

Advent Seriousness and Hope's Direction

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him." Matt 3:3

"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." Matt 3:8

Questions were raised at the *Hope's Direction* forum on November 14th regarding I Cor. 5:9-11. Questions are highly welcomed. They help us know the kinds of things we need to be addressing. The questions on the 14th made me realize I needed to give the scriptural subject of disassociating more attention. I also realized I needed to work harder to show how I Corinthians 5 relates to II Thessalonians 3. Here are the passages.

"But I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is continually immoral..." I Cor. 5:11

"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." II Thess. 3:14

It was asked whether or not I Cor. 5:11 necessarily accused the disassociated party of being un-Christian. Secondly, I think there was a question about the posture and tone of the process of disassociation. Just what does it mean to "not associate" with those bearing the name of brother and sister? What posture and tone do these passages convey? II Thess. 3:14 gives clear direction about both of these questions.

After St. Paul told the Thessalonians to disassociate with those not following sound teaching he then specifically told them the disassociated party was still a brother. ("*...but warn him as a brother.*") *This brother designation is not in name only as I Cor. 5:11 could be misconstrued to mean. No. These are brothers.*

First lesson. If we left the ELCA the members of the ELCA would still be our brothers and sisters. We would not be counting them as un-Christian.

But what about the tone and posture of disassociating? Again, II Thess. 3:14 helps us here, along with the larger context of II Thess. 3.

II Thessalonians 3:14 instructs us not to count the disassociated party as an enemy. ("*Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.*")

Second lesson. If we left the ELCA the members of the ELCA would not be counted as enemies. This says a lot about the posture we are instructed to take.

But the context and language of II Thess. 3 instructs us even further about the tone of such a process.

The word “associate” is made from a Greek word that means “*mix up together, or mingle. Or, to have social relations, or join company.*” (Greek English Dictionary, Liddell and Scott, p.52) The New Testament adds a prefix to this word that means “*together or with*”. The prefix intensifies the original Greek word. It could therefore be translated “*do not mix together, together*” - just as we sometimes repeat a word in English to intensify it. (“You mean now, NOW?”) This kind of intensification adds stress on the relational aspect of the phrase “*do not associate/do not mix together, TOGETHER.*”

Paul is clearly concerned about relationships. Disassociation distances us from the invariable lifestyle message. But disassociation is also for the party from whom we are disassociating. (“...***in order that he may feel ashamed.***” II Thess. 3:14) Disassociation is not a license to be rude. It needs to be done – “as much as it depends on us” – in a manner that is for the other.

What kind of tone, then, does the phrase “*do not associate*” have? The word itself is not in-and-of-itself a harsh exclusionary word. The context would tell us this.

Paul provides clues to his tone with parallel synonym words and other comments in the context of II Thessalonians 3.

“I command you, brothers, to “stay aloof” from every brother who... does not live according to the teaching you received from us.” II Thess. 3:6

I retranslated the sentence from “*keep away*” to “*stay aloof*.” Both phrases are possibilities. I chose “*stay aloof*” because of the tone and connotations it carries. One can be with another person and *stay aloof*. It is done as we hold and communicate good boundaries.

“*Staying aloof*” is a parallel concept to “*not associating.*” With this in mind perhaps we should choose the translation “*not join company.*”

“But I am writing you that you must not ‘join company’ with anyone who calls himself a brother but is continually immoral...” I Cor. 5:11

Just as one can “*stay aloof*” from someone even while physically present with them, so one can be physically present with another and “*not join company.*”

My parents are good examples of this. One is a democrat. One is a Republican. Even while husband and wife, with all the togetherness that that means, they do not associate with each other politically. Or, in the language I just used, they do not “*join company*” when it comes to politics. They drive to the polls together. Cancel each other’s vote. Then drive home together.

And they do this without being enemies... with a tone of best wishes for the other (most of the time – smile).

Similarly, to associate with one denomination and not another is to “*join company*” with one and not another. In the end, this process of Hope’s Direction is a question about with whom we “*join company*.”

Third lesson. If we left the ELCA we would “*join company*” with another Lutheran body. But the tone can be done with self-differentiated good will towards the ELCA.

On the first Sunday of Advent, November 28th, we will meet a second time to talk about **Hope’s Direction**. At first I wondered if we should put this off until after Christmas. But then, the more I thought about it, I realized it was quite fitting to think together about repentance in Advent. John the Baptist’s advent cry reminds us of this again.

So, we enter Advent with all the seriousness of the season. We enter it repentantly ourselves. And we enter it seeking **Hope’s Direction**.

Pastor Joel