

1 Thessalonians - Introduction & Background

Authorship

The letter identifies Paul as its author (1 Thess 1:1; 2:18). Not only does the external evidence strongly favor Pauline authorship,¹ but the internal evidence favors this conclusion as well. The biographical details harmonize well with Luke's chronology of Paul's life as presented in Acts 17–18. Pauline authorship was not questioned until the nineteenth century. Today virtually all New Testament scholars accept Pauline authorship thus repudiating the radical criticism of the Dutch and Tübingen schools of the previous century.

Some have questioned Pauline authorship on the grounds that 1 Thessalonians represents a dearth of doctrinal information in comparison to Paul's other letters. However, the doctrinal content of Paul's letters varies. Paul had already laid a firm doctrinal foundation with the Thessalonians on his second missionary journey thus leaving eschatology as the only problematic issue to be dealt with. Others have questioned Pauline authorship on the grounds that 1 Thessalonians dwells deeply on eschatology and this does seem to be Paul's focus elsewhere. However, Paul's other writings demonstrate his ability to address a wide variety of doctrinal subjects. Others contend that Paul could not have written the epistle because of differences between what is reflected in Acts and what is communicated in the letter. For example, Acts 17:2 indicates a short stay in Thessalonica while the letter indicates a longer stay. However, as will be explained below, it is possible to reconcile this alleged difference. Moreover, Acts 17:4 indicates a predominately Jewish congregation in Thessalonica while 1 Thess 1:9 indicates a predominately Gentile congregation. However, it is possible that the congregation could have been altered between the time of the church's establishment and when Paul wrote to it. More Gentiles could have joined the church in the interim.

Destination

The city of Thessalonica survived and thrived for centuries due to its location. First it was located on the Thermic Gulf located on the North West corner of the Aegean Sea. This made Thessalonica the chief seaport in Macedonia. Such a distinction was only rivaled by the seaport in Corinth. Second, Thessalonica was located on the Via-Egnatia highway that connected Rome to the Orient. Thessalonica boasted a population of 200,000 during the time of Paul. This population consisted of Greeks, Romans, Orientals, Jews, and Jewish proselytes (Acts 17:4).

Cassander originally built the city in 315 BC near Therma. He named the city after his wife Thessalonica, the half sister of Alexander the Great. In 168 BC, the Romans conquered Macedonia at the battle of Pydna and divided the region into four districts. Thessalonica became the capital of the second district. In 146 BC, the Romans reorganized Macedonia into a single province and made Thessalonica its capital. In 42 BC Thessalonica received its status as a free city from Anthony and Octavia. Such status was granted because the Thessalonians had helped Anthony and Octavia defeat Brutus and Cassius. As a free city, Thessalonica was governed with a loose Roman hand. While the Roman proconsul resided in the city, no Roman garrison was stationed there. The city was essentially self-governing as a Greek city-state. It was governed through politarchs or a board of magistrates, a senate, and a public assembly. The city exhibited a Greek rather than a Roman atmosphere. Today, the city is known as Salonica.

Place of Writing

On Paul's second missionary journey after leaving Philippi he stopped at the next major population center, which was Thessalonica (50-51 AD). As was Paul's custom, he entered the Jewish synagogue where he reasoned with the Jews for three Sabbaths (Acts 17:2). Paul's ministry proved effective as Jews, Greek proselytes, and leading women of the city were brought to faith in Christ (Acts 17:4-5). Although Acts tells us that Paul reasoned with the Jews for three Sabbaths, it is likely that his ministry in Thessalonica spanned several months rather than just three weeks. Several factors favor this interpretation. First, in his letter, Paul demonstrates an acquaintance with his audience that could not have been developed within a mere three-week time span. Second, while in Thessalonica, Paul worked full time in order to support himself (1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:8). Because such full time employment took away time and energy from his ministry, his effectiveness among the Gentiles would be unexplainable in a mere three-week period. Third, because the Thessalonian church was comprised of Gentiles (1 Thess 1:9), it would have taken longer than three weeks for Paul to turn his attention away from the Jews (Acts 17:2) and to the Gentiles. Fourth, according to Philippians 4:16, Paul received at least two offerings from the Philippians while he was in Thessalonica. Because of the rarity of such offerings, Paul's reception of two of them implies a stay beyond a mere three weeks. Fifth, the Thessalonian letters presuppose that Paul had already shared with them a great breadth of doctrine. Such doctrine included the Trinity (1:1,5-6); the Holy Spirit (1:5-6; 4:8; 5:19), the Second Advent (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:14-17; 5:23), the Day of the Lord (5:1-3), eschatology (2 Thess 2:5), assurance (1:5), conversion (1:9), election (1:4), resurrection (4:14-18), sanctification (4:3; 5:23), and Christian behavior (2:12; 4:1). This rich doctrinal content could not have been shared within a mere three-week period. These and other factors make it more likely that Paul stayed in Jason's house for a number of months. Because Luke is selective in his

recording of history elsewhere (Acts 17:4; 1 Thess 1:9), it is likely that he mentions Paul's three weeks in the synagogue without mentioning his total stay in Thessalonica.

After seeing the success of Paul's ministry, the jealous Jews hired troublemakers to defame Paul. After being unable to find Paul, they dragged Jason, Paul's host, before the politarchs and accused him of harboring those who advocated treason (Acts 17:5-9). Such a charge sprang from Paul's advocacy of Christ's kingship (Acts 17:7). Although Paul was not advocating an overthrow of the Roman Caesars, the Jews misrepresented Paul's advocacy of the kingship of Christ as one that would lead to an overthrow of the Roman emperors. This was a serious charge in light of the fact that Thessalonica was a free city. Thus, a charge of treason could cause the city to lose this privilege. Fortunately, the politarchs saw through the baselessness of this charge and released Jason after receiving from him a pledge that Paul and his companions would leave Thessalonica (Acts 17:9). Consequently, Paul was forced to leave Thessalonica for Berea (Acts 17:10). There, the same scenario repeated itself as jealous Jews from Thessalonica stirred up the crowds against Paul's effective ministry. This forced Paul to leave Berea for Athens while Timothy and Silas remained in Berea. Paul sent word for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him in Athens and there the three missionaries were eventually reunited (Acts 17:11-15). Then Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica and Silas to Macedonia (1 Thess 3:1-3). Paul proceeded to Corinth (Acts 18:1). Timothy rejoined Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5) and Paul wrote to the Thessalonians from Corinth in response to Timothy's report. Silas also rejoined him in Corinth to present to him a gift from the Macedonian towns (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor 11:9).

Date

The dating of 1 Thessalonians is assisted by the reference to "Gallio proconsul of Achaia" found in Acts 18:12. According to an inscription at Delphi, Gallio was proconsul after Claudius' twenty-sixth proclamation as emperor. Because the twenty-seventh proclamation had already been made in August of 52 AD, Gallio had to have been proconsul prior to this time. The middle of the summer of 52 AD was probably the inauguration of Gallio's proconsulship since proconsuls normally took office in the middle of the summer. Acts 18:12-18 seems to imply that Paul appeared before Gallio shortly after he took office after Paul had been in Corinth for one and a half years. If Paul wrote to the Thessalonians toward the beginning of his stay in Corinth, a date of early summer 51 AD seems appropriate.

Audience

The characteristics of the audience as depicted in the first chapter make it clear that Paul is addressing believers. The church was comprised of some Jews (Acts 17:2,4,12). However, the church was mostly comprised of Gentiles who had formerly worshiped idols (1 Thess 1:9; 2:14-16).

Purpose, Occasion for Writing, and Structure

Upon his return from Thessalonica to Corinth, Timothy gave Paul a report on the status of the newly planted church. The Jews that persecuted Paul while he was in Thessalonica were now persecuting the baby Thessalonian believers. These same Jews were also seeking to undermine the Thessalonians' confidence in Paul's message by disparaging him. Apparently, they had said that because the Thessalonians' conversion was not genuine, Paul's message did not emanate from God. They also challenged the purity of Paul's motives by arguing that he was in the ministry for money. They also contended that Paul's failure to visit the Thessalonians evidenced his lack of care for them. Timothy also reported other deficiencies amongst the Thessalonians such as sexual immorality, laziness, misunderstandings regarding eschatological issues, ministry imbalances, and impediments toward progressive sanctification. It is likely that Timothy also presented orally to Paul questions that the Thessalonians had (1 Thess 4:9; 5:1). Timothy's report prompted Paul to write to the beleaguered Thessalonians.

In the first section of the letter (1 Thess 1–3), Paul defends himself against the false charges of the Jews. He defends the genuineness of the Thessalonians' conversion (1 Thess 1), the purity of his motives (1 Thess 2:1–16), and his concern for the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:17–3:13). It is important for Paul to defend himself against these charges in the first part of the letter or else he would have no credibility for the corrections he introduces in the second part of the letter. In this first section, he also gives the Thessalonians the divine perspective behind the trials that they are experiencing (1 Thess 2:13–16; 3:1–5). In the second section of the letter (1 Thess 4–5), Paul responds to their deficiencies and questions as reported by Timothy. Thus, in this section of the letter, he deals with issues related to sexual immorality, laziness, misunderstandings regarding eschatological issues, ministry imbalances, and impediments toward progressive sanctification.

Message

Although the Thessalonians evidenced true saving faith, they needed to continue to grow in Christ. Interestingly, every chapter in the letter ends with a reference to the return of Christ. Such a focus upon the Lord's return furnishes a natural stimulus for holy living (2 Peter 3:11; 1 John 3:2–3). Thus, the message of 1 Thessalonians is continued growth in faith, hope, and love in view of the Lord's imminent return.

Outline

- I. Personal section: looking backward (1 Thess 1:1–3:13)
 - (1) Greeting (1:1)
 - (A) Addressors (1:1a)
 - (B) Addressees (1:1b)
 - (C) Greeting (1:1c)
 - (2) Defense of the legitimacy of the Thessalonians' conversion (1:2–10)
 - (A) Summary statement (1:2–3)

- (a) Thanksgiving (1:2)
 - (b) Reasons for the thanksgiving (1:3)
 - (i) Faith (1:3a)
 - (ii) Labor in love (1:3b)
 - (iii) Hope (1:3c)
 - (B) Specific reasons evidencing their conversion (1:4-10)
 - (3) Defense of the legitimacy of Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians (2:1-16)
 - (A) How the gospel was to be delivered to the Thessalonians (2:1-12)
 - (a) Paul generally enumerates the charges (2:1-2)
 - (i) Paul's ministry message (2:1)
 - (ii) Paul's ministry motives (2:2a)
 - (iii) Paul's ministry methods (2:2b)
 - (b) Paul expounds upon the inadequacy of the charges (2:3-12)
 - (i) Paul's ministry message (2:3-4)
 - (ii) Paul's ministry motives (2:5-8)
 - (iii) Paul's ministry methods (2:9-12)
 - (B) The genuineness of the Thessalonians' conversion (2:13-16)
 - (a) They received the message as from God (2:13)
 - (b) The Thessalonians had suffered from the hands of the Jews as well (2:14-15)
 - (i) The Judean believers (2:14)
 - (ii) Christ (2:15a)
 - (iii) The prophets (2:15b)
 - (iv) Paul and his companions (2:15c)
 - (c) The fate of the persecutors (2:16)
 - (4) Defense of Paul's concern for the Thessalonians (2:17—3:13)
 - (A) Paul's plans to visit them (2:17-18)
 - (B) Paul's concern for their glorification (2:19-20)
 - (C) Timothy's visit to them (3:1-5)
 - (D) Timothy's report of them (3:6-10)
 - (E) Paul's prayer for them (3:11-13)
 - (a) Return to them (3:11)
 - (b) Progressive sanctification (3:12)
 - (c) Blamelessness at the Bema Seat judgment (3:13)
- II. Practical section: looking forward (1 Thess 4:1—5:28)
- (1) Christian living (4:1-12)
 - (A) General conduct (4:1-2)
 - (B) Negative exhortation: sexual purity (4:3-8)

- (C) Positive exhortation: brotherly love (4:9-12)
 - (2) Rapture and the destiny of the dead in Christ (4:13-18)
 - (3) Day of the Lord (5:1-11)
 - (A) Description of the Day of the Lord (5:1-3)
 - (B) Application of the Day of the Lord to the believer (5:4-11)
 - (4) Church life (5:12-15)
 - (A) Attitude toward leaders (5:12-13)
 - (B) Ministry to one another (5:14-15)
 - (5) Holy living (5:16-24)
 - (A) Positive commands: what to do (5:16-18)
 - (a) Rejoice always (5:16)
 - (b) Pray without ceasing (5:17)
 - (c) Give thanks in everything (5:18)
 - (B) Negative commands: what not to do (5:19-22)
 - (a) Do not quench the Spirit (5:19)
 - (b) Do not despise prophetic utterances (5:20-21)
 - (c) Abstain from all evil (5:22)
 - (C) Divine enablement for holy living (5:23-24)
 - III. Conclusion (1 Thess 5:25-28)
 - (1) Personal requests (5:25-27)
 - (A) Prayer (5:25)
 - (B) Greet the brethren (5:26)
 - (C) Read the letter aloud (5:27)
 - (2) Benediction (5:28)
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Introduction

- (1) Authorship
- (2) Recipients
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- (4) Date
- (5) Audience
- (6) Occasion
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- (8) Unique characteristics
- (9) Purpose
- (10) Message

(1) Authorship

- 1 Thess 1:1; 2:18
- Acts 17-18
- NT scholarship

(2) Recipients

- Thessalonica
 - Chief seaport of Macedonia
 - Received status as free (self governing) city from Rome in 42 BC



(3) Place of writing

Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians on his second missionary journey, from Corinth, after he left Thessalonica, went to Athens, then went on to Corinth. Many commentators will state that Paul was in Thessalonica for three weeks (Acts 17:2). But he was in the synagogue for three weeks, and once they kicked him out of the synagogue, he then had a ministry among the Gentiles of the city.

- The reason it's likely that Paul was in Thessalonica for more than three weeks is that as you read both 1&2 Thessalonians, you see that Paul intimately knows the people of that church. It would take longer than three weeks for that type of relationship to develop.
- In 1 Thess 2:9 Paul said he worked a full-time job as a tentmaker. To establish a business like this that would support himself would take longer than three weeks.
- While in Thessalonica, Paul received "more than one offering" from the church at Philippi (Phil 4:16). This was a huge blessing to Paul. Since there was no Zelle or PayPal at that time, and the offerings had to be taken and then delivered to Paul, while he was in Thessalonica, it's clear that his stay there was for more than three weeks.
- When you look at the doctrine covered in 1 Thessalonians, it's obvious that Paul was with them long enough to lay a biblical foundation. He presumes in his first epistle to them that they already know about the following doctrinal topics:

Presumed Knowledge	
Trinity	1:1, 5-6
Holy Spirit	1:5-6; 4:8; 5:19
Second Advent	1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:14-17; 5:23
Day of the Lord	5:1-3
Eschatology	2 <u>Thess</u> 2:5
Assurance	1:5
Conversion	1:9
Election	1:4
Resurrection	4:14-18
Sanctification	4:3; 5:23
Christian behavior	2:12; 4:1
<i>Adapted from Scofield Study Bible, 1640</i>	

For Paul to lay this complete of a foundation in Christian doctrine for them, it's clear that he was there with them for much longer than three weeks.

In 2 Thess 2:5, in the middle of laying out some serious eschatological doctrine about the Rapture, the Antichrist, the Restrainer, etc., he says, Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?

(4) Date

- 51 AD
- Paul's second letter (Galatians was Paul's first epistle)

Paul's Ministry Chronology				
# of books	Journey	Acts	Date	Books
1	1	13–14	48–49	Gal
2	2	15:36–18:22	50–52	1–2 <u>Thess</u>
3	3	18:23–21:17	53–57	1–2 Cor, Rom
4	4	28:16–31	60–62	Eph, Col, <u>Phlm</u> , <u>Phlp</u>
2	Between Imprisonments	Post Acts	62–66	1 Tim, Titus
1	2 nd Imprisonment	Post Acts	67	2 Tim

Order of Paul's Epistles

- (1) Galatians (49 AD)
- (2) 1&2 Thessalonians (51 AD)
- (3) 1&2 Corinthians (56 AD)
- (4) Romans (57 AD)
- (5) Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians (60–62 AD)
- (6) 1 Timothy, Titus (62–66 AD)
- (7) 2 Timothy (67 AD)

(5) Audience

- Believers (1:3)
- Some Jews (Acts 17:2,4,12)
- Mostly Gentile (1:9)
 - When Paul talks about people turning from idols to serve the Living God, he cannot be talking about Jewish people
 - After the Babylonian Captivity, the Jews swore off idolatry and it was never a problem among the Jews in Israel again

- Idolatry is what caused God to send the Assyrians to take the northern kingdom into exile, and also why the southern kingdom was taken into "timeout" in exile.
- This was why Judaism created the Pharisees during the intertestamental period...to ensure that idolatry never returned to Israel. Of all the bad things you can rightly say about the Pharisees, you can't call them idolaters.

(6) Occasion

- Under persecution
 - The Bible is "crisis literature"...every single book of the Bible was written to address a crisis, to help resolve it
 - The better we understand the problem, the better we can understand the writer's perspective and how he goes about resolving it
 - This is how the Holy Spirit sovereignly superintended the OT and NT to come into existence...problem after problem followed by book after book written to solve the problem.
- The crisis in 1 Thessalonians is...Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica when he arrived in Athens. Paul went on to Corinth, and Timothy returned from Thessalonica to Corinth and reported to Paul that the same unbelieving Jews who stirred up trouble and kicked him out of Thessalonica have now turned their sights on the new Christian converts in Thessalonica.
 - The same unbelieving Jews who persecuted Paul and drove him away are now persecuting these new believers in Thessalonica
 - These unbelieving Jews are jealous of Paul's ministry in Thessalonica, so they begin to lie about him trying to wean Paul's converts away from Paul's teaching and doctrine.
 - One of the things the unbelieving Jews were telling these new believers is that what they believed wasn't real, it was just a phase that they were going through. At some point, they would snap out of it.
- *ad hominem* attacks against Paul
 - Another thing they were saying was that Paul was corrupt, he left, he's no longer ministering to you, and how could a guy that left really love you anyway?
- Other problems
 - Timothy also reported to Paul that there was some sexual immorality going on in the church, there were people who had gotten really lazy and stopped working because they thought the Rapture would come any day.
 - Timothy also told Paul about some eschatological imbalances that they had, they were worried about their deceased loved ones in Christ and if/how they would participate in the Rapture.

- There were ministry imbalances, where the sheep were not in submission to the shepherds in the church
- Timothy also documents a number of other things that were thwarting these believer's sanctification and growth process

(7) Structure

- Personal (1 Thess 1-3) (Looking Back)
 - Genuine conversion (1:1-10)
 - Impure motives (2:1-16)
 - Lack of concern (2:17--3:13)
- Practical (1 Thess 4-5) (Looking Forward)
 - Immorality (4:1-8)
 - Laziness (4:9-12)
 - Eschatology (4:13--5:11)
 - Ministry imbalances (5:12-15)
 - Progressive sanctification (5:16-28)

(8) Unique characteristics

If 1 Thessalonians was not in the Bible, what important knowledge or doctrine would we be missing?

- Every chapter ends with a reference to the return of Christ
- Short amount of time (~6 months) in between planting of the church and Paul's first epistle to them

The Importance of Biblical Prophecy

- 27% of Scripture was prophetic at the time it was written
- 2 Peter 1:19



J. Dwight Pentecost

Prophecy For Today, Page 20

“A short time ago, I took occasion to go through the New Testament to mark each reference to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and to observe the use made of that teaching about His coming. I was struck anew with the fact that almost without exception, when the coming of Christ is mentioned in the New Testament, it is followed by an exhortation to godliness and holy living.”

(9) Purpose

Continued spiritual growth despite persecution from unbelieving Jews.

(10) Message

Continued growth in faith, hope, and love in view of the Lord's imminent return.