

Some Words About...

by Terence Y. Mullins

This article appeared in *Lutheran Partners* (www.elca.org/lutheranpartners), July / August 2005 • Volume 22 • Number 4

Apotithenai (throw off) – ἀποτιθέναι

The Greek word *apotithenai* meant to “throw off” or “discard.” In 2 Maccabees we are told that Nicanor “threw off his fine clothes” and fled to Antioch (8:35). And Josephus tells us that Jeroboam ordered his wife to “throw off her robes” and dress like a peasant woman to see the prophet Ahijah and ask if their son would live (Antiquities 8,266).

New Testament Use

In Acts 7:58 the lynch mob that was out to stone Stephen to death “threw off their robes at the feet of a young man,” Saul. This was the equivalent of rolling up their sleeves. Saul was too young to take part in the stoning, but he was with the mob all the way.

Writing to the congregations in Rome, Paul says “Let us throw off the works of the dark and put on the equipment of the light” (13:12). He describes some of the activities that constitute the works of the dark and says to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, the true light.

The Ephesians are reminded of the life they have learned in Christ and that they “were taught to throw off the old self” (4:22) and be clothed with the new self they were taught in Jesus. The rest of the letter spells out some specifics of the new self, particularly the need to get rid of anything concerning conflict. “Throw off all ill will...” (4:31).

Paul lists some of the immoral acts the Colossians engaged in before they knew Christ (3:1–7). Then he says “Now throw off” all attitudes and acts that are unworthy of the followers of Jesus Christ (3:8–11), including prejudice and those things which might set one part of the body of Christ against another. They must roll up their sleeves and work at the job of Christianizing their society.

The author of Hebrews, too, speaks of rolling up sleeves and getting to work for Jesus. He says “Let us throw off every weight and sin” (12:1) that hinders us.

Even James, who is not the most vigorous of New Testament writers, urges “Therefore throw off all filth and encumbrances of evil” (1:21).

Having described the graciousness of Christian living (1 Peter 1:6–25), Peter says “Therefore, throwing off all evil” (2:1), be as eager for the milk of the Word as if you were newborn babes. Like the other early Christian letter writers, Peter presents the Christian life as a clearing of the decks for action. One gets rid of interpersonal vices not to achieve sainthood but to be able to accomplish the work inherent in the Word of God so that the world might “see your honorable deeds and glorify God” (2:12).

Today

New Testament letter writers regarded evil as an impediment rather than a disease. It was something that could be thrown off like a heavy overcoat that was keeping one from clearing the hurdles of life. Their message was “kick the habit.”

The deeper problem of addiction was seldom dealt with, probably because of the nature of the letters written to help fellow Christians live their lives. These were not philosophical or psychiatric treatises.

The recorded attempt of Paul to deal with a person addicted to evil was a nice try (Acts 16:16–9). His attempts to throw off encumbrances on his own nature are graphically depicted in Romans 7:19–25.

We do not throw off bad habits so that we may achieve spiritual bliss or so that we may appear as shining exemplars or heroes. We throw off bad habits so that we may be unhindered in spreading the gospel. Like the New Testament writers we must learn that there comes a time when we quit plowing and harrowing and we plant those seeds!

The New Testament epistles dealt with the evil that the writers saw hurting Christian communities. There are no references to serial killers, suicide bombers, or terrorist attacks, except as persecution of Christians was concerned. Today the phenomenon of suicide bombers brings into sharp focus the fact that evil can so envelop a person that life itself is destroyed. All un-Christian traits should be thrown off early before they kill the self.

Terence Y. Mullins *is a pastor, writer, and editor of curriculum. He lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*