

# INTRODUCTION

Though it is a relatively brief letter, 1 Thessalonians provides the modern Christian with a challenging glimpse into the life and thought of the first generation of Christianity. Its presentation of the ministry of Paul, the trials of the persecuted church, the ethical demands of the new life in Christ, and especially of the vivid expectation of Christ's return provides some of the foundational elements for genuine Christian experience in every era.

Major critical problems with 1 Thessalonians are fewer than with some other Pauline letters; the bulk of modern scholarship is largely agreed about the general circumstances under which the letter was written. But knowing those circumstances provides a necessary touchstone for the interpretation of the letter, so they will be briefly summarized below.

## THE CITY OF THESSALONICA<sup>1</sup>

Founded by Cassander, a general of Alexander the Great, around 315 B.C., Thessalonica was a city of size and influence. Located at the head of the Thermaic Gulf, now called the Gulf of Salonika, a natural harbor on the Aegean coast of Macedonia, the northern part of the Greece, it was an important port city, providing a gateway to the Macedonian interi-

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<sup>1</sup>For a summary of the current state of knowledge on the city of Thessalonica and its effect on Paul's mission and letters see Robert Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (FFNT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), pp. 113-132.

or. Its prominence as a transportation center was augmented when the Romans constructed the Via Egnatia or Egnatian Way, a highway crossing the Greek peninsula from east to west and ultimately connecting Asia in the east with Italy and Rome in the west. Inland from Thessalonica lay a fertile plain, which provided abundant agricultural resources for the city and the region.

It is little wonder, then, that in 146 B.C. the Romans designated Thessalonica as the capital of the province of Macedonia. The city itself had an independent government with magistrates known as “politarchs” (Acts 17:6, 8), providing a degree of autonomy from the imperial government and its taxes. The religious climate was dominated by paganism; the cults of Dionysus and the Cabirus appear to have been especially prominent. According to Acts 17:1 there was also a colony of Jews large enough to constitute at least one synagogue.

Altogether, then, Thessalonica appears to us as a busy, prosperous, cosmopolitan city, a place where the gospel could readily take root but also meet significant resistance. That image is confirmed to us by the description of Paul’s mission in Acts and the corresponding elements of 1 Thessalonians.

### **PAUL’S MINISTRY IN THESSALONICA AND THE WRITING OF 1 THESSALONIANS**

According to Acts, Paul visited Thessalonica with Timothy and Silas on what we call his second missionary journey (17:1). Having left Philippi after being jailed overnight, Paul traveled to the neighboring city on the Egnatian Way, perhaps pursuing a strategy of planting churches in cities on major transportation arteries so that the gospel could spread out from those centers. There, as was his custom, Paul preached in the synagogue as long as he was able (17:2-3). Acts indicates that his converts included Jews, God-fearers

(Gentiles who acknowledged the God of Israel but had not converted fully to Judaism), and some of the principal women (17:4). According to Acts these conversions prompted a jealous response from non-Christian Jews, presumably synagogue leaders, who incited a mob against the Christians (17:5-7). The magistrates appear to have recognized that the mob's anger was not prompted by any offense against the civil order and required only that Jason, apparently a prominent Christian convert, post a bond pledging no further trouble (17:8-9). The violence did, however, prompt Paul to leave the city, perhaps sooner than he had planned (17:10).

From Thessalonica Paul went to Berea. But the fervor of his Thessalonian opponents was intense, for they followed him there and incited similar opposition (17:13). Paul then went on alone to Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy behind (17:14-15). After Paul had preached in Athens with mixed results (17:16-34), he went on to Corinth (18:1). There Silas and Timothy rejoined him (18:5).

The text of 1 Thessalonians confirms and supplements this outline. Though Paul focuses on the conversion of Gentiles in 1:9 (see comments below), says little about the conversion of Jews, and does not quote the Old Testament, themes from the Jewish Scriptures and Judaism appear throughout the letter (cf. 1:4, 6, 10; 2:4, 10, 12, 15-16, 18; 3:3, 5; 4:3, 5-8, 16; 5:3, 5, 8-9, 23-24), implying an audience familiar with them. The letter acknowledges the opposition to Paul (2:2) and the ongoing problem of persecution in Thessalonica (1:6; 2:14; 3:3-4), elements entirely consistent with the anti-Christian violence which Acts depicts. It indicates that Paul left the city prematurely and under duress (2:17) and was prevented from returning (2:18). In particular it makes clear that from Athens Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica as a substitute for his own presence (3:1-3; see comments below) to strengthen the church and report about its progress to Paul. Timothy's return and report are recounted also (3:6).

It appears, then, that Timothy's report prompts the writing of this first letter. We can infer from the letter's contents

that the report was mostly positive but did note some areas of serious concern. The letter serves to reassure the readers about their status as Christians (1:3-10; 3:11-13) and about Paul's concern for them despite his absence (2:1-12; 2:17-3:10), to strengthen them in the persecution which they endure (2:13-16; 3:4-5), and to reiterate instruction which they had already received about the standards by which they are to live as people in Christ surrounded by an immoral pagan culture (4:1-12). In particular Paul is concerned about their misunderstanding of the significance of Christ's return, especially regarding the status of those who have died as Christians (4:13-18), but also more generally (5:1-11). He also expresses specific concern about the need for Christians to support themselves responsibly (4:11-12; 5:14; cf. 2:6b-9), and to have proper respect for leaders (5:12) and for the spiritual gift of prophecy (5:19-22). In essence, then, this letter is a substitute for Paul's actual presence, containing the teaching which he would have delivered had it been possible for him to return to Thessalonica immediately. While a couple of specific problems had arisen, Paul's primary concern is to strengthen the young church in its commitment and the consistency of its practice.

### DATE

If the reconstruction above is correct, then 1 Thessalonians was written during Paul's stay in Corinth on his second missionary journey.<sup>2</sup> It is conceivable that Paul could have written this letter on his third journey after his second visit to Thessalonica, but since the letter itself refers to only one visit, the obvious explanation is that Paul had made only one. Some have denied the accuracy of the sequence of events in Acts altogether, but the numerous points of confir-

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<sup>2</sup>For full discussion of the evidence on the date of 1 Thessalonians, see Bruce, pp. xxxiv-xxxv.

mation between 1 Thessalonians and Acts as noted above make such a denial highly questionable.

Paul's stay in Corinth can be dated with an exceptional degree of precision. According to Acts 18:12-17, Gallio served as proconsul of Achaia during Paul's Corinthian mission. An inscription at Delphi puts Gallio as proconsul during the twelfth year of Claudius' imperial power, after the Roman senate's twenty-sixth proclamation of Claudius as emperor. Since the twenty-seventh proclamation was made in August of A.D. 52 and proconsuls took office usually in midsummer, Gallio can be assumed to have taken office in the summer of A.D. 50 or 51. The Acts account makes it appear that Paul was brought before Gallio not long after he took office and near the end of Paul's eighteen-month sojourn in the city. Therefore, a date of 50-51 is likely for this letter.

Relative to Paul's other letters, 1 Thessalonians is very early. Unless Galatians was written earlier, as is plausible, between the first and second missionary journeys, or 2 Thessalonians was written first (see the introduction to 2 Thessalonians below), this letter is Paul's earliest. If so, it is also likely to be the earliest book of the New Testament, unless, as we have no way to confirm, one of the Gospels or the letter of James was penned sometime in the forties of the first century. For students of Paul and of early Christianity generally, then, this letter has special import.

## AUTHORSHIP

Few critical scholars have doubted that Paul composed this letter himself. The internal claim of the letter is clear and unequivocal, including not only the salutation (1:1), but the repeated personal references in the middle section of the letter (2:1-3:10). Likewise, the external evidence is clear. The letter was quoted in some of the earliest Christian literature outside the New Testament (Ign. Eph. 10:1; Ign. Rom. 2:1; Did. 16:6-7), attributed to Paul as early as Marcion (c. A.D. 140),

and never questioned in the early centuries of Christianity.

Those who have contended that 1 Thessalonians is not an authentic letter of Paul have largely based their arguments on alleged discrepancies with Acts.<sup>3</sup> As implied above, it has been argued that this letter indicates that Paul's Thessalonian converts were pagans (1:9; 4:1-5) while Acts asserts that they were Jews and God-fearers (17:4). However, as noted in the comments below, Paul may have a particular reason for emphasizing converts from paganism, and Acts certainly emphasizes Jewish converts in Thessalonica as a part of a larger theme in Paul's ministry. Neither book, however, should be understood to be deliberately specifying the precise composition of the Thessalonian church.

Likewise, it has been argued that the movements of Timothy and Silas in 1 Thessalonians do not match those in Acts. In particular, Acts 18:5 shows them rejoining Paul in Corinth, whereas 1 Thessalonians 3:1-6 may show Timothy rejoining Paul in Athens. Several reconstructions of their specific movements can be offered which account for the material in both books. Paul may have initially left Timothy and Silas behind in Macedonia, and they may have returned to him briefly in Athens only to be sent back to Macedonia a second time. Alternately, Paul may have sent his associates back to Thessalonica after arriving in Athens, and Acts may simply condense their movements, giving the result that they were "left behind" while focusing attention on Paul. But most important is the observation that the use of "Athens" instead of "here" in 1 Thess 3:1 indicates that Paul probably wrote from a place other than Athens and so was reunited with Timothy at that place. Corinth clearly fits the details here, precisely in accord with the description in Acts.

A third argument based on alleged tensions with Acts concerns the length of Paul's stay. It is argued that Acts 17:2

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<sup>3</sup>For a more detailed discussion of this argument see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (4th ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), pp. 589-591.

indicates a stay of three weeks, whereas this letter presumes a longer stay with its discussion of Paul's self-support and preaching. However, all that Acts 17:2 asserts is that Paul preached in the synagogue for three sabbaths, not that those three weeks comprised his entire stay. And if only three weeks were involved, Paul still could have preached, taught and worked with his hands.

Another challenge to authorship is found in hypotheses which argue that the letter is a compilation of several authentic or pseudepigraphical letters, edited together by a later follower of Paul.<sup>4</sup> Elaborate arguments for compilation are entirely conjectural and have found little support. Some have argued that 5:1-11 is a later, non-Pauline interpolation based on its vocabulary and content. The differences with the rest of Paul's letters are in fact few, however, and so this hypothesis has little support either.<sup>5</sup> More prominent has been the hypothesis that 2:13-16 are a later interpolation of non-Pauline material. Specific discussion of this issue can be found in the comments on the passage below.

## ORGANIZATION

Most of Paul's letters follow a rather set pattern of salutation, thanksgiving, letter body, and closing greetings. This pattern is apparent in a wide variety of letters from the Greco-Roman world, indicating that Paul adapted the standard letter form for his own purposes.

1 Thessalonians follows this pattern approximately, as the outline below indicates. One variation comes at 2:13-16, where Paul appears to offer a second thanksgiving. Such

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<sup>4</sup>For a summary and significant sources see R.F. Collins, "Apropos the Integrity of 1 Thess.," *Studies on the First Letter to the Thessalonians* (BETL 66; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1984), pp. 96-135.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Joseph Plevnik, "1 Thess 5, 1-11: Its Authenticity, Intention and Message," *Bib* 60 (1979) 71-90.

formal irregularities are not surprising, however, if Paul felt free to adapt standard forms as the occasion demanded.

Recently Paul's letters have been analyzed according to the patterns of Greek rhetoric. Several recent works have employed this approach in understanding 1 Thessalonians, with the beneficial result of stressing that the letter is a unified composition with a specific purpose of communication.<sup>6</sup> Opinions vary, however, on where the precise rhetorical divisions lie, probably because Paul did not compose his letters strictly according to the canons of rhetoric, though he was probably influenced by them. In this commentary, therefore, no direct attention will be given to specifying the precise rhetorical contours of the letter.

### THEOLOGICAL VALUE

As a small, young church in big, pagan city, the Thessalonian Christians faced challenges to their faith at every turn. Persecution, social pressure, temptations of the old lifestyle, conflict with new brothers and sisters in Christ, and surrender to despair were constant threats. Whatever the confidence with which they began their Christian pilgrimage, these believers were now faced with the daily ordeals of life in Christ in hostile surroundings.

Paul's answers to these problems are varied and significant. He confirms the truth of the gospel in the face of the doubts and struggles which they face, reminding them of the change which the gospel has brought to their lives and of the warnings which they had already received about the difficulties to come. He reminds them of his own manner of life with them, itself a confirmation of the truth of his message and an example of the self-sacrificial love and Christ-glorifying

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<sup>6</sup>Among the major rhetorical analyses of 1 Thessalonians are Jewett, *Thessalonian Correspondence*, pp. 61-88; and Wanamaker, pp. 45-52 and *passim*.

integrity which comprise the core of the Christian lifestyle. That love expressed to one another will in turn draw the church together to stand up to the pressure of the hostile culture which surrounds it. Perhaps most importantly, Paul reminds the readers repeatedly that the work of God begun in them in Christ will not be complete until Christ returns. They can therefore look forward to his return with great expectancy, remembering that even death itself will then be utterly defeated, and living each moment in faithfulness as they await the fulfillment of their relationship with Christ.

The situation for Christians near the beginning of the third millennium is not much different from the one that Paul addressed. And so his reminders remain timely. The truth and power of the gospel, the love and integrity which characterize Christ's people, and the living hope of Christ's return are especially relevant to a people confronted with the contemporary diseases of relativism, hatred, selfishness, and despair. The conviction that this universe will end with God's eternal triumph is as foreign to modern thinking as is the idea that it began by God's command. But apart from such a conviction, which stands at the center of 1 Thessalonians, can humanity find meaning in what seems to be chaos? Without it, can humanity find a basis for moral decisions? Faced with such questions, today's reader will not have to read far in 1 Thessalonians to find both blessing and challenge.

# OUTLINE

## **I. GREETING – 1:1**

## **II. THANKSGIVING – 1:2-10**

### **A. The Initial Thanksgiving – 1:2-5**

1. Paul's Constant Prayers for the Readers – 1:2
2. Their Exercise of Faith, Love and Hope – 1:3
3. Their Election – 1:4
4. The Power of the Gospel in Thessalonica – 1:5

### **B. Reiteration and Further Specification – 1:6-10**

1. The Readers' Imitation of Paul and His Associates – 1:6a
2. Their Endurance of Suffering – 1:6b
3. Their Example to Other Churches – 1:7-8
4. Reports of Their Conversion – 1:9-10
  - a. Forsaking Idols to Serve the Living God – 1:9
  - b. Awaiting the Return of Jesus – 1:10

## **III. PAUL'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE THESSALONIAN CHURCH – 2:1-3:13**

### **A. Paul's Behavior in Thessalonica – 2:1-12**

1. Paul's Motives – 2:1-6a
2. Paul's Activity – 2:6b-12

### **B. The Thessalonians' Endurance of Persecution – 2:13-16**

1. Their Genuine Reception of the Word – 2:13
2. Their Imitation of the Judean Christians – 2:14
3. The Continuity of Persecution Age to Age – 2:15-16

**C. Paul's Continuing Concern for the Church – 2:17-3:10**

1. His Desire to See the Thessalonians – 2:17-20
2. Timothy's Visit on Paul's Behalf – 3:1-5
3. Timothy's Report and Paul's Response – 3:6-10

**D. Paul's Prayer for the Thessalonians – 3:11-13**

1. That He Might Return to Them – 3:11
2. That They Might Abound in Love, and Be Blameless at the Lord's Return – 3:12-13

**IV. EXHORTATION – 4:1-5:22****A. Exhortation Concerning Christian Living – 4:1-12**

1. To Continue in Current Behavior – 4:1-2
2. To Remain Sexually Pure – 4:3-8
3. To Exercise Brotherly Love – 4:9-10
4. To Lead a Quiet, Honest Life – 4:11-12

**B. Exhortation Concerning the Lord's Return – 4:13-5:11**

1. The Dead in Christ and the Lord's Return – 4:13-18
2. The Suddenness of the Lord's Return – 5:1-11

**C. General Exhortations – 5:12-22**

1. Behavior in the Christian Community – 5:12-15
  - a. Respect for Christian Leaders – 5:12-13
  - b. Service and Forgiveness – 5:14-15
2. Constants of Christian Behavior – 5:16-18
3. Responding to Christian Prophecy – 5:19-22
  - a. Yielding to the Spirit's Work – 5:19-20
  - b. Testing Prophecy – 5:21-22

**V. CONCLUSION – 5:23-28****A. Benediction – 5:23-24****B. Final Words – 5:25-28**