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# The First Letter to the THESSALONIANS



## Introduction to 1 Thessalonians

Writing a commentary on Paul's two letters to the believers in Thessalonica would in some ways seem to require three introductions: one regarding the city and its Christian community, matters that will be of concern to both letters; and a second and third one on the two letters themselves, since even though they have some obvious relationships with each other, each in fact is unique to itself; and especially because the authorship of the second letter is disputed by many, it requires a much larger section on this matter in that case. But I will here stay with the tradition and offer only two introductions. Where I will tend to part from the tradition is by offering separate introductions at the beginning of each commentary, rather than to offer them both at the beginning of the book as a whole. This is simply my own attempt to give 2 Thessalonians its proper due, rather than to have it "tag along" with a commentary on the first letter.<sup>1</sup> In the present case I begin with the more "settled" matters (authorship and date) and then move on to the more substantive questions regarding the city of Thessalonica and the nature of the nascent Christian community in this bustling metropolis, and thus the occasion of the present letter.

### I. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

Although Pauline *authorship* of this letter has been denied from time to time, dating back to the extreme historical scepticism of F. D. Baur in the mid-

1. I will also here assume the historical tradition to have it right that the numbers before each letter represent their proper chronological order; the one commentator who thinks otherwise (C. A. Wanamaker) has found few followers — for good reasons, I am convinced.

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nineteenth century, such denial faces enormous historical difficulties — so much so that one wonders, “Why bother?” Baur’s reasons were ultimately based not on historical grounds as such, but on his own buying into Hegelian philosophy. Thus since the turn of the twentieth century, the Pauline authorship of this letter has been rather universally accepted as historical fact.

But the more significant question in this regard is that of single or plural authorship, since the two letters to this church are the only two in the corpus with two unique features. First, the “author(s)” in this case are identified without further qualification (“apostles,” “servants,” etc.), which becomes the standard feature in all subsequent letters beginning with our 1 Corinthians.<sup>2</sup> Second the first person plural is basically maintained throughout the letter, so that by all normal historical standards the letter should be identified as Paul’s, Silas’s, and Timothy’s letter to church of the Thessalonians. Indeed, given that all three are named in the address, one must take seriously that Paul intended the letters to have come from all three of them.

Nonetheless, the letter was basically dictated by only one of them, the apostle himself, as the occasional “lapses” into the first person singular (2:18; 3:5; 5:27) make certain. But even so, given the uniqueness of the plural “we” in these two letters, plus the fact that the letter begins by naming the three of them, we should probably take the plurality of authorship more seriously than most of us are wont to do. This becomes the more certain, it would seem, because of the fact that in this first letter (as well as the next) Paul makes absolutely no point of his authority to speak into their situation. This phenomenon begins — for good reason, it turns out — with his first preserved letter to the believers in Corinth. This further adds to the evidence that, however else this letter might be described by ancient standards, it is first of all a letter of friendship. Paul is designated neither as “an apostle of Christ Jesus” nor as “a servant of Christ.” The three of them are simply named as co-authors, jointly speaking into the situation in Thessalonica, even though the letter itself is dictated by Paul.

The *date* of the letter is based primarily on the combined data from Acts 17:1-9 and the singular mention by Paul of his (and presumably Silas’s) being left alone in Athens by his (their) having sent Timothy to the Thessalonians from there (3:1-2). The very way this is stated implies that Paul was no longer in Athens, but had gone on to Corinth.<sup>3</sup> From the Acts

2. This assumes, contrary to a large body of evangelical scholars, that Galatians is not Paul’s first letter, but was written after 2 Corinthians and before Romans. See the Introduction to my *Galatians: A Pentecostal Commentary* (Blandford Forum: Deo Publishing, 2007), 4-5.

3. The outside chronological “peg” for all of this calculation is the reference in Acts 18:12 to Paul’s appearing before Gallio, whose tenure in Corinth can be accurately dated either 51-52 or 52-53 CE.

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reference, where one is told that Paul and his companions came to Thessalonica by way of Philippi, from whence they had been asked to leave by the town authorities, we may legitimately assume a date *circa* 49 or 50 CE for the writing of this letter.

What is unknown specifically is Paul's actual *location* at the time of writing, since the mention in 3:6 of Timothy's return has no geographical referent regarding the place of return. Therefore, on the basis of the Acts account the majority of scholars have assumed the return of Timothy and the sending of this letter to have taken place in the early months of Paul's visit to Corinth narrated in Acts 18:1-18a. This can be neither proved nor disproved; it is simply based on — and fits well with — the few historical data at our disposal.

## II. THE CITY AND ITS CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Thessalonica (sometimes Saloniki) is one of the several Mediterranean cities that has had a continuous history from the Greco-Roman period to the present, mostly because of its strategic location at the northernmost point of the Thermaic Gulf (Gulf of Salonica), while sitting astraddle the Egnatian Way, the main thoroughfare between Byzantium (now Istanbul) in the east and the Adriatic ports in the west. According to the Greek historian Strabo (d. 23 CE), the present city was founded by Cassander in the fourth century BCE and was named after his wife Thessalonice (= "victory of Thessaly"), who was a daughter of Philip and half-sister of Alexander the Great. In 167 BCE, when Macedonia was annexed by Rome and divided into four parts, Thessalonica became capital of the second district. When the province was reorganized in 148 BCE, it became the capital of the province of Macedonia. In the give-and-take of history, the city was fortunate enough to side with Octavian (later Augustus) in the Roman civil war (42 BCE) and thus in victory was awarded the status of a "free city." At the same time, of course, as with Philippi, this assured loyalty to the emperor — and the imperial benefits that went with such loyalty.

According to Luke's account in Acts 17:6, the local government was administered by "politarchs," a word found on inscriptions, but only in Luke in known literature. Apparently there were five "politarchs" at the time of Paul. Because of its strategic geographical location, it almost certainly had a population mix similar to that of Corinth, making it an especially cosmopolitan city, in comparison, for example, with an interior town like Philippi. The majority would have been Greeks, but cities like Thessalonica and Corinth experienced a considerable influx of immigrants from everywhere, including

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especially Diaspora Jews. It was also a city where, unlike more truly Roman cities, women held places of honor and authority. These various realities also meant that it had a considerable mix of trade guilds and religions.

The founding of the church itself, recorded in Acts 17:1-9 and referred to in 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10, probably took place ca. 49-50 CE. As was Paul's habit, the missionary trio (Paul, Silas, and Timothy) began their proclamation not in the Agora, but in the Jewish synagogue, which according to the account in Acts lasted only three sabbaths. What happened next in terms of time and length of stay is shrouded in mystery, since the next event recorded by Luke, hard on the heels of the preceding narrative, is their being hustled out of Thessalonica in the dead of night by "the believers" there. But the evidence of the two Thessalonian letters, both Paul's own references to his teaching them<sup>4</sup> and the degree of Christian maturity the letters reveal, suggests that the believing community had been more sufficiently grounded than one would normally expect to have happened in two weeks. And since Luke's time reference had to do with the length of Paul's ministry in the Jewish synagogue, not with his stay in Thessalonica as such, one should probably posit a stay of several weeks or months.

Indeed, everything else in 1 Thessalonians, plus a passing note in Philippians 4:16, indicates a stay of longer than three weeks. In 1:8 Paul reminds them that news about their own "faith" had preceded him to his next stops (Berea/Athens/Corinth), something that would seem to require time to have developed. In 2:9-12, 17 and 19-20 Paul reminds them of the high degree of mutual affection that existed between him (and Silas and Timothy) and these believers, which again would take more time than two weeks would have normally allowed. Likewise in 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10, Paul further reminds them that he had worked "with his own hands" so as not to be a burden to them and thus also to offer them an example to follow. These kinds of behavioral models would be difficult to establish in two weeks. But the ultimate proof of a longer stay comes from a passing reference in Philippians 4:16, where Paul reminds that congregation that "once and again" they had ministered to his needs while he was in Thessalonica. The "once and again" by itself pushes the time frame far beyond two weeks. But having said all that, we still remain in the dark as to the actual length of stay — probably some six or more months, but who is to know?

According to the Acts account (17:4), the overall result of Paul's stay in Thessalonica was the conversion of "some of the Jews, . . . a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women." This picture fits our

4. See esp. 2 Thess 2:5, where Paul's "Don't you remember that I used to tell you these things?" implies teaching on certain aspects of Christian eschatology that would seem to require more time than just two weeks.

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two letters quite well. Although the evidence from these letters for Jewish presence is nearly nonexistent, that is most likely the result of the heavy predominance of Gentile converts. Moreover, even though the believing community began, as usual, among “God-fearers,” the picture that emerges in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 is one of more purely pagans turning to Christ (1:9); and the issue with the unruly-idle in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-11, which is taken up in greater detail in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, is most likely related to Gentile sociology, probably reflecting a degree of tension between tradespeople and more wealthy householders. The implication in all of these cases is that Paul and his companions had been with the nascent believing community for a stay of several months, not just two weeks.

Finally, we should note that as elsewhere the nascent Christian faith tended to cut across all of these various sociological and commercial boundaries, which was very likely one of the reasons it was suspect and thus destined for its share of persecution, as the (very brief) narrative in Acts 17 indicates. But this is also one of the reasons for some of the tensions that emerge in both of the Thessalonian letters, especially the issue of the “unruly-idle,” whose apparent misunderstanding of one’s place in Christ led to their attempt to live off the largesse of others.

### III. THE OCCASION AND PLACE OF WRITING

In comparison with all the later Pauline letters, 1 Thessalonians has two remarkable features not found in any of the others. First, whereas most of the other letters begin with an opening thanksgiving and prayer report, in this letter that material extends through chapter 3, and thus covers nearly 60 percent of the entire letter — although the majority of this material does not technically belong to these two matters. Put another way, the thanksgiving, which begins in the “normal way” at 1:3, shows no clear evidence of coming to a full stop along the way, as thanksgiving for past relationships (apparently) spins off into a long narrative regarding the history of that relationship, before it concludes with a prayer report in 3:11-13. In later letters, when a prayer report occurs, it does so immediately after the thanksgiving report.

Second, the greater part of this letter — all but 4:13-18 — reflects a return to issues that Paul had previously spoken to when he was present among them. Thus the letter is full of information that is either reminding them of what they had already been taught or reinforcing what they already know. Indeed, there are no fewer than eleven “you already know” kinds of reminders in this letter (1:5; 2:1 [2x], 5, 9, 10, 11; 3:3-4; 4:2, 9; 5:1), and in two of these instances (4:9 and 5:1) he insists that he has “no need to write.” Yet

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he writes anyway! So the “why” question simply must be dealt with, especially since Timothy has returned with what appears to have been an essentially good report about them.

Trying to answer the “why” question is what leads one to a proposed occasion for the letter. A careful reading of 1 Thessalonians causes several matters to emerge. First, the majority part of the “recall” language is to remind them of his earlier time among them, where two matters stand out: *their* conversion and *his* manner of life while among them. Second, his and his companions’ hasty departure from the city had led to some obvious anxiety about the Thessalonians in the meantime. The reasons for his anxiety are three: (a) From Paul’s point of view, he had left Thessalonica before his work there had been brought to its proper conclusion, especially his concern to see them fully established in Christ. The hint of this emerges in 2:17 (“we were torn away from you for a short time”). (b) Meanwhile, evidence from 2:14-16 indicates that they had become a suffering community, which 1:6 implies was there from the beginning. The cause of the “suffering” in this case is related to some form of persecution. (c) These two matters become for Paul matters of some anxiety, based almost certainly on his sudden departure from them (“we were orphaned”! [2:17]), his subsequent inability to return, and their own persecution. Indeed, this latter item joins the first two, not only to fuel the arguments from the opposition but also to increase his own level of anxiety about them.

The letter itself was thus written on the return of Timothy from Thessalonica and his essentially good report about them as a community of believers. At the same time three matters need to be spoken to, which ultimately accounts for the letter: a question related to the sanctity of the marriage bed; the refusal to work by some who were able to, but chose rather to live off the largesse of others; and questions about the nature and timing of the Lord’s return. These issues, besides being addressed directly, seem also to be summarized at the end by the “staccato” imperatives of 5:14.

The place of writing the letter was certainly Corinth. The evidence for this comes from the mention of Athens in 3:1-2, where the implication of the reference is that Paul had waited in Athens but was no longer there; and since, according to the account in Acts, Corinth was not only the next city he visited, but it was also the first one where he stayed for a considerable length of time (18 months, according to Acts 18:11), this seems the most likely place for him to have written back to the Thessalonians.

# Text, Exposition, and Notes

## I. THANKSGIVING, NARRATIVE, AND PRAYER (1:1–3:13)

Almost all letters from the Greco-Roman period<sup>1</sup> begin with a threefold salutation: The Writer, to the Addressee, Greetings.<sup>2</sup> Very often the next item in the letter would be a wish (sometimes a prayer) for the health or well-being of the addressee. Paul's letters, which generally follow this standard form, usually include a thanksgiving<sup>3</sup> — also directed toward God. In some cases he also includes a prayer report, telling them not only *that* he remembers them in prayer, but also spelling out in some detail the *what* of such prayer.<sup>4</sup> These features are already identifiable in this first extant letter.<sup>5</sup> But they are

1. For helpful studies of letter writing in the Greco-Roman period, see J. L. White, *Light from Ancient Letters* (FFNT; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), whose analysis is based on the Greek papyri, and S. K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (LEC 5; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), who throws the net more widely. Either (or both) of these is essential reading for the serious exegesis of one of the NT letters. Along with the useful collection of such letters in Stowers and White, see also A. S. Hunt and C. C. Edgar, eds., *Select Papyri I* (LCL; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1932), for further examples from the Greek papyri.

2. All the true “letters” in the NT follow this pattern (including the letter from James in Acts 15:23-29), except for 3 John, which lacks the standard greeting. For a collection of examples from the papyri, see F. X. J. Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter of the Epistolary Papyri (3rd c. B.C.–3rd c. A.D.)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 23-68; for a further collection and detailed study, see F. Schnider and W. Stenger, *Studien zum neutestamentlichen Briefformular* (NTTS 11; Leiden: Brill, 1987).

3. Noticeably absent in Galatians, 1 Timothy, and Titus.

4. See 1 Thess 3:11-13 and 2 Thess 1:11-12; cf. Col 1:9-11 and Phil 1:9-11.

5. For the judgment that this is Paul's first extant letter, see the Introduction to my commentary on Galatians (*Galatians: [A] Pentecostal Commentary* [Blandford Forum: Deo Publishing, 2007], 4-5); cf. the present Introduction, pp. 4-5.

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so in some contrast to those that will come later — including 2 Thessalonians — where each of the elements becomes more easily identifiable, even when elaborated somewhat. Such is not the case for 1 Thessalonians, with the result that chapters 1–3 have come under all kinds of scrutiny and differing analyses.<sup>6</sup>

It is not that the elements themselves cannot be identified. After all, 1:2-3 have all the markings of Paul's thanksgiving reports, while the (very typical) prayer report finally appears in 3:11-13. But the distance between these two items is part of the problem — along with two other matters that make analysis difficult. First, the thanksgiving report in this case does not come to a neat conclusion. Even though 1:4 is grammatically dependent on "we always thank God" in verse 2, what follows, beginning with verse 5, seems to move away from explicit reasons for thanksgiving, and evolves instead into a long, extended narrative of the apostles' (Paul, Silas, and Timothy) recent past relationships with the Thessalonians. The same thing happens again in 2:13, where the thanksgiving report is resumed (or repeated) from 1:4 — only to be lost again in the continuation of the narrative, now explaining his own anxiety about them in the meantime. This finally eventuated (as they themselves now know) in the sending of Timothy to them (2:17–3:5). The narrative then concludes with an obvious sigh of relief at Timothy's return, whose report about them (3:6-10) became the immediate cause of the present letter. Thus our first difficulty has to do with the *nature* of this thanksgiving that turns into narrative, with the prayer report appended at the end — halfway through the letter!<sup>7</sup>

Second, what are we to make of the *nature* of the long, twofold narrative (1:5–2:12; 2:14–3:10) that dominates this section between the thanksgiving (1:2-4) and the prayer (3:11-13)? The two main concerns in the first narrative section are introduced in verse 5: (a) The fact and nature of their conversion and (b) the nature of the apostles' ministry among them. These are picked up in turn in 1:6-10 and 2:1-12. In the first instance he begins with their suffering (v. 6), followed by the renown of their conversion (vv. 7-8), and concludes with what conversion in their case consisted of (vv. 9-10). In 2:1-12 Paul reminds them of the nature of his ministry among them, that it was totally unlike that of other itinerants (vv. 2-6) in that his and his companions' was one of parental care and concern (vv. 7-12).

6. While this has always been true for this letter (cf. any two commentaries from an earlier period), it has become even more so for 1 Thessalonians with the advent of rhetorical analyses.

7. This would be true, it should be noted, even if we did not have Paul's later letters with which to compare this one. Whatever else, Paul is here breaking every known mold regarding letter writing, including — to use an anachronism — his own habits that begin in 2 Thessalonians and basically carry on thereafter.

### 1:1–3:13 THANKSGIVING, NARRATIVE, AND PRAYER

Following the second thanksgiving, whose emphasis is on their having received the apostolic message for what it is indeed — God’s own message — the narrative resumes by reminding the Thessalonians of their suffering, that it was quite in keeping with that of others who have followed Christ (2:14-16). But the main focus now is on the apostles’ concern for the believers between the time that the three of them had left Thessalonica and the return of Timothy to Corinth with his report as to how the Thessalonian believers were faring. Only then does Paul add the prayer report (3:11-13), of a kind that also became standard in his later letters. Thus the two parts of the narrative together are simply a (chronological) reminder of what things were like at the beginning of their faith in Christ and of the apostolic concern for them from the time the three of them had left the city until the writing of this letter. What Paul has done, then, unique to this first of his letters, is to intersperse a long narrative of past and present relationships between the thanksgiving and prayer report. The emphases in the narrative are best understood as reflecting the historical setting. Although full precision is not possible here, two items recur in chapters 1–3 that allow an educated guess as to the nature of that setting. First, Paul more than once refers to their suffering in the face of opposition (1:6-7; 2:14-16; 3:2-4); second, he also offers a considerable defense both of his ministry while among them (2:1-12) and of his actions since leaving (2:17-3:5). These are best understood as related themes; that is, the persecution the Thessalonian believers are experiencing from their former pagan associations (2:15) is in some way related to their becoming the converts of an itinerant Jewish propagator of a new (non-Greek) religion,<sup>8</sup> in which part of the charge originally laid against him and Silas had to do with the legitimacy of such religion and the honor of Caesar (Acts 17:7).<sup>9</sup> Paul’s own concern is over whether they are standing firm in their newly found faith, despite his and Silas’s hurried leave-taking<sup>10</sup> — and

8. This view is rejected by G. Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward a New Understanding* (SBLDS 73; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 177-201, in an argument that I find not wholly convincing. Part of his reason for rejection is the failure of scholarship to establish a polemical context for the letter, which assumes some opposition to Paul in the church community. On this matter I quite agree; but the opposition is not against Paul — and therefore *within* the Christian community — but most likely is pagan opposition to the Thessalonian believers (as 2:14-16 suggests), and Paul’s role in their conversion is very likely a part of that opposition.

9. That the situation in Thessalonica may well be related to the charge against Paul in Acts 17:7 has been suggested by E. A. Judge, “The Decrees of Caesar at Thessalonica,” *RTR* 30 (1971), 1-7; cf. K. P. Donfried, “The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence,” *NTS* 31 (1985), 342-52; and Wanamaker, 113-14.

10. This assumes that the picture in Acts 17:1-10 is a generally accurate one. Several matters join to give credence to that account: Paul’s obvious anxiety over their welfare, which had led to repeated attempts to return (2:18), to Timothy’s being sent in his

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probably before the Thessalonians were as firmly planted in the faith as he would have desired.<sup>11</sup>

### A. SALUTATION (1:1)

*1 Paul, Silas<sup>a</sup> and Timothy,  
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the<sup>12</sup> Father and the  
Lord Jesus Christ:  
Grace and peace to you.<sup>b13</sup>*

<sup>a</sup> Greek *Silvanus*, a variant of *Silas*

<sup>b</sup> Some early manuscripts *you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*

Although the Thessalonians themselves would not have been privy to our broader knowledge of Paul as a letter-writer, the most convenient way for us to enter into the significance of this salutation is by comparison with the other letters in the corpus. In such a comparison, two matters stand out: its comparative brevity and the unusual designation of the church as “*in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” We will look at each element in turn.

**1 (A) *The Writer(s)*.** Even though the practice is extremely rare among the extant Greco-Roman letters, Paul frequently includes his present companions with himself in his salutations.<sup>14</sup> But this is the only place where

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place (3:1-2), and finally to his great relief in finding out that they were in fact persevering in their faith (3:6-8). It also seems to be corroborated by the need to defend his ministry among them (2:1-12; anticipated in the present passage [vv. 5-6, 9]), since the (probably Greek) persecutors of these new believers most likely knew of his sudden departure in the dead of night — from their point of view to “protect his own skin.”

11. See esp. 2:17–3:10, where his concern over their faith(fulness) is almost certainly the basic reason for his trying over and again to return (2:18) and his sending Timothy instead (3:1-2). Note also his genuine relief that they are in fact standing fast in their faith (3:8), yet his awareness that there are “deficiencies” (3:10).

12. There is no definite article in the Greek text, which causes the secondary ἡμῶν (“our”) to appear early on and eventually to become the Majority Text — influenced by the more standard form found elsewhere in Paul.

13. Although the addition found in the TNIV note is found as early as **Ⲙ** (4th c.), and becomes the standard in the later manuscript tradition, it is secondary on every count: (1) it is missing in all the earliest and best evidence across the board, both East and West; (2) these words are found in 2 Thessalonians in all known manuscripts without variation; thus (3) there is no way to account for such an early and widespread “omission” in this letter alone in the Pauline corpus.

14. He does so in seven letters in the corpus: 1 and 2 Thessalonians (Timothy and Silas), 1 Corinthians (Sosthenes), 2 Corinthians (Timothy), Colossians (Timothy), Phile-

## 1:1 SALUTATION

he includes two such companions, and along with 2 Thessalonians it is the only place where there is no further identifying designation beyond the names.<sup>15</sup>

The Latin name *Silvanus*, which belongs to the man who is mentioned second, is undoubtedly the Silas who first appears in the narrative of Acts as one of the two men entrusted with the letter from the Jerusalem Council to the Gentile churches in Antioch and beyond (Acts 15:22-32), and who subsequently became Paul's companion on his second missionary tour (Acts 15:40-18:5).<sup>16</sup> He and Paul together had been hustled out of Thessalonica during the fateful night recounted in Acts 17:5-10. According to the Acts account, Silas then stayed on in Berea with Timothy when Paul headed south to Athens, and eventually to Corinth, the city where the three of them were reunited (Acts 18:5), at which point he is not further mentioned by name in Luke's account.<sup>17</sup>

At issue in Silas's case is his role (or non-role) in helping to author these two letters. On the one hand, Paul's shift in 2:18 to the first person singular as personal identification indicates that the letter is ultimately from him (Paul), or at least that he was the one doing the actual dictation. On the other hand, Paul's here naming Silas as one of the writers, and his basically consistent use of "we," unique to the two Thessalonian letters, should probably be interpreted as Silas's having more of a role in the letter than merely sitting by listening to Paul dictate.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it seems altogether likely that he actually penned the letter at Paul's dictation.

The story of *Timothy's* joining Paul and Silas at the beginning of this

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mon (Timothy), and Philippians (Timothy). There are no known *examples* outside the Pauline corpus. The only known *reference* to co-authorship is in Cicero, *Att.* 11.15.1: "For my part I have gathered from your letters — both that which you wrote in conjunction with others and the one you wrote in your own name . . ." (LCL 2:363). See the discussion in G. J. Bahr, "Paul and Letter Writing in the First Century," *CBQ* 28 (1966), 465-77.

15. Otherwise he designates himself an "apostle" or "prisoner" (Philemon); he includes his companion (Timothy) in the designation only once (Philippians), where he calls the two of them "servants of Christ Jesus."

16. In one of the truly idiosyncratic moments in NT scholarship, M. D. Goulder ("Silas in Thessalonica," *JSNT* 48 [1992], 87-106) suggests that Silas actually became Paul's opponent and is responsible for the "false teachings" circulating in Thessalonica.

17. Although one cannot be certain, he is very likely the Silvanus/Silas who was responsible for the actual writing of 1 Peter (1 Pet 5:12; lit. "through Silvanus I have written briefly"), which was written from Rome.

18. On this issue for these two letters see, further, S. Byrskog, "Co-senders, Co-authors and Paul's Use of the First Person Plural," *ZNW* 87 (1996), 230-50. Cf. also J. C. M. Laurent, "Der *Pluralis maiestaticus* in den Thessalonicherbriefen," *STK* 41 (1868), 159-66; and W. F. Lofthouse, "'I' and 'We' in the Pauline Letters," *BT* 6 (1955), 72-80.

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missionary tour is told in Acts 16:1-5. He is not mentioned again by name until 17:14; but Paul's letters to the two Macedonian towns (Philippi and Thessalonica) make it clear that Timothy was with them in both places (as is probably to be implied from Luke's narrative as well). But what is not certain, because of the specific mention of only Paul and Silas both in the Philippian prison account (Acts 16:16-37) and in the nocturnal getaway from Thessalonica (Acts 17:10), is Timothy's relationship to these two events. Almost certainly he was not included in the Philippian imprisonment; it is at least possible that he stayed on in Thessalonica for a brief while after Paul and Silas left the city, but that cannot be known.

These various data together thus account both for the lack of designation following their names and for the unusual nature of the plurals ("we, us, our") throughout. The three of them had been involved in the "ministry" together when in Thessalonica, even though Paul clearly took the lead; and their sending Timothy to find out how things were with the Thessalonians (and probably again as the bearer of this letter) means that the letter truly was from the three of them.<sup>19</sup>

(B) *The Recipients.* Although the designation of the addressees in this letter is quite abbreviated when contrasted with later letters, what is said here is full of Pauline theological grist. The fact that they are designated as "the church of the Thessalonians"<sup>20</sup> indicates that this usage of the Greek word *ekklēsia* was by now (ca. CE 48) an already established practice among the early followers of Christ. Its origins in the Greek city-state as a designation for the assembly of citizens gathered to deal with city affairs, as well as a term for "societies" of people who shared common beliefs,<sup>21</sup> made it the happy choice of the Greek translators of the Old Testament, where it was regularly used to render the Hebrew *qahal*, referring to the "whole congregation" of Israel.<sup>22</sup> The choice of this word for the community of believers in any given locale was thus a natural one. And by the time of this letter, it had already begun to

19. Because Paul clearly took the lead (cf. 2:18 and 2 Thess 3:17), for the sake of convenience, and because he is almost certainly responsible for the primary dictation of it, I will throughout this commentary regularly designate Paul as the "writer," always meaning, of course, in the qualified sense discussed here.

20. For a useful discussion of this phrase, see R. F. Collins, *Studies in the First Letter to the Thessalonians* (BETL 66; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1984), 285-97.

21. On this see BDAG 2.

22. The myth that because its origins centuries earlier was a combination of the Greek ἐκ ("out") and καλέω ("call"), so that Christians are "the called out ones," should be laid to rest. The word was already in use by the time of Paul, both in the Greek world and in the Greek Bible, and had nothing to do with being "called out." It simply meant "an assembly." See my *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* (3rd ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 79-80.

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designate all the believers in a given community,<sup>23</sup> whether gathered or not — although in Paul it still most often carries its original sense.

Gentile converts to Christianity were no longer members only of Greco-Roman culture. They had entered the “society”<sup>24</sup> of a people whose roots were in Judaism and whose story had its origins in the Old Testament, a story which the Thessalonians would have known well in its Greek form — the Septuagint (LXX).<sup>25</sup> And the primary term used to refer to this new “society” was that used in the earlier form of the story when referring to Israel as “the gathered people of God.” The new expression of that “gathered people” had now taken deep root in Macedonia.

Only in these two letters is the church described as “*of* the Thessalonians.”<sup>26</sup> The genitive in this instance means simply “composed of people who live in Thessalonica.” It is of some interest that in Paul’s next letter (our 1 Corinthians), he no longer speaks of the church in this way — perhaps because it could so easily carry connotations of possession. Thus in 1 Corinthians they are “the church *of* God in Corinth,” very likely because some in that church had begun to think in terms of “ownership.”

But the real surprise in our letter comes next. They are “*in* God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Indeed, this is the only place in the entire corpus where believers are thought of as having their existence “in God.”<sup>27</sup> This is most easily accounted for as Paul’s way of collapsing into one phrase what he elsewhere tends to keep apart. That is, the church’s present position is “in God” the Father, precisely because it is also “in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Thus both the source (the work of Christ) and goal (God the Father) of their existence as God’s people are expressed together in this compact phrase.

23. See further on 2:14, where the plural is used to designate the many communities of believers in the province of Judea; cf. Gal 1:2.

24. On the sociological question of the early churches as a religious “society” in the Greco-Roman world, see esp. W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 74-80; J. E. Stambaugh and D. L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (LEC; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 124-26, 140-41; and E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 131-36.

25. This has recently been called into question; for a brief rebuttal see G. D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007), 20-25.

26. In fact this phenomenon occurs only in these two instances out of 62 occurrences of the word ἐκκλησία in the Pauline corpus.

27. In Col 3:3, Paul does speak of believers as “having died,” and their present life as now “hidden *with* Christ *in* God”; but that is quite different from this usage, which hereafter is “in Christ (Jesus).” For this reason, Best (62) sees the present usage as primarily instrumental (“salvation lies in what God accomplished” through Christ); but that is especially unlikely here. See 2:14 below.

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The more significant thing about this phrase, however, is its assumed “high” Christology,<sup>28</sup> a Christology that is thoroughgoing in these two letters, and which will be pointed out regularly throughout the commentary. This is the first of many instances where one preposition controls the twofold object of God and Christ, where the two “divine persons” (to use the language of a later time) are seen to be in the closest union regarding divine activities. If this were the only instance, nothing much could be made of it. But in these two letters much can be made of it, since in 1 Thessalonians 3:11 God and Christ are the plural subject of a singular verb as the object of prayer, while in 2 Thessalonians 2:16 the same phenomenon occurs but with Christ in the first position. Furthermore, in 2 Thessalonians 3:5 and 16 “the Lord” (meaning “Christ Jesus”) is the single divine person to whom prayer is addressed.

It is of some importance, then, to note also in this first mention of the deity in the Pauline corpus that God is designated simply as “Father” while Christ is designated as “Lord.” In this regard the lack of the (later) typical “our Father” is perhaps significant, since for Paul God has come to be known as “Father” precisely because he is “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” who then becomes “our Father” because we are related to him through the Son.<sup>29</sup> Hence in this instance the lack of the possessive “our” probably points toward verse 10, where Paul refers to their “awaiting the [Father’s] Son from heaven.”

This designation also suggests that from a very early time Paul (and other believers) had already come to recognize both the Father and the Son in the Greek text of the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4.<sup>30</sup> After all, Paul’s clear expression of this in his next letter (1 Cor 8:6) is not argued *for*, but argued *from*. Thus the “one God” of the *Shema* is the Father, while the “one LORD” of the same *Shema* is Jesus Christ (the “Son” being assumed under the reality of God as Father). It is therefore altogether likely that this first mention of God in the Pauline corpus comes to us with this understanding of the *Shema* already well in hand.<sup>31</sup> And here it indicates the secure position of the Thes-

28. See Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 36-38.

29. See esp. 2 Cor 1:3; 11:31; Gal 4:4-6; Rom 15:6; Eph 1:3.

30. That is, by the first Christian century the divine name (Yahweh) was no longer pronounced and had been replaced orally with *Adonai* (“Lord”), which then appeared at some early point in time in the Septuagint as κύριος. The LXX of Deut 6:4 thus reads: κύριος (Yahweh) ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος (Yahweh) εἷς ἐστιν. What Paul has done in 1 Cor 8:6 is to attribute the κύριος to Christ the Son and the θεός to God the Father. See the full discussion in *Pauline Christology*, 89-94.

31. And all of this, it should be pointed out, because such an understanding of Psalm 110:1 was already common stock in the early church. It will also be pointed out how throughout these two letters the designation κύριος (“Lord”) has become the exclu-

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salonian believers. They are “in” both the Father and the Son simultaneously. In this letter it will be their existence in “the Lord” that Paul will press on most occasions.

(C) *The Greeting.* The greeting found here became the standard in all of Paul’s subsequent letters. As pointed out in the commentaries on both 1 Corinthians and Philippians in this series, here is a marvelous example of Paul’s “turning into gospel” everything he sets his hand to.<sup>32</sup> The traditional greeting in the Hellenistic world was *chairein* — the infinitive of the verb “to rejoice,” but in salutations meaning simply “Greetings!” (see Acts 15:23; Jas 1:1). In Paul’s hands this now becomes *charis* (“grace”), to which he adds the traditional Jewish greeting *shalom* (“peace,”<sup>33</sup> in the sense of “wholeness” or “well-being”).<sup>34</sup> Thus instead of the familiar “greetings,” Paul salutes his brothers and sisters in Christ with “grace to you — and peace.”<sup>35</sup>

It is worth noting that this is the invariable order of Paul’s words, not “grace and peace to you” as in most translations. Very likely there is significance to this order: the grace of God and Christ is what is given to God’s people; peace is what results from such a gift. Hence, “grace to you — and peace.” In a profound sense this greeting therefore nicely represents Paul’s larger theological perspective. The sum total of God’s activity toward his human creatures is found in the word “grace”; God has given himself to his

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sive designation for the exalted Jesus Christ, so that Christ is understood as the “Lord” in all of the OT echoes where that title occurs. See below on 3:12.

32. R. F. Collins (*Studies*, 139-40) argues (unconvincingly) that Paul has here taken over an earlier formula and adapted it to his own purposes. While all things are possible, not all possible things are equally probable. Indeed, it is of considerable interest that the most creative theologian in the early church is seen as not capable of being creative at points like this, but must be assumed to be borrowing from others — and that without evidence. See further n. 74 on 1:9-10 below.

33. Gk. εἰρήνη; on this word see V. Hasler, *EDNT*, 1:394-97; and H. Beck and C. Brown, *NIDNTT*, 2:780-82. It is just possible that, since this Hebrew word had connotations of “well-being” inherent to it, Paul is here using this Jewish greeting as an equivalent of the “health wish” found in many of the papyrus letters; but one should perhaps also remember that the English “hello” is derived from “health to you”! Whether the greeting “shalom” carried with it a wish for health by the time of Paul seems moot, though possible.

34. At the same time, he may also be modifying a Jewish blessing formula (ἐλεος καὶ εἰρήνη, “mercy and peace”) found, e.g., in 2 *Bar.* 78:2 and echoed (in reverse order) in Gal 6:16. This cannot be demonstrated, of course, since Paul could very easily have made his theological point by adopting the blessing without modification. More likely the blessing formula lies in the background, but the modification is the result of his being a man of two worlds, as suggested here.

35. It should perhaps be noted that one cannot be sure that Paul himself is responsible for this “transformation into gospel” of traditional formulas. But his is the earliest evidence for it, and it is quite in keeping with what he does elsewhere.

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people bountifully and mercifully in Christ.<sup>36</sup> Nothing is deserved, nothing can be achieved. The sum total of those benefits as they are experienced by the recipients of God's grace is "peace,"<sup>37</sup> God's eschatological *shalom*, both now and to come.<sup>38</sup> The latter (peace) flows out of the former (grace), and both together come from "God our Father" and are made effective in our human history through our "Lord Jesus Christ," so that in all its subsequent appearances, beginning with 2 Thessalonians, Paul adds the source already assumed here, but not expressed: "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

### B. THANKSGIVING (1:2-3)

*2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3 We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul here begins a practice that carries through most of his later letters, where the greeting is immediately followed by a thanksgiving report. In so doing he is simply radically Christianizing a commonplace phenomenon in certain kinds of letters from the Greco-Roman world.<sup>39</sup> In this first instance, however, we are confronted by twin difficulties: (1) it is not clear when the actual content of the thanksgiving ceases and something else that looks very much like a narrative of past relationships takes over;<sup>40</sup> and (2) our verses 2-10 are

36. Thus the letter also signs off with "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

37. In Paul "peace" can refer in turn to (1) peace with God (= cessation of hostilities), (2) peace within the believing community, (3) inner peace in place of turmoil, and (4) rest or order within a context of worship. Other commentaries express more confidence than I could muster that one can isolate any of these nuances in the Pauline salutations. In the context of greetings to a community it at least includes (1) and (2), and perhaps (3).

38. On the probable eschatological dimension of this word in Paul, see C. H. Giblin, *In Hope of God's Glory: Pauline Theological Perspectives* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 96.

39. On this matter see P. Schubert, *Form and Function in the Pauline Thanksgivings* (BZNW 20; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939), whose interests were, as the title indicates, on form and function; and P. T. O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* (NovTSup 49; Leiden: Brill, 1977), whose discussion of this thanksgiving appears on pp. 141-66.

40. For this reason, both Schubert and O'Brien (preceding note) are prepared to argue that the thanksgiving itself extends through 3:10. In this they are followed by

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comprised of two very long and complex sentences (vv. 2-5 and 6-10). So any breaking up of this material is generally arbitrary on the part of the interpreter — although reasons can be given for whatever one does.

This commentary will follow the paragraph structure of the TNIV, since, under any view, verse 4 serves as a janus between the thanksgiving and the subsequent narrative recall of the Thessalonians' conversion and their relationship with Paul. On the one hand, it is linked to verses 2-3 both grammatically and in content, and thus is still part of the thanksgiving proper. On the other hand, when Paul begins to remind them specifically of the *nature* of their election mentioned in verse 4, in terms of their own experience of it (v. 5), the thanksgiving gives way to an extensive recollection for the Thessalonians' sakes of the events of their conversion (vv. 6-10), including especially a long "defense" of the apostles' conduct while among them (2:1-3:10).

In any event, one should be aware of how the whole sentence (vv. 2-5) "works" in the way it falls out. The structure of the sentence is easy enough to see:

We always thank God for all of you,  
    constantly mentioning you in our prayers,  
    remembering your faith, love, and hope,  
    knowing your election.

Thus Paul says that in prayer he and his apostolic companions give thanks for them by doing two things: always mentioning them in prayer as they constantly remember their faith, love, and hope; and all of this because they also know that these latter are the evidence of the Thessalonians' election. But right at that point Paul goes on to spell out the evidential aspects of their election/conversion, and with that what began as a thanksgiving report begins to tail off into a sustained narrative, where he reminds them first of

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Malherbe and Beale, but this seems to be a clear case where "form" and "function" are at odds. Although structurally the fact that the prayer report begins in 3:11 could mean that the thanksgiving ends at 3:10, in fact the narrative of Paul's and their past relationship (1:5-2:12; 2:17-3:10) has very little to do with thanksgiving for them and everything to do with a narrative relating his own past relationship with them. What stands against such a view are the double realities that (a) Paul himself in 2:13-14 picks up the lost thread and thus repeats himself, including the theme of *imitatio*; and that (b) all the rest (1:4-2:12; 2:17-3:10) is an extended, consecutive narrative regarding his and their past relationships, right up to the time of this writing — which is not the stuff of thanksgivings. Others see the thanksgiving as extending through 1:10 (e.g., Findlay, Best, Bruce, Marshall, Richard, and Green), while Holmes takes it as going through v. 6. One can at least justify these latter on the basis of grammar; but in terms of content vv. 5-10 move far beyond thanksgiving to narrative as such.

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their conversion and its being well known elsewhere in Greece (1:5-10). So for all practical purposes the actual content of the thanksgiving report itself is found in these two verses.<sup>41</sup>

2 What is said in this first part of the thanksgiving report will become typical of all of Paul's later thanksgivings. The thanksgiving takes place in the context of prayer, which in the ordinary "logic" of things should be the first thing up. That is, while we pray for you, we continually give thanks for you. But this is a "thanksgiving report," not a "prayer report," hence the first participle ("making mention") simply gives the context for the apostles' repeated thanksgivings for the Thessalonians believers — in all instances as the three of them pray for them. It is for "all of you," as they are constantly mentioned in prayer. The plural "we," which is found here and in 2 Thessalonians 1:3, occurs elsewhere only in Colossians 1:3, even where others are included in the salutation (as, e.g., in 1 Corinthians). But in contrast to all of Paul's other letters, with the partial exception of 2 Corinthians, it here continues throughout the letter — except for 2:18; 3:5; and 5:27. This is probably significant in this case, in that even though Paul was undoubtedly the "point person" for the attack against the apostles that lies behind 2:1-12, he will regularly remind the Thessalonians that all three of them were in that original ministry together.

The focus of the thanksgiving is "for all of you," where Paul (typically) expresses thanksgiving for people, not for "things" or "experiences." The "all" in this case is probably not so much a matter of emphasis as such, but a way of putting upfront that all of the members of the believing community, including some who will need to be mildly corrected in this letter, are part of the newly formed *ekklēsia* of believers in Thessalonica. At least there is nothing in the letter itself to suggest that Paul's giving thanks "for all of you" hints at some kind of internal unrest in the community, as it very likely does in some other letters (e.g., Romans, Philippians). At the time of this writing the believing community in Thessalonica would not have been very large, and Paul's and his companions' memory of them is still fresh, and thus inclusive — even of the "disruptive idle" noted in 5:14, who had been anticipated in 4:9-12.

The more difficult, but not especially significant, decision regarding the clause that makes up our verse 2 is the placement of the adverb "contin-

41. And this is so, despite those who would perceive rhetorical features here as well (e.g., Wanamaker, Witherington; R. Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986]). If this is a rhetorical device, it is so by fiat, not because there is any analogy to it in the rhetoricians. For a critique of the contemporary enamored with Greek rhetoric on the part of many NT scholars, see P. H. Kern, *Rhetoric and Galatians: Assessing an Approach to Paul's Epistle* (SNTSMS 101; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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ually,” which comes at the end of the verse in the Greek text. The Nestle-Aland Greek text punctuated the sentence so as to make the adverb go with the participle that begins verse 3, and in this they have been followed by many others, including a goodly number of English translations. Thus, “we continually remember before our God and Father your work, etc.”<sup>42</sup> But here is a case where Pauline usage elsewhere, plus the structure of the first two clauses, seems to favor the TNIV and others. Although Paul uses this word only four times in his letters,<sup>43</sup> in each case it is in connection with prayer and thanksgiving, never with “remembering.” Moreover, taking it in this case as the conclusion of the first clause, rather than as the beginning of the next one, makes for a clause that is finely balanced with verse 3, which begins with “remembering” and concludes with “before our God and Father.” In this latter case most English versions rightly bring the final modifier upfront for the sake of good English. So too with this clause, which makes most sense as one finds it above, “and *continually* mention you in our prayers.”

We should note further that the logic of Paul’s sentence implies that he and Silas and Timothy give thanks for the Thessalonians — always — while at the same time they are interceding for them in prayer — continually. Thus in this earliest letter Paul puts intercession and thanksgiving together, which we learn from other letters was his constant habit.

**3** With a second participial clause Paul returns to the thanksgiving with which this long sentence began. The content of the clause itself is basically manageable in terms of understanding what he is trying to communicate to the Thessalonians in their present adversity. Nonetheless, some of the details require discussion, which can best be presented by offering a more “literal” rendition of Paul’s clause (in his word order, and picking up from the main verb): “we always thank God for all of you . . . , remembering your work of faith and labor of love and endurance of hope of our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father.”

We begin at the end, by noting that in this third mention of God in the letter, and thus in the Pauline corpus, God is once again designated as “Fa-

42. See, among others, the KJV, NIV, NASB, NAB, JB, NRSV, REB; cf. Ellicott, Lightfoot, Findlay, Frame, von Dobschütz, Holtzmann, Bruce, Holmes, Green, Beale, O’Brien, *Thanksgivings*. Among those who take it with *μνείαν ποιούμενοι ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν ἡμῶν* (“mentioning you in our prayers”), as the TNIV; see RSV, NEB, GNB, NET, ESV, NLT, NJB; cf. Milligan, Moffatt, Rigaux, Best, Wanamaker, Morris, Richard, Malherbe. Marshall and Witherington are ambivalent.

43. Three times in this letter (here; 2:13; 5:17) and once in Romans (1:9). The word order in the next occurrence (2:13) would seem to be decisive (*εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ ἀδιαλείπτως*). For those who are troubled by the “distance from the verb,” see 1 Cor 15:58 (*περισσεύοντες ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ τοῦ θεοῦ πάντοτε*).

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ther,” but in this case with the possessive “our.” Thus for Paul the risen and exalted Christ Jesus is our heavenly “Lord,” while the eternal God, because of the coming of the Son, is now regularly referred to as *our* Father.<sup>44</sup> How this came about, including the role of the Spirit in the process, is spelled out in some detail in Galatians 4:4-7. The ease with which this is said here indicates that such talk about God has long been in place and has likewise been part of Paul’s instruction of these early Gentile believers.

Otherwise, three matters are at issue in the sentence: (a) how the final phrase, “in the presence of our God and Father,” is intended to function: as a modifier of the phrase “of our Lord Jesus Christ” or of the opening participle, “remembering”; (b) whether the genitive, “of our Lord Jesus Christ,” modifies only the final phrase (“endurance of hope”), or is intended to do triple duty in the same way as the single “your” with which the clause begins; (c) the nature and meaning of the phrases that make up the crucial triad: faith, love, and hope.

The first two items are essentially structural and thus affect only one’s overall understanding of the clause. Regarding the final phrase (“in the presence of our God and Father”), it is remotely possible — especially in light of verse 10 below — that Paul is thinking of “the Lord Jesus Christ” as now in the Father’s presence; but it is difficult to see how that is a cause for present thanksgiving with regard to the Thessalonians themselves. More likely, therefore, as suggested above on verse 2 and in keeping with the word order there, Paul intended this as an *inclusio* with the participle, “remembering,” as the TNIV has it.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Paul envisions himself and Silas and Timothy as being “in the presence of *our* God and Father,” as they offer joyful thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonian believers.

In light of this more certain expression of “*inclusio*” in Paul’s clause, it is possible that he also intended both “our” and “of the Lord Jesus Christ” to do triple duty. That is, just as the TNIV and other translations recognize that the “your” goes with each of the three nouns in the Christian triad, so also the final phrase may go with each of the three. If so, then not only is their “hope in our Lord, Jesus Christ,” but so also is their “work” a product of their “faith in the Lord, Jesus Christ,” and their labor is prompted by their “love for

44. On the significance of this designation in the present letter, see the discussion of vocative ἀδελφοί (“brothers and sisters”) in its first occurrence in 2:1 below.

45. Indeed, this is a place where so-called “literal” translations (e.g., KJV, ASV, NASU), by keeping Paul’s word order intact, create considerable difficulty for the reader. Thus the NASU has it, “. . . steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father.” The KJV and ASV at least tried to alleviate some of the difficulty by placing a comma after “Christ.” The ESV, on the other hand, follows the RSV and most other contemporary translations by changing the word order in the same way as the T/NIV.

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Christ.” While one cannot be certain here, it does fit the pattern of such inclusions that recur in these two letters.<sup>46</sup>

One may note further that in such a reading of Paul’s clause, the whole takes the form of a kind of triple inclusio. The focus is clearly on the inner set of three, which are enclosed by the possessive “your” and “the Lord Jesus Christ,” where the Thessalonians are the subject of the verbal ideas in the triad of faith, love, and hope and the Lord Jesus Christ is the object in at least the first and third instance. That is, their faith and hope are in or toward Christ, while their “love” is most likely toward others. All of this in turn is enclosed by the outer set having to do with Paul’s “remembering [these virtues] before our God and Father.”

What is crucial in the clause are the reasons for the thanksgiving, which seem intended primarily as encouragement to the Thessalonians. Indeed, one should read these words first of all in light of chapters 2 and 3, knowing that they are expressed in response to Timothy’s return with an essentially good report about the Thessalonian believers, even though they are now in the throes of considerable persecution (see 2:14; 3:2-5). Paul’s gratitude to God for them finds expression in terms of the especially Christian triad — faith, love, hope — which appears here for the first time in Christian literature. It appears again in 5:8, and thereafter in Paul’s letters on a recurring basis.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, however, especially in light of the rest of the letter, one needs to take equally seriously the first words in each of the phrases (work, labor, endurance).<sup>48</sup>

It has been common to read the first two of these (“work of faith, labor of love”) as Christian platitudes, having to do with various forms of service and duty directly related to the gospel itself. The reason for this is easy to see; for even though Paul in later letters uses both nouns and their corre-

46. See, e.g., 2 Thess 2:17, where most English translations recognize that the “every” connected to “deed” and “good” connected to “word” go with both nouns (“every good deed and word”).

47. They are best known from their next occurrence, in 1 Cor 13:13, where the order “faith, hope, love” is conditioned by that context; thereafter they occur in a variety of ways and contexts (Gal 5:5-6; Rom 5:1-5; Col 1:4-5; Eph 4:2-5). Outside Paul see 1 Pet 1:21-22 and Heb 6:10-12. Because of the latter two instances, A. M. Hunter (*Paul and His Predecessors* [2nd ed.; London: SCM, 1961], 33-35) argued that the phrases reflect a pre-Pauline formula that may go back to Jesus himself. For a full discussion of the triad in this letter see W. Weiss, “Glaube — Liebe — Hoffnung: Zu der Trias bei Paulus,” *ZNW* 84 (1993), 196-217, who also tends to find them where they are not.

48. One should also note, whether intended by Paul or not, that in the case of both sets of nouns, there is an ascending order. One’s life in Christ begins with “faith,” manifests itself in “love,” and lives in expectant “hope” of the future consummation. Thus faith “works,” while love “toils,” and hope “endures” (cf. Rev 2:2, regarding the church in Ephesus); on the latter three cf. Lightfoot, 11.

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sponding verbs to speak both of “the work of the Lord” and of “working with one’s own hands,”<sup>49</sup> in the context of the divine triad one’s instincts are to think exclusively of the former (doing “the Lord’s work”). However, since Paul’s later thanksgivings regularly anticipate issues that will be addressed in the letter, sometimes where correction is needed in the community,<sup>50</sup> that seems most likely to be the case here as well. Thus Paul, by way of thanksgiving, is commending the whole community, a net thrown wide enough here to embrace those who also need to get on board in these matters.

Unfortunately a “literal” rendering of these three phrases has also led to further misunderstanding on the part of many readers. Thus “labor of love,” for example, is quite understandable at one level since it has made its way into common English parlance, as having to do with certain activities as motivated by love for those involved. But whether that is its meaning here is highly questionable. Furthermore, “work of faith” and “patience of hope” are especially ambiguous in English, unless they are turned into possessives: “faith’s work” and “hope’s patience.” Thus the T/NIV — and a few others<sup>51</sup> — have turned all three of them into meaningful phrases that capture the “result/reason” sense of the three genitives.<sup>52</sup>

The first phrase, “your work of faith,” has been an especially trou-

49. Although the second word (κόπος) leans heavily toward the “toiling” nature of work, it can also be used in some instances almost interchangeably with ἔργον, the catchall word for “work, deeds, actions” of all kinds. Thus in Rom 16:5, Mary πολλὰ ἐκοπίασεν εἰς ὑμᾶς (“worked very hard for you”), apparently referring to manual toil of some kind, while in v. 12, three women (Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis) ἐκοπίασεν ἐν κυρίῳ (“worked hard in the Lord”), apparently referring to “doing the gospel” in some form or another (the ἔργον word group does not appear at all in Romans 16). Apart from the use in v. 5 Paul rarely uses the κόπος word group for work in general, and of all kinds, for which he ordinarily uses the ἔργον word group, especially for “doing the law,” or “doing good” in general. The fine distinction between the two words can perhaps best be seen in Paul’s use of them in 1 Corinthians 15:58: περισσεύοντες ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ τοῦ κυρίου πάντοτε, εἰδότες ὅτι ὁ κόπος ὑμῶν οὐκ ἔστιν κενὸς ἐν κυρίῳ (“always abounding in the ‘work’ of the Lord, knowing that your ‘labor’ is not in vain in the Lord”).

50. See, e.g., 1 Cor 1:5, “you have been enriched with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge” (TNIV), in light of chs. 8 and 12; cf. Phil 1:4, “for your partnership in the gospel,” in light of 4:10-20.

51. See, e.g., NJB, REB, GNB, and the note in NET (“These phrases denote Christian virtues in action: the work produced by faith, labor motivated by love, and endurance that stems from hope in Christ”). Cf. Lightfoot (10), who renders the phrases, “the work that comes of faith, the labour which springs from love, the patience that is born of hope”; cf. Milligan, 6; Frame, 76.

52. Although it should be pointed out that not all think so. BDAG (κόπος 2) suggests that they are descriptive/adjectival; thus “faithful work, loving deeds, hopeful endurance” (cf. NLT); but such a rendering is to lose sight of the uniquely Christian triad altogether.

### I:2-3 THANKSGIVING

bling idea for many Protestants, especially in light of the emphatic contrasts in Galatians and Romans between “faith in Christ Jesus” vis-à-vis “works of law.” But that is an unfortunate misunderstanding of the concern of these latter two letters, not to mention a misreading of Paul, who in both letters is referring specifically to Gentiles’ being required to “do” certain aspects of the Jewish law (circumcision, sabbath, food laws). At the same time Paul is quite insistent that true faith can best be seen in the “good works” that it produces, as Galatians 5–6 make especially clear.<sup>53</sup> His language here reflects much the same idea. True faith in Christ — as with true faith in the Old Testament — expresses itself in “work.”<sup>54</sup> And, in any case, in this earliest letter “faith” is a much broader term than the more narrowly defined use in (most of) Galatians and Romans.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, “work” itself takes many forms in Paul’s letters. Sometimes it expresses the activities of “ministry” (e.g., 1 Cor 3:13; 15:58); sometimes in doing good toward others (Gal 6:9-10; Col 1:10; Eph 2:10); and sometimes it has to do with what Paul himself has accomplished for God (1 Cor 9:1). In the present case, the term probably has no specific referent, except that it would most likely include the first two items just noted.

The more difficult phrase is the second one, “your labor of love.” First of all, the word “labor” in this phrase puts a bit more emphasis on the idea of toil and hardship, although it is also used in a more generic way for “work” of all kinds, including “laboring for the gospel” (e.g., 1 Cor 3:8; 15:58). Indeed, for the majority of interpreters this is the only meaning of the phrase.<sup>56</sup> But such a reading seems to be a much too generic, rather than a case-specific, understanding of the phrase. After all, early on in the narra-

53. In this regard see esp. 5:6 (what counts is “faith that ‘works’ through love”) and 6:9-10. One is not saved by “doing what is good,” but truly “saved” people will express their salvation through the fruit of the Spirit.

54. Collins (*Studies*, 212-13) would see the phrase as referring to “active faith”; but that seems to miss Paul considerably, esp. in light of the next phrase (“working love?”), not to mention Pauline usage elsewhere. Similarly, Best’s rendition (68), “achievement of faith,” seems to put the emphasis altogether in the wrong place.

55. And even in these letters it is not so narrowly constricted as some expressions of Protestantism would have it; note, e.g., Paul’s phrase “he is now preaching *the faith* he once tried to destroy” in Gal 1:23, where “the faith” is nearly equivalent to the gospel, just as its several occurrences in 3:1-10 in the present letter border very much on the sense of “faithfulness.” See further the discussion by Collins, “The Faith of the Thessalonians,” in *Studies*, 209-29.

56. The exceptions are rare. Frame (76) notes both possibilities, but considers the one option to mean “manual labour necessary to support missionary propaganda,” rather than love within the Christian community that causes one to “work with one’s own hands” and thus does not lean on the largesse of others for food; but in the end he leaves the decision itself open-ended (similarly Best, 67). Witherington (59) hints at the possibility argued for here, but without specific application.

## THE FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS

tive that follows (2:9), Paul reminds the Thessalonians that the missionaries themselves did both kinds of “work.” Thus in the same sentence he reminds them that he and Silas “worked (*ergazomenoi*) night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone” and did so “while we preached the gospel of God to you.”<sup>57</sup>

In light of 4:9-12 in this letter, therefore, where Paul urges these believers to “mind your own business and work with your hands,” a matter to which he returns in full measure in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, he most likely is here anticipating that corrective word with this laudatory note. In thanking them all for their “work produced by faith” (probably Christian service) and “labor prompted by love” (probably manual labor), Paul is thus offering genuine thanks for those among them who are doing this very thing, even though for others it will be a matter needing correction. Thus rather than thanking God for them with Christian platitudes, Paul is in fact giving thanks for things that are both at work among them and at the same time need some correcting or bolstering. This also means that the word “love” in this case refers to “love for others,” rather than out of love for Christ.

The final phrase, “endurance inspired by hope,” is the least ambiguous of the three. Whatever else was true of these early believers, they were eagerly awaiting the final glory that would be theirs (and ours) at the coming of Christ. Indeed, the possibility is that they have been overly eager. In any case, such expectation is part of being a follower of Christ. Not only does one labor because of faith in Christ and labor with one’s own hands out of love for others (so as not to burden them), but all of this is done with the firm expectation that what Christ began at his resurrection will be brought to ultimate consummation at his coming. One’s hope rests secure in the risen Lord, the once crucified Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. “Hope,” therefore, in Paul is a “content” word, meaning a word that has to do with his absolute certainty about the future based on Christ’s resurrection, not a word of wishfulness about a less than sure tomorrow.

Thus the primary thrust of the thanksgiving to this point is altogether on the outworking of the Thessalonian believers’ coming to faith in Christ in terms of their living for Christ by caring for others. But that is not all, important as it is, so Paul will go on next to remind them of the dynamic nature of their conversion in its own right, which he spells out in our verse 5.

Much can be learned from listening carefully to Paul’s thanksgiving reports, especially since it is easy to limit thanksgiving to “things” or to “blessings”

57. Similarly, in the first of the next series of letters, Paul also reminds the Corinthians that “up to this very hour we labor (*kopiōmen*), working (*ergazomenoi*) with our own hands” (1 Cor 4:12).

## I:4-10 NARRATIVE PART I

that people receive. But in this first recorded letter two things stand out: (1) that he actually tells the people for whom he is praying what he is thankful for in terms of their ongoing relationship with Christ; and (2) that he thanks God for the very things that will also need some correctives. And this is not “buttering them up,” as it were, so as to let the “have it” later on. Rather, it is gratitude to God for what God has been, and is, doing in and among them. It should perhaps further be noted that Paul thinks of thanksgiving as a part of prayer, and he is especially quite ready to thank God for his friends, even when he well knows that they will need some of the correctives that follow.

### C. NARRATIVE PART 1: THE THESSALONIANS’ CONVERSION AND FOLLOWING (1:4-10)

Without breaking stride, and still in the context of offering thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonian believers, Paul puts forth a third participle (“knowing”)<sup>1</sup> that modifies the main verb, “we give thanks.” But what begins as reassurance based on their divine election evolves immediately into a reminder of Paul’s preaching and of their coming to faith, both of which were accompanied by the Spirit’s power. So if the previous participle offered the *immediate* cause of thanksgiving — their service and love for Christ and others — this one offers the *ultimate* cause: their being grounded in God’s calling them to himself for his own divine purposes. And all of this has apparently been brought about by Timothy’s report as to their remaining faithful in the context of their present suffering.

The result is that Paul’s affirmation as to the divine source of their calling and election (v. 4) is followed immediately by a reminder, first, of the realization of that election through his effective ministry among them (v. 5), then of their own role in furthering the gospel in Thessalonica (v. 6), and finally of the widespread knowledge of their conversion<sup>2</sup> and its radical nature

1. For the first two participles (“mentioning” and “remembering”), see pp. 20-21 above.

2. There have been occasional objections to the language of “conversion” regarding people becoming followers of Christ in the Pauline churches, since many of the original “converts” would have been attending the Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica and became followers of Christ from within that context. Moreover, in contemporary English “conversion” is often related to an “experience” of some kind. But in this case this seems to be exactly what Paul is narrating — their “experience” of conversion, given that it was accompanied by a powerful working of the Holy Spirit (vv. 4-6). Thus “conversion” seems to be the only proper language for what happened to these early believers; after all, it is the very experiential nature of it to which Paul here appeals!