

## 13 1 Thessalonians. The Woman In Paul: The Missionary-Nurse

### Outline

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Introduction. 1 Thessalonians, written by Paul 50-51 AD, probably is the earliest book of our New Testament (--> James, Jude, Galatians). Thessalonica, capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, maintained its Greek culture but devoted itself to the Roman imperial cult. Fleeing persecution in Philippi (2:2; Acts 16:11-40), Paul, Silvanus (Silas), and Timothy arrived in Thessalonica, where they established a predominantly Gentile church (Acts 17:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 1:9). Further persecution soon caused them to flee again, first to Berea, where Silvanus and Timothy stayed while Paul continued on to Athens (Acts 17:10-15).

When Timothy met Paul in Athens, the Apostle immediately sent him back to Thessalonica to check on the new church (3:1-2). Paul then went to Corinth, where Timothy (again with Silvanus) brought him a favorable report (3:6-7). However, Timothy apparently reported the Thessalonians' concern that Paul had not returned to them. Timothy's report, then, motivated Paul to write 1 Thessalonians from Corinth. The new

church in Thessalonica had been in existence less than a year. The church's "leaders" (5:12) worked pastorally but without constituting a formal group, and worship was unstructured and charismatic (5:16-22; "prophecies"), as expected when educated elites do not dominate (see 1 Corinthians 14:26).

1. The Oppressed Poor, Sick, and Physically Challenged. Thessalonica was an important commercial city and from the beginning the church included prosperous women (Acts 17:4). Most members, however, were working class artisans (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12) who only through their work could avoid poverty and achieve a certain independence (5:14). Evidently there were few if any slaves, since the manual labor Paul commands would not have been a matter of choice for them. Oppression (thlipsis, 1:6; 3:3, 7; and thlibo, 3:4), especially expressed in religious persecution due to rejection of idolatry (1:9; cf. Acts 19), had been their common experience and undoubtedly contributed to their economic hardship.<sup>1</sup> The exhortation to help the "weak" (5:14) probably includes the sick, the physically challenged and the poor.

2. Liberating Justice and Future Salvation. Philip Esler reminds us that, although prominent in both Galatians and 2 Thessalonians, the concepts of justice/righteousness (dik-words, from the Greek root) and references to the law are both almost absent from 1 Thessalonians.<sup>2</sup> Esler takes this as evidence that 1 Thessalonians represents a more pristine form of Paul's theology than Galatians and Romans, which with their emphasis on justice, justification and law represent a contextual response to judaizing Christians, and that "righteousness" for Paul signifies basically "legitimate [community] identity".<sup>3</sup>

Not only is justice/righteousness notably rare in 1 Thessalonians, but it even seems to be purposely avoided. Thus in 1 Thessalonians Paul cites Isaiah 59:17, "[God] put on liberating justice [dikaïosne] as a breastplate and placed the helmet of liberation/salvation [soteria] on his head," but changes the phrase "breastplate of liberating justice" to "breastplate of faith and love" (1 Thess. 5:8). This substitution reflects Paul's theological focus on "faith, hope and love" in 1 Thessalonians (1:3; 3:6, 12-13; 4:9-10, 13-14), which contrasts remarkably with the emphasis on justice, justification and law in Galatians and Romans, usually taken as normative for Paul's theology. Dik-words (justice root) in 1 Thessalonians occur only in 2:10 ("how holily and justly and blamelessly we were among you") and in 4:6, the reference to God as the "avenger/vindicator" (Èkdikos) of those who sexually defraud a Christian brother.

In 4:15-17 Paul indicates that he expects the Second Coming of Jesus before his death ("we who are alive"; see 1 Cor. 15:52), but later he changed his perspective (2 Cor. 4:14). Jesus' final intervention

constitutes liberation both from the coming [divine] wrath (1:10; 5:9) and from all human oppression and violence (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:2, 14-16; 3:3-4, 7; 4:6; --> James 4:13-5:11 and “Apocalyptic Hope” --> Jude). While in 1 Thessalonians Paul appears to expect that believers may be caught up, or “raptured,” at any moment (4:13-18; imminence), --> 2 Thessalonians (2:1-12; deuterio-Pauline) indicates the necessity of precursory signs.

### 3. Paul’s guidelines for (male?) sexual behavior.

“For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual misbehavior [porneia]; that each one of you know how to possess your own vessel [skeuos] in holiness and honor, not with covetous passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress against a brother [or sister?] nor defraud him [or her?] in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God did not call us to uncleanness but in holiness. Therefore whoever rejects this rejects

not human authority but God, who also gives the Holy Spirit to you” (1 Thess. 4:2-8). --> 1 Cor. 5--7.

3.1 Paul here bases his instructions on Jesus’ teachings, which, with the exception of adultery and divorce to remarry, said nothing specific about sexual misconduct (see below on porneia). Jesus appears to have found sins in the economic and religious sphere (especially hypocrisy) to be much more serious. Especially if we compare the Pentateuch’s detailed laws (Leviticus 15; 18; 20), the simplicity of Jesus’ and Paul’s teaching is impressive. A few basic guidelines for those who “walk” in Jesus’ way (1 Thessalonians 4:1) take the place of detailed legal codes.

3.2 The fact that both Jesus and Paul use some terms common in the legal codes of the Hebrew Scriptures (purity, holiness) has confused many readers. However, Jesus and Paul each insisted on giving new meaning to the traditional words: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8; cf. the circumcision of the heart in Romans 2:25-29; similarly, “impurity” stands for injustice and oppression in Romans 6:19). In the Hebrew Scriptures, many activities that made participants “impure, unclean, or dirty,” and thus unfit to enter into the Temple and participate in worship, were not sinful. For example, God had commanded: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...” (Genesis 1:28). But on

seeking to fulfill this commandment of the Creator, after having sexual relations, even a married couple remained “unclean/dirty” until the evening, even after taking a ritual bath (Leviticus 15:18). In contrast, Jesus broke with Moses’ legal regulations to declare all food clean (Mark 7:19). Thus, Jesus’ praxis (touching lepers, corpses, and hemorrhaging women) and his teaching that the real “filth” comes from within, from the heart, simply becomes explicit in Mark 7:20-23. Paul went even further, writing that “All things in truth are clean” (Romans 14:14, 20; cf. Titus 1:15, “To the pure all things are pure”).

3.3 Commentators have debated much about Paul’s intended meaning when he uses the Greek word skeuos (vessel, container, implement, tool; 4:4), which could refer metaphorically either to a person’s (male or female) own “body” (NRSV, NIV; possibly even a euphemism for one’s genitals) or to a man’s “wife” (1 Peter 3:7, NRSV note). If Paul uses this metaphor to speak of the wife, he reflects his patriarchal context, since the text, written by a man, is then directed only to men (all apparently married), and the woman is seen as male sexual property. “Sexual misbehavior” (porneia, 4:3) would then refer to adultery, understood as the theft of sexual property belonging to another married man (4:6), contrary to the Ten Commandments (#7 and #10). However, Paul and his most intimate friends (1:1), along with Jesus and almost all of his apostles, did not have wives. Consequently, Paul probably deliberately utilized an ambiguous metaphor (skeuos, vessel= either body/genitals or wife) that would be relevant to all readers, male or female, whether unmarried (like himself) or married.

3.4 Paul stresses the principal of the tenth commandment of not coveting that which belongs to one’s neighbor (see Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 5:3, 5), of not defrauding one’s brother (perhaps with a reference to adultery), and of abstaining from porneia (“sexual misbehavior”). Originally porneia referred only to prostitution, but traditionally has been mistranslated as “fornication” or as “sexual immorality,” infamously ambiguous terms. Neither the word “sexual” nor the word “immorality” are in the Greek, since “morals” (like ethics) is a Greek philosophical concept and not biblical. Moreover, “sexual” is a concept that was not developed until the 18th century (“Song of Songs” refers only to “love,” not “sex”). Perhaps the best translation of porneia today would be “sexual misbehavior,” but in the New Testament various meanings are found: at times it refers to adultery or incest rather than prostitution. Until modern inventions of more dependable contraceptive methods, heterosexual intercourse commonly produced children, involving parental responsibility, so “irresponsible/unjust sexual behavior” would be another alternative translation of porneia.

3.5 In dealing with the sexual sphere, rather than starting from the countless laws of the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul begins with Jesus' teaching, his redefinition of traditional concepts of impurity and holiness, the Holy Spirit's guidance, and the importance of avoiding harm to a brother or sister in the community. Paul makes no explicit reference to Moses' Law but may allude to several of the 10 Commandments as relevant. In 4:3-8 we may detect allusions to #7 prohibiting adultery, #8 prohibiting theft, and #9 prohibiting false witness (4:6, "defrauding the brother"). See also:

#10 on not coveting (2:5; but cf. strong desire in 2:17);

#6 on not killing (2:15);

#4 on working (4:11-12; 5:14, 6-7; but nothing about the Sabbath rest).

Above all, Paul emphasizes the importance of brotherly and sisterly love (1 Thess. 4:9-10; see Romans 13:8-14). As in all the Bible, the life of the people of God is not defined by Greco-Roman philosophical concepts of morals and ethics, but is perceived as a "walk" in specific historical contexts (1 Thess. 4:1, 12; 2:12; 3:11; cf. "praxis" in 4:11).

#### 4. The Woman (Feminine Side) in Paul and His Companions:

"...though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us" (2:7-8).

At times Paul seems to reflect his contemporaries' common gender ideologies regarding rigid differences between men and women, proper social roles, the supposed inferiority of women, and their corresponding submission to men (1 Cor. 11:2-16; Romans 1:26-27 [cf. the textual problem of 1 Cor. 14:34-35]). This traditional side of Paul's thought became even more strongly developed in the deutero-Pauline and pastoral letters. As a result, the diversity and complexity of Paul's own dialectic in this area became obscured.

1 Thessalonians 2:7-8 (cited above) is perhaps the best example among many where Paul transcends the dominant male chauvinist ideology of his culture (see also Paul as "mother" in Galatians 4:19; Philemon 10 "birthed," not "begat"). As always, gender ideology had been built into the very structure of the language, making it difficult to discern and overcome. For example, "act like a man" was the common Greek way of

referring to the virtue of courage. Paul, however, exhorted the entire church at Corinth, women included, to thus “act like men” (1 Cor. 16:13; Greek: andrízomai). In Romans he expressed his gratitude to Priscilla (Prisca) for demonstrating such courage in saving his life (Romans 16:3-4). The fact that Paul typically mentions Priscilla first and then her husband does not give the impression he is describing a timid, submissive woman, but rather a church leader who even corrected the theology of the erudite and eloquent Apollos (author of Hebrews?; Acts 18:24-26).

When Luke indicates that at the founding of the church in Thessalonica “not a few of the leading women” were among those who responded to Paul’s teaching (Acts 17:4), probably he refers to upper-class Greek women attracted to Judaism who attended the synagogue. Notably, 1 Thessalonians names only men (Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, all single) and is addressed primarily to men (see 3.3 above on the possible reference to women in 4:4 under the ambiguous image of a “vessel or implement” [Greek: skeuos]).

5. Anti-Semitism / Anti-Judaism (from a comma?). Modern readers often express concern regarding Paul’s supposed anti-Semitism (more precisely, non-racist “anti-Judaism”):

“For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from those Jews[,!?] who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone....” (2 Thess. 2:14-16).

Many such texts in the New Testament give a similar impression and have been interpreted in ways that foment anti-Semitic violence throughout the history of the Church, culminating in the Holocaust under Hitler, in which six million Jews were killed along with thousands of other minorities persecuted by the Nazis (homosexuals, communists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, gypsies, etc.). The original Greek, however, has no commas!

5.1 Moreover, in Romans (9:3-5; 11:17-31), Paul explicitly presents a different perspective concerning Jews (Israel, Abraham’s descendants). Hence, some commentators argue that Paul presents contradictory views in 1 Thessalonians and Romans, while others even conclude that 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16 is a later non-Pauline addition.

5.2 However, the distinction and separation between synagogue and church, and between Judaism and Christianity, occurred only at the end of the first century after the New Testament was written. When

Paul wrote (50-58 AD), he and his compatriots were considered and called “Jews” or “Israelites,” and those who followed Jesus’ “Way” were viewed simply as one of many Jewish sects (as had been the case of Jesus and his followers).

5.3 Therefore, as conservative evangelical commentator Leon Morris concludes: “Paul is not writing here about all Jews, but only those involved in the activities he names.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, I. Howard Marshall says: “Paul is writing here about particular Jews, those who have shown hostility to God’s messengers, and not about the Jews in general.”<sup>5</sup> This ought to be obvious. Notably, however, such common sense often is not applied when commentators interpret Romans 1:26-27 and interpret the text in a way that foments homophobia and violence against all “homosexuals.” Such use of the text, of course, links Paul to Nazi homophobia and contradicts his intention of following Jesus. To interpret an ancient text that condemns specific harmful activities in the service of racism (against all Jews or Blacks) or homophobia (against all homosexuals) is to abuse both the text and the individuals discriminated against.

## Notes

1. Thomas D. Hanks, God So Loved The Third World (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), 49.
2. Philip F. Esler, Galatians (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), 154-159, 178. Even attentive Bible readers commonly fail to note that the virtual absence of justice terminology (dik-words) in pristine Pauline theology is paralleled by the scarcity of such terms in Q and --> Mark, our earliest sources of Jesus' teaching. In Q (the sayings material common to Matthew and Luke), the only example is Luke 7:35: "Wisdom is justified [dikaiŮo] by all her children" (// Matt. 11:19 "by her works"). Mark employs dīkaios once to report Herod's view of John the Baptist as "just and holy" (6:20), but from Jesus' lips only in the triple tradition saying: "I did not come to call the dīkaios (just/righteous), but sinners" (2:17b // Matt. 9:13 // Luke 5:32, where Luke adds "to repentance"). --> Mark.
3. Ibid., 178, 143.
4. Leon Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959/91), 83.
5. I. Howard Marshall, 1 and 2 Thessalonians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 82.

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