

Article of the Month – February 2012

Missiological Observations in the NT (8) – Thessalonians

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Paul's consistent prayer and thanksgiving for 'his' churches indicated his close relationship with their members.¹ He and his co-workers lived *among* the Thessalonians,² not in a missionary compound or a hotel. Living among a target population increases missionary bonding and also encourages and strengthens personal relationships.

He describes his intimacy with them in parental terms: 'mother', 'little children', 'father' and mutual 'longing'; and by 'we not only shared the Gospel with

you but our lives as well'.³ He is grateful that they, in spite of their intimacy, did not interpret his message as merely human, but as coming from God.⁴ The friendship had not jeopardized his apostolic authority.

Paul compliments them that they became imitators – the best quality of disciples – of the Lord and of him and his co-workers.⁵ Converting and discipling are two halves of the same process. They also became imitators of the Judean churches, by going through persecutions.⁶ Suffering through persecution for being witnesses, runs like a red thread through these letters.⁷

And witnesses they were! Their lives were models of true Christianity. They preached the Gospel in Greece and beyond, so that their faith became known everywhere. Paul even heard from elsewhere how well they had received the Gospel when he and his team first arrived.⁸

He also gave them the example to solicit their *prayers* for his ministry, and in spite of persecution he also asked for prayer to be delivered from wicked and evil men.⁹

The Thessalonians had turned from their idols to the living God.¹⁰ Paul addresses a majority of Gentile believers; the Jews seem to have been a minority.

We smile, when reading 'you know ... our visit to you was not a failure'.¹¹ *They* did not see Paul's visit as such, but *he* had thought so, hence his relief when his ministry had proven to be successful.¹² Even the great Paul was human enough to need encouragement!

¹ 1 Th. 1:2,3; 2:13,17; 3:9,10 & 2 Th. 1:3,11,12; 2:13

² 1 Th. 1:5b

³ 2:7,8,11; 3:6

⁴ 2:13

⁵ 1:6; 2:10,12

⁶ 2:14

⁷ 1:6; 2:2,14; 3:3,4 & 2 Th. 1:4,5; 2:4; 3:2

⁸ 1 Th. 1:7-9a

⁹ 5:25 & 2 Th. 3:1,2

¹⁰ 1 Th. 1:9b

¹¹ 2:1

¹² 3:1,2,5-8

Being beaten, imprisoned, shackled and living through an earthquake might have caused us to leave our mission field, but it did not have that effect on Paul and Silas in Philippi. They simply left that city and continued their ministry in Thessalonica.¹³

His own suffering made it unnecessary to remind the Thessalonians of his good motives,¹⁴ although some questioned these, accusing him of greed. Concerning motives, Paul states that even if he could deceive the Thessalonians, there is God Who cannot be deceived and Who had tested Paul and approved of him as a missionary.¹⁵

In this light he also mentions his tent-making principles – not to burden anyone.¹⁶ When ministering in Thessalonica he received support from Philippi.¹⁷

Paul was not driven by false sentimentality towards Jews but saw their spiritual condition as it was.¹⁸ This did not lead to ‘ethno-exclusivism’;¹⁹ he always preached the Gospel to them first. He expressed his love for them, among other passages, in Rom. 9-11.

No missionary can always work as planned. Paul knew *who* stopped him.²⁰ Once the Holy Spirit changed his direction; another time Satan opposed him.²¹ His solution was to pray that ‘God our Father Himself and our Lord Jesus would clear the way ... to come to you’.²²

‘When we²³ could stand it no longer ... we sent Timothy’.²⁴ Going to Thessalonica would have interrupted his just started Corinthian ministry. It is good to have co-workers to send on other missions.

‘May the Lord make your love overflow for each other *and for everyone else ...*’ has been a condition for mission work since Jesus said so.²⁵

It is of great importance for Developing World churches to ‘work with your hands ... so that your ... life may *win the respect of outsiders* and ... *not be dependent* on anybody’ and ‘warn those who are idle’.²⁶ Idleness and poverty are related and the number of churches and ministries that depend on foreign funds and personnel is alarming. Such churches are usually not missionary-sending churches. Paul proposes how this should change.²⁷

For the Thessalonians to be worthy of God’s calling²⁸ means more than holy and exemplary living; it includes the success of ‘every good purpose of *yours* and every *act* prompted by *your* faith’. These words encourage evangelism and missions among unbelievers.

¹³ Acts 16:22-28; 1 Th. 2:2

¹⁴ 2:3,5

¹⁵ 2:4

¹⁶ 2:4,6,9 & 2 Th. 3:7-9

¹⁷ Philip. 4:16

¹⁸ 1 Th. 2:14b-16

¹⁹ Not a current term, but describing e.g. the attitude that Jonah had towards the Assyrians: he excluded those people in his thoughts from the right to hear the Word of God

²⁰ This is an example of how the gift of discernment of spirits can operate, 1 Cor. 12:10

²¹ Acts 16:7 & 1 Th. 2:18

²² 3:10,11

²³ I.e. Paul and probably Luke, compare with Acts 16:10-17a (‘we’ and ‘us’) although we cannot say with certainty at what places Luke was present. Also, Silas may already have returned from Berea

²⁴ 1 Th. 3:1-8

²⁵ Compare 3:12 (italics mine) with John 13:35 & 17:23

²⁶ 4:11,12; 5:14 (italics mine)

²⁷ 2 Th. 3:6-12

²⁸ 1:11 & 2:17b (italics mine)

Even missionary documents can be falsified, and should be checked on genuinety.²⁹ Satan will try every trick to discredit God's workers and their teaching.

²⁹ 2:2; 3:17