

“Gospeling” the Faithfulness of Christ

Among the Gentiles:

A Study of the Letters to the Galatians and Thessalonians

Diocese of West Texas

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Introduction to I and II Thessalonians

Traditions of Authorship, Then & Now

What is God saying to me today? This is the question most of us bring to our study of the scriptures as an aspect of our devotional practice. From that point of view, it might not seem to be very important whether Paul of Tarsus wrote both of the letters to the Thessalonians or not, because we are not looking for a word from Paul; we are seeking a word from God, mediated to us through the scriptures.

But, in the letters of Paul, we have a chance to engage in an extensive conversation with one of the earliest and most influential followers of Jesus. Paul is the single author of more of the New Testament than anyone else, and in order to understand him clearly it becomes important to understand which of the letters attributed to him are actually his own work, and which are more likely the work of leaders in the next generation who wanted to carry his work forward into new situations.

Traditions of authorship in the first century. In Paul’s day, as now, people certainly understood what it meant to be the author of a letter or a treatise or speech.

- And yet, in the case of a student of a very prominent teacher or philosopher, it could also be a mark of respect to write in the name of one's teacher, acknowledging that that particular teacher was the true source of one's insights.
- In the case of the early Christian communities, a document attributed to the apostle Paul would also, of course, be granted a hearing that might not be accorded to a *follower* of Paul.
- Scholars have generally agreed that there are seven genuine letters by Paul in the New Testament: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and 1 Thessalonians.
- There is disagreement over the authorship of 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, and Colossians, though all three show extensive influence of Paul's thought and may even contain some quotations from Paul himself.
- There is little confidence that 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus could be from Paul's own hand, as they witness to situations and patterns of community life that are quite different from those of the undisputed letters of Paul.

What difference does it make? As in any conversation, we interpret what is said in *one* of Paul's letters in relation to what we have already read in *other* letters.

- There is already a great deal of variety among the so-called authentic letters of Paul, owing to the very different contexts of the communities Paul founded and served.
- For example, when you begin to read 1 Thessalonians, you will see instantly how different the concerns of this community are from the concerns of the Galatians.
- But there is enough theological dissonance between the seven authentic letters and the other six letters that it would be hard to attribute them all to one author.
- 2 Thessalonians is distinct among the letters that purport to be by Paul by, on the one hand, directly quoting from 1

Thessalonians and paralleling its structure; and, on the other hand, containing theological material and vocabulary that appear very unlike that of Paul, and more characteristic of the next generation.

- We will be reading 1 and 2 Thessalonians back-to-back, so you will have a chance to decide for yourself whether they seem to be by one author or by different authors.
- Like the variety among the Gospels, the variety among the letters attributed to Paul offers us, as Christians, guideposts for living in faithfulness in our own wide variety of situations.

Scribes and authors. Another factor in first century authorship concerns how letters were produced.

- First of all, they were expensive. A scribe needed to be hired, and materials purchased (parchment and ink). A typical letter could cost as much as a week's wages of a typical worker.
- When Paul thanks his benefactors, you can be thankful also that these people generously supplied what was necessary for the maintenance of the communities, for Paul's travels, and especially for his letters to be written.
- Note that 1 and 2 Thessalonians both begin with greetings from Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. So you might picture the three of them, and even perhaps a few others, sitting with the scribe, slowly and carefully composing a letter.
- None of Paul's letters is a casual effort, but is rather a very important and costly communication to his sisters and brothers in Christ.

Historical Context

The earliest document in the New Testament. 1 Thessalonians, most likely written around the year 50 or 51, is probably the earliest letter

of Paul in the New Testament, which would also make it the earliest document of the entire New Testament.

The city of Thessalonica. Thessalonica was a sheltered port city on the northern shore of the Aegean Sea.

- It lay along the *Via Egnatia*, the ancient Roman highway that stretched all the way from the Adriatic Sea on the west, across northern Greece, then along the Aegean, all the way to Byzantium on the east.
- Portions of the *Via Egnatia* can still be seen, and modern roads still follow its route.
- This road was instrumental to the spread of Christianity by missionaries who walked it from town to town.

Paul's decision to come to Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-2, we learn that Paul had arrived in Thessalonica after having been "shamefully mistreated" in Philippi.

- From what we can tell, the religious life of Thessalonica was characterized by strong devotion to the Roman Imperial cult, though it was a Greek city.
- Paul tells the Thessalonians that they have, "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God..." (1 Thess 1:9).

Opposition to the church in Thessalonica. In studying the letter to the Galatians, we spoke a great deal about Paul's arguments to counter what he considered to be the false teachings of Christian missionaries who urged adherence to the complete Torah (the Jewish Law).

- Here in Thessalonica, the opposition felt by the fledgling Christian church is quite different.
- They appear to be experiencing severe affliction from the Gentile community that they have been a part of (for example, see 1 Thess 1:6 and 3:1-5).

- Their refusal to participate in the Greco-Roman cults would make them appear both unpatriotic and atheistic to their neighbors.
- Read Acts 17:1-15, where Paul's presence in Thessalonica is described. While evidence from Acts has to be compared to Paul's own accounts, it can give us some insight into Paul's work and his legacy. Consider especially the accusation against Paul in Acts 17:6, "These people who have been turning the world upside down..." We will return to these words when we discuss Paul's apocalyptic worldview.

A long sojourn in Thessalonica. It appears that Paul arrived in Thessalonica in the spring or summer of 49 and stayed until fall or early winter of the same year, long enough to have both the opportunity and the need to work (1 Thess 2:9).

- He describes himself as "gospeling" while he worked, so perhaps we may understand the first converts in Thessalonica as people who came to know Paul in the setting of his workshop, perhaps working alongside him.
- It might be worth imagining how Paul put into practice his own counsels on living in the self-offering patterns of Christ, and how that way of being was felt to be good and life-giving to the people he encountered through his work.

Paul's Teaching in 1 Thessalonians

What can we learn from the first letter to the Thessalonians?

- Paul takes for granted that the evidence of our faithfulness is in our actions. He praises the Thessalonians for the ways in which they have modeled their lives on Paul's way of life, and also Jesus' way of life (1:6-7).

- He charts a way of life that is “sanctifying,” a life of holiness that seeks to please God (4:1) and to love all who are in the family of God (4:9-12).
- He teaches us to how live in the face of our own mortality and with a lively hope for all who have died (4:13-18).
- The “day of the Lord” that Paul speaks of can seem like a subject that has no relevance for us, but Christians are still called to live courageously in ways that run contrary to the ways of the world, to stay vigilant for Christ’s presence in our time and place.
- Some of us are familiar with Paul’s poetic praise of faith, hope, and love in 1 Corinthians 13. In 1 Thessalonians, he also speaks of these three virtues as the core of Christian life, with an emphasis on how energetic these virtues should be in our lives: “your *work* of faith and *labor* of love and *steadfastness* of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:3)

2 Thessalonians

No separate translation. This study addresses the whole of 2 Thessalonians in one session. For this reason, there is no word-for-word translation of the entire letter, but rather some considerations of interesting subjects raised in it. Please use your own Bible for the text of the letter.

What can we learn from 2 Thessalonians?

The teaching in this letter mainly concerns the “coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and how the community should live with that expectation.

- Perhaps in our own place and time we could learn better how to live in a balance of peacefulness and urgency, as this letter recommends.

- The letter also warns the people against “delusion,” (2:11) and in doing so makes us question what kinds of situations and influences “delude” us, and keep us from the path of faithfulness.

A Resource for Study

Our commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians has been created in conversation with the book, *1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians* in the series called “Abingdon New Testament Commentaries.” It is by Victor Paul Furnish, University Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Southern Methodist University (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007). We often recommend this series of books, because they give the reader access to the scholarly consensus and also make some connections to contemporary life. They are written primarily for pastors and preachers, but are also helpful for anyone who wants to engage the Bible seriously.

As you begin the study of 1 & 2 Thessalonians, you might want to keep in mind what Paul says about his teaching:

*We...constantly give thanks to God for this,
that when you received the word of God that you heard from us,
you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is,
God’s word, which is also at work among you believers (1 Thess 2:13).*

*May the word of God be richly at work among you,
in all your believing.*

