).<sup>11</sup> The Lord then concludes the discourse with the parable of the unmerciful servant (18:21–35). The parable emphasizes the importance of showing mercy in helping the errant and in forgiving those who repent. In all of these responsibilities, humility is essential and the pathway to greatness is made clear.<sup>12</sup>

Focusing on 18:15–17, part of the directives the Lord gives on restoring an errant disciple includes action taken by the congregation or “church.” In that this is one of only two passages in the Gospels where of the word “church” is used, there is a question over its meaning. Within its semantic range, the expression can refer generally to any gathering or assembly of the Lord’s disciples. Or it can refer more specifically to an assembly of his disciples as part of the new metaphorical or mystical body of Christ that began on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2.<sup>13</sup> The only other use of “church” in the Gospels is found in Matthew 16:18, where Matthew cites the Lord’s promise, “I will build my church.”<sup>14</sup>

Outside of the two passages in Matthew, the word “church” is regularly found in Acts and the epistles, where it most often refers either collectively to the aggregate number of disciples representing this new universal community or body of Christ or, more frequently, to local congregations as visible expressions of Christ’s universal body.<sup>15</sup> Based

<sup>11</sup>Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 180–81; Thomas R. Schreiner, “The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline,” in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 109–13.

<sup>12</sup>Similarly, Larry Chouinard, *Matthew*, College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin: College Press, 1997), 321–22, “the character of the new community must be defined and shaped by the character of Jesus, who humbly and sacrificially gives himself up for the welfare of others” (322).

<sup>13</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM, 1970), 38–54; Earl D. Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church* (Portland: Western Baptist Press, 1972), 193–220; Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 57–68; Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 29–32, 61–64, 78–82. As Dunn concludes, “We can therefore say that Pentecost is the beginning of the Church and the coming into existence of the Church as the Body of Christ” (*Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 51). For further support and documentation, see R. Bruce Compton, “Water Baptism and the Forgiveness of Sins in Acts 2:38,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 4 (Fall 1999): 21–25.

<sup>14</sup>See W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 195. Their oft-quoted dictum on the authenticity of this promise coming from the lips of Jesus bears repeating, “A Messiah without a Messianic Community would have been unthinkable to any Jew.” See also Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 252–53.

<sup>15</sup>*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (hereafter *NIDNTT*), s.v. “Body,” by S. Wibbing, 1:236–38; s.v. “Church, Synagogue,” by L. Coenen, 1:291–307; *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (hereafter *NIDNTE*), s.v. “ἐκκλησία,” 2:138–41; BDAG, 303–4. See also John S.

on the future tense of the Lord's promise in Matthew 16:18 and on the meaning of "church" throughout Acts and the epistles, the expression "church" in 16:18 is best understood to refer collectively to those disciples forming this new community, with the emphasis on its universal aspect.<sup>16</sup>

In that Matthew 18:17 is the only other use of the word "church" in the Gospels, and since it follows the initial use in Matthew 16:18, the word is taken in a similar sense. In this case, the context in 18:17 has in view a group of the Lord's disciples gathered together to hear and respond to charges against one of its members. As such, the expression in 18:17 refers to any congregation of the Lord's disciples functioning as a local assembly of the body of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

The procedure his disciples are to follow in addressing a "brother" or fellow disciple caught up in sin involves several steps. The first step is for a disciple who observes the sin to go alone to the one sinning and reprove or "show" him his sin.<sup>18</sup> Reproof, in this context, means the disciple is to confront the one sinning about his sin and seek to bring the errant to conviction and repentance.<sup>19</sup> If that fails, the second step directs the individual to enlist two or three witness to assist him in restoring the sinning disciple.<sup>20</sup>

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Hammett, "Church Membership, Church Discipline, and the Nature of the Church," in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 11–13.

<sup>16</sup>Similarly, R. T. France, *Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 622–624; Turner, *Matthew*, 404. On the force of the future tense, see *NIDNTT*, "Church," 1:302–3. Coenen argues, "There is a good deal in favour of the view that the fut. ['I will build my church'] refers to the period after Jesus's death, and very little in favour of [the] idea of the foundation of a church before this. It is clearly impossible to interpret this saying in Matt. as meaning that Jesus spoke of a church coming into being at that moment.... For Luke the period of the church is a particular segment of salvation history between the resurrection and the Parousia. This follows directly from the use he makes of the word. While *ekklēsia* is completely absent from his gospel, he uses the term in Acts 16 times." See also *NIDNTTE*, "ἐκκλησία," 2:142.

<sup>17</sup>Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 468; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 691; Turner, *Matthew*, 404; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 686.

<sup>18</sup>Μεταξὺ σοῦ καὶ αὐτοῦ μόνου (lit., "between you and him alone"); BDAG, 641.

<sup>19</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (hereafter *TDNT*), s.v. "ἐλέγχω," by F. Büchsel, 2:473–76; *NIDNTT*, s.v. "ἐλέγχω," by H.-G. Link, 2:141–42; *NIDNTTE*, s.v. "ἐλέγχω," 2:166; BDAG, 315.

<sup>20</sup>It is unclear whether the witnesses are other eyewitnesses to the sin or simply those who can support and document the effort to correct the one sinning. See the discussions in Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew*, 2 vols., Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1993–95), 2:531–32 (not eyewitnesses) and John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament

If this step fails, the third step directs the individual to bring the matter before the church. Finally, if the one sinning does not listen to the church, the church is to regard the errant as a Gentile and a tax collector. Implicit in each of these steps is the understanding that, were the errant to repent, he or she is to be forgiven and restored and the process terminated.<sup>21</sup>

### The Spiritual Status of the Disobedient

In 18:15 Jesus uses the term *brother* to describe the one sinning. The expression can be found in the Gospels in a literal sense of one who shares a common parentage (Matt 4:18) or ancestry (Matt 5:22). It can also be found in a metaphorical sense of one who shares a common set of beliefs as a member of the Christian community, hence, a follower of Jesus who is part of God's household or family (Matt 12:50).<sup>22</sup> In the context of Matthew 18:15, the expression "brother" describes one who is a member of a local church or congregation.<sup>23</sup> His spiritual status as a "brother" or fellow believer is assumed by virtue of his membership in the church.

The tension with the designation "brother" to describe the one sinning surfaces at the end of the final step in 18:17. Jesus states that, if the individual fails to heed the church, the church is to treat him as a "Gentile and a tax collector." Like the term "brother," the expression "Gentile" can have either a literal or a metaphorical sense. It is used twice in the Gospels, for example, in a literal sense to refer to the nations collectively, in contrast to Israel (Matt 5:47; 6:7). But it is also found in the New Testament in a metaphorical sense to describe those outside a specific community and, in particular, those outside the community of

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Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 746–47 (eyewitnesses). For biblical and extra-biblical parallels, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, Hermenia, trans. James E. Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 451–55; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 453–54.

<sup>21</sup>The subsequent steps are only to be implemented if the previous step has failed. Note the use of the expression "if he does not listen" in 18:16 and 18:17, qualifying the subsequent steps on the condition that the preceding step has not produced the appropriate response. To "listen" in this context means to respond properly to the correction, viz. to repent (cf. Luke 17:3); to "not listen" means to fail to respond properly. See *TDNT*, s.v. "ἀκούω," by G. Kittel, 1:219–220, 223; *NIDNTT*, s.v. "Hear, Obey," by W. Mundle, 2:175–78; *NIDNTTE*, s.v. "ἀκούω," 1:209–12; BDAG, 38, 767.

<sup>22</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. "ἀδελφός," by H. F. von Sodon, 1:144–46; *NIDNTT*, s.v. "Brother, Neighbor, Friend," by W. Günther, 1:256–58; *NIDNTTE*, s.v. "ἀδελφός," 1:149–52; BDAG, 18.

<sup>23</sup>See the discussion in Benjamin L. Merkle, "The Biblical Basis for Church Membership," in *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline*, ed. John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 40–43.

believers (3 John 7).<sup>24</sup>

In that Jesus is speaking to his disciples, all of whom are Jews, his directive that the unrepentant be treated as a Gentile means treating him as one who is outside the community of his disciples or fellow believers and, thus, to treat him as an unbeliever.<sup>25</sup> The expression “tax collector” simply reinforces this designation. The term is used in the Gospels to refer to Jews who were employed by the Roman government to collect various imperial taxes from their fellow Jews.

In addition to their having regular contact with Gentiles, these often abused their office and, driven by greed, overtaxed their fellow countrymen for their own profit. Consequently, they were viewed by the Jewish community as conspicuous sinners to be shunned and avoided.<sup>26</sup> The combined rubric “tax collectors and sinners” captures this sentiment. The combination is found throughout the Gospels to describe those who are despicable and who are ostracized from the Jewish community (e.g., Matt 11:19).<sup>27</sup>

So, what is the spiritual status of this individual? Is he a believer or an unbeliever? Assuming the perseverance and preservation of true believers in salvation, the best way to view this individual is as someone who has made a profession of faith and is a member of a local congregation. As such, it is assumed that he is a “brother” or true believer. However, his resistance to correction and his refusal to listen to the church and repent brings that assumption into question. His persistent disobedience and his failure to repent are the characteristics of an unbeliever, not a believer (1 John 1:8–10; 3:4–10).<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the church is to view him at this juncture as an unbeliever.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup>The adjective ἔθνικός is used four times in the NT, always as a substantive (*TDNT*, s.v. “ἔθνος, ἔθνικός,” by K. L. Schmidt, 2:372; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “ἔθνος,” by H. Bietenhard, 2:795; *NIDNTTE*, s.v. “ἔθνος,” 2:91–92; BDAG, 276).

<sup>25</sup>See, among others, Hagner, *Matthew*, 532; Osborne, *Matthew*, 687.

<sup>26</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. “τελώνης,” by O. Michel, 8:88–105; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “Tax Collector,” by N. Hillyer, 3:751–59; *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, s.v. “Taxation, Jewish,” by T. E. Schmidt, 1163–66; *NIDNTTE*, s.v. “τελώνης,” 4:481–84; BDAG, 999.

<sup>27</sup>The expression “as a Gentile and tax collector” introduces a comparative clause describing the way in which the unrepentant sinner is to be treated (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 675; BDAG, 1106–7). The comparison can be one of similarity (Matt 24:27), treat him in a similar way as an unbeliever is treated. Or, the comparison can be one of identity (Matt 24:37), treat him in the same way an unbeliever is treated. In the present context, the comparison is one of identity. The response of the unrepentant man is consistent with that of an unbeliever and he is to be treated as such. See Blomberg, *Matthew*, 279.

<sup>28</sup>R. Bruce Compton, “Can a Christian Sin unto Death? Perseverance and 1 John 5:16” (paper presented at the 62nd annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, GA, 18 November 2010, 1–14).

<sup>29</sup>One who professes faith in Christ but who does not follow the Lord’s

Furthermore, to treat the unrepentant man as a Gentile and tax collector is tantamount to excommunication.<sup>30</sup> As mentioned above, a “Gentile” refers metaphorically to an unbeliever, and a tax collector depicts one who is to be shunned and avoided. Although the “you” in the expression “let him be to you” in 18:17 is singular, the response of the one who has initiated the process must also be the response of the congregation.<sup>31</sup> This is supported by the fact that the Lord transitions seamlessly from the singular “you” in 18:17 to the plural “you” in 18:18–20 in describing the authority of the local church in such matters.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the unrepentant are to be treated by the congregation as an outsider and, therefore, excluded from all the rights and privileges of membership.

### 1 Corinthians 5:1–13

<sup>1</sup>It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife. <sup>2</sup>You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

<sup>3</sup>For I, on my part, though absent in body put present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. <sup>4</sup>In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup>*I have decided* to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

<sup>6</sup>Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of *dough*? <sup>7</sup>Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. <sup>8</sup>Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

<sup>9</sup>I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people;

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commandments and refuses to repent over sin gives evidence of being a false brother (NIDNTT, s.v. “Brother,” 1:257; Morris, *Gospel According to Matthew*, 469; Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 748).

<sup>30</sup>Blomberg, *Matthew*, 279; Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 454; D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in vol. 9 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 456; Osborne, *Matthew*, 686–87. Contra, among others, France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 693–94, who, based on the singular “let him be to you,” limits the directive to the individual who initiated the process and restricts the action to personal ostracism rather than formal excommunication.

<sup>31</sup>Davies and Allison, *Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 2:785; Carson, “Matthew,” 456–57; Osborne, *Matthew*, 687.

<sup>32</sup>Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 368.

<sup>10</sup>I *did* not at all *mean* with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. <sup>11</sup>But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. <sup>12</sup>For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within *the church*? <sup>13</sup>But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.

### Literary Context

The second key text on church discipline is found in Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church recorded in 1 Corinthians 5:1–13. The body of the letter (1:10–16:12) comes after an epistolary introduction (1:1–9) and is followed by an epistolary conclusion (16:13–24). The body itself can be conveniently divided into two halves. In the first half (1:10–6:20), Paul responds to problems that have developed within the Corinthian church and that have been reported to the apostle by others (1:11; 5:1; 16:17). In the second half (7:1–16:12), Paul addresses questions over doctrine and practice that the Corinthians have raised in a letter previously sent to him.<sup>33</sup>

The above passage is located in the first half, where Paul addresses problems within the Corinthian congregation. The verses record Paul's directives in response to a case of incest involving a member of the congregation, a sin that was being tolerated or even condoned by the church.<sup>34</sup> The passage contributes directly to the present discussion in that it provides information on the spiritual status of the disobedient and, at the same time, on the nature and purpose of the discipline the church is to exercise.

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<sup>33</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 21–23; similarly, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 56–58; William Baker, "1 Corinthians," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2009), 12–13. Another popular option is to see Paul structuring the body of the letter around key themes and alternating between responses to oral reports brought to him by others and answers to the previous letter from the Corinthian congregation (David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 20–23; Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, New American Commentary [Nashville: B&H, 2014], 21–31). With either structuring, the passage is placed within Paul's response to oral reports (5:1). For a rhetorical analysis, see Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 73–77.

<sup>34</sup>For discussion on the readers' complicity in the problem, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 388–90; Craig S. Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 48–49.

The structure of the passage is fairly straightforward. Paul begins by describing the problem and his dismay over the fact that the church has not taken action (5:1–2). He then gives his judgment on the situation and what the church as a whole needs to do to discipline the disobedient (5:3–5). Following this, he supports his judgment and the actions to be taken by drawing an analogy with the Old Testament Passover celebration and the removal of leaven as part of that celebration. In the analogy, Paul uses leaven as a metaphor for sin and directs the Corinthian readers to remove the leaven from their congregation (5:6–8). Paul then concludes the passage by linking his directives regarding the disobedient to a previous letter he had written to the church. In the previous letter, Paul had called for the readers not to associate with those members who were living in this kind of sin (5:9–13).<sup>35</sup>

### The Spiritual Status of the Disobedient

It is clear from the overall context that the individual to be disciplined, the incestuous man, is a member of the Corinthian church. Paul describes him in 5:1 as “among” the readers and in 5:2 as in their “midst.”<sup>36</sup> In addition, addressing the readers’ responsibility in disciplining this individual, Paul establishes the point in 5:12 that they are to judge not those who are “outside” but those who are “inside,” that is, those who are inside the church.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the evidence indicates that this individual had at one time made a profession of faith and had become a member of the Corinthian congregation.

In addition, Paul places this individual in the status of one who is called a “brother” or fellow believer. In support of his directives against the disobedient, Paul calls the readers’ attention in 5:11 to a former letter he had written to them.<sup>38</sup> In that letter, Paul had instructed the

<sup>35</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 215, and, similarly, Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 232. On the development of Paul’s argument in this chapter, see John Paul Heil, *The Rhetorical Role of Scripture in 1 Corinthians*, Studies in Biblical Literature (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 92–99.

<sup>36</sup>The prepositional phrase ἐκ μέσου ὑμῶν refers to a position within a group (BDAG, 635).

<sup>37</sup>The combination of the article plus the adverb of place τοὺς ἔσω describes those within a particular group, here of those within the Christian community (Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, 51; Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 233, 244; Merkle, “The Biblical Basis for Church Membership,” 42–43; BDAG, 398).

<sup>38</sup>The consensus among interpreters takes the aorist indicative “ἔγραψα” in 5:9 as a preterit, pointing to a previous letter the apostle had sent to the Corinthians that is no longer extant. The debate is over the force of the aorist indicative “ἔγραψα” and the adverbial modifier “νῦν” in 5:11. Some interpret the adverbial modifier in 5:11 as a logical marker and take the aorist “I wrote” as another preterit, parallel to the preterit in 5:9 (NASB). As such, Paul continues in 5:11 the discussion of his previous letter he introduced in 5:9 (see, for example, Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 187). Others take the adverbial modifier in 5:11 as a temporal marker and see the aorist as an epistolary aorist (ESV). In this case, Paul transitions from discussing his previous letter in 5:9 to his

Corinthian congregation to take action against anyone who is “called a brother” (NIV) and who is engaged in immorality or some other serious sin. Thus, to be called a “brother” means that the one sinning is viewed by the congregation as a fellow believer, a fellow member of God’s household or family.<sup>39</sup>

However, Paul makes other statements in the passage that raise questions about the status of this individual. The first is the description of the sin. In 5:1 Paul declares that this sin is one that is not found even among unbelievers. Paul’s point is that even unbelievers recognize and roundly condemn incest as a heinous sin.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Paul in this same verse refers to this sin by the statement, “he has his father’s wife.” The expression “he has,” when used of a marital or sexual relationship and in the present tense as here, is a common idiom for an ongoing relationship, not just a momentary one.<sup>41</sup>

The tension comes in harmonizing the description of this individual as one who is called a brother and is a member of the Corinthian congregation with the fact that he is involved in flagrant immorality that is persistent or ongoing. Again, assuming the perseverance of the saints in sanctification,<sup>42</sup> in what way is this individual persevering in the faith and in faithfulness to God and his word? How can the life of this individual not fall under the opprobrium of one who is “characterized by sin” or who is “practicing sin”? Both phrases are used elsewhere in Scripture to describe the conduct of unbelievers.<sup>43</sup>

present letter in 5:11, clarifying comments he made in his previous letter (see, for example, Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., 241–45). In either case, the issues discussed here are not materially affected.

<sup>39</sup>The construction ὀνομαζόμενος is taken as a passive, “is named,” or “is called,” which suggests that “brother” is a name given this individual by others, specifically by other members of the Corinthian congregation (BDAG, 714).

<sup>40</sup>See the discussion in Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 156–59, 181–82, and the cross references to Rabbinic and Roman literature in Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), 209–10; Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 231–35. On the parallels between Paul’s directives against the incestuous man and Roman law, see Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 44–52.

<sup>41</sup>The construction with the present tense is used in the NT to describe a marriage relationship (Mark 6:18) or an ongoing sexual relationship outside of marriage (John 4:18). See Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 132–33. The expression “father’s wife” is employed in the LXX to refer to one’s step-mother (Lev 18:8; 20:11; Deut 27:20). Thus, interpreters generally agree that the woman is the man’s step-mother, but are divided whether or not the relationship involves marriage. See Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 104; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 157–58.

<sup>42</sup>Paul’s description of the believer’s sanctification in 2 Cor 3:18 depicts a process that is both ongoing and progressive, that is, increasing in Christ-likeness. See the discussion in Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 313–18.

<sup>43</sup>E.g., 1 John 3:4–10.

The best way to view this individual is that he is someone who has made a profession of faith and is a member of the Corinthian congregation. As such, it is assumed by the Corinthians that he is a “brother” or true believer, at least initially. This is consistent with Paul’s placing him in the category of one who is “called” a brother. However, his persisting in egregious immorality brings that assumption into question. His continuing in an ongoing incestuous relationship and his failure to repent are the characteristics of an unbeliever, not of a believer. Consequently, his gross, protracted disobedience means he is now to be viewed as an unbeliever. As will be argued below, Paul’s call for the church to expel this individual supports this conclusion.<sup>44</sup>

### The Nature and Purpose of the Discipline

The action the church is to take against this individual is nothing short of excommunication.<sup>45</sup> In 5:2 Paul chastises the readers by stating that the one sinning should have been “removed” or “expelled” from their midst.<sup>46</sup> In 5:7 Paul directs the congregation to “clean out” the old leaven, a reference to the readers’ removing the incestuous man from their membership.<sup>47</sup> And, in 5:13 Paul cites Deuteronomy 17:7 to the effect that the readers are to “remove” the wicked man from among them.<sup>48</sup>

Added to this is Paul’s instruction in 5:11 where he refers to his previous letter, reminding the readers that they were not to “associate” with such sinners, not even “to eat” with such.<sup>49</sup> Thus, Paul’s intent is

<sup>44</sup>Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 173–77; Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 244–45. Commenting on 5:13 and Paul’s injunction to the Corinthians to remove the wicked man, Fitzmyer writes, “Paul’s final instruction is thus similar to the punishment of Roman law, which made use of *relegatio* [a form of banishment]. For the wrongdoer no longer belongs to the body of those who are being saved, but to those who are perishing.” On the OT antecedents to Paul’s directives, see Brian S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5–7*, Biblical Studies Library (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 61–93.

<sup>45</sup>Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 238; Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 197–98.

<sup>46</sup>BDAG, 29.

<sup>47</sup>BDAG, 303. So Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 178–81; Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, 50–51; Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 241.

<sup>48</sup>A compound form of the verb in 5:2 (*NIDNTTE*, s.v. “ἀίρω,” 1:178; BDAG, 344).

<sup>49</sup>It is unclear what Paul intended by the expression “not to eat.” Paul could be referring to church-related activities and, specifically, to the Lord’s Supper and to the fellowship meal observed in connection with the Lord’s Supper. Or, he could be referring to table fellowship outside the activities of the Corinthian church. Deciding between the two options is difficult. Fortunately, the question does not materially affect the present discussion. See Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., 247; and Ciampa and Rosner, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 218–19.

clear. He cites his previous instruction because of its application to the present situation. The readers are to regard the incestuous man as an unbeliever, expel him from membership in the church, and restrict their contact with him to efforts to bring him to repentance.<sup>50</sup>

Lastly, Paul's declaration in 5:5 about turning the incestuous man over to Satan is consistent with the above conclusions. The expression "to give" someone "over" to someone has an established metaphorical use of giving someone over to the realm or authority of another.<sup>51</sup> The only other use of this particular combination, "give [someone] over to Satan," is found in 1 Timothy 1:20, where it has a similar meaning.<sup>52</sup> In both passages, the idea is that of placing someone in the realm and under the authority of Satan.<sup>53</sup> From the larger context, Satan's realm refers to his dominion over the present fallen world of lost sinners (John 12:31; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2).<sup>54</sup>

Paul, in effect, sees two realms or spheres of existence in this verse. There is the sphere of the church and there is the sphere of the world. Therefore, to deliver someone over to Satan means to remove that person from the sphere and protection of the local church, in which the Spirit lives and works (Eph 2:22). And, by doing that, the person is placed back into the community of lost humanity, where Satan exercises power and control.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the expression "to deliver such a one to Satan" is simply another way of saying that the church is to excommunicate the incestuous man.<sup>56</sup>

The one remaining tension with viewing the incestuous man as an unbeliever is Paul's statement in 5:5 about the purpose or goal of handing this individual over to Satan. Paul declares that his decision to

<sup>50</sup>Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 177. Garland notes, "As one who is cast out, the man becomes an outsider (5:12) and is to be treated differently by 'insiders.' He is not to be admonished, as one would a fellow Christian, but evangelized, as one would an unbeliever."

<sup>51</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. "παράδιδωμι," by F. Büchsel, 2:169–70; *NIDNTT*, s.v. "παράδιδωμι," by H. Beck, 2:367–68; *NIDNTE*, s.v. "παράδιδωμι," 3:623–24; BDAG, 762.

<sup>52</sup>William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 68–70; Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 160–62.

<sup>53</sup>Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., 228–29; Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 237–38.

<sup>54</sup>Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying in and Falling Away* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 118; Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., 233.

<sup>55</sup>Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance*, 118; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 169–73.

<sup>56</sup>Ciampa and Rosner, conclude similarly, "In other words, v. 5 states metaphorically what Paul says literally in vv. 2 and 13: the man is to be excluded from the community of faith" (*First Letter to the Corinthians*, 208).

deliver this individual to Satan is designed specifically “for the destruction of the flesh so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>57</sup>

Based on Paul’s “flesh-spirit” antithesis, the initial expression “destruction of the flesh” refers metaphorically to putting to death the sinful inclinations that are dominating the individual.<sup>58</sup> In short, Paul calls on the readers to expel the incestuous man from the church and to expose him to the hardships of Satan’s rule and activity. Paul’s intent is that through Satan’s attacks and the shame of public censure, the incestuous man will be led to renounce his sinful ways. That Satan is the unwitting foil in all of this is consistent with God’s sovereign control over all that Satan does.<sup>59</sup>

The second expression “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” identifies the purpose or goal of delivering this individual to Satan.<sup>60</sup> Again, based on Paul’s “flesh-spirit” antithesis, “spirit” has in view the whole person as oriented toward God.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Paul’s common use of “saved” to refer to salvation from sin fits the context.<sup>62</sup> And, the expression “the day of the Lord”<sup>63</sup> is consistently used in

<sup>57</sup>There is debate whether the expression, “the destruction of the flesh,” represents the intended result or the initial goal of delivering this individual to Satan. For example, Fee, argues for result (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., 230), while Garland opts for purpose (*1 Corinthians*, 169). Fee’s argument is that when Paul employs sequential purpose clauses, he does so with paired constructions, not by a prepositional phrase followed by a final clause as here. Fee’s point is well-taken, though as Garland notes it is difficult to distinguish purpose and result in this context. Fortunately, the choice between the two does not materially affect the issues discussed here.

<sup>58</sup>The debate with the interpretation of this expression is roughly between taking it as a reference to the physical death of this individual and taking it as a reference to the metaphorical destruction of his sinful desires. The consensus among recent commentaries is for the second interpretation. See, for example, the discussions in Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., 229–34; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 169–77; Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 207–9; contra *TDNT*, s.v. “ὄλεθρος,” by J. Schneider, 5:168–69; BDAG, 702. For a history of interpretation, see David Raymond Smith, *‘Hand this Man over to Satan’: Curse, Exclusion, and Salvation in 1 Corinthians 5* (London: T & T Clark, 2008). Smith opts for taking Paul’s statement as a curse formula that ultimately involves the death of the incestuous man.

<sup>59</sup>James T. South, “A Critique of the ‘Curse/Death’ Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 5.1–8,” *New Testament Studies* 39 (October 1993): 539–61; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 169–77; Ciampa and Rosner, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 208–9.

<sup>60</sup>Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., 230.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 233. See also *TDNT*, s.v. “πνεῦμα,” by E. Schweizer, 6:434–36.

<sup>62</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. “σῶζω,” by W. Foerster, 7:992–94; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “σῶζω,” by J. Schneider, 3:214; *NIDNTTE*, s.v. “σῶζω,” 4:431; BDAG, 982–83.

<sup>63</sup>On the textual variants, whether to read “the day of the Lord,” “the day of the Lord Jesus,” “the day of the Lord Jesus Christ,” or “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ,” the shortest reading “the day of the Lord” has good external evidence and the longer readings appear to be scribal additions influenced by the use of the phrase elsewhere in Paul’s writings. See Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 485.

the New Testament to refer to the eschatological “Day of the Lord” in harmony with how the Old Testament Prophets used the expression.<sup>64</sup> Thus, Paul’s goal in all of this appears to be the final salvation of this individual and, specifically, his glorification at the judgment seat of Christ in connection with the future Day of the Lord.<sup>65</sup>

The tension comes in harmonizing the readers’ viewing the incestuous man as an unbeliever in the action they are to take and Paul’s statement that the purpose of the action is his final salvation. In other words, how can Paul instruct the Corinthians to view the unrepentant man as an unbeliever and, at the same time, speak of his final salvation? Does not Paul’s hope for this man’s ultimate salvation indicate that he is, after all, a true brother in Christ?

Without question, Paul’s statement about the purpose of the church’s action indicates that the action is intended to be remedial or redemptive. Paul intends the action to have as its goal the future salvation of this person. But this fact alone does not require that the incestuous man be viewed as a true believer. Paul’s purpose statement, “that his spirit may be saved,” involves an element of contingency. Before Paul’s purpose for this individual can be realized, there is a contingency or condition that must be met. And, the contingency implicit in Paul’s statement is that the incestuous man must first repent of his sin. The converse is that, were he not to repent, he would not be saved.<sup>66</sup>

In sum, the actions of the incestuous man bring into question his profession of faith. While he professes to be a believer and is a member of the Corinthian congregation, his actions are in fundamental conflict with his profession. His flagrant, unrepentant immorality is the characteristic of an unbeliever, not a believer. As such, the church is to treat him as an unbeliever and expel him from membership. Yet, this action is remedial, designed to bring him to repentance. Were he to repent following his expulsion, he would show that he is a true believer and the intended purpose or goal of the action would be achieved. However, if he were not to repent, he would show that he is not a true believer and

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<sup>64</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. “ἡμέρα,” by G. von Rad, 2:944–47; *TDNT*, s.v. “ἡμέρα,” by G. Delling, 2:950–53; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “ἡμέρα,” by C. Brown, 2:890–91. In the immediate context, the “day of the Lord” has in view the evaluation of the believer’s works and the issuing of rewards at the judgment seat of Christ. See Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 45, 107–8, 115, 137. From the larger context, this future Day of the Lord encompasses events following the Rapture of the Church (2 Thess 2:3) and includes the judgment seat of Christ in heaven (1 Cor 1:8), the Day of the Lord judgments on the earth (1 Thess 5:2), the millennial kingdom, and the destruction of the present heavens and earth in preparation for the new heavens and earth of the eternal state (2 Pet 3:10).

<sup>65</sup>Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 177.

<sup>66</sup>Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance*, 116, 119–20; similarly, Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpreter’s Bible Commentary (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 84–86; Baker, “1 Corinthians,” 80–81, 84; Ciampa and Rosner, *First Letter to the Corinthians*, 209. On the relationship between the incestuous man in this passage and the repentant individual in 2 Cor 2:5–11, see the discussion in David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 117–23.

the intended goal would not be achieved.

## 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15

<sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, <sup>8</sup>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; <sup>9</sup>not because we do not have the right *to do this*, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. <sup>12</sup>Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. <sup>13</sup>But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.

<sup>14</sup>If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. <sup>15</sup>*Yet*, do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

### Literary Context

The last key text on church discipline is found in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. Paul begins the letter with an epistolary introduction (1:1–12), continues with the body of the letter (2:1–3:15), and ends with an epistolary conclusion (3:16–18).<sup>67</sup> The body itself is roughly divided into two sections. The first, 2:1–17, essentially corrects the readers' misunderstanding regarding end-time events and, in particular, whether the readers were experiencing the onset of the Day of the Lord. The second section, 3:1–15, gives a series of exhortations, targeting primarily a problem that had taken root in the congregation, where certain members were willfully unemployed and not responding to apostolic correctives.<sup>68</sup>

The text under consideration is found in the second section. Following his request for prayer (3:1–5), Paul begins by laying down the principle that the congregation is to withdraw from any member who continues to live in conflict with apostolic instruction (3:6). Next, Paul applies the principle to the specific problem within the Thessalonian

<sup>67</sup>Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 73–74.

<sup>68</sup>Similarly, Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 534; Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 448, 451–52.

church. Certain members were refusing to work and were relying on the financial support of others.<sup>69</sup> Addressing the problem directly, Paul uses his own example of industry (3:7–9) and his previous instruction while with them (3:10–11) as authoritative guidelines to be followed.

Following this, Paul commands the disobedient to find gainful employment so that they can provide for their own needs (3:12). He then exhorts the congregation not to grow weary of supporting those who are truly needy (3:13). Paul concludes with a final exhortation, restating the principle from 3:6 that the congregation is to follow in disciplining the disobedient. The members are to mark those who continue to disobey Paul's directives and not associate with them (3:14). Paul ends with a caution that, in complying with his directives, the congregation is to regard the disobedient not as an enemy, but as a brother (3:15).<sup>70</sup>

### The Spiritual Status of the Disobedient

Paul clearly views the disobedient minority in this passage as fellow believers. In 3:6 Paul uses the term “brother” to describe the disobedient. As previously discussed, the expression is commonly used in similar contexts as a metaphor for someone who shares a common set of beliefs as a member of the Christian community and who is part of God's household or family.<sup>71</sup> He also places the disobedient in 3:11 among the members of the Thessalonian congregation—“we hear that some among you”—and, thus, as those who have made a profession of faith. He concludes the section in 3:15 by cautioning the congregation that, when disciplining the disobedient man, they are to regard him “as a brother.”

Having said that, the same question is raised here that was raised in the discussion of the disobedient in Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5. Paul describes the disobedient individuals in 3:6 as “leading” or “living” unruly lives in conflict with apostolic tradition. He repeats his description in 3:13, portraying the disobedient as “leading” undisciplined lives.

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<sup>69</sup>Questions about the relationship between willful unemployment and patron-client relationships or the readers' misunderstanding of eschatology are significant for a proper interpretation of the passage. At the same time, these issues do not materially affect the concerns addressed here. On the background and cause of the problem, see the discussion in D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 274–77; Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 454–57. For a rhetorical analysis of the passage, see Ben Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 245–57.

<sup>70</sup>For a similar development of the argument, see D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles: A Call to Readiness* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 337–51; Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, 271–87; Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 324–39.

<sup>71</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. “ἀδελφός,” by H. F. von Sodon, 1:144–46; *NIDNTT*, s.v. “Brother, Neighbor, Friend,” by W. Günther, 1:256–58; *NIDNTTE*, s.v. “ἀδελφός,” 1:149–52; BDAG, 18.

In both verses, Paul's description depicts these individuals as engaged in persistent, ongoing disobedience.<sup>72</sup> Thus, how can someone who continues to disobey God's word and who refuses to repent be considered a brother or fellow believer, a member of God's spiritual family? In other words, does not the fact that these are persisting in unrepentant disobedience bring into question their status as true brothers?

These questions notwithstanding, the evidence in 2 Thessalonians 3 for the unrepentant man to be viewed as an unbeliever is not as clear. True, the willfully unemployed are persisting in disobedience and refusing to repent. But their sin does not seem to be of the same stripe as, for example, the sin in 1 Corinthians 5. Disobedience is still disobedience, but the combination of willful unemployment, freeloading, and meddling in the affairs of others does not seem to rise to the same level of sin as sexual immorality. In short, the sins of the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5 and the willfully unemployed in 2 Thessalonians 3 simply do not appear to be on the same scale.<sup>73</sup>

Some who recognize the tension still want to see Paul (and Jesus) speaking with one voice on church discipline of the unrepentant. Their solution is to heighten the sin in 2 Thessalonians 3 by associating it with the sin Paul harshly condemns in 1 Timothy 5. In 1 Timothy 5:8, Paul declares that those in the church who fail to care for the needy among their own family members are, in effect, denying the faith. Paul adds that such failure to care for one's own family makes the guilty worse than an unbeliever. Thus, by linking willful unemployment with failure to care for one's family, proponents heighten the sin in 2 Thessalonians 3 to an inflammatory transgression. As such, they argue that Paul calls for the willfully unemployed to be treated as unbelievers, not as believers.<sup>74</sup>

The problem with heightening the sin in 1 Thessalonians 3 in this way is that such heightening must be read into the text. The text says nothing about the willfully unemployed failing to care for the members of their families. Paul does describe other sins the unemployed are committing—leading undisciplined lives, doing no work, acting like busybodies (3:11)—but failure to care for family members is not

<sup>72</sup>Paul uses identical attributive participles in the present tense to describe the conduct of the disobedient in 3:6 and 3:11. On the force of the present tense with the attributive participle indicating an action in progress or ongoing, see Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 408–11. Fanning labels the construction in 3:11 as customary or habitual (411). See also Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., Biblical Languages: Greek (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 21, 29; Constantine R. Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek: New Insights for Reading the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 107.

<sup>73</sup>Similarly, Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1972), 344–45.

<sup>74</sup>See, for example, Charles J. Bumgardner, "As a Brother": 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 and Ecclesiastical Separation," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 14 (2009), 67–76, 93.

mentioned among these. If such failure involves a heinous sin, it is strange that Paul does not mention this, were the disobedient in 1 Thessalonians 3 also guilty of this sin.

Furthermore, Paul says nothing in the 1 Timothy 5 passage about those who fail to care for their families as shirking their responsibility because they are willfully unemployed. In fact, the context points in the opposite direction. Those who fail to care for their families are condemned precisely because it is assumed they have the means to do so. Theirs is not a lack of means, as though unemployed, but the failure to use the means they have to care for their own. In short, the two passages offer no common denominators that suggest the sin in the one is related to the sin in the other.

Returning to the question, then, what is the spiritual status of the disobedient in 2 Thessalonians 3? Is the church to view the disobedient as believers or as unbelievers? The evidence from the context argues that the readers are to view the disobedient as believers.<sup>75</sup> As mentioned above, Paul specifically directs the church in 3:15 to regard the disobedient as brothers, that is, as fellow believers. The one issue that remains is to identify the nature of the discipline the church is to exercise toward the disobedient. Does the discipline itself counter the above evidence and argue in favor of treating the disobedient as unbelievers?

### The Nature and Purpose of the Discipline

The question that needs to be answered is whether Paul's directive for the church to "keep away" from the unrepentant refers to excommunication. In other words, if Paul is calling for the church to excommunicate the unrepentant, that argues effectively for treating the disobedient as unbelievers. As in Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5, the unrepentant man may be called a brother, but if the church is being directed to remove him from membership, it must be because his actions are viewed as those of an unbeliever, not those of a believer.<sup>76</sup>

The chief argument in support of excommunication is that Paul gives the church the same directive for disciplining the disobedient in 3:14 as he does the disobedient in 1 Corinthians 5:11. After directing the readers in 3:14 to identify the disobedient man—"take special note of that person"—Paul then adds, "and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame."<sup>77</sup> The expression "do not associate" is

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<sup>75</sup>See, among others, Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 344–45, 356; Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 605, 627–28.

<sup>76</sup>G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 262–63. Beale lays out several options on the nature of the discipline and argues for excommunication.

<sup>77</sup>The context points to the church identifying the disobedient by name during a service when the church is gathered for worship (Hiebert, *Thessalonian Epistles*, 350; Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 458, 460; Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 255).

identical to the directive Paul gives to the Corinthian church concerning the incestuous man (1 Cor 5:11).<sup>78</sup>

As argued earlier, Paul calls on the Corinthian believers not to associate with the incestuous man by removing him from membership and by limiting their contact to efforts to bring him to repentance. Thus, Paul's use of the identical expression in 2 Thessalonians 3:14 in a similar context of church discipline favors interpreting the expression in the same way.<sup>79</sup> Paul is calling on the Thessalonians not to associate with the disobedient man by removing him from their membership and limiting their contact to efforts to bring him to repentance.<sup>80</sup>

These similarities notwithstanding, there are difficulties with this reading of the text. Certainly, the action the church is to take against the unrepentant in Matthew 18 and the unrepentant in 1 Corinthians 5 is essentially identical. In both passages, the church is to view the unrepentant as unbelievers and remove them from membership. As well, the removal of the unrepentant is understood in both passages as the final step in church discipline. In short, the directives for the church in both Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 represent the final step in church discipline, and it is at this step that the church is to view the unrepentant as unbelievers.

The tension comes in that Paul specifically cautions the Thessalonians in 3:15 to treat the unrepentant man as a "brother," as a fellow believer.<sup>81</sup> Using the Matthew 18 passage for comparison, the problem in equating the discipline in Matthew 18 with the that in 2 Thessalonians

<sup>78</sup>μη συναναμίγνυσθαι.

<sup>79</sup>Bumgardner, "As a Brother": 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 and Ecclesiastical Separation," 77-79.

<sup>80</sup>Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 289.

<sup>81</sup>Bumgardner, "As a Brother": 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 and Ecclesiastical Separation," 80-81, takes the infinitive "do not associate with him" here and in 1 Cor 5:11 as referring to excommunication, where the unrepentant are viewed as unbelievers. To counter the force of Paul's admonition in 3:15 about treating the unrepentant "as a brother," Bumgardner links Paul's admonition in 3:15 with the command "take special note of that person" in the middle of 3:14 rather than with the infinitive "do not associate with him" at the end of 3:14. Thus, according to Bumgardner, once the congregation "takes note" of the unrepentant man as a "brother," he is then expelled and viewed as an unbeliever.

While innovative, this handling of the text appears counterintuitive. With the directive "admonish him as a brother," Paul is cautioning the readers against overreacting in their disciplining the unrepentant. It seems much more likely that Paul's caution qualifies the readers' action of not associating with the unrepentant man at the end of 3:14 rather than with their action of "taking special note of him" in the middle of 3:14. Furthermore, the readers' taking note of the unrepentant has as its intended goal or outcome their not associating with him. It is difficult to see how the readers could view the unrepentant man as a brother when taking note of him, but as an unbeliever when not associating with him. The two actions have a cause and effect relationship that takes place virtually at the same time.

3 is that the respective designations of the unrepentant are not synonymous. The semantic ranges of “Gentile” (Matt 18:17) and “brother” (2 Thess 3:15) simply do not overlap. In fact, in these contexts, the two expressions are antithetical. In the Matthew passage, “Gentile” refers to someone outside the community of believers, an unbeliever, while in the 2 Thessalonians passage, “brother” refers to someone inside the community, a fellow believer.<sup>82</sup>

So, what is the nature and purpose of the discipline in 2 Thessalonians 3? When taken together, the evidence argues for seeing Paul’s directives in this context as pointing to a level of discipline short of excommunication.<sup>83</sup> In effect, the disobedient person is given notice that his conduct is in violation of apostolic standards and told he must repent. To drive home the seriousness of the breach caused by unrepentant sin, the members are to withdraw normal fellowship, to include withholding the Lord’s Supper.<sup>84</sup> In addition, they are to give notice that, if he does not repent and find gainful employment within a reasonable time as determined by the church, he will be viewed as an unbeliever and, thus, excommunicated from membership.<sup>85</sup>

Two questions remain. The first question is, if there is a step of church discipline short of excommunication, why is the disobedient man in 1 Corinthians 5 not given a similar opportunity to repent before he is excommunicated? Perhaps the simplest answer is the best. The sin of the incestuous man is such that his failure to repent left only one option for the church. Because he is persisting in flagrant immorality, the church has no choice but to view him as an unbeliever and remove him from their midst.<sup>86</sup> While a true believer can get caught up in sin (Gal 6:1) and even persist in a given sin (1 Cor 11:30), his life cannot be characterized by the habit and pattern of sin or by a lack of repentance.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, the evidence from 1 Corinthians 5 indicates that there are some sins a church member simply cannot persist in and be

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<sup>82</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 229; F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 211; Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 356.

<sup>83</sup>Hiebert, *Thessalonian Epistles*, 350; Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 210; Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 344–45, 354–55; Witherington, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 253. See the discussion in Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 27–37.

<sup>84</sup>*TDNT*, s.v. “στέλλω,” by K. Ringstorf, 7:589–90 (who allows for “table fellowship”); Hiebert, *Thessalonian Epistles*, 341; Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 253; Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 355.

<sup>85</sup>Green lists Rom 16:17–18, Titus 3:10–11, and 2 John 10–11, in addition to Matt 18:17 and 1 Cor 5:9–11, as passages where the unrepentant are to be viewed as unbelievers and excommunicated (*Letters to the Thessalonians*, 354).

<sup>86</sup>Similarly, Schreiner, “Biblical Basis for Church Discipline,” 129.

<sup>87</sup>R. Bruce Compton, “Can a Christian Sin unto Death?”

considered a true believer.<sup>88</sup>

The second question is, if there is a step of church discipline short of excommunication, why does the Lord not include this in Matthew 18:17? The answer is that the Lord's statement in 18:17, "if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector," allows for an intermediate step.<sup>89</sup> In other words, at what point does his refusal to listen to the church take place? Does it take place immediately following his confrontation by the church or at some point after that? With the disobedient man in 1 Corinthians 5, that point comes when the incestuous man fails to repent right after the church confronts him. With the disobedient in 1 Thessalonians 3, that point comes when the willfully unemployed fail to repent and find work in the time determined by the church.

### CONCLUSION

Returning to the questions raised at the outset, the initial question was over the spiritual status of those disciplined. When exercising church discipline, is the church to view the disobedient as believers or as unbelievers? Two of the key texts, Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5, identify the disobedient as unbelievers. This is directly stated in Matthew 18 through the description of the unrepentant man as a Gentile and tax collector. And, it is clearly implied in 1 Corinthians 5 with the church's removal or excommunication of the incestuous man.

The third key text, however, identifies the disobedient as believers. In calling for the church to exercise church discipline, Paul warns the congregation in 2 Thessalonians 3 not to treat the disobedient man as an enemy, but to admonish him as a brother, as a fellow believer. This means that, when the church disciplines its members, its discipline can take the form of correcting a brother or fellow believer, but it can also take the form of excommunicating one who is viewed as an unbeliever.

The second question was over the nature of church discipline. Must church discipline involve excommunication or does the New Testament allow for a level that stops short of that? Again, two of the key texts call for excommunication. This is clearly implied in Matthew 18 when the Lord says that the disobedient man is to be viewed as a Gentile and tax collector. As discussed earlier, the combination describes metaphorically those regarded as unbelievers who are to be placed outside the membership of the church. In the 1 Corinthians 5 passage, Paul specifically commands the Corinthian congregation to remove the disobedient member from among them, that is, to excommunicate him.

In contrast, the third key text calls for discipline that falls short of

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<sup>88</sup>Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus, Building Healthy Churches* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 55–63.

<sup>89</sup>Thomas White, "The Why, How, and When of Church Discipline," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 209–12.

excommunication. The disobedient man in 2 Thessalonians 3 is viewed specifically as a brother or fellow believer, to be disciplined within the church, not as an unbeliever, to be placed outside the church. Paul directs the readers to “withdraw” from him and “not to associate” with him. As with the 1 Corinthians 5 passage, this means the members are to withhold normal fellowship from the disobedient man in an effort to bring him to repentance. But this level of separation does not entail excommunication in that the disobedient man is still considered a brother in Christ. Thus, depending on how the church views the disobedient, church discipline can involve excommunication, but it can also involve a level short of excommunication.

This raises the final question about the number of steps in church discipline. The Lord lays the foundation for church discipline in Matthew 18. The steps begin with private confrontation of one caught up in sin and end with excommunication if he persists in unrepentance. At the point where the church collectively takes action, the Lord mentions only one step, that of excommunication. However, as mentioned above the Lord’s statement, “if he refuses to listen to the church,” allows for an intermediate step. Furthermore, 2 Thessalonians 3 expressly identifies a step in church discipline that comes short of excommunication. Consequently, the Scriptures teach that there are in fact four steps involved in reclaiming the disobedient.<sup>90</sup>

The first step is when a member of the congregation sees another member caught up in sin and he goes alone to the one sinning to convict him and bring him to repentance. If the first step fails, the second step is where the concerned member takes two or three others to assist him in confronting the sinner. If the second step fails, the third step is where the matter is brought before the congregation. Assuming the specific sin allows for a step other than excommunication, the congregation directs the sinner to repent and initiates discipline to bring about repentance. If that step fails—he refuses to listen to the church—the final step is where the church views the unrepentant person as an unbeliever and excommunicates him.

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<sup>90</sup>R. Stanton Norman, “The Reestablishment of Proper Church Discipline,” in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas White, Jason G. Duesing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 214–17; Eric J. Bargerhuff, *Love That Rescues: God’s Fatherly Love in the Practice of Church Discipline* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 139–55.

