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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

The Person and Work of Christ in 1 Thessalonians

by R. E. H. Uprichard

Dr. Uprichard recently completed a Ph.D thesis for the Queen's University, Belfast, on the date of 1 Thessalonians. His interest in the letter goes deeper than questions of chronology, and he has contributed this helpful study of its theology in which he compares it with that of the other Pauline writings.

108

1 Thessalonians is regarded as being one of the earliest of Paul's letters. This fact is said to explain, in part, the scarcity of teaching relating to Christ's person and work in this epistle, as compared with other later writings of Paul. Certainly, none of the characteristic Pauline pictures of the death of Christ, such as justification, reconciliation or propitiation, occur in 1 Thessalonians, while there is no lengthy description or systematic instruction on our Lord's person such as we find in Philippians or Colossians. Indeed, the dominance of teaching on Christ's return in both Thessalonian epistles is said to force any details there are of Christ's person and work into a futurist mould. Hence, the primary emphasis on the effects of Christ's death is that believers will obtain salvation at his return, will live with him in a future state of glory, while they wait in hope for God's Son who will return to them from heaven. Some would even go as far as to suggest that this 'primitive Christology' of the Thessalonian epistles reflects the early Paul whose theological formulations were not fully developed, a Paul who in 1 Thessalonians stands nearer the Paul of the Acts, who preached at Athens or Ephesus, than the Paul of Galatians or Romans!

However, this is doubtful. Paul's letters, by their very nature, were addressed to specific persons and deal with specific matters, germane to these congregations. One of the prime issues Paul deals with in writing to the Thessalonians was that of Christ's return. This accounts for the emphasis it receives in these epistles. It surely also largely accounts for the nature of the christological teaching (or the lack of it) in the letters? Justification by faith was not mentioned in 1 Thessalonians simply because it was not relevant to the issues of the correspondence. The preponderance of a futurist emphasis on the death of Christ in its effects arises because the return of Christ dominates the on-going discussions between Paul and the Thessalonians.

Further, teaching on the person and work of Christ in 1 Thessalonians is by no means non-existent. There is a much fuller Christology in 1 Thessalonians than some have suggested. In some cases, it is explicitly referred to. Many of the elements relating to Christ's person and work found in other Pauline writings are present in 1 Thessalonians. Their particular form in this letter is not so much dictated by the maturity or immaturity of Paul's thought at the time of writing, as by the circum-

stances to which the letter is addressed. Let us establish the nature of this teaching in more detail.

THE WORK OF CHRIST

By far the greater emphasis on the work of Christ in 1 Thessalonians relates to his second coming. The word invariably used for this is *parousia*. Of all the Greek words used to describe our Lord's return, it connotes particularly the majestic arrival of a king with all the pomp, ceremony and anticipation connected with this. This coming, then, is heralded by fitting accompaniments — a cry of command, the arch-angel's call, the sound of the trumpet of God — for it is the arrival of the Lord himself (4:16). His coming relates directly to his people for their benefit and good. By this he delivers them from the wrath to come (1:10). He returns specifically for them, for the dead in him will be raised and living Christians caught up with those raised to meet him. They will be with him for ever (4:16-18). He will present them to himself and to God blameless and holy on that occasion (2:19; 3:13; 5:23). This is to be both comfort and hope to them (4:18; 5:24). The return of Christ dominates the epistle.

But the death of Christ is also mentioned. Paul describes the Jews as those 'who killed the Lord Jesus' (2:15). A reference to the death of Christ is also embedded in a section of the letter where Paul comforts Thessalonian Christians concerning their departed loved-ones (4:14f.). The form in which it occurs would almost suggest that it echoes a credal formula prevalent in the early church — 'For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again.' It certainly presupposes a belief in the death (and resurrection) of Christ as being basic to the Christian faith. It is specifically on the grounds of the death and resurrection of Christ and, by means of their belief in it, that the Thessalonians are urged to hope in anticipation for their Lord's return and to comfort themselves regarding the destiny of their deceased on that occasion.

However, the most articulate theological formulation concerning the death of Christ found in 1 Thessalonians is at 5:9, 10: 'For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, *who died for us* so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him.'

Here is a statement of the purpose of Christ's death in relation to his people. Now, it might be argued with a fair degree of justification that the primary thrust of emphasis in this purpose is future: Their destiny is not wrath but to obtain salvation. Their 'living' (*zesōmēn*), regardless of their dying before or surviving to the *parousia*, is within the context of that event. Further, they are said to live with (*sun*) him, not in (*en*) him,

which might indicate a future rather than present union. It might also be argued, though with less force, that Paul's use of the somewhat colourless *peri* (for) in the expression 'who died for us' contrasts with the more definite *hyper* used on other occasions in connection with Christ's death — with less force, since the two prepositions differ little in meaning both in Hellenistic or New Testament Greek.

But surely it is natural that the primary emphasis should be future? Paul's teaching is concerning the day of the Lord and his reference to Christ's death and its effects is naturally referred to within this setting. He is not by implication denying a present experience of life in Christ accruing from our Lord's death. What is inescapable in this statement is simply this: that Christ's death relates to his people, it concerns them, its purpose is relevant to them, they are directly connected with it. While we may not rightly read into this a doctrine of substitutionary atonement as evidenced in clearer texts, we cannot deny that Paul here teaches a relationship between Christ's death and the believer, a theme characteristic of his other writings. The only difference here is of context and hence emphasis — the second coming and thus, future life with Christ. But even this arises from his death for us.

110

References to the resurrection of Christ are even less in evidence than those to Christ's death. There are only two. At 1:10 the resurrection of Christ is attributed to God's power: 'His Son . . . whom He raised from the dead.' The resurrection portrayed as God's raising of Christ from the dead is a concept frequent both in Paul and in the New Testament generally for this event. The other mention of the resurrection in 1 Thessalonians is in 4:14 where it is coupled with the death of Christ in a form which may well have been credal. Together with the death, it is to be the believer's ground of hope and comfort in the *parousia*. There do not appear to be any references to the incarnation, ascension or intercession of Christ in the epistle.

So, explicit references to the work of Christ in 1 Thessalonians, apart from his second coming are noticeably scarce. But where they do occur they are significant. Apart from what they indicate clearly as to the historicity of these events, they imply and presuppose quite a full theology and certainly one in keeping with Pauline teaching in other places.

APPLICATION OF THE WORK OF CHRIST

This is obvious at a number of places in 1 Thessalonians, and where it does occur, it tends to confirm the view that Paul's understanding of the significance of Christ's work at this point of time, was essentially the same as when he wrote his other letters. Particularly, we find the

application of the work of Christ to the believer evident in the following:

1. The relationship of spiritual life which the believer is said to enjoy in Christ. Churches are described as being 'in' Christ (1:1; 2:14). The grounds of the believer's assurance of comfort in Christ's return are the death and resurrection of Christ. (4:14). Indeed, the Christian's consolation respecting his departed, believing loved-ones resides also in the fact that these friends are 'in Christ' even in death, for they are described as 'the dead in Christ', who will first rise (4:16). The destiny of all believers is to be eternally present with their Lord, where 'Lord' is obviously used for Christ (4:17). Believers will be delivered from future judgment, obtain salvation and will live with Christ, all through the merits of the person and work of their Lord (1:10; 5:9, 10).

Whatever led Paul in other letters to describe the believers' relationship with Christ as being 'in Christ' or induced him to portray the believer as dying with Christ in his death to an old way of life and coming alive with him in his resurrection to a new existence is surely implicit here. The basic structure of these Pauline definitions is present in 1 Thessalonians. His appreciation of the work of Christ and the life-giving benefits to the believer from it, is the presupposition of all that he writes here, though given in a particular mould. If we remove this presupposition, his teaching becomes virtually meaningless.

111

2. Instructions or teaching for the believer come ultimately from Christ. It is from him that these instructions also derive their authority. As such, the relationship begun through faith in the saving work of Christ is to be maintained and continued through observing the commands of Christ. Hence, the basic 'good-news' facts of Christianity are alternatively described as the 'word of the Lord' sounding out from the Thessalonians to the surrounding areas (1:8) or as the 'gospel of Christ' of which Timothy is God's servant (3:2). The authority of Paul's word of comfort to the Thessalonians respecting departed loved-ones derives from the fact that it is given 'by the word of the Lord' (4:13). In this, and the above instance, Lord seems to be used of Christ. Instructions which the Thessalonians have received from the apostles and which they are observing, they are urged 'in the Lord Jesus' to continue following, as these very instructions have been given 'through the Lord Jesus' (4:1,2), *i.e.* from him they ultimately originate and bear his imprimatur. Spiritual teachers in the congregation are to be respected because their position of oversight is from Christ (5:12).

Again, the same emphases as we find in other Pauline letters are here. Apostolic authority derives from Christ, the respect of teachers for their works' sake, and the imitation of apostolic behaviour and following of apostolic instruction as that which the apostles have received from Christ

and so hand on to his church — all these find echoes in 1 Thessalonians and show the progression of the work of Christ in the believer.

3. Sanctification as the on-going experience of the believer in Christ is also found here, with the ultimate purpose of glorification. The resultant effects of Christ's work is evident in the fruitful trilogy — work of faith, labour of love, steadfastness of hope — which characterizes the believers' lives at Thessalonica (1:2). In their very conversion experience, born of persecution, they are imitators of Christ and of the apostles (1:6). Paul prays that the Lord will increase their brotherly-love with a view to their final settlement in complete holiness at the *parousia* (3:13). Paul rejoices in the fruit of love obvious in their present living and exhorts them to further continue this (4:10). He anticipates prayerfully their entire preservation and sanctification — spirit, soul and body — at their Lord's return (5:23).

112 All of this is part of their continuing experience of their acceptance of the word of the gospel and their imitation of Christ. It arises in the present as a result of Christ's saving grace in them just as it anticipates in the future in Christ's return for them. Their evident brotherly-love and their vital gospel witness are abundant proofs of the effects of Christ in them. Their hope will reach fruition when their Lord comes back for them. And this same theme is represented throughout Paul's epistles. Christ who has begun a good work in the believer will bring it to completion. Christians are changed from one degree of glory to another. They manifest the fruit of the Spirit as evidence of their salvation. To the faith, hope and love are added other visible demonstrations of Christ in them, their hope of glory. There is a hope laid up for them in heaven, an immortality and a crown. These all accrue to them through the merits of Christ's work. There is no demonstrable difference between the effects of Christ's work as applied to the believer in 1 Thessalonians and other Pauline letters. The emphasis certainly is future, but the effects are similar.

THE PERSON OF CHRIST

It is evident that Paul's understanding of our Lord's nature was substantially the same when he wrote this letter as when he wrote others later. There are perhaps three spheres in which this is particularly evident:

1. The position attributed to Christ in relation to God. In this, the elevated station granted to our Lord implies his divine nature. The Thessalonian church is described as being both in 'God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (1:1). To Christ along with God the Father, prayer is offered, and the significance of this is underlined by the use of a singular verb, 'direct' (*kateuthunai*) after the plural subject 'our God and

Father himself, and our Lord Jesus' (3:11), so close is the unity existing between Son and Father. And yet, as in all of Paul's writings, the distinction of persons is clearly maintained. So Christ is described as 'Son' at 1:10. This in itself is a truly remarkable reference, for it is more usual for Paul to use 'Lord' in eschatological contexts to describe Christ. Indeed, the entire 'un-Pauline' nature of 1:9,10 has been suggested both doctrinally with an absence of reference to the death of Christ in a context where redemption is mentioned, and in the language used, e.g. 'turning to God from idols.' However, here Paul may well be using a traditional saying about the success of Christian missions which would well suit his purpose at that point. At any rate, Christ is described as 'Son' and the unity of nature with diversity of persons within the God-head, characteristic of Paul's understanding is maintained.

2. The generally high rank given to Christ throughout the letter. Most of this we have already noted. Old Testament language applied to Jehovah is referred to Christ (5:2). The apostolic authority is derived from him and Christian teaching is carried out in terms of his commission (2:6,7; 3:2; 4:1,2; 5:12). The gospel is called the 'gospel of Christ' (3:2). He is the agent through whom God's will is accomplished (5:9,10). He is the author of his people's redemption, growth and establishment in holiness to the point of perfection at his second coming (1:9,10; 3:11-13). He is also perhaps depicted as indwelling the believer and the Church (1:1; 4:16). While not spoken of directly as judge, his part in judgment is implicit in statements about the *parousia* (4:6,17; 5:2f.).

113

All of this is entirely consistent with Paul's portrayal of Christ in his other writings.

3. The significance of the titles attributed to our Lord in the letter. An examination of Paul's use of names to describe Christ in 1 Thessalonians *viz.*, Jesus; Son, Lord; Christ or combinations of these, as compared with his usage in other letters yields interesting results.

A characteristic feature, in this respect, of 1 Thessalonians is the incidence of the epithet Lord in the letter. It is used 13 times in this comparatively short epistle. Though in certain instances it may refer to God, it is mostly used of Christ. It is used for Lord in quotations of or allusions to the Old Testament, or introducing them, including the phrase the 'Word of the Lord' (4:15; 5:2f.), in statements about practical conduct (1:6; 3:12), in statements about the *parousia* (4:6; 15, 16, 17 (bis) 5:2) and in the phrase 'in the Lord' (3:8; 5:12) all of which concur generally with Pauline practice.

The complete title 'Lord Jesus Christ' occurs 5 times in 1 Thessalonians and 9 times in 2 Thessalonians, which has been said to provide clear

evidence of a full Christology even in these early letters. However, caution must be urged here, since the usage may not be governed by a development from the simple 'Lord' to the fuller 'Lord Jesus Christ', as much as by the demands of the context in which the usage occurs.

While the epithet 'Son' in 1:10 is truly exceptional in terms of Pauline practice and may reflect, as we have mentioned, his use of a current Christian statement on missionary work, the terms 'Jesus', 'Christ', 'Christ Jesus' and 'Lord Jesus' in 1 Thessalonians are similar to his use of these terms in other letters.

Generally speaking, then, there is little difference between Paul's use of these epithets in 1 Thessalonians and in his other writings. Even allowing for their use being governed by other factors such, for example, as possible pre-Pauline material in opening salutations, closing benedictions or Pauline quotations of existing Christian statements, Paul uses these titles in a similar way here as in his other letters indicating the full deity of Christ.

Thus, there is in 1 Thessalonians a Christology similar to that of the other Pauline letters. Where differences occur, they are differences of emphasis, rather than of kind. The same basic presuppositions, with regard to the person and work of Christ, exist in 1 Thessalonians as underlie Romans or Galatians. The future emphasis in the letter under consideration is natural because the major issues discussed and the chief problems faced centre on the return of Christ. But even the benefits which accrue to the believer at the *parousia* from the merits of Christ come from the Christ who has died for them and has risen again.

Paul teaches here, as he does elsewhere, of a Christ who is truly man and yet truly God — a real person killed by the Jews yet, at the same time, the Son of God who will return from heaven for his people, their Messiah, their Lord. He speaks of a Christ, whose death and resurrection are the historic facts upon which Christians ground their hope of salvation and their anticipation of his glorious return. He has died for them and so they will live with him. They are in him in their fellowship of faith and their loved-ones are united to him even in death. They are taught by his authority, evidence a change in character as a result of their relationship with him and anticipate a future perfection at his return.

There is here no stunted Christology, no immature Paul with half-developed ideas. These are the same truths which animate all his letters in respect of Christ's person and work. They are put in a different form because of the context, but they are substantially the same concepts. On this score, at any rate, there seems little support for the thesis of a radical development in Paul's thought during his letter-writing period.