

The Historical Background And The Comparison in Thought of the Biblical Commands In Matthew 18:17; Romans 16:17, 18; 2 Corinthians 6:14; and 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15.

By: Carl Lawrenz

Dear brethren in the ministry, you have asked me to present an essay on the historical background and the comparison in thought of the biblical commands in Matthew 18:17; Romans 16:17,18; 2 Corinthians 6:14; and 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15. The thought behind your assignment is a very proper one. We will not want to lose sight of the context in which the various Biblical precepts are expressed lest we apply them in a way that is not warranted. The thought of carefully examining the historical background of the very passages mentioned or listed in your assignment is, however, not a new one. These passages are some of the leading passages in which members of the Synodical Conference have through all these years found divine commands bidding them to withhold an expression of church fellowship. Particularly during the last twenty years there has been a great deal of inducement for a careful examination and re-study of these passages. Dr. Reu's essay, "In the Interest of Lutheran Unity," sent out also to every pastor of our synod in 1940, was such a challenge for study; for in this essay he questioned the traditional Synodical Conference application of many of these passages. Also a challenge for re-study was the publication and dissemination of "Speaking the Truth in Love" by the Missourian Statementarians in 1945; so was Dr. Theodore Graebner's pamphlet on "Prayer Fellowship"; so in general has been the entire growing impact of the Ecumenical Movement, especially also as it manifested itself in the trend toward closer alignment of Lutheran church bodies not yet fully united in doctrine and practice. There is this challenge to careful examination also in the cost recent Missouri Synod presentation of *Principles Governing the Exercise of Fellowship*:

"While the church today must seek to live, as it must seek to live in every age, in obedience to the apostolic Word., it cannot simply revive or reproduce the conditions of apostolic times. The apostolic indicatives and imperatives concerning the church cannot be automatically transferred to present-day confessional-organizational groupings. Rather, their intent must be faithfully understood and brought to bear on the altered and complex contemporary situation."

Those serving on our synod's Commission on Doctrinal Matters, or as we formerly simply called it, the Union Committee, were therefore frequently called upon, directly and indirectly, formally and informally, to re-examine- the historical background and the context of the passages listed in your assignment, because either our own application had been contested outside of our synod or because confusion concerning these precepts and their relation to one another had arisen in our own synodical circles. It was particularly my venerable teacher and present colleague, Professor John Meyer, who was frequently called upon to lead us in such a re-examination of these vital passages from Matthew, Romans, 2 Corinthians, and 2 Thessalonians. He was particularly qualified to lead us because of his thorough knowledge of his Greek New Testament and his rich study of Near Testament historical backgrounds. These studies in which the rest of us learned from him and with him have been made available in *Quartalschrift* articles, particularly his article on Prayer Fellowship, his study on II Thessalonians, and his running commentary on II Corinthians.

A caution needs to be expressed, however, against the over-emphasis on historical background. Some Scriptural precepts are of a very general nature expressing God's holy will as it pertains to some phase of conduct and remains quite unchanged for any pertinent situation. The historical background in which the general precept was set forth may still be of value in helping us fully to grasp what the abiding holy will is that has been set forth in a general way. Still the historical background is in this case of minor importance and the general precept may also be understood quite satisfactorily even though the immediate context in which it was expressed is not fully known. General principles and directives are very often found in a context that is very concrete and specific. This does not mean, however, that the principle only applies in an identical situation.

Consider 1 Samuel 16:7: “For the Lord seeth not as man seeth; but man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.” This general truth certainly has a very wide application and is not merely pertinent when someone is choosing a king. In other instances, of course, general directives are found in specific contexts in which the context leaves its imprint upon some aspects of the directive. Yet the directive with necessary qualification applies over a wider area, far beyond the scope of its particular context. Consider 2 John 9-11: “Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.” Embedded in this passage is a general precept to withhold fellowship from persistent errorists. For the reason adduced for withholding such fellowship, “For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds,” would apply equally well to any persistent errorist. Yet the judgment on the errorists involved that they do not have God pertains only to the type of errorist with whom John’s readers were dealing.

Besides general directives there are, however, also other commands and precepts in Scripture which give counsel to very specific individuals in very concrete life situations. These precepts and commands likewise have a message for us in our own life situations; like all Scripture these practical precepts have been written for our learning. Yet the message lies in the underlying principles out of which the very specific and concrete precept is addressed to a specific individual in a very definite situation in life. Here the historical background is generally much more vital in establishing what the underlying Scriptural principles really are, and in determining what is purely incidental, applying to the specific case. WE need to determine whether any of the passages listed in this assignment are of that nature or whether they all involve direct assertion of general principles.

In the very first passage which we wish to study in its historical background the Savior says, “And if ye shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: and if ye neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican.”

Here the church is enlisted to admonish a brother ensnared in a sin; Christians are also bidden to declare something if such a brother fails to give heed to the admonition of the church. Hence we have reason to ask, first of all, whom the Lord means with the church. We find that only twice does the Savior use the term *ecclesia*, here rendered as church in the English translation. Jesus uses the term here in this passage and used it previously in Matthew 16:18 during the solemn questioning of the disciples at Cesarea Philippi. In the earlier passage Jesus very clearly means the communion of saints, the gathering of all believers, the entire number of those who are united with him and with one another by a common faith in Jesus as their divine Redeemer, all those who with Peter believe and confess that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Savior, and as such the Son of the living God.

In the first part of the 18th chapter of Matthew Jesus then speaks of some of these members of His church of believers; He speaks of the little children who believe on Him and points out what a dreadful thing it is to offend any one of them, that is by word or deed to do anything that would cause them to suffer harm in their faith or lose it altogether. Suffering a violent drowning in the depths of the sea would not be too high a price to pay, if that could keep one from becoming involved in the guilt of causing a little believing child to lose its faith. Reminding us of what a shepherd will do for a lost sheep, Jesus bids us to realize that the Heavenly Father’s saving love goes out in equal measure to every believer who is in danger of being lost, in danger of perishing.

Then Jesus shows us how we can and should pay our full debt of love as God’s children toward the sinning brother:

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it to the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Jesus assumes the situation that a brother, a member of His church, this body of believers, has fallen into a sin and remains ensnared in this sin. His brethren cannot leave him in the lurch; they will at once want to swing into action to save him. They know, from experience, the treachery of sin and the difficulty of a brother who has been overtaken by a sin. They are themselves all sinners who must daily pray the Fifth Petition in their own behalf. The witness of this brother's fall will speak to him first alone about the case, several times probably if he thinks that that can serve his purpose of winning the brother. If his admonition and testimony succeed, he has the great joy of having won his brother. If his testimony does not succeed, however, he will want to call in one or two further brethren that they may support him with their Christian testimony. If that also proves unsuccessful, he will tell it to the church, in the hope that the unanimous testimony of all the brethren may cause him to see the full guilt and curse of his sin and induce him to take refuge from it with a penitent heart to the Savior's gracious pardon.

If the sinning brother neglects to take to heart also the appeal coming to him from the whole church, then Jesus says "Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican," *esto set hosper o ethnikos kai o telones*. Then like the heathen and the God-estranged publican he is outside of the church. Every brother individually and also all of them collectively are to regard him as being outside of the church. The bond which once united him with Christ and His spiritual body of believers has been manifestly severed. Sin as such does not disrupt the fellowship with Christ and with it the fellowship of the church—all sins have been washed away in the blood of Jesus our divine Savior—but a refusal to turn away from his sin to the Savior and His gracious cleansing, refusal to accept the testimony of the church, given in the spirit and in the name of Jesus and calling the sinner to such penitent faith does cut off from the blessed fellowship of the church. The Lord does not want us to recognize and treat anyone as a Christian brother who in spite of all brotherly admonition impenitently clings to a sin. We are to regard him as a heathen man and as a godless publican. His and our own spiritual welfare call for termination of church fellowship. That the brethren whose admonition he has rejected in impenitence are not only to regard him as standing outside of the church as a heathen man and a publican, but are also to give expression to this individually and collectively is made clear by the words with which the Savior continues. "Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven..."

The church of which Jesus is here speaking is clearly the fellowship of brethren, the gathering of believers. No heathen men are found among its members. Anyone revealed as a heathen man can no longer be recognized or acknowledged as one of them. Like the individual believing brother who begins the admonition and like the two or three whom he subsequently enlists to join him in this admonition, so also all those constituting the church in this precept of the Savior are concerned about the spiritual welfare of the brother ensnared in a sin. Jesus speaks and thinks of them as all testifying alike to such a brother who has become involved in a sin in order to win him. That is clearly the communion of saints, the *una sancta* at a specific place confessing, the church of believers in action in the world. We need to note the obvious numerical progression; one brother, two or three brethren, the church, the larger communion of brethren, the many brethren, as many as can be practically enlisted in this urgent endeavor of love. That is also verified by 2 Corinthians 2:6 where this function of the church is under discussion and where Paul says: "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted by many." Very obviously we have quantitative expressions in each case here, in Matthew verse 15, verse 16, and verse 17: first admonition on the individual and personal level; then continued admonition by enlisting the help of several additional brethren; finally admonition as the urgent concern of the larger communion of brethren, as many as can be practically enlisted, yet with the matter brought to their attention not as one man's word against another's, but as established by two or three witnesses.

But you may ask, how is the church as the communion of many brethren, the gathering of believers, to be found practically for the purpose of telling them about the manifest sin of a brother, for the purpose of enlisting their unanimous testimony to win him back to repentance. It would be presumptuous to try to find believers on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts. The obvious answer must be: we can find the church only by its marks, the right use of Word and Sacrament. This is only the answer that Scripture has for our question, Where can I find the church? When we are intent upon enlisting the many brethren to win a brother

who has fallen into sin we turn to those who with us profess faith in the Savior and who wish us express this common faith by being gathered about the pure Word and the Sacraments.

Since believers ordinarily live at some local place, the Holy Spirit through their common faith then first of all gathers them together locally around the Word and Sacrament so that their faith may be nourished and replenished through regular use of the Means of Grace. In other words, the local congregation generally becomes the primary grouping of believers, the primary form of the church. Hence the God-enjoined considerations of Christian love and order (1 Cor. 14:33, 40; 1 Cor. 16:14) will cause us to turn to it first of all when an occasion arises for us to carry out the Savior's bidding: "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it to the church." Christian love and order would never let us turn to some secondary grouping of believers in such a way that thereby the functioning of the local congregation as the primary form would be hampered and ignored. Yet we need to note that the priority status of the local congregation in Christian discipline does arise out of the considerations, divinely enjoined, of Christian love and order. For wherever two or three believers are gathered in Christ's name, be it formally or informally, be it to glorify God together, to commune together, to pray together, or to engage in any other joint expression of their Christian faith, there is a little church upon earth, there is the *una sancta* active and confessing, there Christ is in the midst of them. (Matthew 19:19, 20; Romans 16:5).

We need to note that as the Savior journeyed about with His disciples in the Holy Land during His public ministry there was no local congregation yet called into existence in quite the form in which we are ordinarily accustomed to think of one. At most the Savior's Word assumes that there will be local groups of Christians who can be called together to help raise up a fallen brother. We also need to note that the Savior's Word itself places no limitation on the size, the form, the constitution of the *ecclesia* that is to be enlisted. There is nothing that the Lord says here with reference to the church that could not with equal property be applied to a circuit, a conference, and also a synod. They, too, can be appealed to as brethren; they, too, can testify as brethren.

Shifting the emphasis here from the Christian obligation of trying to save a fallen brother to the establishment of a unique status for a specific form of the church leads to the establishment of a unique status for a specific form of the church leads to a legalistic interpretation of Christ's exhortation regarding the use of the keys of heaven. For what the church is to do also when someone, who thus far has been a brother in its midst, shows himself manifestly impenitent, is to use or administer the keys of heaven, in this case the binding key. The impenitent individual is to be told that he has manifested himself as a heathen man and a publican, that with his impenitence he has placed himself outside of Christ's church. We commonly designate this action with the term excommunication. No further expression of fellowship together with such an excommunicated person until he repents is possible. This pronouncement of judgement is in itself an action born out of love, the only action of love on the part of the church still possible under the circumstances. Such an excommunication is to shock the sinner into a realization of what his impenitent clinging to a sin really involves and means.

Paul's epistles to the Corinthians give us an illustration of such an effect. A member of the Corinthian congregation was living in a state of incest, offensive even to heathen. The sad thing here was this that the members of the congregation were tolerant and indifferent about it. They had failed to function as true brethren. Since this fornicator now clung to his sin, abetted by their neglect, to deliver him to Satan was all that was left for the Corinthians to do. Paul urged it (1 Cor. 5:1-6), practically formulating the resolution of excommunication for them. They were to take this action in order that this man's Old Adam might be crucified and his spirit be saved, if possible, in the day of the Lord Jesus. Also their own spiritual welfare demanded such action. Paul warned: "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" In his second epistle Paul is able to allude to the happy outcome. The congregation had taken the apostle's rebuke to heart and had dealt according to his instructions. As a result the sinner had repented and Paul could now urge the Corinthians to receive him anew as their brother.

From all of this it is very evident that only manifest impenitence with regard to a manifest sin calls for excommunication according to Matthew 1:17. Impenitent clinging to a manifest doctrinal error comes into consideration as well as impenitent clinging to manifest sinful conduct. When a brother has actually fallen into

an error, yet continues to profess full obedience to the Lord and to His Word and cannot be brought to realize and recognize his error, and this error does not necessarily subvert the very foundation of faith, the Gospel message, then manifest impenitence concerning the errorist cannot be established. Hence also excommunication according to Matt. 18:17 is not in place. Chile fellowship with such a persistent errorist cannot be maintained termination of fellowship cannot consist in declaring such a man a heathen man and a publican. Should a former brother, on the other hand, persistently cling to an error that subverts the very foundation of faith, such as a denial of Christ's deity and His vicarious atonement, a denial of the Holy Trinity, a denial of Christ as Savior, then this constitutes a denial of Christian faith, then this is tantamount to manifest impenitence and calls for excommunication. Note that in Matthew 1;17 Jesus speaks of an individual. Since excommunication is a judgment upon manifest impenitence it is evident that only individuals can be excommunicated, not groups.

Romans 16:17,18 is the second passage which we wish to examine in its historical background and then compare in its thoughts with those in the other three passages singled out for special study. Before we can make any useful comment concerning its historical background it will be necessary to become clear as to what the passage itself is saying. The King James version of verse 1? is certainly familiar to all of us: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." Is this a basically correct and acceptable translation of what Paul wrote in Greek first of all to the Romans: "*Parakalo de Was, de humas, adelphoi, skopein tous in tas dichostasias kai ta skandala to skandala gars ten didachen hen para ten didachen hen humeis emathete poiountas, kai ekklinete ap' auton.*"

Since this passage has been so very much under discussion of late everyone here is probably quite familiar with the points of contention on which a basic deviation from the translation of the Authorized Version has been advocated. The first point of contention involves the fact that the Greek words translated as divisions and offenses have articles, *tae tas dichostasias kai ta skandala*. Are these articles specific or generic? The *Authorized Version* takes them to be specific articles, though it feels no need of translating them at all. For nouns defined by a phrase are of necessity specific. The other point of contention is whether the phrase "contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned," *para ten didachen hen humeis emathete*, is adjectival or adverbial. Does this phrase describe the kind of divisions and offenses that are caused and so modify these two nouns? Or is this phrase adverbial? Does it define the manner in which the divisions and offenses are being caused and so modify the verb "cause", which in Greek is a participle used nominally? The *Authorized Version* takes the phrase to be adjectival: "divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned." This grammatical analysis of taking the aforementioned articles to be specific and the aforementioned phrase to be adjectival is grammatically sound.

Others have taken these articles to be generic and the phrase to be adverbial and translated: mark them which are contrary to the doctrine which you have learned cause divisions and offenses. This, however, does not face the fact that instances can seemingly not be adduced either from the Greek New Testament or from Greek literature in which generic articles are used with plural abstract nouns. In divisions and offenses we do have clear plural abstract nouns. This leaves only the other possibility of taking the two articles under discussion to be specific and the phrase to be adverbial. Thus those who do not agree with the grammatical analysis of the *Authorized Version* more generally translate: mark them which contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned cause the divisions and the offenses. If they choose a different word order this is still their grammatical analysis. Grammatically there is nothing against this translation; but it does demand that the immediate context must make it very clear to what the specific articles are referring. Then these articles are left hanging in mid-air.

This then takes us to the question of historical background which we want to examine. Does the immediate or wider context give us a historical background which would clearly indicate certain specific divisions and offenses? A considerable number of interpreters have maintained this. The trouble is, however, that they have not agreed on what the specific reference was. None have been able to bring conclusive proof for their contention. Some have maintained that with the specific article Paul had the divisions and offenses in mind which were caused by the Judaizers with their denial of justification by faith in Christ alone. Yet can this be

maintained with certainty? Professor Kowalke, who does not agree with this contention, refutes their claim quite effectively in his essay on Romans 16:17, 18. He says:

“In all of Romans there is not a syllable in support of the assumption that they were Judaizers of the kind that were troubling the Christians in Galatia. Commentators have imported Judaizers out of Galatia into this epistle without good reason. Those were false brethren unawares brought in who openly opposed Paul’s Gospel. And they were Jews. A search of the Epistle to the Romans reveals only one mention of Jewish enemies of St. Paul. That is in 15:31 where Paul asks the Romans to pray for him that when he comes to Jerusalem he may be delivered from those who do not believe in Judea. Those were not even Judaizers, but Jews who never even pretended to accept Christ in any sense. Furthermore, Acts 28:17 reports that when Paul arrived in Rome (that was at least three years after this epistle was written), the chief Jews in Rome whom Paul called together, assured him that they had not heard anything against him either by letter from Jerusalem or out of the mouth of their Jewish brethren. They even assured him of their desire to hear what Paul had to say, because ‘as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against.’ From that it certainly appears that three years before Paul arrived, there had been none of the kind of hateful activity that threatened in Galatia.”

While we cannot say that the divisions and offenses of Judaizing teachers were the very specific ones which Paul had in mind to warrant specific articles, it would be difficult likewise to assert that Paul’s inspired exhortation did not include them at all. St. Paul did have trouble with Judaizing teachers in a great many congregations. The likelihood that they might come to Rome was therefore also there. In the first five chapters Paul does stress the article of justification through grace by faith alone and develops it very carefully. The Letter to the Hebrews shows us that later on the Christians at Rome were exposed to the danger of falling back into Judaism.

Others again have sought to establish the very specific divisions and offenses, justifying specific articles even with the adverbial analysis of the phrase by connecting Paul’s exhortation in Romans 16:17 with chapters 14, 15, and 16. Professor Kowalke favors this viewpoint in his essay and points to a great many things which could well serve as a background for Paul’s exhortation to mark division-makers and causers of offenses. In chapter 14 Paul speaks at length of the *skandala*, offenses, in connection with the use of *adiaphora*, offenses brought about an inconsiderate conduct of the spiritually strong over against the weak who still had unnecessary scruples, conduct by which the faith of the weak was harmed and by which it could easily be destroyed. Paul warns against divisions caused by the spiritually weak when they are presumed to judge the strong.

Concerning chapter 15, Professor Kowalke writes:

“If we go back to the 15th chapter we find that Paul there strongly emphasizes the unity that exists in the Christian church between believing Israel and the converted Gentiles. He mentions ‘Gentiles’ ten times in that chapter, and his prayer (v.6) ‘that ye may be with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ refers to this unity created by the Holy Ghost (v. 16). It is this unity of believing Israelites and converted Gentiles that furnishes the reason for his wanting to go to Spain. He refers to that in this chapter. He also mentions the collection of money made in Corinth for the benefit of Jews in Jerusalem because that collection was motivated by the debt that the Gentiles owed for having been made partakers of spiritual things. That collection of money was a mark of unity between Corinth and Jerusalem. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, and what happened to him there will be of such intimate concern to the people in Rome that he earnestly entreats their prayers, so that he may visit them on his way to Spain. He then follows with a long list of greetings in the 16th chapter.

“There are 26 names in the list, names of relatives, acquaintances, co-workers, Latin names, Greek names, Jewish names. The accent here is again on the oneness of them all in Christ. He asks the Romans to receive Phebe and to assist her in whatever business she might have need of them; he remarks that not

only he but all the churches of the Gentiles that Aquila and Priscilla for having risked their lives for his sake. He bids them salute each other with the holy kiss, that customary sign of belonging together in Christ, and concludes the greeting with a salute from the churches of Christ outside of Rome. They all belonged together, as is strongly emphasized by their friendly, happy, grateful mention of name after name. There is not a jarring note anywhere in the list of greetings.”

Yet even when we consider everything in these last three chapters at least two different sets of divisions and offenses are already suggested, such as arose in connection with the *adiaphora* on the part of the spiritually strong and the spiritually weak and such as undermined the true appreciation of the unity of the Christian church among Jews and Gentiles. Thus we will again have to say that a reference to very specific divisions and offenses warranting specific articles with the phrase taken adverbially had not been established conclusively. Though we have every reason to think also of all these vital matters touched upon in chapters 14, 15, and 16 when we hear St. Paul’s exhortation to mark those causing divisions and offenses, we can on the other hand, not say with certainty from the context that Paul is specifically speaking of these particular offenses and divisions and none other. In other words, the historical background of Romans 16: 17, 18 bids us to let it stand as a very general closing admonition, leaving room for a wide range of application. Hence the grammatical analysis of the King James version in taking the longer phrase to be adjectival and the articles to be specific covers the situation very well. For with this combination the specific articles are accounted for by the fact that the nouns are more fully defined by the adjectival phrase.

St. Paul is admonishing the Christians at Rome to avoid those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the teaching which they had learned from him and other apostles, teaching which had set forth the whole counsel of God as to faith as well as to Christian conduct flowing out of faith in God’s grace in Christ. This apostolic teaching is also the teaching of the Old Testament Scripture, for as Paul says in Romans 15:4: “Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

With the solemn preference, “Now I beseech you, brethren,” Paul introduces the plea that the Roman Christians should take note of those who are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the teaching which they had learned. They had been properly instructed in Christian truth as it pertained to Christian faith and life. They had again been taught by Paul in this very epistle addressed to them, in which he had veritably presented a thorough and orderly discussion of what pertains to Christian faith and life, of what pertains to human sin, to God’s saving grace in Christ, and to a Christian life of faith-born thankfulness according to God’s holy will. Thus they were well able to keep a watchful eye on anyone who deviated from the teaching which they had learned. Paul earnestly exhorted them to do so.

Here, too, Paul is not thinking of anyone who might casually make an erroneous doctrinal statement, who might unwittingly harbor a false religious concept, who might lapse in weakness or stumble into a bit of un-Christian conduct. No, he had such in mind as cling to their doctrinal error, as adhere persistently in principle to their deviation in Christian conduct, and thereby create divisions and disturb and harm the faith of others. The present participle, *tous poiountas*, seems to bring out the fact that it is something which those against whom he is warning practice habitually. It would mean this in any case insofar as the passage is to apply to former brethren who are causing divisions and offenses contrary to Scriptural teaching. For Scripture is too clear and emphatic in its many exhortations to admonish, correct, instruct, and warn brethren who have been overtaken in a fault that we could understand Paul to mean anything else but persistent causers of divisions and offenses who have rejected all admonition. It will be different, of course, with those who have never been our brethren, who come to us with their divisions and offenses, want to maintain and spread them. In their case the apostle’s exhortation to avoid calls for no admonition before it is to be applied. From this it becomes evident that our obligation to pay our full debt of love in patient admonition is not expressed in Romans 16:17 but may be called for on the basis of other clear passages of Scripture before Romans 16:17 can be applied to a given situation.

Persistent causers of divisions and offenses contrary to apostolic teaching the Roman Christians are to avoid, and that means cease all further fellowshiping with them, every further joint expressions of faith. That Paul does not mean social contact or any other ordinary contacts of life is evident from what he told the Corinthians when they misunderstood his exhortation that they should have no company with fornicators. In 1 Cor. 5:9-11 Paul wrote: "Yet not altogether with fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of this world." No, Paul, when speaking of avoiding errorists, means any contact which would be an acknowledgement and expression of fellowship. "Avoid them" excluded any contact that would have acknowledged the persistent errorist as a Christian brother. It called for a cessation of further joint expressions of faith. These errorists who are to be avoided stand in contrast to the people mentioned in verse 16, who are to receive the holy kiss of Christian fellowship and brotherhood. If the error does not overthrow the foundation of saving faith the termination of fellowship is not to be construed as an excommunication. He may still be a Christian, but his sincerity and personal faith do not prove his error right, nor do they justify continuing in fellowship with him.

Those who question the application of this inspired exhortation to all who persistently deviate from any teaching of God's Word are apt to object that we have stressed the 17th verse of Romans 16 but failed to consider the following 18th verse adequately. In this 18th verse Paul goes on to say: "For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." *Hoi gar toioutoi to kurio hemon Christo ou douleuousin alla te heauton koilia, kai dia tes Chrestologias kai eulogias exapatosin tas kardias ton akakon.* In applying verse 17 to all persistent errorists we have no thought of slighting this 18th verse, yet verse 18 does not give a description by which Paul's bidding to mark and to avoid is restricted only to a certain class of those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to Scriptural teaching. Verse 18 does not serve the purpose at all of telling us whom we are to mark and avoid. It sets before us God's own appraisal and judgement upon all those whom he would have us avoid, namely all persistent errorists. God would have us know in this matter of clinging to error in doctrine and practice, and in defending and disseminating it, they are taking orders from their own heart instead of serving the Lord Jesus in this respect, whether they are fully conscious of it or not, whether this service of their own heart and flesh, though unacknowledged, has fully undermined their faith in the Lord or not. The RSV translates *te koilia* as "appetites." Phillips paraphrases serving their own belly as "but are utterly self-centered." We cannot fellowship with such as though our and their were a common cause. All who follow such an errorist and make his confession their own help to spread it. Those who make common cause with the errorists, too, make it impossible for us to acknowledge them as Christian brethren. St. John in his second epistle, verse 11, says concerning persistent errorists: "He that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds." In more than one way will he be sharing in his evil deeds. He sins against the Lord, being indifferent to His Word. He sins against the church, for he gives offense to its members by leading them to believe that one doctrine is as good as another, thus making Christians indifferent. He sins against the false teachers by strengthening them in their convictions that they possess the truth, instead of helping them by testifying against their error in all meekness. He sins against his own soul, because he exposes himself to the corrupting influence of error, which is never static but spreads. Cf. Acts 13:50. It cannot be maintained that God's judgement in verse 18 only applies to those who are out and out servers of their own heart, of their own interests and desires, that it applies only to those who in no wise still serve Christ our Lord. It cannot be maintained that God's judgement in verse 18 does not also apply to those who only in respect to a certain error which they persistently defend, to which they adhere, and which they seek to propagate are serving their own heart and desires, while they still serve the Lord Jesus, being self-deceived concerning their error.

In this place it is probably in order to ask: How does God's command in Matthew 18:17 compare with Romans 16:17, 18? From all that has been said it should be evident that the precept of Romans 16:17 has the wider scope, but that to a certain extent the precepts to terminate fellowship in the two passages may overlap. In connection with certain persistent errorists the avoiding, the terminating of any further church fellowship, may have to be carried out through a declaration of excommunication. That would be true if the error into which a former brother has fallen and to which he clings in spite of full admonition undermines the very foundation, the

heart of the Gospel. The avoiding, the terminating of further joint expressions of faith would also be carried out through excommunication in other cases where manifest impenitence could be established in connection with persistent adherence of an individual to un-Scriptural doctrine and practice, where the error involved does not necessarily subvert the foundation of faith, manifest impenitence on the part of the persistent errorist will not be established. This will especially be true of those who associate themselves confessionally with the persistent errorists. Here too the “avoid them” of Romans 16:17 applies, through it is a termination of further joint expressions of faith which is not to be construed as an excommunication.

Before God there are indeed only believers and unbelievers. God, who reads the hearts of men, who himself is the one who creates faith in their hearts through the gospel and who himself alone sustains such faith, knows his own and distinguishes them infallibly from all unbelievers. Also concerning all errorists and those following such persistent errorists He knows unmistakably whether they are still believers or whether their error has undermined their faith. It is God who through His Word and Spirit preserves faith in the hearts of many in spite of their involvement in pernicious error. We rejoice in the fact that God in His grace and mercy can and does bring forth, sustain, and preserve believers also in the midst of erring congregations and church bodies. We remember, however, that He does so not through the errors that are taught and condoned there, but only through the true Gospel message that is still heard in these erring churches. Only the Lord Himself knows amidst how much error an individual’s faith in Christ as his Savior can still be maintained.

God binds us Christians here on earth, however, to the confession which men make concerning the attitude of their heart. It would be presumptuous on our part to attempt to recognize people as Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts, or unbelievers on the basis of their unbelief. 1 Samuel 16:7. Those who do not confess Christ as their Savior we are to treat as unbelievers. We are also to declare all those to be unbelievers who reveal their manifest impenitence in word or deed. We are to recognize those as fellow believers who confess faith in Christ as their Savior and with this confession profess obedience to His entire Word. For the Lord binds His believers in a willing obedience to His entire Word, John 8: 31; Matthew 5:19; Revelation 22:18, 19. Hence a confession of Christian faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. For the conscious denial, adulteration, or suppression of any Word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief.

Though a believer in principle always professes full obedience to his Savior’s entire Word, all Christians here on earth are in reality still weak and imperfect in this full submission to His Word. The faith of Christians and its manifestations are marked by imperfections of one kind or another, either in the full grasp and understanding of Scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in their lives. Weakness of faith is not in itself a reason for terminating Christian fellowship. If it were there would be no fellowship. As long as those who confess faith in Christ as their Savior they are ready and willing to receive instruction, admonition, correction, and strengthening through God’s Word in their weaknesses and imperfections, we are to keep on acknowledging and treating them as fellow Christians. Only those who persistently adhere to error in doctrine and practice in spite of all admonition, who show such persistence by demanding recognition for their error and by making propaganda for it does God bid us to avoid. Yet if manifest impenitence cannot be established on the part of such errorists God would have us carry out this avoiding without passing any judgement concerning their faith or unbelief. The most that we can do is to entertain hopes or fears and express them.

How far we are to go, on the other hand, in still acknowledging Christians in their obvious weaknesses as fellow believers and how far we will want to go to pay our full debt of love to the weak by way of patient admonition so that the weak brother may be strengthened and raised up anew, we can see from 1 and 2 Thessalonians. These epistles offer the historical background for a further divine command included in your assignment, the historical background of 2 Thessalonians 3: 14, 15.

As Professor Meyer states in one of his studies of 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, this epistle is not a manual of church discipline. It is a letter of St. Paul to a very young and inexperienced congregation, in which he gives it instruction also with regard to a very specific problem in its midst. He shows the Thessalonians how the new life created by the Gospel in their hearts must be applied also to this situation.

The church at Thessalonica had been founded by St. Paul on his second missionary journey. After having left Philippi Paul came to Thessalonica and preached there in the synagogue on three consecutive Sabbaths. Then he was forced to leave under pressure. Jason, his host, was required to give bond. Though Paul had labored night and day to earn his living while at Thessalonica and though the period of instruction had been very brief he had nevertheless done very thorough work with the Gospel. As we see from various portions of his First Epistle his instruction had been comprehensive in content, including besides the heart of the Gospel of Christ also instruction concerning the Savior's return for judgment and concerning the coming of Antichrist. He had instructed them in various ways in sanctification and taken time even to comfort and exhort and direct individuals as a father does his children. He saw to it that they had congregational leaders.

The congregation at Thessalonica was barely a few months old when Paul wrote his first epistle to them. In the meantime Paul was very much concerned about this young congregation, knowing that it still lacked a deepened understanding of the Gospel and training in applying the Gospel to their individual and congregational lives. The persecution which the congregation suffered from countrymen gave further reason for concern. Though prevented from revisiting the Thessalonians Paul did send some of his co-workers to them, first Timothy and then Silas to strengthen them in their faith and life. Both brought back good reports concerning the faith, love, and hope of the Thessalonians, good reports which had also reached other Christian congregations. Yet there were also definite problems.

Some members among the Thessalonians were weak, some faint-hearted, some even walked *ataktos*. The *Authorized Version* translates *ataktos* as disorderly, but this must be understood in the sense that their conduct violated the tradition, the teaching that they had received from Paul. His disorderliness involved both doctrine and practice. Some of the Thessalonians were not clear on the doctrine concerning Christ's return for judgment, His glorious appearance, which they assumed to be close at hand. They began to act on their false assumptions in that they ceased to work. Note that Paul did not consider it a minor point of doctrine and life. In his first epistle he took note of this disorderliness and wrote: "We beseech you, brethren, . . . that ye study to be quiet and to do your own business and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; that ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing." He likewise urged, "We beseech you, brethren, warn them that are unruly . . ."

The congregation was less than a year old when the apostle followed up with his second epistle. From it we see that these busybodies had not taken Paul's instruction and admonition to heart and that the disorderly conduct had seemingly spread. The apostle exhorted them that instead of getting excited about the nearness of Christ's return, "they should rather be on guard against the terrible apostasy which Satan would cause through the advent of Antichrist," who would be God's judgment upon the Christians in their apathy toward the saving truth of the Gospel. Then he comforted the Thessalonians and strengthened them by pointing to their election.

Yet in the closing chapter of his second epistle Paul was constrained to write: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves (*stellēsthi*) from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which ye received of us." Still farther on in this chapter come the statements of verses 14 and 15 listed in this assignment: "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." *Ei de tis ouch hupakouei to logo hemon dai tes epistoles, touton semeiousthe, me sinanamignosthai auto, hina entrape; kai me hos ecthron hegeisthe, ala noutheteite hos adelphon.*

Even now Paul does not recommend a complete break of fellowship relations. He is still ready to believe that the offenders are not hardened in their course, for he entertains the hope that they may still be brought to blush in penitent shame when they are given to realize how serious their brethren consider their disorderly conduct. Yet their fellowship is to be restricted now in its expressions; brotherly admonition is to be administered through the act of withdrawing from these offenders, through the act of no longer being utterly identified with them in the sight of others. Such withdrawal is to call his brotherly standing into question, so that he may realize that if he persists the congregation will be compelled to separate itself completely and conclusively from him, no longer considering him a Christian brother. Still, this is to be carried out together with an act of withdrawal from these offenders so that the disassociation of the admonishing brethren from the

offensive conduct of the disorderly brethren be made clear. That lies in the *me sunanamignusthai auto*. In his essay *What Do We Mean When We Say 'So Says the Word of God?'* Professor Frederic Blume throws some interesting light on this passage. He first of all says

The KJV translates 'have no company with', reading the imperative form, rather than the better attested and preferable infinitive. The word has been translated to mean 'have absolutely nothing to do with', 'break off all fellowship immediately with.' But let's take a closer look at the word itself and a few passages in which it occurs. The word is a present tense of the so-called Greek middle of the word for 'mix', 'mingle', and it is compounded with one adverb indicating association and another indicating completeness. If we were to translate this form together with the preceding negative quite literally, we should come up with something like 'so as not to continue to be utterly commingled with.' But what can 'continue to be utterly commingled with' mean?

He answers the concluding question in part by a quotation from Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*. The quotation has to do with a use of *synanamignymi* in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri:

The word here appears in the adjective form *synamigos* ('commingled with utterly') and is used of a four-acre plot of ground that some one claims is part and parcel with a larger, fifty-three acre section. The passage is translated by the editors: '(He) stated that these 4 *arourae* acres of Crown land were included in the 53 *arourae* belonging to me.' Here we see that the connotation of the word is not merely that of casual relation. The four acres spoken of go together with the 53 to make one larger unit. Here lies the emphasis, not merely on the point that they lie close to one another, are similar in certain respects, and the like. Evidently here 'being utterly commingled with' means identification so far as the point of view of those on the outside is concerned. The writer knows that the four acres are not the same as the fifty-three. But to an outside observer there will be no distinction; so far as the latter is concerned the 4 acres and the 53 will make one plot of ground.

In Matthew 18 Jesus outlined a mode of procedure in dealing with a sinning brother and showed to what length love will go in its endeavor to win him back, illustrating his point by the parable of the Lost Sheep. Paul adapts these same principles which Jesus enunciated to the case in Thessalonica. In these Thessalonian passages we do not have a general exhortation but counsel, practical counsel for handling a very specific disciplinary case. Naturally it gives guidance for the handling of similar cases; yet not all cases can be handled in quite the same way.

Still left is the discussion of the historical background and the significance of 2 Corinthians 6:11. Our Commission on Doctrinal Matters has not quoted this passage in its Fellowship Theses. Nevertheless it is frequently quoted in the context of fellowship matters, especially over against syncretistic endeavors or practices.

Content analyses of 2 Corinthians very generally place this passage into the final portion of the first section of the letter comprising the first seven chapters. In these seven chapters the Apostle Paul seeks to regain the love and confidence of the Corinthians by endeavoring to remove some false conceptions which they have regarding him and his actions, and above all by exalting the glory of his New Testament ministry with which he ministered to the awakening of Christian faith in their own hearts. The final portion of this first main part is chapter 6:11-16 in which the passage under consideration occurs.

This part begins with the words (6:11): "Oh ye Corinthians; our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged." Phillips quite correctly and idiomatically translates: 'We are hiding nothing from you and our hearts are absolutely open to you.' Yes, in those first chapters, the seven that precede it, Paul had talked very frankly to the Corinthians, he had kept nothing back. Professor Meyer in his *Quartalschrift* commentary on the epistle sums up the apostle's thoughts set forth in these seven chapters as follows: "Some of the trouble in Corinth had

started from the fact that Paul had changed his travel plans; at least, his detractors made this charge an excuse for questioning Paul's sincerity, and then also for casting suspicion and doubt on his Gospel message.

Paul did not brush this aside as too childish, he took up the charge, and in a very friendly way explained the matter. Paul maintained that he does not make his plans in a careless way, nor does he, on the other hand, stubbornly stick to a plan once he has made it. He is serious in making his plans; but they are subject to revision by God's over-ruling providence. In this case he had changed his plans out of consideration for the Corinthians, to spare them (and himself) some very embarrassing moments. Moreover, his personal plans have nothing whatsoever to do with the Gospel which he proclaims. The Gospel is the faithful word of the faithful God, resting on the unshakable foundation of Christ's redemption.

"The fact that he changed his plans is only a minor point anyway; for greater weaknesses may be found in connection with his person. He is an earthen vessel; but this fact will serve to set forth with all the more compelling force the divine power of the Gospel of Christ. In bringing the Gospel to the people Paul does not, and does not have to resort to trickery; he is not 'selling' the Gospel for personal gain or glory' he is bringing it as healing balm to mortally wounded consciences. If it does not save them, that is their own fault because they permitted the God of this world utterly to blind their hearts. But this will not induce Paul to change his methods or to supplement the Gospel message in some other way in an endeavor to make it more palatable to the people. No, he does not grow weary—an understatement—rather, all the more strenuous, under a constraining Christ-like love, will he labor untiringly that the glorious Gospel of God be not received in vain."

On the basis of these facts which Paul had frankly discussed in his letter so far he can now say: Our heart is wide (expanded, roomy). *He kardia hemon peplatuntai*. The Corinthians may have felt that Paul had little room for them in his heart, that other people came first and held the first place in interest and in his affection; they may have felt that if they wished to get into his heart they would find it rather cramped. Paul assured them that there was lots of room for them in his heart. He had showed his deep concern for them. It had made him plead with them not to receive the grace of God in vain. It had made him postpone his visit to avoid an embarrassing situation. It had made him pass up a splendid missionary opportunity in Troas. It had also given him full confidence in them concerning the case of discipline which they had on their hands, the incest case.

The shoe fit on the other foot. Paul says in verse 12: "Ye are not straightened in us, but ye are straightened in your own bowels." He goes on to say in verse 13, "Now for a recompense in the same, (I speak as unto my children), be ye also enlarged." The RSV translation of these verses is probably more readily understood: "Ye are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return—I speak as to children—widen your heart also." Paul means to say: You Corinthians imagine that we lack interest in you because you yourselves have allowed other interests to occupy your heart and thus crowd the interest in the Gospel and therewith a correct evaluation of our work and of our concern for you into some corner. You are receiving into your hearts some element which vitiates the Gospel and which crowd it and its true messengers out of your heart. So Paul is holding back nothing. He has spoken frankly. His interest and concern for the welfare of the Corinthians is as fervent as ever. Now Paul asks them for a return favor. He wants them to reward him with the same complete candor. This reward shall consist in this, that they copy him and walk in his footsteps, that they conduct themselves over against him and the Gospel, which brought them to faith, just as he conducted himself over against them. In order to achieve this, namely that Paul and His Gospel will again have an uncramped position in the hearts of the Corinthians, they will have to throw out some of the things which they have admitted to a greater or lesser degree by listening to Paul's detractors, the false Judaizing prophets that had come to Corinth. Paul writes in verse 14: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers." *Me ginesthe heterotzugountes apistois*. Prof. Meyer gives the happy translation: Do not become mismatched yoke-fellows with unbelievers. Paul alludes to Deut. 22: 10. In itself there may have been no wrong in having an ox and an ass join their efforts under the same yoke. In the Mosaic Law God had, however, declared the one to be clean and the other to be ceremonially unclean. This separation in the Old Testament discipline was also not outwardly to be ignored. Paul applies the principle in asserting that believers and unbelievers are not to be yoked together. If this happens in any venture it will always be at the expense of the truth. If the unbeliever

would accept the truth he would no longer be an unbeliever. He may vary the shade of his error but no matter whether it is an error of the deepest dye, or whether it shows only faintly, it still remains an error, and opposes the truth.

When Paul speaks about unbelievers he does not have a weak brother in mind. The minds of true believers may be tinged with deep and dangerous delusions, but since they are in all humility and prayerfully seeking the truth and willing to be instructed by the Word of God, they are not unbelievers. The Corinthians knew what to do in the case of weak brethren. Paul had devoted several chapters in his First Epistle to this problem. Here he had the false teachers in mind who had disturbed the peace in Corinth and undermined his apostolic ministry. One thing needs to be remembered, however, that they claimed to be ministers of Christ (11:23). In their own estimation their work for Christ was superior to that of Paul. In irony Paul calls them super-fine apostles (11:5). They pretended to preach the Gospel in a more perfect form than Paul. But the warning which Paul addressed to his Galatian churches applied in the present case likewise; these people preached another Gospel which is not another, Gal. 1: 8-9. Concerning such Paul says twice: "Let him be accursed." Whether they were sincere in their conviction when they preached Christ according to this false Gospel is not the point. Paul did not question their conviction. Paul does not question their ability either. He calls them unbelievers because of the pernicious error with which they adulterated the pure Gospel, though they professed allegiance to Christ.

It was probably difficult for the Corinthians to bow to this judgment. These false teachers had come to them as devout men, who devoted themselves to the cause of the Gospel. In their judgement, or at least in the judgment of many of the Corinthians, these false prophets had presented the Gospel in an attractive, fascinating way. It seems that some of the Corinthians felt that they had been enriched and edified by the eloquent presentation of these excellent apostles. Paul bluntly calls them unbelievers and warns the Corinthians against cooperation with them. Any cooperation of a spiritual nature with those who adulterate the Gospel must be avoided. Not to withhold the practice of church fellowship with them would result in an unmatched yoke-fellowship with unbelievers. Paul's opposition to these false teachers who had troubled the Corinthians and undermined his apostolic ministry was not a personal matter; Paul was not ranting against persons. Paul denounced them because of the treacherous errors which they espoused. This is clear from his statement of the reasons with which he motivates his warning: "For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?"

If we keep in mind that Paul used these questions against teachers who claimed to be ministers of Christ and His Gospel but perverted the Gospel, we will have no doubt that the passage still applies to all who claim to be ministers of Christ, Christian teachers, and who may enjoy high acclaim as such but who in their teaching adulterate the Gospel, undermine the material principle of the Gospel, justification by grace alone through faith as a gift of God. It certainly applies to Tillich and Bultmann and many others who in our day are counted great as teachers in the Christian church.

The question still remains whether Paul's admonition, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers," does not also have a wider application beyond that which was made by the apostle in the historical background which we have considered and which suggests similar applications for our day. The length which this essay has already attained will make it impossible to still enter upon this fully. We shall content ourselves with quoting R.C.H. Lenski from his interpretation of 2 Corinthians on this verse:

"With unbelievers" mentions the extreme. Too many read this and the following like the Pharisees read the Commandments: Thou shalt not kill, shalt not commit adultery, as if this forbids only the extreme. Did Jesus, then, expound in vain in Matthew 5:21 etc., showing that every extreme includes everything of the same nature that has not yet reached that extreme? To be sure, the extremes murder and adultery must be named, for many go that far; but this forbids even the very first step in that direction. This is true with regard to total unbelief which makes open mock of Christ. It includes every

bit of unbelief, every repudiation of Christ's doctrine, every little yoke that is not of the true faith. Besser is right when he sees in these yokes unionism with those who repudiate any part of the Word."

It is my understanding that in the four instances in which our confessional writings quote the passage it is being applied both in its primary and in its wider application.

It is my hope and my sincere prayer that this presentation has touched upon most of the questions which you had in mind when you assigned this essay, and that God with His spirit may bless the Scriptural truths set forth to our edification and for true unity in Christ's church.