

COMMENTARY – THESSALONIANS - Elias
BIBLICAL REF – 1 & 2 Thessalonians – Elias

Jacob W. Elias. Believers Church Bible Commentary on *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995),

Ministry of all (I Thess. 5:14-15)

And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.

Paul and his fellow missionaries remind the whole congregation as a whole that no individual or team can accomplish all the needed ministries. The ministry of the church belongs to all. At issue are two related questions: the characteristic behavior of the *ataktoi* which basically means “not in proper order,” and the motivation for such behavior. Some writers attribute their behavior to naïve trust that their needs will be provided or simply benign laziness (hence *idlers* or *loafers*); other see this group as meddlesome, or obstinate resisters of authority (the unruly). Motivation for this idleness or disorderliness is most often found in some form of spiritual enthusiasm, especially the enthusiastic expectancy among those early Christians that Christ would soon come as triumphant Lord. After all, why continue with the normal routines of life, especially working for living, if the return of Christ near? Others argue that the motivations are social in nature: Russell envisions a situation where poor people brought into the circle of Christian love enjoy the attention they get, stop working, and increasingly become dependent on the wealthier members of the church or on those who had better work habits.¹

It therefore seems best to regard the *ataktoi* as a group whose behavior is characterized both by the cessation of work and by a corresponding increase in some of problematic and enthusiastic religious activities. This proves disruptive within the congregation, leads to an unhealthy dependence, and produce a problem for the church within its social context.

Who is the *fainthearted* (5:14)? In the Septuagint it characterizes fearful or grieving people (Prov. 8:14; Is. 35:4; 54: 6). Paul and his missionary colleagues have in mind those who tend to despair in the face of their own suffering (cf. 3:4) and the death of loved ones (4:13). Such people, *the fainthearted*, need comfort. *Help the weak*: Who are the weak? *The weak* could be physically ill (I Cor. 11:30) or beaten down by adverse circumstances (4:10-11).²

The concluding charge was urging to be *patient with them all*. Patience describes an attitude, but it also leads to action: “Love is patient; love is kind” (I Cor. 13:4). The congregation’s caring responses toward the *fainthearted* and *the weak* need to be graced by patience.³

In Rom. 16:1-2, Paul commends **Phoebe** to the church at Rome, urging them to receive her “in the Lord.” Phoebe likely carried Paul’s letter to Rome. Paul’s commendation was designed to help clear the way for the Roman Christians to accept both Phoebe and his letter. Phoebe is described using three titles: “our sister”; “a

¹ Jacob W. Elias. Believers Church Bible Commentary on *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 220.

² Jacob W. Elias. Believers Church Bible Commentary on *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 221.

³ Jacob W. Elias. Believers Church Bible Commentary on *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 222.

minister [RSV: deaconess; NRSV: deacon] of the church at Cenchreae”: and “a leader [RSV: helper; NRSV: benefactor] of many and of myself as well.”⁴

Elias wrote that “my rendering of two of these descriptions of Phoebe departs from that given in most translations.” According to Elias, The Greek word *diakonos* (for the second title) can have the general meaning “servant” (Rom. 15:8) or the more specific meaning “deacon” (Phil. 1:1; 1Tim. 3:8, 12) or “minister” (2 Cor. 3:6; Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:7; 4:7); it is often difficult to know which word best conveys the intended meaning. Translations have tended to relegate Phoebe to the lesser role of deaconess rather than recognized her as a “minister” in Cenchreae with leadership responsibilities. The third title “leader” (*prostatis*, the noun form of the participle *proistamenos*, in Rom. 12:8 and 1 Thess. 5:12) confirms that indeed Phoebe was a leader in her congregation and beyond. In short, Phoebe is an early example of a servant leader, “one who stands before” her people.⁵

⁴ Jacob W. Elias. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 230.

⁵ Jacob W. Elias. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 230.