Introduction

Current leisure textbooks sometimes quote 2 Thessalonians 3:10 to illustrate and explain a biblical view of work. For example, Henderson, Bialeschki, Hemingway, Hodges, Kivel and Sessoms (2001, p. 112) directly quote part of this verse, “If any would not work, neither shall he eat,” to support their statement that “Diligent work is praised as a virtue in several Biblical passages.” While Henderson et al. make reference to one other verse (1 Thes. 4:11), the partial quotation of 2 Thessalonians 3:10 is the only direct quotation they make from the biblical record to support their statement. In a discussion of Christianity and work, Goodale and Godbey (1988, p. 33) do not reference or directly quote 2 Thessalonians 3:10 but they allude to it in a paraphrase: “And Paul, in his missionary work, was quite clear; if you want to eat, then you must work,” and then incorrectly attribute to Paul the phrase from Genesis “From the sweat of thy brow…” In a discussion of the Judeo-Christian view of leisure, Sylvester (1999, p. 24) also quotes this verse, and includes the two subsequent verses as well: “if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. (3:10-13).” Neither Henderson et al., Goodale and Godbey, nor Sylvester, explains the context of this passage. While Sylvester does make reference to, and quotes, other biblical passages, the majority of these refer to God’s work (Gen. 2:2, I Cor. 3:10, Psalm 7:28, Psalm 22:24) or what we would commonly refer to today as spiritual activities (I Cor. 3:9; Matt. 4:19). Two questions arise from the quotation of this verse. First, can 2 Thessalonians 3:10 be understood without an explanation of the context in which it occurs? Second, is 2 Thessalonians 3:10 representative of the entire biblical teaching on work? The purpose of this paper is to investigate these two questions.

Methods

The methodology used to explore the above two questions is that of hermeneutics which “designates the science of explaining and interpreting a text. Hermeneutics generally seeks to establish rules, principles, and methods for use in the interpretive endeavour” (Collins, 1983, p. 416). “The process of interpreting a text—a single phenomenon—can be viewed as including two approaches: exegesis and hermeneutic. Exegesis aims at understanding the text itself, while hermeneutic attempts to elucidate what the text means for the modern interpreter and the people of his culture” (Patte, 1976, p. 3). Proper biblical “hermeneutics” starts with good “exegesis.” Thus hermeneutics requires an understanding of the historical and literary context of the text (Fee & Stuart, 1993). First then, there needs to be knowledge of the historical situation: what is the time and culture of the author as well as the occasion and purpose of the writing. Second, in terms of the literary context, there needs to be an understanding of the language of the text, including its vocabulary, grammar and style, as well as the meaning of words within sentences and sentences within paragraphs. Thus this paper will investigate the historical
and literary context of 2 Thessalonians 3:10, and then determine if and how the text has relevance in another time and culture.

**Results**

**Historical Context.** During his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul visited Thessalonica for several weeks (as recounted in Acts 17:1-10) probably in the early summer of 50 C.E. (Bruce, 1987). However, opposition forced him to leave the city before he was able to deliver all the instruction that he thought was necessary for a newly formed Christian community (1 Thes. 3:10). The newly formed church in Thessalonica experienced active persecution. Paul sent his companion Timothy back to Thessalonica. When Timothy returned to Paul he reported that the Thessalonian Christians were standing firm in spite of persecution. However there were several topics on which they wanted further teaching, in particular, teaching about the return of Christ. Paul was pleased with Timothy’s good report and wrote to encourage these Thessalonian Christians and to respond to their practical problems. His letter, what we know as the first Epistle to the Thessalonians, is thought to have been written towards the end of 50 C.E. The letter is primarily a missionary’s letter to new Christians which includes teaching on eschatology (final times) and the parousia (the personal presence, coming of Christ) in order to clarify some confusion on this topic (1 Thes. 2:19, 3:13, 4:13-5:4, 5:23, cf. 2 Thes. 2:1-12; Bruce, 1987). The second Epistle to the Thessalonians to a large extent deals with a similar situation as that of the first Epistle. The persecution of the Thessalonian Christians seems to be less, but excitement and confusion about the return of Christ exists (Bruce, 1987). Thus a primary reason for writing Second Thessalonians was to clarify a misconception about the parousia: “its main aim is to tell them certain things which will calm their hysteria and make them wait, not in excited idleness, but in patient and diligent attendance to the day’s work” (Barclay, 1975, pp. 182-183).

**Literary Context:** What is the Paul’s thinking and teaching about work in these two letters to the Thessalonians? Paul’s instruction about work in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 must be seen in conjunction with his teaching in his first Epistle to the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 4:11, Paul writes, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.” Commentators see these instructions as a response to the unhealthy situation where there was an overemphasis and hysteria about the second coming of Christ. Some Christians in Thessalonica had a fanatical expectancy about Christ’s return and neglected their work and daily responsibilities which made them a burden on others and gave the Church a bad name (Barclay, 1975; Bruce, 1987; Grayston, 1967). In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-14, Paul is addressing a situation, similar to the one he addressed in 1 Thessalonians, where some Christians thought that Christ’s return was so imminent that they gave up their work and their normal everyday activities to wait about in excited and restless idleness (Andrews, 1926; Barclay, 1975; Bruce, 1987; Grayston, 1967; Henry, 1977). However only some were involved; the problem was not widespread (Grayston, 1967, Forrestell, 1968). The verb Paul uses to describe the idleness of these people is ataktōs, which means to play truant. Within this context he refers to both his own example of working while with them and his previous teaching. He continues with a play on words in the Greek, méden ergazomenous all periergazomenous, which is captured in the N.I.V. translation as “They
are not busy; they are busybodies” (v. 11). In other words they have not only neglected their own activities but they have also interfered in the activities of others.

Discussion

Relevance to Other Contexts. As the findings suggest, this saying occurs in a very specific context where the original readers had a confused understanding of eschatology and expected the immediate return of Christ. Therefore direct applications to other contexts require caution. It is important to note that the verse states “If any one would not work” and not “If any one does not work.” Stott (1990, p. 178) noted that “it was addressed to the voluntary, not involuntary, employed.” Similarly, Whitely (1969, p. 109) stated, “The passage deals with refusal to work, not with inability to do so. In the 1930s it was necessary to stress this fact because millions were unemployed against their will…”

One commentator provides an example of a modern situation that might be similar to the original context of this verse. McGee (1983) describes a situation where two students at theological seminary sat in their dormitory and did not show up for meals nor engage in the daily activities as they thought they would receive some sort of special revelation if they waited patiently.

Biblical Teaching on Work. Given the specific context of this saying, on its own, it is not reflective of the total biblical understanding of work. A biblical understanding of work can only be developed through a thorough review and exposition of dozens of references to work and related terms that appear throughout the Bible. The biblical understanding of work is a much broader concept than the contemporary understanding of work as a job. In biblical times work was not its own distinct sphere of life, but was integrated with worship and the home which often was also the workplace (Preece, 1997). The Genesis creation account (Gen. 1-3) and other Old Testament passages provide the reasons for work: to meet human needs including service to others and the community; to bring human fulfillment; and to care for the earth (Preece, Stott). The wisdom literature suggested that work was part of the natural created order of the world just as the sun rises or lions hunt (Ps. 104: 19-23). The so-called “house tables” found in the Epistles (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim. 6: 1-2; Titus 2:9-10; and 1 Pet. 2:18-25) contain the most specific teaching that we find in the New Testament on the subject of daily work. These passages explain the attitude and responsibilities of Christian slaves (douloi, i.e., workers) who carried out the daily labour of the household, farm and workshop in the biblical world; basically they were the labouring classes. In these passages work is seen as the expression of an attitude, a spirit of thanksgiving to God.

The biblical record also placed limits on the extent and value of work. For example, the Sabbath commandment is more central to Israelite life than any of the other Old Testament instructions. Not only is it longer than any other of the commandments in the Decalogue, but it is reformulated and discussed throughout the Old Testament. The Sabbath inculcated not only one day’s rest in seven, even for slaves, but also an attitude of joy and celebration (Heintzman, 1994). In addition, the Old Testament wisdom book, Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) critiques workaholism and advocates an enjoyment of life in creation which is a gift of God (Johnston, 1976, 1983; Whybray, 1982). Furthermore, the value placed on work in the biblical record is balanced by several other biblical elements, such as the concept of rest (ranging from a pleasant, secure and blessed life in the land to a spiritual rest; Heintzman, 1994) and festivals (e.g., Feasts of Passover, Weeks, and
Booths; Johnston, 1983). A biblical perspective on work needs to take all of this material into account.

**Actual or Potential Applications**

The saying “If any would not work, neither shall he eat” from 2 Thessalonians 3:10 has no doubt been quoted out of context by Christians and leisure scholars. If it is not put into its historical and literary context, the saying definitely suggests a strong work orientation and even sounds overly harsh and callous to contemporary readers including leisure studies students who may not be familiar with biblical texts. It is important to understand this verse within its original context and within the total biblical teaching on work which is conditioned by other biblical elements suggestive of leisure. In a paper on hermeneutics which included an application to Aristotle’s writings, Sylvester (1990, p. 292) wrote that “Ideas do not come freeze-dried in vacuum-sealed pouches, conveniently ready to heat and serve as operational constructs. Instead, ideas are deeply embedded in the flux and flow of history.” This principle is also applicable to biblical texts. Care is needed in presenting biblical verses in leisure textbooks so that the historical and literary context of the verses is explained along with the place of these verses in the overall biblical understanding of work and leisure. Such care is especially needed in today’s society when students have little familiarity with biblical texts. Finally, summaries of biblical themes are more helpful than the quotation of isolated verses when explaining biblical concepts such as work.

**References**


Henderson, K.A., Bialeschki, M.D., Hemingway, J.L., Hodges, J.S., Kivel, B.D., &


