

Preaching in 1 Thessalonians

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The Revised Common Lectionary calls the preacher and the congregation to listen to 1 Thessalonians on only seven Sundays out of 156: one Advent Sunday each in Years B and C, and five Sundays during the Ordinary Time of Year A.¹ Even the passages of 1 Thessalonians that are assigned² omit a large central section of the letter. Within 1 Thess 2:14-4:12, arguably the most contingent portion of the letter,³ only 3:9-13 is appointed for Lord's Day proclamation. The pastoral relationship between Paul and his colleagues, on the one hand, and the assembly of the Thessalonians, on the other, is thus explored from the pulpit significantly less frequently than the situations reflected in Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, or even Philemon.⁴

Homiletical preference for narrative over non-narrative texts further contributes to unfamiliarity with or disinterest in 1 Thessalonians. Many preachers share a (perhaps unconscious) assumption that Gospel stories are more accessible than Epistles, that Gospels are less theologically complex, that they are not so difficult to read as Paul's letters. "Paul places heavy demands on his readers," concedes my colleague Charlie Cousar.⁵ So, I would add, do the Gospels, but that is another story for another day. For now, it is enough to observe that preaching from Paul is simply not popular among pastors in mainline churches,⁶ which further contributes to unfamiliarity with this small letter lodged near the end of the canonical list.

Finally, there is no small distrust of 1 Thessalonians because—much like the Revelation to John—many preachers think it has been appropriated, or even hijacked, by millenarian and dispensationalist groups. What comes first to mind about 1 Thessalonians these days is eschatological anxiety: concern that the return of the risen Lord might "leave behind" loved ones who have died (4:13-18) and urgent exhortation to prepare for the judgment day (5:1-11). It is not only churches with lively expectations of the eschaton for whom 1 Thessalonians carries this reputation. While the annual Bible Content Test administered by the Presbyteries Cooperative Committee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) may not quite be the gold standard for biblical literacy, it is nevertheless widely used to assess knowledge of the content of scripture. In the history of that examination, questions have called for identification of precisely three verses from 1 Thessalonians:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (4:13; NRSV)

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. (4:17; NRSV)

For you yourselves know very well that the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (5:2; NRSV)

Each of these three verses concerns matters of eschatology and is drawn from the relatively small section of the letter 4:13-5:11. Similarly, the only verse from 2 Thessalonians ever to appear on the Bible Content Test is 3:10, which addresses eschatological confusion: “For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (NRSV). One might reasonably conclude from this that Paul’s chief worry about the Thessalonians is their attitude toward the end of the world. The introductory paragraphs accompanying 1 and 2 Thessalonians in most study Bibles similarly lead readers to think the letters concern this subject alone.

There is good reason to lament unfamiliarity with 1 Thessalonians and disinterest in or distrust of it. The letter can again offer an evangelical “word on target”⁷ for us when we read it on its own terms rather than simply as part of a debate about eschatology since its true center of gravity is not the cosmic future but the present life of the church. Eschatology is by no means the sole or even primary subject in 1 Thessalonians. In point of fact, discussion of the end times comprises only thirteen percent of the letter. Paul’s assurance that the Lord will not abandon Christians who have died and his exhortations about the Day of the Lord (4:13-5:11) occupy a single page of the letter’s seven-and-one-half pages in the Nestle text. Although anxiety about the destinies of believers who have died is very real, as is the church’s anticipation of the eschaton, these are scarcely the only matters that occupy Paul’s attention in the letter.

This may sound like a peculiar claim in view of Paul’s repeated references to the *parousia*, the appearing of the risen Lord:⁸

For they themselves report what sort of access we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to *await his Son from the heavens* whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, the one who rescues us from impending wrath. (1:9-10)⁹

For who is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before *our Lord Jesus at his appearing* if is it not you? (2:19)

May the Lord cause love for one another and for all to increase and abound just as we also have love for you, in order that he might strengthen your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at *the appearing of our Lord Jesus* with all his saints.(3:12-13)

For we say this to you with a word of the Lord, that we who live, who are left behind at *the appearing of the Lord*, will never precede those who sleep. (4:15)

May the God of peace himself make you completely holy, and may he keep your spirit and soul and body sound and blameless at *the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ*. (5:23)

Each reference to Jesus’ *parousia* stands at a critical turning point in the letter’s structure. The first three mark transitions within the letter’s thanksgiving—Paul’s

gratitude for the Thessalonians' faithfulness to the gospel (1:2-8) and for their faithfulness to the apostolic mission team (2:1-18), and his prayer for their continued faithfulness (3:1-10)—and the fifth initiates the letter's concluding benediction (5:23-28). Only the fourth mention of *parousia*, at 4:15, occurs in the context of discussion of the end times. The recurrence of this image of the Lord's appearing serves as something like the letter's heartbeat, the steady rhythm that moves it from beginning to end. The apostle sounds a persistent note of reminder throughout 1 Thessalonians that the risen Christ is both the source of the church's faithfulness and the guarantor of that faithfulness. Jesus' *parousia*, Jesus' appearing, Jesus' presence in the church carries at once the reality of God's election and the promise of redemption. Jesus is "the one who rescues us from the impending wrath" (1:10), the risen Christ who will gather his church to himself at the last trumpet (4:16; cf. 1 Cor 15:52). He is also, however, the one through whom the Thessalonians bring their faithful work, loving labor, and hopeful endurance into the very presence of God (1:3), the one who makes the faithful church a crown of boasting for the apostles (2:19), the one who pours into believers' hearts his own love such that their love becomes known beyond their own fellowship (1:8; 3:12; 4:10), and the one who sanctifies the church and assures its holiness so that it may stand in the presence of the holy God (3:13; 5:23).

This assurance of Jesus' *parousia* that suffuses 1 Thessalonians stems from an emphatically apocalyptic conviction that is by no means limited to eschatology.

The word "apocalyptic" commonly denotes doom and destruction, the end of things, the demise of the world. Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* captured well the popular sense of the term. The war in Vietnam signaled to Coppola the end of personal morality and the collapse of national virtue. Despite longstanding theological habits, though, as well as popular usage, "apocalyptic" should not be used interchangeably with "eschatological."¹⁰ The word "apocalyptic" means "revealed" or "revelatory"; "eschatological" describes convictions about the end of history, the day of God's redemption. Jewish and Christian apocalypses of the first century often contain eschatology, visions of God's plan to rescue the covenant people and bring justice and healing to a fallen world. Christian writers like Paul, however, do not look forward only to the Day of the Lord, but also claim God has already initiated the era of redemption in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul is concerned far less with the cosmic future than with the transformation of the human present. He speaks more of the way things are than the way things will be. The new age inaugurated in Christ is scarcely complete, since the church and the world continue to struggle against the power of sin and under the burden of death, but it has surely begun. The resurrection of Jesus, God's justification of sinners, and the Spirit's presence in the church provide a present foretaste of the glory that is yet to come. Paul clearly anticipates the return of the risen Lord in his own near future. Believers are "those upon whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11), for whom "the appointed time has grown short" (7:29). The revelation that has changed Paul's life, however, has comparatively little to do with turning the pages of the heavenly calendar or watching the rushing hands on the cosmic clock. The apocalypse that defines Paul's gospel is rather the cross of Jesus Christ, the revelation of God's new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15).

The new creation, unlike the one portrayed in Genesis, is not a matter of God's planting a garden and filling it with plants, animals, and human beings. Paul's

language is much more radical. J. Louis Martyn examines the language of new creation in Galatians to show that for Paul the new creation is nothing less than the invasion of God's righteousness; it sets aside the old world held captive to sin and death and liberates enemy-occupied territory.¹¹ The new creation is marked not by power but by weakness, not by human wisdom but by divine foolishness. It is a new world that finds life in the midst of death and glory in the midst of suffering and humiliation. The new creation turns upside down the most treasured of human values and replaces them with Jesus' cross. Paul's gospel discloses the present life of the church under the impact of the cross of Christ as well as its destiny in the triumph of God.¹² The Christian community is thus cruciform, shaped by the revelation that Jesus' death shows God's love for the world. The life revealed in the death of Christ is self-giving, power-renouncing, death-denying. The cross redefines even love in terms of itself. The life brought into being by the gospel of Christ crucified is the corporate life of the church that God has loved so decisively that the church becomes able to lay down its own life for the world God loves.

Earlier investigations of the function of apocalyptic language explained it largely in terms of ethical warrant: righteous living will be rewarded and wickedness punished at the last judgment.¹³ Paul says some things that sound like that in 1 Thessalonians: at 1:10 he says Jesus is the one who rescues us from imminent divine wrath; at 4:6 he says God will avenge those who are wronged. Most of this letter, however, reflects the apocalypse of Christ that reorders the world the church inhabits. It results for Christians in the reversal of prevailing cultural values, the dismantling of the social economy of honor and shame, and the replacement of conventional morality with the radical claims of the gospel. Paul's portrayal of his mission in Thessalonica in 2:1-12 illustrates the point.

Interpreters have engaged in lively debate about rhetorical and epistolographic functions of this section of the letter.¹⁴ Some claim that chapter 2 offers an apology that answers accusations aimed at him from the Thessalonians. On this reading, some in the church have criticized Paul and his coworkers of peddling their message for money or of flattering their listeners in order to win support. Paul's response then is to deny such base motives and assert instead the divine source of his message and the authenticity of the apostolic ministry in Thessalonica. The more persuasive argument, though, notes first the overwhelmingly laudatory tone of the letter—Paul does not seem to be under attack anywhere in this letter but instead praises the church repeatedly for its faithfulness to the gospel and to himself. There are remarkable similarities between Paul's language in 1 Thessalonians and the conventional contrasts first-century popular philosophical teachers draw between themselves and their competitors.¹⁵ Paul rehearses the origins and character of his relationship with the Thessalonian Christians (not only in chapter 2 but throughout the letter) for the purpose not of defending himself but rather of encouraging the church.¹⁶ The rehearsal of Paul's pastoral history with the congregation in 2:1-12 supplies one reason for his abundant thanksgiving to God:¹⁷ "For you yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our access to you has not come to nothing" (2:1). The multiple kinship images clustered in this brief passage are noteworthy:

Although we might have been able to throw our weight around as apostles of Christ, we became instead *babies*¹⁸ in your midst, as a *wet nurse* might

care tenderly for *her own children*, so because we long for you we are pleased to hand over to you not only the gospel of God but even our own lives, because you have become beloved to us. For you remember, *brothers and sisters*, our labor and toil, how we worked night and day so that we might not weigh any of you down when we preached to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, as is God, how we came to you believers in a holy and just and blameless way, as you know, how with each one of you we were as a *father with his own children* as we exhorted you and pled with you and testified to you that you might walk in a way that is worthy of the God who calls you into his own glorious realm.... But when we were *orphaned* from you, *brothers and sisters*, for a brief season—and only physically, not emotionally—we longed all the more eagerly to see you in person. (2:7-12, 17)

Paul refers to himself and his apostolic colleagues in a single brief paragraph as infant child, the nursing mother, the brother, the father, and orphan of the church they have established in Thessalonica. Each of the metaphors alone—with the exceptions of the infant and the orphan—occurs commonly in the first century. Philosophers frequently hold up wet nurses as the epitome of gentle instruction that takes account of a listener's frailty, teachers often assume paternal responsibility for their students, and several religious communities use sibling language to refer to themselves. No one but Paul, though, claims both the role of the infant and the nursing mother at the same time. The apostolic mission takes on the astonishing weakness of a newborn and the precarious vulnerability of an orphan, the tender love of a nursing mother and the guiding authority of a father—and all of them in the same paragraph!—because that mission is cruciform in character, shaped by the love and vulnerability of the cross of Christ. This is what Paul elsewhere describes as power made perfect in weakness and wisdom revealed in foolishness. Although the gospel that God has entrusted to the apostles gives them power to “throw [their] weight around” (2:7) that gospel instead shapes their ministry according to the model of Christ.

The central concern of 1 Thessalonians, then, is not so much the church's proper construal of God's eschatological timetable as the formative function of Christian proclamation. Far more pervasive in 1 Thessalonians than discussion of the end times is this concern for preaching and its effects. Paul variously calls his proclamation the word, the word of the Lord, or the word of God (1:6, 8; 2:13 [*bis*] 4:15, 18),¹⁹ the gospel (1:5; 2:2, 8, 9; 3:2, 6), exhortation or comfort (2:3; cf. 2:12; 3:2; 4:1, 10; 5:11), command (4:2, 11), and prophecy (5:20). It is instructive to consider the verbs he uses when he talks about preaching. He customarily uses verbs of speaking and hearing with *euangelion*, “gospel,” and he does so in 1 Thessalonians at 2:2, 9. Elsewhere in the letter, though, the gospel is more than the specific words he speaks or his listeners hear. God entrusts the gospel to Paul and his coworkers (2:4) and they in turn hand it over to the Thessalonians (2:8). Nowhere is there such a clear picture of the preacher as intermediary between God and the church. The only use of the verb *euangelizomai* in 1 Thessalonians describes what happens when Timothy reports to Paul that the Thessalonians have stood firm in the faith despite opposition and suffering (3:6). The safety and well-being of the church are themselves gospel to the apostle, since “we now live since you stand firm in the Lord” (3:8). Paul thanks God that the gospel

“happened”²⁰ to the Thessalonians “in power and in the Holy Spirit and with complete conviction” rather than in word alone (1:5).²¹ The Thessalonians receive the word (1:6; 2:13) and it “sounds forth” from them (1:8). Paul says the word of the gospel did not occur among the Thessalonians as a word of flattery or as a disguise for greed (2:5) but in purity and authenticity from those to whom God entrusted it (2:4). The Thessalonians received this word with joy (1:5) and in great tribulation (1:6). The apostles delivered to the church not only the gospel but also their own lives (2:8). The word of the gospel thus is never entirely circumscribed by the words uttered by human preachers because it comes from “the God who gives you his Holy Spirit” (4:8).

This largeness and otherness of the word of proclamation and its power to save determine the several specific consequences of preaching as Paul speaks of it in 1 Thessalonians. Those who hear the word preach it to others (1:8; 4:18). The church encounters resistance and struggle from those who refuse its message; indeed suffering is to be expected and embraced rather than avoided because that confirms rather than disconfirms the truth of gospel (2:14-16 3:3-4, 7). The word of the cross, as he calls the gospel in 1 Cor 1:18, inevitably subjects those who preach it and those who believe it to the same destiny their Lord experienced. “We told you ahead of time,” he says, “that we were about to be beset by tribulation, and so it has happened and so you know” (1 Thess 3:4). The gospel further reorients the priorities of the Christian community it creates: it is not the living but the dead whom the Lord of glory summons first to himself (4:16-17); the church is called to care with its ministry not for the strong and the hearty of faith but for the weak, the fainthearted, and idlers (5:14).

Paul sees the church called into being and nurtured by Christian proclamation as a community that looks like its Lord. It lives at once in hopeful anticipation of Jesus’ appearing in glory to reveal God’s triumphant sovereignty over creation and in loving and faithful labor that discloses the power of Jesus’ cross to save creation. The church’s life together demonstrates the self-giving character of God’s love in its own granting precedence to the least among its membership. First Thessalonians thus may offer the church in Eastertide an opportunity to hold cross and resurrection together in faithful tension at a time when less subtle preaching might instead allow Easter to wipe out Good Friday.

Notes

1. The same can be said about 2 Thessalonians, which appears on only three Sundays of the three-year cycle. Those lections also represent disconnected fragments of the letter.
2. 1 Thess 1:1-10; 2:1-8; 2:9-13; 3:9-13; 4:13-18; 5:1-11; 5:16-24.
3. Contingency here refers to the specific context to which a letter responds. J. Christiaan Beker uses the language of “coherence” and “contingency” to describe the relationship between Paul’s gospel and the particular ecclesiastical situations to which he writes interpreting that gospel (“Recasting Pauline Theology: The Coherence-Contingency Scheme as Interpretive Model,” 15-24 in *Pauline Theology: Volume I: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, ed. Jouette M. Bassler [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994]; idem, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980]).
4. Philemon (all but its concluding four verses) is the Epistle reading for the twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C).
5. Charles B. Cousar, *The Letters of Paul* (IBT; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 15.
6. James W. Thompson encourages a reversal of the trend with his helpful *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).
7. The language is Beker’s: “The letter form, then, with its combination of particularity and authoritative claim, suggests ... the historical concreteness of the gospel as a word on target in the midst of human.

contingent specificity" (*Paul the Apostle*, 24).

8. Outside the NT, *parousia* frequently denotes the appearance or visit of a ruler among subjects; sometimes in the New Testament it also describes the return of the risen Lord in glory (Albrecht Oepke, "*parousia, pareimi*," *TDNT* [1967] 5.858-871). Paul is the least consistent NT writer. Of 24 occurrences of the word, Paul accounts for 11; of those, only five refer to the eschatological appearing of Christ. Only in 1 Thessalonians does Paul use the word to speak exclusively of the appearing of the Lord, and the only place outside this letter that he mentions the Lord's *parousia* is 1 Cor 15:23: "Christ the first fruits [of resurrection], then at his appearing those who belong to Christ." More frequently, Paul uses *pareimi* and *parousia* to describe his own appearing among his churches (1 Cor 5:3; 2 Cor 10:2, 11; 11:9; 13:2, 10; Gal 4:13). See R. W. Funk, "The Apostolic *Parousia*: Form and Significance," in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, R. R. Niebuhr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 249-268.

9. NT translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

10. I argue this point in greater detail in "Apocalyptic Family Values," *Interpretation* 56 (2002): 34-44, as does Martinus C. DeBoer, "Paul, Theologian of God's Apocalypse," *Interpretation* 56 (2002): 21-33.

11. J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians* (AB33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 97-105; idem, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 85-156.

12. Beker's astute observation that God's imminent victory stands at the heart of Paul's apocalyptic gospel is helpfully expanded by Martyn's treatment. See Martyn's review of Beker's *Paul the Apostle in Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*, 176-181.

13. John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 49-57; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). For a specific application of that understanding of apocalyptic language to 1 Thessalonians, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (AB 32B; New York: Doubleday, 2000).

14. See the essays collected in Karl P. Donfried and Johannes Beutler, eds., *The Thessalonians Debate: Methodological Discord or Methodological Synthesis?* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000), particularly the initial essay by Donfried, "The Scope and Nature of the Debate: An Introduction and Some Questions," 3-27.

15. Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

16. Interpretations written from a similar perspective are Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Int; Louisville: John Knox, 1998); Charles B. Cousar, *Reading Galatians, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (RNT; Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 191-235.

17. First Thessalonians contains the longest thanksgiving of any of Paul's extant letters. It extends from 1:2 through 3:13. Gaventa notes wryly, "there is more thanksgiving here than interpreters know how to handle" (*First and Second Thessalonians*, 13).

18. Gaventa's text-critical argument in support of *nēpioi*, "babies" over *ēpioi*, "gentle" (*First and Second Thessalonians*, 26-27) is stronger than Malherbe's case for *ēpioi* in *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 145-147.

19. Compare also the contrast between God's word and human words in 1 Thess 2:5, 13; 4:8.

20. Or "came" or "appeared" or "occurred," however we choose to render the verb *ginomai*.

21. First Thessalonians has a large concentration of forms of the verb *ginomai*, "become" or "happen" or "appear," in addition to describing what happens to the word of proclamation. The other instances of *ginomai* rehearse the relationship between the mission team and the Thessalonians who "became" the church in that city. "You became imitators of us and of the Lord" (1:6); "you became a model to all believers" (1:7); "our entrance to you has not become empty" (2:1); "we became infants among you, as a nurse might care tenderly for her own children" (2:7); "you became dear to us" (2:8); "we became holy, just, and blameless to you" (2:10); "you became imitators of the church of God in Judea" (2:14); "I sent [Timothy] so that I might know your faith, lest the tempter tempt you and our labor become empty" (3:5). These reminders of what "happened" in the formation of the Thessalonian church are clustered in the first three chapters, the thanksgiving period, which points to the importance throughout the letter of the pastoral relationship between the Pauline mission team and the Thessalonian Christians. Paul Schubert's classic study demonstrated that the issues raised in a letter's thanksgiving telegraph at the outset the primary concerns of the letter (*The Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgiving* [BZNW 20; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939]).