

2 Thessalonians (12): “A Disciplined Local Church”

In this last section of Paul’s second epistle to the Thessalonians, the apostle addressed a problem that this local church was having with some of its members. There were some church members who were behaving, or living, in a disorderly manner. They were bringing discredit to the Lord they professed to know and follow and were troubling those members of the church who were attempting to live godly lives. These disorderly Christians were scandalous in the community. Paul instructed the church that these men must be addressed. Let us read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15:

⁶Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. ⁹It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. ¹¹For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹²Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

¹³As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. ¹⁴If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

The church at Thessalonica was a good church, even a stellar one, in the opinion of the apostle Paul, who had originally evangelized the region and had begun the church. Paul had said of this church:

We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, ³remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, ⁴knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. ⁵For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. ⁶And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. ⁸For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. ⁹For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1 Thess. 1:2-10)

But no church is a perfect church. And no church will be a perfect church as long as it has church members comprised of people in this fallen world. But the local church is not resign to church members living in such a way to bring reproach upon the church. The Lord would have His churches address these people, confronting them, correcting them, and instructing them in right living.

I would like us to consider this passage before us by first focusing on the apostle’s instruction to this church in particular. But I would like us then consider what our passage informs us about the nature and ministry that should characterize every local New Testament church of Jesus Christ.

I. The Apostolic instruction to the church at Thessalonica

As we look over our passage we may discern a subtle but important division in its contents. In verses 6 through 12 Paul gives instruction to the church on how to minister to *disorderly members* of the church. But in verses 13 through 15 Paul gives further instruction to the church on how to address these disorderly Christians if they persist in their ways, having passing from a state of being disorderly, into a state of *disobedient members* of the church.

A. Addressing the disorderly Christian (3:6-12)

Paul first instructed the church in **verse 6** to “keep away” from any “brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.” Here is the full verse:

⁶Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.

We have used the word, “disorderly” rather than “idleness”, to describe these Christians, for this is the English word used in the King James Version (KJV) as well as in the New King James Version (NKJV). Actually, the word, *disorderly*, is used three times in the NKJV of this paragraph:

But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks *disorderly* and not according to the tradition which he received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not *disorderly* among you; ⁸nor did we eat anyone’s bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, ⁹not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. ¹¹For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a *disorderly* manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. (2 Thess. 3:6-11)

The Greek word, which is translated as “idleness” in the ESV but translated as “disorderly” in the NKJV, is ἀτάκτως (*ataktos*). It is used as an adverb only here in this chapter. There is an adjective form, which is in 1 Thessalonians 5:4. This reads, “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are *unruly*, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.” The Greek word is translated as “unruly”, in other words, it describes as one who is not ordering his life according to the “rules”.

Paul is suggesting that these people knew better, but had chosen to live in a manner contrary to what they had been taught. Their primary failure was that they were not working, but there may be more to their disorderly lives than this. **William Hendriksen** suggests that these disorderly persons included those

1. who were loafing. They were “do-nothings”,
2. who were spreading all manner of gossip about Christ’s immanent return (Cf. 2 Thess. 2:2),
3. who were asking to be supported by the church,
4. who were meddling in the affairs of others, particularly with the business of the church elders.¹

Paul identified these disorderly Christians as not walking according to the “tradition” which he received from us. He was referring to his *previous instruction* to them, that he had previously given

¹ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews*, in New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 2007), p. 198.

them. This would have included his apostolic instruction when he first evangelized the community and founded the church, the instruction he sent to them conveyed by Timothy, and the contents of 1 Thessalonians that he had sent to them earlier. These “disorderly Christians” had failed, perhaps even refused, to order their lives according to this “tradition.”

Paul instructed the members of the church that they “*withdraw* from every brother who walks disorderly.” The ESV translates the command that “you *keep away* from any brother who is walking in idleness.”

Now it is important to recognize that Paul is *not* advocating removing these people from membership by means of excommunication. This is a measured but limited action taken upon church members who are not living in proper or appropriate Christian ways. This is not the action that our Lord prescribed to the unrepentant one in **Matthew 18**. There we read the words of our Lord Jesus:

¹⁵“Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ ¹⁷And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” (Matt. 18:15-18)

This action that the apostle prescribes is not to be regarded as the act of excommunication to which he had directed the church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 5 we read:

⁴In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁵deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. (1 Cor. 5:4f)

Paul was not instructing the church at Thessalonica that these “disorderly” persons were to be put out of the church, nor were any of them to be treated “like a heathen and tax collector.” They were to be regarded as brethren. But the members of the church were to distance themselves from these disorderly ones, so as to lead them to be ashamed and perhaps repent of their sin.

These disorderly church members had been behaving badly in this manner for quite some time. As Hendriksen rightly stated:

The fact that a rather lengthy paragraph (vs. 3-15) is devoted to this sin would seem to indicate that the evil here signaled had grown worse since the first epistle had been written (see on 1 Thess. 4:11, 12; 5:14; then also 1 Thess. 2:9). Such conduct was certainly far removed from “the tradition” which the Thessalonians had received from the missionaries (i.e. Paul, Timothy, and Silas). This “tradition” was the teaching which Paul, Silas, and Timothy, on the basis of authority vested in them, had passed along to the congregation. It included such instruction as this one: “If anyone does not want to work, neither let him eat” (verse 10). The Thessalonians had received it from the missionaries during their first visit (verse 10), and also subsequently by letter (1 Thess. 2:9; 4:11; 5:14). No doubt Timothy, on his visit, had stressed the same thing.

In the case of some individuals all this instruction had been in vain. Hence, somewhat stronger methods must now be used. When *admonition* does not succeed, *segregation* must be resorted to. At least to a limited extent.²

After Paul had referred to his *previous instruction* in verse 6, we next read in **verses 7 and 8** that Paul had demonstrated a *personal example* when he had served among them.

² Ibid, p. 199.

⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.

When Paul had initially served them in the gospel, he had a right to be financially supported by them. He gave this instruction to support ministers in other places. Paul had written to Timothy about a supported ministry by the churches.

¹⁷Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. ¹⁸For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer is worthy of his wages" (1 Tim. 5:1).

We read of Paul's instruction to the church at Corinth that he had a right to be supported by them.

³This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴Do we not have the right to eat and drink? ⁵Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ⁷Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

⁸Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? ⁹For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. ¹¹If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? ¹²If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?

Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. ¹³Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? ¹⁴In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. (1 Cor. 9:3-14)

But though Paul had a right to be financially supported by the churches and the churches had the responsibility to support him, he never demanded his rights; he never received money from them to compensate for his ministry among them. Paul could say to the church at Corinth,

¹⁵But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting. ¹⁶For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. ¹⁸What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. (1 Cor. 9:15-18)

We read here in 2 Thessalonians 3:9 that Paul had ministered in this church according to the same convictions and principles. He wrote, "***It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.***"

Paul had instructed the members of the church not to be idle, not to depend on others for support, and he himself had illustrated before them this manner of living. He worked long and hard so that he could be free to serve others without being a burden to them.

And so, we read of Paul's ***previous instruction*** about this matter in verse 6, of his ***personal example*** while among them in verses 7 through 9, and we read next of his ***apostolic command*** to them in

verse 10: *“For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”* Now Paul was, of course, an apostle of Jesus Christ. An apostle is one who was sent on behalf of another. The Greek word for apostle is ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*), which means “one who is sent forth.” The apostle bore the authority of the Lord who had sent him. When the apostle gave a command, it was as though the Lord Jesus Himself issued that command, for the apostle represented him and spoke on his behalf.

The Lord Jesus wills that all men would support themselves through faithful, diligent, work. After Adam had fallen into sin, God told him,

“In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread
Till you return to the ground,
For out of it you were taken;
For dust you are,
And to dust you shall return.” (Gen 3:19).

And God would have all able-bodied men thereafter to support themselves and their families through labor. And then the Lord commanded through Paul, *“If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”* He did not say, “If anyone is *unable* to work, let him not eat”; but rather, if anyone was unwilling to work, let him not eat.” Here is a divine principle that, if ignored or set aside by a nation, a church, or a family, there will be sore consequences. Again, here are **Hendriksen’s** words of application of Paul’s words:

It concerns the pious (?) sluggard *who does not want to work*, and who proceeds from the idea: “The church owes me a living.” Substitute “world” or “government” for “church” and the passage would fit many people living today, both inside and outside the church.³

Paul then identifies these disorderly persons directly in **verses 11 and 12**, giving instruction regarding them:

¹¹For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹²Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

The apostle commands and encourages these idle people to “work quietly”, supporting themselves, living in a manner so that they are not a burden to anyone. And until these people order their lives in this manner, the other brethren in the church were to distance themselves from these professing Christians. Paul commanded that they were to “keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us” (v. 6).

But what if these disorderly Christians refused or failed to obey Paul’s command? What if they were determined in their disobedience to the apostolic instruction? Then further steps are necessary. This is what is set forth in the following verses of 13 through 15.

B. Addressing the disobedient Christian (3:13-15)

¹³As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. ¹⁴If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

³ Ibid, pp. 201f.

If these disorderly Christians continue in their disruption and disobedience, the faithful members of the church had a responsibility to these disobedient Christians. Those who had received Paul's instruction, observed Paul's example, and had heard Paul's command, but persisted in their ways, were to be ostracized by the church community. That one who was disobedient should be publically identified, the church body instructed not to have fellowship with him, "not to have anything to do with him."

But in spite of the offender's culpability, this disorderly Christian was not to be declared to be a non-Christian. He was a brother and should be regarded as such. The church brethren were not to "**regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.**"

In concluding this section, let us recognize that there are at least three levels of disciplinary action that a church is to take toward its members who insist and persist in walking contrary to the Christian faith.

1. Ostracizing the disorderly Christian: Verse 6 declares, "**Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.**"

2. Disfellowshipping the disorderly Christian: Verses 14f declares, "**If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.**"¹⁵**Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.**

3. Excommunicating the professing believer from the church, thereafter regarding him as an unbeliever. Our Lord declared in Matthew 18:17, "**But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.**" Paul instructed in 1 Corinthians 5:4f, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."

Now, after considering the specific situation and remedy that the apostle prescribed for this local church at Thessalonica, I would like us to consider what we have before us in that it reveals...

II. The nature and ministry of the local church of Jesus Christ

The passage that we have just considered has played an important role in the history and development of Baptist church polity and practice. In order to address this matter, let me provide some historical background.

Modern Baptist churches may trace their origin to the English puritan separatist movement of the 17th century. Protestantism arose in the previous century on the European continent under the leadership of the early Protestant Reformers, most notably, Martin Luther (Germany), John Calvin (Geneva), Ulrich Zwingli (Zurich), Martin Bucer (Strasbourg), and John Knox (Scotland.) England became Protestant in the 1540's, but in an entirely different way than these other nations. Where these other nations rejected Roman Catholicism and became Protestant largely through influential men recovering and proclaiming the authority of the Holy Scriptures to determine all matters of faith and practice, the Reformation began in England through an entirely different means. In 1534 King Henry VIII of England desired the pope to give him an annulment from Catherine of Aragon so that he could remarry and bear a male heir to the throne. The pope refused to grant the king the annulment. King Henry's response was to break from Rome. In 1534 Henry declared that he would be the final authority over the church in England. For the next century England vacillated between being anti Roman Catholic and pro Roman Catholic determined by the will of the English monarch. During these early days of English "Protestantism", the biblically centered puritans sought to influence the Church of England toward biblical Christianity. In time many of

the Puritans became convinced that reforming the Church of England was not possible. Many of these Puritans became separatists, separating and forming churches independent of the Church of England. Among these separatist churches there arose reformed Presbyterian churches, reformed Congregational churches, and reformed Baptist churches.⁴ Each of these three groups, although agreeing in essential doctrines of the faith, differed from one another in their understanding of the nature of the government of the local church, the nature of the ministry that the local church exercised, and matters such as the identity and qualifications of the church's leaders.

A. The three major reformed Protestant English denominations

We might briefly describe the essential nature and traits of each of these three Protestant groups, Presbyterianism, congregationalism, and the Baptists.

1. Presbyterianism

Presbyterians believe that councils of elders should govern local churches. Teaching and ruling elders are ordained and convene in the lowest council known as a session. These elders have authority in the local church over all matters of the discipline and nurture of church members, and they are responsible to formulate and govern the mission of the local church. Individual congregations call pastors. A congregation issues a call for the pastor's service, but the local presbytery must ratify this call. Above the sessions there are presbyteries over geographical regions, to which all sessions belong, the presbytery sends representatives to a broader regional or national assembly, generally known as the General Assembly, which has the supreme authority over the denomination.

2. Congregationalism

Congregationalism is similar to Presbyterianism in doctrine, but it rejects the authority of any persons or body of leaders outside the local congregation. It advocates the responsibility of every local congregation to be self-governing, rejecting all claims of authority outside the local congregation. Each church is autonomous. The practice infant baptism by sprinkling, like the Presbyterians, but their church government is much like the Baptists.

3. Baptists

Baptist churches believe that the only authority over and outside the local church is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our King and He governs our church according to His will that He has revealed in His Holy Bible. Historically only Baptists have held that members of their churches should be ones who have given evidence of personal faith in the Lord Jesus and have resolved to live their lives as Christians in obedience to the Lord Jesus while in fellowship with their brethren. Baptists reject government and ecclesiastical control outside their local churches.

B. Reasons that our passage supports Baptist polity regarding the local church

1. The rule of Jesus Christ.

When the apostle gave a command, it was as though the Lord Jesus Himself issued that command, for the apostle represented him and spoke on his behalf. Paul indicated this relationship with His Lord in

⁴ Many people wrongly believe that English and later American Baptist churches developed from the continental Anabaptist churches. But this is not correct. There was very little contact between English Baptists and continental Anabaptists. English Baptists developed largely in isolation to the churches of Europe.

the passage before us. Take note of the manner in which Paul asserted his authority over the church at Thessalonica. We read in verse 6,

“Now we command you, brothers, *in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”

And then in verses 11 and 12 when Paul again asserted his apostolic authority, wrote,

“For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons *we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ* to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”

The Apostle Paul asserted his authority in that he was speaking in the authority of and on behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ. The command of the Apostle Paul “in the name of the Lord Jesus” reveals that Jesus Christ is the only heads of His church, which is the local church. Our confession states this conviction:

The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the church, in whom, by the appointment of the Father, all power for the calling, institution, order or government of the church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner (Art. 26, par. 4).

We reject any belief and practice that looks to men outside the local church to lead or govern the church. We are committed “To Follow the Lamb Wheresoever He go.”⁵

Among Particular Baptists⁶ the conviction that “Christ is both Lord and King of the Churches” was developed as part of their critique of the power and authority civil magistrates claimed to possess in establishing Church government. In response to the question of his invisible interlocutor: “What power the Civil Magistrate has in establishing Church government?” Thomas Collier’s bold answer was, “They [magistrates] have none at all” because Christ is the King of saints, of Sion, that is, the church. Collier regarded human power in spiritual matters as a usurpation of the prerogative of King Jesus. Any attempt by the State either to establish, or compel citizens, to conform to true religion was a violation of the rule of Christ, who himself compelled no one.⁷

2. That the Apostle Paul addressed the local church at Thessalonica, it shows that the Lord’s churches should be identified principally as local congregations, not a collection of local churches or that of a national church.

Baptists emphasize the independence and importance of the local church, while denying that the term “church” should be applied to a national church (Presbyterianism) or a collection of local churches (Congregationalism).

According to the First London Confession, Calvinistic Baptist ecclesiology focused on the church, “as it is *visible* to us,” a company of *visible* saints, to the “*visible* profession of the faith.” A significant point about this emphasis on the “visible” church was its distinctiveness in relation to the majority of other Reformed theologies of the 1640s. In contrast to mainstream Congregationalism which admitted a visible catholic church, “comprehensive of all who throughout the world outwardly

⁵ This is the title of a book I am presently reading about historic Baptist church polity and practice. Ian Birch, *To Follow the Lamb Wheresoever He May Goeth* (Pickwick Publications, 2017), 228 pp.

⁶ Particular Baptists was another name for Reformed or Calvinistic Baptists. Here, “Particular” speaks of the particular atonement of Christ’s death as a substitute for His particular people.

⁷ Ibid, p. 34.

own the gospel,” Baptists in the 1640s focused narrowly on the local, congregational manifestation of the visible church. In contrast to Presbyterianism, they entirely ignored the notion of an “invisible church.”⁸

One Baptist described the local church in this way:

The visible church of Christ in the right constitution of it, is a company of people gathered out of the world by the Spirit of Christ in the ministry of the Gospel, to believe in him, and love his name, and to yield up themselves in a professed obedience to the whole will of Christ, as the effects and fruits of the work of the Spirit in faith and love.⁹

The manner that the Apostle Paul wrote to and addressed the church at Thessalonica is consistent with this understanding of the local church.

3. The Lord’s instruction through Paul to the church at Thessalonica was directed to all of the church members, not just to a few leaders.

Paul addressed all of the members of the church at Thessalonica, pressing upon them all the responsibility to minister to the others in the church body. This underscores the Baptist conviction that a church should admit only converted persons into its membership. This is in distinction to paedobaptist (infant baptizers) churches like the Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Their membership does not consist only of those who give evidence of conversion. Presbyterian ecclesiology promotes a national church in which all citizens are members. Congregationalists admit members on the virtue that their parents were believers; thus church membership was comprised of converted and unconverted persons.

4. Similarly, the responsibility of ministry being placed upon the membership of the church suggests the Baptist view of church government of congregationalism.

In Baptist churches there is not a primary distinction between clergy and laity. All members alike are subject to the rule of Christ in the local church.

The priority of the local gathered congregation in Baptist ecclesiology is evident when Collier discusses the form of government and discipline in a true Church which was in his view,

Not an Episcopal government by Lord Bishops, not a Presbyterian Government of many, to rule over one.

But every Assembly of Saints thus gathered, ... are to elect and Ordaine Officers, and to them Christ hath given full power to performe every duty of a Church, that is, to watch over one the other, to admonish one the other, to Censure such as are disorderly, in a word, to receive such as they conceive the Lord hath added; to cast forth such as walk disorderly.

In contrast to the hierarchical structure of Presbyterianism, and the presbyterial oversight of Independency, Baptist ecclesiology asserted the authority of each gathered congregation of believers, under the Kingship of Jesus, to appoint its own officers and expel disorderly members.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid, p. 54. Later in the 17th century, however, Reformed Baptists acknowledged an invisible universal church (see *The Baptist Confession of 1689*, Art. 26, par. 1.

⁹ Ibid, p. 58.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 51.

Presbyterianism asserted that only ordained clergy had the ability and the responsibility to exercise ministry in the churches. All matters of church discipline, including confronting, correcting, rebuking, restoring, or casting out members was the duty of the clergy only. Baptists, however, understood the Scriptures to entrust this responsibility to the church body as a whole, although pastors were entrusted by the church body to minister within the congregations. One of the reasons for this different view of spiritual authority within the church was due to their understanding of our Lord granting the spiritual authority of the “keys of the kingdom” to Peter. This is recorded for us in Matthew 16, when our Lord said to Peter these words:

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 16:18f)

The “keys of the kingdom of heaven” was the authority to minister in the church. Included in this authority was the power to admit and cast out people from the membership of the churches. Of course Roman Catholicism had claimed for centuries that the “keys” were given to Peter alone, and then they were passed on to his successors, the popes over the church. Protestants of the 16th and 17th centuries rejected this teaching, but they differed in their understanding who it was that the Lord entrusted spiritual authority in the church. Presbyterianism was somewhat similar to the teaching of Roman Catholicism. They claimed that the Lord had indeed given “the keys” to Peter as an apostle, and therefore “the keys” were thereafter given to the elders of the churches, the spiritual successors to the apostles who had authority over the churches. The Baptists, however, objected. They claimed that the Lord had given “the keys” to Peter, not as an apostle, but as a “confessor of Christ” (Cf. Matt. 16:17). Therefore, the Baptists claimed that the Lord did not give “the keys” of authority in the churches to the elders, but to the collective congregation. It is the gathered church that has the responsibility to admit or discharge members and to exercise church discipline on its members. Paul’s instruction to the church body to deal with these disorderly members in the church at Thessalonica, underscores the Baptist view that the Lord has invested spiritual authority to the gathered congregation, not to only a few of its leaders.

That Christ had given the keys to the Church, that is, the power and authority to make spiritual decisions, was not in dispute amongst advanced Puritans. The point of controversy between Puritans, however, made visible during the “Grand Debate” in the last three days of the Westminster Assembly in October 1643, was to whom they were given. Was it Peter, the Apostles, the church, or a combination of the latter two? The question divided conservative Presbyterians who desired to uphold the status of the clergy and affirm ministerial authority over the laity, and Independents who insisted that Christ had bequeathed the power of the keys to Peter considered to be a believer, thereby locating the power in the body of the congregation. On 31 October 1643, the conservative majority in the Assembly won the argument and it was affirmed that the power of the keys, that is, church governance, had been given by Christ directly to the apostles, and was to be exercised by church officers apart from the church.¹¹

Baptists rejected this position, advocating that Jesus Christ was King over every individual congregation and that He had given the authority to each congregation of believers to admit or remove its members and to exercise discipline in its membership.

5. It follows, therefore, since the Lord entrusted the ministry to these disorderly brethren to all the members of the church, it reveals the Baptist conviction of soul competency and that every member is a minister.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 92.

One of the objections by reformed Presbyterians and Congregationalists of the 17th century against Reformed Baptists was their charge that the Baptists elevated the role of the church members in performing ministry beyond what was warranted. Presbyterianism places great authority on its elders as the ones called by God to perform ministry in the local church. The Congregationalists similarly criticized the Baptists for often having pastors who were uneducated and uncertified according to their standards. But Baptists defended the competency of church members to serve one another in the church. The Holy Spirit had given to every true Christian in the church spiritual gifts which not only enabled him to serve the body, but made it his responsibility to do so.

Every baptized believer joining a Baptist congregation was under an obligation to employ their spiritual gifts and graces for the edification of the body. Ministry was not the reserve of university educated and state-validated men, but the responsibility of all the saints.¹²

There were four major factors that led Baptists to have this high view of church members performing spiritual ministry in the body. First, they believed that the Bible in the language of the people, being understandable and available to the people, would instruct and qualify the people for the work of ministry in the local church. Second, the presence and immediacy of the Holy Spirit to every believer meant that any member of the congregation could be the means to bring spiritual blessing to others. Third, the arise of lay ministry in the 17th century resulted from “the erosion of the culture of deference which coincided with the Civil War.” There was a disillusionment and rejection of hierarchy within the culture. And fourth, the promotion of the Reformed doctrine of the priesthood of all believers resulted in a belief in the competency of the regenerate Christian to serve others.¹³

All of these characteristics and principles of Baptist belief and practice are underscored in Paul’s instruction to the church at Thessalonica in this section of chapter three that we have considered today. May our blessed Lord help our local church become all that we are capable of doing and becoming.

Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another,
according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify
the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 15:5f)

¹² Ibid, p. 132.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 137-140.