

*New Beacon Bible Commentary

I & 2 THESSALONIANS

A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition

Terence Paige



BEACON HILL PRESS
OF KANSAS CITY

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Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City
PO Box 419527
Kansas City, MO 64141
www.BeaconHillBooks.com

ISBN 978-0-8341-2394-6

Printed in the United States of America

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Cover Design: J.R. Caines
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Paige, Terence Peter, 1960- author.

Title: 1 & 2 Thessalonians / Terence Paige.

Other titles: First and Second Thessalonians

Description: Kansas City, MO : Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2017. | Series: New Beacon Bible commentary |

Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016036849 | ISBN 9780834123946 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Thessalonians—Commentaries.

Classification: LCC BS2725.53 .P35 2017 | DDC 227/.8107—dc23 LC record available at

<https://lccn.loc.gov/2016036849>

The Internet addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers in this book are accurate at the time of publication. They are provided as a resource. Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City does not endorse them or vouch for their content or permanence.

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COMMENTARY

I THESSALONIANS

I. GREETING: I THESSALONIANS I:I

BEHIND THE TEXT

The openings of Paul's letters generally follow a standard pattern of a greeting, thanksgiving, and prayer-wish for his readers (with exceptions: 2 Corinthians has a benediction; Galatians, 1 Timothy, and Titus lack thanksgivings). Ancient letters typically named first the sender, then the recipient, and often included a wish for the recipient's health.

In most of his letters, Paul identifies himself with a title expressing his divine commission. Here it is simply "Paul, Silas and Timothy" (1:1). This is not because it is an early letter, written prior to any challenges to his authority (against Best 1986, 60; Murphy-O'Connor 1996, 26). Paul had already been in ministry for at least sixteen years. The informal greeting seems to express the intimacy Paul had with this church, as well as his humility (1 Thess 2:6b-12; so Airhart 1965, 439; Green 2002, 82).

IN THE TEXT

■ **I Paul** always uses his Roman name in his letters. Murphy-O'Connor suggests it would have been chosen as one of the three Latin names every Roman citizen took (1996, 41-43; see Acts 16:37-38). His given name Saul we know only from Acts (9:1-25; 13:9). It was common for Jews moving in Gentile circles to adopt Gentile names in addition to their given Hebrew names (note Peter, Andrew, and Mark: Mark 3:16; Acts 12:12). Perhaps this was his way of identifying with the Gentiles God had placed under his care. “Saul” also sounded in Greek like the adjective for an effeminate gait, so **Paul** was preferable in that context.

Silas and Timothy are named as co-senders of the letter. Did Paul include them as a polite formality, because they evangelized with him and were with him in Corinth as he wrote? If so, Paul was really the sole author, speaking for all three (Best 1986, 27-28; Richard 1995, 40). Or, was the letter a cooperative effort by all three?

In 1 Thessalonians the author refers to himself in the singular in only three places (2:18; 3:5; 5:27). Elsewhere the “we”-form dominates. Most commentators interpret the “we” statements as an authorial plural, meant to express camaraderie with the readers (Malherbe 2000, 88; see also Airhart 1965, 439; Best 1986, 27-28; Wanamaker 1990, 67; Richard 1995, 40; Furnish 2007, 37; but see Lyons 1985, 179).

First and Second Thessalonians are the only Pauline letters to include a second apostle in their greetings—note the plural “apostles . . . we” in 1 Thess 2:7. Ancient papyrus letters did not normally name multiple senders in their greetings unless the letter was actually from all of them (Prior 1989, 38-39; Murphy-O'Connor 1995, 18-19).

There was good reason for Paul to seek his coworkers' aid in the creation of this letter. Paul was stretched thin in Corinth as he wrote. He was still working full time to support himself, at least until Silas and Timothy returned from Macedonia (Acts 18:3-4; → 1 Thess 2:9). Tensions with the Jewish community led to an attempt to prosecute Paul before the Roman proconsul (Acts 18:12-17). He must have been exhausted emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Besides, Silas and Timothy were well known to the audience as cofounders of the church; and Timothy had just completed a visit with them (1 Thess 3:1-2, 6). It made sense for Paul to involve his friends in the drafting of the letter (see Prior 1989, 38-39; Murphy-O'Connor 1995, 16-20; Reicke 2001, 30-32, 42, 44).

Nevertheless, the “I” statements do show Paul breaking out here and there as the senior member of the team. No doubt his voice dominates and he approved the final draft, adding his command that it be read out loud, with a benediction on his beloved Thessalonians (5:27-28). Some plurals may best

be explained as authorial plurals (see 3:1). And some plurals include the Thessalonians in the discourse (3:3; 4:14). But it is a misplaced regard for Paul's authority that would balk at his sharing the task of writing a letter, when he freely praised fellow workers in the gospel (e.g., Rom 16:1-7, 21; 1 Cor 3:5-9; 16:15-16; 1 Thess 5:12-13; Reicke 2001, 30-32).

Silvanus must be the same person Acts calls **Silas**. The first form is a Latin name; the second, Greek. The NIV uses **Silas** everywhere, despite Paul's spelling. After the Jerusalem Council, Silas was sent as an emissary with Paul (Acts 15:22, 25-33). He helped evangelize Thessalonica. He was an apostle and a prophet (1 Thess 2:7; Acts 15:32).

Silas is the Greek version of the Aramaic name "Saul" for this Jewish Christian (BDAG, 923). Paul took Silas with him on his second missionary journey, perhaps as a gesture of unity between Gentile and Palestinian branches of the church (Acts 15:40; Wanamaker 1990, 69). He may have been one of the "representatives" (*apostoloi*) sent by Pauline churches to accompany their offering to Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:23; Wanamaker 1990, 69). Sometime after Paul arrived in Corinth, Silas joined him (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor 1:19).

Timothy was from Lystra in southern Galatia. He had a Jewish-Christian mother and a Greek father, who was probably pagan (Acts 16:1-3; 2 Tim 1:5). Timothy's mixed heritage proved to be the perfect preparation for bringing the gospel into the Gentile world (Wall 2002, 227). Starting as an assistant, he would become one of Paul's most trusted colleagues. He was like a son to Paul (Phil 2:22). He is mentioned as a co-sender of six letters (1 and 2 Thessalonians, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon).

The addressees are **the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. First and Second Thessalonians are the only letters to use this particular description of a church in the greeting (compare "all God's holy people in Christ Jesus" [Phil 1:1]; "God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus" [Eph 1:1]). The word "church" never appears in the English OT. But Paul's first readers would have recognized the word "church" (*ekklēsia*) in their Greek OT.

What did this word mean, and why did early Christians choose it to describe themselves? In secular Greek, the *ekklēsia* was the assembly of male citizens gathered to do the business of a democratic city. Greeks never used the word for religious groups. That this *ekklēsia* is "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus" tells us to whom this unusual assembly owes its existence (Malherbe 2000, 102).

In the Greek OT the term *ekklēsia* was used for the "assembly" of the nation of Israel as God's people (Deut 23:2-4; 31:30; 1 Kgs 8:14; Mic 2:5). Israel gathered to hear God at Sinai on the "day of the assembly" (Deut 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; see Deut 31:12). Hence, Christians, by calling themselves "the **assembly** in God" (1 Thess 1:1; "**assembly** of God" [Acts 20:28; 1 Cor 10:32; 11:18; 15:9]) invoked the identity of Israel as a people called to belong to God.

Their identity is established not by their ethnic heritage, but by God's call and God's covenant with them. Christians apparently understood the church to stand in continuity with ancient Israel, because they were the people of God in this age. Those who "belong to Christ . . . are Abraham's seed" (Gal 3:29).

In what sense is the church **in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**? Some argue the **in** should be understood instrumentally, meaning "the assembly of the Thessalonians brought into being by God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Best 1986, 62; Richard 1995, 38; Malherbe 2000, 99). But the instrumental use of the Greek preposition *en* (**in**) usually accompanies a verb; and there is no verb in the greeting.

There are good reasons to think that Paul intended **in** as a marker of *place*, a theological metaphor, which makes God the dwelling place of Christians. It is the functional equivalent to Paul's references to being "in Christ" or in the Spirit (see Frame 1912, 70; Bruce 1982, 7). Being in God (or Christ) is the corollary to saying God indwells believers (Rom 8:1, 10; Col 1:2; 2:10; see also John 14:23; 17:21).

Believers owe their existence to God. They live inhabited by God's presence—his Spirit, thanks to the grace of the new covenant (Rom 8:9-11; 1 Cor 12:13; 1 Thess 4:8). This spatial metaphor points to Jesus' "inclusive personality," which was evidence of his divinity (Moule 1977, 47-96). Paul's greeting strikingly brackets God and the Lord Jesus together. The apostle had the highest possible view of Jesus: he shares fully in God's divine nature.

Dunn explains being in God/Christ as referring to "existential participation in the new reality brought about by Christ"—a mystical experience (1998, 400, 401; see "in Christ" and "in the Lord" in, e.g., 1 Thess 3:8; 4:1, 16; 5:12; 2 Thess 3:4; Rom 6:11; 1 Cor 1:2, 30; 9:1). This experience is alluded to in the metaphors of co-burial with Christ and being his body (Rom 6:4-5; 1 Cor 6:15; 12:12-13, 27).

That God is called **the Father** is common for Paul. Although God is occasionally called Father in the OT and Jewish literature, the title was rare. God was usually referred to by honorific titles such as the Holy One or the King of the Universe. Apparently, Jesus' constant reference to God as Father indelibly stamped the writings of his disciples.

In Paul's day, fathers were the head of the family. As such, they were to be obeyed. Nevertheless, by referring to God by this title Paul presented a more intimate image of God than was typical of Jews. He implied that believers were a fictive *family* with God as the *paterfamilias*. Hence, they call one another "brothers and sisters" (1 Thess 1:4). This concept is so important that Jesus is remembered for the radical idea that God's family may conflict with or even replace one's natural family (Mark 3:31-35; 13:12-13).

For Jesus, the title **Father** also pointed to God's love and to God's desire for the restoration of fallen humanity (Luke 11:11-13 || Matt 7:9-11; Luke

15:11-32). Paul will go on in this letter to recount how he himself modeled this parental compassion for the Thessalonians (1 Thess 2:7-8, 11).

Lord (*kyrios*) is the title Christians gave to the risen Jesus (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3). Greek speakers used it of humans in positions of authority (a slave's master or a high-ranking government official). They addressed their deities as "lords" (*Hymn to Isis* [P.Oxy. 1380]; Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 367A; Apuleius, *Metam.* 11). Roman emperors—both living and dead—were addressed as "lord."

What is more relevant is that the title *kyrios* was used by Greek-speaking Jews for the God of the OT. The LXX translated God's name YHWH with *kyrios*, in line with synagogue practice. The Hebrew Scriptures address God with the Hebrew title "Lord" (*ādōn*). Several times daily Jews prayed to God as Lord, reciting Deut 6:4-5 ("Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength"). Where English says "LORD" the Hebrew reads YHWH, and the Septuagint has *kyrios*. So to a Greek-speaking Jew like Paul, "Lord" used in prayer and religious speech was inevitably associated with God. With this usage, early Christians clearly indicated that Jesus stood "on the divine side of reality" (Marshall 1983, 49).

Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew title "Messiah," meaning "anointed one." It came to be used in Judaism as a title for the expected great end-time deliverer God would send to Israel. There were a variety of messianic expectations in first-century Judaism. But the most common one held that a royal messiah, a descendant of David, would restore Israel politically and defend her from her enemies.

As the **Christ**, Jesus redefined his messianic role in terms of the Suffering Servant (see Isa 52:13—53:12; Mark 8:29-31; 10:45; Luke 22:37). His disciples accepted him as Messiah, although they did not understand the full import of that until after his death and resurrection. Early Christians argued that the resurrection confirmed that Jesus was Messiah in fulfillment of prophecy (Acts 2:24-32; 1 Cor 15:20, 25, echoing Ps 110:1).

The greeting **Grace and peace** appears in every letter by Paul (1 and 2 Timothy add "mercy"). This is not identical to any greeting previously known from other ancient letters (Malherbe 2000, 100). The most familiar explanation is that Paul combines the typical greetings from Jewish and Gentile societies. Hebrew *Shalôm*, "peace," also means "hello"; and Greek *chairein* means "greetings." He substituted *charis* ("grace") for *chairein* (Best 1986, 64). Some theorize that Paul modified extant formulas in Jewish letters, such as "mercy and peace," or used the Aaronic blessing from Num 6:24-26 (2 Bar. 78:2; 2 Macc 1:1; Marshall 1983, 49; Malherbe 2000, 100; Fitzmyer 1993, 228).

FROM THE TEXT

Paul models humility in the greeting of this letter. The apostle to the Gentiles wrote as part of a team, respecting the work of others. Jealousy is

one of the most insidious and destructive sins in the church, often masquerading as spirituality. We need to remember Jesus' request that we pray for co-workers in the harvest of potential believers (Matt 9:37-38; Luke 10:2; John 4:34-38). When others succeed in ministry, we should all rejoice.

Paul's faith infused even the conventional letter greeting: into it he has brought the special title of God as "Father," the association of Jesus with God, and the existential grounding of the church in the risen Christ and God the Father. His casual greeting alludes to two key gospel concepts: the grace God gives believers in Jesus and the peace with God this produces.

Believers are also the "assembly" called by God's grace to a new existence in Christ and in God. Like Israel in the wilderness, they are on their way to a promised land, led by their Lord.