

20 2 Thessalonians. Preventing Poverty by Diligent Labor

Outline

Greeting, 1:1-2

Thanksgiving and petition, 1:3-12 (Jesus' return, 6-10)

Six precursory signs of Christ's return, 2:1-12

Perseverance of the Christians, 2:13-17

Prayer and evangelization, 3:1-5

Praxis: the obligation to work, 3:6-15

Farewell and benediction, 3:16-17

The first scholar to seriously question whether Paul himself actually wrote 2 Thessalonians was J. E. C. Schmidt in 1798. Although Paul undoubtedly wrote 1 Thessalonians about 50-51 AD, making the first letter quite possibly the earliest document of the New Testament, most scholars now conclude that 2 Thessalonians was written a generation later (80-90 AD) by a disciple of Paul. This conclusion has become increasingly common since 1972, when German scholar E. Trilling published his first detailed research (despite 2 Thess. 3:17).

Whatever our conclusions about authorship and date, 2 Thessalonians represents a rather queer bird in the New Testament canon. It differs enormously from the pastoral letters (1-2 Timothy and Titus) and the other deuterio-Pauline letters (Colossians and Ephesians), and does have most in common with 1 Thessalonians. Nevertheless, when 1 Thessalonians is compared closely with 2 Thessalonians, significant differences, both theological and stylistic, become

apparent. Most contemporary investigators conclude that superficially similar elements 2 Thessalonians shares with the earlier letter give the impression that a later Pauline disciple is seeking to imitate the Apostle. This later writer does lay claim to the inspiration of Paul's own spirit (3:17) and in a later crisis seeks to communicate apostolic "traditions" (2:15; 3:6). His emphasis on the readers being "counted worthy" of God's kingdom and call (1:5, 11) need not imply that they acquired merit by their suffering and so deserved divine acceptance, but rather as pointing to God's providential ordering of their lives (including the persecution) and their gracious inclusion in the new humanity (Luke 17:10; 20:35). However, in all probability Paul himself did not write 2 Thessalonians (cf. Mark 7:3, 8, Jesus' critique of the oppressive, purely human traditions of the elders).

1. Eschatology. 2 Thessalonians is the only Pauline/deutero-Pauline letter that has as its primary theme eschatology, the events related to Jesus' Second Coming. Although the eschatology in this letter is of the abrupt apocalyptic type, the author does insist that before the climactic Second Coming six other events must occur first (2:1-12; cf. 1 Thessalonians where the Second Coming appears to be imminent without the necessity of preceding signs). The first chapter focuses on the revelation of Jesus in his Second Coming (1:5-12), the second (2:1-12) speaks of the lawless oppressor (similar to the antichrist of John's letters), while the third (3:6-14) insists that the Christian praxis appropriate to the time is diligent manual labor to avoid poverty, coupled with good works expressing solidarity with the weak and poor (--> Titus).

The "lawless one" (1 Thess. 2:3, 7-8) is not presented as an anarchist but as a totalitarian tyrant-oppressor (see 'adik'- terms, "injustice" in 2:10, 12). 2 Thessalonians' affirmation that "he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God" (2:4b) has perplexed interpreters of all persuasions (regarding authorship and date). If we assume Paul himself to be the author (50 AD), the prophecy of a desecration of the Jerusalem temple never was fulfilled

literally and that temple was destroyed in 70 AD. However, if we accept that 2 Thessalonians was written around 80-90 AD, 15-25 years after Paul's death (ca. 65 AD), then the author is describing a future desecration of a temple that no longer existed!

Some, therefore, have proposed that 2 Thessalonians must refer figuratively to the church as God's Temple (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Ephesians 2:21), but the New Testament never teaches that the church as a whole would become apostate. In 1646 the Westminster Confession (xxv:6) still identified the lawless tyrant as the pope in Rome (the common Protestant interpretation during the Reformation). More recently, dispensationalist interpreters (see below) have insisted that the temple in Jerusalem must be reconstructed before the revelation of the lawless one (the antichrist) and Jesus' Second Coming (see Luke's reference to "the times of the Gentiles," 21:24; but such a reconstructed temple still would not be the one literally intended by Paul, if writing around 50 AD). For the majority of interpreters today, therefore, we should not understand such apocalyptic images so literally, but recognize them as metaphors: "No specific temple is in mind, but the motif of sitting in the temple and claiming to be God is used to express the opposition of evil to God."¹

2. The Oppressed Poor and the Physically Challenged. Although 1 Thessalonians also had addressed a church that suffered persecution and oppression (see 1:6; 2:2, 14-16; 3:3, 7), 2 Thessalonians appears to reflect a more serious situation that clamors for the sudden intervention of Jesus as a just judge (1:4-10, with the root thlipsis, oppression, affliction four times, plus "persecutions" one time and "suffer" one time).² Eschatological hope for God's liberating justice normally is expressed in a dramatic apocalyptic form in such oppressive contexts (--> James 5:1-6; Revelation; cf. the calmer parables of the Kingdom quietly "growing" in Matthew 13). In all the Pauline and deuterio-Pauline literature, only 2 Thessalonians describes the final judgment with its punishment of oppressors as a kind of consolation for the oppressed (1:6-9; cf.

3:2; see Paul himself, who usually describes God's justice as a positive liberation from all oppression and suffering, as in the Exodus).

In 1 Thessalonians Paul had addressed a church greatly perplexed about the destiny of those who had already died and sought to encourage believers with the hope of Jesus' imminent second coming (1 Thess. 4:13--5:11). 2 Thessalonians, on the other hand, no longer contemplates an imminent Second Coming but rather focuses on six necessary prior events in the apocalyptic calendar--above all the revelation of the Final Oppressor, the lawless tyrant, who seeks to take God's place, sitting in the temple itself and demanding to be worshipped as God. Moreover, the second letter speaks mysteriously of a thing (2 Thess. 2:6) or a person (2:7) that acts as an obstacle that restrains the revelation of the lawless one whose characteristic work would be injustice/oppression (2:10, 12).³

In 1 Thessalonians Paul expressed concern about certain unruly believers (1 Thess. 5:14) and--contradicting elitist prejudices of the Greco-Roman culture--exalted the value of manual labor for all (1 Thess. 4:11) with the goal of helping the needy through good deeds (4:12; cf. 2 Thess. 3:8). 2 Thessalonians, however, addresses a more serious problem: many in the church apparently claimed to have already entered their heavenly Sabbath "rest" (2 Thess. 1:7) and had stopped working, contrary to the Fourth Commandment, which commanded six days of work before the seventh day of rest. Therefore, 2 Thessalonians exhorts at length (3:6-15), referring to Paul's own example, and sets forth a severe principle: "Anyone not willing to work should not eat" (3:10). The warning concerns only those "unwilling" to work, since the plight of those who had lost their land and become urban unemployed was well-known in New Testament times (Matt. 20:2-7). This teaching, then, was not directed against the unemployed, nor should it be applied with any legalistic literalism to children, the sick or the physically challenged. However, in cases of persons who refused to work, 2 Thessalonians recommends a kind of "tough love"

that still insisted on acknowledging the unruly as brothers and sisters in the faith (3:14-15; cf. 1 Corinthians 5 and the incestuous man). With our common tendency to regard as “enemies” those who disagree with us (on controversial ideological issues such as abortion, equality for women and sexual minorities), much may be learned from this letter.

3. Judaism. Like Yahweh (the Liberator-God of the Exodus), Jesus comes to liberate his people (2 Thess. 1:4-9) from their oppression and from the persecutor-tyrant (“the lawless one,” soon to appear, 2:1-12). Additional continuity with Judaism is evident in the allusions to the 10 Commandments: work and rest (#4, 2 Thess. 3:6-13--but without legalistic Sabbatarianism), truthfulness (#9, 2:9-10), and against idolatry, the ideology of the oppressors (#1-2, 2:4). The Law is understood as teaching love (1:3; 3:5), justice and good works, and sin is understood as oppression/injustice (Romans 8:4; 2 Timothy 3:14-17). However, the traditions with greatest authority come from Paul himself (oral instruction and letters), not from the Law (2:15; 3:14). See also the comments about the Jerusalem temple and regarding Dispensationalism.

4. Women and Sexual Minorities. When Paul established the church in Thessalonica (Greece), his co-workers included prominent women (Acts 17:4) and in 1 Thessalonians Paul compares himself with a nursing mother (1 Thess. 2:7-8). In 2 Thessalonians, however, although the “brothers” (2 Thess. 1:3; 2:1; 3:1, 15) undoubtedly included many women, specific references to women do not appear. The same tranquil restfulness and eagerness to listen (εσυχία) that 1 Timothy (2:11-12) counseled for women, as well as men (2:2), 2 Thessalonians (3:12) also recommends to all (see “peace” as the frame of the letter’s theology, 1:2; 3:16).⁴ “Busybodies” of both genders are encouraged to respect the privacy rights of others (2 Thess. 3:11; see 1 Tim. 5:13; 1 Peter 4:15; Luke 12:13-14). The images of Jesus in his Second Coming (1:7-10) who destroys the Oppressive Tyrant (2:3-10) are militant (masculine?) figures. Each

letter presents itself as coming from Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, all unmarried (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1).

5. Dispensationalism. This contemporary theology and hermeneutics had antecedents in the eighteenth century, but its principal “ecclesiastical father” was the lawyer and Anglican cleric, John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) of London and Dublin. In 1828 Darby left the Anglican Church to join the Plymouth Brethren. However, the movement soon split into the “exclusive” Brethren (under Darby’s leadership), who did not permit persons from other denominations to partake with them in the Lord’s Supper, and the more “open” Brethren (following B. W. Newton).

Soon far transcending Plymouth Brethren circles, dispensationalist-type hermeneutics became widely promulgated in fundamentalist circles in the Americas through the Bible annotated by Cyrus I. Scofield (1843-1921, an American Congregationalist layman and, like Darby, a lawyer) and the works of Lewis Sperry Chafer and Charles C. Ryrie. This interpretation of the Bible (hermeneutics) tends to be quite literalistic, but its most fundamental characteristic is the emphasis on a strong distinction-or dichotomy-between Israel and the Church. The primary question asked regarding any New Testament text is whether it is addressed to Jews (e.g., Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord’s Prayer) or to the Church (which includes Jews who believe in Jesus). With such criteria Paul’s letters come to have more authority for Christians than do the Gospels, where Jesus addresses primarily his fellow Jews.

The name “dispensationalism” comes from the practice of dividing the Bible in seven “dispensations” (administrations). A dispensation, according to Scofield, is “a period during which man is proved with respect to his relative obedience to some specific revelation of God’s will.” Seven dispensations are thus delineated in the Bible:

1. Innocence: before the Fall of Adam and Eve, Genesis 1-2 (see Gen. 1:28);
2. Conscience: from the Fall to Noah, Genesis 3--5 (3:7);
3. Human government: from Noah to Abraham, Genesis 6--11 (8:15);
4. Promise: from Abraham to Moses, Genesis 12--Exodus 19;
5. Law: from Moses to Christ, Exodus 20--Malachi and the Gospels;
6. Grace: the period of the Church, Acts 2/13/28 to the Rapture;
7. Kingdom: the Millennium, when the Hebrew Bible promises of an earthly Kingdom for the nation of Israel will be fulfilled (Revelation 20:1-6).

For most dispensationalists, the Church was born on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), and they continue practicing water baptism and the Lord's Supper. Nevertheless, some ("hyper-dispensationalists") follow E. W. Bullinger (1837-1913) and insist that the Church began only with Paul (Acts 9/13 or 28). Therefore, they practice neither sacrament (if they accept Acts 28) or only the Lord's Supper (if they accept Acts 9/13). Such a diversity of conclusions results from assuming that only certain later Pauline letters have direct authority for the Church under the Dispensation of Grace.

Traditionally the church taught that Christians would have to endure a great tribulation before Jesus' Second Coming (Mark 13; Luke 21; Matthew 24--25). Nevertheless, beginning with their sharp distinction between Israel and the Church, dispensationalists insisted that Jesus' teachings in the Gospels were addressed only to his fellow Jews, but that Jesus would return before the Great Tribulation to rescue Christians (the secret "rapture" of the Church, from the Latin rapio, snatched away; see 1 Thess. 4:15-17). Non-believing Jews would then have to endure the Great Tribulation of seven years (Revelation), after which Jesus would descend to earth to reestablish the national Kingdom of Israel (the millennium, Revelation 20), in accord with Hebrew Bible promises. This new doctrine of a secret rapture of the Church seven years

before the Second Coming (in effect dividing Jesus' Second Coming into two stages) appears to have its origin in a prophetic vision of Margaret MacDonald in Scotland (1830) and a charismatic service of Edward Irving (1832), which then influenced John Darby's notion of a secret rapture and his strange interpretation of Jesus' Second--and Third!--Comings.

Dispensationalism has enjoyed enormous success in spreading its literalistic interpretation of the Bible by means of annotated Bibles (especially that of C. I. Scofield, 1902-09, revised 1917; revised by others, 1967), Bible institutes for the training of evangelists, missionaries and pastors (without university training), and popular books (Hal Lindsey). Rather than "dispensations," the Bible itself prefers to speak of "covenants/alliances" and manifests a fundamental continuity (the history of salvation/liberation that culminates in the Gospel).

Nevertheless, Dispensationalism has made significant contributions by:

1) rejecting the traditional Neoplatonic tendency of excessively "spiritualizing" many texts (although still tending to overlook materialistic interpretation now more coherently developed in Latin American liberation theologies);

2) breaking with elitist educational traditions to pioneer forms of theological education by extension;

3) underscoring something of the diversity in the Scriptures (see the biblical theology movement, beginning in the nineteenth century);

4) anticipating contemporary emphasis on canonical interpretation (developed especially in the works of Brevard Childs); Scofield wrote: "It is impossible to understand any portion of the Scriptures without having some conception of its place in the total context of the Bible;"

5) recognizing the importance of distinguishing between Israel and the Church (without going to the extreme of creating artificial dichotomies). The great twentieth century theologian,

Karl Barth, was influenced by the writings of E. F. Stroüter, a dispensationalist who returned from America to Switzerland and insisted in the importance of distinguishing between Israel and the Church in the interpretation of the New Testament, an approach that has become fundamental for proper interpretation, especially of such books as Romans.

Dispensationalists and other fundamentalists exercise an important influence on contemporary international politics, since (starting from their literalistic interpretation of biblical prophecy) they strongly support the State of Israel against its Arabic neighbors, while at the same time aggressively proselytizing to convert Jews to fundamentalist Christianity.

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