

1 Thessalonians

Overview

1 Thessalonians is widely believed to be the oldest book of the New Testament. Paul's main concern for the Thessalonian church is their authenticity and courage in the face of persecution, which the Thessalonians faced on three fronts: 1) from the Jewish establishment, which had fought hard for its own religious freedom and closely guarded their identity (Jews and Christians would have still been closely associated at this time), 2) from pagans who saw Christians as undermining their cultural values, and 3) from the Roman state, which had a strong presence in Thessalonika and would have regarded speech about the lordship of Jesus as sedition. In somewhat refreshing contrast to letters like Galatians and 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul is writing to the Thessalonians not to admonish them for their spiritual immaturity, but to lift them up as a model church and encourage them to keep doing what they already do well (e.g. 4:9 "Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other."). His goal is to affirm them in their calling to live out the gospel despite suffering, and he does this by continually orienting their focus to the future when Christ will return and redeem their suffering. This makes 1 Thessalonians a highly *eschatological* letter, meaning it's focused on what it means to be a follower of Jesus in light of the *eschaton* or the last days. The letter is replete with familial terms¹ reinforcing the idea that they are in a spiritual and eternal family, since many members of the church would have left or been rejected by their families because of Christ.

2:9-13 (Week of November 2)

While Paul holds up the Thessalonians as examples to other churches, they are still a young, impressionable community. In chapter 2 he reminds them of his teaching and leadership style in response to possible accusations (2:2) that he is a charlatan or just another philosopher-for-hire. Paul dares to teach what is unpopular, because he serves the interest of God, not just of people (2:2, 2:6), he does not work from impure motives (2:3), and he doesn't flatter them excessively or hide behind rhetorical niceties (2:5). He is not an authoritarian teacher who makes harsh demands on his followers; instead, he is the one who toils and labors on their behalf (2:9).

There are some curious mixed family metaphors here. While he describes his leadership using the image of parents (2:7, 2:11), he never actually refers to the Thessalonians as his children but as his brothers and sisters. This communicates that although he is in a position of moral authority over them, he is ultimately their peer, struggling alongside them at equal footing. When he invokes the image of the father, he doesn't mention the authority fatherhood brings but the way fathers "encourage, comfort and urge" their children to live well (2:11). Paul even uses feminine imagery for himself in 2:7, which reads either "wet nurse" or "nursing mother" depending on the translation. The emphasis is on the intimate care Paul pours over the Thessalonians.²

¹ *Father* (1:1, 3; 2:11; 3:11), *brothers and sisters* (1:4; 2:1,9,14,17; 3:2, 7), *mother* (2:7), & children (2:7, 11).

² 1 Thessalonians is written on behalf of Paul, Silas, and Timothy (1:1), which explains the use of "we" throughout the letter. However, it is clearly Paul writing, and he even slips in and out of the first person singular (2:18) and refers to Timothy in the third person (3:1-2, 16).

In verse 13 he gives thanks for them because they accept his teaching not as mere human teaching but as the “word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.” Two things stand out here. **1)** Generally speaking, in the Greek culture of the time, moral teaching would have been divorced from religious life. Religious life would have consisted in rituals in honor of particular gods, whereas *philosophy* would have been the source of moral teaching. (Jews would not have known this dichotomy.) Paul continually butted up against this, and this is why he strains to get his gentile audiences (Corinth, Galatia, Colossae, Philippi) to make strong connections between a newfound “religious” truth (participation in a new reality through Christ’s resurrection) and “ethical” consequences (following the teachings of Christ). **2)** Many moral teachers of the time would have boasted about being “untaught” or “self-taught”. Paul, however, does not pretend to have any original insight but merely relays what he has received from God. This humbles Paul, but it also reinforces that Christ’s teachings are not merely the pursuit of some intellectual enterprise, but submission to a truth that exceeds human understanding. In addition, this teaching is “at work in you”; it is living and present to all of us.

Paul’s tone can often sound pedantic or authoritarian to modern readers, and maybe this is because the idea of a professional moral philosopher is foreign to us. When seen in his context, where moral teachers had comparable correspondence with their proteges and communities of followers, Paul’s humility, self-effacement, and genuine care stand out considerably.

Sources:

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