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1 Thessalonians 1:1



PAUL, SILAS AND Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the
Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace and peace to you.

Original Meaning

WITH REGARD TO the letter's structure, 1:1 forms a complete structural unit, the "prescript," and 1:2 begins a new section (the "thanksgiving"). Like any prescript, it identifies the senders and recipients and conveys an expression of goodwill. Of all the Pauline letter openings, this is the simplest and most like contemporary Hellenistic letter openings (typically "A to B, greetings"; cf. Acts 15:23, "The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings").¹

The senders. For reasons we can only guess at, 1 and 2 Thessalonians are the only letters in which Paul does not characterize himself or his colleagues in some way.² The name of the second person is actually "Silvanus" (cf. NIV note), whom Paul mentions elsewhere (2 Cor. 1:19; 2 Thess. 1:1). He is the same person as the "Silas" mentioned in Acts (see Acts 15:22–40; 16:19–29; 17:4–15; 18:5) and probably the person mentioned in 1 Peter 5:12.³ Either he had (like Paul) two names, one Semitic and one Latin, or "Silvanus" and "Silas" represent Latin and Greek forms, respectively, of a Semitic name.

Acts presents Silas as a Jerusalem prophet who was delegated (with Judas Barsabbas) to deliver the results of the Jerusalem Council to the

1. See further P. T. O'Brien, "Letters, Letter Forms," *DPL*, 550–53; J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995).

2. Elsewhere Paul describes himself as either a "servant" (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1) and/or an "apostle" (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1; Titus 1:1), or a "prisoner" (Philem. 1). When colleagues are named in the prescript (Timothy in 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, and Sosthenes in 1 Corinthians), they are designated as "brother" or "servant."

3. So Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 198; J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1988), xlvi–xlvii, 306–7; but as J. B. Lightfoot (*Notes on Epistles*, 7) observes, the name is too common to be certain.

church at Antioch. After Barnabas and Paul separated (Acts 15:36–39), Paul chose Silas as his coworker, and the two traveled through Galatia, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece (Paul's second missionary trip; cf. Acts 15:40–18:22). Paul apparently viewed him as a fellow apostle (cf. the discussion of 1 Thess. 2:6). He played a substantial role in establishing churches in both Thessalonica and Corinth, as did Timothy, who joined Paul and Silas as a junior member of the team early in their travels (see Acts 16:1–4). Timothy is described in 1 Thessalonians 3:2 as "God's fellow worker," and Paul's own feelings toward him are captured in 1 Corinthians 4:17 ("my son whom I love") and Philippians 2:22 ("as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.").

The conjunction of the three names (which also occur in 2 Thess. 1:1) and the frequent use of the first person plural ("we") throughout the letter indicate that all three are cosenders of the letter.⁴ The order of the names and Paul's occasional use of "I" (2:18; 3:5; 5:27) indicate that he was the one who actually composed the letter. Timothy, who had earlier served as Paul's emissary to Thessalonica (3:2, 5) may have delivered this letter. It is unclear whether Silas had a hand in its composition or writing.⁵

The recipients. After identifying the senders, Paul identifies the recipients: "the church of the Thessalonians." In the Greek world, *ekklesia* (in the New Testament routinely translated "church") could designate, among other things, a public assembly (Acts 19:32, 39) or a philosophical school, that is, a gathering or a movement. Similarly, in the LXX (Septuagint, i.e., the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) *ekklesia* and *synagoge* ("synagogue") each designates Israel both as a gathered assembly and as God's people. As *synagoge* had become the standard term for local Jewish congregations, *ekklesia* was an obvious choice for designating the Christian movement and distinguishing it from Judaism. In Christian usage *ekklesia* could indicate individual house churches (Rom. 16:5), local congregations (Rom. 16:1), or the Christian movement as a whole (1 Cor. 12:28; Col. 1:18, 24). Here it means the local congregation in Thessalonica, as the phrase "of the Thessalonians" clearly indicates. This

4. Similarly E. J. Richard, *Thessalonians*, 40; see BDF §460 (3); cf. 2 Cor. 1:19, where "by us" means "by me and Silvanus and Timothy" [NASB]. See also J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer*, 19–20.

5. For a discussion of his possible influence, see E. Best, *Thessalonians*, 23–29; E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1947), 9–17.

phrase also indicates the relation between the local congregation and God's people elsewhere: the basic concept is the church as a whole, of which the Thessalonians are the local representative.⁶

The local assembly of the Thessalonians is further identified as "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The meaning of the phrase is difficult to determine.⁷ "In God" is as rare in the Pauline corpus as "in Christ" is common,⁸ and interpreters are divided whether to interpret the unusual in light of the common or vice versa. Frequently the phrase "in Christ" "has 'incorporative' force, pointing to believers' participation in Christ's risen life or their membership in his body."⁹ If this is what this phrase means here, then the parallel phrase "in God" must be understood similarly. On the other hand, in view of the lack of parallels elsewhere in Paul's letters, some interpreters understand (correctly, in my estimation) the preposition "in" as indicating "means" rather than "position." That is, it designates the community as "brought into being" or "assembled by" God and Jesus.¹⁰

However one takes the phrase, the close linkage of God and Jesus indicates their unity of purpose and action (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18–21), without which and apart from which the Christian *ekklesia* does not exist. Moreover, the full Christological formula "the Lord Jesus Christ" brings to mind key aspects of God's saving work in Christ that brought the church into existence: The name "Jesus" lays stress on his death, the title "Christ" emphasizes his resurrection, and "Lord" expresses the believer's profession of faith in Jesus the Christ.¹¹

6. See further J. Roloff, "ἐκκλησία," *EDNT*, 1:410–15; L. Coenen, "Church, Synagogue," *NIDNTT*, 1:291–307; P. T. O'Brien, "Church," *DPL*, 123–31.

7. In addition, the absence of the article before "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" creates some degree of uncertainty about what word or phrase this statement modifies. The parallel in 2:14 and the pattern of other Pauline prescripts indicate that it modifies the phrase that precedes it. Also, the use of the preposition "in" (*en*) rather than "from" (*apo*) stands against taking it with the following salutation ("grace and peace to you").

8. Outside of 1 Thess. 1:1 and 2 Thess. 1:1, "in God" occurs only five other times, none of which match the usage here (Rom. 2:17 and 5:11, boasting in God; Eph. 3:9 and Col. 3:3, being hidden in God; 1 Thess. 2:2, courage in God), while "in Christ" occurs ca. 170 times.

9. F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 7; on "in Christ" see further B. Witherington III, "Christ," *DPL*, 98–99; C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), 54–69.

10. So E. Best, *Thessalonians*, 62; E. J. Richard, *Thessalonians*, 41–42; for the view that it indicates position, see J. E. Frame, *Thessalonians*, 69–70; C. F. D. Moule, *Origin*, 56; J. R. W. Stott, *The Gospel and the End of Time*, 27–28.

11. E. J. Richard, *Thessalonians*, 43.

In addition, it is important to note how this phrase *functions*. By emphasizing the *ekklesia's* theological basis and Christological focus, it serves to differentiate sharply this particular assembly from any others (pagan or Jewish) with which the recently converted Thessalonians were familiar. The monotheistic confession of "God the Father"¹² involves a rejection of the Thessalonians' former gods (cf. 1:9), while the acknowledgment of Jesus as Messiah ("Christ") and Lord distinguishes the Christian movement from Judaism (cf. 1:10).

The greeting. "Grace and peace to you" stands in place of the simple "greetings" (*chairein*) typical of a Greek letter and is similar to greetings found in Jewish letters (e.g., 2 Macc. 1:1 has *chairein* and "peace;" 2 Bar. 78:2 reads "mercy and peace"). But more important than the formal parallels is the theological content of the two evocative terms. For Paul, God is the ultimate source of grace (see 2 Thess. 1:2, "from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"), which is the foundation and basis of all God's actions on behalf of his people. Indeed, grace is not so much an attribute of God as it is his redeeming activity, visible in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ. Peace, on the other hand, indicates the outcome of God's saving activity, a restored relationship with God (Rom. 5:1; see also 5:2–11). Here the difference between cultural and biblical definitions of "peace" is clear: not merely the absence of conflict, but the presence (and enjoyment) of whole and harmonious relationships. In short, the phrase "grace and peace" (which functions as both an affirmation and a prayer) calls to mind both the basis and the consequence of God's saving activity, which finds its focus in Jesus Christ.¹³

*Bridging
Contexts*

THIS OPENING VERSE of 1 Thessalonians immediately presents us with at least three interpretive challenges frequently encountered when studying and applying Scripture: (1) the matter of historical precedent; (2) the question of arguments or infer-

12. The phrase also occurs at 1 Thess. 1:3; 3:11, 13 (discussed under "Bridging Contexts"); 2 Thess. 1:1–2; 2:16.

13. As J. B. Lightfoot observes, "χάρις [grace] is the source of all real blessings, εἰρήνη [peace] their end and issue" (*Notes on Epistles*, 8). For "peace" see further the discussion of 5:23 below.

ences from silence; and (3) the challenge of evocative language (with the accompanying potential pitfalls of over- or under-interpretation).

The matter of historical precedent. The question of historical precedent arises out of Paul's consistent practice of working as part of a team (exemplified here by his deliberate mention of Silas and Timothy in the address, and the significant role they played in the establishment of the Thessalonian congregation), and of installing teams as the leadership of the churches he established. Unlike itinerant philosophers of his day (with whom Paul will contrast himself in 2:1–12), Paul whenever possible was accompanied by others.¹⁴ Also, he left behind him teams of leaders in the churches he and his colleagues established (Acts 14:23; 20:17, Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:17). Moreover, while the evidence regarding church structure in New Testament times is incomplete, it is nonetheless consistent: Team leadership was the basic pattern. So the question arises: Is this consistent pattern merely a matter of coincidence, or is it an important aspect of Paul's method of ministry that we ought to follow, which may even have normative value for churches today? In other words, is this *description* of how Paul worked also in some way a *prescription* for us?

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, in their excellent discussion of the question of historical precedent, offer helpful guidelines.¹⁵ They correctly note that in general "*unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative way.*" They also acknowledge that "*biblical precedents may sometimes be regarded as repeatable patterns—even if they are not understood to be normative.*" In this particular instance, I would argue that the consistency of Paul's practice with regard to team leadership—a consistency that transcended individual cities, regions, and cultures, and therefore was not a matter of merely local practice—suggests that the pattern exemplified here in 1 (and 2) Thessalonians is indeed worth repeating today, even though it may not be normative.

Inferences from silence. It was noted above that in the prescripts of all Paul's letters except 1 and 2 Thessalonians, he characterizes himself

14. On his first journey, he followed his mentor, Barnabas, while Silas and Timothy were with him on his second trip, and Timothy and Erastus (see Acts 19:22; 2 Cor. 1:1) on the third.

15. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 78–112, esp. 105–12. Following quotations are from pp. 106 and 111; italics are in the original.

as either a "servant" and/or "apostle" or "prisoner." In two letters (Romans and Galatians) in which Paul substantially expands his prescript, scholars have found these expansions to be significant for interpreting the meaning and circumstances of those letters. Correspondingly, is there some significance to be found in the *absence* of any characterization here in 1:1? While silence is occasionally significant (e.g., the Sherlock Holmes story in which the clue to solving the mystery was the hound who did *not* bark), as a general rule conclusions or arguments based on silence are at best of only limited value. In this instance in particular (one of his earliest letters, in which he may still have been developing what only later became his characteristic prescript form), it is best not to try to find something significant in what Paul did not say.

The challenge of evocative language. Especially in an opening section like this, phrases such as "church," "grace," "peace," and "the Lord Jesus Christ" often imply more than they explicitly state. These are terms that were for Paul deeply evocative, but which do not necessarily function that way today. Sometimes they evoke little or nothing, or because of changing usage evoke something quite different from what they did for Paul (e.g., "Jesus Christ" as a swear word, or "church" as a designation for a building). Here the twin pitfalls of under- and over-interpretation become apparent: Just how much content or which ideas did Paul intend to communicate?

For example, "grace"—a foundational concept for Paul and a word that occurs one hundred times in the Pauline corpus—is found only twice in 1 Thessalonians (1:1; 5:28). Clearly it is not a significant topic of discussion in this letter. Yet the two places it does occur "frame" the entire document. Moreover, it occurs here in close connection with other phrases (e.g., "in God the Father") that reinforce the basic emphasis of "grace" in Paul's usage.¹⁶ This suggests that grace is in some way foundational for the entire message and therefore ought not to be ignored. Thus, the challenge in this instance is to make clear the foundational nature, the "taken for grantedness," in Paul's thinking of terms such as "grace," without detracting undue attention from the specific topics he does address in the course of the letter.

In the Original Meaning section, I treated, for the sake of clarity, each term or phrase separately. But it is also important to see how the

16. For an excellent discussion of grace, see Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997).

individual pieces fit together as a whole, especially when seeking to bridge from meaning to application. What is the main impression or primary emphasis that Paul, simply by mentioning some foundational terms or phrases, seeks to communicate in his prescript? I suggest that he is emphasizing, from the very beginning of his letter, *the centrality and importance of God for the life of the church*. The phrases Paul links together—"grace," "in God the Father," "the Lord Jesus Christ," "peace"—remind us that the church has no life apart from God's saving work in Christ, work rooted in God's grace and resulting in "peace" (i.e., a restored relationship) with God, of which the gift of the Spirit is evidence. That is, Paul's gospel (see 1:5), in response to which the Thessalonian congregation came into existence, is fundamentally from and about God, and only secondarily for and about humans.

That this *theological* emphasis is not some incidental feature of his gospel is clear from the way the apostle will later develop it more fully and explicitly in Romans. There he makes it clear that the gospel is fundamentally the "power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16); that while humans (who have turned their back on God, worshiping the creature rather than the Creator, 1:25) "were still sinners" (and thus didn't even care if a God existed), "God demonstrates his own love for us in [that] . . . Christ died for us" (5:8); that Christ died because "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement" (3:25), in order to demonstrate "that he himself [i.e., God] is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus" (3:26 NRSV; cf. 1:17). What Paul spells out in Romans, he implies here in his prescript to the Thessalonians.



THIS OPENING PRESCRIPT offers at least three topics for discussion. One of them, the "church of the Thessalonians," is the primary focus of the following section (1:2–10) and will be dealt with there. The other two are Paul's model of team leadership and the way that important terms and phrases in the prescript emphasize the centrality of God for the life of the church.

Team leadership. If the Pauline pattern of team leadership is indeed worth repeating today (even though it may not be normative), how might one go about applying it? From one perspective, the matter of team leadership can be seen as a question of church structure. This is

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probably not a fruitful line of approach, however, because most of us already have substantial commitments, both as individuals and as denominations, to one or another of the different forms of church structure that have developed over the centuries for a variety of reasons (historical, theological, and sociological). Moreover, even if we were somehow to slip free of these commitments and agree to start from scratch, there is in the New Testament no definitive model for church structure to guide us. There may be a principle that should guide our thinking about church structure (specifically, the structure should serve the needs of the congregation, rather than the reverse), but there is no definitive model as such. So approaching this matter as a question of church structure is not the most practical way to proceed.

Instead, we might begin by thinking about the Pauline model in terms of how it contrasts with a common feature of many churches today regardless of their particular structure. Whatever their formal structure (congregational, presbyterian, episcopal, or nondenominational), many individual churches are hierarchically structured in a way that typically concentrates power and authority in the hands of one person. In this respect, they are more like a pyramid-shaped, hierarchically organized corporate structure or military command model than the models of the New Testament, whose dominant images with respect to leadership are those of the family and of servanthood. Consider, for example, the many churches today in which the senior pastor functions essentially as a CEO, with staff and church board subservient to him, or how often (and how quickly!) the latest fads in business organization filter their way down to the church, or the extent to which the jargon of business infiltrates our thinking (e.g., a "business manager" of a church who boasted of turning its day-care ministry into a "profit center").

There are not insubstantial dangers associated with this pattern of church leadership. As Gordon Fee observes, "leadership, especially of the more visible kind, can be heady business. . . . The great problem with single leadership is its threefold tendency to pride of place, love of authority, and lack of accountability."¹⁷ The last point, accountability, is particularly critical in view of the significant temptation to moral failure (sexual or financial, in particular), temptations to which

17. Gordon D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 143.