

A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEMS OF THE THESSALONIAN EPISTLES

by R. GREGSON

THAT the letter which we call Second Thessalonians was in fact written before its companion which we call First Thessalonians is an idea which has occurred independently to several students of the two letters. In the following short study Mr. Gregson gives the reasons which have led him to this conclusion and the solutions which in his judgment it provides for otherwise insoluble problems raised in relation to the occasion and purpose of 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

I. THE PROBLEMS

THE problems associated with the purpose and occasion of writing these Epistles were first brought to my notice during a series of studies in the life of St. Paul. Fuller examination of the problems led to the conclusion that it did not seem possible to reconcile the conflicting evidence, or to solve the problems without doing violence to the clear statements of Scripture.

The problems relate both to the occasion and to the purpose of the Epistles.

1. *Occasion.*

In Acts 17: 13-15 Paul leaves Berea and goes to Athens but Silas and Timothy remain behind.

In Acts 18: 1-4 Paul, after preaching in the Areopagus (which he did while waiting for Silas and Timothy), departs to Corinth.

In Acts 18: 5 Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia and meet Paul at Corinth.

The picture is quite clear and causes no trouble till we seek to reconcile it with 1 Thess. 3: 1, where Paul says that he sent Timothy from Athens to Thessalonica.

2. *Purpose.*

On examining the problem more fully it is seen that there is an allied problem, viz. what was the purpose of Paul's writing both these Epistles within a short time of each other, especially when the second one does not add a great deal to the first?

There have been various suggestions made as to the reason for this second part of the problem. Some commentators suggest that one of the Epistles was written chiefly to the Gentile section of the church, and the other to the Jewish; some suggest it was mainly to make sure that the Thessalonians kept Paul's teachings in mind.

Although it is true that the second Epistle does not add a great deal of new material, the eschatological section (2 Thess 1: 7-2: 12) does include some important information which is not in 1 Thessalonians, and most commentators see this as being the key to this part of the problem, and believe that the main purpose for Paul's writing this second letter was to expand this important theme more fully.

Thus we have an outline of the main problems.

1. An apparent contradiction regarding the movements of Timothy causes a problem about the time or occasion of writing.
2. The apparent lack of real purpose for writing the second epistle is the second problem.

It appears to me that there is a simple solution which solves both these problems and which sheds considerable light on the subsequent study of the epistles. The solution is that the epistles were actually written in the reverse order and thus what we now have as 2 Thessalonians was written before 1 Thessalonians.

II. EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF THE PROPOSITION

The main reasons for holding this view are that, contrary to popular opinion, I consider that the eschatological teaching of 1 Thessalonians is more mature, or is written for more mature Christians, than that in 2 Thessalonians. The volume of such material in 1 Thessalonians is probably less, but the content is such as would be more helpful to bear in mind constantly than the content of the passage in 2 Thessalonians.

In 2 Thessalonians we have clear teaching about the judgment and punishment of lawless people when the Lord comes to vindicate those who are His.

But 1 Thessalonians looks not to the destruction of those who oppose the Gospel but to the assurance of glory and blessing in fellowship with Jesus Christ for ever of those who believe the Gospel (1 Thess. 4: 16-17).

Another reason for believing the reverse order to be correct is that in everything else taught by the Epistles, 1 Thessalonians is much fuller and introduces much new material as, for instance, Chapter 5 with its many cryptic injunctions.

If we accept this reverse order, the purpose of writing the two epistles becomes clear. The first one (2 Thessalonians) was written in fear that the persecution which had caused Paul himself to leave Thessalonica might have caused his converts to give up their profession. The epistle therefore, with very few preliminaries, concentrates on encouraging the Christians to persevere and to endure;

and, to support his purpose, Paul shows that their opponents will suffer a horrible fate, but they will be sure of great reward if they continue steadfastly. The whole epistle has a note of fear and urgency about it which shows the emotional state of the writer and the content of the epistle is all channelled towards this one aim of establishing the Thessalonian church.

1 Thessalonians was written after this state of urgency had passed, for Paul has received the gladdening news that not only are the Christians holding fast to their faith, they are in fact out evangelizing those around them, and the church is growing in grace as well as numbers. His purpose therefore in writing is to encourage them to continue, and to share with them unashamedly the effervescent joy which news of their establishment in the truth has brought him. This takes up most of the first 3 chapters, and then in chapters 4 and 5 he gives them some further instruction—on Christian behaviour in 4: 1-12 and on eschatology in 4: 13-5: 11, including the answers to some questions as in 4: 13 which seem to have been put to him.

The whole tone of the epistle is one of joy and assurance, and it seems much more likely to be the sequel to the anxiety of 2 Thessalonians than the unsuspecting forerunner of a letter of great emotional turmoil, neither the cause nor the result of which is really known.

III. THE OCCASION OF WRITING

If we accept this proposition, how does this affect the problem associated with the occasion of writing the epistles? Here again the result is strikingly satisfactory, and, in fact, the evidence seems to make any other suggestion untenable.

In 1 Thess. 3: 1-2 Paul says he sent Timothy to the Thessalonian Christians from Athens. He says he sent him to establish them in their faith and exhort them not to be moved by their afflictions. It is unlikely that Paul would do this without sending them some word of exhortation himself, and this purpose of establishing them in their faith and exhorting them not to be moved by their afflictions we have already seen to be the purpose and content of 2 Thessalonians. In 1 Thess. 3: 5 Paul says that the reason that he sent to them was to know their faith, because he could not bear the suspense any longer for fear that the tempter had tempted them, and that they had not finally gained anything from Paul's labours among them. In verse 6 we read that Timothy has come back to Paul with joyful news. This would have been the coming recorded in Acts 18: 5 and may explain Paul's apparently increased enthusiasm, and zeal in proclaiming the word.

IV. THE RECONSTRUCTION

Thus the reconstruction of events as they occurred would be that Paul left Thessalonica and went to Beroea with Silas (Acts 17: 10); Timothy may have stayed in Thessalonica for a while.

Then the Jews from Thessalonica came down to Beroea and stirred up trouble. The Beroean brethren took Paul to Athens, and Silas and Timothy, who had apparently reached Beroea by this time, stayed there in Beroea (Acts 17: 14).

The brethren who brought Paul to Athens carried a message back to Silas and Timothy to come and join Paul at Athens (Acts 17: 15).

Timothy at least did so, probably leaving Silas in Beroea for a while longer.

When Timothy came to Paul at Athens, Paul was very distressed about the Thessalonians; especially was he concerned about the persecution they might have been enduring and which might have caused them to give up.

Timothy brought another report which worried him even further, viz. that many of the Thessalonian brethren were busybodies, living in idleness (2 Thess. 3: 11).

So he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica with a letter (2 Thessalonians) and instructions to establish them in their faith and to exhort them to endure their tribulations with patience (1 Thess. 3: 2). Paul had addressed the Areopagus while waiting for them to come (Acts 17: 16) and, as he seemed to be unable to get very far with the Athenians, he told Timothy that he would go on to Corinth and that Timothy and Silas were to come to Corinth rather than to Athens to meet him. Timothy went back to Thessalonica and delivered the letter and words of exhortation and then he and Silas went to Corinth and met Paul.

Paul was overjoyed with Timothy's report and sat down and wrote the second letter (1 Thessalonians) and sent it to them from Corinth. In this letter he explains about the Christians who have died (1 Thess. 4: 13), a query which Timothy was no doubt asked to put before him.

V. OTHER FEATURES EXPLAINED

There are also other features of the two Epistles which are explained more clearly by this reconstruction—for instance, the implication of Paul's statement in 1 Thess. 2: 17-18 that he wanted to come to them once and again. This sounds hollow and unreal if we maintain the orthodox order of the epistles, but becomes full of meaning if we reverse the order. Also it will be observed that although this desire was to some extent satisfied by his sending

Timothy to them (1 Thess. 3: 1-2), it still continues (1 Thess. 3: 10-12), and yet is not mentioned in 2 Thessalonians.

We cannot see much of the church as it exists in Thessalonica in these two Epistles, but of the glimpses that do come through to us, the church as we see it in 1 Thessalonians looks more advanced than it is in 2 Thessalonians. For example, in 2 Thess. 1: 3 we have the statement that their faith and love is growing, but in 1 Thess. 4: 9-10 Paul says, "you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, and you do indeed love all the brethren throughout Macedonia." Again, in 2 Thess. 3: 7 Paul tells them that they know how they ought to imitate his colleagues and himself whereas in 1 Thess. 1: 6-10 he says that they had become imitators of them, and had themselves become examples for others to imitate.

VI. OBJECTIONS TO THIS VIEW

I am aware of two objections to this view. The first is that in manuscripts these two Epistles are always arranged in the traditional order. The second is that in 2 Thessalonians there are references which seem to imply that Paul had written a previous letter to them. The clearest of these references is 2 Thess. 2: 15 which is usually thought to refer to 1 Thessalonians and may make it necessary to postulate an earlier letter no longer extant, written while he was in Beroea, or in Thessalonica itself.

VII. REASONS FOR REVERSING THE ORDER

If we are to hold the reverse order of the Epistles, we must enquire into the reason for their being presented in their present order.

There are various suggestions, any of which could account for the change adequately.

1. In the first place there is their relative size. 1 Thessalonians being considerably longer than 2 Thessalonians, it would be natural to place it first, particularly as this is the one the Thessalonians are commanded to read (1 Thess. 5: 27).
2. The fear which called forth the urgency of 2 Thessalonians having proved to be unfounded, it would be natural to relegate this epistle to a place of less importance.
3. It may have been that 1 Thessalonians was read more often than 2 Thessalonians because its contents were more helpful to the Christians, and so it was copied out first by some of the scribes who later added 2 Thessalonians to their work.

It is my belief that an acceptance of the reverse order will open up a new and fruitful understanding of these Epistles which are to a great extent neglected.

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