

FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE —
A MISSIONARY PERSPECTIVE ON THREE
SEMINAL MOTIFS IN 1 THESSALONIANS 1:3

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ABSTRACT

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is often regarded as providing pastoral support to them in a time of anxiety and stress. Focussing on the introductory part of the thanksgiving in 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5, this article investigates facets of the text that are neglected because of this reading. It analyses certain qualities ascribed to the Thessalonian believers in the first part of the thanksgiving. The qualities are first of all investigated in their general religious sense and, secondly, in terms of their results. In a concluding section the function of this portrait is spelled out.

1. INTRODUCTION

The first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, representing the earliest of all his extant writings, reflects a far-reaching decision of Paul to complement his missionary career by writing letters to his converts. Malherbe (1987:61) noting the "relatively unorganized" situation of these churches after Paul's departure, described them as "fraught with distress, with only rudimentary instruction in the faith, and in tension with the larger society". They "were anything but stable when he left them". He therefore stresses that Paul wanted to support them and that his letter therefore has a primarily pastoral nature, reinforcing this approach by illuminating Paul's pastoral care with illuminating examples of similar widespread approaches in Graeco-Roman moral philosophy and texts.

This pastoral focus is thus not restricted to the first letter to Thessalonians. The pastoral image of Paul is projected on other Pauline texts and regarded as typical of his continuing career. This is evident, for example, when Paul lists in 2 Corinthians 11:28 as his "chief apostolic hardship, 'the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches'".² Independent

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2 Malherbe developed the pastoral motif of Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians in an impressive manner in his book with the title *Paul and the Thessalonians*, subtitling it quite tellingly as *The philosophic tradition of pastoral care*.

sources seem to confirm this reading of Paul. The portrayal of Paul by Luke in Acts 20 confirms this pastoral character of his apostolic ministry.

It makes sense to use letters like 1 Thessalonians to reconstruct a picture of an author who is in the first place concerned about the spiritual well-being of the recently converted believers in a situation of displacement and oppression. His awareness of such a situation is already clear from his overt reference in the *exordium* of the letter with its unusual thanksgiving to their acceptance of the gospel ἐν θλίψει πολλῇ (6). The social and spiritual ramifications caused by the dislocation of those who gave up their secure pagan context to become Jesus followers, were severe and traumatic. In such a situation they undoubtedly would have needed all the support they could garner, as Paul realised all too well.

How strong this understanding of the letter is, is evident once one realises how it determines the interpretation of individual passages like the thanksgiving in the first chapter. For Malherbe (2002:104) Paul “writes in a self-referential way”³ in this passage for a particular reason. In order to support them pastorally, he wanted to secure the goodwill of his readers by this philoprenetic passage:

It is in the nature of paraenesis that the practical advice that is given be justified by the character or the person who gives the advice ... Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his behavior in a way that forms the basis for the practical directions that he will give in chaps. 4 and 5 (Malherbe 2000:105).

Paul, by thanking God for what transpired between them, wrote in order to strengthen the bond between them so that he could have enough authority for his advice to them in their difficult situation.

Another interesting effect of this focus on the pastoral approach of Paul is that the Thessalonians are almost consistently portrayed in a negative way as Christians with a wavering faith because of their displacement and social dislocation after their conversion to Christianity and because of their disappointment at the deaths of fellow believers. The reconstructed image of the Thessalonian church is not very positive, suggesting to the modern reader a community ridden with anxiety, deeply distressed and in the process of falling apart as a community.

3 Malherbe (2000:103ff.) discusses 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3:13 under the heading of “Autobiography”.

2. WEAK CHURCHES?

The problem is that this picture does not adequately reflect all the textual information. Except for the reference to tribulation in the thanksgiving and even the more extensive passage on it in 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5 with the obvious implication that such a situation requires pastoral support, the thanksgiving also contains positive pronouncements about the Thessalonian believers that suggest that the situation of the Thessalonians is not so negative.

In the following parts this problem will be investigated by analysing two parts of the thanksgiving that contain pronouncements that reveal other facets of the Thessalonian community. After a brief discussion of the form of the thanksgiving, the essay will analyse firstly how the Thessalonians are portrayed in its first part in terms of a traditional triad of qualities. It will then investigate how this initial picture is expanded to write about them as active missionaries, emulating the apostles in their proclamation of the gospel. In a conclusion the implications of this picture for the interpretation of the letter will be spelled out.

3. THE THANKSGIVING

The thanksgiving in 1 Thessalonians 1 is one of the relaxed, beautiful passages in the Pauline correspondence. Its first part can be systematised in the following manner:

- ²Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πάντοτε
περὶ πάντων ὑμῶν
- (A) *μνείαν* ποιοῦμενοι →
ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν ἡμῶν,
- ³(B) ἀδιαλείπτως μνημονεύοντες ὑμῶν →→
(a) τοῦ ἔργου τῆς πίστεως →
(b) καὶ τοῦ κόπου τῆς ἀγάπης →→
(c) καὶ τῆς ὑπομονῆς τῆς ἐλπίδος →→→
τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ πατρὸς ἡμῶν,
- ⁴(C) εἰδότες, ἀδελφοὶ ἡγαπημένοι ὑπὸ [τοῦ] θεοῦ,
τὴν ἐκλογὴν ὑμῶν,
³ὅτι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ἡμῶν
οὐκ ἐγενήθη εἰς ὑμᾶς ἐν λόγῳ μόνον
(a) ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν δυνάμει
(b) καὶ ἐν πνεύματι ἀγίῳ
(c) καὶ πληροφῶρᾳ πολλῇ, →→→
καθὼς οἴδατε οἷοι ἐγενήθημεν [ἐν] ὑμῖν δι' ὑμᾶς.

Formally this part of the thanksgiving comprises a triad of participles (A, B, C). The first participle is temporal, referring to the way in which Paul expressed his thanks, whilst the following two indicate the immediate and ultimate grounds for the thanksgiving (so already Findlay, taken over by Frame 1946:75, and Malherbe 2000:109).

The three participles, with present meanings,⁴ are climactic, as will be explained below. Their form also reveals a hierarchical order. The first is short when compared with the middle and last one. Verse 5 is an embedment of the third participle, emphasising through this expansion and thus its length, its importance. The focus on it is intensified because of its final position in the triad. The hierarchical pattern can be represented as follows: A, B (a, b, c), C (a, b, c).

Several smaller patterns characterise the thanksgiving. The participle in the middle of the triad also consists of a triad, of which the third is the one that is underlined and in focus. Semantically this triad climaxes in the hope, a central theme in the letter, also revealing a hierarchical order.

Within this form, another striking feature needs to be noted. The cohesion between the three participles in particular and of the first half of the thanksgiving in general is strengthened through the repeated use of the same form of the second person personal pronoun. The pronoun is used in such a way that the Thessalonians become objects of action and description. This will change in the following section, as will be noted below, but here further attention is needed for this portrayal of qualities of the Thessalonians.

4. RELIGIOUS AND MISSIONARY QUALITIES OF THE THESSALONIANS

The profuse thanksgiving portrays a group of three enthusiastic apostles intimately involved with their addressees. Their enthusiasm is evident from the hyperbole in the opening words. If hyperbole in Galatians 2:11-15 reveals a “thespian, aggressive” communication between Paul and Peter (Paul opposed him to *his* face and did not give in, *even for a moment*), the hyperbole here points to a caring relationship.⁵ Even if the alliteration with “p” reflects his rhetorical skills⁶ and formally serves to mark the beginning

4 The third is a perf. act. pt. with a present meaning.

5 Thurén (2000:70-1) writes succinctly on this, illustrating the way in which Paul expresses himself and the bearing it has on the meaning of his texts.

6 Aune (1987:212), referring to Hebrews. Cf. also Malherbe (2000:106-7). On the rhetorical nature of the Pauline letters, cf. Thurén (2000, esp. 29-35). On hyperbole, cf. e.g. Young (1994:242).

of a new section, the prayer of thanksgiving with words like “always,” “for you all,” “without ceasing,” has an intense impact and reveals the strong bond between the two parties.⁷ Addressees of a letter would indeed have been touched and cheered by such enthusiasm, especially if they were experiencing dislocation and oppression because of their conversion.

If the intimate language of the opening remarks would have pastorally supported the Thessalonians in a time of trauma, the language in the following sections seems to reflect more than pastoral intentions. Before this is discussed in more detail, it must be noted briefly how the attention shifts away from an emotional and intimate I-perspective (in the first participle) to an increasing focus on qualities of the Thessalonians from the second participle onwards. Malherbe (2000:108), analysing the Greek text, writes that with the phrase *μνημονεύοντες ὑμῶν* the *ὑμῶν* as a subjective genitive is in an emphatic position, indicating that “it is something about the *reader's*, not his own, circumstances that Paul calls to mind as cause for his thanksgiving”. With the first participle, representing a temporal clause in which he points out how often he thanks God for them, Paul had emphasised his own prayerful thanking more than anything in particular about the Thessalonians themselves. The *ὑμῶν* in 2 carries no special weight, as is the case with the one in the following verse where the pronoun is used more emphatically. With the second participle, though, Paul moves on to say something specifically about his *addressees*. The focus shifts from what Paul was doing continuously in his prayers, from his own experiences and concerns, to his readers. The decisive shift is then confirmed by the contents of the second participle. It lists three important qualities of his *readers*, that is, their faith, love and hope and its results. Paul obviously wants his readers to know that he is appreciative of something that is special about them in particular.

4.1 Religious qualities

The focus on certain characteristics of the Thessalonians seems complex. Frame (1946:76) observed, “The genitives are somewhat bewildering and the interpretations are various”. Paul presents his comments about them with six genitives that, on closer investigation, form a striking list compri-

7 Aune (1987) lists several examples of thanksgiving in ancient texts. He notes (1987:216) that the other ancient texts reveal the function of a thanksgiving: it serves to obtain the goodwill of the recipients in some, whilst it adumbrates main themes of the text in the Pauline literature. The lack of a thanksgiving reflects strained relationships in some Pauline texts, like, e.g. Galatians and 2 Corinthians.

sing a triad, that is, three pairs of genitives. The list can be represented schematically in the following diagram (where the number of arrows indicates emphasis):

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| (a) τοῦ ἔργου τῆς πίστεως | → |
| (b) καὶ τοῦ κόπου τῆς ἀγάπης | →→ |
| (c) καὶ τῆς ὑπομονῆς τῆς ἐλπίδος | →→→ |

One of the two groups of genitives comprises the three cardinal Christian qualities of love, faith and hope. This group is of a general religious nature, well known as a fixed⁸ combination from other Pauline sections (like 1 Cor. 13) and referring to qualities that Paul kept in high regard. The group reveals a neat pattern: they appear in the same phrase final position.

The importance of *faith* will become clear from 1 Thessalonians 1:8 (cf. below). *Love* is a significant motif in the rest of the text, as is, for example, clear from 1 Thessalonians 4:10 where the apostles write about the love of the Thessalonians for believers “throughout Macedonia”. In this verse “brotherly love” is used. 1 Thessalonians 3:12 reveals that love is more than that, since it should be shown to “all” (cf. further below). In this last example love is clearly a quality that believers are required to display to unbelievers. Their missionary task is driven by it.

The qualities are, however, not of equal weight. There is a hierarchy: of the three, *hope* is most prominent, emphasised⁹ by its position at the end of the triad, but also underlined by the elaboration that follows in the phrase τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ πατρὸς ἡμῶν. The rest of the letter will confirm the importance of hope as a motif and, therefore, implicitly confirm its importance and its climactic place here. Paul, for example, ends the thanksgiving by referring to how the Thessalonians ἀναμένειν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν who saves from the coming wrath (1:10), a pronouncement at the end of a smaller section in which the Thessalonian response to the Pauline message is described: they have turned away from the idols to serve the living God. Their service of the living God includes waiting patiently for his return. With this reference to hope, a seminal motif of the missionary proclamation to the Thessalonians is mooted. Proclaiming the gospel is, at least in this letter, all about proclaiming this trust in the future redemption of those in the city who converted to the living God.

8 Roosen (1971:32) regards the triad as a pre-Pauline formula, especially since it appears so often in the two letters to the Thessalonians.

9 So also Von Dobschütz (1909:*ad loc.*).

Paul recommends the Thessalonians for the basic qualities of faith, love and hope that they display in difficult circumstances. Paul writes this letter exactly because of the good news about their faith (3:7) and their abundant love (4:10). Although they may be anxious and in need of support, it does not mean that they lack a strong and intimate relationship with Christ. Even when he calls on them to mutual support, he notes that they are doing it already (5:11). One should not paint only a negative picture of this community.

4.2 Missionary qualities

Having analysed the pattern in this way, attention needs to be given to the other pair of three genitives that determines the meaning of this section in a decisive manner. The positive religious qualities in the first pair are given an outgoing, active character in a rather unique manner through the link with action expressed in the second pair with its loaded concepts.

Paul's converts are active in a threefold way, engaging in *τοῦ ἔργου* τῆς πίστεως καὶ *τοῦ κόπου* τῆς ἀγάπης καὶ *τῆς ὑπομονῆς* τῆς ἐλπίδος (1:3). Frame (1946:76) reflects the general feeling in commentaries that this pair proves that not the qualities, but rather the activities inspired by them are foregrounded:

The stress is laid not on faith alone but on the work that results from faith; not on love alone but on the toilsome activity prompted by love; not on endurance alone but on the endurance that is inspired by the hope in Christ.

This focus is confirmed by their common position in the initial position in each of the three phrases.

What then is the practical nature of each of these three “activities”? Frame linked at least one of them to evangelistic work, arguing that the “unique” phrase, the labour of your love, could mean “manual labour necessary to support missionary propaganda, or the laborious missionary effort as such (3:3) or both”. He remarked in passing that this phrase was “minted from the situation” (Frame 1946:76), suggesting that the missionary framework in which the letter functioned, determined the language.¹⁰ In this case, then, Paul is praising God that the Thessalonians have a faith that is actively pursuing the proclamation of the Gospel.

¹⁰ Malherbe (2000:108) also reads this passage in this way.

If this is true for one, there is good reason that it could be true for all three. In the case of love, to focus briefly on it again, the use of the word is important to create solidarity between believers who suffered social ostracism because of their conversion. In this situation of alienation, they had to care for each other. But the use of the word elsewhere in the letter reveals that it relates to much more than that. In 1 Thessalonians 3:12 Paul records a strong wish that the Lord will increase their *love* for one another and *for all*. Haufe (1999:64) observed that this prayer for love makes sense in the missionary context in which the church found itself: in the light of the hostile context, they could easily withdraw and isolate themselves. Practising love counters such isolationism and promotes an outward movement. He writes about their reputation throughout Macedonia for their brotherly love (1 Thess. 4:10) and asks elsewhere that they must also love all (1 Thess. 3:12), so that one could understand his reference to the labour of their love as mutual and outgoing love. When Paul then praises God for them, he has also in mind their outreaching love in missions.

The notion of *labour* of your love also relates well to a missionary situation. This is clear when the phrase, the *work* of your faith, is traced in the letter. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 the two terms are given a missionary meaning and are mutually interchangeable: Ἐρωτῶμεν δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, εἰδέναι τοὺς **κοπιῶντας** ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ προϊσταμένους ὑμῶν ἐν κυρίῳ καὶ νοουθετοῦντας ὑμᾶς καὶ ἠγεῖσθαι αὐτοὺς ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ διὰ τὸ **ἔργον** αὐτῶν. Other parts of the Pauline letters confirm the missionary nature of these words. The word ἔργον appears in 1 Thessalonians 5:13 and refers to preaching, as is clear from 1 Corinthians 3:13-15, κόπος to toilsome labour as preaching (cf. 1 Cor. 4:12) and ὑπομονή, as is evident from 2 Cor. 6:4, to the endurance of hardships experienced in the ministry.¹¹

Most interesting of the three is the reference to endurance (τῆς ὑπομονῆς). It is often used in the Pauline letters, reflecting the need of believers to remain steadfast in their new state of belief in the light of adversity. Though working and toiling implicitly imply endurance as well, it is especially the word endurance that is intense because it spells out a much-needed quality not to give up in the difficulties associated with the end times. Malherbe (2000: 108), has observed quite succinctly that the word “also describes the endurance in the midst of hardships with which Paul carried out his own ministry”, referring to 2 Corinthians 6:4 and 12:12. He notes that the word or its cognates do not appear elsewhere in 1 Thessalonians. But it is striking

11 For further motivation of the missionary nature of this word, cf. Malherbe (2000:108).

that the letter is all about retaining hope and trust on the future. Once again, the conclusion of the thanksgiving in 1:10 reiterates how the Thessalonians themselves, having converted to the living and true God, “waited” for God’s Son from heaven. This unique word, derived from the Septuagint, refers to waiting with faith and full assurance for God’s judgement and salvation.¹² The faith of the Thessalonians that reverberated in their witnessing to their neighbouring countries (1:8) was especially and all about this endurance. Once again these remarks reveal that the third word in the first pair is clearly climactic, representing the most intense form of missionary action.

These three pairs, then, clearly relate to the religious life of the Thessalonians, more specifically in terms of their involvement in missionary work. Paul is thankful because of the way in which his converts have involved themselves intensively with missionary work, using three different phrases to describe this in a comprehensive manner. They as the converted have themselves become missionaries in the service of the Lord. Like in his own case where his calling made him a witness to the world (e.g. Acts 9:15), they have also been called by God (1:4) and sent out to labour and work as witnesses. Their activities as expressed in these two pairs of three members thus point to a strong, active witnessing community in Thessalonica. They are an oppressed, pressurised community, yes, but at the same time they are also a missionary community. As such, it counters a too lachrymose reading of this letter.

5. THE MISSIONARY PREACHING AND THE ELECTION OF THE THESSALONIANS

Having developed his argument progressively from a mere statement about his constant prayers about the Thessalonians to a second statement regarding a triad of characteristics, each one of which represents a deepening of the line of argument, Paul then moves on to the third participle as the deepest of the three levels, mentioning the election of the Thessalonians as the ultimate reason for his thanksgiving. This theological observation also reveals a dynamic picture of the Thessalonian church, as now needs to be explained after some formal observations have been made.

12 Cf. the references in Malherbe (2000:121). He adds, “Paul thus signals the eschatological interest that will occupy him throughout the letter.”

Certain features of the text stress the climactic nature of this third participle. Paul addresses the readers for the first time directly, using the vocative and the descriptions, “brothers” and “beloved of God”¹³ that are so seminal in the letter (cf. e.g. 2:1, 17; 3:7; 4:1, 9-10, 13, 5:1, 12, 26).

The reference to the election is also underscored by the following extensive clause that elaborates on it further. This rather extensive new clause complicates the flow of the argument and the structure of the thanksgiving that is so full of embedments.¹⁴ The nature of the new section needs special attention. Its introductory ὅτι¹⁵ is interpreted in different ways. Some see it as yet another causal phrase, motivating Paul’s knowledge of the election that had been mooted,¹⁶ or alternatively as expegetical, explaining how the election had taken place or what he means by election.¹⁷ Both Henneken (1969:28) and Malherbe (2000:110) note that the expegetical use of ὅτι is more likely than the causal use, since

it correctly relates election to preaching, the subject that has occupied Paul in vv. 2-4 and that he now further comments on in v. 5.¹⁸

The election is intricately linked with the missionary preaching of the Pauline team, with “our gospel” (1:5) that came to them with power. This is clear from the core of this verse that is presented as yet another triad. The preaching is

- (a) καὶ ἐν δυνάμει
- (b) καὶ ἐν πνεύματι ἀγίῳ
- (c) καὶ πληροφορία πολλῇ

- 13 Addressing them as “beloved” and as “brothers” is clearly a pastoral statement in the light of their social dislocation and their alienation from supporting social structures (cf. De Villiers 2002).
- 14 Scholars (e.g. Collins 1984:305) often point out how Paul in such extensive sentences seems to lose the thread of his argument completely. Here it causes him to write another one of his well-known anacoloutha (8). The anacolouthon reflects an involved style, illuminating the inner disposition of the author.
- 15 Henneken (1969:27) observes that the interpretation of this word is “sehr umstritten.”
- 16 Thus Rogers & Rogers (1998:471).
- 17 Others, like Wohlenberg, refuse to embed it in this way, since it would then become a mere addition about Paul’s knowledge of the election of the Thessalonians, whilst it is much rather, to his mind, the object of Paul’s thanksgiving (1909:26-27). The ὅτι-phrase in his view does not refer to the immediately preceding motif of the election.
- 18 Cf. also Frame (1946:79).

The first and last aspects are closely related, framing the middle phrase as the focus. In this way the preaching is intricately linked with the Holy Spirit.

Three aspects of the election are important. 1. The election is obvious from the *missionary preaching* and its contents — hence Paul's emphasis on the gospel. 2. It is evident from the *power* of the missionary preaching by the apostles, so that the *nature* of the preaching is equally significant.¹⁹ Paul thus states that his knowledge of the election is based not on mere theory or words, but through the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in the missionary preaching of the apostolic team (Roosen 1971:35-36). This is why he also stresses that the preaching was brought with full confidence, πληροφορία πολλῆ, reflecting the inner trust and certainty of the proclaimers that what they were proclaiming was worked by the Holy Spirit (cf. 2:1-2; cf. Acts 4:31; Roosen 1946:36). How important this is, is shown by 1 Thessalonians 2:13 where the apostolic "word of God" is contrasted with a word brought by humans (cf. also 1 Thess. 2:4-6). 3. The election is also clear from the joyful *reception* of the message by the Thessalonians. Their knowledge of the Pauline gospel and the presence of the apostolic them "for" them, motivates the election as well.

It is clear from these remarks how decisive missionary preaching is in the mind of the apostle. The preaching itself becomes part and parcel of the eschatological events, of the gospel. The Thessalonians have been entrusted with the gospel by God (1 Thess. 2:4). The dynamic apostolic preaching reflects God's call to them and their special place in the movement of God's gospel (1:5) through the world.

Was Paulus also in 1 Thess 1,5 zum Wesen des Wortgeschehens sagt, ist in das Handeln Gottes einzuordnen, insofern er in der Verkündigung sich sein Volk "erwählt" (Henneken 1969:29).

They have become brothers, loved and elected by God as and when God empowered the missionary gospel of the apostles (1:4) to bring the gospel to them. As Henneken (1969:33) formulates it, "Das Evangelium Gottes ... handelt nicht nur von Gott, sondern ist Gottes eigene Tätigkeit." God's

19 Frame (1946:79) thought otherwise, stating, "Paul puts the emphasis more upon the message as the means of realising God's call than upon the bearers of the message" because the text formulates that "our message came" and not, "we came with the gospel". But this reading does not render justice to the contents and context of this extended phrase: 1:5 begins quite strikingly with the phrase about "our" message and ends with the statement that the Thessalonians know how "we were" among them.

actions are inherent in the proclamation and make it into an eschatological event.

The reference to the election is so striking because of this explicit link with the missionary preaching of the apostles. In focus is here a picture of a group of apostolic missionaries whose dynamic message inspires their audience to become part of the family of God but whose message itself at the same time proved to the audience that they are part of a new, alternative order, the family of God. This audience has experienced the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation that inspired them to abandon their heathen religion. They can look back and hold on to the memories of missionary events that gave them the extraordinary status of being God's elect.

But all this has a deeper significance in the light of the next verse (6) where the motif of imitation is mooted for the first time. There the Thessalonians are described as imitators of the apostles and of the Lord. This implies that they emulate the missionary team who not only proclaimed the gospel powerfully but also did so despite having suffered and having been persecuted in Philippi. In 1 Thessalonians 2:2 Paul refers explicitly to the fact that they knew this, just as he refers in 1:5 to the Thessalonians' knowledge of the powerful apostolic proclamation. They imitated a pattern of work that was known to them.

What then is the function of these remarks about imitation? To describe them as imitators empowers them in more than one way. It approves and compliments them for it. But it also confirms them in that imitation and word. More than pastoral concerns are operative here. As the elect of God, they need to be confirmed in doing what the apostles are doing, proclaiming the gospel to the gentiles (1 Thess. 2:16). Their special status and their ongoing work as missionaries require reiteration. That they have been doing this, as 1 Thessalonians 1:8 indicates, recommends them as a church that is strong even in weakness.

5.2 The corporate nature of the missionary preaching

The references to the qualities of the Thessalonians as Christians, finally, must be understood within the context of the corporate nature of the Pauline missions. It has become customary to read this letter as having been written by Paul, overlooking the corporate nature of its language. The letter, and especially the thanksgiving, abounds with a first person plural perspective. So striking is its frequent use that Frame (1946:68) thought it "suggests an intimacy of association in writing". It is indeed a group of apostolic missionaries that is writing and addressing believers in Thessalonica.

The missionary activity of the apostles is a driving force for the letter to the Thessalonians, and, for that matter, for most if not almost all of the Pauline letters. All three apostles listed in this letter are also mentioned together in 2 Corinthians 1:19 as preachers of Jesus Christ. Paul's missionary drive had a collective nature, or was, as Meeks (1983:133) described it, a "collective enterprise".²⁰ From the beginning of his career, Paul worked with others. Timothy was an important figure in the Pauline ministry, mentioned as the co-sender of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon and Colossians. Paul's initial contact with this community of believers in Thessalonika was followed up by a commissioned visit of Timothy to strengthen them in their faith. Paul used language that creates the impression that he explicitly wanted to confirm their status in his missions. The contents of this letter proves the collegial nature of the link between apostles and believers: in 1 Thessalonians 3:2 Timothy is described in extraordinary terms as co-worker of God (τὸν ἀδελφὸν ἡμῶν καὶ συνεργὸν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ), clearly stressing his special missionary status.²¹ Silas is equally well known as member of the Pauline team. He is mentioned in Acts 15 as a delegate with Paul and Judas Barsabbas to report to Antioch the decision of the meeting in Jerusalem about the gentiles and as a companion of Paul on a mission in Asia Minor. He participated in Paul's missionary work in Corinth (2 Cor. 1:19).

The reference to the Christian qualities of the Thessalonians is to be understood against this background. Though recent converts, they were already visible in their consistent and active missionary work and endurance because they were exposed to a pattern of missions in which that was how things were done. As converts they became part of the Pauline circle of missionaries and of a programme of witnessing that was a corporate en-

20 Meeks (1983:133) notes that the corporate nature of Paul's mission was one of the most effective elements in the mission's successful adaptation to its urban setting. He adds that it was not a uniquely Pauline matter, but something that he took over from the Antioch church. Paul began his own career in such a collegiate relationship with Barnabas, retaining the pattern after they split (cf. Gal. 2:11-14).

21 Note the remark in Ellingworth & Nida (1976:53) about Timothy as co-worker of God:

Many copyists seemingly were shocked that Paul should call Timothy "God's co-worker", though a similar idea is expressed in 1 Corinthians 6:1.

The Afrikaans translation, like many others, softens this by replacing "co-worker" with "servant."

terprise. Among members of this circle, to be a church, to be called the elect of God, meant to witness. Proclaiming the gospel was not an option, but belonged to the very essence of the gospel and the church.

All this is finally confirmed by 1 Thessalonians 1:8 where it is explicitly mentioned how the believers witnessed in Greece, that is Macedonia and Achaia, and, then, in every place. This verse is the clearest indication that the qualities in 1 Thessalonians 1:3-6 portray the church in a very positive light, reflecting how they were deeply involved in early Christian missionary practice — despite the suffering and oppression that they experienced.

6. CONCLUSION

The first letter to the Thessalonians reveals Paul's pastoral concerns for his converts. At the same time the letter offers glimpses in the early missionary practice of the early Church and its members that determined the language and identity of the believers in a most decisive manner.

Paul was not only supporting believers in order to cope with suffering and oppression. He was inspiring them to become part of a missionary team and to promote as church the proclamation of the gospel in their immediate and neighbouring countries. He set his eyes far beyond their own borders, stating emphatically that such an outward movement belonged to the very essence of faith. Even amidst the most challenging of situations, believers need to be moving out with the gospel of faith, love and hope.

From this it becomes clear that the letter should not be read too lachrymously. Paul was not only concerned with anxiety and distress. His apostolic guidance should also be understood to be about informing and imparting of knowledge (4:13), about confirming believers in what they were already doing and about inspiring them to greater heights (4:10). In doing so, he spoke about their weaknesses, but he was also keenly aware of their strengths. In the case of the Thessalonians, it is particularly impressive in which way the believers in that gentile city remained involved in the proclamation of the gospel.

Finally this essay illustrates how significant it can be to read Pauline texts from a most obvious, but neglected perspective, namely in terms of their missionary context. In doing so, one will not only discover more about the early church, but also allow the texts to speak for themselves.

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