

Exegetical Brief: 1 Timothy 6:5 (Variant)"Withdraw Yourself From Such [People]"

[Pastor Keller serves at St. Stephen Ev. Lutheran Church, Adrian, Michigan.]

Brian R. Keller

Church fellowship is like a two-sided coin. On the positive side we place the Bible passages in which our Lord encourages us to join in visible, confessional, church fellowship with those who confess God's truth in full unity with us (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:10; 3 John 8). On the negative side we place the Bible passages in which our Lord commands us to keep away from visible, confessional, church fellowship with persistent errorists and their followers (e.g., Romans 16:17; 2 John 10).

1 Timothy 6:5 was customarily added to that latter list.¹ Today, it seems to be cited much less often. Perhaps the reason for not citing 1 Timothy 6:5 when discussing separation from persistent errorists has to do with the fact that the applicable reading, "Withdraw yourself from such [people]," cannot be found in the NIV. In fact, most modern translations no longer even accord this reading a footnote. Bible students will find this sentence included in the text of the KJV and NKJV ("From such withdraw yourself"). The NRSV grants the reading a footnote. We normally do not cite this translation due to its weaknesses, but for this variant reading the citation of the NRSV is significant, since Bruce Metzger served as the chairman of the Committee on Translation for the NRSV. The footnote says, "Other ancient authorities add *Withdraw yourself from such people.*" The attentive lay Bible reader may wonder who is right? Is the NIV right for omitting any reference to the sentence at all? Or, have the KJV and the NKJV chosen better by placing the reading in the text? Or, has the NRSV made the safest choice of all, in this case, by inserting this variant in a benign footnote?

Most contemporary commentaries state that this variant is not in "the best manuscripts." Some commentaries state that this variant has very weak attestation, since it is not found in the early Greek texts. Some opine that this reading was added by a later copyist, who felt it was needed to complete the thought. Some commentaries have chosen not to mention the reading at all. It may be hard to find a scholar who is in favor of including the variant reading in the text, unless he is part of the "KJV only" group.

Some pastors may not feel qualified to venture into textual criticism. Most who feel this way will be hesitant to use this passage if it doesn't even merit a footnote in most of today's English Bibles. It will be easier to follow the NIV and just ignore this variant.

A careful study of the textual apparatus, however, reveals that this variant should not be dispensed with so easily. In fact, the different views concerning this variant demonstrate how different theories of textual criticism can yield very different results. Many of today's scholars base the analysis of Greek manuscripts on the theory espoused by Westcott and Hort that the best and purest manuscripts are the Alexandrian uncials, especially \aleph and B. Alexandria (Egypt) has indeed been the source of ancient copies of the New Testament manuscripts, but should these copies be considered primary, while equally ancient copies from other areas are considered inferior or secondary? It is wise to take into account all of the early manuscript evidence from all of the areas of the Mediterranean world where copies of the New Testament were made during the early centuries of the Christian era, rather than to limit the focus to only a few copies from one area.²

Consider the evidence provided from Byzantium (Asia Minor) and Antioch (Syria), for example. Careful study has revealed that the Byzantine manuscripts, while neither superior to the Alexandrian witnesses nor inferior to them, merit equally careful consideration. Westcott and Hort claimed that the Byzantine texts were inferior to and dependent on the Alexandrian texts.³ Harry Sturz marshaled convincing evidence to refute

¹ Cf., e.g., Seminary *Dogmatics Notes* (The Church, VII. 4); F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III, p. 422; C.F.W. Walther, *Essays for the Church*, I, p. 211.

² D. Kuske, *The History and Practice of New Testament Textual Criticism*, p. 15.

³ Harry Sturz, *The Byzantine Text-Type & New Testament Textual Criticism*, p. 129.

this claim. The case for the importance of early evidence from Antioch begins with information given in the New Testament. Sturz wrote:

Antioch may well have been the prime source of the earliest copies of most of the New Testament Scriptures for newly established churches. It will be recalled that Antioch was the place where the first Gentile missions originated; it was the home base for the apostle Paul; Luke may have been there; Mark, Barnabas and Silas, Paul's companions were there; Peter visited Antioch; Matthew may have written his Gospel there. Paul himself could have double-checked the local copies of his own epistles which were thus far possessed by the church at Antioch before he made his last journey from that place....Furthermore, the apostles and other early Jewish members of the Antiochian church had the tradition of Israel's careful copying of the Scriptures as an example for their care.⁴

Sturz added that it is "difficult to believe that Antioch would look to Alexandria for help" in obtaining reliable manuscripts, due to "the difference of attitude toward Scripture and its interpretation which existed between the theological schools of the two cities."⁵ Further, studies of the papyri have revealed that the Byzantine text reproduces ancient readings which date all the way back to the second century.⁶

With that in mind, consider the available evidence on the chart appended to this brief. The chart provided uses bold print for witnesses which include the reading ἀφίστασο ἀπὸ τῶν ποιούτων and italics for those which omit it. It may be helpful to use one color to highlight the witnesses which include the reading and another color to highlight those which omit it. All of the witnesses on the chart are ancient and date back to the first five or six centuries. The witnesses are divided into six areas of the world. The reading which is the earliest and the most widely attested among the various areas is most likely the original on the basis of the external evidence. After examining the chart of evidence, we see that the situation is not as clear, simple, and easy as one may have been led to think. The evidence for including the reading is just as early and just as widespread as the evidence provided for omitting the variant. (It should be noted that the dates and locations of some of the witnesses listed on the chart are debated.)

Briefly consider each section on the chart.

North Africa (Carthage)

The apparatus cites two witnesses from this area. Speculum is a witness that appears in the 4th Revised Edition of the UBS text. Cyprian, who died in 258 A.D., is a very early witness. Both include the reading ἀφίστασο ἀπὸ τῶν ποιούτων.

Gaul/Italy

The earliest witness from this area of the world is the church father, Irenaeus, who was considered "the most eminent teacher of the Church in the second half of the second century."⁷

He lived roughly between 120-200 A.D. The UBS text lists his name in favor of including the reading ἀφίστασο ἀπὸ τῶν ποιούτων. The evidence from the fourth and fifth centuries is virtually even. Lucifer of Calaris (Sardinia, d. 370 A.D.) includes the reading. The Vulgate omits it, but some of its manuscripts include the variant. Ambrose leaves it out, but Ambrosiaster includes the reading. This section may be considered split, but since the earliest witness includes the reading, one may consider it slightly in favor of inclusion.

⁴ Sturz, p. 105; cf. Acts 11:25-26; 12:25; 13:1-5; 15:30-40; Galatians 2:11.

⁵ Sturz, p. 106.

⁶ Sturz, p. 55-69, 145-159.

⁷ 1954 version of the *Lutheran Cyclopaedia*, p. 523.

Asia Minor (Byzantium)

As mentioned, the Byzantine texts and lectionaries contain readings which date all the way back to the second century. Byzantine texts and lectionaries include the reading ἀφίστασο ἀπὸ τῶν τοιούτων. This section is in favor of inclusion.

Syria (Antioch)

The ancient evidence provided in this section is unanimous in favor of including ἀφίστασο ἀπὸ τῶν τοιούτων. This is one question of textual criticism in which the versions printed in other languages, such as Syriac, are very helpful. Regardless of the language of the text one can tell whether this sentence is included or not.

Palestine (Caesarea)

Origen (d. 253 A.D.) does not include the reading. He was a contemporary of Cyprian (cf. North Africa). Origen might also be included in the next column, Egypt.

Egypt (Alexandria)

Today's scholars usually give this section undue weight. Early Alexandrian witnesses clearly favor omission. Coptic (Sahidic and Bohairic) and the Greek manuscripts) and A omit the words. In later texts from this area the words are included.

Conclusion

Palestine (Caesarea) and Egypt (Alexandria) do omit the words. North Africa (Carthage) and Syria (Antioch) unanimously include the words ἀφίστασο ἀπὸ τῶν τοιούτων. Asia Minor (Byzantium) favors inclusion. Gaul/Italy is divided, but the earliest witness (Irenaeus, second century) includes the reading.

Overall, the evidence for including the reading is at least as strong as that which would omit it, if not even stronger. At the very least, it cannot be claimed that the reading is late. It dates all the way back to the second century. In addition, the reading is widespread. Five of the six sections have witnesses that include the reading. Only four sections have witnesses that omit it. The external evidence alone seems to indicate that the reading ἀφίστασο ἀπὸ τῶν τοιούτων merits at least a footnote in the English Bible. But does it merit inclusion in the text?

Bruce Metzger wrote, "If it [this reading] were present originally, no good reason can be assigned for its omission."⁸

But this argument from silence is not convincing. The opposite could be said just as well. If it were not present originally, no good reason can be assigned for its addition. It is similar to a few other passages, but does that argue for inclusion or omission? It is not convincing proof in either case. Metzger seems very certain when he writes that this reading "must be rejected as a pious but banal gloss," but that conclusion is far from certain in light of the evidence. Perhaps his rejection stems from preferential treatment of the Alexandrian witnesses. The "banal gloss" comment seems to be a guess which lacks convincing evidence. At least Metzger agrees that "the reading is ancient," a point missed by more than a few commentaries.⁹

The reading fits well with the context. The second person singular present imperative ἀφίστασο follows the second person singular present imperatives δίδασκε καὶ παρακάλει at the end of verse 2. The apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, addressed Timothy directly. The (continuing) commands involve teaching and

⁸ Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [1994], p. 576.

⁹ Metzger, p. 575.

urging the very words of God (ταῦτα). Ἀφίστασο (a middle form of ἀφίστημι) literally contains the idea, "stand off." Thayer properly clarifies that this word means "to withdraw one's self from, to keep one's self away from, to absent one's self from anyone's society or fellowship, 1 Tim. vi. 5."¹⁰

To "keep away" or "withdraw" from persistent errorists means to refuse to be involved in visible, confessional, church fellowship. It does not mean to leave society as a whole (1 Corinthians 5:10).

The preposition ἀπό precedes the genitive τῶν τοιούτων (cp. Romans 16:17, ἀπ' αὐτῶν). "Withdraw yourself from such [people, those previously mentioned]." This genitive plural fits well with διεφθαρμένων ἀνθρώπων...ἀπεστερημένων... νομιζόντων in verse 5. Τῶν is an anaphoristic article (previous reference).¹¹ The persons to be avoided are any who fit the description in the preceding words:

(1 Timothy 6:2b) These are the things you are to teach and urge on them. (3) If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, (4) he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions (5) and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain (NIV)...*Withdraw yourself from such people* (NRSV, footnote).

These words would take a place alongside Romans 16:17 and 2 John 10 on the negative side of the church fellowship coin. The reading seems to merit a footnote, at the very least, if not inclusion in the text. This very ancient and widespread reading reminds us to be careful in our practice of visible, confessional, church fellowship.

A Chart on 1 Timothy 6:5 (variant)						
Key: Bold print: include ἀφίστασο ἀπὸ τῶν τοιούτων						
<i>Italic print:</i> omit ἀφίστασο ἀπὸ τῶν τοιούτων						
1 Tm 6:5	N. Africa (Carthage)	Gaul/ Italy	A&18 Minor (Byzantium)	Syria (Antioch)	Palestine (Caesarea)	Egypt (Alexandria)
I						
II 100 to 200		Irenaeus	Byzantine	Lectionaries		
III 200 to 300	Cyprian				<i>Origen</i>	<i>cop^{sa}</i>
IV 300 to 400		Lucifer ^{Sardinia} <i>Vulgate (Mss)</i> <i>Ambrose</i> Ambrosiaster	<i>goth^A</i> goth^B Basil	Theodore Ephraem Chrysostom		<i>Aleph</i> <i>cop^{bo}</i>
V 400 to 500	Speculum	<i>it^d it^b</i> <i>D* D^c</i> Paulinus- Nola <i>048</i>	061 Byzantine	syriac^p Armenian Theodoret syriac^h Lectionaries		<i>A</i> Euthalius

¹⁰ Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 89.

¹¹ Cf. Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, pp. 217-218.

VI		<i>it</i>				ethiopic
----	--	-----------	--	--	--	-----------------

Notice: A Chart listing the dates and provenance of various NT manuscripts can be found at the WLS web site at: <http://www.wls.wels.net/publications/WLQ/man.htm>